MOIRA DUSTIN | NUNO FERREIRA
KAMRAN MATIN | MEHRAN REZAEI-TOROGHI
ISABEL SOLOAGA

# DECOLONIZING QUEER MIGRATION

## IRANIAN VOICES IN EXILE

GLOBAL MIGRATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

# DECOLONIZING QUEER MIGRATION

# Global Migration and Social Change

*Series Editors:* **Nando Sigona**, University of Birmingham, UK and **Alexandra Délano Alonso**, The New School, US

---

This series showcases original research that looks at the nexus between migration, citizenship and social change. The series aims to open up interdisciplinary terrain and to develop new scholarship in migration and refugee studies that is theoretically insightful and innovative, empirically rich and policy engaged.

## Also available in the series:

*Detention and Deportation in Europe*,
edited by **Francesca Esposito**, **Teresa Degenhardt** and **Annika Lindberg**

*Death in Migration*,
by **Paolo Boccagni** and **Thomas Lacroix**

*Politics and Practices of Transborderism*,
by **Mitxy Mabel Meneses Gutierrez**

*Migration and Mobile Rights*,
by **Marco Perolini**

*Refugee Reception and Camps*,
edited by **Lucas Oesch** and **Léa Lemaire**

*Governing Migration and Mobility*,
by **Bronte Alexander**

*Entangled Asylum in the Nordic Region*,
by **Sarah Scott Ford**

*Buildings of Refuge and the Postcoloniality of Asylum Infrastructure*,
by **Paolo Novak**

*Borders, Citizenship and Pregnancy*,
by **Gwyneth Lonergan**

*Intimacy as a Lens on Work and Migration*,
by **Jingyu Mao**

*The Shape of Belonging for Unaccompanied Young Migrants*,
by **Özlem Ögtem-Young**

## Find out more at:

bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/
global-migration-and-social-change

# DECOLONIZING QUEER MIGRATION

## Iranian Voices in Exile

Moira Dustin, Nuno Ferreira, Kamran Matin,
Mehran Rezaei-Toroghi, and Isabel Soloaga

With a Foreword by
Arghavan Shamsara

BRISTOL
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2026 by

Bristol University Press
University of Bristol
1-9 Old Park Hill
Bristol
BS2 8BB
UK
t: +44 (0)117 374 6645
e: bup-info@bristol.ac.uk

Details of international sales and distribution partners are available at bristoluniversitypress.co.uk



DOI: 10.51952/9781529253504



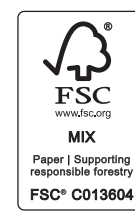
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5292-5348-1 paperback
ISBN 978-1-5292-5349-8 ePub
ISBN 978-1-5292-5350-4 OA PDF



Cover design: Andrew Corbett
Front cover image: 'Simorgh' by Isabel Soloaga
Bristol University Press uses environmentally responsible print partners.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Bristol University Press' authorised representative in the European Union is:
Easy Access System Europe, Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia,
Email: gpsr.requests@easproject.com



Dedicated to all the participants who in one way or the other contributed to this book.

Especially dedicated to Sina and Amir, two participants who lost their lives during the course of this research. Their courage, presence, and willingness to share their stories remain with us and within every page of this work.

Their deaths are a painful reminder of the dangerous conditions so many refugees are forced to endure. No one should have to risk their life in search of safety. May their memory be a call to action, and a vision for a world where people forced to flee persecution and discrimination are met with care, protection, and the chance to build a future in peace.

# Contents

# Series Editors' Preface

*Alexandra Délano Alonso and Nando Sigona*

As a series committed to publishing work that advances social justice and transformation, we are honoured to publish the collective project *Decolonizing Queer Migration: Iranian Voices in Exile* by Moira Dustin, Nuno Ferreira, Kamran Matin, Mehran Rezaei-Toroghi, and Isabel Soloaga. This book is a powerful example of work that embodies decolonial approaches to migration, not just in its theoretical and conceptual framing, but in every aspect of the research and the production of the volume itself: from the methodology and the approach to fieldwork and participatory research, to the investment in co-authorship and interdisciplinarity, and the centring of voices and life histories of queer and trans Iranians in exile throughout the project. As Arghavan Shamsara beautifully puts it, this is 'not just a body of research but a collective act of survival, imagination, and resistance' that embraces the multidirectionality, illegibility, contradiction, and complexity of queer and migrant identities, movements, and narratives.

In your hands is a beautifully written book from the different perspectives of different authors – what they refer to as a multivocal work – including poetry written by participants in the project. As such, it is a work that has a lasting echo beyond and in addition to scholarly inquiry about the experiences of people in exile to escape persecution based on gender identity or sexual orientation, and the shortcomings of the asylum systems and refugee law in response to these groups. *Decolonizing Queer Migration* is an inspiration for readers interested in participatory and creative methods, decoloniality, Middle Eastern studies, and alternative approaches to migration and mobility. We see this as a critical and necessary contribution to the emerging field of queer studies of migration, to which we are proud to contribute through our Series.

# List of Figures and Tables

## Figures



## Tables

# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| COI | Country of origin information |
| ILGA | International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association |
| IR | International Relations |
| IRGC | Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps |
| IRQO | Iranian Queer Organization (also known as the Persian Gay and Lesbian Organization) |
| IRR | Iranian rial (currency) |
| LGBTIQ+ | Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer and others |
| NGO | Non-governmental organization |
| PSG | Particular social group |
| SRS | Sex reassignment surgery |
| SOGI | Sexual orientation and/or gender identity |
| SOGIESC | Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics |
| UCD | Uneven and combined development |
| UKLGIG | UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (now Rainbow Migration) |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNHCR | UN High Commissioner for Refugees |

# Foreword

*Arghavan Shamsara*

In reading *Decolonizing Queer Migration: Iranian Voices in Exile*, I encountered not just a body of research but a collective act of survival, imagination, and resistance. As a trans woman who has lived through the intersection of war, patriarchy, theocratic violence, and queerness in Iran, my own story reverberates with the voices in this research. This study is not simply about migration; it is about the migration of the self, of desire, of memory, and of dignity. It is about what happens when our bodies cross not only borders but paradigms of being – from enforced silence to audibility, from shadow to speech, from imposed identities to chosen truths.

Growing up in the midst of the Iran–Iraq war, in the militarized border city of Kermanshah, my earliest memories are filled with the sounds of air-raid sirens and the haunting stillness that follows explosions. And yet, amid the physical violence of war, the daily psychological violence of gendered expectations and societal repression was far more persistent. This dual terrain – of national trauma and personal illegibility – shaped the contours of my existence.

As a child, I was drawn to softness, colour, imagination. I wanted to wear floral tiaras and dance in front of mirrors. The world, however, insisted I hold toy guns and perform boyhood. My first act of resistance was not political in the traditional sense; it was a refusal to pose for a photo in a male suit. But as I learned early on, in authoritarian systems, even a gesture as small as that becomes political. And from that moment on, I was marked – not just as deviant, but as disposable.

The testimonies collected in this book are vivid reminders of what queer and trans Iranians endure, both in Iran and in exile. The stories here unsettle neat narratives of migration as liberation. They show that leaving Iran does not mean leaving behind violence; rather, it means entering new terrains of racism, surveillance, precarity, and marginalization. What distinguishes this work is its refusal to romanticize exile. Instead, it offers us grounded accounts of what it means to reassemble a sense of self in hostile lands, to carry the weight of an erased past while being misread in the present.

My own journey, like many in this volume, has been marked by both rupture and reinvention. In my late teens, I began to articulate a language for what I had long felt: that I was a woman, not in some symbolic sense, but in the deepest truth of my being. But Iran does not allow you to be who you are without cost. Transitioning meant confronting the full force of a queerphobic medical system, a punitive legal regime, and a society trained to humiliate. Yet even within that violence, there were pockets of resilience – underground support networks, defiant friendships, secret dances, and, sometimes, even unexpected moments of compassion.

As a journalist, translator, and activist, I have spent much of my adult life trying to give voice to what we were taught to bury. And I have learned that the act of naming – of insisting on one's existence – is itself a form of rebellion. But this rebellion is not without its scars. We lose jobs, families, homes. Some of us lose our lives. And those of us who survive carry the weight of many others who did not.

To speak of migration without speaking of coloniality is to miss the deepest root of displacement. Migration is never just about the movement from one geography to another. It is about moving through power – who is allowed to leave, who is allowed to arrive, who is welcomed, who is policed. The queer Iranian migrant stands at the edge of multiple margins: racialized by the West, queered by culture, politicized by history. In this liminal position, we are often asked to perform our trauma for institutional recognition or to downplay it for survival. Either way, we are forced to translate ourselves – and translation, as I have come to know both linguistically and personally, is never neutral.

The beauty of this book is that it refuses such flattening. The narratives, interviews, and reflections included here resist the impulse to turn queer Iranian migrants into mere case studies. Instead, they allow each subject to speak from their own shifting positionalities – as lovers, children, artists, workers, asylum seekers, thinkers. What emerges is not a single story, but a constellation. Some contributors are angry; others are weary. Some are rebuilding; others are still running. There is no single arc, no neat moral resolution. And that is precisely why it is honest.

This complexity also calls us to reimagine what we mean by 'home'. For many of us, home has never been a stable place. Home was the site of discipline, of fear, of silence. And yet, in the absence of a physical sanctuary, we made homes in each other's arms, in coded language, in poetry, in drag, in dance. Diaspora, then, is not merely exile. It is also an invitation – to reassemble kinship outside of bloodlines and to build new solidarities grounded not in shared nationality but in shared vision.

When I began transitioning in Iran, I was already acutely aware of how gender intersects with class, geography, and access. Iran's legal recognition of gender reassignment – a paradoxical product of the same regime that criminalizes homosexuality – gave me a narrow path to explore my gender

identity, but not a safe one. I met trans women who had undergone gender reassignment surgery only to be disowned, abandoned to the streets, and forced into sex work to survive. I met others who were rushed into transition before they could understand what it meant for them, pressured by bureaucratic demands for 'certainty'. There was no room for exploration – only proof. We were always proving something to someone: to doctors, to judges, to families, to God.

In those years, I came to see that the most dangerous force was not simply state violence, but epistemic violence – the kind that erases, mistranslates, silences. The kind that defines us before we have defined ourselves. This book stands as a counter-archive to such violence. It says: We were here. We loved, We cried, We made art, We ran, We survived. It refuses to allow dominant structures – be they state narratives or academic disciplines – to speak over us.

I often think of what it means to live a life that is legible. For queer migrants, legibility can be a trap. In asylum systems, for instance, we must often narrate our lives in a way that aligns with Western expectations of suffering. We are expected to have realized our queerness early, to have been punished for it systematically, to have fled as a result. Any deviation from this script can result in disbelief or denial. And so, we are compelled to curate our stories, even our pain.

But *Decolonizing Queer Migration* refuses curation. It offers messiness. It offers contradiction. It offers truths that do not fit within institutional forms. One contributor writes of finding more safety in anonymity than in visibility. Another speaks of loving their queerness but not wanting it to be the first thing people see. Still another mourns the loss of a language they can no longer use to speak to their mother. These are not narratives built for funding proposals or human rights reports. These are the real stories – and they matter.

I began my work in media not because I believed in its fairness but because I understood its power. As a journalist, I saw early on that stories – especially the ones told about queer people – were often shaped not by truth but by agenda. In Iranian media, trans people were either sensationalized or pathologized. In Western media, we were often erased, or used as symbols of either oppression or progress. There was rarely room for nuance, let alone dignity.

Visibility, for people like us, is not just a tool – it is a gamble. Every time we make ourselves visible, we risk our safety, our credibility, our peace. And yet, remaining invisible means forfeiting the power to name ourselves.

For those of us in the diaspora, especially those with platforms of communication, the burden of representation can become overwhelming. We are asked to explain Iran. To explain gender. To explain ourselves. We are made into bridges – between languages, between cultures, between ideologies. But bridges are not homes. They are places people cross and forget. What I love about this book is that it does not ask anyone to be a

bridge. It does not ask anyone to explain. It allows each voice to stand as it is – incomplete.

There is a moment in every migrant's life when they realize the past is not something they have left behind – it is something they carry. For queer migrants, that past is not just personal; it is political. It shows up in our accents, our gestures, our fears, our relationships. It shapes how we love, how we parent, how we mourn. And it shapes how we imagine freedom – not as a place, but as a possibility.

What *Decolonizing Queer Migration* offers us is not just a set of perspectives, but a vocabulary. A vocabulary that resists the frameworks imposed upon us – from both East and West – and insists instead on complexity. A vocabulary that understands that exile is not only displacement but also creation. A vocabulary that reclaims queerness not as an identity imposed by state classifications, but as a lived resistance against normativity, hierarchy, and colonial control.

Reading through these pages, I was reminded over and over again that our lives – our actual, lived lives – are richer and stranger than any theory can contain. And yet, we need theory. We need it not to explain ourselves, but to protect the stories we tell. We need theory to name the forces we resist. We need it to connect our struggles across borders. And we need it to imagine what comes next.

As a trans woman, as a former asylum seeker, as someone who has lived both the violence of theocratic repression and the disorientation of diasporic exile, I know what it means to feel split between worlds. But I also know the power of naming – not in the colonial sense of fixing meaning, but in the decolonial sense of opening it. The power of naming ourselves, claiming our truths, refusing to be statistics or symbols.

I am grateful to have played a small part in the research documentary film that inspired this book, and even more grateful to see it become something so alive, so generous, and so necessary. The University of Sussex, in supporting this publication, has helped carve out space for voices that are too often left out of migration studies, queer theory, Middle East studies, and trans studies alike. And the contributors – with their candour, their courage, their contradictions – illuminate the lived realities of a marginalized community within Middle Eastern society, a community often silenced and stigmatized under the weight of taboo and misconception.

In an era of rising nationalism, shrinking refugee protections, and increasingly violent transphobia across the globe, we need works like this. Not just as academic contributions, but as maps for how to live, how to remember, how to resist. As you turn the final pages, I hope you will carry these stories with you. Not as examples. Not as inspiration. But as companions. Because the truth is: none of us walks alone.

# Preface

This book is the main output of the project 'Negotiating Queer Identities Following Forced Migration (NQIfFM): A Comparative Study of Iranian Queer Refugees Living in Turkey, the UK and Canada', funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) between 2022 and 2024. The support of the ESRC is gratefully acknowledged (Grant Ref: ES/V017497/1).

The project retheorizes queer identity formation processes and investigates the processes of identity transition of people who have left Iran to escape persecution or discrimination on grounds of their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC), and went to countries generally seen as being of transition, destination, or resettlement. It makes critical contributions to postcolonial research on gender and sexuality, augments life histories of exile, explores trauma-based cultural politics, blends poetry with more traditional methods of social science analysis in a creative form of participatory research, and makes a nuanced contribution to emerging queer studies of migration, transnationalism, and exile.

The book is a collective work, however one co-author took the lead in producing the first draft of each chapter, as follows: Nuno Ferreira led on Chapters 1 and 7, Mehran Rezaei-Toroghi led on Chapter 4, Kamran Matin led on Chapters 2, 3, and 8, Isabel Soloaga led on Chapter 5 and co-led on Chapter 6, and Moira Dustin co-led on Chapter 6. We thus think of this book as a multivocal work – one that includes different disciplinary perspectives reflecting the diverse expertise of the authors, with each chapter having its own focus and argument, but with the notion of 'identity' acting as a thread line. Being a book authored by several researchers from different perspectives, it is also the case that each author has responded to the same fieldwork material in different ways, highlighting different aspects of that material.

Each chapter is introduced by a quote from a poem produced by one of the participants in the project. The full versions of all poems can be found in the poetry collection *Rainbows on Rugged Terrains: Poetics of Queer Iranians in Exile*, edited by Nilofar Shidmehr and published by Transnational Press London (freely available online on https://www.tplondon.com/product/rainbows-on-rugged-terrains/). All figures have been produced by the authors.

The book cover has been created by Isabel Soloaga, depicting the Persian myth of Simorgh, a symbol of benevolent and powerful energy of renewal for several of the participants in the NQIfFM project. Isabel took inspiration in particular from the cover of the book *Shahnama (The Book of Kings)* by Ferdowsi, bound by Nicky Oliver (available online on https://www.hewit.com/blogs/showcase/shahnama-the-book-of-kings?_pos=1&_sid=4008aa9f1&_ss=r).

Further to this book, the NQIfFM project has led to a range of other outputs, including a documentary, a poetry collection, several journal articles, blog pieces, podcast episodes, and other smaller outputs. This book should be seen as part of that broader body of work, as an overall contribution to the scholarship on queer Iranians in exile. You can read more about the project on the website https://iranqueerefugee.net/.

Throughout the life of the NQIfFM project, we have benefitted from the generous input of a range of people who deserve recognition and our utmost gratitude. We would like to thank in particular the members of our Advisory Board, namely Mehrdad Alipour, Matt Forouzandy, Saghi Ghahraman, Hasan Hüseyin Halastar, Hayriye Kara, Elham Malaki, Amir Hadi Mohammadi, Shahrzad Mojab, Arghavan Shamsara, Paul Statham, and Transnational Community Federation e.V.[1] We would also like to thank all organizations and individuals that in one way or the other supported our fieldwork, especially by facilitating the use of certain spaces and helping us to recruit participants, in particular KAOS (https://kaosgldernegi.org/en/) in Ankara, Simorgh (https://simorghngo.com/) and Amira Zolghadri in Toronto, and Zeynab Alsadat Peyghambarzadeh in the UK. Moreover, we wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of the first draft of this book and the participants at various events where research team members presented provisional findings of the project for their constructive and useful feedback and suggestions.[2]

We are also very thankful for the time and dedication offered by Professor Sally Munt (Emeritus Professor at the University of Sussex) and Professor Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip (Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Nottingham), who were involved with the inception and design of the NQIfFM project, as well as its initial launch. We wish to thank those who undertook placements with NQIfFM, namely Deborah Faudoa Rodríguez, Michèle Dvořáková, and Karolina Tajovska. We would also like to thank all colleagues at the University of Sussex for their support for this project, in particular Elif Demirbas for her advice on the Turkish context. Finally, our deepest gratitude goes to all NQIfFM participants – without you, this project would not have been possible. We hope that we have reflected your experiences and views adequately.

This book discusses issues and contains language that – by their very nature – some readers may find offensive or disturbing. While acknowledging

this, we believe that a thorough and serious analysis of our subject-matter could not circumvent such issues or avoid the language in question.

All information is correct to the best of our knowledge as of March 2025.

*Moira Dustin, Nuno Ferreira, Kamran Matin,*
*Mehran Rezaei-Toroghi, and Isabel Soloaga*
*Brighton, August 2025*

1

# Escaping Iran

I started this path, not
knowing where
it leads me.

Peyman, Turkey

## 1. Setting the scene

Connecting online, we met Amir, a gay Iranian man living in Turkey. During our conversation, he told us:

> I don't want to have such a terrible life. I don't want to die in this awful situation in loneliness. I don't want to stay in this situation. I want to survive. The only thing I need now is peace and a comfortable life. I want to be left alone.

His desperation was palpable, and it echoed the urgency of many who have escaped homophobia and transphobia in Iran but have not yet found the peace they hungered for.

Globally, rights related to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are under threat as many countries criminally punish a range of forms of consensual adult same-sex relationships and gender non-conforming behaviours. Iran is one of 11 countries where 'sodomy' is punishable by death even though the Quran is silent on the exact punishment (Raeesi, 2015). Over the years there have been multiple reports from reliable sources about individuals being threatened with serious criminal sanctions in Iran – including the death penalty – owing to same-sex sexual acts and queer activism (Amnesty International, 2007, 2022a; Ramón Mendos, 2020, p 441; AP News, 2022; Gritten, 2022; OHCHR, 2022). Most Muslim theologians from the medieval period (Al-Tusi, 1980) to recent times (Kadivar, 2023) have denounced same-sex

desires. However, the practice of same-sex relationships was widespread in the period prior to the rise of modern, centralized nation-states in the Middle East, including Iran (Papoli-Yazdi and Dezhamkhooy, 2021). Post-revolutionary Iran adopted a restrictive interpretation of Shia Islam, which persecutes non-normative sexual and gender roles. There is a growing body of literature about queer Iranians, including scholarship that critiques the application of modern Western categories such as 'LGBTIQ+' to Iranian same-sex relationships (Najmabadi, 2005c, 2012, 2014; Afary, 2009).[1] With some notable exceptions (Najmabadi, 2005c; Mahdavi, 2012; IGHLRC, 2015; Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016; Karimi, 2018; Azadi and Saeidzadeh, 2022), Iranian queer realities are still seriously under-researched and often only considered tangentially in the context of same-sex desire in the Arab or Muslim world (for example, Murray and Roscoe, 1997; Massad, 2008). This book addresses this gap.

In this book, we explore the lived experiences of queer Iranians in exile by adopting multiple lines of enquiry. These include how migration from Iran to the West affects the way queer Iranians in exile negotiate their sexual and gender identity, and how some may feel misrecognized, retraumatized, or silenced in that process. Other lines of enquiry include how some queer Iranians in exile understand and articulate their identities in new ways after or through the positive and/or negative experiences of their migration journeys. Finally, we also enquire into how queer Iranians in exile negotiate culturally specific categories such as 'LGBTIQ+' and how innovative, tactical, and strategic they are in resisting processes of determination and subjugation. This analysis is made with an understanding that queer diasporic desires and bodies are often 'riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles' (Gayatri, 2005, p 4), and that a queer diaspora can 'unsettle the ways in which the diaspora shores up the gender and sexual ideologies of dominant nationalism on the one hand, and processes of globalization on the other' (Gayatri, 2005, p 10).

Through these lines of enquiry, we investigate the difficulties of cultural translation and the ways in which Iranian experiences are read through the prism of dominant Western signifiers, a phenomenon that is often found in critiques of West-centric accounts of gender identity formation in Iran that nevertheless fail to develop an interactive framework that fundamentally challenges the dualism of prevailing scholarship. Iran is often perceived through Western eyes in simplistic terms as an isolated, intolerant, and punitive state, emblematic of East-West political and cultural polarization. Models of sexuality are similarly reductive and based on cultural expectations: while a 'substitutive model' of sexuality (sexual identity and conduct are inter-exchangeable) that relies on privacy, identity, and anti-discrimination strategies is prevalent in Western societies, in other countries and cultures a 'transformative model' (where homosexuality is associated

with transgenderism) or 'additive model' (where same-sex conduct is dissociated from sexual identity) is often identified (Katyal, 2002). With this book, we depart from these models to provide an original, non-dualistic theoretical framework for the study of the formation of gender identity and sexuality that, inspired by the idea of uneven and combined development (UCD), registers the significance of inter-societal relations and foregrounds the agency of non-Western states and subjects. We also offer a nuanced investigation of expressive and creative traditions in Iran, primarily through the voices of non-heterosexual and non-cisnormative Iranians in exile.

We compare the experiences of queer Iranians in exile in three countries: Turkey, the UK, and Canada. Historically, Turkey has been the first destination and mainly a country of transition, where refugees can be referred to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) for resettlement (Kara and Çalik, 2016; Hêvî LGBTI Association, 2019; Koçak, 2020; Sarı, 2020b; Aytaçoğlu, 2023, p 123). The UK is a country where a significant number of Iranian refugees have recently resettled or lodged their claims (Home Office, 2022a; UNHCR, 2022), but not without difficulties or mental health struggles (Lewis, 2013; Danisi et al, 2021). Canada has been a primary destination for Iranian queer refugees due to its perceived hospitality and liberalism (UNHCR Canada, 2024), but its asylum procedures are not exempt from criticism (Sharif, 2015). Such differing scenarios make these countries highly appropriate for a comparative and policy-relevant analysis (see Chapter 4 for further details). We explore the experiences of communities of queer Iranians in exile in these three countries and investigate the differential discourses of queer identities (encompassing sexual orientation, gender identity and gender performativity), pre- and post-exile. We focus on those who have relocated from Iran because of fear of persecution relating to their queer minority status. Thus, we use the notion of 'forced migration'[2] in the context of our analysis as including those persons who have fled Iran because of hegemonic heteronormative and prejudicial attitudes towards queer individuals, although their presentation to state authorities in host countries may not necessarily disclose sexual orientation or gender identity as the primary justification for international protection or migration.

Our methodology included semi-structured life-history interviews in Iran, Turkey, the UK, and Canada, with individuals who identified themselves as non-heterosexual or non-cisnormative, as well as supporters and activists. We incorporated creative practices owing to the strong artistic and folk traditions of poetry in Iran, where poetry has long been a communal countercultural discourse for expressing political dissent. Queer romance also has a long history in Persian poetry (Afary, 2009), and poetic inquiry helped us gain insight into the emotional and symbolic aspects of identity renegotiation following 'forced migration'. We organized poetry

workshops where participants talked about a familiar poem that they felt expressed their refugee or migratory journey, exile, and potential sense of (un)belonging in their host country. Then we worked with each respondent individually to create short poems that expressed their journeys.[3] Each of the following chapters in this book opens with a line from a poem of one of our participants, reflecting the theme of that chapter. In Chapter 4, we explore our methodology in greater detail.

## 2. Enhancing the field of scholarship

This book offers the first empirically and theoretically based study of how queer Iranian individuals experience and present their sexual and gender identities in different locations, as they move from their country of origin to countries of transition, destination, and resettlement. Our intention is to give voice to queer Iranian individuals at these different stages of their life journeys, while making an important contribution to the understanding of how sexual and gender identities and expressions are affected by processes of 'forced migration'. This book thus develops a non-Eurocentric account of the formation of queer identities in Iran and of the negotiation of queer sexual and gender identities in exile.

The research that underpins the analysis in this book is theoretically informed and empirically grounded, comparative, and interdisciplinary. The focus on the experiences of queer Iranians in exile, the use of identity as the main analytical tool, the adoption of three country case studies, and the use of creative methods, all further enhance our original contribution to the existing scholarship. Our contribution is threefold: theoretical, methodological, and empirical.

Theoretically, this book is the first to bring the theory of UCD into dialogue with postcolonial gender theory. It contributes to postcolonial theory by creatively addressing postcolonialism's tendencies towards cultural essentialism (Lazarus, 2011; Matin, 2013c) and analytical dualism, which foregrounds the agential primacy of Western states and actors, neglecting the causal and constitutive agency of non-Western queer individuals and states in the formation of and contestations over queer identity (Chapter 2). More specifically, we offer an original theoretical framework for the study of the formation of modern gender and sexuality through a critical engagement with and enhancement of postcolonial literature. We show how postcolonial theories' dualistic framework, which construes the West versus non-West as the main axis of analytical and normative interventions (for example, Said, 1978), obfuscates important political and historical dynamics within non-Western societies such as Iran, and dilutes the agency of non-Western states and queer subjects in the process of gender identity formation (Rao, 2010, 2020, p 33). By contrast, the original theoretical framework that we

develop innovatively combines key insights of postcolonial and performative theories of identity formation and critical International Relations (IR) and historical sociology through and around the theory of UCD. This framework challenges the 'West and the rest' dichotomy and articulates the relationship between modern geopolitics, postcolonial nation-state formation and transformation of gender and sexual identities, emphasizing 'hybridity' (Bhabha, 2012) and 'combination' (Matin, 2013b). We therefore recover the agency of the Iranian state and queer subjects both analytically and normatively. In Chapters 5–7, we provide original empirical material to enrich the growing body of postcolonial queer theory (for example, Gayatri, 2005; Massad, 2008; Kapur, 2010, 2017; Rao, 2010, 2020; Otto, 2017) and criticize classic stereotypes of Muslim sexual identities for their lack of contextual specification. Simultaneously, we make an original contribution to the literature on the regional distinctiveness and discourses of Iranian queer identities.

Methodologically, we blend poetic enquiry with more traditional sociological, legal, and anthropological methods. To complement the poetic enquiry, we have also produced a documentary – *The Other Place*[4] – and four podcast episodes,[5] which reflect the artistic, creative, and participatory approach we have applied to the research that underpins this book.[6] We thus build on and develop a new participatory action research methodology in the field of refugee and migration studies by enhancing the value of creative methods (Chapter 4).

Empirically, we adopt a life-history approach through semi-structured interviews with 57 individuals across four countries, including some participants living in Iran, offering new insights into the experiences of queer Iranians across different geographical, socio-economic, and cultural contexts (Chapters 5–7). Moreover, we explore the impact of Western identity categories of sexuality and gender (for example LGBTIQ+) on non-Western queer individuals – including experiences of empowerment, agency, trauma, and disidentification – and how re-identifications emerge after migration, in specific national contexts. We also investigate how migration processes can re-stigmatize, silence, and exclude queer subjects, and how these subjects reclaim voice and agency in response.

The examination of sexuality and gender identity in migration and transnationalism studies is embryonic in comparison to many other fields of research. This book offers significant new insights that enrich theoretical and empirical debates by providing comparative perspectives and highlighting national variables in the renegotiation of postcolonial, hybrid queer identities following traumatic exile. We focus on the experiences of queer people themselves, in their own ontological and epistemological reworkings, through oral narration and poetic writing, as they attempt to find a vocabulary, and a visual and poetic discourse reflective of their experiences.

Our analysis enables a critical understanding of the processes of identity transition of queer Iranians in exile. Symbolically, Iran has become the distillation of the West's fears/projections of the savage, fundamentalist Muslim (an association intensifying in current USA foreign policy) (Kinch, 2016; Pillar, 2016; Fawcett and Payne, 2023). We need a more nuanced, informed, and sensitive nomenclature for and engagement with queer experiences in Iran, and in the Iranian diaspora. We begin this process by breaking down social sciences-humanities binaries to the benefit of scholars and non-academic stakeholders alike. At a time when public discourse on immigration is simplistic and reductive, we believe it is a strategic and ethical necessity to communicate the heterogeneity of refugee and migrant experiences through empirically and theoretically innovative research that also contributes to the field of queer studies.

We also go beyond the existing studies into Iranian queer experiences. A lack of engagement with and research on the lived experiences of queer Iranians is highlighted by postcolonial scholarship (Shakhsari, 2014). We provide a detailed investigation of cultural traditions in Iran through the voices of Iranians in exile that serves to complicate the fundamentalist presumptions of the West in formulating orientalist projections of the violent, savage, and homophobic Muslim. We also problematize postcolonial theories' tendency to cultural essentialism and analytical dualism through the conceptual articulation of the trialectics of national, transnational, and international dynamics that is central to the theory of UCD (see Chapter 2).

Among Muslim/Iranian scholars, there are different interpretations of the religion-law-sexuality nexus, and indeed Iranian law and policy is hybrid: there are harsh laws against 'homosexuality' and yet Iran also has some of the world's most relaxed laws on sex reassignment surgeries (SRS) (more commonly known as 'gender-affirming surgery') (Chapter 3). Some scholars have attempted to reconcile Quranic verses with a more liberal view of homosexuality, while others have concluded that that is not possible (Ali, 2006; Ganji, 2008; Kugle, 2011; IGHLRC, 2015; Naraghi, 2015; Jaspal, 2016). Scholars have also raised serious doubts about seeing Iranian same-sex behaviour and relationships through the lens of modern Western categories such as 'LGBTIQ+' (Najmabadi, 2005c, 2012; Afary, 2009). We need new language – or, at the very least, more sophisticated translation skills – to express modern non-heterosexuality in Iran and in the Iranian diaspora, and more broadly in the space beyond the Euro-American region (Babayan and Najmabadi, 2008; Najmabadi, 2012; Baer and Kaindl, 2017). Despite the work of several scholars (for example, Afary, 2009; Najmabadi, 2011, 2014; Mahdavi, 2012; Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016; Karimi, 2018), Iranian queer realities are still significantly under-researched, and very little has been written on the experiences of migration of queer Iranians. Through this

book, we offer greater understanding of how specific discourses of hetero- and cisnormativity circulate in Iranian cultures.

We are thus building on the key literature available. Afsaneh Najmabadi, in particular, has conducted valuable fieldwork and published research analysing Iranian same-sex relationships inside Iran (Najmabadi, 2005c, 2014). Her idea of 'professing selves', or queer subjects who perform sexual identity situationally and contingently, is further developed in our book by elucidating a specifically international dimension of the performative production of gender and sexuality and studying how Iranian queer life subsequently changes *outside* of Iran, in diaspora (for a critique, see Rezaei, 2015; Meyer, 2016). We specifically analyse how 'professing' Iranian identities can be re-shaped through the process of 'forced migration' (Chapters 5–7), expanding Middle Eastern understandings of queer identity and migration.

Finally, with this book, we take the existing literature on SOGIESC asylum and refugees in a new direction. Since 2000, a small body of work on queer migration studies, primarily from North America, has emerged (for example, Luibhéid, 2008; Carrillo and Fontdevila, 2014), which reframes sexuality and gender identity as a core axis of migratory flows. Queer migration research based in Europe has slowly developed (for example, Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; Peumans, 2018), with at least two EU-funded programmes in the UK.[7] This book makes a significant and original theoretical and empirical contribution to this field by comparing the experiences of queer Iranians in exile from a postcolonial perspective in the three country case studies (Turkey, the UK, and Canada) – the first such comparative analysis.

Moreover, although there are some large publications on the experiences of queer refugees, these are mostly limited to the European context (for example, Spijkerboer, 2013; Raboin, 2016; Giametta, 2017; Danisi et al, 2021). Other books touch on the topic of queer asylum, but only to a limited extent in the context of broader debates (Keenan, 2015; Ammaturo, 2017). None of the books mentioned here engages specifically with the experiences of queer Iranians in exile or benefits from poetic inquiry as a research method.

There is a growing, but still relatively small body of work on Middle Eastern queer migrant sexualities (Peumans, 2018; Shakhsari, 2020a). There is also pioneering, theological writing on Islam and same-sex desire in general (Ganji, 2008; Kugle, 2011; Naraghi, 2015). There is historical research focused on the (pre)modern period of Iranian history and how non-heterosexual relationships have emerged in Iranian cultural forms/practices (Najmabadi, 2001, 2005c, 2005a, 2006, 2012; Afary, 2009; Papoli-Yazdi and Dezhamkhooy, 2021). Yet, the empirical aspects of Iranian queer lives have only rarely been researched (Bucar and Shirazi, 2012; Karimi, 2018), especially those of queer Iranians in exile (Shakhsari, 2013, 2014; Sarı, 2020b, 2020a). We build on this pre-existing field of research, while

also offering an original contribution via our life-history and poetical/interpretative methods.

## 3. The structure of the book

Following this introductory chapter, in Chapter 2 we present a theoretical framework for the study of the formation of queer identity in Iran that avoids the abstract universalism of Eurocentric approaches, analytical dualism of postcolonial theory, and subjective hyper-agency of performative accounts. We do so by embedding Najmabadi's performative account of the formation of gender and sexuality in Iran (Najmabadi, 2014) in the theory of UCD as an internationally sensitive social theory. The chapter argues that the constitution of queer identity in Iran is performative and contingent in its immediate context but structurally shaped by the socio-cultural terrain fashioned by the nation-state, which is in turn (re-)constructed through an international process of which a key axis is the interaction with the West. In this international process, Western discourse on gender and sexual identity refracts through geopolitical, ideological, and developmental dynamics. At the same time, transnational dynamics afford queer subjects direct access to Western gender nomenclature which they critically and selectively draw upon in accordance with the contingencies of their negotiation of identity vis-à-vis the state at national level. The chapter therefore enhances the anti-Eurocentrism of postcolonial queer theory through the theoretical articulation of agency of non-Western states and queer subjects, beyond dualistic schemas of queer imperialism or norm diffusion from the West.

Chapter 3 tracks the UCD of queer identity in Iran over the last two centuries. It shows how during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the geopolitical encroachments of a modernizing Europe generated a transformative 'consciousness of backwardness' among Iranian elites whose initial response was an imitative project of nation-state formation seeking political centralization and cultural homogenization. The Qajar era therefore involved a discursive erasure of premodern Iran's diverse culture of homosociality, that had been exemplified in the phenomenon of 'amrad', that is, a 'young adolescent male object of male desire' (Najmabadi, 2005c, p 4). The phenomenon was re-construed as a sign of 'backwardness' through self-comparison with the heteronormative Europe. This paved the way for the Pahlavi state's socio-cultural heteronormativization of Iran à la modern Europe. Following the 1979 revolution that toppled the pro-Western Pahlavi state, the Islamic Republic embarked on a politically and ideologically driven self-identification against the West. Yet, it juridically and culturally enhanced Iran's pre-revolutionary heteronormativization through homophobic legislation and gender segregation. Indeed, the Islamic Republic posits heteronormativity as a pillar of Iran's cultural authenticity

and rejects homosexuality as 'foreign' and 'deviant' and internal to the West. It is in this international context that queer Iranians fashion their identity contingently and situationally, interacting with both the Islamic Republic and the West through pragmatic adaptation to the former's legal constraints, and selective adoption of the latter's gender discourse and nomenclature.

In Chapter 4, we turn our attention to methodology and the ethical considerations of the fieldwork we conducted. We elaborate on the research design, participant selection, recruitment strategies, the characteristics of the life-history interviews we carried out, the theoretical framework guiding our questionnaire design, and the socio-demographic profiles of the queer Iranian participants. We also expand on the characteristics of the interviews with supporters, and the structure of the poetry workshops. We discuss the reflexivity that underpinned our team work as researchers, by drawing specifically on the notion of 'hermeneutical circle' of Hans George Gadamer (Gadamer, 1989, p 267). Finally, we explore the ethical dilemmas encountered during the fieldwork, along with our approaches to addressing them.

Following the explanation of our methodology, we move to the analysis of our original empirical data. Chapter 5 investigates SOGIESC in Iran, focusing on the identities and expressions of the participants in our fieldwork. Building on the discussion of the history of SOGIESC issues arising in modern Iran in Chapters 2 and 3, Chapter 5 explores current understandings, self-identification, and treatment of queer Iranians in Iran and in exile today. Taking an in-depth look at first person accounts by queer individuals in Iran, the chapter explores the influence of Iranian poetry, language, and the internet in creating a framework for modern queer culture in Iran. Despite official state condemnation and severe punishments for offenders, queer communities continue to evolve in diverse forms, embracing new identities rooted in Iranian culture and articulated through online channels. The chapter explores the strong, socially reinforced binary gender roles and how the state's focus on gender-affirming transition has led to a widespread use of the term 'intersex'. Finally, the chapter analyses how many Iranians devise new, powerful avenues for personal self-identification and public representation through their migration journeys.

In our second analytical chapter – Chapter 6 – we delve into how external factors impact upon journeys of gender and sexual self-identification for queer Iranians. With this purpose, we analyse a range of important influencing elements in these individual journeys, inspired by an intersectional lens. The chapter analyses early experiences and memories, family contexts, the importance of social class and educational background, as well as employment and economic status. It considers how queer Iranians' gender and sexual identities are informed by health issues (including mental health, trauma, and instances of violence), military conscription, relationships, community

integration, and activism. Finally, the chapter explores how our participants' experiences of (lack of) safety, stigma, discrimination, vulnerability, and persecution, influence their gender and sexual identities and often contribute to their decisions to leave Iran.

The third analytical chapter – Chapter 7 – explores how navigating legal procedures plays a role in our participants' gender and sexual identification journeys. We consider the range of legal paths our participants have followed, including asylum, resettlement, sponsorship, work, education, tourism, and family reunification. We consider our participants' perceptions of interviews with authorities, the importance of translation and interpretation, the quality of legal representation and access to legal aid, and the content of official decisions on asylum claims and other types of legal claims, including issues of credibility, stereotypes, and instances of Western bias. Crucially, we consider how our participants' gender and sexual identities are influenced by varying degrees of involvement with legal procedures.

Finally, in our concluding chapter – Chapter 8 – we reconsider the international story of identity formation and migration of queer Iranians, and highlight their strategies of survival and adaptation upon 'forced migration' and the ways in which the afterlife of Iran's premodern homosociality reverberating through the canon of Persian classical poetry is an important source for their creative self-imagination and sense of cultural community and historical continuity. The chapter also reflects on the ways in which the tension between the hybrid and fluid nature of queer Iranians' conception of their gender and sexual identity and the singular and stable frames and referents of Western immigration authorities can retraumatize queer Iranians in exile. But it also highlights experiences of resilience, struggle and self-rediscovery despite the wounds of homophobic and transphobic violence inflicted by the state and society. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the wider implications of our research for the study of gender, sexuality and migration in the Middle East and beyond.

## 4. Choice of terminology

As in any other field of research, and as is usually the case in literature on queer migrations (for example, Luibhéid and Chávez, 2020, pp 6–8), we have had to make clear and conscious choices in relation to terminology. When referring to our group of participants, we opted to use the expression 'queer Iranians in exile' as default. We understand the word 'queer' here as encompassing any non-heteronormative and non-cisgender person (and, more broadly, anyone challenging hetero- and cisnormative conventions and expectations), and 'in exile' as referring to anyone who does not feel able to return to their country of origin for fear of negative repercussions. Yet, in light of the complex and rich context of our subject-matter, we

have also opted to use a range of alternative terms throughout the book, choosing the option that best suits each context. Indeed, the social and cultural situatedness and constructiveness of categories such as gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity, homosexual, gay, transexual, and so forth, generate endless differences and relationships, both within and between the West and the East (Halperin, 2002; Waites, 2009). In the words of Plummer:

> And with all these categorizations comes the paradox: they control, restrict and inhibit whilst simultaneously providing comfort, security and assuredness. On an even wider scale, categorizations are attempts to order and structure the chaotic, complex and undifferentiated. To search for complexity is to undo categorization; to search for order is to categorize. Both seem necessary and thereby hangs the twist. (Plummer, 1981, p 29)

Consequently, we embrace the challenging of terms and notions, and value the range of potential meanings used by our participants, scholars, and activists alike. Throughout this book, we thus use expressions and acronyms such as queer, SOGIESC, and LGBTIQ+, as well as words in Farsi, as what is appropriate varies depending on the literature, topic, or aspect in question. By adopting a range of terminology dependent on context, we hope to avoid the essentialist-constructivist approaches to these debates 'in favour of a more contextualized and pragmatic perspective that does not erase the subjectivities of those who claim to feel or (dis)identify in a certain way' (Ioannides, 2014, p 119). Simultaneously, we acknowledge the historicization, social and individual performances, transnational debates, and contingent selves that underpin terminological and self-identification choices (Najmabadi, 2014, pp 294–298). Ensuring respect for our participants' self-definition and choice of terminology is the approach most consistent with our decolonial and theoretical framework of analysis (Chapter 2) (Nasser-Eddin and Abu-Assab, 2020, p 197).

In relation to our participants' migration journeys, we have avoided using the expression 'forced migration' as default on account of the recognition that reasons to leave one's country cannot be clearly divided into 'forced' and 'voluntary'. Rather, this is a false dichotomy and the reasons that lead people to migrate are most commonly of a hybrid nature (Gkliati, de Lange, and Mantu, 2023, p 5), and they can be more accurately seen as sitting on a continuum (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018). We have thus only used this expression when it was appropriate to do so in a specific policy or analysis context, and find it essential to problematize its use in this context. This is not to mean, however, that all forms of migration can be equally restricted and regulated, as some should indeed be entitled to greater degrees of protection

on humanitarian grounds (Goodman and Speer, 2007; Sajjad, 2018; Akoka, 2020; Lama and Norman, 2020; Hamlin, 2021). Similarly, the expression 'in transit' has become increasingly inapt for our participants in the Turkish context (Chapter 7), so we have only used this wording when it made sense in a particular context.

In terms of how we have chosen to refer to our participants and fieldwork, we have opted to refer to all migrant participants by first name only, using a pseudonym where requested, to protect their identities and avoid exposing participants to future danger, even when participants allowed the use of their surnames. In relation to supporters and activists, we have used their first and last names, if so requested by the participant in question. These decisions are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Rather than Türkiye – the country's official name – we have opted to use the traditional nomenclature of Turkey, as that is still the most widely used and how our participants most commonly referred to the country. Furthermore, we have used expressions such as West/East and Global North/Global South sparingly and critically, reflecting their contentious conceptualization and instrumentalization (Nasser-Eddin and Abu-Assab, 2020, p 194). In relation to different languages, when using Farsi words, we adopted a simplified version of the standard convention of transliteration, that is, we have followed the way words are currently pronounced in Iran.

Throughout the book, our choices in terms of terminology, structure, and analysis are led by our desire to do justice to the participants' voices and experiences. We seek attunement with the challenges, metaphors, and aspirations arising from our conversations with those who made time to speak to us. As clearly expressed by Maryia – now in the UK – the journeys taken by our participants are full of perils and obstacles, but also of hope and determination:

> I see my journey as climbing a mountain, in the storm. In really horrible weather. Where you don't even know, you are not even sure if you will ever survive and you think, like, you are dying and everything is finishing in the middle of the way. But then at some point, you keep strong, you keep very strong, and … it will get to a point that you get to the top of the mountain and you can see the other side. And the weather is not bad anymore. You still need to put some effort to go down to get to a normal life, but at least the path is easier now. There is no storm and there is no up-hills, you just need to keep strong. This is something that I can see my life journey as.

In the chapters that follow, we hope to have done justice to our participants' journeys and aspirations, as well as contributing to the concretization and demystification of the 'queer' and 'trans' (Stoffel and Birkvad, 2023) in

the particular case of the lives and experiences of queer Iranians in exile. This book's chapters also reflect the different voices and expertise of its co-authors. We consider this diversity to be one of the book's strengths and as contributing to its originality. We proceed by first delineating the theoretical underpinnings of our thinking and analysis, which subsequently colour to varying degrees the historical, methodological, and empirical chapters. In other words, the theoretical thesis expounded in Chapter 2 is then explored and applied through a multi-disciplinary analysis in Chapters 3–7, before we finally return to the theoretical foundations of the book in the concluding Chapter 8, closing the circle of this book. Each chapter also stands alone and can be read in isolation for anyone interested in one particular theme or perspective. However you choose to read this book, we wish you a wonderful journey.

2

# Reframing Queerness: The International Formation of Queer Identity in Iran

Imagine every departure,
an arrival, every bird,
a nest, every human,
a dream …
So there remains
the same story:
'There was one and there was none.'
An everlasting tale
of exile.

Pedram, Canada

## 1. Introduction

The negotiation of identity by queer Iranians in exile is bound up with the prior and broader question of the formation of queer identity in Iran. Contemporary debates on queer Iranians display normative hallmarks of international contestations over homosexuality that have been raging over the past few decades (Khatami, 2006; Shakhsari, 2012; Walsh, 2019; United Against Nuclear Iran, 2024). In these contestations, non-Western states claim to defend their societies' heteronormative culture against Western states and actors' queer imperialism (Massad, 2008; Rao, 2010; Shakhsari, 2014; McGlynn, 2020). Sara Ahmed pithily depicts this cultural battleground as one in which 'white queers [seek to] save brown queers from brown straights' (2011, p 126). For non-Western states and their 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci, 1986, p 18) this means the violation of postcolonial states' sovereignty, social cohesion, and cultural mores (Lakemfa, 2023).

Culture wars over queerness in Iran, and the Middle East more generally (Dalacoura, 2014, p 1291), are arguably the political corollary of academic debates over Eurocentrism in the fields of gender and feminist studies (for example, Hughes, 1992; Mojab, 1997; Ashaolu, 2023), and social sciences more generally (for example, Wallerstein, 1997; Bhambra, 2007). Eurocentrism is an intellectual perspective that derives its 'universal' categories from the 'particular' historical experience of Europe as the sole generator of modernity (Matin, 2013c). It therefore theoretically externalizes non-Western forms of developmental difference as ignorable anomalies (for example, Skocpol, 1982), which are, as a result, often pathologized (for example, Kurzman, 2005, p 7). The normative upshot of this theoretical operation is the attribution of cultural superiority to 'the West' over 'the rest'. Consequently, the West arrogates to itself the right, if not the duty, to civilize non-Western societies into threading the linear path of history charted by the West (Matin, 2013c). Queer imperialism can therefore be seen as the operation of Eurocentrism's historical, epistemological and normative hierarchy in the domains of laws, norms, and relations concerning gender and sexuality.

Eurocentrism has come under sustained critique over the last few decades. The most potent and fertile of these critiques have originated from the burgeoning field of postcolonialism (see, inter alia, Fanon, 1963; Said, 1978; Bhambra, 2007; Chakrabarty, 2007; Bhabha, 2012; Spivak, 2015). The anti-Eurocentrism of postcolonialism, and that of its intellectual sibling, 'decolonial theory',[1] is centrally articulated through the notions of 'colonial modernity' and 'coloniality', respectively. The former refers to the experience of modernity by non-European societies under European duress (Guha, 1983; Dabashi, 2006, pp 11–12); and the latter to the Eurocentric matrix of colonial power underlying Western modernity, which through its structural legacies continues to shape modes of being, feeling, seeing, thinking, and acting (Mignolo, 2007). At the heart of postcolonialism therefore lies a rejection of Eurocentrism's homogenous and homogenizing universalism based on a stadial history derived from European history. Normatively, this entails a sustained indictment of economic, epistemic, and cultural imperialism of the West against 'the rest' despite the formal-juridical equality of all states central to modern sovereignty.

Postcolonialism has proved an indispensable intellectual resource to the critique of Eurocentrism and to the development of critical social sciences more generally. But it has also been inadequate. In the rest of this chapter, first (Section 2) we outline analytical and normative problems of postcolonialism and discuss how a performative account of gender identity formation addresses some of these problems and yet carries its own limitations due to its theoretical insensitivity to 'the international', that is, the fact and consequences of 'societal multiplicity' (Rosenberg and Kurki,

2023). Second, we introduce the idea of uneven and combined development (UCD) as a non-ethnocentric general social theory that through its plural social ontology and its interactive conception of development, overcomes Eurocentrism without incurring postcolonialism's analytical and normative liabilities (Section 3). Third, we deploy UCD to retheorize the formation of the Iranian nation state as the wider and generative context of queer identity formation (Section 4). In so doing, we foreground the international determination of Iranian nationalism and the selective, and hence combined, nature of modernization that underlies the formation of the citizen-subject as a hybrid, liminal modern subject, and other amalgamated socio-political and cultural forms and practices involved in state-led modernization. We therefore show how UCD can account for, inter alia, the Islamic Republic's seemingly paradoxical treatment of non-cisnormativity, which includes simultaneous political homophobia and legal endorsement of sex reassignment surgery (SRS). Finally, we reflect on the ways in which our internationally sensitive approach can analytically illuminate the negotiation of identity by queer Iranians in exile, especially through transformative recovery of the homoerotic repertoire of classical Persian poetry that forms the literary dimension of the subjecthood in the subject-citizen (Section 5).

## 2. Antinomies of postcolonialism

Postcolonialism is arguably the most influential form of anti-Eurocentrism. It has reshaped all branches of social sciences over the last forty years or so since the publication of Edward Said's seminal book *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). And yet, postcolonialism also involves four main problems which have important implications for critical studies of the formation of gender identity and sexual orientation in non-Western contexts. First, postcolonialism's conception of 'colonialism' is, paradoxically, Eurocentric, that is, it implicitly defines its key category of colonialism by abstraction from European colonialism. As a result, it removes non-Western forms of colonialism and postcolonial states' violence against their 'otherized' communities, including queer groups, from its theoretical and normative purview (Dalacoura, 2014; Matin, 2022a; Ghazal Aswad, 2023). Second, postcolonialism's 'Eurofetishism' (Hobson, 2020, p 20) entails a strategic preoccupation with indicting the West as the 'singular source of evil' (Ghazal Aswad, 2023, p 364) and colonial violence, which arguably overstates Western agency and downplays non-Western agency (Táíwò, 2022). Third, in its susceptibility to 'orientalism-in-reverse' (Al-'Azm, 1980; Arghavan, 2017), postcolonialism has a latent tendency towards cultural essentialism and uncritical acceptance of an internal cultural unity that postcolonial nation-states espouse and violently uphold. And finally, and crucially for our purposes, postcolonialism's opposition to Eurocentric universalism is grounded in a poststructuralist theoretical

sensibility that rejects the very category of the universal rather than its Eurocentric construction. Postcolonialism's categorical rejection of 'the universal' therefore pre-empts the construction of an alternative non-ethnocentric general social theory (Matin, 2013c).

Intellectual strengths and weaknesses of postcolonialism in the academic studies of gender and sexual identities in the Middle East can be discerned in Joseph Massad's (2002) seminal text on the 'Gay International'. Massad defines the Gay International as Western discourse and organizations that seek, in a missionary style, to universalize Western forms of gender and sexual identity. He argues that the Gay International creates 'gays' (as subjects of an 'identity' rather than practitioners of a particular sexual behaviour) for its own purposes. It does so through identitarian emplotment of Arab[2] men displaying same-sex desires on the dualistic (straight versus gay) grid of Western gay rights discourse. This, he argues, involves an 'incitement to discourse' (Foucault, 1978, pp 17–35) that provokes repressive nationalist responses from Middle Eastern governments against those of their citizens whom the Gay International redefines as 'gays'.

Massad is of course right to highlight the West's cultural imperialism, which is manifest in the insistence of US and European states and human rights organizations on the universal nature of their Euro-American categories of gender identity and sexual orientation. And yet, in conflating the epistemological moment of the formation of gender and sexual categories and the politico-normative moment of their adoption by the would-be Middle Eastern 'gays', he elides the latter's agency and the political, historical, and semantic dynamics of the exercise of that agency (Najmabadi, 2012). Relatedly, in reducing Middle Eastern governments' homophobic violence to a political reaction to the West's cultural encroachment, Massad implicitly posits a pristine, unitary Middle Eastern culture, à la 'orientalism-in-reverse', and elides Middle Eastern states' proactive agency in committing homophobic and transphobic violence, thus implicitly exonerating them (Rao, 2010).

A performative conception of queer identity (Butler, 2006) has provided a potent perspective for steering away from Eurocentrism's false universalism and postcolonialism's tendency towards cultural essentialism and 'methodological dualism' (Kermanian, 2024), that is, postcolonialism's 'the West' versus 'the rest' frame of analysis. Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005c, 2012) has masterfully deployed this perspective to recast the formation of queer identity in Iran. Her account is strategically grounded in a critique of the Eurocentric conception of identity as the basic traits of 'a self with a deep interiorized psyche' (Najmabadi, 2012, p 171, 2014, p 6, passim). This enables a fluid and performative conception of gender and sexual identity in which the 'sense of self [or narrative of identity] is contingently constituted within particular nodes of relations, through what one does at a

given conjunction of networks of affection, work, play, and other spaces of social presence' (Najmabadi, 2014, pp 276–277). Through this performative turn, Najmabadi foregrounds queer Iranians' agency in the process of identity (re)formation. This in turn enables an analytical distinction between the arrival of modern categories of gender and sexual identity in Iran and the politically and culturally driven process of their adoption and translation. However, in Najmabadi's account, the international process of modern (nation-)state formation in Iran as the wider socio-historical context of the performative constitution of queer identity in Iran is under-theorized. This limitation of Najmabadi's account is particularly important given her own contention that the performative formation of queer identity in Iran, which involves the subversive negotiation of identity against and through state laws and regulations, simultaneously renders queer subjects legible for the state's practice of governmentality (Najmabadi, 2012, p 175). Najmabadi's performative account therefore theoretically over-represents the agency of queer subjects in the dialectic of state-society relations; a dialectic that is in turn overdetermined by the international relations of modern state-formation in Iran.[3] In other words, Najmabadi's performative approach addresses postcolonialism's problematic neglect of the agency of Middle Eastern queer subjects in selectively and strategically adopting (or rejecting) Western gay discourse in constructing and negotiating their identities against, within, or through the legal and political terrain they inhabit in their home countries. However, she undertheorizes that terrain in terms of the wider international processes of modern state-formation.

This circumstance is generated by a deeper problem in poststructuralism and modern social theory more generally. It consists of the fact that modern social theory, even in its critical strands, assigns an empirical and episodic rather than a theoretical and systematic status to 'the international' as 'that dimension of social reality that specifically arises from the existence within it of more than one society' (Rosenberg, 2006, p 308; Rosenberg and Kurki, 2023). In this sense, the international is not a passive spatial terrain on which modernity merely unfolds, but causal and constitutive of both Western and non-Western experiences of modernity. Thus, and more specifically, the 'situation' in Najmabadi's (2014, pp 294, 301) performative conception of queer narratives of selfhood as 'contingent horizontal *situational* conduct' is over-localized and conceptually excludes the structural and constitutive role of 'the international' in gender identity formation through ongoing processes of state-formation in modern Iran.

Building on the foregoing sympathetic critique of postcolonialism, in the rest of this chapter we seek to develop a theoretical framework that addresses the normative and analytical problems of postcolonial and performative accounts of queer identity formation in Iran. We do so through incorporating 'the international', as mutually constitutive of 'the social', into the historical

sociology of nation-state formation in Iran. We show why and how the international overdetermines social relations, cultural forms, and ideological discourses and thus enters the formation and articulation of gender relations and identities. The intellectual device to capture and operationalize this dynamic is the idea of UCD (Trotsky, 1985), especially its recent rearticulations in the discipline of IR (Rosenberg, 2006; Matin, 2007; Anievas and Matin, 2016). The ontologically plural conception of the 'social' central to UCD overcomes the problem of 'internalism' underpinning Eurocentrism, and postcolonialism's 'methodological dualism', cultural relativism, and aversion to general social theory (Matin, 2013c, 2022a). Through UCD, we bring theoretical unity and coherence to the brilliant analytical reconciliation of Foucault, Massad, and Najmabadi by Katarzyna Korycki and Abouzar Nasirzadeh (2014). We show that Korycki and Nasirzadeh's analytically distinct moments of queer identity formation in Iran, namely, erasure of premodern homosociality, modern heteronormativization of Iranian social space, and post-revolutionary formation of queer identity, are historically integrated through the international relations of modern state-formation in Iran. Their discursive enunciation corresponds to the formation and reconfiguration of what we call the 'subject-citizen' (Matin, 2013b, p 115): an emergent subjectivity produced by Iran's UCD that fuses the notions of 'citizen' and 'subject'. Insofar as 'identity' is concerned, 'citizen' denotes the modern, sovereign, right-bearing individual with a deep, interiorized self, and 'subject' refers to the premodern constricted, duty-bound persons defined through native communitarian identity and cultural discourse. It is the politically and historically determined modality of the subject-citizen that shapes the formation of the queer identity in Iran (and beyond) in and through the international. Before elaborating on this argument, we turn to the theory of UCD as a non-ethnocentric form of general social theory that overcomes Eurocentrism and is immune to the analytical and normative problems that postcolonialism involves.

## 3. Supplanting Eurocentrism: uneven and combined development

Eurocentrism is an internalist mode of comprehending modernity that begins and ends with Europe. It constructs its *general* categories through extrapolating a *particular* European experience of modernity. This involves a cross-cultural translation of European modernity that abstracts from the spatial dimension of social development and therefore produces developmental equivalence out of historical difference (Chakrabarty, 2007, p 17). Eurocentrism therefore individuates societies and encloses them within an abstract 'universal' European history (Matin, 2013c). Consequently, modern world history is conceptualized as a series of discrete re-enactments

of modernity's endogenous and autonomous emergence in Europe (Rostow, 1959; Mill, 1991; Fukuyama, 1992; Ferguson, 2011). Historical experiences of modernity that defy this purportedly universal history are rendered into theoretical externalities by Eurocentrism which dismisses them as ignorable cases of anomalous or pathological exception (Matin, 2013b, p 2).

Eurocentrism is rooted in internalism. Internalism assumes that phenomena and dynamics internal to a given society have theoretical and methodological primacy in explaining developments within that society (Tenbruck, 1994; Matin, 2013b). Internalism underpins and is reproduced through classical sociology's equation of 'society' and 'state' (Mills, 2000; Walby, 2003), 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002), and the 'comparative method' (McMichael, 2000) commonly deployed in social and political sciences. It is therefore unsurprising that postcolonialism, the intellectual nemesis of Eurocentrism, foregrounds colonial and imperial relations and interactions, in which the West always occupied a superordinate position, in its critique of Eurocentrism's flat ontology – an ontology that subtends Eurocentric approaches' stadial conception of development according to which different societies progressively resemble the modern West in a staggered process culminating in global socio-cultural homogeneity.

However, postcolonialism's critical edge is unnecessarily blunted by its ambivalent stance towards the category of 'the universal'. For postcolonialism *theoretically* rejects the universal but *methodologically* broaches it through deploying a specifically intersocietal method (Matin, 2013c, pp 369–370). The latter move is involved in postcolonialism's methodological foregrounding of violent and hierarchical colonial relations between the West and non-Western societies in analysing the latter's experience of modernity. This methodological manoeuvre, however, implicitly operationalizes a form of epistemological holism, which is a logical prerequisite of universal theory. Thus, postcolonialism's poststructuralist hostility towards the category of the universal as intrinsically repressive of difference a priori rules out the construction of an alternative, non-ethnocentric general social theory. And this in turn means that postcolonialism's anti-Eurocentrism is detained in its moment of critique, rendering it susceptible to normative relativism and cultural essentialism.

Postcolonialism's anti-universalism incurs two other important intellectual liabilities that we briefly touched upon in the introduction to this chapter, and that have important implications for our analysis of queer identity formation in Iran and other non-Western contexts. These are 'orientalism-in-reverse' (Al-'Azm, 1980) and 'methodological dualism' (Kermanian, 2024). In his classic critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the Syrian intellectual Sadiq Al-Azm (1980) argued that Said's conception of reality as discursive representation involves an epistemological relativism that reproduces the very ontological difference between the 'occident' and

the 'orient' of which Said accuses academic orientalism. This is because, by Said's own admission, representation is always already shaped by the representer's own cultural ambience and political agendas. And this in turn means that the 'true representation' of the 'other' is impossible, so all that is left is self-representation. But from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, self-representation is never identical with real 'self'. This is because the speaking subject is, Lacan argues, intrinsically split, leading to an unbridgable gap between the unconscious *I* of the enunciation and the grammatical *I* that represents the subject in textual form (Lacan, 1977, p 269). Self-serving self-representation lies at the heart of anti-colonial discourse of cultural authenticity that reproduces orientalism's ontological and epistemological dualism, but reverses its normative arrangement in a way that the non-Western culture is equal or superior to that of the West. Al-Azm gives 'Arab nationalism' and 'Islamic revivalism' as examples of this circumstance. This normative reversal can also be seen in the treatment of Islam by leading postmodernist intellectuals from Nietzsche to Žižek (Almond, 2007). Foucault's early seduction by Islamist revolutionaries in Iran is an important case in point, directly related to our argument (Afary and Anderson, 2005).

A corollary of postcolonialism's orientalism-in-reverse is the internal homogenization of non-Western societies as a prerequisite for their normative and (geo-)political encounters and confrontations with the West. Postcolonialism's homogenization of non-Western societies is implicated in, and reproduced through, its 'methodological dualism' (Kermanian, 2024), whereby colonialism is considered as exclusive to the West's domination of the non-West. This renders 'the West versus the rest' the central frame of analysis. Consequently, colonial violence within and by postcolonial states against (internal) subaltern groups, including queer communities, becomes theoretically illegible. It also normatively disqualifies those resisting 'postcolonial colonialism' (Young, 2001, p 20) from receiving support from progressive forces. This can indeed be seen in postcolonialism's tendency to being unreceptive, if not resistant, to the indictment of postcolonial states or actors for committing colonial practices in favour of its own paradigmatic indictment of Western colonialism and imperialism (but see Rao, 2010, pp 176–192). W. E. B. Du Bois's endorsement of Japanese colonialism in East Asia (Choi, 2003; Lee, 2015), Edward Said's (1991) denial of the Iraqi Ba'athist regime's use of chemical weapons against the Kurds (which is symptomatic of postcolonialism's general silence on anti-Kurdish colonialism: Matin, 2022a), and Joseph Massad's aforementioned dilution of Arab governments' homophobic policies and practices (2002) are just a few cases in point.

To recapitulate: the foregoing discussion has shown that the intellectual root of Eurocentrism lies in internalism. Postcolonialism's anti-Eurocentrism

is blunted by its ambivalence towards the category of the universal, which it deploys methodologically but rejects theoretically on the grounds of it being intrinsically repressive of socio-cultural difference. This ambivalence generates a series of second order problems, including 'orientalism-in-reverse', 'methodological dualism', and 'cultural relativism', which in turn problematize postcolonialism's accounts of the formation of subaltern gender identities and compromises its progressive politics of gender and sexuality. These problems are the result of postcolonialism's conflation of the category of the universal per se and its specifically internalist – and hence homogenous and homogenizing – construction in Eurocentrism. Thus, the universal can be rethought away from its Eurocentric formulation as the immanent self-transcendence of the particular à la Hegel and reconstructed as a radical amenability to, and constitutiveness of, alterity (Matin, 2013c). In other words, cultural homogeneity and the repression of difference that the internalist concept of the universal involves is not intrinsic to the idea of the universal per se. Rather, it is an effect of its specifically internalist construction in Eurocentric social theory. The universal therefore can be reconceptualized in an interactive way to embrace cultural heterogeneity, a move whose logical prerequisite is the ontological assumption of intersocietal difference and multiplicity. It is precisely this conception of the universal that lies at the heart of the idea of UCD, to which we now turn.

UCD was first developed by the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky (1985) to account for developmental peculiarities of the Tsarist Russia, which despite being industrially the least developed country in Europe, became home to the first socialist revolution in history. Trotsky implicitly overhauled orthodox Marxism's linear theory of history and stagist conception of development by incorporating into the heart of his historical sociology an ontologically plural conception of the social, that is, 'unevenness'. This meant that UCD diverged from the tradition of classical social theory, including Marxism, by departing from an ontologically plural conception of the social (Matin, 2013b, p 153). Consequently, social, cultural, and historical difference – the central problematic of postcolonialism – is indeed the fundamental premise of UCD.

From the basic premise of 'unevenness' flows the second premise of 'combination', that is, 'a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms' (Trotsky, 1985, p 27). This is because the constitutive elements of unevenness, that is, societies[4] of different size, ecology, geography, natural endowments, levels of development, cultural forms and so forth, interactively coexist.[5] Combined development is central to our account of the Iranian nation-state, which forms the broader context of performative formation of gender identity. It takes place through three key mechanisms: 'the privilege of historical backwardness', 'the whip of external

necessity', and 'substitution' (Matin, 2013b, pp 17–19). 'The privilege of historic backwardness' – in the words of Trotsky – 'permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages' (Trotsky, 1985, pp 26–27). 'The whip of external necessity' involves geopolitically shaped conditions of 'coercive comparisons' (Barker, 2006, p 78), that is, self-comparison with more powerful states under geopolitical duress, and 'defensive modernisation' (Matin, 2013b, pp 56–57). Finally, 'substitution' refers to the mobilization of various replacements, native and foreign, in 'backward' societies, for the agency, institutions, instruments, material, or methods of earlier processes of capitalist development (Matin, 2013a, pp 460–461).

The intrinsic unevenness and combination of the historical process means that 'development' is a fundamentally interactive and multilinear process. Thus, UCD captures – at the level of a 'general abstraction' (Rosenberg, 2006, p 319) – the interlocking of different societies' patterns of development, such that their interactive coexistence is constitutive of their individual existence and vice versa (Matin, 2013b). UCD therefore captures key consequences of societal multiplicity, that is, 'difference, coexistence, interaction, combination, and dialectical change' (Rosenberg, 2006, pp 135–141).

At this point, a note on the notion of 'backwardness' is in order, since it is commonly associated with the European colonial discourse of stagist history reproduced in modernization theory and its various iterations in the mainstream strands of the field of development studies – a discourse that, like postcolonialism, UCD also fundamentally rejects and indeed was first developed to counter. In Trotsky's formulation, and especially in UCD's refined versions in the discipline of IR over the past 25 years or so,[6] as well as in our use here, 'backwardness' has a very different meaning, as its combination with the term 'privilege' in the expression 'privilege of historic backwardness' should immediately suggest. As a concept of a lower level of abstraction than UCD, 'backwardness' signifies an inherently relational condition pertaining specifically to capitalist modernity.[7] It does not involve a moral judgement. Rather, it intends to demarcate a 'clear social and historical uniqueness' which terms such as 'less developed' or 'under-developed' do not convey (Knei-Paz, 1978, p 63). 'Savages' therefore can 'throw away their bows and arrows for rifles all at once, without travelling the road which lay between those two weapons in the past' (Trotsky, 1985, p 27). The possibility to 'adopt' advanced products and 'skip intermediate stages' signifies the developmental 'privilege' of 'backwardness', while the compulsion to adopt advanced products and technology highlights the 'whip of external necessity' under which non-capitalist states come. In Trotsky's use, 'the whip of external necessity' is therefore also a primarily modern phenomenon that includes developmental and institutional contrasts that capitalism imposes on

all non-capitalist polities. As a result, 'backward' polities, their political elites, and privileged classes in particular, pursue projects of political and economic modernization to maintain or restore political independence. Such projects, and their generative context of 'backwardness', therefore, pertain as much to European as to non-European contexts (Mirsepassi, 2000, p 11; Shilliam, 2009).[8] They are, however, particularly pronounced in societies such as Iran, which escaped direct Western colonialism. And, as our account in the next chapter shows, the state-led erasure of Iranian homosociality and the importation and coercive imposition of heteronormativity on society since the mid-19th century were the result of a 'consciousness of backwardness' (Shilliam, 2009) among Iranian political and intellectual elites. These elites viewed European cultural forms and norms as representing a modern standard of civilization that Iran had to adopt in its rite of passage into the modern world (Papoli-Yazdi and Dezhamkhooy, 2021, p 17). In the next section, we sketch the broad contours of this tormented passage through a broad account of the UCD of the Iranian nation-state.

## 4. The uneven and combined development of the modern Iran

Afsaneh Najmabadi (2014, p 1) begins her seminal book, *Professing Selves*, by noting how Western coverage of the legalized practice of SRS in Iran is imbued by an element of surprise: 'how could this be happening in an Islamic Republic?' For the Islamic Republic sanctioned sex changes and criminalized same-sex practices simultaneously, with the latter carrying the possibility of a death penalty. Najmabadi suggests that this surprise is symptomatic of a Eurocentric perspective on genders and sexualities in Iran, which explains them in terms of transnational diffusion of Western cultural and gender norms. She counters this Eurocentric approach with a perspective that understands the formation of gender and sexual identity in terms of a 'nexus formed not simply by transnational diffusion of concepts and practices from a Western heartland to the Rest' but also by Iran's 'sociocultural and political circumstances' (Najmabadi, 2014, p 3). This transnational-national nexus – with an analytical accent on 'the national' – is indeed central to Najmabadi's account of the formation of genders and sexualities in contemporary Iran.

Supplementing 'transnational' dynamics of the formation of gender and sexual identity with 'national' dynamics goes a considerable way in recovering the agency of queer Iranians in fashioning their gender identity and sexuality, something neglected in Eurocentric and postcolonial accounts. However, it elides the 'international' aspect of that same process of identity formation. 'International' dynamics are distinct from 'transnational' ones. Transnational dynamics occur *despite* societal multiplicity, that is, the political fragmentation of the world into multiple societies. By contrast, international dynamics occur

*because* of societal multiplicity (Rosenberg, 2022, p 19). The international dimension of modern development is particularly pertinent to any account of the modern formation of genders and sexualities, because it is central to understanding the formation and reproduction of the nation-state – a process that has involved political centralization and cultural homogenization, which form the wider context of the performative formation of genders and sexualities. The gender dimension of state-led cultural homogenization, as we intimated earlier, involved the erasure of premodern homosociality and the institution of heteronormativity. Superadding 'the international' to Najmabadi's biaxial account therefore enhances its analytical power through an explicit theoretical articulation of the nation-state as the mediator of the intersection of transnational and national dynamics. We do this through UCD, whose basic premise of societal multiplicity encompasses international, transnational, and national vectors and dynamics of socio-historical change. Crucially, a UCD-based account of nation-state formation also de-pathologizes peculiarities of the formation of genders and sexualities in Iran by demonstrating why and how hybrid social, political, and cultural forms are organic to, rather than anomalies of, modern development.

Let us now turn to Iranian nation-state formation. We noted earlier that nation-state formation involves cultural homogenization. But why? This is a centrally important question, for cultural homogenization involved the erasure of diverse forms of gender and sexuality by naturalizing the binarism of heteronormativity (Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016).

A recent UCD-inspired account of nation-formation (Matin, 2019) has shown that addressing this question requires retheorizing nationalism in terms of the intersection of capitalism and geopolitics. It is shown that following the rise of capitalism in England, British capitalism exercised mounting geopolitical pressure on non-capitalist polities coexisting with it, above all France. Lacking capitalist productive resources, France responded by mobilizing and regimenting its populations through political and cultural centralization. This was exemplified in revolutionary France's *Levée en masse* (the citizen-soldier) and the *Code Civil*. The French substitution of the 'impersonal collective' (Shilliam, 2009) of a culturally defined nation for Britain's 'abstract individual' thus became the blueprint for geopolitical survival in non-capitalist polities, from Japan and Russia to the Ottoman and Qajar empires. Like pre-revolutionary France, these decentralized, confederal tributary empires also rested on non-capitalist social relations. Their immediate response to capitalist geopolitical pressures was defensive modernization projects that combined political and administrative centralization with cultural homogenization as the key ingredients of nation-state formation. Cultural homogenization involved the universalization of one of several pre-existing cultural identities. In the case of Iran, this collective identity was Persian language and culture, of which Shia Islam

was a key element. Thus, from the early 20th century onwards the Pahlavi monarchy modernized and standardized Persian language and culture through its selective embellishment with modern European cultural ingredients, of which heteronormativity was a key element. This was because the precapitalist political class and intellectual elites of Iran and other non-Western countries fashioned their defensive modernization projects by comparing their societies with Europe, which was 'both a foe and a teacher' (Trotsky, 1985, p 26). This meant that they tended to see the source of their countries' 'backwardness' through a European orientalist lens that projected an image of cultural decay and inferiority, in which sexual promiscuity and homoeroticism was an imposing motif (Said, 1978).

The foregoing discussion also shows how UCD is different from, and improves upon, postcolonial accounts of non-Western nationalisms. The seminal statement of such accounts is provided by Partha Chatterjee (1986, 2012). Chatterjee argues that anti-colonial nationalisms are imitative of Europe only in the domain of 'outside/material' (that is, economy, statecraft, science, technology) and not in the 'inner'/'spiritual' 'domain of cultural identity' (Chatterjee, 2012, p 184). In the former domain, Chatterjee argues, 'the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed' (Chatterjee, 2012, p 184). Anti-colonial nationalism therefore establishes its sovereignty firmly in the cultural domain. Indeed, he argues that 'the greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture' (Chatterjee, 2012, p 184). The imposition of heteronormativity on Iran's pre-national homosocial culture contradicts this postcolonial axiom. That Iranian nationalism involved the proactive assimilation of European heteronormative culture at the price of the erasure of its own homosocial culture might be explained in terms of what a modernist sensibility might see as a disjuncture in Muslim societies between *de facto* and *de jure* treatment of homoeroticism. While Islamic Sharia law explicitly prohibited same-sex sexual acts, many predominantly Muslim societies, including Iran, accepted their practice. Indeed, in Persian classical poetry, attraction of adult males to pretty boys was often depicted as a superior form of love.[9] This tension was mediated and ameliorated through the development of a metaphoric literary sensibility which distinguished between 'lust' and 'love' and portrayed the real subject of love and affection in Persian poetry and literature to be God. This metaphoric manoeuvre has its roots in Shia Islamic philosophy, especially the works of Mulla Sadra (1981), who in turn had drawn on Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna) (1945 [1021]). In his *The Transcendental Wisdom in The Four Intellectual Travels*, Mulla Sadra (1572–1641) argues for the permissibility, even necessity, of non-lustful love for pretty, young boys on the grounds that it involved a form of pastoral care aimed at their spiritual perfection. In his words, 'divine providence has created in the souls of adult

men a desire for children and a passion for and love for young men with beautiful faces – so that this will be a call for them to discipline and refine them, perfect their imperfect souls, and lead them to the goals intended in creating their souls' (Mulla Sadra, 1981).[10] The distinction between 'lust', whose purpose is the propagation of human species, and 'love', whose aim is approximation to God and divine union, therefore became a key element in interpretations of classical Persian poetry's recurrent theme of same-sex love and affection and rationalized in terms of a spiritually motivated pastoral care. It is against this background of philosophical rationalization of same-sex love that the post-revolutionary Islamist state in Iran could portray the political and legal intensification of heteronormativity and homophobia, which its predecessors had imported from Europe as part of their attempt to overcome Iran's comparative 'backwardness', in terms of an anti-imperialist project of promoting cultural authenticity (Mirsepassi, 2000). Thus, the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic treated the heteronormativity it had inherited from the secular Pahlavi state as native and integral to the culture and identity of Muslim Iran, which was now engaged in a culture war against the imperialist Western countries whose liberal culture had become tolerant of same-sex relationships.

The violent replacement of homosociality with heteronormativity was not the only consequential substitution that the UCD of the Iranian nation-state involved. The replacement of the modern state for social classes in the process of capitalist development was another significant instance of substitution. It generated 'the citizen-subject', a hybrid form of subjectivity that combined premodern and modern traits. Through the concept of citizen-subject we capture a strategic aspect of the modern Iran that has great significance for the conceptual and analytical recovery of the role of the state in overdetermining the process of gender identity formation. Like the modular nation-form, the citizen-subject also emerged from a geopolitical inflection to the original process of capitalist development that occurred first in England. To understand this, we need to look at the *differentia specifica* of capitalist modernity.

According to the sociologist Derek Sayer (1991, pp 13–14), Marx distinguishes precapitalist and capitalist societies in the following basic terms. Precapitalist society is characterized by 'personal dependence'. By contrast, capitalist society is predicated on 'personal independence based on dependence mediated by things [commodities]'. Marx tended to view the organic evolution of societies from precapitalist to capitalist form as driven primarily by internal dynamics. He rarely considered the process and possible outcomes of the interactive co-existence of precapitalist and capitalist social forms as geopolitical entities in any systematic way (Matin, 2013b, p 119) – a circumstance that Ernst Bloch famously described as 'the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' (Bloch, 1977). In making this

suggestion, Marx was making a prognosis, since in his time capitalism was far from being globalized. And his prognosis proceeded by extrapolating from the only advanced instance of capitalist development, namely, England (Kaviraj, 2005). However, societal multiplicity means that the development of capitalism always involves intersocietal refraction, mutation, and synthesis of the anterior and modern forms. It was indeed this interactive property of modern social transformation that prompted Trotsky to formulate UCD to account for Russia's skipping of developmental stages.

From a UCD perspective, we can therefore observe how, by self-modernizing under international duress and utilizing means and opportunities that international relations offered (for example, modern Western administrative, military, and industrial methods, technology, and so forth), the Iranian state took on a leading role in socio-economic modernization. This leadership was significantly accentuated by the arrival of the massive oil revenues from the second half of the 20th century, which turned Iran into the textbook case of the 'rentier state' (Mahdavy, 1970).

Crucially, the substitution of an anachronistic absolutist state for bourgeois classes in capitalist development meant that the 'separation of the economic and the political' – the hallmark of English capitalism – underwent a particular transmutation in Iran. There was, on the one hand, a general process of socio-economic abstraction of individual producers from direct relations of personal dependency typical of tributary modes of production. On the other hand, this very same process was substantively effected and controlled by the state. Thus, these new socio-economically abstract subjects were simultaneously and paradoxically subject to direct political determination. It is this hybrid subject that is conceptualized by the notion of 'citizen-subject': a modern subject whose substantive socio-economic abstraction remains politically incomplete due to its political constitution by a modern impersonal bureaucratic nation-state. The 'citizen' part of this term signifies the traits and dynamics arising from 'primitive accumulation', that is, disentanglement from precapitalist relations of personalized political dependency. This disengagement is the sociological basis for the modern conception of identity around a deep, interiorized selfhood and thus the possibility for defining heterodox forms of gender and sexual identity as aberrational and pathological – in need of medical intervention.

The 'subject' part in 'the citizen-subject' signifies the consequential retention of traits and dynamics pertaining to precapitalist personalized political dependency. These traits were reproduced and valorized as a result of the political containment of the ramifications of the social transformation of premodern 'subjects' into modern 'citizens' by the rentier state. The 'subject' part also includes premodern forms of identity as conduct and practice rather than a deep psychological selfhood. In the context of Iran, these traits and

dynamics include Islamic ideology and cultural sensibility overdetermining relations of personal dependency characteristic of the bazaar-based mercantile economy and its petty bourgeois and lumpenproletariat components (Fischer, 1982).

In short, modern UCD in Iran gave rise to a social form that was marked by personal independence based upon dependence *mediated by the state* (Matin, 2013b, p 120). This meant that no civil society emerged as a protective belt for the Pahlavi capitalist state, which as a result was structurally brittle. Herein lies the fundamental reason for the rapid and unforeseen success of the 1979 revolution and the peculiar form of the post-revolutionary state that combined divine and popular sovereignties in the form of an 'Islamic Republic' (Matin, 2013a). The post-revolutionary process of formation of modern forms of gender and sexuality therefore can be better understood by tracking the specific modalities of the citizen-subject determined by the contingent intersection of transnational and national dynamics that the Islamic Republic mediated and articulated in the social, cultural, and legal domains. This observation is also key to understanding the apparent flexibility of the Islamic Republic which can accentuate the 'Islamic' or 'republican' element of its composite identity without crossing its self-defined line of ideological legitimacy. This also explains the possibility of arguably stark variations in gender policies of the Islamic Republic under 'reformist' and 'conservative' governments.

## 5. Migrating selves: UCD and refashioning queer identity in exile

The preceding sections demonstrated how the theoretical framework of UCD can enhance performative accounts of the formation of queer identity and sexuality by incorporating into their biaxial structure of transnational and national dynamics a third, specifically international, dynamic. However, UCD's analytical utility is not limited to aiding a more holistic and concrete account of the historical formation and modalities of queer identity in Iran. It is also useful in understanding conflictual negotiations of queer identity in exile. In order to demonstrate this, we first need to briefly look at the existing literature on queer identity in exile. This literature consists of two distinct but related streams: refugee and queer asylum studies (for example, Gartner, 2015; Najjar, 2020; Peyghambarzadeh, 2020; Danisi et al, 2021) and the emerging field of queer diaspora studies (Patton and Sanchez-Eppler, 2001; Wesling, 2008). The former field tends to focus on host countries and the causes of migration. By contrast, queer diaspora studies focus on the ways in which geographical mobility and spatial displacement produce new understandings and experiences of gender identity and sexuality. The two fields therefore intersect at the complex

nexus of identity, displacement, belonging, cultural preservation, and power dynamics.

Zooming in on the intertwined issues of identity and belonging can better illuminate the utility of UCD for an analysis that refashions queer identity in exile. We can begin from the seemingly counterintuitive observation by Johanna Garvey (2011, p 758) that 'there is no queer homeland, no single site from which queerness has been dispersed, forced to emigrate, or otherwise scattered into two or more locations'. The notion of homeland here is not merely geographical but political in essence. 'Homeland' is a space of recognition, integration and security, a space that queer subjects lack irrespective of the place they have left behind. Indeed, going into exile, to migrate under duress, is a political act towards the critical creation of such a space (Fortier, 2001, p 406). The spatial displacement intrinsic to diasporic life and the spatio-temporally fluid nature of 'queerness' are reflected in postcolonial diaspora studies' development of a conception of identity away from essentialist and primordial framings around 'nature' and 'culture' towards 'transgression, contingency, indeterminacy, … hybridity …, power and conflict' (Fortier, 2001, p 406). De-ontologizing identity is central to the postcolonial conception of identity and queer theories of gender and sexuality, so our study of queer migration ought to embrace a conception of 'home' not as 'origin' but as a 'destination' (Fortier, 2001) that is creatively produced through the production of community and continuity. Garvey's (2011) idea of 'spaces of queer (un)belonging, spaces that undo belonging while not leading to the destructive erasure of not-belonging', is particularly relevant here. Queer (un)belonging can host multiple identities, combat violent categorizations such as racism and sexism (Garvey, 2011, p 759), and resist enlistment for reactionary projects of 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2017).

A key aspect of the production of queer community and continuity in exile is the way in which queer subjects 'critically reappropriate their "past" and creatively redefine what is available to them by selective mix and match of "traditional" … ["native"] resources and "modern" ["foreign"] options' (Shahidian, 1999, p 192). Here 'traditional'/'native' and 'modern'/'foreign' broadly signify national and transnational resources whose intersection is, as we saw in discussing Najmabadi's account, a key site for the production of queer identity. These 'native resources' include 'a reservoir of cultural and social patterns "transported" from home' (Shahidian, 1999, p 191). New and critical spaces of queer (un)belonging as the undoing of abandoned spaces of non-belonging emerge out of the particular form of this combination of the native and foreign forms, values, symbols, patterns, and vocabulary. In this process, what is being undone is the juridical attachment to a state that denied queer migrants recognition, integration, and security, without the full erasure of belonging to socio-cultural space under that state's jurisdiction. And a key, understudied ingredient of the 'native' reservoir in the case of queer Iranians

is poetry, whose classical Persian cannon, as we noted earlier, is replete with the eulogization of same-sex relationship, affection, and desire. Poetry as an instrument of creative and subversive self-expression is a novel aspect of this work that embodies UCD's core logics of interactivity and combination at subjective and artistic levels. These logics also accommodate the postcolonial dictums on the centrality of non-essentialism and asymmetric power in socio-historical analysis.

Queer Iranians in exile selectively mix and match cultural and discursive resources belonging to different socialities and temporalities in order to create new forms of identity. This can be seen as the formation of a new modality in the composition of the citizen-subject, the hybrid subjectivity of Iran's UCD. Exile involves often arduous and tormented passages through, and stays in, transit countries. And our participants share many heart-wrenching stories of hardship in host countries. Nonetheless, once in host countries, they gain access to new discursive, cultural, and legal resources that are unavailable or restricted in Iran. In combining these resources with elements of the national cultural reservoir they carry, they create new, exilic articulations of the citizen-subject in which the native elements find new meaning and signification. These new articulations arguably involve a critical recovery of classical Persian poetry's homosocial ethics and ethos that were erased by the processes of state-led imposition of cultural homogeneity and heteronormativity that Iran's nation-formation involved.

To the extent that UCD is a general abstraction, it does not predetermine particular forms of the reformation of queer identities upon migration. Rather, it foregrounds basic axes of difference, hierarchy, and interaction that are relevant to the analysis of the specific case of the transformation of identity following migration. In this sense, UCD approximates what Sara Ahmed (2013, p 9) describes as 'failed theory', that is, a theory that construes the relationship between the particular and the general as never fully determined. Such a theory poses the question of the relation between 'the general' and 'the particular' always historically, so that 'it cannot be answered in a total or exhaustive manner' (Ahmed, 2013, pp 9–10). Part of the reason for this impossibility of a total or exhaustive answer to a historical question is the role of conscious agency whose exercise often, if not always, entails unintended consequences. UCD displays key features of Ahmed's notion of 'failed theory' to the extent that its second premise of combination foregrounds agency working with and through a diverse, though not infinite, set of resources at any given time and place. In our case of queer Iranians in exile, this set includes poetic and literary resources of Persian classical literature as well as particular forms of cultural discourse and subjectivity that Iran's modern UCD has generated and which queer Iranians in exile carry with(in) them. By recovering the role of agency involved in the combination of 'native' and 'foreign' resources, UCD can highlight the resilience of displaced queer

subjects while also interrogating the power dynamics and hierarchies that shape their experiences within transit and host societies.

## 6. Conclusion

Queer criticality consists of a fundamental challenge to 'the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse' (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, 2005, p 1). Indeed, queer theories' refusal of a 'clearly bound referent object' enables critical engagement with the '"regimes of the normal" beyond the sexual' (Richter-Montpetit, 2018, p 222). However, the understanding of 'queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent' (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, 2005, p 1) risks turning it into a 'fetishized abstraction' (Stoffel and Birkvad, 2023). And yet, theory is impossible without abstractions. Indeed, 'without strategies of abstraction the infinity of reality would overwhelm us' (Krishna, 2001, p 403). What is needed, as Stoffel and Birkvad (2023) persuasively argue by critically drawing on Karl Marx (1993), is a methodology that rests on concretizing abstraction through attending to their specific historical and social determinants. In this manner, abstractions are denied a supra-historical standing that erases the very historical relations and antagonisms from which abstractions have been crafted. Our argument in this chapter has been an example of such concretization. We have argued that there is a specifically international dimension to historical processes of the formation of gender identities and sexualities that is neglected in performative accounts. We have done so through UCD as a theoretical device that integrates national, transnational, and international axes of identity formation and is uniquely accommodative of conditions of hybridity, fluidity and mobility of subjectivities and subject positions.

Our deployment of UCD has also enhanced postcolonial queer theories by addressing their paradoxically Eurocentric conception of colonialism and subalternity, which has generated methodological and normative blind spots with respect to non-Western societies. These blind spots include the agency of non-Western states and actors in committing homophobic violence.

And finally, we have shown how UCD not only enables a more holistic understanding of the formation of queer identities in Iran but also aids conceptualizing the processes and practices of recasting queer identity in exile. This process involves the creative reappropriation of the available cultural and discursive resources of different spatial and temporal provenances, a process that is conceptually, logically, and historically digested by UCD.

Our use of UCD in the subsequent substantive chapters does not follow a linear pattern whereby UCD tightly and explicitly frames the empirical

accounts of various aspects of the formation and (re-)negotiation of gender identity in exile. Rather, we use UCD as a theoretically orientating device that furnishes 'multiple vantage points' (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2015, p 60) and therefore enables a conceptually multi-vocal narrative that is analytically agile and normatively sensitive with respect to the process and implications of socio-cultural displacement and exilic experiences. On this basis, the next chapter develops a historical sociology of same-sex relationships in Iran and their modern transformation over the longue durée. This provides the broader historical context for more concrete accounts of the evolution and negotiations of queer identity in exile in subsequent chapters.

3

# From the *Amrad* to 'the Gay': The Making of Queer Identity in Iran

O People who triumph over the verses of the Holy Book, arise!
For even the God of men found Himself powerless against His promise to you …

Rise and see that even in the Nahj al-Balagha Park,
the eloquence path does not pass through any straight line.

Amira, Canada

## 1. Introduction

There is an overwhelming body of evidence demonstrating the social prevalence of same-sex erotic relationships on the Iranian plateau over the past two millennia (El-Rouayheb, 2005, p 11; Habib, 2007; Babayan and Najmabadi, 2008; Floor, 2008). Throughout this extensive period, same-sex relationships, particularly pederasty, were not only socio-culturally tolerated but even tacitly condoned to the extent that their depiction became the leitmotif for expressing love in Persian classical literature, especially poetry, over many centuries (Floor, 2008, pp 279–365). Evidence also shows that during the premodern epoch, while there were relatively clear notions of masculinity and femininity, both gender and sexuality were temporally fluid and were viewed as forms of conduct rather than fixed identities that are biologically determined and have deep psychological roots in one's identity as selfhood. However, from the early 20th century, there occurred a sharp and rapid reversal in the cultural permissibility, social acceptance, and legal tolerance of same-sex erotic interactions. This reversal had two overlapping stages: the systematic erasure of premodern homosociality through the modern, centralized educational system and cultural productions, and

the legalization of homophobia in modern Iran through the systematic deployment of state power. Concurrently, heterosexuality was (and still is) promoted as the 'norm', and a dualistic conception of gender has been posited as the organizing principle of legal and cultural order.

This chapter tracks this complex history through the conceptual prism of uneven and combined development (UCD) developed in Chapter 2. It proceeds in three main steps. Section 2 provides an overview of the plurality and fluidity of premodern forms of gender and sexuality and explains cultural, jurisprudential, philosophical, and political circumstances that in their cumulative intersection enabled that plurality and fluidity. Section 3 shows how during the 19th and early 20th centuries the imperial encroachments of a modernizing Europe generated projects of defensive modernization that sought to erase premodern Iran's diverse culture of homoeroticism as a sign of 'backwardness', which was construed through self-comparison with the heteronormative Europe. This process reached considerable discursive prominence during and in the immediate aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution (1906) and was vigorously pursued by the Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1979). Through the vast apparatus of a centralized, bureaucratic nation-state, the Pahlavi monarchy implemented the socio-cultural and legal heteronormativization of Iran à la modern Europe. Section 4 examines the evolution of gender and sexuality under the Islamic Republic, which replaced the Pahlavi monarchy following the 1979 revolution. It shows how and why the Islamic Republic embarked on a politically driven ideological self-identification against the West, which has entailed the assertion of heteronormativity as a pillar of Iran's Islamic identity and the criminalization of non-heterosexual practices as 'deviant' and 'foreign' phenomena. It is in this nexus of national and international relations that Iranian queer subjects, including our research participants, have articulated their gender and sexuality as contingently and situationally (Najmabadi, 2014) interacting with both the Islamic Republic and the West.

## 2. Before the nation-state: explaining premodern homoeroticism

Zoroastrianism, the religion predominant in the Iranian plateau before the arrival of Islam in the 7th century CE, condemned male-male sexual intercourse as a sin. It also condemned heterosexual anal intercourse (Skjærvø, 2012). These condemnations suggest the common occurrence of same-sex sexual intercourse in pre-Islamic Persian Empires (Briant, 2002, p 269), a fact also reported by Herodotus (5th century BCE) and Plutarch (1st century CE) (Floor, 2008, p 281). Indeed, one of the main forms of tribute exacted from subject regions and populations by the Persian Empire was young girls and boys. The boys were castrated into eunuchs and employed

in the imperial court and the emperor's chamber, where they 'prostituted themselves' (Floor, 2008, p 281). An interesting etymological issue here, directly linked to the machoistic texture of contemporary Iranian nationalist discourse, is that in Middle Persian – the literary language of the Sassanian Empire (224–651 CE) – anal intercourse is described as *kun-marz*, which literally means 'buttock-rubbing' (Floor, 2008, p 82). In modern Persian, *marz* means 'border' as in the border of the state or homeland and the Arabic word *tajavoz* is used to describe both 'rape' and the 'invasion' of one country by another. Thus, Iranian nationalist discourse sanctifies the protection of the national borders of the 'motherland' against foreign invasion as a matter of masculine 'honour'.

The Muslim conquest of the Persian Empire in the 7th century and the conversion of much of the population to Islam did not significantly change the status quo of the endemic occurrence of same-sex relationships. The evidence of the existence of same-sex relationships among women in this period is comparatively limited but sufficient to conclude that it existed (Habib, 2007). Afzal al-Din Khaqani (Khaqani, nd), a 12th-century poet, has a famous *ghazal* (ode) observing the occurrence of tribadism among women in Baghdad. Floor (2008, p 320) relates a poem from the 13th century that describes erotic interactions between two women. He also invokes evidence dating back to the 9th century confirming the use of a 'leathered dildo called *machachang*' by women engaging in sexual interactions, suggesting the existence of same-sex relationships between women in the medieval period. Women's use of *machachangs* was referred to as *sa'atri* and the practice was called *sa'atar-bazi* (Floor, 2008, p 320). There was also the practice of 'sisterhood vow' (*khahar-khandegi*) (Afary, 2009, p 8), whereby two married women adopted each other as sisters and engaged in erotic interactions. The practice existed in the 19th century during the Qajar period (1789–1925), though it was probably much older and persisted till as late as the 1930s (Floor, 2008, p 351).

The type of same-sex relationship common in the period following the Muslim conquest was that between an older man and a young, prepubescent beardless male as the passive partner, or *amrad*.[1] This was due to the jurisprudential leeway provided by some *hadith*,[2] which entertained a certain ambivalence regarding sodomy and qualified its blanket sanction commonly inferred from the Quran.[3] Indeed, one branch of Sunni Islamic law, namely, the Maliki school of jurisprudence, permits pederasty under certain circumstances (Floor, 2008, p 309, fn 86). This explains the fact that almost all Muslim rulers as well as senior court officials and members of Muslim aristocracy often retained young boys throughout their lives. In fact, it was not uncommon for even adult men of high status to engage in sodomy. Shah Ismail I, the founder of the Safavi dynasty and the ruler who made Twelver Shia the state religion, reportedly had sexual intercourse

with his grand vizier, Mirza Shah Hoseyn (Floor, 2008, p 322; Papoli-Yazdi and Dezhamkhooy, 2021, p 67). Moreover, the Quran and *hadiths* explicitly recognize *mukhannas* (also spelled *mokhannath*) as a third gender, 'an effeminate but seemingly male person, passive homosexual, a she-male' (Floor, 2008, p 284). Since the Quran's sanctions against sodomy concern only men and some Muslim jurists allow a man to have anal intercourse with his own wife, it can be surmised that sex with *mukhannas* could find theological justifications among some Muslims, insofar as the hybrid gender of *mukhannas* was seen to have divine origin. However, in later centuries and as late as the Qajar era, it seems that *mukhannas* came to describe any 'adult man desiring to be an object of desire for adult men' (Najmabadi, 2005b, p 3).

As we have seen, the social presence of *amrads* and *mukhannases* was common throughout the premodern period. Indeed, male-male sexual relationships were so common in Qajar Iran that 'sodomy' has been described as the 'Persian vice' (Floor, 2008, p 335). However, a phallic conception of masculinity, which ascribed manliness and male power and vigour to the act of penetration, also predominated. That *amrads* were not necessarily seen as being dishonoured due to their passive role in the practice of pederasty was related to the temporally fluid conception of gender in the premodern period that excluded young boys from the category of 'men' as the subjects of masculine honour. Indeed, *amrads* could rise to high offices and important positions of power. The Safavi king, Shah Ismail I, was known to have been sodomized at the age of 13 by Mani Shirazi (Floor, 2008, pp 322–323).

Against this background, the obvious question arises as to how the Quranic sanction against sodomy and widespread practice of pederasty in Iran following the Muslim conquest can be explained. There are several intersecting circumstances that shed light on this apparent paradox. We briefly discussed two relevant circumstances earlier, namely, the perceived ambiguity of Islamic jurisprudence regarding male-male sexual relations, and the temporally linear conception of gender, whereby a prepubescent beardless male person was not yet a 'man' and therefore not covered by the Quranic prohibition of sodomy, which was interpreted to cover adult men only. The third important circumstance (briefly discussed in Chapter 2) is related to philosophical justifications developed by some Muslim scholars, including Mulla Sadra (1572–1641), whereby a clear distinction is made between 'lust' and 'love'. Mulla Sadra argued that non-lustful love for pretty, young boys is not only permissible but even necessary because it involved a form of pastoral care aimed at their spiritual perfection. Mulla Sadra derived his argument from Ibn Sina's famous text *A Treatise on Love* (Ibn Sina, 1945 [1021]) whose fifth section is entitled *On the Love of Those Who Are Noble-Minded and Young for External Beauty*. Ibn Sina's argumentation is predicated on a fusion of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies. He adopts the Platonic tripartite division of

the soul into 'nutritive-appetitive, emotional-animal, and rational parts', whose value and significance ascend in a linear fashion (1945 [1021], p 210). Plato advocates the suppression of the lower parts of the soul en route to the perfection of the highest part. But Ibn Sina applies an Aristotelian logic to this linear conception, reconstructing it as a hierarchical and harmonious normative order. In so doing, his argument is precociously semi-Hegelian, as it implicitly involves the notion of 'subsumption' (*Aufhebung*), whereby the attachment of the normatively lower (instinctive) parts to the higher (rational) parts elevates the former in value. Thus, 'whenever any of the faculties of the soul is conjoined with another higher in rank … the result of this alliance with such excellence will be an increase in nobility and ornament for the lower faculty' (Ibn Sina, 1945 [1021], p 218).

Ibn Sina also makes two other assumptions, namely, the highest and purest form of love is the love for God as 'the first object of love', and love involves a desire for unity with subjects of higher forms of value represented by their harmony and order. Thus, he argues that 'both the rational and the animal soul – the latter by reason of proximity to the former – invariably love what has beauty of order' (Ibn Sina, 1945 [1021], p 220). Ibn Sina therefore constructs a logical link between beauty (harmony and order) and love as desire for unity with that beauty: 'it is part of the nature of beings endowed with reason to covet a beautiful sight; and that this is sometimes … to be considered as refinement and nobility' (Ibn Sina, 1945 [1021], p 220). On this basis, Ibn Sina distinguishes between 'lust' and 'love' as the expressions of natural-instinctive and rational-spiritual forms of desire for unity and beauty. The former occupies a lower normative rank. He therefore argues that:

> if a man loves a beautiful form with animal desire, he deserves reproof, even condemnation and the charge of sin as, for instance, those who commit unnatural adultery … but whenever he loves a pleasing form with an intellectual consideration … then this is to be considered as an approximation of nobility and an increase in goodness. (Ibn Sina, 1945 [1021], p 221)

The key passages which explicitly license same-sex physical contact – though not intercourse – come towards the end of the fifth section of Ibn Sina's treatise on love. There he argues that 'three things follow from the love of a beautiful human form: (i) the urge to embrace it, (ii) the urge to kiss it and (iii) the urge for conjugal union with it' (Ibn Sina, 1945 [1021], p 221). He describes the third urge as related to 'animal soul' and 'hideous' but allows it to occur if its fulfilment has a 'rational purpose', that is, 'the propagation of species … [which] is impossible with a man, and with a woman who is forbidden by religious law it is abominable. It is permissible and may find approval only in the case of a man with either his wife or female slave' (Ibn

Sina, 1945 [1021], p 222). It is on this philosophical basis, which has, it ought to be noted, earlier counterparts in the works of Al-Farabi (870–950) and *The Brethren of Purity* (9th century), that subsequent Muslim philosophers such as Mulla Sadra justify love for young beautiful boys, whose lower level of rational evolution given their young age means they will benefit from attachment to older, wiser men who have a more developed rational faculty and can therefore perform pastoral and pedagogic care aimed at spiritual perfection. In their cumulative evolution, these arguments seem to have philosophically, and arguably theologically, subtended the Sufi practice of *nazar* (gaze), whereby 'Sufi men would gaze at attractive pubescent boys as a sign, or witness (*shahed*) of the beauty of God' (Floor, 2008, p 296). The practice is also known as *shahed-bazi* (the witness game), during which 'the meditating sufis might be overcome by ecstasy during the spiritual [dance] (*sama*) and make physical contact with the boy leading to more intimate contact' (Floor, 2008, p 296). These philosophical arguments can also explain the fact that classical Persian and Arabic poetry was replete with explicit references to wine, women and pretty, young boys on the implicit ground that '"poets say what they do not do" hence allowing for a peaceful coexistence between the sensual ideals … and the rather more austere ideals upheld by religious jurists' (El-Rouayheb, 2005, p 111).

However, as mentioned previously, in reality such instances of love often went beyond a merely spiritual form, especially given that physical contact such as kissing and embracement was not explicitly prohibited as Ibn Sina's treatise clearly suggests. This was reenforced by a political circumstance that concerns the meaning and function of the Sharia in the centuries preceding the rise of Islamic revivalism, the predecessor of 'political Islam', in the 19th century. For much of the history of Islam, the Sharia was primarily 'a religious, scholarly, and holistic field of social reflection and deliberation' (Jung, 2007, p 33). Its remit was limited to 'the areas of personal status and religious endowments' (Schacht, 1982, p 89). During the *Tanzimat* (reforms) period in the Ottoman Empire in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, preexisting secular law called *Kanun* was codified and expanded and further limited the Sharia. In Qajar Iran, the judicial system was also de facto divided into the Sharia courts run by the *ulama* (clergy) and administrative or customary (*u'rf*) courts managed by the state (Keddie, 2003, p 29). It was Muslim societies' tormented encounter with the modern European states and the consequent projects of 'defensive modernization' and the rise of modern nation-states in Muslim majority countries that set in motion a process of legal modernization whereby Muslim reformers emulated the European tradition of positive law. Consequently, the Sharia 'acquired the character of a rather fixed set of rules enforced by the coercive means of the modern state' (Jung, 2007, pp 31, 33). In the absence of a positive, universally applicable body of Islamic law, it was the state, in effect the Muslim sovereign, that is,

the caliph or the monarch, who controlled the administration of justice. And given the aforementioned ambiguities of the Islamic tradition regarding same-sex erotic relationships and the philosophical reasoning on and distinction between 'lust' and 'love' discussed earlier, same-sex relationships, pederasty in particular, had considerable legal and political space for development. To this, one can also add the implication of the fact that Shia *ulama* were initially financially dependent on the state. This is likely to have compelled them to articulate theological justifications for the same-sex relationships already practiced by their patrons as fait accompli. This argument is, for example, relevant to the case of Mulla Sadra, who rendered more explicit the argument by Ibn Sina on the permissibility, even necessity, of pastoral care and tutorial love for young boys, a philosophical euphemism for pederasty.

The foregoing overview of same-sex relationships in the premodern period shows that while there was a dominant phallic conception of masculinity, which had likely co-emerged with patriarchy and the state during the Sumerian period (5000–1800 BC), a fluid, practice-based plurality of genders and sexualities existed that reflected political and cultural decentralization. This circumstance cannot be mapped onto modern dualistic conceptions of gender and sexuality as expressions of deep identities with psychic roots. Indeed, many adjectives that are contemporarily exclusively used to describe feminine bodies and beauty were applied to both men and women in the premodern period (Najmabadi, 2001, pp 89–90). Similarly, the modern categorical distinction between the 'public' and the 'private' did not exist and sexual practices took place in various places, from homes and [public] baths, to gardens and alleys, and other public spaces (Papoli-Yazdi and Dezhamkhooy, 2021, pp 46, 68). Neither were same-sex relationships a cultural or normative taboo; instead they were consistently and explicitly referred to in classical literature and poetry.

This diverse culture of homoeroticism began to radically change during the Qajar era (1789–1925), as the country came under growing and direct European geopolitical pressure and cultural and intellectual influence. This circumstance led Iran's modernist intellectuals to construct a direct link between Iran's comparative backwardness and its culture of homoeroticism and homosociality. With the rise of the Pahlavi state and the coercive foundation and consolidation of the modern, centralized and unitary nation-state of Iran in the early 20th century, a dualistic conception of gender and sexuality, along a culture of heterosexuality, was legalized and became hegemonic. These transformations are the subject of the next section.

## 3. Iranian modernity: erasing homoeroticism, imposing heterosexuality

The Qajar dynasty came to power in 1789, the year of the French Revolution. This historical coincidence is rather suggestive. The French Revolution is

generally viewed as the political revolution of modernity. It was caused by the geopolitical impact of the rise of capitalism in England, the economic revolution of modernity. The geopolitical ramifications of these economic and political revolutions of modernity were acutely felt in Qajar Iran from the early 19th century onwards. The Russian Empire, which was rapidly industrializing under the geopolitical pressures of the more advanced West European countries, was expanding southward into the Caucuses and Central Asia, seeking a direct route to the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, while British colonial rule over India animated Britain's policy of maintaining a strategic buffer zone around the subcontinent against Russian threats to India. Iran was therefore strategically important to both British and Russian empires. Caught in the Anglo–Russian pincer movement, the Qajar state's survival increasingly rested on diplomatic acrobatics and alternating economic and trade concessions to the imperialist rivals. The Qajars sought to balance the imperial ambitions of both Britain and Russia through a strategy of dual appeasement, granting each power sufficient influence in Iran to deter either from formally colonizing the Qajar state. In the short run, this peculiar balancing propped up Qajar rule, but its deeply contradictory nature was ultimately self-destructive. It antagonized the powerful *bazaar-ulama* (merchants-clergy) alliance, whose economic interests and privileges were being eroded by the growing extent of trade and economic concessions made to foreign European powers (Matin, 2012, p 50). The *bazaar-ulama* alliance was soon joined by liberal nationalist and social-democratic intellectuals and activists in promoting the idea of a constitutional monarchy supervised by a parliament. Radicalized by the monarchy's resistance to reforms, the constitutionalist movement soon turned into an urban revolutionary movement that culminated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, commonly seen as the birth of Iranian modernity.

During the century from the Qajars' first military defeat by Tsarist Russia in 1813 to the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, Iran's intellectual and political elites engaged in a sustained exercise of 'coercive comparison' (Barker, 2006, p 76). As we saw in Chapter 2, coercive comparison is a key mechanism of UCD. It refers to the critical introspection of backward states' elites through the prism of what they perceive to be the sources of the superior power of the more advanced states they confront. It is in this process that the 'threatening Western foe becomes a teacher' (Trotsky, 1985, p 25). However, there was a basic contradiction in the process of emulative development resulting from coercive comparison. This contradiction consisted of the fact that the material basis of modern European states' power was capitalist social property relations, which became dominant first in England from the 16th century onward. However, the development of capitalist property relations in precapitalist states such as the Ottoman and Qajar empires required the destruction of premodern tributary forms of social property relations on

which these states rested. Consequently, in their defensive modernization projects, these late-comer states were, in the first instance, attracted to the more visible, political, and cultural aspects of European modernity for which Victorian England, post-revolutionary France, and post-unification Germany were paradigmatic models. And central to these model states were military modernization, political centralization, and cultural homogenization, key ingredients of most nation-states.

With administrative and political reforms failing to take hold due to stiff resistance by the Shia *ulama* (Abrahamian, 1979; Afary, 1996), the attention of the elites was further concentrated on socio-cultural issues, including gender relations. By the late 19th century three broad and overlapping discourses on modernity emerged: Iranian nationalism, social democracy, and religious conservatism. These discourses differed in their stance on gender relations (Afary, 2009, p 111). The nationalist discourse 'gave women greater authority within the home [without] radically [altering] existing gender and sexual patterns or [challenging] the Sharia in terms of family and personal law' (Afary, 2009, p 111). The social-democratic discourse was more progressive thanks to its radical provenance in Russian Marxism. It arrived in Iran via a large community of Iranian migrant workers employed in the oil and mine industries in Azerbaijan and Armenia, where they were exposed to the revolutionary politics of Russian social democracy, the predecessor of the Bolshevik (Communist) Party (for relevant statistics, see Afary, 1996, p 22). Thus, in addition to the nationalist agenda on gender, the social-democratic discourse also sought to 'redraw the boundaries between the public and the private arenas and alter many gender norms' even if these clashed with the Sharia (Afary, 2009, p 111). The discourse of religious conservatism was hostile to European modernity and opposed any reform that undermined patriarchy. It considered 'women's education … industrialization, urbanization, and democracy as threats to the established order' (Afary, 2009, pp 111–112).

The development of these three discourses was gradual. It was driven by the growing interaction with Europe during the 19th century. Iranian intellectuals and politicians were initially shocked upon encountering modern European gender norms but then proceeded to accommodate them to varying degrees (Afary, 2009, p 112). Elite Iranian men were indignant at the institutionalized monogamy of Europe, and unaccustomed to the public display of European women's bodies and faces. They tended to equate the latter with promiscuity and even prostitution.

The initial, subjective resistance of Iranian elites to gender norms and mores of modern Europe was eroded by the painful realization of Europe's objective superiority in military, economic, technological, and scientific domains. This paved the way for a growing repudiation of conceptions and practices of gender and sexuality common in Qajar Iran. Soon many members of Iran's

political and intellectual elites, especially those with a Western education, associated monogamy, heterosexuality, and women's freedom with modernity and progress. Their coercive comparison of Qajar Iran with Europe also led them to associate polygamy, same-sex relationships, and the veiling of women and restrictions on their public presence with 'backwardness', which they desperately sought to overcome. They also began to articulate what by the time of the Constitutional Revolution became a new hegemonic masculinity that linked patriotism, progress, and development to being a 'real man' (Balslev, 2019, pp 89–121). It is noteworthy that the affirmation of heterosexuality and opposition to same-sex relationships were shared by both secular and religious discourses on modernity, given that religious intellectuals and members of the Shia *ulama* could readily find support for them in the Quran. Women's rights were a different issue, however. The Quran (for example, 4: 1–15) describes women as inferior to men, implicitly rejects companionate marriage, that is, marriage based on mutual affection rather than traditional expectations, and allows the male practice of polygamy though with some conditions attached (Moghissi, 1999; Mojab, 2001). Thus, there occurred a convergence of the positions of secular and religious political forces on eliminating same-sex relationships, pederasty in particular. Beset by a 'consciousness of backwardness' (Shilliam, 2009, p 6, passim), the intellectuals of these forces construed a causal link between progress and modernity on the one hand and the elimination of same-sex relationships and promotion of heterosexuality on the other. This homophobic ideological alliance meant that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries the main issue in the domain of gender and sexuality that separated liberal and social-democratic forces and discourses from the nascent discourse and practice of political Islam was women's rights and duties.

Attempted reforms of the gender status quo were initially focused on restricting polygamy and abolishing divorce by repudiation, a practice allowed by Islamic law whereby men have the unqualified right to divorce their wives. From the mid-19th century onwards and following the repression of the Bahai religion and its offshoot of Babism, both of which held more progressive views on women's rights (Afary, 2009, p 114), the mantle of improving women's condition was assumed by secular freethinkers such as Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh (1812–1878) and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1854–1896). Akhundzadeh promoted companionate marriage and women's rights and attributed the contemporary rightlessness of Muslim women to early Islamic practices, including those of the prophet Mohammad. Kermani, a founding figure of Iranian nationalism (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, p 454; Mohammadpour, 2024, p 5), decried the 'evils of the veil, age differences in marriage, and polygamy', which he perceived to have Arab origins, and noted the link between venereal diseases and sexual promiscuity entailed in the Shia institution of 'temporary marriage' (*sighe*) and pederasty (Afary, 2009, p 117).

Akhundzadeh and Kermani opposed same-sex relationships and associated the prevalence of pederasty with women's compulsory veiling and their exclusion from public spaces. These practices, they argued, undermined heterosexual marriage by limiting the interaction between opposite sexes (Afary, 2009, p 118). Their discourse involved a simultaneous advocacy for heterosexuality as progressive and virtuous and an assault on 'homosexuality' for being backward and sinful. At the same time, this emerging discourse of normative heterosexuality reproduced the masculine and patriarchal traits of European discourses on gender and sexuality it selectively emulated.

The growth of the modern imitative discourse on normative heterosexuality found some measure of legal support from the Constitutional Revolution, which abolished the institution of *harem*, thus preventing the king and courtiers from having multiple wives and concubines (Afary, 2009, p 129). The post-revolutionary parliament also abolished domestic slavery. The political radicalism and secularism of the key forces of the Constitutional Revolution frightened many Shia clerics, most of whom rejoined the royalist camp following their early support for the revolution. A key battleground between secular and religious forces was print media, whose emergence was arguably one of the most prominent features of modern politics during the late Qajar period. The satirical periodical *Molla Nasreddin* was particularly influential. Published by Azerbaijani social democrats in the Caucasus, *Molla Nasreddin* began to articulate a modernist, progressive discourse on gender relations that invoked Quranic support for its promotion of heterosexuality and linked progressive reforms in women's social condition and status in family to eliminating same-sex relationships between males. The main thrust of *Molla Nasreddin*'s discourse on gender and same-sex relationships shaped much of the debate on these matters over the next decades and contributed to the recoding of adult male desire for an *amrad* as unnatural (Najmabadi, 2005b).

The Constitutional Revolution's bourgeois-democratic reform project was soon frustrated by the royalist counter-revolution backed by Tsarist Russia. The 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the growth of the Bolshevik-backed Iranian communism frightened Iran's nationalist and liberal elites, who consequently increasingly sympathized with the wealthy and privileged classes' urgent quest for a strong ruler who could re-establish Iran's independence, restore order, and contain communism. The man who emerged to become this strong ruler was Reza Khan Sawad-Koohi (1878–1944), an officer in Iran's Russian-trained Cossack Brigade. Backed by Britain, he crowned himself as Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925, ending the Qajar dynasty and establishing the Pahlavi monarchy, which lasted until 1979 (Matin, 2013b, pp 69–70).

Reza Shah's 'authoritarian modernization' (Atabaki and Zürcher, 2016) continued the basic pattern of Iran's modern combined development

inaugurated by the Constitutional Revolution, which had grafted modern political, cultural, legal, and bureaucratic forms and institutions upon a premodern social structure based on tributary and semi-feudal agriculture. It normalized heterosexuality and criminalized same-sex relationships through cultural and legal reforms. The former was effectuated through promoting 'patriotic motherhood' (Kashani-Sabet, 2011), of which the hallmark was the 1936 decree on the compulsory unveiling of women (Kashani-Sabet, 2011, p 156). The Pahlavi state thus linked patriotism to both women's childbearing and child-rearing capacities and their visibility in social and economic domains, which in turn required unveiling and gender de-segregation.

Another key policy of Reza Shah was the marginalization of the Shia *ulama*, whose social role he limited by abolishing Sharia courts. This confined Shia *ulama*'s authority to matters concerning 'marriage, divorce, and the appointment of guardians' (Afary, 2009, p 153). Reza Shah's new Civil Code raised the legal age of marriage for girls from 9–15 and for boys from 15–18. It also required the official registration of marriage contracts, which allowed the stipulation of the right to divorce should the husband take a second wife (Afary, 2009, pp 153–154). Nevertheless, men retained the right to divorce by repudiation and a new Penal Code legalized 'honour killing' by stipulating no punishment for a man who killed his wife and her accomplice for committing adultery (Afary, 2009, p 154). Interestingly, the Pahlavi law regarding honour killing was based on Article 324 of the 1810 French Code on 'crimes of passion' (Afary, 2009, p 154).

Same-sex relationships were directly addressed in the 1933 Penal Code, which prescribed a prison term of 3–10 years for the rape of boys and 1–12 months for encouraging a youth of either sex under the age of 18 to pursue illegal sexual activities, including *levat* (sodomy) (Afary, 2009, p 160). The combination of legal sanctions against and cultural denigration of same-sex relationships led to a severe diminishing of homosocial spaces and the growing invisibility of same-sex relationships. This invisibility was not limited to the social domain and was also extended to art and literature. Modern schools, with their centrally designed curricula, offered Iran's intellectual elites a powerful leverage for advancing their campaign for normative heterosexuality. Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946), an historian and a judge during Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign, was particularly prominent in this regard. During the 1930s and 1940s, he exercised considerable influence on the government's cultural and educational policies through his relentless public advocacy for purging from school textbooks the homoerotic themes so common in classical Persian poetry. Indeed, Kasravi founded a new secular religion called *Pak Dini* (Purity of Religion) with a ritual held at the winter solstice in which 'immoral and harmful books were thrown into a bonfire' (Afary, 2009, pp 163–164). This homophobic purge of school textbooks was a challenge for Iran's nationalist government for two interrelated reasons.

Classical Persian literature was, as we have seen, replete with explicit portrayal of same-sex relationships, especially between an adult man and a prepubescent male. And yet, the ideology of Iranian nationalism construed classical Persian literature as central to the cultural identity and the purportedly millennia-old existence of the Iranian nation. It was arguably in their attempt to address this challenge that many Iranian intellectuals argued that the real love object of classical Persian poems was a woman (Afary, 2009, p 175) and that these poems 'should be taken not literally, but as symbolic expressions of lofty ideas and themes' (Jazayery, 1973, p 199). The argument about the spiritual symbolism of classical Persian poetry became central to post-revolutionary discourse under the Islamic Republic.

Reza Shah's pro-Nazi sympathies and Iran's strategic location led to the occupation of Iran by the British and Soviet armies in 1941 (Foran, 1993, p 245). The Allies forced Reza Shah to abdicate in favour of his son, Mohammad Reza, whose reign came to an end with the 1979 revolution. Under the second Pahlavi monarch, the normalization of heteronormativity continued apace. Two milestones in this process were the granting of voting rights to women (1963) and the passage of the Family Protection Law (1967), both of which were opposed by the Shia *ulama*, of whom Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was emerging as a radical, oppositional voice. The Family Protection Law of 1967 gave women certain rights to divorce but still allowed men to take a second wife provided certain conditions were met. Regulations for temporary marriage were also made stricter. The legal age of marriage was also raised to 18 for women and to 20 for men. As a result, the number of woman-initiated divorces and divorcee women living independently increased (Afary, 2009, pp 216–218). Under the influence of second wave feminism in the West, literary works by women increased. These works bore the signs of a female worldview and represented women's preoccupations, relationships, and desires, including sexual desires. This trend was exemplified by the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad (1934–1967). This indirectly reflected the impact of the ongoing consolidation of heteronormativity that involved a continuation of the marginalization and demonization of same-sex relationships. Nevertheless, by the 1970s and as the presence of and interaction with American and European advisors increased, 'a small gay male subculture was gradually taking root in elite circles of Tehran' (Afary, 2009, p 243).

In a social structural sense, the most consequential aspect of the second Pahlavi period was the formation of the new hybrid agency of the 'citizen-subject' described in Chapter 2. Land reforms dissolved feudal relations in rural Iran. The concurrent industrialization project undermined the guild-based mercantile economy of the bazaar. In their totality, these social transformations gave rise to the 'abstract individual', a person detached from the communitarian relations in which they were implicated and

through which they were defined. The mediation of social relations through commodity exchange amplified the experience of personal atomization and individual autonomy. It was within this context that the Eurocentric notion of identity as a particular form of selfhood, that is, the basic traits of 'a self with a deep interiorized psyche' (Najmabadi, 2012, p 171), took hold. This also entailed the possibility of a dualistic, man-woman conception of gender with a corresponding conception of heterosexuality as the norm. Any perceived disjuncture between gender identity and sexual practice could therefore be pathologized and become amenable to medical intervention. However, the political subordination of the abstract individual in the highlighted sense to an autocratic state meant that, in the late Pahlavi Iran, the abstract individual was simultaneously both a 'citizen' and a 'subject'. The political autonomy entailed by the former was repressed by the political dependency of the latter, which rested on premodern notions and practices of governance based on social hierarchy. The subject part of the 'citizen-subject' also carried the potentially recoverable memories of the diversity of gender and sexuality of premodern homosociality discussed previously. The citizen-subject was therefore a liminal subjectivity prone to insurrection. Its political expression was the 1979 revolution.

The road to the 1979 revolution was paved with the dynamics of UCD. As we saw, traumatized by their consciousness of backwardness, Iranian secular intellectuals' approach to Western modernity was initially summed up in the (in)famous dictum by the dean of Iranian nationalism, Hassan Taqizadeh, who in 1920 argued that what was absolutely necessary for Iran was 'the unqualified acceptance and adoption of European civilization' (cited in Matin-Asgari, 2018, p 56). However, from the mid-20th century onwards, it became increasingly apparent that Iran's experience of modernity was not a carbon copy of its liberal European form. Thus, many secular and religious intellectuals began to adopt a rejectionist approach to the West. This political radicalism was solidified by the Pahlavi state's growing integration into the US-led Western bloc. Following the Anglo-American backed coup against the nationalist government of Mohamad Mosaddeq in 1953, opposition to the Pahlavi dictatorship was couched in a wider anti-imperialist discourse that rejected 'Westoxification' or 'Weststruckness' (Al-e Ahmad, 1997) in favour of a revolutionary nativism that combined elements of Third World national liberation and anti-colonial movements with Marxist and Islamic ideas. This ideological amalgamation was most pronounced in the writings of Ali Shariati (Matin, 2013b, pp 130–136). It involved a discursive metamorphosis that obscured its own international genealogy, especially in the domain of gender and sexuality. The heteronormativity that had originally been imported from the West, was now considered a pillar of Iran's cultural authenticity, increasingly placed in contradistinction to the growing acceptance of homosexuality in the West, seen as a sign of cultural

decadence. Remarkably, during the late Pahlavi period, the Iranian leftists' opposition to US imperialism, consumerism, and the sexual objectification of women in the West brought them into a tacit alliance with the Islamists, who held much more conservative views on gender relations and sexuality. The Islamists' successful appropriation of key elements of leftist discourse on social justice and anti-imperialism enabled them to craft the discourse of 'revolutionary Islam' (Matin, 2013b, pp 122–144), which became the hegemonic ideology of the 1979 revolution and the ideological foundation of the post-revolutionary state, the Islamic Republic (Matin, 2013a).

## 4. The Islamic Republic: patriarchy, queerphobia, and the birth of 'the gay'

The 1979 revolution that gave rise to the Islamic Republic was explicitly anti-Western, for the Pahlavi autocracy it opposed was a staunch ally of the US and the West more generally. Moreover, the US benefited from the Pahlavi autocracy's anti-communist (geo-)political policies and its subordinate, 'semi-peripheral' (Wallerstein, 1974) economic integration into the US-led global capitalist system. The US therefore offered the Pahlavi regime strategic support. This circumstance led to the attraction of Islamist and leftist opposition groups to the 'dependency theory' (Frank, 1967; Amin, 1977), which in policy terms advocated delinking from the Western-dominated world capitalist system as a precondition for national development. As a result, along with the call for social justice and political liberty, an independent Iran free from the Western yoke became the core demand of the revolution that toppled the Pahlavi monarch in February 1979, embellishing its ideological discourse with Third World anti-colonialism (Matin, 2013b, pp 122–144).

Freedom from the Western yoke was, however, a complex, if not contradictory, process. Despite appearances, the Khomeini-led Islamists who dominated the post-revolutionary state had opposed the Pahlavi state not merely, or even primarily, on the grounds that it had implemented modernization as such. Rather, they fought the Pahlavi regime because they claimed Iran was 'underdeveloped' because the Pahlavi monarchy subordinated it to the West, allowing the latter to plunder Iran's natural resources. Indeed, Khomeini's famous book *The Islamic Government* (Khomeini, 1981, p 34; Matin, 2013a) begins with an indictment of Western imperialism for keeping Iran 'backward'. He argues that the main cause of this was the absence of 'Islamic laws', which 'provide a solution for the problem of poverty' and Iran's backwardness (Khomeini, 1981, p 34). The modern notions of 'progress' and 'development' were central to Khomeini's political discourse, which wrapped the substance of leftist slogans in a Shia-Islamic cover. Khomeini therefore justified his theological innovation that extended the Shia notion of *velayat-e faqih* (the rule of the jurist) to the state

power as the basis for Islamic government. The concept of *velayat-e faqih* was institutionalized after the revolution that created the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) (Matin, 2013a).

The Shia variety of 'revolutionary Islam' in Iran therefore displayed the dualistic praxis of anti-colonial nationalism. As we saw in Chapter 2, anti-colonial nationalism divides social life into two domains to which it relates differently. In the domain of the external/material (economy, statecraft, science, technology), Western superiority is acknowledged and emulation justified. By contrast, in the internal/spiritual domain or the domain of cultural identity, native primacy is asserted and national sovereignty is established (Dabashi, 2006; Chatterjee, 2012, p 184). In other words, as a product of 'colonial modernity' (Guha, 1983; Dabashi, 2006), anti-colonial nationalism involves cultural, discursive, and ideological forms of combined development. Indeed, IRI proactively borrows from the West in the external/material domain, to which its industrial, military, scientific, and technological projects and policies over the past four decades clearly attest. However, IRI's sovereignty (as state-identity) is defined in opposition to the West and based on Iran's Shia-Islamic culture, as IRI ideologues (re-)interpret and re-construct it. And herein also lies the dynamics of IRI's gender policies. So, let us briefly look at IRI's production of sovereignty.

Sovereignty rests on the production and reproduction of the boundary between 'inside' and 'outside', between 'us' and 'them' (Heiskanen, 2019). In other words, it rests on 'othering'. The Pahlavi regime had pursued its modern othering project by mobilizing secular Iranian nationalism, which constructed the Iranian nation around the Persian language and culture to which heterosexuality was purportedly central. Thus, having emerged from the revolutionary destruction of the Pahlavi regime, IRI was driven by the logic of its political genealogy to define its 'self' as the negation of its 'other': the Pahlavi regime and, by implication, the West. Thus, IRI's Islamist ideology involved a categorical rejection of the cultural norms and social practices that the Pahlavi regime had imported from the West. These included women's position as free and publicly visible citizens equal to men, and political, if not legal, tolerance of same-sex relationships. IRI's ideological recreation of Iranian sovereignty through anti-Western 'othering' therefore involved a lumping together of Western decadence, the free, unveiled woman, and the homosexual as 'foreign' and 'deviant' (Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016, p 57). Let us delve deeper into IRI's gender ideology.

IRI's Islamist ideology posits that 'the universe is gendered, systematic, and goal-oriented' (Bahreini, 2008, p 5). It holds a teleological view of gender, asserting that individuals are born as either male or female, each with predefined roles and responsibilities. IRI considers itself dutybound to uphold these rights and duties, adherence to which, it asserts, ensures an ethical life consistent with Islam. Policing gender is therefore a governing

principle of socio-political organizations in IRI (Bahreini, 2008, p 6). Informed by extrapolations from certain Quranic verses (for instance, 4: 1, 3, 11, 15, 34, 176), IRI's gender ideology is strictly heteronormative, considering cisgender men and women as the only 'true', 'healthy', and 'normal' subjects of gender. It also holds women to be inferior to men and potential generators of sinful desires in men, necessitating the subjection of women's bodies – and less strictly – men's bodies to religiously guided and legally enforced control and discipline.

IRI maintains its hierarchical gender order through Western technology. It imports and deploys the latest technologies of administration, surveillance, and control developed in the West to subject Iranians to an Islamist form of 'biopower' (Foucault, 2003, pp 239–264). This biopolitical war against women commenced immediately after the revolution (Higgins, 1985; Shojaie, 2014). It had both cultural-discursive and legal-political aspects. In the former arena, IRI demonized feminist accomplishments, foregrounded women's motherhood role, and associated women's rights with 'notions of ritual impurity and Western [imperialism]' (Afary, 2009, p 270). Legally, IRI declared 'un-Islamic' many provisions of the pre-revolutionary Family Protection Law and voided them. IRI's new, Sharia-based laws promoted child marriage and polygamy and placed obstacles on women's ability to leave abusive marriages. IRI reinstituted male guardianship in family life, placing major decisions concerning women's lives in the hands of fathers and/or husbands, lowered the legal age of marriage to puberty, banned abortion, restored men's unilateral right to divorce, reintroduced polygamy, encouraged temporary marriage, limited mothers' custody rights, and reduced sentences for men accused of 'honour killing' (Afary, 2009, pp 278–279). Women's testimony in criminal trials concerning sodomy, homosexuality, prostitution, and drinking was not allowed, and in other cases the testimonies of two women was made equivalent to the testimony of one man (Bahreini, 2008, p 5).

Two key sites of the IRI's biopolitical war against women are gender segregation and compulsory veiling. Institutionalized sex segregation is enforced in various public spaces, including 'schools, university classes, buses, metro trains, beaches, sports stadiums, and mosques' (Bahreini, 2008, p 5; Shahrokni, 2020). Compulsory veiling was enforced immediately after the revolution and later legalized (Article 638 of the Islamic Penal Code approved in 1996). Gender segregation and compulsory veiling, enforced through Western technologies of control and surveillance, amounted to a systematic 'spatial injustice' against Iranian women by regulating, barring, and controlling women's access to public spaces (Akbari, 2021, pp 183–184).

IRI's ontological binary of gender and sexuality, its patriarchal politics, and its incorporation of modern medical technology into medieval Islamic jurisprudence in the context of the modernist erasure of Iran's

past homosociality constitute the queer person as the 'irredeemable other' (Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016, p 52). Consequently, central to IRI's rule is a systematic violence against non-heterosexual desires and practices through a comprehensive system of queerphobic government(ality) (Foucault, 2009, pp 87–114). During the first decade or so after the revolution, this violence rested on the construction of homosexuality and other non-heterosexual forms of sexual practices as expressions of sexual and moral perversion and the construction of individuals engaging in them as 'gender troubled' persons contaminating and endangering Muslim society and therefore subjected to 'intimidation, persecution, arrest, and torture, if not outright death' (Bahreini, 2008, p 2). This early post-revolutionary Islamist queerphobia was not only *not* a simple assertion of traditional cultural norms against deviant, foreign (Western) cultural norms polluting Iran as a Muslim society, as IRI claimed (Bahreini, 2008), but it was also a product of a doubly Eurocentric modernization of Islamic cultural and legal discourse. This double Eurocentrism involves the (flawed) assumption that heteronormativity was native and natural to Iran, and the reconstruction of queer practices as constitutive of individual identity, which presupposes the Eurocentric concept of the 'individual' as a self-contained subject with a deep, interiorized selfhood determining its desires and practices (Najmabadi, 2014). The key Islamic element of IRI's queerphobia was the deployment of an eliminatory punishment for non-heterosexual persons based on a particular interpretation of certain Quranic verses. Thus, the 2012 amended version of IRI's Penal Code (Article 234) states that the:

> punishment for *livat* [male-male sex] shall be the death penalty for the insertive/active party if he has committed *livat* by using force, coercion, or in cases where he meets the conditions for *ihsan*; otherwise, he shall be sentenced to one hundred lashes. The … punishment for the receptive/passive party, in any case (whether or not he meets the conditions for *ihsan*) shall be the death penalty. (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2014)[4]

Note 1 to Article 234 adds a xenophobic severity to the punishment. It states that 'if the insertive/active party is a non-Muslim and the receptive/passive party is a Muslim, the *hadd* punishment for the insertive/active party shall be the death penalty' (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2014). Article 239 of IRIs' Penal Code stipulates that 'the *hadd* punishment for *musaheqeh* [a female person putting her sex organ on the sex organ of another female person] shall be one hundred lashes' (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2014).

These cruel and inhuman punishments of non-heterosexual practices have found a considerable degree of social acceptance thanks to 'the erasure of a

rich homosocial and homoerotic past from the collective memory of Iran' (Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016, p 51), a process that began in earnest in the early 20th century and formed a key axis of the formation of Iran as a modern nation-state. Iranian nationalism constructed homosexuality as a sign of 'backwardness' and partook in the state-led erasure of Iran's homoerotic past. This largely explains why significant sections of Iranian society display open 'hostility to expressions of gender non-conformity or same-sex desire' (Bahreini, 2008, p 14). This process has facilitated the formation of a 'state-society-family triad' that functions as a 'powerful apparatus of gender that works towards a community of disciplined, gender dimorphic, heterosexual men and women' (Bahreini, 2008, p 14).

In the late 1980s, a further instance of discursive combined development brought about a change in the IRI's policy and practice vis-à-vis trans persons, who could now undergo SRS after a filtering process taking several months and involving 'psychotherapy accompanied by hormonal and chromosomal tests' to distinguish '"true transsexuals" … from misguided and opportunist homosexuals' (Najmabadi, 2008b, p 32; OutRight Action International, 2016; Saeidzadeh, 2019). This change was the result of the confluence of classical Islamic jurisprudential discourse and modern Western scientific discourses. Classical Islamic discourse on the problems of identifying the '"true genus" ("kind" or "type")' of hermaphrodites and Ayatollah Khomeini's 1985 reissuance in Persian of his 1967 Arabic edict (*fatwa*) on the permissibility of sex reassignment surgery in the case of transsexual persons were amalgamated with Western originated medical science, psychology, and behavioural therapy. The latter Western products not only enabled 'knowing the true sex despite ambiguous genitalia but also envisioned a determinate relation between gender identification, gender role behavior, sexual desire, and subjective gender identity for each and every body' (Najmabadi, 2008b, pp 26–27). Khomeini's *fatwa* rested on the Islamic philosophical distinction between 'soul' and 'body', which subtended the argument by some Shia *mujtahids* (senior clerics able to issue binding opinions) that since the human soul is inaccessible, the disharmony between the soul (gender) and the body (sex) can be rectified by medical modification of the latter.

IRI's move from its initial blanket criminalization of all queer people to its subsequent classification of being transgender as a pathology curable through modern medical interventions has provided some legal protection for transgender persons who are willing to undergo SRS. At social and psychological levels too, it has made life relatively easier for recognized trans persons (Najmabadi, 2008b, 25, passim), even though the post-surgery transition is a gradual process fraught with social and legal complexities (OutRight Action International, 2016; Saeidzadeh, 2019). Nevertheless, some queer Iranians managed to exploit the loopholes in the official filtering process to live their lives less dangerously. For example, evidence that they had

started the filtering process, which could be prolonged, could protect them from the (morality) police. These developments coincided with the 1997 victory of the reformist candidate, Mohammad Khatami, in the presidential elections. Khatami's two-terms presidency enabled the growth of a vibrant civil society that increasingly used the press and the internet to promote a Western-inspired discourse of rights. The queer community was also influenced by this development and exposed to the rights-based discourse on same-sex desire in the West. Queer Iranians increasingly used the internet to arrange sexual encounters and educate themselves about queer culture in the West (Afary, 2009, pp 333–340; Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016, p 59). Thus, and concurrently, a localized queer discourse developed, which drew on Western discourse to counter popular, street-level derogatory terms used to refer to queer Iranians with new, positive alternatives that emphasized 'sexual orientation' as opposed to 'sexual identity'. For example, *hamjens-gara* (a person sexually oriented to the same sex) was used as an alternative to the derogatory terms *hamjens-baz* (a person who plays with the same sex), *kooni* ('faggot' or the passive partner in anal intercourse), and *evakhahar* (effeminate male). Similarly, the term *degarabashan-e jensi* was coined as an equivalent for 'sexual queer minority' (Afary, 2009, p 352; Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016, p 60).

IRI's conservative wing, dominating the real levers of power, responded by fighting the reformist project of civil society. It shut down more progressive newspapers and publications close to the reformist faction in the state that controlled the presidency and for a period of time also the parliament, arrested dissident journalists and politicians, and massively expanded and intensified cyber surveillance, creating an apparatus of internet censorship second only to China's (Korn, 2009). IRI's security apparatus (including the *Basij* paramilitary force, which is part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corpse, IRGC), patrolled cyberspace, blocked websites containing information on homosexuality, and used the internet as an entrapment means to identify and arrest queer persons (Human Rights Watch, 2010). This enhanced the efficiency of IRI's anti-queer legal establishment. These moves, combined with IRI's discursive construction of queer persons as deviant, sick, non-authentic Iranians, entrenched the state's identification of homosexuals as irredeemable others. In this context, the growing trend among queer Iranians to use the Western term 'gay' for positive self-representation has a dual function. It reinforces IRI's discourse on hetero-homosexual binary and homosexuality as 'identity' (not practice), but also subverts that very discourse by undercutting the derogatory meanings intended in IRI's usage of the vocabulary of homosexuality (Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016).

The Islamic Republic's patriarchy and queerphobia have been challenged by reformist and revisionist Muslim intellectuals, who try to develop a new interpretation of the Quran that is egalitarian and tolerant of gender diversity.

Proponents of 'Islamic Feminism', for example, distinguish between Sharia or 'revealed law' and *fiqh*: the 'science of jurisprudence' as 'the process of human endeavor to discern and extract legal rules from sacred sources of Islam – that is, the Koran and the Sunna (the practice of the Prophet, as contained in *hadith*, Traditions)' (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p 632). They argue that patriarchal laws in Muslim societies, including Iran, are the result of Muslim men dominating *fiqh*. They argue that female *faqih*s (practitioners of *fiqh*) can derive 'feminist' friendly laws from the Sharia on the basis of a fundamental assumption of every Muslim that Islam is intrinsically 'just' (Badran, 2009).

Other revisionist Muslim intellectuals have addressed legalized queerphobia in Islamist-led countries like Iran by challenging traditional and contemporary interpretations of the Quran that have condemned same-sex desires and acts, including homosexuality and bisexuality, as categorically immoral, sinful, and punishable (Alipour, 2017, p 1931). Revisionist Muslim intellectuals who adopt an 'essentialist' approach argue that homosexuality is an innate disposition and a creation of God. And since Islam accepts difference and diversity, it also accepts homosexuality as an alternative form of sexuality (Habib, 2007; Kugle, 2011).

Another line of revisionist arguments against homophobic Islamist laws directly challenges the accuracy of the dominant interpretations of the story of *Lut* (or *Lot*) in the Quran (7: 80–81). This Quranic story is commonly invoked by conservative Muslim jurists and political Islamists as establishing the immorality of same-sex acts. Revisionists argue that the 'condemnation of the Lot's tribe is for general disobedience to Allah, not necessarily only, or even primarily, for the male rape of the male strangers' (Bucar and Shirazi, 2012, p 424). They further argue that the key word of *fahisha*, used in the Quranic verses on the story of *Lut*, is used throughout the Quran (for example, 3: 135, 7: 28, and 17: 32) in the more generic meaning of selfish, immoral behaviour that is not necessarily sexual (Bucar and Shirazi, 2012, p 424). Thus, Kugle argues that 'the story of Lot is not about homosexuality at all. Rather, … Lot condemns sex acts that are coercive, like rape. This is a critique of male sexuality driven by aggression and the urge to subjugate others by force, not of male homosexuality in particular' (2011, p 66).

The growth of revisionist and reformist works by Muslim intellectuals who seek to articulate an Islamic discourse that is tolerant of the diversity of gender and sexuality is a welcome development. While these efforts have been challenged on intellectual grounds (Moghissi, 1999, 2008; Alipour, 2017), their main limitation is political. This is because of the simple fact that patriarchal and queerphobic readings of the Sharia that govern the gender order in contemporary Iran today are dominant not by virtue of the intellectual or religious authority of IRI's leaders or the ideologues offering them, but by virtue of the enormous *political* power that violently

enforces them though IRI's vast legal and security apparatuses (Mojab, 2001; Najmabadi, 2008b, p 26; Saeidzadeh, 2023). Reformist projects that do not address the material foundations of legalized 'heteropatriarchy' (Assa, 2023, p 56), and its intertwinement with class and ethnic hierarchies, are unlikely to generate radical change in the dominant heterosexual, patriarchal, and queerphobic gender order in Iran. Under these circumstances, many queer Iranians, like our research participants, find living in Iran simply too unbearable and opt for a life in exile.

## 5. Conclusion

The historical and discursive journey from the *amrad* to 'the gay' in Iran took more than a century. It has gone through three mutually constitutive conjunctures: a) the normative reconstruction of Iran's diverse, premodern culture of homoeroticism as a sign and cause of 'backwardness' followed by the erasure of the collective memory of that homoerotic culture in favour of heterosexuality; b) the institutionalization of heteronormativity through criminalization of sexual behaviours deviating from heteronormativity and the construction of the person displaying same-sex sexual desires and practices as a deviant subject, an irredeemable other with homosexuality as its identity; and finally, c) this irredeemable other's proactive appropriation of the language of gay rights in the West to enunciate 'I am gay' (Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016, p 52). We have shown that these three conjunctures can be coherently theorized as aspects of a wider process of UCD, as specific social, cultural, and discursive combinations involving both Western and Iranian/Islamic elements. As a result, they are beyond the conceptual reach of singular theories that fail to integrate 'the international', that is, societal multiplicity, into their basic premises, a move that is foundational to UCD.

Substantively, we have shown that IRI's patriarchal and homophobic gender order is shaped by the political genealogy that led to the construction of post-revolutionary sovereignty through a selective process of anti-Western cultural 'othering' that tacitly relies on modern Western notions of deep selfhood and identity as well as Western medical science and technology. As such, IRI's queerphobic gender hierarchy is not based on a pristine and singular Islamic culture, as Islamists claim and orientalists and Eurocentrists accept and echo. Nor are queer Iranians merely passive subjects who are discursively animated by the West's queer interpellation (Althusser, 2001, pp 85–126). Rather, both IRI and queer Iranians are proactive subjects operating on and through a discursively and historically plural and interactive context in which the modern state mediates global and national gender and sexual praxes that are recalibrated and reconfigured through their mediation. As such, they are always already 'both Eastern and Western' (Matin-Asgari, 2018).

The discursive construction of the queer Iranian as the 'irredeemable other' by the Islamist regime in Iran does not mean that the queerphobic and patriarchal order of post-revolutionary Iran can be positively transformed into a plural and horizontal order of gender equality through discursive revisionism alone. The material impact of Islamic feminism and Islamic jurisprudential revisionism is likely to remain very limited unless the intertwined material and political bases of theocratic patriarchy and ethnocracy in Iran are politically transformed. This is attested to by the radical trajectory of struggles for gender equality in post-revolutionary Iran. This trajectory extends from the women's demonstration against compulsory veiling less than a month after the revolution on 8 March 1979 (Keddie, 2000), to Kurdish women's participation in the armed struggle against the Islamic Republic in the 1980s (Karimi, 2025), to the 'One Million Signature Campaign' against discriminatory laws in the 2000s (Sameh, 2014; Ardalan, 2021), to the 'Daughters of the Revolution Street' public self-unveiling protests in 2018 (Hernroth-Rothstein, 2018; Ooryad, 2020), to the 2022 'Woman, Life, Freedom' revolutionary movement that shook the foundations of the Islamic Republic (Afary and Anderson, 2023) and in which queer activists proactively took part (Tamer and Sadrolodabaee, 2023; Mohammadi, 2024) and were consequently targeted by security organs of the Islamic Republic (UN Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, 2025). This history suggests that it is arguably the successful convergence of various forms of struggles for emancipation by violently marginalized social groups within Iran, especially women, gender minorities, and subaltern nations, that holds the greatest promise for the project of queering Iran.

4

# Methodology and Ethical Issues

I see you
yes, you free of chains and locks
dancing and dancing
fluttering your wings
waving your hands

Hooman, Canada

## 1. Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of our empirical research methodology and the ethical considerations integral to our approach. The interdisciplinary nature of the book means that Chapters 2 and 3, which develop an alternative framework for theorizing the formation of gender and sexuality and explore the evolution of gender and sexuality in Iran, respectively, are written in the register of historical sociology and therefore not covered by the research methodology elucidated in this chapter. In the following sections, we elaborate on the specific methods employed (Section 2), examine the role of reflexivity, especially the hermeneutical method, in shaping our research process (Section 3), and address the ethical dilemmas encountered during fieldwork and our strategies for resolving them (Section 4).

Previous studies on Iranian queer life have extensively explored historical aspects (Najmabadi, 2005c, 2008c; Afary, 2009; Hosseini-Lewis, 2015; Hashemi, 2018) and theoretical dimensions (Bucar and Shirazi, 2012). Additionally, some studies have conducted empirical research on queer Iranians residing either within Iran (Aghabikloo et al, 2012) or in exile (Abdi and Van Gilder, 2016; Hautefeuille, 2017; Peyghambarzadeh, 2024). Few studies, however, utilize mixed methods to address the multiple facets of queer Iranian social life. Afsaneh Najmabadi (2014) provides a prominent exception, examining both the historical and theoretical aspects of same-sex relationships, alongside the lived experiences of trans people within Iran.

In terms of methodology, the research that underpins this book is a new attempt to holistically address the theoretical, historical, and empirical aspects of the lives of queer Iranians, both within Iran and during their journeys of migration and asylum. This interdisciplinary research explores various aspects of queer Iranian life, including the social, political, and legal experiences of individuals living in Iran and who have migrated. The complex and intersectional nature of such a topic requires an interdisciplinary research design capable of addressing the multiple aspects of the phenomena investigated (Harlan et al, 2008; Davidson, 2015). Recognition of the complexity of social phenomena in law and sociology has been extensively discussed in legal studies (McConville and Chui, 2017), especially regarding intricate topics like gender and sexuality (Lamble, 2021). To align with an interdisciplinary research design, we adopted collaborative research strategies to integrate knowledge. Each team member's specific background and input served to enrich the project overall, while monthly online team sessions facilitated the integration of these diverse perspectives and areas of expertise, leading to more comprehensive project outcomes. Individually, the assignments of each member of the team mapped onto their respective capacities and expertise. The allocation of tasks facilitated working autonomously within a shared research framework, with all the fieldwork carried out by Mehran Rezaei-Toroghi. Collectively, the team addressed common issues and reviewed each other's work in regular sessions. Previous research has highlighted the significance of team-based approaches in interdisciplinary research (Repko and Szostak, 2017), and we have applied this insight to our research design. To further enhance this interdisciplinary perspective, we established an Advisory Board comprising academics and activists who were either scholarly experts in SOGIESC issues or activists closely connected to the queer Iranian community.[1] The Advisory Board offered critical external feedback on the research design, maintained researchers' engagement with queer Iranian communities, and offered feedback on the team's outcomes based on their expertise.

Our team carried out fieldwork in three countries: Turkey, the UK, and Canada. As briefly discussed in Chapter 1, the reason for choosing Turkey is that it is often considered as a country of transit that 'regularly serves as an area of temporary asylum and/or transit' (Manaert, 2003). Since the Second World War, it has been a transitional country for many refugees, including Iranians. Between 1980 and 1991, over 1.5 million Iranians settled in Turkey, hoping to then be resettled in a third country (Manaert, 2003). This has established Turkey as the primary country of transit for Iranian refugees for many years. However, international protection and the responsibility of the UNHCR for resettling refugees from Turkey to 'third countries' underwent a significant change in 2018, when the Turkish Immigration Office took over many of the functions of the UNHCR (ANSA, 2018). This shift

has resulted in a slowdown of the resettlement process, especially as some countries, like Canada and the US, prioritize refugees from conflict zones such as Syria. Despite this change, which has left more than 39,000 Iranian refugees stranded in Turkey (Bahri, 2023), the country continues to be seen by Iranian refugees as a temporary haven until they can be resettled in a safer place by the UNHCR or other organizations (see Chapter 7). This is a perception which is still common among Iranian refugees who travel to Turkey and was admitted by some of the participants in our research, like Farhan.

The rationale for choosing the UK for fieldwork was that it has become the main destination of many Iranian immigrants and refugees, including queer Iranians. Approximately 37,000 Iranians were living in the UK as non-British nationals in 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2021).[2] In terms of asylum claims, Iran is now the second most common country of origin, after being the first every year since 2016, with 9,652 claimants lodging their claims in 2022 (UNHCR, 2022). Official statistics published by the Home Office indicate that Iranians are the second largest group of claimants in the UK applying for refugee status where sexual orientation formed part of the basis of the claim (Home Office, 2024).

Canada has also been a main destination for resettling Iranian queer refugees. We do not have official statistics as to the number of Iranian SOGIESC immigrants and refugees in Canada, however, the official figures from the Canadian government show that from 2017 to 2022, 2,776 resettlement applications were received from Iranians (Government of Canada, 2022), and between 2015 and 2025, 3,400 resettled refugees from Iran were admitted within different categories, including 1,765 as privately sponsored refugees (IRCC Canada, 2025).

We designed the project to consider both the heterogeneous aspects of individual experiences alongside the multiplicity of state policies. Turkey, the UK and Canada have distinct immigration and asylum systems, which affect people's experiences of immigration and claiming asylum in different ways. They also each have a particular social and legal context that shapes individuals' experiences. These comparisons provide a picture which is beneficial both epistemologically for academic research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Landman, 2017) and for policy makers wishing to compare different policies around the world (Hantrais, 2008).

In addition to fieldwork in these countries, we interviewed a smaller number of people residing in Iran for two reasons. While the participants currently residing in Turkey, Canada, and the UK shared stories from their past experiences of living in Iran, interviews with those in Iran offered insights into the contemporary circumstances of queer life in the country. They explored the existing regulations concerning the exemption of trans and homosexual individuals from military conscription, the gender-affirming

surgery administered by the government for transgender individuals, and the ongoing presence of conversion therapy within Iran. Moreover, understanding the experiences of queer Iranians in exile made it necessary to carry out interviews with queer individuals in their country of origin to provide a snapshot of the current situation inside Iran. The notion that immigrants are not simply 'uprooted' from their home country is not a novel concept within migration studies (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc, 1995). Consequently, we conducted five interviews with participants in Iran via secure online platforms to capture the contemporary narratives of eyewitnesses in order to understand the current circumstances in Iran.

## 2. Methods

### *2.1 Participant selection*

We employed purposeful sampling, which involves intentionally selecting specific settings, individuals, or events to obtain valuable information that cannot easily be obtained through other means (Maxwell, 2008). We applied this to the project's target population, specifically Iranian queer refugees and immigrants who were compelled to leave Iran due to their SOGIESC, and were residing in Turkey, the UK, or Canada.

In terms of the identification of participants, we chose to prioritise their own understandings of self-identification, which was often fluid. Because of this, we kept our selection criteria intentionally broad, allowing participants to self-identify as they wished, which was sometimes with ambiguity or scepticism about categorization. This allowed us to include and accurately reflect upon identity and diversity within the queer Iranian community. Participants were comfortably free in their self-identification, and sometimes unwilling or unable to find a suitable category. For instance, Sima explained that categorization is merely for communicating with other people, not for herself. She said: 'These categories serve for the comfort of people in the society in recognising and, so, it is sometimes necessary'.

Some participants identified as gay but with a disclaimer. For example, Shahab said: 'I know myself as gay, as in male homosexual. But what I feel is the case within the LGBTQ society – and perhaps what I'm saying is not scientific – is that one might know themselves as gay today, but in 5–10 years they could understand themselves as transgender'. Another participant, Rima, questioned how to categorize themselves, explaining: 'I could never manage to figure out whether I am gay or trans. I am still not certain. You know why? … There have been many occasions in which I have yearned to be present in society as a girl'.

This approach ensured a rich understanding of the multiplicity of identifications and the heterogeneity of the lived experiences of Iranian queer refugees and migrants. It also gave participants space and freedom to

reflect upon their own identity formation, which is further elucidated in Chapters 5 and 6.

This project was executed on a larger scale than existing qualitative studies on queer Iranian migration. For this project, we aimed to recruit up to 20 participants from each of the three case study countries and a smaller number in Iran. We conducted 60 interviews between 5 April 2022 and 23 September 2023. Participants were given the right to withdraw at any point before publication, and three individuals chose to do so. Therefore, 57 interviews were used for data analysis: 11 out of the 57 interviews were conducted with supporters, while 46 interviews were conducted with queer Iranians in exile. Two participants (Zeynab Peyghambarzadeh and Maziar Shirali) were interviewed twice as people with lived experience and also in their roles as NGO workers. Therefore, we include and name them both as queer Iranians in exile and as supporters.

### *2.2 Recruitment methods*

Finding refugee research participants is challenging because, understandably, people are often reluctant to share traumatic life experiences. It is even more difficult when the participants are queer refugees who are considered a 'socially invisible group' (Sulaiman-Hill and Thompson, 2011). We used a multi-modal approach to recruit participants, including passive and active strategies in a phased plan (Broyles et al, 2011; McCormack, 2014).

Initially, we disseminated calls to participate through social media platforms, mailing lists like SOGI International, and direct inquiries to pertinent gatekeepers and LGBTIQ+ organizations. However, these initial approaches were not as effective as we had hoped, partly because of organizations' confidentiality policies. We also shared visual materials on our social media to promote the invitation.[3] However, public flyers and invitations were often unsuccessful in overcoming individuals' reluctance to share personal narratives and life experiences. The initial stage of participant recruitment was thus less successful than initially hoped.

A pervasive lack of trust and frustration was evident among participants, particularly those residing in Turkey, where the halting of UNHCR resettlement processes in 2018 had precipitated increased hardship for queer refugees. We observed a significant level of scepticism towards academic research, particularly among queer refugees in Turkey. Some had taken part in previous research endeavours over several years, yet had seen their circumstances progressively worsen, leading to disillusionment with academic research and activist intervention as a useful way to address their concrete challenges. During the recruitment phase, some Iranian queer refugees with whom we spoke sought help simply to survive. We heard stories of homelessness, lack of medical care, illness, deportation threats

from Turkish officials, harassment, rape, and reports of suicide attempts. While we made personal efforts to alleviate their suffering, these urgent issues required immediate attention and resources, which as academics we lacked the capacity to provide. Mistrust of academic work also impacted the recruitment process. Securing participant recruitment proved challenging, partly due to the tension between refugees' pressing needs and the long-term nature of academic research.

In response to participants' frustrations with academic endeavours, we implemented an active recruitment strategy during the project's second phase. We sought to demonstrate to potential participants how their involvement in the research could align with both their short-term and long-term interests. The idea of producing a documentary as part of the project played a pivotal role in our active engagement with participants. Prior to its final production, we also produced some short videos in response to participants' requests. These participatory activities strengthened the bonds between the researcher and participants. In some cases, participants shared concerns and requests that we were able to address during the fieldwork within our capacities. We aimed to make the participatory activities mutually beneficial, tailoring them to meet both participants' needs and the goals of the research. For instance, Farhan, a participant stranded in Turkey and in urgent need of assistance, was featured in a video showcasing their challenging situation. This video went viral on various social media platforms after it was released on 30 January 2023.[4] The support of a network of activists and friends resulted in Farhan's expedited relocation from Turkey to claim asylum in Europe.

Similarly, in Canada, our documentary team assisted queer Iranian individuals in promoting their involvement in the Toronto Pride Parade 2023.[5] This collaborative effort garnered significant support from the Iranian queer community in Canada, resulting in the recruitment of new participants to the project. Through these initiatives, the project successfully bridged the gap between the long-term goals of academic research and the urgent needs of the community, ultimately fostering trust and engagement among queer participants who may have previously doubted the merit of academic research.

As part of this active approach, we individually emailed some well-known queer Iranian activists and invited them to an interview. Our Advisory Board members also helped us to recruit participants. Fortuitously, we received invaluable assistance from five esteemed queer activists,[6] facilitating the establishment of trusting relationships with potential participants. This collaboration enabled us to reach out to many participants and this, in turn, allowed us to employ the snowball sampling technique, a method commonly employed in studies focusing on queer individuals (McCormack, 2014). Table 4.1 shows how effective this active and engaged approach was in this research project.

**Table 4.1:** Recruitment outcome by strategy (n=57)[7]

| **Recruitment strategy** | | | | | **%** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Passive** | **Iran** | **Turkey** | **UK** | **Canada** | **Total** |
| Social media posts | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3.51 |
| Mailing lists | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Emails to LGBTIQ+ organizations | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Active** | | | | | |
| Recruiting by Advisory Board members | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3.51 |
| Recruiting by members of the team through direct invitation to participants | 3 | 2 | 7 | 4 | 28.07 |
| Recruiting by Iranian queer activists | 0 | 7 | 3 | 12 | 38.60 |
| Snowballing | 2 | 7 | 6 | 0 | 26.32 |
| **Total** | 5 | 20 | 16 | 16 | |

### *2.3 Semi-structured interviews*

Fieldwork was conducted by deploying two methods of data collection: semi-structured life history interviews and poetry as a method of research inquiry. The existing scholarship on this subject employs either quantitative (Aghabikloo et al, 2012) or qualitative methods (Abdi and Van Gilder, 2016; Peyghambarzadeh, 2024). Given the nuanced experiences of queer individuals and the intersection of migration and refugee status with a range of personal characteristics and factors, it is important to use methodologies that can effectively address this complexity and respond to the culturally sensitive nature of the topic. In this regard, some scholars suggest the use of qualitative methods in fields like queer research where cultural contexts play a significant role (Rogers and Rogers, 2022). This recommendation stems from the inherently interpretative nature of such research. When nuanced understanding and interpretation of meanings are paramount, qualitative methods emerge as the preferred approach (Gamson, 2000). Berg explains that a qualitative methodology 'refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things' (Berg, 2001). The same idea is reflected by Tewksbury who states that 'qualitative research focuses on the meanings, traits and defining characteristics of events, people, interactions, settings/cultures and experience' (Tewksbury, 2009). Considering these points, we conducted qualitative research involving semi-structured life history interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the life trajectories of participants.

Embracing this semi-structured interview format, our approach centred on a set of predetermined open questions, with additional inquiries emerging

from the dynamic interaction between researcher and participants, as articulated by scholars in the field (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). This method guided our inclusion of questions pertaining to participants' life histories, allowing them the opportunity to share their own narratives authentically in dialogue.

The life histories of participants offer rich data that illuminates the diversity of experiences among queer individuals. This was a foundational element in this study, aimed at avoiding the common tendency to oversimplify the experiences of queer Iranians. Such oversimplification by 'Western activists' or the so-called 'Gay International' is critiqued by postcolonial scholar Massad (2002). However, postcolonial scholars themselves are criticized for overlooking the complexities of lived experiences in 'Middle Eastern' nations and for the self-referential nature of postcolonial theory, which does not consider the heterogeneity of concepts like 'West' and 'East' (Ahmad, 2000). These critiques lead some Iranian scholars to emphasize Iran's unique cultural and historical context, distinguishing it from other Middle Eastern countries (Najmabadi, 2008a) and highlighting its peculiarity in the history of sexuality (Rezaei-Toroghi, 2019). We elaborated on these points with greater discussion of the shortcomings of these approaches in Chapter 2. Building on these theoretical foundations, our methodology entailed a thorough exploration of the individual life narratives of queer individuals to illuminate the diverse tapestry of lived experiences, transcending the tendency towards homogenization prevalent in both international activism circles and among postcolonial theorists.

In keeping with this approach, we designed a versatile, dialogical questionnaire, tailored to the trajectory of the events in each participant's life. The questionnaire for queer Iranians in exile, in particular, was divided into three sections based on participants' life trajectories:

1. The first section explored early experiences of queer individuals in Iran with common questions for all participants.
2. The second section asked about experiences of the asylum claiming process, focusing on the memories of those who were in Turkey and the UK during that time. Canada was not included in this part because for our participants Canada was a country of resettlement.
3. The third section centred on participants' adaptation to a new environment after settling in the UK or Canada. These questions explored the experiences of participants who settled in these countries as immigrants, asylum claimants, or recognized refugees, usually after residing in a transit country or through resettlement.

Two key themes shaped our dialogue with participants. The first theme was the immigration or asylum claiming experiences of participants, covering the interview process for claimants, challenges faced in the new environment,

and suggestions for improving the asylum process managed by relevant authorities such as UNHCR and government bodies.

The second theme was the identification process throughout the migration journey, tracing its evolution from Iran to the transit or host countries. To formulate questions related to this theme, we integrated a modified model of theories of identity, which typically begins with an unfamiliar or 'chaotic' encounter of queer individuals. This is assumed to be a stage when people do not have a clear idea about their identity, but they detect a sense of difference from other people in their typically heteronormative surroundings. Over time, this experience progresses with enhanced self-esteem and a deeper sense of belonging, as individuals build connections with a supportive network and like-minded individuals (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979; D'Augell, 1994). While this generic model serves as a foundation, it is crucial to recognize its limitations, especially considering the cultural variations in identity formation (Jhang, 2019).

In our study, we recognized the need to move beyond this narrow perspective by foregrounding participants' narratives during interviews. This approach allowed us to adapt and refine questions throughout the fieldwork process. For instance, we gradually uncovered the growing significance of the internet and virtual spaces in the realm of identity formation. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, the internet emerged as a primary source for individuals to explore and define their identities (Chapters 5 and 6).

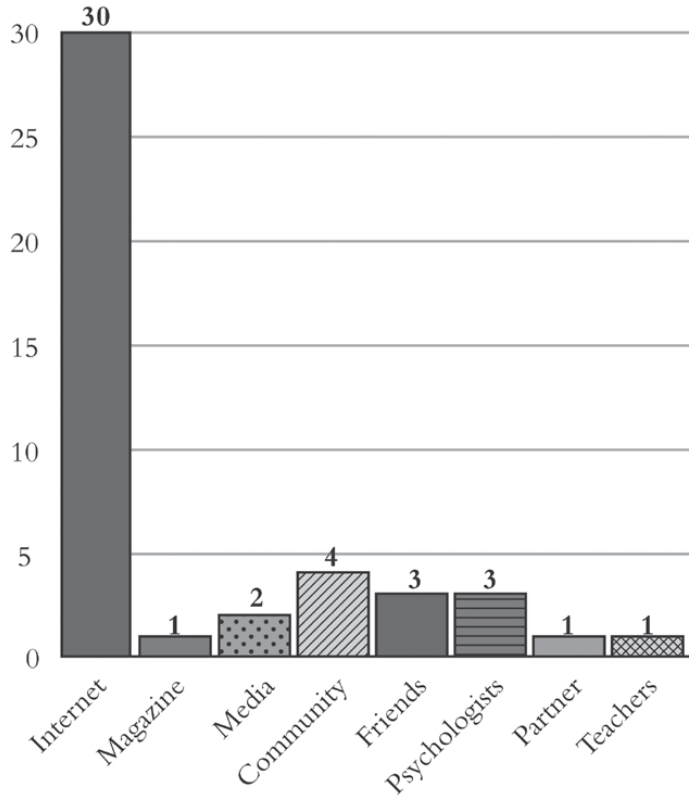
Hence, in each instance the interviewer drew more attention to exploring the spaces where knowledge and connections with like-minded individuals were established. In these inquiries, the significance of the internet was particularly remarkable, especially for those still in Iran, where participants utilized virtual spaces as an alternative means of accessing and exchanging knowledge related to sexual and gender identification. Additionally, the internet in Iran served as a platform for connecting with communities of like-minded individuals. So, the question about the role of the internet and social media gradually became more central in the interviews (see also Chapter 5).

While earlier theories of 'coming out' and queer identification were based on a linear narrative of identification (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979; D'Augell, 1994), the reflective and dialogical process we used allowed us to observe the fluid and strategic nature of identification that has been highlighted in more recent work (Orne, 2011). To understand this complexity from the standpoint of the participants, the interviewer asked participants to share their general perspectives on their life journeys and the changes they had noticed, as they themselves saw them.

### *2.4 Socio-demographic information*

Demographic information about the queer Iranian participants is relevant to the book's analysis. Some details, such as sexual orientation and gender

**Figure 4.1:** Queer Iranian participants' first source of information in relation to SOGIESC identification




identity, were central to the research topic and we specifically asked about them during the interviews. Other questions, including education, age, and religious affiliation, were collected to provide supplementary background information relevant to the themes we planned to analyse. These are self-identification categories, and some participants used them flexibly for clearer communication, even if they did not feel the labels were fully representative of their identities (see next).

The participants' ages spanned a broad range, from 21 to 58, providing a rich perspective on the nuances of identity formation across different life stages. This age diversity allowed us to capture the generational differences in how queer Iranians navigate their journeys of self-identification, as younger participants often faced distinct societal norms and challenges compared to older generations. By ensuring a balanced representation of age groups across varying social and legal contexts in each country,

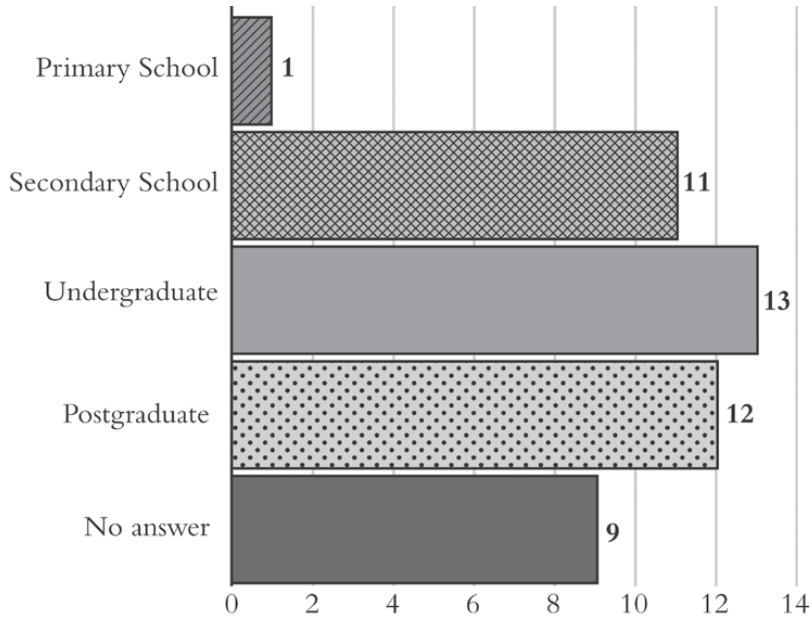
we aimed to better understand how these factors influence identity differently at various life stages. This generational and geographic diversity enriched our findings, allowing us to explore how broader social shifts and country-specific conditions impact the experiences of queer Iranians of different ages.

Iran ranks relatively well in terms of education within the region (Madandar Arani, Navid, and Ranaei, 2019). The level of education within a population can significantly impact the availability and diversity of knowledge sources, including those related to identity. A more educated population is likely to have access to a broader range of information, which can facilitate self-awareness and understanding of different identities. This is particularly relevant when considering how queer Iranians navigate the process of educating themselves about their identities. The majority of our queer Iranian participants were highly educated. In terms of the highest educational level attained, out of 46 queer Iranian participants, one held only a primary school certificate (2.2 per cent), while 11 (23.9 per cent) had secondary school qualifications, 13 (28.3 per cent) held undergraduate degrees, and 12 (26.1 per cent) had postgraduate qualifications. Nine did not provide this information (19.6 per cent) (see Figure 4.2).

Economic privilege can also significantly ease access to alternative sources of knowledge in Iran, where education and media are tightly controlled by the government. To explore this, we asked queer Iranian participants about their economic backgrounds during their time in Iran. Of those who responded, most self-identified as belonging to middle or lower economic classes, with the majority placing themselves in the middle class (see Figure 4.3). However, many participants, particularly those living as refugees in Turkey, experienced a downward shift in class status due to their refugee circumstances, resulting in less privileged conditions.

Being queer in the Middle East is also a controversial topic in terms of the role of religion and identification (see Chapter 6). In recent years, the situation of religiosity in Iran has been considered a peculiar case. A recent poll claimed that there exists a secular shift in the Iranian society regarding faith and religiosity (GAMAAN, 2020). To have a clearer picture of the intersection between faith and identification of queer Iranians, we asked participants about their religious beliefs to understand this correlation (see Figure 4.4). People who identified as non-religious were the majority (47.8 per cent, n=22). Some people also identified their affiliation as atheist (13.0 per cent, n=6) and agnostic (4.3 per cent, n=2). This population formed the majority of participants (65.2 per cent, n=30), and were mainly born in Muslim families and had disengaged or defected. There was also a minority of participants who indicated an affiliation with other beliefs or religious approaches, including identifying as Christian (6.5 per cent, n=3), Secular

**Figure 4.2:** Education level of queer Iranian participants



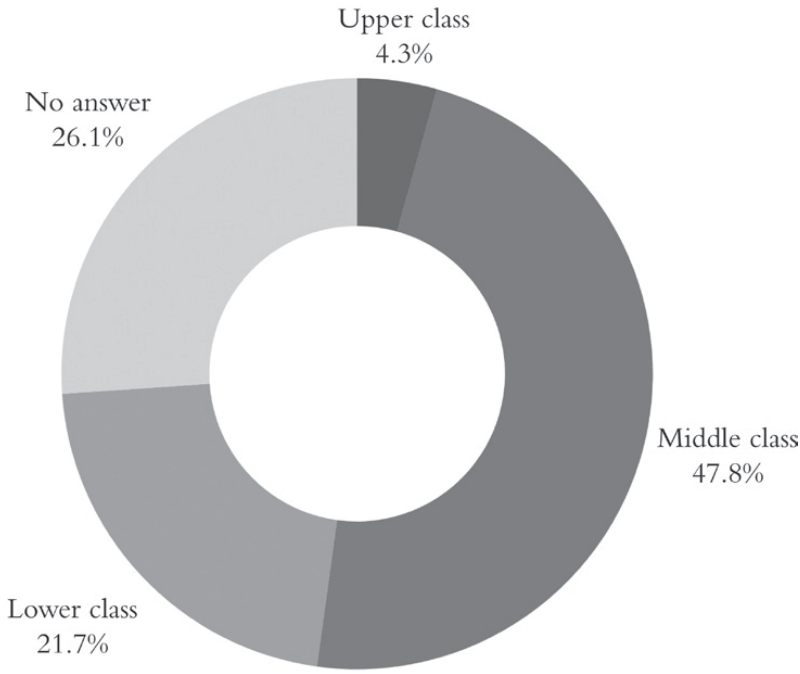

Muslim (2.2 per cent, n=1), Mildly religious (2.2 per cent, n=1), Sufi (2.2 per cent, n=1), Spiritual (4.3 per cent, n=2), and Deist (4.3 per cent, n=2). There were six who did not provide a response (13 per cent) (see Chapter 6).

In our study, participants' gender identity and expression was notably diverse, with a significant number of participants identifying as nonbinary and gender fluid. Overall, we had 41.3 per cent (n=19) of participants identifying as male, 30.4 per cent (n=14) as female, 26.1 per cent (n=12) as nonbinary, and 2.2 per cent (n=1) questioning (see Figure 4.5).

In terms of sexual orientation, the majority identified as gay (45.7 per cent, n=21). But the number of participants who identified as lesbian was lower (6.5 per cent, n=3). We also had a significant number of participants who identified themselves as heterosexual (trans men or women) (23.9 per cent, n=11). Additionally, we had participants who identified as homoflexible (2.2 per cent, n=1), bi/pansexual (10.9 per cent, n=5), queer (4.3 per cent, n=2), questioning (2.2 per cent, n=1), non-heterosexual (2.2 per cent, n=1), and one participant who did not answer (2.2 per cent) (see Figure 4.6). All these categories and terminology were freely chosen by participants, as we had decided against using a tick-box list approach.

Finally, one queer Iranian participant based in Turkey also identified as intersex. Most of this demographic information is reflected in the following table (Table 4.2).

**Figure 4.3:** Economic class of queer Iranian participants




*2.5 Interviews with supporters*

We designed a specific questionnaire for the interviews with supporters across different categories, including nine NGO members, one activist, and one scholar (see Table 4.3). The primary aim of these interviews was to gather expert insights into the context in which individuals navigate the impact of international, regional, and domestic frameworks on their journey of self-identification. This interview questionnaire focused on three overarching themes: 1) the lived experiences of queer Iranians in Iran, 2) the migration and refugee process, and 3) the challenges faced by participants post-settlement. Tailored to the expertise and backgrounds of the respondents, the questions varied accordingly. Some supporters were interviewed about just one of these three themes. For instance, in our discussion with Raha Bahreini from Amnesty International, we asked only about the current legal circumstances of queer Iranians in Iran. Similarly, we directed questions pertaining to the asylum system in the UK to Pliny Soocoormanee from the Tatchell Foundation. In our interview with scholar Shahrzad Mojab, the focus shifted to the circumstances of immigrants and refugees after resettlement in Canada.

**Figure 4.4:** Religious affiliation of queer Iranian participants

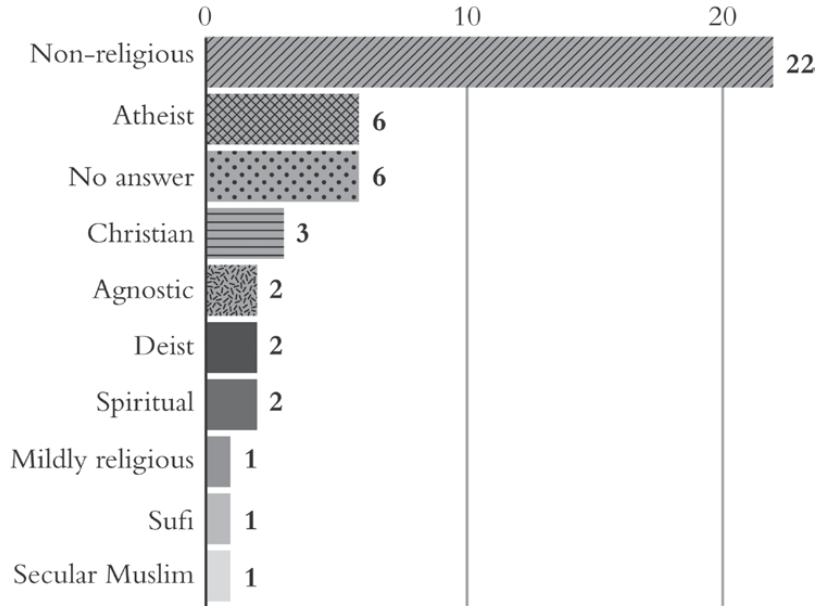
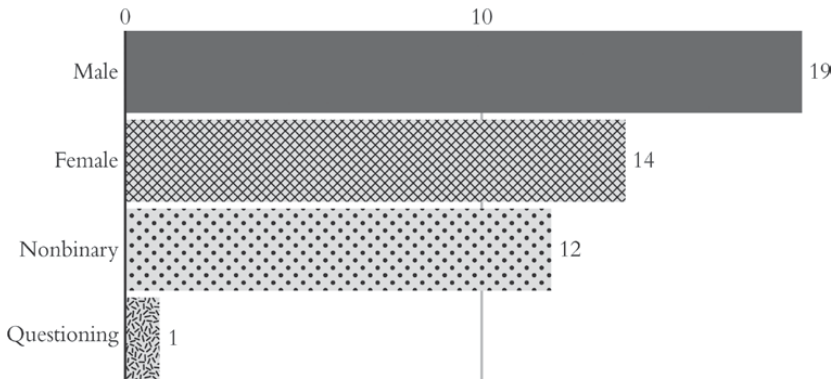


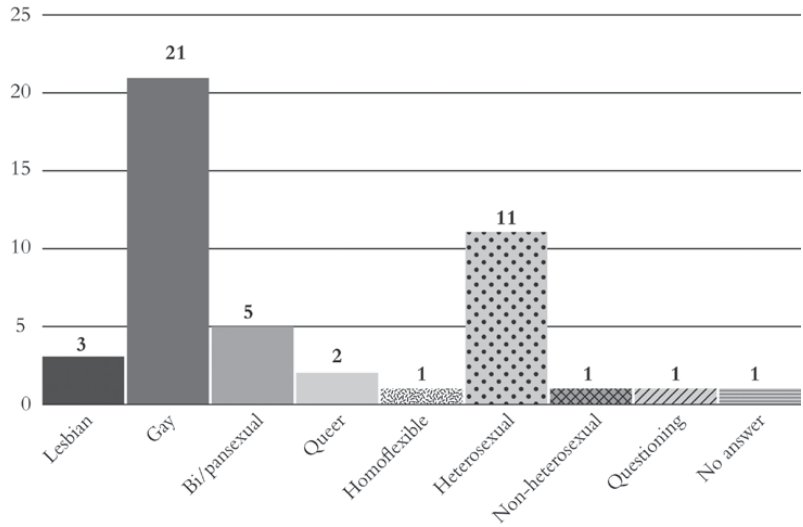

**Figure 4.5:** Gender identity and expression of queer Iranian participants




## *2.6 Poetic inquiry*

In recent years, poetic inquiry has been increasingly used in social science research (Faulkner, 2009; Apol, 2020). It is considered an effective method for working with traumatized people in complex situations (Bracegirdle, 2011), a means to uncover different ways of understanding and seeing phenomena (Butler-Kisber, 2012) that are not easily accessible through

**Figure 4.6:** Sexual orientation of queer Iranian participants




traditional methods (Faulkner, 2009). If prose, provided by interviews, is typically more recognizable and has a stable and familiar structure, poetry brings out the deeper side of people's lived experiences and visions. As Canadian poet Anne Carson says, '[i]f prose is a house, poetry is a man on fire running quite fast through it' (Carson, 2016).

Apart from its general value, poetic inquiry is particularly appropriate in the context of this research. In Iran, there is a deep-rooted tradition of poetry, with poets like Hafiz holding a cherished place in many households. His works are often present in homes and recited in everyday conversations (Ferdowsi, 2008; Soltani, 2014). There are strong artistic, oral, and folk traditions of poetry, which form an important communal countercultural discourse for political dissent, and a powerfully expressive creative medium for emotions. Farsi poetry about same-sex relationships is also common. As explained by Ehsan Yarshater, same-sex romance was a popular theme among many great Farsi poets, such as Hafiz (Yarshater, 1986) and these poems remain widely recognized and familiar among Iranians today.

For this element of the fieldwork, Iranian-Canadian poet and writer Nilofar Shidmehr, who is an experienced tutor of creative writing, organized five poetry workshops and worked on an individual basis with 14 participants to create short poems that expressed their journeys. Participants in this part of the fieldwork were either already experienced in writing poetry or were given an induction and support to allow them to fully immerse themselves in the workshops. Workshops were mainly

**Table 4.2:** Demographics of queer Iranian participants (n=46)

| | Iran | Turkey | UK | Canada | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Age range** | 25–50 | 22–42 | 21–58 | 26–47 | 21–58 |
| **Education** | | | Primary school: 1 | | Primary school: 1 |
| | Secondary school: 2 | Secondary school: 5 | Secondary school: 1 | Secondary school: 3 | Secondary school: 11 |
| | Undergraduate: 3 | Undergraduate: 5 | | Undergraduate: 5 | Undergraduate: 13 |
| | | Postgraduate: 2 | Postgraduate: 6 | Postgraduate: 4 | Postgraduate: 12 |
| | | No answer: 6 | No answer: 2 | No answer:1 | No answer: 9 |
| **Economic class** | Upper class: 1 | | | Upper class: 1 | Upper class: 2 |
| | Middle class: 1 | Middle class: 4 | Middle class: 7 | Middle class: 10 | Middle class: 22 |
| | Lower class: 1 | Lower class: 7 | Lower class: 1 | Lower class: 1 | Lower class: 10 |
| | No answer: 2 | No answer: 7 | No answer: 2 | No answer:1 | No answer: 12 |
| **Religion** | Non-religious: 1 | Non-religious: 8 | Non-religious: 3 | Non-religious: 10 | Non-religious: 22 |
| | | Atheist: 4 | Atheist: 2 | | Atheist: 6 |
| | Agnostic: 1 | | | Agnostic: 1 | Agnostic: 2 |
| | Mildly religious: 1 | | | | Mildly religious: 1 |
| | | | Christian: 3 | | Christian: 3 |
| | | Deist: 1 | Deist: 1 | | Deist: 2 |
| | | | Spiritual: 1 | Spiritual: 1 | Spiritual: 2 |

**Table 4.2:** Demographics of queer Iranian participants (n=46) (continued)

| | Iran | Turkey | UK | Canada | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sufi: 1 | | | | Sufi: 1 |
| | Secular Muslim: 1 | | | | Secular Muslim: 1 |
| | | No answer: 5 | | No answer: 1 | No answer: 6 |
| **Gender identity and expression** | Woman: 1 | Woman: 5 | Woman: 5 | Woman: 3 | Woman: 13 |
| | Man: 4 | Man: 9 | Man: 3 | Man: 3 | Man: 19 |
| | | Nonbinary: 3 | Nonbinary: 3 | Nonbinary: 6 | Nonbinary: 12 |
| | | | | Gender questioning: 1 | Gender questioning: 1 |
| **Sexual orientation** | Lesbian: 3 | | | | Lesbian: 3 |
| | Gay: 3 | Gay: 10 | Gay: 3 | Gay: 5 | Gay: 21 |
| | Bi/pansexual: 2 | Bi/pansexual: 1 | | Bi/pansexual: 2 | Bi/pansexual: 5 |
| | | Queer: 1 | | Queer: 1 | Queer: 2 |
| | | Homoflexible: 1 | | | Homoflexible: 1 |
| | Heterosexual: 2 | Heterosexual: 4 | Heterosexual: 1 | Heterosexual: 4 | Heterosexual: 11 |
| | | Questioning: 1 | | | Questioning: 1 |
| | | | Non-heterosexual: 1 | | Non-heterosexual: 1 |

**Table 4.3:** Overall number of participants – queer Iranians and supporters (n=57)

| Participants | Iran | Turkey | UK | Canada |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Queer Iranians | 5 | 18 | 10 (2 of which were also supporters) | 13 |
| NGOs members | - | 2 | 5 | 2 |
| Activists | - | - | 1 | - |
| Scholars | - | - | - | 1 |
| Total | 5 | 20 | 16 | 16 |

in-person with some held online when meeting in-person was not possible during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were conducted in the three case study countries of the fieldwork: two workshops in Turkey, in Istanbul and Denizli (in-person); one workshop in the UK, in London (online); and two workshops in Canada, in Toronto and Vancouver (one in-person and one online).

The poetry workshops involved several stages. The pre-workshop recruitment focused on participants who had already been interviewed, with some additional participants joining for the workshop. Shidmehr asked them to bring to the workshop a poem reflecting their migration and identity experiences. During the session, participants were informed about confidentiality, respectful language, and the right to withdraw from participation. They discussed poems resonating with their refugee or migratory journeys and identities, followed by a 'free writing' exercise based on key phrases from the discussion. After sharing their writings in small groups, participants created collective 'poetry clusters' by combining parts of their poems.

Post-workshop, Shidmehr checked in with participants regarding their well-being. In one-to-one sessions, participants received feedback on their poems and had one month to finalize them for inclusion in a poetry collection. They were told that poems could be published anonymously, and poets could withdraw from the project any time before publication. The final collection features 16 poems from 12 participants, with translations from Persian to English and an introduction discussing the themes and significance of the works (Shidmehr, 2024). The poems also inform the analysis in subsequent chapters.

## 3. Reflexivity: hermeneutical circles

Reflexivity in research refers to the process by which researchers critically reflect on their own role, pre-understanding, and positionality within the research process. This critical reflection was first emphasized by feminist scholars due to the importance of gender and the specificity of

women's issues. The concept has also been elaborated in studies focusing on queer individuals. Furthermore, in research concerning refugees and immigrants, scholars such as Moralli (2023) and Di Feliciantonio et al (Di Feliciantonio, Gadelha, and DasGupta, 2017) have underscored the significance of reflexivity. We found it to be key in considering our own roles as researchers.

The research underpinning this book embraces the intersection of complex axes of gender, sexuality, and migration/refugee experiences. In such research, we are aware of the restrictions of knowledge-production related to the role and positionality of researchers in data gathering, data analysis, and rendering the findings. The research team, including individuals whose contributions were of a short-term nature, was diverse, comprising a range of backgrounds and identities. This team consisted of both heterosexual and non-heterosexual cisgender scholars, representing a variety of perspectives. Among the team members were three individuals of Iranian background, including two of the co-authors of this book (Kamran Matin and Mehran Rezaei-Toroghi), as well as non-Iranian scholars (including the other co-authors of this book: Moira Dustin, Nuno Ferreira and Isabel Soloaga). The team also included individuals with different citizenship statuses, with some having lived experience of migration and asylum processes, while others had not. Although the team's diversity enriched the research process, members who do not identify as queer, lack experience with refugee or migration issues, or have not lived in Iran and lack background knowledge about the country, may not fully grasp the nuances of the participants' experiences. We acknowledge the limitations related to the positionality of team members vis-à-vis participants. To reduce these limitations as much as possible, all interviews were carried out by a team member whose lived experience most closely resembled that of participants, and all project outputs were reviewed by all team members. These outputs included a documentary, a poetry collection, several journal articles, blog pieces, podcast episodes, and other smaller outputs,[8] all produced with the purpose of centring participants' stories and giving them as much creative control and freedom of expression as possible.

To further overcome the limitations related to the positionality of team members vis-à-vis participants, we applied a reflexive approach to our research design. We adhered to methodologies that encourage leveraging our diversity for deeper insights and understanding. According to Moralli, positionality 'is not static but flexible, and is conditioned by different emotionalities emerging during the fieldwork' (Moralli, 2023, p 751). Therefore, the ongoing negotiation between researchers and participants valorized the relationships that emerged during the research. This negotiation helped the researchers transcend the boundaries of positionality restrictions. To foster this dialogical relationship, we

adopted an interpretative method inspired by the hermeneutical circle of Hans George Gadamer (1989, p 267) and his concept of 'fusion of horizon' to overcome these epistemic restrictions during data gathering and subsequently.

In Gadamer's hermeneutics and theory of interpretation, the 'horizon' represents our vision and perspective, shaped by our life experiences, academic disciplines, and personal journeys. These horizons influence our understanding when we engage in dialogue with others. Horizons can 'fuse' if there is a shared field between our horizon and that of the other person. In other words, we all bring our own 'prejudgements' when encountering others (Gadamer, 1989, p 578). In this interpretative world, one cannot fully adopt the perspective of another but can reflect on one's own limited knowledge as part of the process of understanding others. This reflection can expand the shared area of understanding. The dialogue itself helps us to reconsider and modify these prejudgements. Therefore, even if team members, including the interviewer, do not share participants' lived experiences, this reflective strategy is designed to minimize bias and enhance understanding.

These fusions are considered achievable based on the circular nature of understanding applied by Gadamer. He borrowed the concept of a hermeneutical circle from the interpretive method of understanding biblical texts of Friedrich Schleiermacher (Gadamer, 1989, p 291) and the phenomenological role of this concept in Martin Heidegger's philosophy (Gadamer, 1989). For Gadamer, like Schleiermacher, 'we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole' (Gadamer, 1989, p 291). This way of interpretation requires the subject of interpretation to move in a circular way between parts and whole in interpretation, an ongoing process that makes understanding provisional and temporal (Gadamer, 1989). In the same way, in a social phenomenon, one may argue that there should be a circular engagement between researcher and participants, resulting in a broader picture of their lived experiences which is ongoing, provisional, and open to modification in the process of research.

We considered this dialogical feature of hermeneutics in the design of the interview questionnaires. As mentioned earlier, open-ended questions enabled us to have a dialogical interaction with participants, where they could correct or enhance the interviewer's initial perception during the interview. For example, the term 'Life' was repeatedly raised during the fieldwork in a context that was unfamiliar to the interviewer, who could not find any literature to explain it (see Chapter 6). Through interviews, we learnt that 'Life' was an underground community, where queer individuals in Iran would meet to support one another. In 'Life', people gave each other familial labels – Mother, Father, Brother, Sister. Our academic 'pre-judgement' was that 'familial roles' in a community or organization may reflect the existence of patriarchal power relations under the canopy of caring family roles, but

participants corrected this assumption by explaining how these roles were fluid in their 'Life' community.

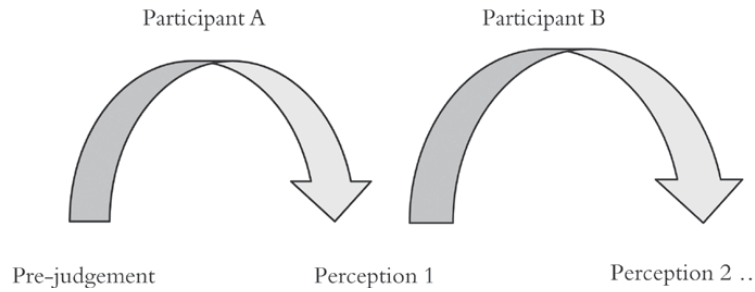
A second perception was that queer people used labels in a performative way to deconstruct gender roles.. To examine this view, we voiced our perceptions during interviews, opening them up to modification. So, participants took the opportunity to correct our assumption and clarify the way they experienced or regarded these phenomena as 'insiders'. For example, in the interview with Sina, this took place as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Researcher: | It seems that these roles have been very flexible and fluid. While you were referred to as an 'aunt', your behaviour leaned towards the more masculine side. |
| Sina: | No, those patterns and roles were not directly related to sexual orientation, gender identity, or social roles. It was more like a sweet playfulness among LGBTQ+ individuals, especially within the gay community. |
| Researcher: | A kind of ironic and humorous play? |
| Sina: | Yes, indeed, I really love this play. Why? Because, for example, when a gay man takes on a feminine role and plays it with delight, he unconsciously sends a message that says, 'We have no issue with gender, and we have no sexual stereotypes or sexist thoughts'. |

The intellectual added value of the hermeneutical circle lies in the way we articulated and fostered this interpretive technique deliberately over time with each interview, intending to approximate our horizon to that of the participants in a process reminiscent of non-violent communication teachings (The Center for Nonviolent Communication, 2025). Through this process of dialogue, the understanding of a theme, such as 'Life', evolved. The dialogue continued over multiple interviews, subjecting our assumptions and provisional understanding as researchers to validation by the participants (see Figure 4.7).

This hermeneutical circle also has an impact on the conventional power relations between researcher and participants; the researcher is not present simply to record responses but also to be the subject of participants' validation (Darawsheh, 2014). This shift in role empowers the researcher to partake in the 'fusion of horizons', as Gadamer's hermeneutic suggests. Although this fusion may not change the situated knowledge of the researcher, as everyone is bound by their own 'prejudice' (Gadamer, 1989),[9] researchers can move towards new understandings with the aid of participants. Conversely, employing this method alters the power relations of traditional interviews, empowering participants to make more meaningful contributions to the research. The outcome of such dialogical interviews and protecting

**Figure 4.7:** Hermeneutical circle of evolving understanding in the interview process




Source: Designed by authors on the basis of Gadamer's (1989) work

participants' space to share provided the project with rich data and a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of participants, and ultimately helped us unearth topics not yet explored in scholarship.

Maintaining a reflexive strategy, we also applied thematic analysis through an inductive, bottom-up approach, designed to be shaped by the contingencies of lived experiences. As Sophia Zisakou describes in her study on queer asylum claimants, this approach enables researchers 'to unravel emergent and contradictory patterns in the process' by 'focusing on the ambivalences and uncertainties of communication during interviews' (Zisakou, 2024, p 4). We remained open to the diversity and uniqueness of queer Iranian identities and their varied experiences. Consequently, some themes were more emphasized in the analysis due to the participants' specific contexts. For instance, 'technology and the internet' emerged as a significant theme mentioned by participants, offering rich material for analysis.

All interviews were transcribed professionally and participants were offered the opportunity to confirm the transcript if they so wished. We used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to organize and manage this data in the post-fieldwork phase, ensuring that all team members could take part in the analysis of the interview transcripts and contribute to the outcomes. An inductive and thematic content analysis approach was adopted, whereby interview segments were openly coded according to emerging themes and then grouped into broader thematic categories that informed the themes and content explored in this book, as well as other outputs of the NQIfFM project.

## 4. Ethical issues

This project received ethical approval from the University of Sussex Research Ethics Committee, reference ER/NF213/2. Throughout the fieldwork, we

adhered to established protocols and proactively tackled emerging ethical concerns in line with the 'Codes of Practice Research' outlined by the University of Sussex (REIC, Research Ethics and Integrity Committee, 2022), including in relation to storage of fieldwork data.

Before holding interviews and setting up the poetry workshops, we provided participants with information sheets to explain the fieldwork process and their right to withdraw from either activity without providing a reason. Throughout this book we have used participants' preferred names or pseudonyms upon request. Before interviewing and starting each poetry workshop, participants were informed again about the characteristics of the project, the process of the fieldwork, and their right to withdraw from the research whenever they wished. If they were not able to sign the consent form for any reason, we recorded their consent verbally.

Due to the traumatizing experiences of queer refugee participants, we frequently asked for their renewed consent during the fieldwork when we felt that the interview or poetry workshop content might potentially trigger traumatic memories. We also provided participants with a list of supporting organizations in their country of residence.

Conducting the fieldwork in three case study countries entailed some risk management for the researchers. To minimize potential risks, we carried out fieldwork during the day, in locations where we could access support if necessary, and where health and safety standards could be ensured. Interviews were conducted mainly in public places unless the participants or the researcher wished for a safer or more convenient location for any reason. For instance, in Turkey, what constituted a safe place was tangibly different from the equivalent in the UK and Canada. Following the advice of members of the Advisory Board and a group of Turkish activists and scholars, we avoided public places in Turkey as much as possible, due to reports of trans/homophobia, instead holding interviews and poetry workshops in safer places identified with the help of local research assistants and NGO staff.

In light of the draconian laws in Iran and reports at the time on the policing of queer individuals (United States Department of State, 2023), we implemented stringent measures to protect participants in Iran from potential risks. To ensure their security, we recommended the use of secure applications endorsed by cybersecurity experts. Iranian participants used virtual private networks (VPNs) to connect to these applications, thus adding a further layer of security to the applications. All participants from Iran opted to remain anonymous, and they carefully reviewed their interviews to prevent any inadvertent disclosure of identifying details.

Engaging with participants through interactive methods allowed us to seek consent regularly throughout the research process. While 18 participants did not ask to review the transcripts of their interviews, there were 39 participants who did. This ongoing interaction extended to the poetry

inquiry process, ensuring that poets were engaged and consented at every stage of the fieldwork.

In all aspects of the fieldwork, our methodological approach reflects a strong commitment to recognising the diversity, uniqueness, and heterogeneity of the lived experiences of queer Iranian participants. Our research design aimed to avoid perpetuating Western scholarly biases in the study of non-Western queer communities critiqued by other researchers (García Rodríguez, 2023). We also sought to move beyond reinforcing cultural dualisms that wrongly assume a sharp distinction between the so-called 'East' and 'West'. Our methodological approach thus reacts to and replicates calls to action for ways to do research better and differently. The next three chapters will explore and elaborate on the empirical findings our fieldwork has yielded.

5

# Language, Queer Vocabularies, and Self-identification

I am not a rainbow
I am this murky sky
dark as dirt
I?
Who
am I
Actually?

Peyman, Turkey

## 1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on how queer Iranians utilize and adapt language to describe themselves and their inner journeys towards self-identification. Investigating how queer Iranians understand their relationship to themselves, their sexuality, and their gender identity, this chapter provides an unfiltered account of the process of identification as articulated and felt internally, through migration journeys, and across languages.

Shifting the focus in the field of SOGIESC asylum and migration scholarship from legal and social processes to perspectives on the evolution of individual identities, this chapter provides an intimate study of how queer Iranians come to understand their identities in Iran, in transit and in countries of destination. Our research shows how queer Iranians experience the boundaries of selfhood and push the limits of language to share their experiences, often motivated by a need for connection, and the desire to build new homes in Turkey, the UK and Canada. Increasingly, younger generations of Iranians reject the rigid gender and sexual binaries frequently imposed by both Western and Eastern cultures, refusing to be defined by simplistic labels that are incongruous with their lived realities. Telling one's own story, in one's own words, proved a critical step to personal

empowerment and belonging for many participants, whether living in Iran or in exile.

Gender and sexual orientation – important aspects of personhood, identity, and behaviour – continue to develop throughout the course of individuals' lives. Our participants' stories attest to the active role they play in creating their identities through poetry, language, and community, refracted through diverse temporalities and spatialities. This is yet another example of the historical process of uneven and combined development (UCD) outlined in Chapter 2, drawn into the present-day lives of the individuals directly impacted by both international debates on queerness and the specific context of Iran from the late 1960s to the present date.

We investigated identity and language through first-person accounts from the 57 participants in our fieldwork. In addition, small-group poetry workshops gave many participants another avenue through which to share their stories (Chapter 4). Their focus on the words used to describe themselves, and a notable rejection of harsh, inflexible labels among many participants, reflect a growing awareness of the power of change and the reality of multiplicity in gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, and other identifiers. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's work *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Kristeva, 1993), this chapter explores how our queer Iranian participants reconnect language with its semiotic, bodily roots, creating new spaces for subjectivity, self-identification, and belonging. According to Kristeva, 'linguistic changes constitute changes in the *status of the subject* – his relationship to the body, to others, and to objects' (Kristeva, 1993, p 15). As such, this work of carefully interrogating and reimagining language, especially the incorporation of poetry as method, holds the potential to create change and open new spaces of belonging.

The following sections articulate the ways in which participants reclaim and reimagine their relationships to language through poetry and new vocabularies. In doing so, they recreate language to better capture their felt realities, emotions, and personal experiences. Moreover, increasing access to the internet and social media allows queer Iranians, both at home and abroad, to engage in debate, learn from one another, and share their individual stories. More and more, younger generations conceive of their identity as something that evolves over time, embracing a radical fluidity in SOGIESC identity – a key finding of this research that merits further study.

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, author Azar Nafisi (2008) writes about teaching an illicit literature class as strict morality squads staged raids in the then-new Islamic Republic of Iran. Today as then, Iranian police actively enforce a strict code of social ethics based upon the gender binary. Nafisi writes:

> Lolita belongs to a category of victims who have no defence and are never given the chance to articulate their own story. As such she

> becomes a double victim – not only her life but also her life story is taken from her. We told ourselves we were in that class to prevent ourselves from falling victim to this second crime. (Nafisi, 2008, p 41)

Through participatory research, we trace multiple, complicated, and intersectional narratives on the subject of queer migration. The participants in this research, by carefully utilizing vocabulary, creating new translations, and redefining their diverse identities throughout the course of their lives, likewise play with language and creative forms such as poetry in order to take charge of their narratives. Our participants are authors, experts, and sources in their own right (see, for example, Peyghambarzadeh, 2020). In *Men Explain Things to Me*, feminist scholar Rebecca Solnit states: 'You read enough books in which people like you are disposable, or are dirt, or are silent, absent, or worthless, and it makes an impact on you. Because art makes the world, because it matters, because it makes us. Or breaks us' (Solnit, 2014).

Contributions like this book play an important role in redefining categorizations, breaking them apart, and allowing those at the centre of the research to reassert their agency in creating the narratives that describe them.

Here we focus on the relationship between language and identity, building on and resonating with formative feminist and queer semiotics, psychological and philosophical theory, and discourse analysis. Complementing the discussion of the history of SOGIESC issues in Iran in Chapter 3, this chapter explores current understandings and self-identification of queer Iranians, both in their origin country and in exile today, highlighting the central role of language. We follow queer Iranians' internal journeys of identification through the theme of language by centring their own words, poetry, and perspectives. In order to give context and clarity to their stories, we highlight and build on some key feminist theoretical frameworks.

Creating an individual identity is never easy, and least of all for those who fail to fit neatly into established categories. Indicating the intersection of gender and 'race', Gloria Anzaldúa writes about the appropriation of terms including 'queer' and 'dyke' that make it difficult for her, as a woman of colour, to choose an identity label in the English language (Anzaldúa, 2009). Similarly, some of our participants explained that the English terms for SOGIESC failed to resonate with their experiences as queer Iranians. For Judith Butler, language is part of the signification process that constitutes the subject, and not an 'exterior medium or instrument into which I pour a self' (Butler, 2006, p 196). By employing poetry as a research method, the methodology underpinning this book places language in the hands of our participants. In this way, our participants freely employed both semiotic and symbolic language to actively describe themselves and their experiences within the safe spaces of queer, Iranian-led poetry workshops.

Queer Iranians, by virtue of necessity and through the desire to connect, continually adopt old and develop new terminologies and vernacular styles for self-identification, both within Iran and over the course of their migration journeys. As our interviews attest, learning about feminist theories on gender and Western terms such as 'gay' and 'queer' proved to be formative experiences in many participants' understanding of their own identities. French second-wave feminists tackled the process of dismantling biological gender/sex determinism, with Simone de Beauvoir's recognition that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman' (de Beauvoir, 2011 [1949], p 334). Throughout feminist literature, and illustrated by our participants' stories, language plays an integral part of the 'becoming' process (de Beauvoir, 2011 [1949]; Kristeva, 1993; Butler, 2006; Anzaldúa, 2009). Our participants experienced and re-experienced 'becoming' throughout their lives, through both direct experiences, new vocabularies, and learning to mould language into new forms that they felt expressed who they were.

In Iran, state-sanctioned determination of gendered roles in all dimensions of society – legal, social, familial, religious – deeply affects the lives of queer individuals, and often constitutes a major factor in the decision to emigrate from Iran. However, we found that despite official Iranian state condemnation and severe social repercussions, queer communities in Iran continued to evolve, creating unique hybrid identities arising from Iranian culture and expressed through online channels, activist networks, and word of mouth. One important finding of this research is the role of the loosely organized community known as 'Life', which has played a critical role in developing language to protect queer Iranians from homophobia and transphobia while simultaneously creating spaces for queer self-identification and socialization (see Chapter 6).

Queer Iranians in Iran, in transit, and those living in exile strive for new ways of identification that align with their sexual orientation, gender identity, and other important aspects of their lives. Increased access to social media, the internet, and globalized queer discourses provides younger generations around the world with new opportunities to build community, discuss identity, and build knowledge and vocabulary around these issues (Cheong, Johns, and Byron, 2023). As a result, many young Iranians, including some of our participants, reject the rigid gender norms and expectations upheld by state and social actors, instead embracing fluid, ever-changing notions of gender and sexual identity.

In the section that follows (Section 2), we put queer identity in Iran into context for Western audiences, undermining official state dismissals of the existence of homosexuals in Iran, and addressing the challenge this creates for queer visibility in Iran. We acknowledge the bravery of our participants in speaking out publicly about their identities and experiences. Section 2 also ties queer culture in Iran to our theoretical framework based on

UCD. Section 3 juxtaposes historic examples of queer terminology with the modern poetic expressions of identity created during our fieldwork. Section 4 explores language, the limitations of translating queerness across cultures, and the vocabularies participants use to self-identify. In Section 5, we hone in on new and emerging queer vocabularies in Farsi. Section 6 explores binary expectations of identity in the Iranian context, the impact of state-subsidized gender-affirming surgeries on understandings of gender and sexuality, and the widespread use of the term 'transsexual' among queer Iranians. Section 7 investigates the role of the internet and social media in connecting and educating people, leading to Section 8, where we find a growing embrace of gender and sexual fluidity among queer Iranian youth. We conclude, in Section 9, by considering the emerging prevalence of gender fluidity, bisexuality, and pansexuality, especially as championed by younger generations of Iranians. Their understanding of dynamic gender fluidity and freedom from designating specific sexual orientations clashes with the labels, boxes, and binaries that establish SOGIESC as categories based on behaviour and identity. Bringing us full circle, we argue that this newly emerging understanding of fluid, continually evolving gender and sexual identity is consistent with the ambivalence and dynamism of Iranian poetic tradition from Rumi to today's emerging poets.

## 2. Queerness in context

In 2007, the president of Iran at the time, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, claimed there were no homosexuals in his country: 'In Iran we don't have homosexuals like in your country … In Iran we do not have this phenomenon, I don't know who has told you that we have it' (Seldin, 2012). When a state categorically denies homosexuality as an identity in public discourse and criminalizes same-sex sexual activities, how do those who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender and who practise non-heteronormative sexualities articulate their identities, find their communities, and engage in sexual relationships? Put another way, how do queer Iranians understand and articulate their heterogenous identities under harsh legal codes and the threat of death? Finally, what impact does migration have on the identities of those who leave?

While the Iranian state continues to criminalize individuals accused of sodomy (Human Rights Watch, 2024b; Mohammadi, 2024) it does not recognize 'homosexuality' as an aspect of personhood or identity; rather, sodomy is widely understood as an act that critically undermines the gendered order on which the modern theocratic nation-state is built. The harsh criminal consequences queer Iranians face (Chapter 3) – much like those faced by their hetero and cisgendered feminist counterparts who are criminalized for their activism, for speaking out, or for failing to comply

with state-mandated dress codes – result from the criminal enforcement of this gendered binary order. During the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' protests that started in September 2022, queer people were specifically targeted and there was a 'permissive environment for gross human rights violations to be committed against LGBTQ+ persons' (UN Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, 2025, p 80).

The experiences of our research participants shed light on how they and younger generations have conceptualized SOCIESC identity in ways that break with traditional ideas of gender roles and the conservative legal codes of Iran. Beginning in the early 2000s, Iranians increasingly grew up with access to the internet and social media (Shakhsari, 2020b). As such, they gained distinct purchase on queer history and culture globally, as well as emerging theories and current debates on diversity in sexual expression and gender. The internet and social media have allowed unprecedented sharing of information outside of strictly controlled government media channels. However, as with all new technologies, new risks also emerged. Iranian state surveillance and punishment of offenders, in Iran and living in exile, are well documented (Shakhsari, 2020b; Freedom House, 2021; O'Brien, 2024). Nonetheless, transnational networks of queer Iranian activists, academics, and intellectuals contribute to a growing queer vocabulary and debate around Iranian sexualities and gender identities, informed by international discourse and intimately shaped by the unique social, historical, and legal environment of Iran itself.

Our participants' caution in sharing their experiences testifies to the risks they were taking. One participant, who chose to go by the name Matt A. (now based in the UK), stated:

> Just being yourself takes a lot of courage. Even if you are a straight man in Iran, you know, just being yourself takes a lot of courage because there is a prototype out there for who is the perfect citizen … you either hold up to that or you try to be more of yourself … Gays, you know, we are just courageous for being ourselves.

Matt A.'s testimony to the courage of queer Iranians emphasizes the social and political pressure to live a life expected of this 'perfect citizen'. In actively speaking out about their identity and life stories through participation in this research, our participants bravely – and sometimes for the first time – disclosed the stories behind their identity, migration, and life trajectories.

One significant finding, which emerged from discussions with participants, adds an important nuance to Iranian understandings of SOGIESC identity. While in Western discourse 'queer identity' is generally viewed as an intrinsic or defining characteristic, and comparable to other core identity markers such as 'race' or religious affiliation, Iranians often perceive their sexual

orientation and gender identity as more closely akin to external actions, behaviours, and inclinations. This is reflected in Iranian legal codes, which typically reference specific acts (for example, *livat* or sodomy) or conditions (for example, transsexuality) rather than fixed identities or social groups (Cohen, 2015).

The inadequacy of language to accurately describe individuals' experiences of the intersectional nature of identity emerged time and time again during our interviews in relation to the reading of queer identities across cultures. Some of our participants spoke of their attraction towards certain genders or sexual acts without necessarily embracing the English language identifiers of SOGIESC identity. Often, neither Farsi terminology nor Western queer vernacular contained the words that captured who they felt they were. In these cases, poetry became an important tool for expressing the essential self. As such, we start our analysis with poetry in the following section.

## 3. Poetic traditions

As explained in Chapter 3, queer culture has a long history in Iran. Persian poetic tradition in particular contains many moving accounts of same-sex love and attachment. Persian authors Rumi and Hafez, illustrative of the long history of influential romantic poets in Iran, wrote about love between same-sex partners. In the following poem, Hafez likens the same love between men and women who are married to 'men and men who are lovers' and 'women and women who give each other light' (cited in Ryan, 2018):

> It happens all the time in heaven,
> And some day
>
> It will begin to happen
> Again on earth –
>
> That men and women who are married,
> And men and men who are
> Lovers,
>
> And women and women
> Who give each other
> Light,
>
> Often will get down on their knees
>
> And while so tenderly
> Holding their lover's hand,

With tears in their eyes,
Will sincerely speak, saying,

'My dear,
How can I be more loving to you;

How can I be more
Kind?'

Rigid heteronormative identities and gender roles, as alluded to in this poem, were not always part of Iranian society. Rumi, Hafez, and many other notable poets penned verses detailing homoerotic love and intimacy, as part of a longstanding Islamic tradition and a culture of homosociality in Iran (see Chapter 3). Historically, the legal prohibition of same-sex sexual acts often coincided with the day-to-day existence of same-sex relationships, as discussed by Muslim philosophers including Avicenna and Mulla Sadra (Murray and Roscoe, 1997). Longstanding Farsi vocabulary and terms – including 'girl-boys' or *mukhannas*, described by one participant – attest to the historical reality of a culture of homosociality (again discussed in Chapter 3).

In the face of discrimination and harassment, queer Iranians bravely fight for recognition, societal acceptance, and an inclusive vocabulary to describe their unique experience as queer Iranians. Through poetry, words may take on multiple meanings simultaneously, creating images in a reader's mind rather than dictating rigid labels. Through the artistry and openness of poems, both historic and modern, the ambiguity and fluidity of identity that many of our participants experience inwardly is captured.

Self-description through writing can be a critical step in forming identity. Rusty Barret observes that individuals create multi-layered identities 'based on different "linguistic styles"' (Barrett, 2017, p 313) and queer scholarship has identified 'lesbian- and gay-centered text-making' as part of the process of what is called 'self-managed socialization' (Leap, 1999, p 264). By creating written works, individuals create their own spaces for social connection, identity formation, and community building. Queer Iranians today craft their own social networks, cultural expressions, and modes of belonging within a social and political environment in which their identity is criminalized. To get to the heart of questions of identity, we engaged both with this scholarship and employed it in the form of a unique opportunity for participants to take part in the creation of queer poetry.

Through group poetry workshops hosted in person and online in Turkey, the UK and Canada, our participants attested to the new ways they conceive of and carry identity with them throughout and following their migration journeys (Chapter 4). In these group sessions, participants came together

to articulate their journeys of self-identification. Next, and included at the start of this chapter, is an example of one participant's poem:

> I am not a rainbow
> I am this murky sky
> dark as dirt
>
> I?
> Who
> am I
> Actually?

When asked about their interpretation of their poem, Peyman responded: 'In reality, sexual orientation and gender identity are not something that change in East (Iran) and Western societies … we in the Iranian gay communities do not see any difference between ourselves and Western communities'.

Peyman's poem alludes to the complicated nature and challenge of creating an authentic identity, including for members of queer communities around the world. Rather than choosing to be identified solely by Western-based identifiers or Iranian labels, some Iranians, both in Iran and abroad, are embracing the changing, ambivalent nature of identity over the traditional constructs offered by language and precise vocabulary. As we go on to describe in detail in Chapter 6, which focuses on external influences on identity, queer Iranians may use certain labels to help build community or out of necessity, such as for the purposes of asylum applications. However, such labels often fail to capture how individuals see themselves. In contrast, poetry may offer a way to present identity while avoiding inauthentic labels; an essential part of Iranian culture and history, brought forward in a new age and in new places by queer Iranian writers who are choosing their own pathways. Through these poetic descriptions, individuals claim a right to freedom of expression, the freedom to change how they identify, and articulate how they uniquely understand and relate to the world around them. Accordingly, the next section explores the language and words some queer Iranians claim to describe themselves.

## 4. Language: translating queerness

'You know, language matters a lot, where the issue of gender enters a language' (Amira, Canada). The language we use when describing queerness and gender is, as Amira states, critical when thinking about identity. Words, grammar, and language as a whole provide the framework within which we think about, write, and theorize highly nuanced, personal aspects of life. It is worth noting that nearly all of our interviews were originally conducted

in Farsi, and the quotes used here have been translated into English by Farsi-speaking researchers and translators. Inevitably, nuances and layers of meaning are lost or transformed through the translation process. Here we explore what is lost in translation and how new, emerging forms of identification are being developed to help queer Iranians around the world connect and express themselves personally and in community. Words have power: both for positive change or destruction. Our participants dance between these extremes in their journeys to knowing and expressing themselves through language.

Debates over language, pronouns, and self-identification can appear regressive or a challenge to queer inclusivity (Ross, Kinitz, and Kia, 2022). However, for many queer Iranians, the ability to engage in public debates on sexual orientation, gender, and language can feel liberating, representing both a step towards their freedom and a reward for their arduous migration journey.

For some of our research participants, like Hope in Canada, the Western preoccupation with queer identification and vocabulary at first seemed like a privilege, an invented problem:

> I was aware of the terminology, and I had studied about it and stuff, but while speaking with a friend in the US, she told me not to use the pronoun 'she' and instead use 'they/them' … my feeling upon hearing that was frustration, as in, 'look at these First World problems and the level of concern regarding such matters. Our issues are so deep, while theirs is a preoccupation that someone should call them "they" rather than "she"'.

In the context of Iran, where queer individuals face the death penalty and activists and individuals must fight daily for access to their basic rights, the Western preoccupation with chosen pronouns at first appeared to Hope to be a superfluous privilege. Only later, when analysing their own gender identity, did the relevance of the debate to their own experience become apparent to Hope:

> But only a year after that I realised that I was calling myself nonbinary. I arrived at the understanding that gender is not a binary matter. When I say that, I mean that I don't really give a shit if they call me 'they' or 'she', rather the affirmation around the matter that I am gender fluid, and often I don't even wish to define a gender for myself … It was mostly an internal thing for me.

For Hope, the important part of this discussion lay not in what pronouns were used to describe them, but in the affirmation of their gender fluidity. Taking up the term 'nonbinary' allowed them to avoid claiming a gender that did not resonate with their understanding of themselves. For them, this

change in self-identification was an *internal process*, informed by global debates on queerness and gender identity but not reliant on external validation or the use of specific vocabulary.

Nearly all of our participants experienced moments of isolation and loneliness, both as queer people in Iran and in migration. For many, like Shaya, who now lives in Canada, learning about queer identities and categories gave them hope that there were others like them:

> The mere fact that I had found a term that I could describe myself with, even if it was a disease, was a ray of hope for me. To feel like I too am someone and I too have a name. Prior to this it felt like because I was different from everyone else, nature would omit me.

For Shaya, having knowledge of the terminology that described her, even if it had negative connotations, brought a sense of belonging.

For queer Iranians, language and choices of terminology may be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, identification as part of the queer community can bring salvation, recognition, community membership, and the chance of asylum abroad. On the other hand, it can also mean sin, stigma and at worst the threat of death. Amira, for example, told us that: 'People like me got eliminated because they got labelled. If I was Amira in society in the past, now I have become "the one who is trans", "the man who looks like women". Why do we need to say "man" or "woman" at all? I am just myself'.

As Amira emphasized, to be labelled as a homosexual, trans, or nonbinary person in Iran is to be targeted for persecution. In some situations, ambiguity can provide protection from the harsh criminal sanctions imposed by the state. However, in other contexts, using an identifier can provide a benefit. For example, proving membership of a 'particular social group' on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity could be necessary for an asylum application (Dustin, 2018). Identification brings political, social, and criminal consequences that queer Iranians must navigate on a daily basis.

Rima, a PhD researcher now based in Istanbul, stressed the fear and shame that they associated with being labelled as queer in Iran: 'In our childhood, we were afraid of such words or labels, we didn't even name them. It was because we were prohibited by society. Because our families would say people who are like this are a sign of apocalypse, a shame, a dishonour. We were always told such things'.

When approaching the potentially dangerous, emotionally charged issue of self-identification, several of our participants felt more comfortable with English language terms for queerness, as opposed to terms in their mother tongue. Parham A., who remains in Iran, shared that he found it easier to express his identity in English than in Persian: 'These days, when I chat with strangers, I express myself as gay; however, it is easier in English. In Persian,

I have to use some terms that are meant to be somehow humiliating. It did hurt me in the past'.

Parham A. chose to use English terms that are less humiliating, he felt, than their Persian counterparts. His choice of language in describing his identity resonates with the semiotic nature of language, and in particular the ways in which the meanings of language are context-dependent and socially constructed. Many English language phrases for queerness have been reclaimed from previously offensive words, and are now part of a queer vernacular. Words such as 'homosexual' have attained a level of public respect and, in some places, official legal protection; however, their translations in Persian have not. Parham A. is not alone in experiencing this phenomenon, and it is notable that even within primarily Farsi interviews, many of our research participants used English language terms to describe their identities.

Today, a growing number of Iranians are addressing these issues, especially through online channels and social media, as they actively debate and recreate the Persian language in an effort to proudly self-identify in their mother tongue, as we discuss in the following section.

## 5. New Iranian terminology: *hamjens-gara*

The lives of queer Iranians, while constrained by harsh laws, are not only defined by these restrictions. Especially in the capital of Tehran, queer Iranians work to create spaces of solidarity and community support (Rahbari, 2022). Meanwhile, law and prevailing social attitudes have also seen changes in response to international pressure and changing conceptions of SOGIESC identity. There were changes in discourses around gay relationships in 2013 (Cheong, Johns, and Byron, 2023): Iranian lawmakers removed the derogatory term *hamjens-baz* from legal frameworks, replacing it with *hamjens-gara*, which is the term accepted by most Iranian queer organizations (see Chapter 3).

Changes in legal terminology reflect shifting attitudes towards same-sex relationships; however, queer Iranians still find themselves at great risk along their migration journeys. Amidst legal constraints and daily threats, queer Iranians navigate informal networks of support and solidarity, fostering community and what Iman Ganji and Asef Bayat describe as 'silent movements' (Tellis and Bala, 2015, p 105). Queer Iranians are innovatively adopting and co-opting their own language to re-establish queer vocabulary in their native languages. In order to address the negative connotations of common slang words to describe queer Iranians, some – particularly some more educated individuals – have begun using an invented Farsi word to describe queer people: *degarbash*. *Degarbash* consists of two parts: *degar* (other, hetero-) and *bash* (existence, being). Therefore, it literally means a heterogeneous existence, referring to the heterogeneity of desire or sexuality (Karimi, 2018).

Some activists and queer Iranians reject this term, claiming that as a newly-invented word, it lacks mass resonance (Tellis and Bala, 2015, p 106). Meanwhile, others assert that the word only re-emphasizes the duality between norm and deviation, thereby re-ostracizing already socially outcast queer Iranians. Therefore, some queer activists avoid using *degarbash* in favour of more familiar translations of terms like 'homosexuals', 'transsexuals', and 'bisexuals' (Hosseini-Lewis, 2015). Although the precise language used is contested, attempts to reassert queer identity in the Persian language show an important turning point in activism and the visibility of queer people in Iran.

Saghi, now living in Canada, shared their experience and pride in the new Persian language around their identity:

> How can I be something that has such an ugly meaning for the rest of the world? … They made experiments with this name and that name and *degarbash* was one of the names that eventually they came up with. *Hamjens-gara. Hamjens-gara* is a beautiful name. That when somebody says I am *hamjens-gara,* they can be, you know, happy with it, they can like it. They can be proud of it … *Hamjens-gara* means somebody who is interested and can fall in love and be sexually, romantically or erotically interested in the same sex.

*Hamjens-gara* is a compound word in Persian, combining *hamjens* meaning 'same sex' or 'of the same gender', and *gara* meaning 'orientation' or 'toward'. Thus, *hamjens-gara* literally means 'same-sex-oriented'. Now used in both formal and informal contexts, many Iranians consider *hamjens-gara* among the most neutral terms for describing same-sex attraction. With increased access to global media and discussions of SOGIESC rights, the word *hamjens-gara* is now part of the vocabulary used by younger generations and in international dialogues regarding human rights and sexual orientation (Kashani-Sabet, 2011; Hosseini-Lewis, 2015; Karimi, 2018).

## 6. Binary expectations

Queer Iranians notably self-identify using the term 'transsexual', perhaps to a greater extent than their counterparts in the West, likely in part because of the legalization of state-sanctioned gender-affirming surgery. Pegah, a trans woman who has gone through gender-affirming surgery, lives in Canada today: 'My family and friends call me by this name. They also call me [X]. I identify myself as transgender, specifically as a transsexual. This means that I have undergone gender-affirming surgery'.

The initiation of medical transition in Iran began with the 1967 *fatwa* by the then-exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, who declared there is no religious restriction on sex reassignment surgery. In 1985, an appendage to this *fatwa*

extended this to include transsexuals (Jafari, 2013). Today, the IRI classifies being transgender as a pathology curable by modern medicine through SRS (Najmabadi, 2008b, p 25). As such, the issue of gender transition, as well as life in the aftermath of transition surgery, remained uppermost in many participants' minds – especially those still living in Iran.

While the Iranian state subsidizes gender transition, same-sex partnerships remain punishable by death: an unexpected example of UCD in the Iranian penal and medical systems. For queer Iranians, this stark reality brings the issue of gender identity into questions of queer identity more broadly, as individuals negotiate their own self-understandings within what is societally accepted, subsidized, and punishable. This complexity is compounded by the pathologization and medicalization of trans people. In a 2017 article for Quartz magazine, Kevin Schumacher from OutRight Action International, a global LGBTIQ-rights organizations, explained a critical nuance between Iranian understandings of trans people and the leading understanding in the Western world: 'The Iranian government doesn't recognize being trans as a category per se, rather they see trans individuals as people with psychosexual problems, and so provide them with a medical solution' (cited in Bagri, 2017).

In some cases, as in the case of Minoo, who emigrated to Turkey, a medical solution proved necessary to address the intense pain and discomfort she experienced as an intersex individual. Their experience of gender-affirming surgery in Iran provides important social context for those existing on the edges of the accepted gender binary in Iran. Minoo explained that people misunderstand SOGIESC minority individuals in Iran, believing that the problems lie in taboo behaviours rather than genuine physical complications, as in her case:

> People used to see intersex individuals as trans people, and they had a lot of hate towards them. They thought that intersex people were choosing to be that way or that something was wrong with their minds. It took a while for society to understand that being intersex is just a biological thing and not the person's fault … Before those physical changes happened to my body, people's behaviour towards me was very different. It was more violent and hurtful, which was really heart-breaking and humiliating. But I was strong and kept going. So, basically, I had the surgery when I was pretty young, like 19 or so, and the whole process went on until I was 21–22 or something like that. As time went by, I became more knowledgeable about my situation. I learned the proper terms and categories used to describe intersex individuals, and I was able to identify which category best described my condition.

For Minoo, as with other queer individuals interviewed, gaining the knowledge that explained her condition (in this case, medical) and then

adopting this new vocabulary enhanced her power to tell her own story. Meanwhile, the medical system's acceptance of gender-affirming surgery allowed her to undergo surgery that saved her from physical pain and allowed her to be more readily accepted into wider Iranian society. The availability of such medical treatment was on account of the need to protect a strict gender binary. According to Schumacher, Iranian state subsidies for gender-affirming surgery – unique in the Muslim world – exist as an essential way of protecting the gender binary that must be maintained in order to maintain the existing social structure in Iran: 'If you're born a man and your body is a female then in order to protect you and the wellbeing of society … the government is responsible for fixing the issue' (cited in Bagri, 2017).

However, state subsidizing and recognition of gender reassignment surgeries should not be seen as entirely positive: while they enable individuals like Pegah and Minoo who wish to transition to do so, other participants shared grim stories of forced surgeries, ill-equipped doctors, and enduring intolerance. The strictly enforced gender binary and accompanying gender roles mean that nonbinary, gender fluid, homosexual, and bisexual individuals such as Amira and Minoo frequently experience the brunt of the theocracy's severe legal system, a topic that will be further explored in Chapter 6.

## 7. Internet connections and a queer new world

The significance of the internet and social media for queer Iranians cannot be overstated. Online communications have become the basis for connections that transcend geographical, national, cultural, and class differences. They enable queer or questioning individuals in Iran to interact with like-minded people inside Iran and beyond, and secure information about SOGIESC – often for the first time. As Pardis Mahdavi observes: '[m]any of the young men who saw themselves as part of the emerging gay movement in Iran noted that the internet was integral to the construction of a gay movement as they had the ability to be inspired by and work with members of gay movements around the world' (Mahdavi, 2012, p 233). Similarly, the 'explosion of [interest in] transsexuality' that Afsaneh Najmabadi identifies in the early 2000s is linked to electronic as well as print media (Najmabadi, 2014, p 207). This was reflected by our participants. As with the experience of university for some (see Chapter 6), social media and the internet offered the opportunity to explore sexual and gender possibilities unsupervised.

Here, there is a significant difference in experience between participants in their late thirties and forties and those in their twenties and early thirties. As Farhan (aged 25) explained in relation to the generation that preceded them, '[t]he wave that exists now wasn't there before. The organizations that are in place now weren't there before. The pages on the social media that are

giving information and are building a culture now weren't there before'. This meant our older participants lacked access to online support and information when they were younger, sometimes with harmful implications. Arghavan (aged 42 at the time of the fieldwork) explained that the profound lack of understanding or knowledge of trans experiences while she was growing up led her to deeply question her own sanity: 'I didn't hear about trans life, at that time there was no internet, there was no international access and, especially, Iran was a very, very isolated country. So, you didn't have access to very much information.'

Alireza recognized the generational change: 'When a teenager faces an unknown phenomenon, they immediately Google it. My generation has not learnt this. My generation is not the generation of the cyber world'. As X, living in Iran and aged 50, explained, before the era of the internet, same-sex desires were seen as a symptom of individual evil rather than a general phenomenon. That all changed with the arrival of the internet and social media. It was on the internet that Karen first encountered terms like 'gay' and 'LGBT', although at this time, as he laughingly explained, 'it was the dial-up, when we used to start at 9pm and finally at 4am we would connect!'.

Younger participants had greater access to the cultural content on the internet and the ideas they encountered as a result. Hope explained:

> I was born in 1996 [1375], and when I was in middle school, we did have access to the internet. It wasn't like those born in the 2000s [1380s], but still it helped to have access to the internet and to satellite TVs. I could do some searches. For instance, I remember the music 'I kissed a girl and I liked it' [a song by Katy Perry released in 2008] came out, I would listen to it and tell myself: 'Oh, OK'. What I mean is that the openness of the atmosphere was helpful in preventing the guilty conscience and not allowing the family and the culture of the society to make me plunge into myself and pensiveness. It was as if there was an exit, an open way, somewhere.

Social media and the internet were also, of course, the source of new sexual and non-sexual relationships. Hope used a popular dating app 'and dated a few people through that'. Amira, also in their twenties, used to access apps on their sister's computer before getting their own phone aged 15. They described the sense of security that social media provided: 'it gives you a space that you do not have in the real world out there'.

In spite of the threat of the death penalty if exposed, queer Iranians turn to online apps to facilitate same-sex connections within Iran. One participant who chose to go by the name Pasha explained that many people, including gay men, lesbian women, transgender, nonbinary, intersex, and even some straight men use dating apps to connect with other queer people. The

individuals involved frequently dictate their preferred sex positions within their profiles. Habitual use of such apps is common, Pasha says, even among some married men. Pasha further explained the widespread use of these apps by non-queer identifying individuals:

> Guys have made up something about them [saying] that a top [active partner] that does not suck is the same as a straight who does not have money to get a wife. They're just after that experience. Guys think of them as not having money and just wishing to have sex.

Externally, these men fulfil their societal roles and responsibilities; yet in their private life, a different story of identity unfolds. Importantly, many male 'tops' specify their preferred roles on such dating apps, and many users do not consider themselves to be queer at all. In an environment in which sexual activity, among both men and women, remains strictly taboo, these online outlets may allow individuals to gain a sense of control and agency within their own sex lives (Kjaran and Martino, 2019).

Online friendships not only provided freedom to Parham A., but they also provided mental health support of a kind: 'I am a chat-addicted person talking to strangers online, and share my history with them, it is a way that I found to make myself calm'. His declaration that 'you cannot imagine how good it feels to not be alone, especially for someone like me', was echoed in the words of other participants, such as Khalil, who described the peace he felt after realizing, through internet connections, that there were others like him.

While online communications allowed some participants to explore their identity and find solace in like-minded communities, sadly, in the context of Iran as elsewhere, such communications could not always be relied upon to be safe. Sobhan, who now lives in Canada, shared mixed feelings about the role that the internet played in their own exploration of identity, describing the way that acquaintances or friends had introduced them to online chats:

> At that time, I was quite young, and I don't recommend this approach to others. However, I did get to know and establish relationships with individuals through these [online chats]. Indeed, back then it wasn't like now where there are applications that allow you to easily see each other's pictures during chats and arrange meetings afterward. During that time, issues related to homosexuality were much more sensitive and had security concerns.

Sobhan's security concerns proved warranted: after exposure by a fellow member of the queer community on a messaging app, Sobhan was detained by *Sepah*, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Other participants echoed Sobhan's sobering experience, a reminder of the criminal consequences

of queerness in the Iranian context. As Artin, who emigrated to Turkey, explained, 'in cyberspace you could not really trust anyone'. Queer Iranians must carefully navigate the risks and rewards of internet use in order to connect, learn, and identify themselves as part of local and global queer communities.

Our participants used the internet to find a common language to describe themselves and platforms to connect. Some participants also found inspiration through the internet by reading works by famous queer theorists, performers, and influencers. For example, X (in Iran) said that 'the first book in gender studies that I downloaded was the translation of a selection from Judith Butler's writings'. Pasha, who also continues to live in Iran, concluded that it was through internet sources that 'we learned that one can actually live like this and have a job and all without the consequences that we were told were awaiting us'. Critically, internet connectivity allowed many of our participants to understand that they were not alone. Younger generations increasingly have access to queer culture through the internet, leading to a proliferation of debates and discussions on language, terminologies, and queer culture that helped them to describe themselves, understand their identities, and connect with one another. This interconnection also allowed queer Iranians to actively participate in public movements such as Pride and, notably, the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' demonstrations, enabling them, sometimes for the first time, to publicly display their queer identities on a public, political, and global stage.

## 8. New landscapes of identity: embracing fluidity

Despite the prevalence of historically-rooted, same-sex relationships in Iran, some of our participants had difficulty accessing information about queer subjectivity during their youth. Social pressure, stigma, and strict sodomy laws, including the death penalty, prevented open conversations around these topics. Shaya, a journalist and trans woman now living in Canada, shared her experience of growing up in Iran between the late 1980s and the early 2000s:

> I think that, for my generation, being confronted with gender or sexual identity and/or orientation has not been an easy task. Social media did not exist then. There were no smartphones. The differences were felt since childhood. I first heard the term trans and became aware of 'being a trans' at the age of 20–21. If we compare with today's generations, this was pretty late. Prior to that, and given that everyone associated the male gender [مردانه] with me, I myself also thought that I was a boy, a man, and that's how I was born and have no other way than to accept this. This was until puberty, when I was confronted with sexual orientation and realised that whether sexually or

> emotionally I am attracted to men, and then, I figured that I was certainly gay, a homosexual. Back then, at least with regards to terminology, 'homosexual' was more known.

Today, Shaya is a producer and presenter of a transgender-focused radio series, increasing visibility and creating a platform on which active, open discussions of identity can take place on a daily basis.

Many of our participants lived in constant fear of identification by the wrong parties in Iran; meanwhile, they longed for the vocabulary and information with which to identify and understand themselves. As Zeynab (now in the UK) said, '[i]t doesn't matter for the government if you are bi or if you are gay; they will punish you'. Zeynab's experience of fear and repression led them to establish Radio Rangin Kaman: a show dedicated to the LGBTIQ+ community which was broadcast in Iran.

Through the course of their migrations within Iran, and abroad to Turkey, the UK and Canada, participants like Zeynab and Shaya came in contact with new queer communities. They also created communities and safe(r) spaces that allowed them to explore and find the words to describe themselves. The internet, especially social media, provide powerful tools for self-identification, especially among the younger generations. Influenced by online sources and leading theorists like Judith Butler, who highlights the performative nature of identity, Iranian youth increasingly understand identity as fluid and dynamic (Butler, 2006, p 25).

While increased internet connectivity, transnational networks, and social media help support a framework for liberal queer culture in Iran, these same networks can also make activists the targets of repression within and outside Iran. In 2022, the Iranian government intercepted Seddiqi Hamedani, a vocal queer activist and gender nonconforming individual, on her journey to seek asylum in Turkey. She became the first known woman sentenced to death in Iran as a result of her sexual orientation, outspoken political views, and queer activism (Gritten, 2022). Before her attempt to flee Iran, Seddiqi Hamedani recorded a video on YouTube. In it, she said: 'I want you to know how much pressure we LGBT people endure. We risk our lives for our emotions, but we will find our true selves … I hope the day will come when we can all live in freedom in our country' (Gritten, 2022). The sacrifices of queer activists, who are often forced to leave Iran as a result of their lives and work, have increased public awareness around these previously taboo topics. According to our participants, young Iranians in particular are more informed than previous generations. Shaya, described this development:

> The generations now are more aware. Kids who are queer and live in Iran know much more, many more concepts and distinctions compared

> to us who live here. They know, for instance, that they are 'gender fluid' or a 'nonbinary trans', 'homoflexible', 'heteroflexible', and this is really good. It is great that these very [queer] kids/guys have learned these subtle distinctions, because I am sure no medics in Iran could tell these to them.

Zeynab has always felt that categories fail to define them. Nonetheless, they emphasized the importance of language in helping to communicate and explain themselves: 'I'm always out of the gender boxes when it comes to binaries. However, whatever the labels are, they have helped me to know and explain myself better'.

Through their accounts, our participants thus repeatedly complicated the narratives around queer identity in Iran and around the world, in part because of the ever-changing nature of identity itself.

## 9. Conclusion

Despite state condemnation and severe punishments for offenders, queer communities continue to evolve in diverse forms, creating identities rooted in Iranian culture and disseminated through online channels. Our research revealed that strong, socially reinforced binary gender roles and the state focus on gender-affirming transition led to a noticeably high use of the term 'transsexual'. Many of our participants discovered new terminology, developed powerful communities, and actively developed avenues for personal self-identification and public representation through the internet and through their migration journeys. Today, through increased internet access, education and social media, language, and research around these topics is becoming more accessible. As a result, many participants see a change in younger generations, whose connection to social media and the internet allows them unprecedented access to discussions and information on SOGIESC topics from around the world.

For some queer Iranians, migration offers a pathway to living more authentic lives in public. Zeynab, now based in the UK, recalled that their first international journey to Turkey for academic research was 'the first time I publicly talked about it [my SOGIESC identity] … I travelled to Turkey for my academic research about bisexual asylum seekers'. Indeed, migration, for some of our participants, went hand in hand with change, shifting identities, losing relationships, giving up hopes, and making new ones in host countries. As another example of this, Hope, now living in Canada, described in detail the challenges they endured and the struggle to find acceptance within themselves and within society, both in Iran and in their new home in Canada. This poem by Hope reflects their focus on the acceptance of oneself amidst all the complication and rejection they faced:

> Who cares if the world rejects you;
> What matters is that you yourself embrace you? (You? myself?)

The increasing availability of a simple internet search tool continues to open up new ways for queer Iranians to connect with one another and the wider world, to create their own identities, and to express themselves (Shakhsari, 2020b; Soloaga, 2021; Rahbari, 2022). As such, the strict conceptions of the gender binary upheld by the state are being challenged by the youth, and especially by the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement. In this movement, SOGIESC activists played an important and vocal role to support women and trans communities (Mohammadi, 2024).

In conclusion, self-identification for queer Iranians remains a dangerous and contested matter. Strict criminal norms and sanctions (including the death penalty), the state-sponsored gender-affirming surgeries, and criminally, as well as socially, reinforced gender norms, all create risk and precarity in the lives of queer Iranians. For those living in Iran and for those who choose to migrate, revealing SOGIESC identities creates threats as well as some rewards, including, in some cases, pride and community solidarity. Migration leads queer Iranians around the world to new realities, lived experiences, and modes of expression. Proactively carving identities and spaces for themselves in the wider world, queer Iranians refuse to be defined solely by their SOGIESC identity and bravely embrace the multiplicity of their identity. Our participants' stories attest to the ways in which queer Iranians judiciously adopt and actively create new terminologies and labels that resonate with them, allowing them to accurately convey their identity and connect with others in diverse international contexts. Their selective appropriation of terminologies, both 'new' and 'old', 'native' and 'foreign', resonates with the dynamics of uneven and combined development and continues to illustrate this ongoing process in relation to identity formation.

In the following chapter, we explore how external influences on queer Iranian identities intersect, focusing on the role of family dynamics, class, religion, education, and military conscription. Our participants' testimonies offer a window into the powerful and diverse ways in which they respond to external pressures, negotiate belonging, and build their identity throughout their lives, both within Iran and in exile.

6

# External Factors Shaping Queer Iranians' Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, and Migration Decisions

Everyone's concern is those kids
with whispers of 'queer',
echoing in their ears,
instead of tales of princesses
awaiting Prince Charming on horseback.

Amineh, Canada

## 1. Introduction

> If I want to look at the entirety of who Amira is, it is a combination of all of these sides and it cannot be limited to her gender identity. And this is important. Because gender identity is constructed in a culture, in life experience. You cannot separate it from the other angles of your identity.

These words from Amira eloquently articulate the message of this chapter: that SOGIESC identity cannot be separated from many other aspects of identity. Rather, identity formation in the lives of queer Iranians depends upon a convergence of diverse factors. This chapter considers some of these factors in order to understand how they contribute to, rather than determine, identity formation.

The previous chapter explored our participants' sexual and gender development, focusing on the analysis of language and their personal journeys of self-identification. In this second analytical chapter, we step back and broaden our lens, analysing the familial and societal factors that shaped

our participants' lives and identities. These experiences often informed and influenced their later decisions about whether or not to leave Iran. The intersections between many different factors contextualize and paint a more detailed picture of who our participants are: starting with their early experiences and memories of life in Iran, we explore their familial contexts, the role of social class, religion, early schooling, and university life. Participants also shared how stigma, persecution, and violence informed their understandings of gender identity and sexual orientation, playing an important role in their decisions to migrate. External factors, especially supportive family members and community, proved important factors in participants' decisions for or against migration. By exploring how agency and resistance emerge in different ways depending on the interaction between many external societal and state phenomena, we seek to show how queer Iranian subject-citizens are not defined by their queerness and nationality, but rather influenced by these identifiers alongside many other factors.

This chapter builds upon and deepens existing scholarship on intersectional and decolonial theory. Shifting the lens away from legal and social processes, this chapter focuses on individual participants and their processes of identity formation. Luibhéid's statement that sexuality is 'constructed within multiple, intersecting relations of power, including race, ethnicity, gender, class, citizenship status, and geopolitical location' is apt in relation to the queer Iranian identities discussed here (Luibhéid, 2008, p 170). Postcolonial and decolonial theory that complicates earlier scholarship, especially the arguments presented in Chapters 2 and 3 that articulate the theory of uneven and combined development (UCD), are helpful to understanding the apparently contradictory approach of the Iranian state to non-conformity in sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (Matin, 2013b). Afsaneh Najmabadi's exploration of trans lives and same-sex relationships in modern Iran shows the continual reconfiguration of religion and marriage as institutions in ways that resonate with our analysis in this chapter (Najmabadi, 2014).

This chapter complements Najmabadi's work by providing intimate accounts of participants' personal, and often deeply private, process of identity formation vis-à-vis the external world. We delve into the concept of 'continual reconfiguration' and build on it from Najmabadi's observations to offer a unique account of the ways in which institutions shape the way that queer Iranians, both within Iran and in exile, understand and articulate their identities. Our research shows that participants continually recreate their understanding of queer identity throughout their lives, influenced by their migration experiences across the world but also, and poignantly, shaped by specific childhood memories, economic and social status, religious beliefs, medical institutions, and many more factors not discussed in this chapter. By doing this, we problematize the notion of 'queer imperialism'

by showing the 'local' structures and agency of the participants in proactively understanding their gender and sexuality. Furthermore, the specificity, trust, and intimate stories shared by our participants here represent a unique and valuable contribution to scholarship on an under-researched and difficult to access subject.

In Section 2, we consider participants' early understanding of their SOGIESC identities as experienced within the family (2.1), in relation to social class (2.2), religion (2.3), and at school (2.4). Section 3 looks beyond childhood, as our participants met new people and discovered new ideas at university (3.1) and through queer Iranian communities and networks (3.2).

In Section 4, we address some of the negative experiences of queer Iranians in Iran: Section 4.1 describes some examples of identity-based discrimination while Section 4.2 highlights accounts of sexual violence that a number of our participants shared. Section 4.3 explores a related common threat, the phenomenon of military conscription in Iran, and how this may be experienced differently for those with 'homosexual' and 'trans' identities. Finally, Section 4.4 discusses medical and psychological interventions experienced or imposed on queer people in Iran. Leading up to the next chapter, we conclude with Section 5 by asking how all the experiences in this chapter inform and relate to participants' decision to leave – or attempt to leave – Iran.

## 2. Early years

### *2.1 Family and home*

> Immersed in endless gloom of galaxies,
> standing on a rooftop, I get lost
> in the clammer of children at play
> down in the street.
>
> I still get lost – as in my childhood –
> wander from one scene to another
> wearing wrong masks, improvising dialogues
>
> and keep asking myself:
> Who else but me
> feels like an empty shell?

This poem by Zeynab beautifully captures the coexistence of the universal and the particular as experienced in childhood. Zeynab is lost in the crowd of other children while at the same time isolated behind their mask. Their words could be the words of any child unsure of who they are and how they

fit into the wider world, while also providing a vivid portrayal of sexual and gender non-conformity as experienced through the eyes of a child. In this section, we consider participants' early understanding of their SOGIESC identities during their early years within the family and at school.

While the family (or lack thereof) plays a formative role for all children, it can be argued that this is particularly true for Iranian children. Karimi views family structures as central in the regulation of identity in Iran because 'in absence of liberal democratic states and social individualism, … family has become the space to negotiate sexualities and identities' (Karimi, 2018, p 457). This resonates with our participants' very strong memories of the early years of their identity development. Arghavan (now in Canada) told us:

> My personal experience started in early childhood when you understood your outside world and the social norms that were imposed on you, even as a child. I can say the differences started with the way that I clothed [myself] and the way that I wanted to express myself in my behaviours on a daily basis. And I always faced criticism and I always faced negative reactions from my family and from the people who were my loved ones. And since they were the first critics, were the ones who were the loved ones … I tended to believe them. So, from the very beginning I was always questioning myself, why am I in such a way that my loved ones do not approve of me.

Arghavan faced criticism from her family from an early age, leading her to question her identity and belonging within her childhood home. Other memories were happier. When asked about his first memory of becoming conscious of his SOGIESC identity, Hooman, now based in Canada, answered:

> I was perhaps 5–6 years old. We were two male kids of the same age together with girls from our family who were older than us. The girls were dancing to the tunes of the 1360s [1980s according to the Western calendar] [laughs] and there was a chiffon curtain, I remember. I was playing with it, going under, putting it on my head, pretending I was a bride, and having fun with it. And this boy came along and asked me to go play with cars and I was like: 'No way! I want to be here and do my thing'. And that's my first memory, I believe. And in the end, I have stayed under that chiffon curtain and never went to play with the cars [laughs].

Most of our participants realised early on that their behaviours and preferences did not match those expected of them by family and society. However, this did not stop many of our participants from exploring these early childhood

attractions. Like Hooman, Pasha, who remains in Iran, shared positive memories of early sexual exploration within his extended family's home:

> I was five and there was a cellar at my aunt's place. My cousin was 16–17 years old. I was together with his brother in the cellar when he came and pulled our pants down and brought his penis out and stroked it against us from back and put it between our legs. I actually really liked the feeling, the warmth.

At such a young age, Pasha did not connect his enjoyment of this experience with any form of identity or social stigma. Instead, he shared his experience with his family openly:

> I was so happy after that, while my mum and aunt were upstairs chatting with one another, I went straight to my mum and told her that [cousin's name] has brought our pants down and rubbed his *bolbol* [willy/penis] against us and it was great (back then they would ask us to call our dick, penis *'bolbol'*) … My mum started arguing and crying and stuff. Thereafter my mum became anxious and whenever I wished to go out alone to play or for anything, she would warn me not to let anyone do the same.

Despite criminal law and his mother's concern, Pasha and his friends explored homosexuality throughout their youth. Pasha explained that his 'some sort of rape' at the age of five was the 'initial spark' which initiated his curiosity around the subject of sexuality. However, it was not until the age of 17 that he began to recognize this pattern of behaviour as sexual orientation: 'Later, between the ages of 8 and 12, me and my friends would be doing things like exhibiting our bodies and playing with each other's *bolbol* and stuff like that. This was what there was until the age of 17, when I recognized this finally'.

This process of exploration of identity, especially within a close-knit circle of trusted friends, represented a consistent theme among research participants. Importantly, a sense of identity did not necessarily form immediately following such behaviours; rather, this developed over time. X, who lives in Iran, emphasized their early lack of awareness around identity:

> Well, given the period we are speaking about, and the lack of awareness during childhood, etc., one cannot refer to it as 'identity', as in, this matter does not start in the form of identity. It starts in the form of a sexual behaviour or experience, and it remains with you as a spark in your thoughts.

For both Pasha and X, only later did these initial sparks grow into an understanding of their SOGIESC identity. Nonetheless, early childhood

inclinations towards nonconforming genders or activities created tension within some participants' families. Arghavan, who later migrated to Canada, felt unable to meet her family's expectations. They expected her to be, as she says, 'the real big brother', a role she felt unable to fill. She described playing with girlfriends and (female) cousins in her neighbourhood as a young child. As she grew older, that ended due to the gender segregation of Iranian society. She was encouraged to be part of the boys' gang instead. But Arghavan could not play football and felt she was merely the subject of boys' ridicule. She became increasingly lonely. Aged seven or eight, she felt she did not want to live and went so far as to plan her suicide.

Many participants hid their identities from their immediate family members. However, some, including Matt A., who now lives in the UK, eventually came out to certain trusted members of their family. This increased their comfort level around their SOGIESC identity and at home. Matt A. did not come out to his father or grandmother ('Why do I need to come out to my grandma? She is like 70 years old and I don't want her to go through that') but opened up to his mother, sisters and aunts. By confiding in family members who would presumably be more accepting of him, Matt A. tried to make a difficult situation more bearable.

Within a wider environment of forced secrecy and criminality, SOGIESC minority friends and supportive family members provided a rare and welcome respite for our participants, enabling them to explore their desires, gender roles, and orientations within a safe space. These opportunities, however, came with different risks and consequences, depending on the individuals' circumstances.

Some people's experiences in the family were frightening. Farhan, based in Turkey at the time of interview, was forcibly medicalized by their relatives. Khalil, now also living in Turkey, shared that his father reacted violently to his coming out, and threatened to kill him: 'You want to ruin my honour. I will find you wherever you are and kill you'.

However distressing people's relationships with their close family were, most participants wanted to keep in contact and sometimes achieved this. Matt A. retained a strong connection to his family and Iranian culture. He explained how, in 2019, he returned to Iran to reconnect with his family, culture, and national identity:

> I needed that to, to just feel like I actually belong, because at the end of the day, no matter … what language I speak or where I live, I still identify as Iranian. And … I wanted to be there, so I was like, ok, I am going to go and stay with the family for a few months, which didn't really turn out well, because I ended up staying with my aunt the whole time.

Alireza, now in Canada, had been terrified that their mother would find out about their sexuality but one day, when the two were chatting, their mother said: 'No need to act … I know that you like boys'. Alireza told her mother that 'just how some people are left-handed and some others use their right hands, some are homosexual. It is not something unusual'. Their mother understood, and proved an important support to them in their journey of self-identification.

People experienced pressure from different quarters, not always the immediate family, but sometimes the wider ethno-cultural community. Jebo explained how it was possible to have illicit sexual relations with someone from outside the tribe, but having a 'homosexual' relationship with someone from the same tribe was the cause of shame. Jebo left Iran for Turkey because he had a relationship with someone from his tribe and, as a result, his life was endangered. State and societal persecution combined for Jebo, and even though he longed to be reunited with his family in Iran, 'I don't see Iran as a country where I belong to nationality-wise because Iran never protected me, in fact I ran from Iran. Like, I literally took my life and ran from it'.

### *2.2 Social class and financial constraints*

Class and financial background were important identifiers for our participants, some of whom were very precise about where their family was situated in the social hierarchy. Rima said that '[w]hen my parents used to live together, we were middle class. But after they divorced, I lived with my mother for five years and we were lower-middle class'. Rima, now living in Turkey, spent much of their life hiding their identity by 'putting [on] makeup and feminine looks'. They explained, '[m]y family was a priority for me. And since I had been able to reach a good status in society, I didn't want my LGBT identity to become an obstacle for my progress. So I kind of killed it in myself. This is what happens in Iran'. Rima's effort to fit in with society and maintain those close familial ties was vital when Iranian officials threatened them with 10 years' imprisonment in Iran. Their family stepped up immediately to pay bail, allowing them to flee to Turkey.

Rima's story shows how emotional capital, especially capital based on close familial relationships, represents a critical aspect of survival for many queer individuals in Iran. Many described receiving some form of support, whether from a mother or another queer relative who provided compassion in the face of social scrutiny and criminalization. For some, this degree of acceptance within their families allowed them to feel at home in Iran, despite the overwhelming political and social pressure to fit in. According to Rima, putting on makeup and presenting themselves as more feminine allowed them to gain status and emotional capital at home: a strategic self-presentation that may have ultimately saved their life.

Even without having the full support of their family, Rima's loved ones stepped up in their time of need to provide the support that helped them escape Iran. For some of our participants, this financial and emotional support continued through their migration journey, often making such journeys possible. With few connections in transit countries, new queer migrants undergo severe financial and personal stress in Turkey, the UK, and Canada, as they wait – sometimes years – for immigration decisions, employment, and the chance to establish themselves in host countries. The social and physical capital provided by families like Rima's can provide a lifeline to queer migrants attempting to find safety abroad (Koser Akcapar, 2010, pp 161–164).

Class and economic status impacted all of our participants, both in regard to their understanding of identity and their ability to express it. Khalil, who now lives in Turkey, wished to share their identity with their family, but hesitated due to material constraints:

> When my economic conditions were not good, I could not, for example, think that I would come out, and if my family does not approve of me, I can just move out and live somewhere else. At the age of 16 or 17, I could not even leave our town. I had no allowance. I was very limited.

Similarly, for Ami, who has remained in Iran, the bottom line was financial. He needed medical care and could not afford to leave. Conversely, money opened doors for some people.[1] Amira would not have had the opportunities they had without money, including the opportunity to leave Iran: 'I could basically leave the country because my family, especially my sisters, who were able to influence my dad, thought "let's get rid of this one"'. They were able to pay to send Amira to Turkey.

However, location was equally important in affecting people's early experiences, with strongly felt differences in attitudes between North and South Iran, and between urban and rural locations. Khalil, a gay male we interviewed in Turkey, was afraid that people would find out about his sexuality, saying 'whoever lives in the southern areas of Iran will know really well what I am talking about. As we go further from the centre toward more peripheral areas, the conditions get way harder for the LGBT community'. Hooman, from the Western region of Kermanshah, identified a centre-oriented culture and felt under pressure to lose his Kermanshahi accent. He felt that 'to be a homosexual as well as Kermanshahi constitutes another form of being on the margins'. There is a common perception that cities are more cosmopolitan and accepting of different lifestyles than rural areas and small towns (Choi, 2022, p 995). Among our participants, N. (now in the UK) talked about the bigotry of small cities where everyone

knows each other, while Zeynab's early ambition was to get out of Qom, where books, movies, TV and newspapers were restricted and the hijab and chador were compulsory for women. Neither could they forget the sense of freedom they experienced walking the streets of Tehran for the first time. The significance of location intersects with the religion as interpreted more or less conservatively over place and time, as explored in the next section.

### *2.3 Religion*

The relationship between Islam and SOGIESC is invariably and often with reason assumed to be a troubled one, including in the context of migration, where it may be the basis for claiming asylum (Boellstorff, 2005; El-Tayeb, 2012; Spijkerboer, 2018; Danisi et al, 2021; Greatrick, 2023, pp 1919–1939). The stereotype of queer Iranians in terms of their relationship with religion is that everyone is raised in deeply pious families, indoctrinated with notions of sin both at home and at school, and then, at some point in adolescence, the queer individual rejects Islam in order to accept their genuine sexuality or gender identity. There are elements of truth in this stereotype, but it is an oversimplification. It was certainly the case that many of our participants had negative experiences of religion. Sobhan's father and paternal family were rigid in their religious views and Sobhan disassociated themself from Islam at an early age. Hope (in Canada) connected the heteronormative stereotypes with which they were raised – boys were 'wolves' and girls needed to be 'pure' – to their mother's religious background. However, several people came from families that were not religious, like Saman in Canada, who encountered concepts of sin only at school. In general, it was at school that people encountered a uniformly oppressive interpretation of religious requirements. For Pegah, now based in Canada, this added a layer of self-doubt and confusion to the adolescent experience:

> My parents were not religious, but I attended school during the peak of the Islamic Revolution, where religious matters were heavily emphasized. They would instil religious teachings in our minds, which caused me to have a lot of negative feelings about myself during adolescence. I didn't know what those feelings were or how to interpret them.

Some of our participants were themselves believers, at least for a time. Amira turned to religion in defiance of their family. In doing so, they established an identity for themself and were able to express themself in an environment outside the home. Thriving in this new community, Amira explored a new layer of their character: 'My family is Yaresan, Ahl-eHagh

[a non-Shiite Muslim minority in Iran]. I converted to Shiism. I did this to defy my family … to gain an identity in the society as a Shiite, an identity I was missing in the family, where I was constantly humiliated'.

They also developed their first queer crush on a prophet in an Iranian TV series: 'All my sexual fantasies were with Yuzarsif as well'. However, Amira later became extremely anti-religion after being raped at the age of 15 by a religious mentor, and said '[i]t sounds silly, but I felt like all my beliefs had raped me'.

Feelings of sin and guilt were often connected to religion and a source of conflict, as X explained: 'When the [sexual] desire was reduced, suppression took over, to the benefit of religious beliefs, and when the desire grew, one suppressed religious beliefs', leading to a kind of 'double life'. For Karen, the feeling of guilt was 'like a rock falling on me over and over again'. Khalil also asked himself why he had feelings that 'could take me to hell after my death'.

Yet, spirituality, rather than orthodox or organised religion, was not always viewed in a negative way. Arghavan explained that the 'spiritual and emotional side of life was stronger in Iran for me' and the source of deep emotional attachments. Minoo, based in Turkey, prayed 'for comfort' and retained a belief in a higher power while finding the dogma and discrimination connected with religion dispiriting.

Hooman had liberal religious leanings before, for a time, turning to spirituality in the form of engagement with Dervish circles, explaining that he felt no contradiction between his spiritual beliefs and his desires. However, when he came out, the spiritual connections also 'proved fake'. For Pasha, who had stayed in Iran, religion was always marginal: 'Who cared if they said something was *haram* [forbidden]'. Similarly, from a place of self-doubt, Khalil came to recognize the 'ludicrous laws' in Iran in relation to SOGIESC that 'ruined religion for me entirely'.

The extent to which individuals' SOGIESC was a problem or a source of guilt was connected to many factors, with religious values often appearing as a proxy for some of these. For example, many of our participants mentioned the expectation to have a heterosexual marriage and children, and felt unhappy at the prospect of not fulfilling their family's expectations in this regard.

The importance of marriage and children to parents and the wider community came up in several of our participants' accounts. Matt A. explained that people would often give in to this pressure, get married, and then realize they had ruined their own and someone else's lives. Mozhdeh, currently in the UK, described the questions her mother faced when she remained unmarried, which happily Mozhdeh's mother rebuffed. Karen also described his guilt in not meeting his parents' wishes: 'I knew they had wished for their son to be married, and that I won't be able to do that for them'. However, marriage was only one of a number of institutions

that played a formative role in our participants' sexual and gender identity formation, and in the next section we identify schools as another significant social structure.

### *2.4 School*

Education is an important site for the 'ongoing (re)production of national heteronormativity' (Luibhéid, 2008, p 175). This is true in Iran as in many other states (Atkinson, 2020; Naeimi and Kjaran, 2022). In several of our participants' cases, school administrators and teachers banned queer students on account of their inability to fit into gendered expectations. Many of our participants experienced bullying and harassment; almost all reported feelings of intense loneliness and isolation.

As much as one's immediate family, school was a significant factor for our participants and often a place where people first experienced abuse, at the hands of their peers and school authorities. Arghavan described daily life in her family as a battle, in which her feminine identity and male body created unfulfilled expectations in her family and severe self-doubt within herself. However, she considered entering primary school as when 'the real story starts'. She explained how she felt entering an all-boys' school for the first time:

> [I]n a gender segregated society, you had to go to the boys' school, and it was there that I really realized how different I am. I remember myself standing at the school yard watching multiple, hundreds of students, boys, fighting with each other and wrestling with each other. They were rascals, they were so energetic, and I couldn't see myself in that aggressive, boyish environment and I couldn't explain why. … I just cried and I couldn't believe this is the way I should live for the rest of my life.

At school, for the first time, Arghavan encountered a collective vision of masculinity and boyhood that was alien to her, leaving her isolated. For Amira, too, life changed when they went to school. Pre-school had been co-educational, but at an all-boys' school they were bullied and regularly beaten while their family's response was 'let it be, he'll become a man when he gets beaten'. Clover also experienced bullying in middle school, when they were still questioning their identity. They felt ostracized and alone:

> The children teased me. There are things that even if you try hard to limit yourself and maybe even build up walls around you, will still be revealed. Especially in middle school, when I was really young and hadn't yet learnt any strategies to hide it … During those three years I was really suffering a lot.

Adolescence was often the dividing line between a period when girlie boys and boyish girls were seen as acceptable and the point at which it becomes problematic, according to Najmabadi (Najmabadi, 2014, p 236). Najmabadi saw a further distinction in the particular concern that boys might become *kuni* (anally penetrated or penetrable) while girls' interest in boyish activities can safely be cured by marriage. For children, adolescence is 'the years of becoming subject to severe parental supervision, restrictions, and sometimes harsh punishments' (Najmabadi, 2014, p 238).[2]

In Iranian culture, entering high school is seen as the moment of entering society and, for that reason, a time for self-exploration through interaction with peers. For Parham A., it was in high school that their identity formed more deeply and became secure:

> When you enter a community like high school, where you see boys of your age or older boys who are growing facial hair and have matured, I believe it is at this stage that some people become aware of their own orientation. Indeed, prior to that stage, the issue is often perceived superficially. However, at this stage, when you enter a community, the differences become much more apparent. You realize, for example, that you become excited by seeing a particular older boy. It is at this point that you truly understand your *feelings* and become aware of your identity and orientation, rather than before that.

In middle and high school, some of our participants learned how to balance the need to hide their identities in a hostile environment with the need to explore and discover their identities. Moreover, while school was often a place of isolation and abuse, it was also a place where, despite harassment, friendships were made. Rima explained how it felt to meet up at a friend's house at the weekend: 'Because it was like we could only enjoy life at that time. For the rest of the time we were in prison, the prison of school, the prison of family'. When asked what they did and how they felt, Rima said: 'We gathered together. Cooked, danced, put on girls' clothes, put on makeup, talked about characters and laughed. Our laughter was from the bottom of our hearts. We were our real selves'. At school in Kermanshah in the decades of 1360s–1370s (1980s–1990s), Hooman and his friend named their backpacks *Derafsh Kaviani*, the national flag during the Sasanian or Second Persian Empire, not as a tribute to the past but as a shared secret code for the rainbow flag.

Hooman and Rima's experiences echo that of Sobhan, who later moved to Canada. For them, school became a place to cautiously begin to explore identity and attraction, learn more about queerness, and develop community. They described their first encounter with their SOGIESC identity through an intense crush they developed on one of their teachers:

> I have a memory from when I was 14 years old – I'm currently 29 – about 15 years ago. As far as I remember, I was in love with my teacher. I really had strong feelings for him. That period of time had a significant impact on me. It seemed like everyone had a crush on a teacher during that time, but emotionally, I was more preoccupied with this particular teacher.

Sobhan's queer acquaintances later introduced them to the concepts like 'queerness' and 'sodomy', allowing them to continue to research into identity and their overwhelming feeling of loneliness:

> Without even labelling or recognizing my own identity, I knew that I was doing something wrong because I was completely different from my other schoolmates. I knew that I couldn't change what was preventing me from getting close to my classmates, and I didn't have a precise and necessary explanation for it. So, during that time, I tried to find people who were in similar situations like mine and talked to them. And then, gradually, I was able to find the term 'gay' or the concept of 'sodomy' in the vocabulary of the Islamic Republic, or the term 'homosexuality' on Wikipedia.

They went on to describe the ensuing loneliness they experienced:

> And then I realized that I was alone in my class, or I was alone in the schoolyard because I didn't know anyone. This loneliness really bothered me. And I shared this issue of loneliness with one of my acquaintances who happened to be a psychologist. After talking to my acquaintance, which was fortunate for me (as many unfortunately don't have this opportunity in Iran), I gradually began to explore my identity and confided in my mother about it.

Sobhan's case illustrates the importance of educational institutions in allowing young Iranian queers to connect, share information, and begin to self-identify on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Importantly, Sobhan's experiences in school intersect with their relationship to their family: understanding their identity better, and finding the vocabulary to do so, allowed Sobhan to confide in their mother. In doing so, they actively addressed their loneliness and took steps to find support.

As shown by our participants' stories, queer Iranian students navigate their emerging sexual and gender identities with a multitude of emotions, including curiosity, shame, loneliness, joy, and desire. These experiences in school intersect with their experiences at home, leading to the formation of unique and varied queer identifications and understandings. Like Sobhan,

Hope, who now resides in Canada, experienced their first attractions in middle school. At their all-girls' school, they first felt 'a certain attraction towards some of my friends'. For many of our participants, including Hope, it was not until a few years later – after moving away from home for university – that pathways to deeper understanding of their queer identities began to emerge. In the next section, we explore new opportunities for queer identity and community through the university system and in the queer community, including the loose affiliations of the self-described queer organization 'Life'.

## 3. New opportunities

### *3.1 University*

University is an exciting time anywhere, providing opportunities for independent living, fresh ideas, and new relationships. For Arghavan, it opened the way to different kinds of social interaction with intelligent people and a feeling of greater personal safety without guilt. For Darya, now based in Canada, starting university in Tehran meant 'I could find more people I felt were like me … and not hide myself anymore. I found people at uni that I could speak with deeply'. They also became involved in women's rights activism. Similarly, Zeynab encountered feminist theory and activism at university in Tehran, introducing her to discourses that were formative to her subsequent life choices.

Pasha had hidden their sexuality at school apart from some covert sexual games with close friends, before being instructed in the sinfulness of homosexuality by their religious studies teacher. University offered a chance to meet other queer students, see alternative relationships and ways of living, and encounter new ideas and sources of information:

> There were two boys that loved each other a lot. Each from a different region. They had both come to study at our uni and had got a house together and their relationship had moved from classmates to lovers. They were the laughingstock among all classmates, but I could relate to them and wished I could live with them. I could understand their feelings. I wished to grasp how they were together and wished to be part of that.

Pasha still had a picture of the boys on their laptop. They explained how staff at university advised male students living in bachelor houses on how to avoid sin, yet 'little by little, gays would find courage to answer and debate Kadivar' (an Islamic theologian who has written on homosexuality).

During this time, Pasha encountered scientific arguments against orthodox religious and cultural perspectives for the first time. Likewise, Alex, now

in the UK, was introduced to the work of Freud and their thesis was an analysis of the meaning of *khoshbakhti* [happiness] within the Iranian queer community. They were part of a bisexual and lesbian group, and they describe the thrills evocatively: 'In terms of the kind of relationship we were involved in, imagine that a bunch of 18-year-old kids, after the years of oppressive gender segregation within schools, all of a sudden get to uni, logically they all wanted to screw one another. So, they were pretty bad relationships, and I was hurt, not physically, I mean emotionally'. Alex was in love with someone and had their name tattooed on their body before seeing the person kissing someone else.

University also provided practical opportunities and independence. Higher education provided Zeynab, for instance, with a pathway to Europe through a scholarship. University life also offered students increased access to online libraries, chat rooms, and virtual communities, creating a gateway to knowledge described in detail in the preceding chapter. Through the combination of internet connections and strong social bonds formed in university, some of our participants succeeded in creating robust queer communities in Iran, online, and in host countries abroad.

### *3.2 Community and 'Life'*

The sense of community that some of our participants found as they grew up came from different sources. For Alex, it was through the 'LGBTIQ-friendly' crowd he encountered at university. Matt A. explained that 'it was only when I actually learnt a lot of English and I had access to proper internet, that was when I found out like a whole community of gay people living in Iran and in Shiraz'. Mani (now in Canada) had not initially sought out a gay community, seeing being gay as a purely sexual act restricted to the bedroom. But in his 30s he fell in love and realised his sexuality was something within him and part of his identity: 'Before that, all of my friends were straight, all of them open-minded and ok, and I never thought that I need a gay friend, a queer friend, but that was the time that I found out I needed some people from my community to talk to, or share experiences'.

A number of participants talked about 'Life'[3] – a loose queer community with bases in different parts of Iran at one time. Sobhan described Life as a 'chosen family': a group of people who share similar experiences and form a community. They spoke wistfully of Life's heyday: 'By the old "chosen family" I mean the community that had its own unique customs and traditions, reminiscent of the past, where members supported each other selflessly'. In Life, people took on different roles, as Saghi explained: 'There were small groups, maybe eight or ten, and the "Mother" was one of the members of that small group. He would take care of the rest, would

advise them, would look out for them, would help them if they got in a fight'. Arshia (currently in Turkey) was a member of two Life groups, each of which had a family hierarchy with a 'mom' and a 'sister'.

Life provided a space for queer Iranians to meet to socialize and support each other. However, the community – or communities – were not always harmonious: Alireza described Life as a space where differences between people dissolved and coming out was a joyful experience but there was also a lot of gossip, because 'LGBT people like gossiping, backbiting. I like it myself too'. They went on to depict Life warmly in terms of a shared language: 'For example, when there is a small community, a friendly group, with maybe more than four or five members, we call that a "Life"'.

Life was not the only way for queer Iranians to meet and find relationships. Minoo developed a network through the gender reassignment clinic she attended in Tehran: 'At the clinic, people shared information and knowledge with one another, so that they could better understand what needed to be done. They worked together to find solutions and figure out the best course of action'. Outside these largely positive spaces – whether virtual or physical – many queer Iranians experienced overwhelming negative experiences as a result of their SOGIESC. These factors pushed several participants to ultimately leave Iran. We look at these in the next section.

## 4. Hostile environment

### *4.1 Prejudice and persecution*

The lack of legal protection in Iran from SOGIESC and gender-based discrimination exposes queer people to abuse at the hands of the police, state officials and community members. Saman explained how, as a queer individual in Iran, your very identity makes you a criminal, without legal recourse: 'when you have been subjected to injustice, you cannot defend yourself. You have no rights'. This turns normal social activities, like going to parties, into dangerous endeavours requiring careful planning. Matt A. described his excitement at being invited to a party for the first time and planning to go even though he knew it was risky: 'So, it was supposed to happen somewhere outside the city, but then [the organizers] wouldn't give you the location because they were very scared'. Instead, they had to drive in convoy to the party location without anyone except the party organizer knowing where they were going.

The secrecy surrounding Matt A.'s first party was appropriate. There were several accounts by participants of police showing up at parties (Matt A., Zeynab, Rima). Many participants had been arrested for breaches of the law or social norms. Mani, for example, was detained for possession of alcohol and violating gender segregation and modesty rules, while Zeynab's activism led to their arrest on four occasions and a suspended prison sentence. Matt

A.'s friends were even less fortunate. After one gathering, some were jailed for a few days and others for up to two years.

People experienced discrimination on a daily basis. Arshia was detained by the moral police for inappropriate attire. Alireza was stopped by the police on multiple occasions and interrogated about their clothes, hair, and nails. Discrimination presented practical problems too, for example, in finding accommodation. While some landlords would not rent to single people, even if they did, neighbours would 'put their noses in', as Alireza described it, asking about the marital status of cohabitants.

Transgender individuals, in particular, experienced persistent discrimination. Arghavan, a trans woman now living in Canada, observed that even following state-subsidized gender reassignment surgery, many transgender individuals continued to be called out as the result of their noticeable gender identity:

> If you were not passable as a female and you were, you were easily recognized as a transgender person, you would never have a safe life and you would always be in danger. And I was witnessing that, in the life of almost every trans woman that I visited. And even the trans men.

Persecution against transgender individuals in Iran, as in many other countries around the world, proved especially pervasive and often violent. Women – trans, lesbian, and queer alike – also experienced targeted gender-based discrimination. Sima's professors showed very clearly that they thought women had no place at university: 'being a woman in Iran was certainly an issue and had an impact on my educational and social status'. Similarly, Pegah found her post-transition circumstances unbearable, owing to the limitations imposed on women:

> After the surgery, I realised that as a woman in Iran, I have no freedom at all. It means that all the freedoms I had before the surgery were taken away from me. I was told things like, 'You have to come home early! Now you're a girl! You have to be home before sunset! You can't travel.'

Amira's identity, which lies between trans woman and nonbinary, ultimately led to their emigration from Iran. This move separated them from their queer community still in Iran: 'I realised that you don't only travel through places but also through time. So many things change when you travel. People change and won't remain the same as you knew them'. Now based in Canada, they reflected on how the laws and repression they experienced at the hands of the Islamic Republic shaped their understanding of identity and migration: 'This is all caused by the Islamic Republic. The reason I am who I am is because they negate life'. Responding to the IRI's outright denial of homosexuality and nonbinary individuals, as well as facing legal

and social persecution on a daily basis, Amira ultimately left Iran in order to assert their life and identity abroad.

### *4.2 Sexual violence and abuse*

A number of our participants told us they had experienced rape or sexual assault, often as their first sexual experience. Pasha described being raped by a cousin at the age of five and saw that as the 'initial spark' that led to his interest in gay porn and boys. Mazi was also sexually abused from a very young age: 'It was always older people that touched me. And it was never my desire for them to do this to me'.

The themes of shame, humiliation and powerlessness were common among our participants. Parham A. shared his experience of being raped at the age of 13:

> I felt that I had to keep him [his rapist] satisfied for my own protection, and it wasn't the only problem I had. Sometimes I enjoyed it when he touched me and it gave me a sense of guilt. I believed that it was a wrong feeling and I remember sometimes, especially at night, I blamed myself for feeling that way.

Shahab was raped by the moral police in their van when they were detained. They found it difficult to talk about their experiences for two reasons: personal shame and concern about the impact it would have if their family found out. Shahab imagined their sisters crying together if they knew.

For a number of people, sexual abuse happened during their military conscription. In Iran, males over the age of 18, with some exceptions discussed next, must carry out up to two years' military service. This was a time of abuse for some. Saman describes being forced into a relationship. Amir was raped twice during conscription but knew he could not call for help because the criminal punishment for the receiving male in the act of sodomy is death. The superior officers in the army had complete impunity, as he explained:

> The second time, the rapist was our unit's security officer. … I just begged him not to rape me as I was not able to press charges against him. He said it was an order and if I didn't consent, it would be very bad for me. I was afraid I would be imprisoned, or my military service time would be extended. He was my superior. He could invent some excuse and put me in jail, for example he could say I didn't observe the hygiene standards.

Military conscription creates a complex situation for queer people and we heard different experiences, as we now discuss.

### *4.3 Military conscription*

Military service is compulsory for adult men in Iran. However, according to Raha Bahreini from Amnesty International, queer individuals may qualify for an exemption on the basis of their SOGIESC in certain circumstances. Unfortunately, many queer Iranians do not realize this at the time of conscription. Ashkan only found out when a doctor on the military base told him he could exempt himself, which he then did. Others, such as Pegah, did not identify as a member of a SOGIESC minority at the time of conscription. Meanwhile, Pegah's time in the military facilitated their first 'coming out' after they met someone who identified as gay in the service who wished to date them.

Saman knew that he could claim an exemption but chose not to: 'Because back then, in order to be exonerated due to your [sexual] orientation, at least one member of the family should have known. So, I did the military service and it was awful.' Hooman also chose not to seek an exemption. Instead, he hid his identity throughout his service:

> When I was forced to do the military service, I took loads of books with me, so that in the dorm I could read and not have to speak to the others because I had nothing in common to talk about with them. They even called me Mr Study there [although] often I wasn't even reading, merely holding the book in front of me while listening to what others were saying in the dorm.

Parham A. was exempt, not because he was gay but because his mother was divorced and had only one child. He was very clear that he would rather have endured military service than applied for an exemption on grounds of sexuality.

An important moment for many queer people, as Najmabadi explains, was a change in official diagnosis of trans people in 2011. Previously, both trans people and gay men had been exempted from conscription on the basis of having a mental disorder. In Najmabadi's words, considering trans people as having a physical disease rather than a mental illness 'represented an important shift in status for trans persons, who had often referred to Section 33 exemptions as "red exemptions" because becoming marked by mental disease made one virtually unemployable. On the other hand, glandular disease exemptions are considered benign by employers' (Najmabadi, 2014, p 202).[4]

For Shahab, it did not really make a difference what was written on the exemption card: 'Write whatever you like on that card, as long as I can get it and leave'. However, whether on grounds of homosexuality or gender identity, exemption from military service came at a cost. It involved a state examination – at one time a physical rectal examination and a

family testimonial, later a psychiatric examination and a lengthy series of interviews – as Arshia experienced:

> Yes, the law states that individuals who are deemed by the Organization of Conscription Affairs to have permanent sexual disorders (something similar to this) that are contrary to military ethics and Islamic principles are exempted from military service. Of course, I didn't personally agree with the narrow-minded perspective they had. They would say that people like me have problems, but I didn't have any issues with my own condition.

Nonetheless, he used this legal opportunity to secure first a temporary and then a permanent exemption from the military service, in a lengthy process that involved telling a medical officer 'I am homosexual', undergoing tests including the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) test,[5] 'consisting of several hundred questions that had no direct relevance to determining your sexual identity', appearing before doctors from three military bodies, and being asked: 'What does being homosexual mean?', before finally securing an exemption certificate.

Applying for exemption was a big decision because of the importance of the military service card in Iran. Ashkan explained that '[i]t is required as an ID card to do anything important. The code on the card shows the reason for your exemption. So, you cannot be employed in any state organizations or project. There are so many things that you cannot do'.

However, the cost of revealing a queer identity by applying for an exemption could be a great deal worse than unemployment. Khalil explained how one of his friends was kidnapped and murdered by family members in 2021 after his military exemption card was posted to his father's address and seen by relatives.

Earlier, we touched briefly on the implications of a 'homosexual' versus a 'trans' identity in the context of military service, and the next section explores this further in the context of medical interventions and therapy.

### *4.4 Medical and psychological interventions*

While the World Health Organization declared that homosexuality should no longer be considered to be a disorder in 1990 (World Health Organization, 2019) at the 22nd session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2013, Mohammad Javad Larijani, Secretary General of Iran's High Council for Human Rights, reportedly explained that '[i]n our society, homosexuality is regarded as an illness and malady' (Dehghan, 2013). The distinction between trans and homosexual identities in Iran is specific and was made more so by the 2011 legislative change described above. The two identities are clearly

distinguished but '[w]hile there is a growing acceptance of the medico-legal-religious notion that transsexualism is not a willed (*iradi)* condition, non-heterosexuality, in contrast, continues to be seen overwhelmingly as not only unnatural but a wilfully corrupt practice' (Najmabadi, 2014, p 192). The Iranian state continues to criminalize same-sex acts while considering 'transexuals' sick, but medically treatable. And treatment was often involuntary. Our participants told us of forced medication, including testosterone injections (Pegah) and 'big pink' testosterone pills (Minoo) that resulted in mood changes and other unpleasant side effects.

Arghavan (now in Canada) explained that the lack of understanding or knowledge of trans experiences led her to question her own sanity. The psychiatric medication doctors prescribed to her, moreover, impacted her behaviour, making her uncharacteristically aggressive. When she finally learned about gender reassignment surgeries, it gave her hope during what she described as a 'dark age': 'I became so aggressive, I even engaged in physical fights with people on the streets and everywhere. I was taking so much psychiatric medicine'.

One day, she was lying aimlessly on the floor at home when she saw a newspaper article about people who are trapped in the wrong body that mentioned the main gender reassignment surgeon in Iran. The revelation changed her world. Within a week, she had consulted the surgeon and learned that gender reassignment in Iran is legal based on Khomeini's *fatwa*. She also met transgender people*:* 'I viewed them as kind of ethereal non-earthly beings who risked such a huge thing and made such a huge change in their lives'. Meeting other trans people showed her the difficult reality that lay beyond gender transition: 'When I talked to them, I learned about the horrendous experience that they had after transition, the way the society treated them, the way they lost everything and the fact that almost, almost all the trans women at that time had no other choice but sex work'. She found most had been abandoned by their families, were totally alone and sometimes homeless, and often resorted to drug abuse.

Arghavan described how, after surgery, women's experiences would depend on whether they could 'pass' as female. For those who could not, their lives remained under constant threat. Meanwhile, N., despite identifying as a trans man, decided not to undergo gender-affirming surgery. As such, their relationship with their girlfriend remained classified as a forbidden same-sex relationship. In both scenarios – with or without SRS – queer individuals find themselves with little freedom, exposed to both social stigma and legal harms as a result of their gender identity.

Many participants had seen psychiatrists, whether voluntarily or at their family's wishes. Their understanding of SOGIESC in general and in relation to themselves was informed by their experiences in therapy. Sometimes this was part of the process of gender reassignment. Sersei wanted to have

surgery but discovered she needed confirmation from a psychologist as the basis for securing legal permission to change gender. Some experiences were positive: Hannah's psychiatrist asked if she had heard of transsexuality and when she said she had not, suggested she do some research which she did, describing it as a 'door opening'. She found a website that explained transsexuality, realised she was not alone, met people, and attended group talks online. Similarly helpful was Shahab's counsellor, who saw them for a few sessions and then advised them not to come back because there was nothing wrong with them, there are people like them in the world, and they should 'go out' and get to know their true self and leave Iran if possible.

Not everyone's mental health treatment was so positive. Amira was threatened with electric shock therapy. Farhan had behavioural therapy and was dosed with 'anti-depressants, anti-psychosis meds, SSRIs … strong medications'. N.'s psychiatrist believed that their SOGIESC:

> was like a broken finger which was always with me, and I had to keep it forever. So, I accepted myself as a sick person. And then more saddening incidents happened in this process. They prescribed me medications that were not necessary. Medications for mental health disorders that gave me an extra 35 kilograms.

In conclusion, prevailing medical and psychological practice in Iran fails to understand or meet the needs of SOGIESC individuals. Instead, state-subsidized gender reassignment, medical, and psychiatric services act to uphold or impose binary gender roles, with care for the needs of the individual rarely a priority. Within this environment, queer Iranians must navigate a flawed healthcare system in order to survive the best they can in the given circumstances. For some, their experiences led them to leave but others chose to stay or felt they had no alternative, as we consider in this final section.

## 5. Conclusion: to stay or to go?

In this chapter, we explored how our participants' family and social relationships, education, and other factors and experiences structure (without defining) their lives and identities. As Najmabadi states and as mentioned in Chapter 2, the 'sense of self [or narrative of identity] is contingently constituted within particular nodes of relations, through what one does at a given conjunction of networks of affection, work, play, and other spaces of social presence' (Najmabadi, 2014, pp 276–277). Through this understanding of the performative yet at the same time purposeful nature of individual identity development, we recognize that the changes in how migrants self-identify throughout their lives are not conflicting narratives; rather, they

are strategic adjustments necessary to traverse the different stages of queer migration in pursuit of a fulfilling life.

In addition to the punitive legal framework, this chapter explored some of the family and societal problems facing queer individuals in Iran. Yet, not everyone who experienced discrimination and/or persecution felt driven to emigrate as a result. Despite not being entirely satisfied with the conditions in Iran and longing for more freedom, some of our participants, like Pasha and Parham B., chose not to leave in part at least because of their attachment to people and culture in Iran. On balance, they chose to stay in Iran and deal with the challenges that resulted from that through a combination of discretion, adaptation, and separating their personal lives from their lives in public, including by having online relationships. Others, like Ami, felt unable to emigrate on account of the economic and health challenges that they would face. Parham A. was also financially constrained, explaining that he would need his mother's consent and financial support to go abroad. Yet others felt, at least for a time, that it was possible for queer people to live in Iran, even living with a partner, if one is 'smart' about it. Rima explained: 'I had a normal life in Iran myself where my LGBT identity would at times create obstacles and troubles, but not deadly problems, not a problem that would cause dysfunctionality'. They eventually left for Turkey when they were sentenced to ten years in prison for organizing a party.

For those who (eventually) took the decision to leave, their reasons for doing so were diverse. Artin and Maryia, for example, were pressured into marrying (three times in the case of Maryia) and, after those marriages ended in divorce, were shunned by their families, prompting them to leave Iran. Saman was beaten, raped, and lost his job when his sexuality became known. Others, like Amir, suffered sexual violence in the military. Some of our participants were expelled from the family home (like Sobhan at the age of 15) or physically and verbally assaulted and forcibly medicalized by relatives (like Farhan). Khalil's father reacted violently to his son's coming out, and threatened to kill him. Daily life often became unbearable, as in the case of Alireza:

> I am extremely attached to my family, especially to my mother. That was why I did not have any intentions to leave. But the pressures had gradually risen to such a level that within the last whole year before I left Iran, I had not left the house at all. I did not dare to step my foot outside.

In some cases, like Amir's, participants were caught out having sex with a person of the same sex and did not feel able to face their families again:

> I couldn't face my family again and look in their eyes. The only thing I wanted was to leave there. To be at a distance. I wanted to get lost,

> to go someplace where nobody knew me any longer. Where no one would know my identity, where no one would recognize me.

Sina explained that the punitive legislation had emboldened members of society to take matters into their own hands to the extent of killing members of SOGIESC minorities without fear of legal repercussions. Khalil also highlighted that victims and their relatives were often deprived of judicial redress, as perpetrators – even if they were identified and prosecuted – would claim in court to have been defending their *namoos* (a term used in Iran to justify honour killings) and be acquitted. For some, the wish to leave came with the realization that discretion and efforts to adhere to social mores may not protect queer people from persecution at the hands of state officials or family members. In the words of Matt A., 'when gay people are hanged and when gay people are killed and imprisoned, they don't make it to the news, we only see a fraction of what is happening in Iran'. Trans individuals also confirmed that Iran was not a safe haven for them and that, despite undergoing all the medical and legal procedures related to gender reassignment, they were still stigmatized, as in Shaya's case. Her family had to leave their old home neighbourhood and when visitors arrived unannounced, Shaya would need to hide: 'Otherwise, they had to explain who I was! Our son who is now a daughter. This all piled up and up and I realized that not even the operation solved the situation'. Matt A. simply wanted to live a normal life, pointing out that being gay was not his only and defining characteristic, and a lot of his friends 'just happen to be gay, it stands for 10% of their whole existence, it is not everything about them. They have so many other qualities to consider'.

For these and other reasons, for many queer people, the decision to leave Iran was a logical one. As Zeynab put it, '[i]n the University of Tehran, nobody asked why you want to emigrate, the question was why you don't'. The decision to leave Iran was often supported by relatives, as in the case of Sobhan, whose mother said: '[i]t's your own life to live' and '[w]hatever happens to you, I am proud of you'. However, in other cases, support was conditional. Farhan, for example, had to implore their parents for financial help to leave Iran, in exchange for which Farhan had to sign a declaration relinquishing any inheritance entitlement and promising not to contact the family again. Either way, leaving Iran comes at a high cost of heartbreak for relatives and queer people escaping. Alireza told us that 'the separation [from my family] was really hard for me'. Sobhan also shared that they 'kept crying throughout the entire flight'.

We end with a final word from Amira: 'I am more like Attar's *Simorgh* [a legendary Persian bird sought in *The Conference of the Birds* by Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar, and who we have taken as the inspiration for this

book's cover] who has come to knowledge about different pieces of its identity, and all of those have become the bird that has emerged today'.

As this illustrates and as this chapter has shown, the fabric of intersecting social, legal, political, and familial relationships led many, but by no means all, of our participants to emigrate and seek a safer place elsewhere. In the next chapter, we consider the pathways that follow for those who leave.

7

# Drawn into a Legal Web

... wearing wrong masks, improvising dialogues
and keep asking myself:
'Who else but me
feels like an empty shell?'

Zeynab, UK

## 1. The ever-present law

Law is ever present in people's lives. That is even more the case in the lives of queer Iranians in exile, whose experiences are deeply influenced by international and domestic laws that criminalize their actions and expressions, prevent them from moving, determine what alternatives are available in their future, and shape their chances of integrating in any given place. Queer Iranians' attempts to leave Iran and seek international protection elsewhere have also shaped legal developments around the world, including refugee law in countries such as Germany,[1] Greece,[2] and many others across Europe (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; Andreassen, 2021; EUAA, 2023b), beyond Europe such as in New Zealand,[3] as well as at the United Nations,[4] and at the European level.[5] This is most notable in the decision in *HJ (Iran)*, the case of an Iranian man who arrived in the UK in 2001 and waited until 2010 for the UK Supreme Court to decide on a narrower use of 'discretion reasoning', in other words, the unrealistic policy of returning asylum claimants to their countries of origin on the premise that they can avoid harm by concealing their sexuality.[6] Although this landmark decision and many other positive legal developments have improved the treatment of queer refugees in many jurisdictions, it will become clear throughout this chapter that queer refugees – including Iranians escaping queerphobia – still face often unsurmountable legal difficulties.

In this chapter, we explore how the law impacts on the lives of those queer Iranians who search for a safer place outside Iran. The range of

journeys undertaken and the interactions with the law will be analysed with a particular focus on the identity of our participants; the process of migrating and seeking international protection often impacts queer people's identity and sense of self (for example, Frada, 2024). The power asymmetries and silencing of claimants that characterize the asylum system in any jurisdiction will become painfully evident throughout this chapter. More broadly, the chapter documents the practical impact of international legal and bureaucratic structures concerning asylum and migration on the life choices of queer Iranians in exile. The chapter is therefore an implicit statement of how the process of uneven and combined development (UCD) operates at the juridical level, and not only shapes the dynamic formation of the sexuality and gender identity of queer Iranians in Iran (Chapters 2 and 3) but also how the interlocking of those long-term processes of identity formation and specific conjunctures in international politics, such as the election of Donald Trump in the US or influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey, directly impact the life of queer Iranians who left Iran.

In Section 2, we sketch the different paths that queer Iranians follow to leave Iran and seek a safer place elsewhere, mapping out the legal implications those paths entail. In Section 3, we focus on the experiences of those queer Iranians who apply for international protection in Turkey, in particular issues with procedural and substantive fairness in the decision-making process. The length of this section is reflective of the range and seriousness of the issues affecting queer Iranians seeking asylum in Turkey, as well as the significant events that have shaped the Turkish refugee system over the last decade. In Section 4, we delve into the experiences of those queer Iranians who reach and settle in the UK, again considering issues of procedural and substantive unfairness in the decision-making process. In Section 5, we discuss the stumbling blocks in the process of resettlement in Canada. Finally, in Section 6, we explore key areas for improvement in the legal experiences of queer Iranians, and end the chapter with some concluding remarks. As we proceed, it will become apparent that queer Iranians are required to navigate an increasingly restrictive migration and international protection framework resulting from multiple geopolitical events, which puts them in extremely precarious positions. This shapes their identity in various ways.

## 2. Leaving Iran

What path to take in order to leave Iran differs considerably from person to person, depending on socio-economic background, financial resources, and educational qualifications. Such paths also differ in terms of costs, logistics, and legal framing. Some of our participants were able to leave Iran to study abroad, like Koroush in Turkey, Matt A. in China, and Zeynab in Sweden before all reached the UK, and Mani in Canada, either through a scholarship

or their own financial resources. More commonly, however, our participants travelled to Turkey on tourist visas and then tried to find work or somehow settle there. Rather than claiming asylum as soon as they arrived in Turkey, some of our participants chose (at least initially) to live in Turkey by relying on a tourist visa or a renewable yearly residence permit. At least five of our participants viewed their time in Turkey as a temporary stage of their lives and/or hoped to avoid making an asylum claim in order to live safely in Turkey. This hesitation in applying for asylum may be linked to a desire not to identify as a refugee, which can carry a range of negative connotations. However, with time, many realized that claiming asylum was necessary to secure a more stable legal status and avoid being returned to Iran.

Regardless of timing, the path of claiming asylum was often felt as a 'really painful … really sad' experience, because – as Hannah expressed – one is 'at the end of the line and need[s] a "refuge" … What a sad word "refuge"'. Claiming asylum in Turkey was also an experience that played a 'crucial role' in shaping some individuals' understanding of their identity, as in the case of Sobhan. Although still considered as a 'transit and temporary country' by many (Arshia; Boran, an NGO worker in Turkey) – as it was seen for several decades by Iranian refugees (Zapparoli-Manzoni-Bodson, 2015) – Turkey has in effect become a long-term host country for many refugees seeking a safer place.

Most queer Iranians arriving in Turkey remain there with the status of 'conditional refugee' after a Turkish Immigration Office has processed their asylum application (a status that affords very limited rights)[7] and may be referred to the UNHCR for resettlement.[8] By resettlement, we here refer to the process facilitated by the UNHCR that allows legally recognized refugees to relocate from one country to another willing to host them.[9] This can be a long, complex, and anguish-filled process entailing interviews at embassies, medical examinations, and other checks, generally with a view to being resettled in Canada, the USA, or Australia. Understandably, our participants expressed their desire to be resettled as soon as possible to 'make up for all of those years' in limbo, as was the case for Hannah. While in the past some people experienced a relatively short wait before being accepted for resettlement in Canada (for example, 6–7 months in the case of Sobhan), resettlement waiting times have increased exponentially in recent years. Indeed, due to the prioritization of Syrian refugees for resettlement in Canada and the Trump administration's travel bans on nationals from a group of mainly Muslim-majority countries – including refugees from Iran (Almasy and Simon, 2017) – waiting times to leave Turkey have increased to up to ten years. Such long waiting times have so negative an impact on queer Iranian refugees – specially in terms of their physical and mental wellbeing, financial situation, and social relationships – that some lose any hope of a better future and become suicidal, as Amira and Farhan experienced.

While resettlement in most states has traditionally been a process managed exclusively by public authorities, Canada has progressively developed a resettlement process that largely relies on a refugee private sponsorship programme (Labman, 2024).[10] Under this programme, a group of at least five private sponsors wishing to sponsor the resettlement of a refugee needs to raise enough money to cover the start-up costs and on-going monthly costs for basic necessities (Government of Canada, 2024), which generally amounts to CAD 25–30,000.[11] While this has the advantage of tapping into private resources and the generosity of host communities, it leaves refugees who have been recognized by Turkish authorities and are waiting for resettlement dependent on the good will and motivation of private sponsors. Refugees can also resettle in Canada via the Canadian Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) programme, but almost two-thirds of the refugees who resettle in Canada do so via the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) programme (UNHCR Canada, 2024). In the absence of realistic alternative resettlement avenues, the number of refugees in limbo in Turkey has inevitably considerably increased. The fact that most depend on individual sponsorship renders resettlement an increasingly unrealistic avenue for a large number of refugees.

For those queer Iranians who benefit from resettlement, leaving Turkey after many years is likely to be yet another difficult moment. Sobhan, for example, shared with us that 'separating from Turkey and coming to Canada was emotionally much harder for me than separating from Iran and coming to Turkey. … Emotionally and sentimentally, it was a difficult experience'.

Rather than resettling in another country like Canada, many queer Iranians who arrive in Turkey plan their next steps to reach a safer place in Europe. That may be because of the conditions in Turkey, the difficulties in resettling via the UNHCR, or another reason (or combination thereof). Some, like Taha, attempt to reach Greece (even if intending it to be yet another transit country), but are seldom successful in doing so through irregular means. However, others manage to travel onwards, like Hana, who travelled by truck and eventually reached the UK, and Mozdeh, who travelled by boat from Turkey to Italy, a trip that took five days and nights, in the company of six families, and then onwards to the UK. Once settled in a European host country, some queer Iranians try to be reunited with their partners, as in the case of Matt A., whose partner joined him in the UK as a dependant on a student visa.

Queer Iranians thus follow a range of different paths to reach and remain in safer places – a combination of study visas, tourist visas, work visas, renewable yearly residence permits, asylum claims, resettlement, and/or irregular crossings. These paths are pursued against a background of increasingly restrictive developments in migration and asylum regimes at national, regional, and international levels. While previously Turkey was a

stopping point for refugees wishing to eventually reach Canada, the UK, or another country, now refugees – including queer Iranians – are for the most part constrained to remain in Turkey either for many years or indefinitely. This chapter considers in detail the challenges queer Iranians face during these migration journeys, in particular when applying for international protection and/or undergoing a resettlement process.

## 3. Claiming international protection in Turkey

Turkey is a signatory state of the 1951 Refugee Convention and of the 1967 Protocol, but the geographical limitation of the original Refugee Convention to refugees that originate in Europe still applies to Turkey (Ergin and Kader, 2021). In other words, in a political effort to limit its legal obligations, Turkey only recognizes as refugees under the Refugee Convention those whose country of origin is in Europe, leaving outside the scope of protection of the Refugee Convention all those seeking international protection who originate from countries outside of Europe. Although non-Europeans can apply for international protection in Turkey, they are at best granted conditional refugee status ('Şartlı Mülteci' in Turkish) – not refugee status under the Refugee Convention. This allows them to then be referred for resettlement by the Turkish authorities and remain in Turkey while awaiting resettlement (Skribeland, 2021). The conditional refugee status therefore simply grants claimants a right of residence until resettlement, with no specific entitlement to access the labour market, health services, the educational system, and so forth (Presidency of Migration Management, 2025).

While the conditional refugee status formerly lasted 2–3 years, until the point of resettlement in another country, it is now common for this status to last 10–15 years, as Hayriye Kara (an NGO worker in Turkey) told us. This is mostly on account of the changes introduced to international protection procedures in Turkey over the last decade (Aytaçoğlu, 2023, pp 123–124). While until 2018 the UNHCR was the agency responsible for adjudicating international protection claims and then facilitating the process of resettlement in another country, since 2018 the Turkish authorities have taken control of the adjudication of international protection claims, with the UNHCR retaining the role of facilitating resettlement processes (Skribeland, 2021) (Section 5). These changes have been mainly prompted by the influx of large numbers of refugees escaping the Syrian civil war, as well as civil unrest in Afghanistan and Iran. The changes represent concrete expressions of UCD and demonstrate the impact of international relations on the transnational legal dynamics of international protection. Such developments have been seen negatively by our participants, like Sobhan, and have had a profound impact on the experiences of queer Iranians seeking protection in Turkey, as Boran pointed out:

> In the past, the UN used to do the interviews, allocating cities or towns that you needed to live in until you were sent to the third country. You could say in your interview that 'this or that town is better for me because I have friends or acquaintances'; they were helpful. But since this authority has been given to the Turkish government, to the Turkish Immigration Office in fact, everything has become way stricter.

Governorates of the Presidency of Migration Management (Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı) – previously known as Directorate General for Migration Management (Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü) and run by the Ministry of the Interior – are now responsible for receiving international protection claims, processing them (including the possibility of summarily refusing them and ordering the return of the claimant to the country of origin), and allocating refugees to specific cities and towns (Korkut, 2016; Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel, 2021, chap 3). These changes to the asylum system in Turkey have been shaped by a securitization drive, as Hayriye Kara highlighted. Concurrently, according to Saghi Ghahraman, founder of the Iranian Queer Organization,[12] Turkish authorities are suspected of arbitrary behaviour, illegally refusing claims, insulting and threatening refugees, and evading monitoring, which deprives queer refugees of essential safeguards. These suspicions have been confirmed by desk and field research (for example, Sarı and Dinçer, 2017; Aras and Mencütek, 2020).

### *3.1. Procedural challenges*

The procedural challenges faced by queer Iranians filing their international protection applications in Turkey are numerous, and relate in particular to the duration of procedures, training and conduct of case workers, legal representation and advice, availability and quality of interpretation services, and production and use of country of origin information (COI). As in any other asylum system, the importance of asylum interviews and procedures for the future of the claimants cannot be overstated. Interviews, in particular, need to include appropriate questions – based on free-recall and open questions – to develop a rapport with claimants and obtain reliable answers, thereby avoiding unfair decisions (Helenelund, 2023, pp 1–4).

As previously explained, Iranians, including queer Iranians, claiming international protection in Turkey have historically filed their claims with the UNHCR. Several of our participants were complimentary about the empathy and competence that UNHCR officers and interpreters imprinted on procedures until 2018, like Karen, Artin, or Minoo. Shaya, for example, said that:

> The UN interview was a very good interview. The lawyer who was interviewing me was very aware. You see, I was very triggered, as I was

> telling my story since childhood, and so I was crying unintentionally. And he went and got a napkin from his bag and a glass of water for me. … They treated me well. He even gave me a break and sent me out to hang out with my friend who had come there.

Alireza found that 'the atmosphere was friendly and comfortable', and was offered a break to smoke and have tea. Similarly, Pedram felt the interview with the UNHCR was 'better than I expected', as the interviewer did not 'enter much more [into] sensitive areas', 'treated me relatively well', and seemed to believe what Pedram told them. Raha, in particular, found the interview with UNHCR officials an empathetic experience:

> I didn't want to tell lies, I wanted to tell my real life. I mean, I didn't want to tell fake stories, so I was ready for every question. Of course, I was mentally damaged and it hurts me to recall all those dark memories. At that interview, I felt terribly bad with a recall of those annoying memories and with the repetition of all those images, and even all those officers in that room felt really sympathetic and wept with my tears.

Not all experiences with the UNHCR were positive and we were also told of systemic failures, for example in record keeping. However, since the Turkish authorities took over the asylum adjudication system in 2018, procedural efficiency and fairness have considerably deteriorated. The asylum process before Turkish authorities starts with an initial application that asks claimants why they travelled to Turkey and what would happen if they returned to the country of origin.[13] Afterwards, claimants can receive their *kimlik* (an ID card for residents in Turkey). An interview is then supposed to take place within 30 days and the procedure should reach an outcome within six months. In case of a negative outcome, claimants generally have the opportunity to appeal to a local administrative court, and if the outcome to the appeal is negative, a final appeal is possible at the Constitutional Court level.[14] Although the overall legal system is designed according to international legal standards, such standards are routinely ignored, with Hayriye Kara reporting that interviews often take years to be held as opposed to 30 days. Sina, for example, had been waiting for almost six years for an interview, while Shaya told us that there are queer refugees in Turkey awaiting a decision three years after their interview with the authorities. Ali commented on such delays in extremely strong terms: 'Turkey is a hellish swamp, in which all refugees are trapped, consciously or unconsciously. You can't find any other developed country with this mode of management. Here the only way of management is to "subject the cases to a delayed future!"'

To worsen this situation for queer Iranians and other individuals seeking international protection in Turkey, many claimants who had already been

interviewed by the UNHCR before 2018 but had not been resettled yet have had to undergo a new interview, this time by the Turkish Immigration Office. Ali expressed frustration over this development in these terms:

> I had to pass another interview in the Immigration Office. I had the UN interview six years ago, when I could remember all details of the events with the exact dates, names, and places. Now I can't remember many of those things exactly, and the officer of the Immigration Office in Turkey may tell me 'you said that before and now you can't say exactly the same story'. They do not consider the very fact that I had six hellish and nightmarish years in Turkey.

Moreover, after a lengthy wait, interviews can be traumatizing. Clover, for example, recounted their agonizing experience, after four years of waiting, of an interview where both their material and emotional wellbeing were disregarded. Clover's interview took place in a public area of a police station, by a staircase, requiring Clover to stand up and move the chair every time someone wanted to pass by. Moreover, the interview was initially carried out by the interpreter alone, who put pressure on Clover to offer summary answers, so that the interpreter did not have to type too much. The inappropriateness of the interview venue and having an interpreter carry out the interview is striking. Yet, the arrival of the official interviewer did not improve the quality of the interview:

> She came and, after hello, she said: 'Do you know that this interview is going to determine your destiny? Do you know that if you are rejected you will be deported?' … she would interrupt me and say things like: 'No, this is not the answer [that I want]. This was not what I asked. This is what I want', and so on. I mean, she had a really harsh attitude.

Sobhan had a similar experience of a procedurally inappropriate interview, which fortunately had a positive outcome. During the interview, an employee entered the room without permission and asked whether the interviewer and Sobhan wanted some coffee or tea. This sudden and unorthodox interruption left Sobhan 'speechless and bewildered', until they said:

> 'I don't want anything to drink.' But the gentleman insisted: 'No, no, you must have something!' and went on to order Turkish coffee. It was all a ridiculous comedy of errors. Of course, all of this helped alleviate my initial stress, and I exclaimed, 'These are childish theatrics!'

In another indication of lack of professionalism and of inefficiency, some claimants were interviewed three or four times, as reported by Boran. In these

multiple interviews, the same questions are often asked of the claimants, as Minoo explained to us: 'Turkish officers ask all the questions again from the beginning [at each new interview]. They ask these questions so frequently in each of their calls that I have become completely professional and memorized all the questions. I can even ask all the questions to others.'

Procedural inefficiencies are not only frustrating; they may lead to unfair negative decisions. Hayriye Kara reported that despite some officers being well qualified to carry out asylum adjudication and standards having slowly improved throughout time, regional standards vary considerably and the political atmosphere in Turkey is not propitious to producing positive decisions. Artin confirmed this, saying that '[t]here are so many people who had been admitted by the UN in 2016 or 2017 and then in 2020 got rejected by the Göç İdaresi [Turkish Immigration Office] and got the deportation order'.

In terms of legal support, Saghi highlighted the role that the IRQO played between approximately 2008–2018 in supporting queer Iranians seeking asylum. IRQO's activities had an impact on the formation of the identity of queer Iranians in Turkey, both by offering advice on how to present one's case effectively to the UNHCR and by 'sifting' cases perceived as 'genuine' from those perceived as 'fake': 'If I was convinced that they are gay, you are trans, you are lesbian, I would accept the case, otherwise I wouldn't accept the case'. This task of sifting the 'genuine' from the 'fake' claims is indeed something that several stakeholders in the asylum system take upon themselves to do, including refugees themselves asserting who is 'authentic' and 'deserving' (Koçak, 2020; Ferreira, 2022). Although some of the advice offered by IRQO would now be seen as inappropriate in light of legal developments on lawful means of evidence in SOGIESC asylum claims (see next), at the time, it seemed necessary in order to support queer Iranians in Turkey. In the words of Saghi:

> I would ask them 'why do you think you are gay?'. They were shy sometimes to talk about their sex life, for example. I know that now after many years, people say that UNHCR doesn't have the right to ask, or other, you know, the Turkish immigration doesn't have any rights to go into people's private life. But that was important, that was crucial. They had to know they didn't have any other way. So, I told them that, 'don't worry, talk about your private life, talk about your sexual life. You don't need to say how you actually have sex, you can say how you feel, because how you feel is very different than a straight man would feel. They don't know how you feel, talk about how you feel. Talk about what you like'.

IRQO's support, specifically Saghi's, was appreciated by other participants who benefitted from it at the time, as in the cases of Alireza and Karen, who

were appreciative of the reassuring and calming conversations they had with Saghi ahead of their interviews with the UNHCR. IRQO's services also included statements of support for applications, as well as direct efforts to train and brief UNHCR staff on applications from queer Iranians. Such efforts unintentionally risked replicating stereotypes of how queer Iranians in exile behaved, depending on their regional origin, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender identity, and other characteristics. Prompted at the time by a picture of two lesbian women in Iran, Saghi told us what she would tell UNHCR staff members: 'this is how a lesbian couple would look like … look at their faces, look at their dresses … And I would explain to them that this is how lesbians live'. While such efforts aimed to support individual asylum claims as effectively as possible, they also unwittingly reinforced fixed ideas of gender and sexuality, consequently impoverishing the lived realities and identities of queer people applying for asylum. Admittedly, this is a conundrum that still haunts refugee supporters in virtually any jurisdiction (Dustin, 2022).

In the view of Saghi, IRQO's work contributed to many successful asylum claims and resettlement applications in Turkey, but that came to an end in 2018, when the Turkish authorities became responsible for the asylum adjudication process, since the Turkish authorities refused to engage with IRQO. Other NGOs and groups have also been active in Turkey in supporting the legal applications of queer refugees over time. Arshia, for example, told us about the support he received from a Turkish LGBTIQ+ association in navigating his application to the UNHCR in 2017. Boran also told us about the work that the Hêvî LGBTI+ Association carries out to support LGBTI+ asylum claimants, including legal representation (in collaboration with the Turkish Lawyers Association) to file asylum claims, advice on resettlement programmes, and rights awareness raising, which can help claimants avoid homophobic treatment by officials. Kaos GL has also prepared supporting statements and offered interview preparation to queer refugees, as Hooman explained to us.

Legal assistance in Turkey is also sometimes provided by individual lawyers, as was the case for Saman, who received legal support to navigate the resettlement process. Nonetheless, according to Saghi, this individual representation work is plagued with incompetence and inaction: 'they take the money and they put the files on a desk, nothing happens … nobody has the power, the authority, the language to go and say "well, this lawyer did not follow up my case with the police as it should, as they promised". So, everything is in a chaos.'

Most advice, however, seems to be informal, and come from non-qualified individuals, mostly other refugees and members of the diaspora. While no doubt well-intentioned, such advice can be misleading. Alireza, for example, recalled the unhelpful advice they were offered ahead of their interview with the UNHCR:

> There were some pieces of advice. And I am happy I did not listen to them. Because they were mostly giving advice around making up a persecution story. Proving that your life is in danger. From the very beginning I insisted and told them that you don't have to create all these strange stories, like 'my dad opened my bedroom door and saw me with a man' or things like that.

Similarly, Karen was offered advice ahead of his interview with UNCHR that was not only inappropriate but also denied his true identity, as he rightly recognized:

> Some of our friends had told me to say that I was trans, since they believed that trans people would be accepted. But I was like, why should I say I am something that I am not? And what if they ask me to go for an analysis of hormones and so [on]. They [my friends] would say that this was not going to be the case and that trans people will be accepted. … generally they would suggest that we exaggerate about everything. About the fact that society had been harsh, like that we had gone out and were beaten up and so on and so forth. But I was like, those things have never happened to me.

Besides the fact that dishonesty in one's asylum application is likely to backfire and have negative consequences for the legal outcome, advice of this nature may also contribute to shaping a claimant's sexual and gender identity in an artificial and constraining fashion.

Further to legal advice and representation, the role of interpreters in the asylum procedure is key to ensuring a fair determination process, and this has specific implications for queer refugees (EUAA, 2024, sec 4.2.1 and 4.3.4). Several of our participants feared that their interpreters had not captured the necessary nuances of terminology in translation, be it in the context of the UNHCR in Turkey (Shahab) or the Turkish Immigration Office (Artin). The experience Artin underwent was striking and illustrative of the need for good quality interpretation in the asylum procedure – and the impact of the lack thereof: 'I had arguments a couple of times with the Afghan man [interpreter]. … Because he was making erroneous translations. … I got angry and started explaining with my broken Turkish: "I have not said such a thing. He is giving you wrong translations."' Artin's interpreter was replaced and when Artin returned to the interview after lunch, they were faced with a new translator: 'Now all my pain started all over again because I had to answer again all the questions that I had already answered the whole morning'.

Insufficient training may be partially to blame for such issues. Karen asserted that the Turkish authorities hire interpreters who 'picked up a semester of

Persian or have Persian-speaking friends and they have then gone [on] to do the exam and got the bare minimum score in order to become a translator. They might not know many of the terms or expressions, and are not familiar with our culture'.

Another example of inappropriate use of interpretation services – this time by a case worker in the Turkish Immigration Office – was reported by Clover. The case worker implied that Clover was not being truthful and, knowing that the interpreter had lived in Iran, the case worker included the interpreter in the interview, asking 'is it really like this?' As Clover explained, '[t]he translator herself got really shocked and she was like: "How do I know? I was not gay in Iran"'. Involving interpreters in the process of collecting COI or assessing the credibility of a claimant is professionally and legally inappropriate, as these are functions for which the case worker is solely responsible.

A final element to consider in terms of procedural efficiency and fairness in the adjudication of queer refugees' claims relates to COI. The importance of producing quality, thorough, and up-to-date COI in this context has already been explored (Danisi et al, 2021, sec 6.5; EUAA, 2023a). Unfortunately, that quality is often not achieved, as Amira shared with us, while recounting her experience with the UNHCR in Turkey: '[case workers] had no idea at all [about cultural intricacies]. They did not have the faintest idea about what was going on in Iran. I mean, even if they had information about gender identity and sexual orientation, they had no knowledge about Iran'.

In the case of queer Iranian refugees, this gains a renewed importance. Indeed, although Iranian criminal law foresees harsh penalties for same-sex sexual acts (Chapter 3), official or reliable reports of actual prosecutions and sentencing are rare. This may be conveniently interpreted by asylum decision-makers as a lack of enforcement of those criminal provisions while wrongly ignoring the social impact of these norms independently of legal enforcement (Danisi et al, 2021, sec 7.3.1). This can lead to a finding of lack of risk of persecution and eventually a denial of international protection.

More generally, case workers' lack of knowledge and understanding of COI can inappropriately determine the course of an interview and the eventual credibility assessment. Clover's account of their interview with the Turkish Immigration Office clearly highlighted the potential negative consequences of such lack of knowledge and understanding of COI by case workers:

> Her questions were not professional at all. For example, something that was really strange for her was that, when I was telling her I had a sexual relationship in Iran with someone who threatened me with evidence from the relationship, she could not understand the implications of being the 'top' or 'bottom' there. These are expressions I really hate myself, but the fact that being the *fael* ['top' or 'doer'] or *mafoul*

> ['bottom' or 'receiver'] made such a difference that someone who was on top could in some cases go around and spread the words about the relationship and even brag that I 'raped' that person as a consequence of toxic masculinity … This was not a fathomable concept for her at all.

The case worker in Clover's interview not only had limited understanding of the content and implications of the relevant legal provisions in Iran, but she also let that unduly influence the direction of the interview and her judgement on the veracity of Clover's account:

> She had got stuck on this point that if two people have had a relationship that you say can lead to prison or death sentence in Iran, how is it possible that one of them walks around and talks about it freely, but only you or that second person cannot admit it? She said: 'as you know, here in Turkey, such a relationship also has some social taboos around it, but it is for both people, so they will both stay quiet about it'.

### *3.2. The substantive assessment of claims*

Having considered the procedural shortcomings in the asylum adjudication system in Turkey, and how these affect queer Iranians in particular, we now consider the issues affecting the substantive decisions on queer Iranians' asylum claims, in particular credibility assessment. Assessing credibility in the context of an asylum claim has been a long-debated topic, being one of the thorniest aspects of queer asylum claims (Danisi et al, 2021, chap 7). This also relates to contentious issues of what constitutes a 'particular social group' (PSG), what constitutes 'persecution', and what elements harm a claim's credibility. To support decision-makers, the UNHCR has produced the *Guidelines on International Protection No. 9: Claims to Refugee Status Based on Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity* (UNHCR 2012 SOGI Guidelines) (UNHCR, 2012). Although of overall good quality, these Guidelines are not immune to criticism (Dustin and Ferreira, 2021, pp 322–323), and do not necessarily translate into good practice even within the UNHCR. Indeed, several of our participants in Turkey who had been interviewed by UNHCR case workers reported inappropriate lines of questioning and insufficient expertise on SOGIESC matters. Shahab, for example, found the requests for evidence and the nature of the questions asked unacceptable:

> [Y]ou needed to provide documentation that you are homosexual, and this was ridiculous for me. What images could one give?! How should one prove they are homosexual? If one was to prove they are straight, would that be possible? … from the beginning [of the interview]

> I cried. At points they would really enrage me with their questions, and I'd be like, what question is that?! And why should I have to answer this question. For example, 'when was the first time you had sex?' 'What did you feel?' 'How did you realize you were gay?' 'Since when did you realize that you wish to be with the same sex?'

Despite obtaining a positive decision, Saman also found some of the interview questions disturbing and unnecessary, because of their excessive sexual and private nature. Jebo also found the interviewers unprofessional, and the questions asked unhelpful and reflective of shallow understandings of sexuality and gender matters. Amira told us that UNHCR case workers dealing with queer asylum claims had an inadequate general knowledge level, which could mean rejection, for example, for gay asylum claimants who were not able to express themselves clearly: 'Because not every homosexual who faces dangers in Iran has the knowledge to pinpoint the essential things and express their case, for example, the way that I can'.

Other participants in Turkey had more positive experiences with the UNHCR, and Jebo acknowledged that queer refugees' claims are now dealt with more professionally and UNHCR officers have greater expertise on these matters. Amira told us about being encouraged to wear make-up and generally 'exaggerate your gender expression, so the interviewer knows that you are gay or trans', but they refused to play these games of gender and sexual stereotypes and obtained a positive decision based on a genuine presentation. In an example of good practice, Rima complimented the UNHCR case worker who interviewed them for focusing on their problems with the police, rather than on their queer identity as such. This aligns with what some of us have advocated for elsewhere, in terms of shifting the emphasis from proving queer refugees' membership of a particular social group to their risk of persecution on account of certain objective conditions in the country of origin (Dustin and Ferreira, 2021). Similarly, Alireza praised the UNHCR case worker for adopting an open line of questioning: 'it was not like asking prepared questions. He asked a general open question and, as I was explaining, he would ask other questions'. Adopting an open line of questioning rather than pre-prepared lines of questioning is indeed the best approach to eliciting relevant information and offering claimants a fair opportunity to present their story (UNHCR, 2012, para 63; Helenelund, 2023).

It appears that, just at the time that standards in UNHCR interviewing and decision-making for queer refugees were improving, the Turkish authorities took control of the asylum system. In the absence of domestic guidelines, lawyers in Turkey make use of the UNHCR 2012 SOGI Guidelines. However, as discussed before, procedures conducted by the Turkish Immigration Office are often imperfect. From a more substantive

perspective, the asylum adjudication carried out by the Turkish Immigration Office also has shortcomings. Alireza, for example, told us that:

> [I]n our time, the UN had a 'default to truth' policy, based on which the applicant was telling the truth unless its opposite was proven. Now the Turkish Immigration Office is the opposite. Their default is that the person sitting in front of them is lying and they have to prove that they are not. That is why the interview looks like an interrogation. And for most gay people – not transgenders – they require a persecution case, meaning that the applicant has to prove that they are being threatened.

Reminiscent of the 'culture of disbelief' of the UK Home Office (Millbank, 2009; Danisi et al, 2021, sec 7.5), such 'lying as default' approach is incompatible with the principle of the benefit of the doubt enshrined in the UNHCR 2019 *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status* (UNHCR, 2019a, para 203). Furthermore, requiring evidence of actual persecution is unlawful, as the status of refugee should only require a 'risk of persecution' (UNHCR, 2016, paras 24–25 and 89–92) – not actual persecution. Concomitantly, according to Boran, the threshold for a finding of risk of persecution has increased considerably.

Sobhan's experience demonstrates the unacceptable lines of questioning queer refugees may now face in Turkey. In Sobhan's case, the overly sexualized nature of the interrogation ran against current international and European legal standards and UNHCR guidance:

> [the case worker] delved into details and asked me, 'You fall into two categories: the active and the passive! Well, which one were you?!' I was surprised … [I said] 'whether I was the active or passive participant in a relationship, or whatever it may be, the complexity of sexual experiences goes beyond those simplistic categories you're trying to impose'. The interviewer persisted in asking the question. … I gradually tried to keep up with the interviewer. … The interviewer, who was a woman, said, 'No, I want to learn and know it myself'.

This relentless and coercive intrusion into a claimant's private and sexual life – apparently motivated by the interviewer's curiosity rather than the essential requirements of the adjudication process – constitutes a serious violation of professional ethics and refugees' rights. Sobhan concluded that:

> the respectful and professional atmosphere that should be present in an interview was completely lost in that situation. … [refugees] are forced to go through very long and unprofessional interviews in a non-specialized environment, where they have to 'defend themselves'

> and swear to God that 'we have experienced violence! We are telling the truth!'

Inappropriate lines of questioning by the Turkish Immigration Office were also described by Karen, who knew of claimants – including his partner – who:

> have been asked questions such as: 1) Are you the man or the woman in the relationship? 2) What do you do in bed? 3) Do you wear women's clothes for your partner or not? These are insulting questions. And a person who is in charge of making such a decision on your life should know better. … A few of my LGBT friends, despite having truthful cases, have been rejected, because the documentations [evidence] have not been sufficient for the officer in charge.

Farhan, as well, was aware of abusive and illegal behaviour by case workers, including officers requesting to check claimants' genitalia and ask about sexual practices, and leading to arbitrary and unfair instances of denial of international protection.

To compound these problems, bisexuality remains an undesirable and unintelligible category. In fact, there is a prevailing understanding that bisexual claimants have less chances of obtaining international protection, as Zeynab Peyghambarzadeh (a scholar and activist based in the UK) told us:

> in Turkey, bi asylum seekers told me that they have been directly advised by other asylum seekers and also by activists not to tell that they are bi … I found out that they [bisexuals] believe talking about their orientation was not good for their asylum-seeking process, because they heard that bisexuals had less chance for asylum seeking and they'd better identify themselves as homosexuals.

This was reiterated by Clover, who was adamant about the biphobia of the Turkish Immigration Office, despite the serious issues bisexuals can face in Iran:

> if you are a bisexual in Turkey, you have nearly zero chance of an interview. Because the interviewers are extremely biphobic. Biphobia is so common as if there is no LGBTQ, but [only] LGTQ. … for example, to a bisexual man who has relationships with their same sex as well, they might say: 'Oh! You can sleep with girls too? So, why wouldn't you just do this? Are you crazy?'

Such biphobia not only erases bisexuals and others who identity as 'queer' outside the more familiar categories, but it is also used to fuel the narrative

of 'fake claims', that is, a bisexual asylum claimant in an opposite-sex relationship is seen as having presented a 'fake' sexual orientation asylum claim (Ferreira, 2022).

Finally, Hayriye Kara highlighted a tendency from case workers and courts – all the way up to the Constitutional Court – to determine that there is no risk of persecution if a claimant has not been politically active in Iran, as in that case they can go on living in Iran by keeping a 'low profile'. Echoing the debates in Western asylum scholarship and jurisprudence on the 'discretion reasoning' or 'concealment argument' (Danisi et al, 2021, sec 7.3.2; Wessels, 2021), Hayriye Kara rightly pointed out that such reasoning is 'ridiculous' and 'not sustainable at all', as Iranian authorities may at any point in the future become aware of the sexuality or gender identity of that claimant, which can lead to harmful consequences.

The procedural and substantive fairness issues outlined earlier are bound to distort and constrain a free and emancipated journey of discovery and assertion of one's sexual and gender identity for queer refugees in Turkey. This was reflected in the words of Amira, who spoke of a sort of expectation that members of the Iranian LGBTIQ+ community in Turkey follow 'a redefined set of the patriarchal principles' to confess and perform their sexuality and gender to case workers; this 'causes a general exaggeration in that community. I know many people who were one thing there [Iran] and here they are a completely different thing [in Turkey]'.

If recognized as a refugee by the Turkish authorities, such recognition comes in the form of the 'conditional refugee' status and accompanied by the issuance of a *kimlik* – an ID card for residents in Turkey, which is valid for three years and then renewable every year. Yet, the protection offered by this status is flimsy at best, as Sobhan's experience reflects:

> Even afterwards, nothing really changed. I still faced the same challenges and experiences as before, despite the change in my status. How did I experience it? When I tried to file a complaint against the person responsible for an incident that happened to me, that person told me, 'Don't think just because you're a "conditional refugee" you can complain and speak up against me. Don't think I can't take action against you and deport you'.

The weaknesses of the 'conditional refugee' status were confirmed by the fact that several lawyers advised Sobhan against filing a complaint, and even warned them that they could also end up being convicted despite their legal status.

Hayriye Kara confirmed that although the formal legal system may be protective and in conformity with international and European legal standards, current practices are unpredictable and arbitrary: 'Unjust deportation decisions, you know, unjust detention circumstances, unjust interviews, unjust

rejections'. Whether 'conditional refugees' are required to keep signing in at police stations or not varies from local authority to local authority. Such lack of standardization of mechanisms and processes increases the precarity of queer Iranians in Turkey. 'Conditional refugees' may also be threatened with deportation and actually deported to countries of origin, first countries of asylum, and 'safe' third countries, on account of a range of minor incidents, rule violations, and non-legally relevant disagreements with authorities (Amnesty International, 2019, 2022b; Human Rights Watch, 2024a).

Instead of, or in addition to, seeking refugee status, some of our participants wished to apply for naturalization and become Turkish citizens, as they felt integrated enough in society, had developed a strong social network, enjoyed several aspects of the local culture, and/or were pursuing their studies in Turkish higher education institutions. In the Turkish context, gaining citizenship is particularly important, because, as Hayriye Kara explained, there is 'no status in-between and no rights in-between' being a 'conditional refugee' and being a Turkish citizen. In light of the limited protection offered by the 'conditional refugee' status, the importance of gaining citizen status is apparent. The majority of our participants, however, wished to leave Turkey.

## 4. Seeking refuge in the UK

Many queer Iranians reach the UK, either via Turkey or other countries, but there as well they struggle to secure recognition as refugees and are re-traumatized by this process. Although some of our participants, like Mozdeh, described the Home Office as 'welcoming', others had worse experiences. Although the success rate of asylum applications on grounds of sexual orientation has increased from 44 per cent to 62 per cent between 2019 and 2023 (Home Office, 2024), almost 40 per cent of LGB claimants are still denied protection, and the UK asylum system is known for posing many challenges to queer refugees (Kirkup and Winnett, 2012; McFadyen, 2016; Raboin, 2016; Lopes Heimer, 2020; Raj, 2024). The UK has developed increasingly restrictive and hostile immigration controls, and these developments became particularly harsh with the succession of the 2010–2024 Conservative-led governments and the raft of statutes introduced towards the end of this period: the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the Illegal Migration Act 2023, the UK-Rwanda Agreement 2022, and the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024. The combined restrictive and hostile effect of these pieces of legislation are of great concern, with Matt A. and Pliny Soocoormanee (Executive Officer in the Peter Tatchell Foundation, UK), for example, expressing extreme unease at the consequences of these Acts for refugees in general and queer refugees in particular. Indeed, these Acts not only undermine the UK's obligations under the Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2023; Powell et al, 2024), but also further undermine the legal rights of queer refugees in very specific ways, especially in

terms of inadmissibility of claims, and the standard and burden of proof (Powell and Rifath, 2023; Pulvirenti, Lalor, and Jaquiss, 2024). It remains to be seen how much of this legislation will be dismantled by the Labour government in power at the time of writing (see Section 6 of this chapter).

Similar to what we saw in Section 3 in relation to Turkey, queer Iranians claiming international protection in the UK face numerous procedural challenges, again in relation to the duration of procedures, legal representation and advice, availability and quality of interpretation services, and COI production and use. The procedural efficiency and fairness of the UK asylum adjudication system have indeed been severely questioned over the years (Danisi et al, 2021, chap 7). Pliny, for example, has witnessed cases lingering in the asylum system for as long as 13 years. He described this as 'delaying tactics' to render the asylum procedure harder to navigate, and which courts also criticize for clogging the judiciary.

In contrast, and perhaps surprisingly, given the harsh legal and policy regime that has developed in the UK, most of our participants had positive experiences while claiming international protection. Maryia, for example, described her experience with the Home Office as a lesbian asylum claimant in the 2010s as 'very impressive':

> It was the first time that I felt really supported. Because the interviewer heard my story, asked some questions and treated me in a very trusting and respectful way. It was like they could tell that my story is true and is hurtful. They were very understanding. They understood where I was coming from, and they approved my case very quickly, like, my interview was really short, and I got home, two days after I received my papers. It was approved.

Similarly, Matt A., who arrived in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic on a student visa and applied for a visa for his unmarried same-sex partner, found that 'the Home Office has been very good, in fact, with my case, and they prioritized the interview time just because my partner's visa depended on my outcome'. However, he was also conscious that he had not had to go through the asylum process and that this positive experience was exceptional:

> you have to make sure that what I am saying does not represent anybody else within the community, because I was one in a million, super lucky person. I was absolutely lucky throughout the whole process … I and my story in no way should represent anybody else's asylum case because cases like me are very rare.

The Home Office was also described as 'very welcoming' by Mozhdeh (who applied for asylum as a trans woman) and sympathetic by Hana (who applied

for asylum as a lesbian woman), both after the COVID-19 pandemic. Such seemingly positive experiences with the Home Office by our participants may relate to the strength of their applications and evidence gathered, COI that was at the time available on Iran (Home Office, 2022b), and the legal advice and support they received. This is true in all jurisdictions: the quality of the experience of queer Iranians applying for international protection will depend considerably on whether or not they receive legal advice and representation.

Nonetheless, legal representation was a challenge for some queer Iranians in the UK. Mazi's experience confirmed that, even if one obtains legal representation, the service received is often unsatisfactory. He was assigned a lawyer who, despite also being Iranian, failed to complete the basic paperwork for his case, as Mazi found out only when he arrived at the Court. The incompetence of the legal representation received by Mazi in his appeal had drastic consequences, as his appeal was rejected. The chances of queer refugees in the UK obtaining good quality, free legal advice have diminished drastically over the years owing to cuts to legal aid, leading to a situation that can be described as one of structural violence (Alessi et al, 2024). In the face of inadequate legal advice and representation, NGOs and campaigners often step in and provide informal advice, as Pliny explained:

> we do encourage them [claimants] to be more visible since, you know, Britain comparatively is a much more tolerant place as well. So, I always tell the person that 'coming out' is their personal choice, you should not be forced to 'come out' until you feel it is the right time for you. That is something I make very, very clear, but I also stress the point that now is [the] opportunity; if you want to take that opportunity, I will encourage you and will help you … to try to maximize their chances with the application.

Such 'coming out' narratives do indeed play an important role in credibility assessment (see next in this section) and are promoted with the legitimate and well-intentioned aim of securing international protection for a claimant. At the same time – as noted previously in the context of NGOs operating in Turkey – they encourage narratives that are reductive and constraining of individual sexual and gender journeys and identities.

In the UK, as well, issues regarding the quality of interpretation services used by the Home Office have been under scrutiny (Bolt, 2020). Stakeholders have highlighted specific concerns relating to queer refugees (UKLGIG, 2019), and this was confirmed by Mazyar Shirali. And even if the interpreter is competent, being of the same nationality or ethnicity can create obstacles to providing a thorough and honest testimony (Danisi et al, 2021, pp 245–246). As Mazi told us: 'It was difficult, because my interpreter [during the

interview] was Iranian, and you really cannot explain such things [relating to sexuality]. You swallow half of what you had wished to say. So, it was pretty hard for me to explain what had gone on'.

The inability to discuss his sexual orientation during the interview on account of the interpreter being a co-national cost Mazi dearly, as the case worker did not believe he was gay and denied him international protection. This supports the recommendation that UK asylum authorities should 'allow claimants to provide their own interpreter at the expense of the state, and to request a replacement where they have concerns about the interpreter provided' (SOGICA, 2020, para 12).

There have also been criticisms of the quality of COI produced and used by the Home Office (Bolt, 2017). Mazi recalled that when he presented his asylum claim in the UK in the 2000s, he was told by the authorities that 'in Iran there aren't any issues [for gay people] and you could do it [sex] in the park – I myself did not know about that then. Perhaps they meant that I could have a hidden life there'.

The substantive fairness of the UK asylum adjudication process was also questioned by some of our participants, who felt that they were constrained to perform their sexuality and gender in certain ways to meet the expectations of decision-makers for the purposes of credibility assessment, otherwise they would be seen as non-credible. Mazi, for example, saw his claim rejected by both the Home Office and courts in the 2000s, mainly on account of his conventional heteronormative appearance:

> First, they said that I wasn't a homosexual. … [B]ut at the same time there was another Iranian who went for an interview, and his case was that already in Iran he would put on makeup and wear feminine clothing, and when he arrived here, he continued doing that, and in any case, he was more feminine than I was. … [Courts] think that a man that wears women's clothing is gay, or [needs] to be effeminate.

To his appeal hearing, Mazi wore a 'simple button up shirt and suit', which he described as an Iranian office look. He was conscious that '[a]s soon as he [judge] saw me, he closed my file'; Mazi concluded that the Home Office and courts put too much emphasis on queer claimants' appearance. This inappropriate emphasis on appearance cost Mazi eight years in the asylum system. Among claimants, the perception persists that demeanour plays a crucial role in queer asylum cases. Alex told us: 'I have heard that your appearance plays a role in the process, because that makes you stick out and be obvious. If the judge or anyone else sees you, they can figure you out'.

Crucial to one's performance of sexuality and gender is the adoption of a label that is legible to UK decision-makers. Clare Summerskill – who has acted as member of the board of the Peter Tatchell Foundation – thus

mentioned that many queer refugees 'have never used these words [LGBTIQ+ categories], so they are having to learn them from English people'. And as in Turkey, in the UK also, bisexual Iranian claimants risk being erased and disbelieved, as Zeynab Peyghambarzadeh told us:

> there is this general understanding in the LGBT community among asylum seekers around lawyers, interpreters, case officers, aid providers, volunteers, experts, everyone has this assumption that bisexuality can decrease the chance of being granted asylum. So, people are being advised not to talk about it and, by not talking about it, they just reproduce the invisibility of bi asylum seekers and bi people in general.

Substantiating this, Zeynab gave details of a support group in Northern England explicitly using their advice and training materials to advise queer claimants against identifying as bisexuals before the Home Office or telling case workers about past or present opposite-sex sexual experiences or relationships, on the basis that it could be detrimental to their claim. While this is understandable advice from a strategic perspective, such strategies 'reinforce narrow stereotypes and judicial assumptions of what a "credible" gay narrative should look like' (Ballin, 2023, p 8). This is a problem affecting asylum systems across Europe and beyond (Peyghambarzadeh, 2020).

To complement such performance expectations, claimants need to present evidence as well, ideally including not only their personal testimonies but also some sort of documentary evidence. Some, like Mazi (who claimed asylum in the 2000s), were able to present documentary evidence, but it was dismissed by the authorities: 'I had a letter from a court in Iran from that woman [ex-wife back in Iran], but they [the court] said one can buy a letter like that with 50 tomans [IRR 500] and didn't accept my letter'. Many claimants, however, have to rely purely on their personal testimonies. The lines of questioning the Home Office adopts in asylum interviews are thus extremely important and can influence the type and extent of information gathered from queer refugees.

For most of the 2000s and 2010s, the Home Office often asked sexually intimate and inappropriate questions about claimants' sexual experiences; that seems to have improved, even if not completely (Danisi et al, 2021, sec 7.4.2). Matt A. had a more positive experience when his turn came:

> I know everyone is not as lucky when it comes to interview, but for me it went quite smoothly and the questions were focused on how I felt, more than what I did, which was very nice. So, instead of asking me 'what you did with your first partner', it was like 'how you felt about him', 'how does your relationship differ from this person

> to another person'. You know, it was more about emotions and that made it much easier.

Such lines of questioning have the benefit of not violating claimants' rights to human dignity and privacy by avoiding questions of a sexual nature (Ferreira and Venturi, 2018). Nonetheless, an excessive focus on 'emotional journeys' also presupposes that claimants have the emotional and cognitive capacity to verbalize those emotions, and that their experiences and approaches to sexuality are also predominantly framed in terms of emotions (and identity) rather than acts (and behaviour). Indeed, going from the extreme of only focusing on sexual activity to the other extreme of only focusing on emotions may negatively affect some claimants' narratives in similarly exclusionary ways. This is particularly important in the case of queer Iranians, as '[n]ormative gender/sex expectations [in Iran] have become formed around conduct rather than identities' (Najmabadi, 2014, p 299).

Besides expecting emotional depth and reflection in the testimonies of queer refugees, the Home Office also expects a high degree of consistency across the whole testimony. As Pliny Soocoormanee highlighted:

> the Home Office is not very tolerant of inconsistencies or of minor differences in the narratives, and we are trying to get the message out to make these people [case workers] understand that if somebody has been beaten, has been raped, has undergone substantial trauma based on their sexuality, or even their experience, recollecting these events, narrating that back again and again, they might miss some details. Some leeway has to be given to these people.

Such leeway is indeed consistent not only with psychological studies (Herlihy, Cameron, and Turner, 2023) but also the legal principle of the benefit of the doubt (UNHCR, 2019a, para 203).

While acknowledging the need for some degree of scrutiny of queer refugees' claims, Matt A. concludes that some queer refugees arriving in the host country directly from their country of origin may have hardly any evidence: '[T]hat is concerning, because a lot of people that make it out of Iran, they were hiding in Iran and now they are out of the country and they have only been out for a few months, and some of them don't even speak English'.

After having lived in hiding in Iran and been in the UK for only a short period of time, a queer Iranian refugee is unlikely to have acquired the type of experience, knowledge and evidence that Home Office case workers and judges sometimes expect, such as an understanding about Pride events, past same-sex relationships, and involvement with LGBTIQ+ NGOs. An illustration of this is a case that Clare Summerskill spoke about, concerning

an Iranian queer refugee Clare interviewed in the context of her research for the verbatim theatre play *Rights of Passage* about LGBTQ asylum claimants in the UK (Summerskill, 2016), who was asked by a judge at the appeal hearing:

> '[C]ould you tell me the opening times of GAY?', which is a nightclub in London. Now this particular chap, when he applied for asylum in England, after three weeks he was sent off to the first place where he was meant to go to spend time, which was I think in Plymouth, so when being questioned, he said, 'no, I am sorry, I don't know the opening times of GAY', and the judge said, 'well, if you don't know the opening times of GAY, then how can you be gay?'. And the Iranian man said … I had only been there three weeks. And then the judge said, 'well, we have decided you are not gay'.

More recent experiences reinforce the inappropriateness of some of the performativity expected by the Home Office, including in relation to integration in the LGBTIQ+ community. Indeed, if one is not prone to socializing, does not feel the need to seek a community, or does not have the material or emotional conditions to do so, it should not be necessary to adapt to meet the Home Office expectations of integration in the LGBTIQ+ community. In Matt A.'s words:

> I had a lot of things to worry about. I had to work for my tuition, I had to work for my life, I had no support from anyone, and I had to pay rent, and do this and do that, so I didn't have time to go out and find a community and hang out with them. And to be frank, that is not even my concern, that is not something that I want to do at the moment … I don't see the necessity to join or belong or, I don't know, participate in a certain community.

The shortcomings of queer asylum adjudication in the UK discussed here illustrate Frada's critique of the asylum system as 'a site wherein individual subjectivities are modified not with direct coercion, but instead through ideological, intellectual, social, and political operations of power that discipline refugees' (Frada, 2024, p 376). Conversely, legal refugee recognition – when it occurs – can be very significant, including as an affirmation of identity: Mazi felt 'completely reborn here. Here was another birth for me'. Eventual naturalization can also give greater security and more rights, such as voting, than refugee status, and was thus desirable to some of our participants. Maryia, for example, first obtained leave to remain as refugee and then became a British citizen, despite the costs involved.[15] While Matt A. did not feel like he 'belongs to any nation', he did not exclude the possibility of naturalizing and identifying as a UK citizen in the future,

'[b]ecause this is the country that provided the refuge that I needed and made me feel like I am at home'.

## 5. Resettling in Canada

If not able to reach other countries like the UK through their own means, many queer Iranians seek authorities' support to resettle elsewhere. Some of those who obtain conditional refugee status in Turkey are then referred by the Turkish Presidency of Migration Management to the UNHCR to be considered for resettlement (UNHCR, 2019b). Although resettlement processes have been criticized for being complicit in producing, disciplining, and modulating queer refugees as safe, future citizens of the country of resettlement, and for expecting refugees to disavow their national belonging, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and political stances (Saleh, 2020, p 76), resettlement remains the ultimate aim for most queer Iranian refugees in Turkey. If that means constructing overly simplified narratives of injury and sexual identity in order to be intelligible to the authorities as 'proper, exceptional, and, thus, eligible for resettlement' (Saleh, 2020, p 79), then that may well be a sacrifice worth making. Resettlement countries tend to be Canada, the USA, or Australia – the UK offers negligible opportunities for resettlement (Lenegan, 2024).

The resettlement process can be lengthy, traumatizing, and full of obstacles and throwbacks (Ehrkamp, Loyd, and Secor, 2022; Fee, 2022). These difficulties reflect a degree of fear of 'opening the floodgates' to queer refugees and 'queering' asylum decision-making too much (Raj, 2020, p 94). The 'Country Desk' at the UNHCR is responsible for processing resettlement cases, including informing refugees of the alternative resettlement destinations, collating the necessary documents, and supporting with the travel arrangements (UNHCR, 2024). Other partners – such as the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) – may also assist in the resettlement of refugees based in Turkey.[16]

As Hayriye Kara explained, the process of resettlement from Turkey was previously relatively fast (usually taking around two years in 2013–2014), and most queer Iranians – like Alireza – preferred to wait to be resettled in Canada, owing to social ties and their positive impressions of Canada compared to other resettlement countries such as the USA. Australia has also constituted an alternative, and, as Pedram clarified, 'if you had an immediate family member in a different country, you could also request [to be resettled in] that country'. In a dramatic turn of events, the possibility of any degree of choice quickly disappeared, as Alireza, who has been waiting in Turkey for eight years, explained:

> [I]f someone had stayed for 22 months [in 2014], it would be very long. … everyone went to a third country in one, two or, the worst

> scenario, three years. … In 2015, due to the Syrian war, the European borders were open for a while and with only TRY 1,000 you could get on a train [to] go to Germany. … And we said: 'Germany? No, there is phobia and racism there. We want to go to Canada.' [laughs] This was our opinion. In 2018, Canada closed up.

Despite intense lobbying, the Trudeau administration did not agree to continue prioritizing the resettlement of LGBTIQ+ refugees in Turkey (Robertson, 2017). As an alternative to Canada, queer refugees in Turkey – such as Alireza – were then offered the USA as a resettlement country, but that option also disappeared when the Trump administration issued travel bans (Almasy and Simon, 2017). Similarly, Shaya's experience of waiting four and a half years in Turkey illustrates the tragic succession of events affecting queer refugees over this period:

> [A]fter another couple of weeks, the ICMC [International Catholic Migration Commission] gave me an appointment [to be resettled in the USA]. … I was in the building of ICMC for ICMC1 step, when Donald Trump signed the travel ban. I was in the lift together with the interpreter, and I remember asking him, 'now what will happen?' He said, 'we don't know either'. …This was the process of anyone who was supposed to go to the US. And all that cohort stayed for another 3–4 years.

It was clear that queer refugees had become victims of global geopolitics, or, to use Pedram's words, a 'lower priority'. Although the resettlement process depends to a large extent on countries' willingness to welcome refugees through specific programmes, Arshia highlighted the 'administrative obstacles and bureaucratic red tape' that had kept him in Turkey for six years. Saman also experienced a disappointing situation with the UNHCR, where the country of resettlement on his file was wrongly recorded as USA rather than Canada. By the time the mistake was corrected, Canada had stopped accepting queer Iranian refugees.

Karen also complained about not being able to get through to the UNHCR to get them to correct the information about the choice of resettlement country on his file. After a year of inefficiency, missing interview records, and repeated questions, Karen was asked for a third time where he would like to go: 'I said Canada. She [UNHCR official] said that Canada is closed now. I told her: "Madam, you have asked me these same questions a year ago …" Anyhow, I asked where was open and accepting then for me to go to. She said: "currently nowhere"'.

A strong sense of frustration was ever present in our conversations with participants. In Amir's words, 'I call the UN every week and tell them I am

in a dire situation. … They say they are sorry and end the conversation'. This seems to be a widespread situation persisting since the mid-2010s, and characterized by 'deliberate misinterpretations' and 'manipulations' (Sarı, 2020b, p 96).

Most queer Iranian refugees have remained in Turkey for 'at least four or five years and in some cases for up to eight or nine years', as Rima explained. Artin, for example, waited for nine years and knew of refugees who had been waiting for 11 years. Karen had been waiting for eight years to be allocated to a country. This is the consequence of the stringent criteria for resettlement. As Selin Unal, a spokesperson for the UNHCR Turkey, acknowledged, '[o]nly those with extreme vulnerability and meeting both UNHCR global resettlement submission categories and criteria of each resettlement country will be considered for resettlement' (Sahinkaya and Aslan, 2021).

Although being allocated a country for resettlement is just the beginning of a long bureaucratic process, it can constitute a fundamental moment in a queer refugee's life, as in the case of Sobhan, who explained that the notification of resettlement 'was a very good moment. The moment I picked up the phone made me feel like half of the burdens on my shoulders had been lifted off'. The process in Turkey also includes what is called a 'country-level interview', that is, an interview with an official from the embassy of the country willing to resettle the claimant, as well as collecting biometric information and other relevant documentation. In Sobhan's experience, this interview covers similar ground to an asylum interview, but is more forward-looking and gives a renewed sense of hope and self-respect: 'This interview was the first one where I felt like I was truly being treated as a human. … Because I wasn't just interrogated. I was asked about my aspirations, my goals, and my plans for the future'.

An increasing number of those who do succeed in being resettled, do so through private sponsorship schemes promoted in Canada, as mentioned in Section 2. Such schemes have effectively occupied some of the space left empty by the Canadian government. Making use of such schemes is time-consuming and exhausting, but often provides a shred of hope. As Shaya shared with us:

> I got in touch with the organization called Rainbow Refugee,[17] in Canada, to go there via a sponsorship. An organization in Quebec, Montreal, responded to me. They said they could arrange for me but that I had to learn French. I was willing to do anything just to be taken from there. … My lawyer sent me a message to say that it's a miracle! … And these angels whom we call sponsors took care of my case.

In fact, several organizations and private individuals in Canada work intensively to support queer Iranian refugees in Turkey to resettle in Canada

through a private sponsorship programme. Rainbow Railroad is one such organizations (Espinosa et al, 2024, pp 5–6).[18] As Paige Maclean – a worker at Rainbow Railroad – explained, the organizations receives almost 10,000 requests for help a year, and they start by scrutinizing applications to ensure that claimants have 'genuine' claims:

> [We] verify that folks that reach out to us are LGBTQI, because we want to make sure that we are helping LGBTQI+ people, because that is our mandate. We have two different ways of verifying cases. So, one would be if they come from a trusted referring partner. … Now, for folks that just reach out to us through our request for help website … that verification process is usually back and forth through email, we ask them about different things, like do you have any screenshots of you on dating apps or texting, if you are a gay man, for example, texting other men in a romantic way. Or photos of you with queer activists at this organisations or at this rally, what have you. Just anything that we can use to kind of try to make sure that we are helping the queer community.

While ostensibly reasonable, such processes for determining service users' 'genuine' sexuality or gender identity raises concerns about the power dynamics, stereotypes and Western biases that may be at play in such processes (Giametta, 2020; Ferreira, 2022).

Even when a refugee is to be resettled through a private sponsorship programme, governmental agencies and external partners are still involved to confirm that beneficiaries of such programmes meet all the applicable criteria. Paige Maclean described the resettlement process as intensive and in-depth, covering all key aspects of the last ten years in the life of a refugee. The process not only includes an interview, but also medical exams and collecting biometric information from the claimant. Such thoroughness takes a long time, leaving refugees in a limbo for long periods of time. Paige concludes that the process is 'too long and oppressive and doesn't recognize the realities for LGBTQI+ people'.

The length of the process is not, however, the only issue with private sponsorship. A perhaps more serious issue relates to the fact that such processes are costly and dependent on the good will of individuals, as mentioned in Section 2. Indeed, relying on private sponsorship schemes to support the resettlement of queer Iranian refugees from Turkey has led to a situation where only those with substantial financial resources and personal connections are able to have their cases for resettlement processed and eventually travel to Canada. As Saghi Ghahraman puts it, '[t]he rest of the people, those who needed to leave Turkey, didn't leave Turkey, they have been there for maybe 10 years now'. This private and individual-centric

approach to resettlement has been widely critiqued in scholarship on the Canadian experience: it forces refugees affected to seek media exposure and rely on personal connections, leaving them at the mercy of individual sponsors' preferences, rather than official and impartial resettlement criteria (Labman and Cameron, 2020). In the face of this situation, Sarı has argued that 'Canada's doors are only open to a small minority consisting of rich, highly-educated, English-speaking, and well-connected refugees' who are able to obtain the support of private sponsors (Sarı, 2020b, p 97). This can be seen as a form of privatization of migration management, which raises serious ethical issues (Labman and Cameron, 2020; Labman, 2022, 2024; Parent-Chartier, Santamaria, and Van Haren, 2022). Pedram eloquently criticized this privatization of the refugee system:

> The government gives no financial support for those cases. It is like they say: 'You gather the expenses yourselves and bring them. I am not going to spend anything'. I think this process needs a kind of reconsideration. … I think the fact that they have allowed a human-rights-related matter to be privatized has some ethical problems.

Shahrzad Mojab – an academic at the University of Toronto – has also pointed out that this 'privatization is particularly evident in the intake stage' and that 'the privatization of migration has become a significant point of debate within Canadian migration policy'.

Despite the legal and ethical shortcomings of private sponsorship schemes, it is clear that they constitute a lifeline for the few who are able to benefit from them. Shaya has been one of them, and she was appreciative of the opportunity that private sponsorship programmes gave her:

> I was telling her [my sponsor] that 'you did a great job for me and gathered most of my funds via your family'. And she told me an interesting thing, that she used to do laundry for that too: 'I took people's dirty clothes, washed and dried them and this way gathered CAD 12 at a time to have the money to bring you over'.

Private sponsors' generosity and dedication cannot be understated. And no matter whether one has arrived in Canada through a government-organized or private sponsorship resettlement programme, it is also evident that many of our participants have slowly felt reborn and liberated in Canada. Nonetheless, such feelings are neither linear nor stable. Eventually acquiring citizenship is a way for some to feel more firmly like they belong in Canada. Some, like Pegah, had become citizens and felt completely integrated in Canada. Clover and Darya, however, found that since they already enjoyed the right to move within Canada, work, education, social security, and so

forth, there was no urgency in applying to become a Canadian citizen and were satisfied with possessing a permanent residency (PR) permit. Queer Iranians' experiences in Canada are thus rich and diverse.

## 6. Conclusion

The previous discussion has highlighted numerous legal issues that queer Iranians face throughout their journeys to a safer place. These refer to serious shortcomings with the refugee status determination process both in Turkey and the UK, including in terms of the duration of procedures, training and conduct of case workers, legal representation and advice, availability and quality of interpretation services, production and use of COI, and credibility assessment of claims. If hoping to be resettled elsewhere through the UNHCR, queer Iranians also face enormous challenges, as it has become abundantly clear in relation to the resettlement opportunities in Canada.

As in the play *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett (Beckett, 2010), characters in this asylum story may keep (mis)talking and (mis)encountering each other while waiting for the re/settlement opportunity that never arrives. In Ali's words: 'I wish at least they could solve this uncertainty of time … But this "Wait! Wait!" becomes so frustrating. How much can I wait? Waiting is the worst thing to do'. Waiting is hardly a new theme in migration studies (for example, Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi, 2020). The current social and political repressive environment in Turkey inevitably slips into the practices of the Turkish Immigration Office, likely resulting – as Boran foresees – in longer asylum processes (probably 13 years) and an increase in deportations. This confirms Frada's assertion that 'the myopic fixation on border control has generated a dehumanizing surveillance machinery that transformed the asylum system into a threatening opponent of refugee protection, eliminating individual subjectivity and undermining the fundamental non-derogable prohibition on forcible return' (Frada, 2024, p 369). The dehumanization of the asylum system could not be better exemplified by the experiences of those queer Iranians we have met, who have waited in Turkey for so many years and wake up every day simultaneously hoping to have some good news from the UNHCR and fearing to be deported.

To alleviate the consequences of this stalemate from a legal perspective, Hayriye Kara recommends a range of measures in Turkey, such as creating written guidelines, introducing monitoring mechanisms, extending deadlines to appeal against negative decisions as to allow for appeals of good quality, as well as developing a body of domestic case law at all appeal levels, to support future asylum applications. These improvements could be supported by developing a discrete legal field of migration and asylum law in Turkish law schools, as well as specialized courts on migration and asylum claims, as currently these matters fall within the broad areas of public and administrative

law. At an institutional level, it is also crucial to increase the capacity, training, expertise, and awareness of equality and diversity issues of the Turkish Immigration Office and all other civil servants coming into contact with refugees – as Rima, Sobhan, and Hayriye Kara suggested. More fundamentally, to radically improve the current situation it would be necessary to return to the previous, UNHCR-led asylum system, as Minoo and Shaya asserted, since the UNHCR has the experience and human rights approach required in this field. Yet, that is extremely improbable, as it would entail the Turkish authorities relinquishing much power in this field, which they are unlikely to accept.

In the UK, as well, there is much scope for improvement in the current situation. This includes improving lines of questioning, producing better COI, shortening the length of procedures, and increasing access to legal aid. Case workers, in particular, need to be trained to be more aware of cultural differences, as N. suggested, and less judgemental and more humane, as Mazyar Shirali asserted. Mazyar also stressed the need to better train all individuals throughout the asylum process (including lawyers, police officers, interpreters, housing officers, healthcare workers, and others), to ensure they have the necessary legal, linguistic, and cultural skills. This could be in the shape of an asylum system informed by a trauma approach (Cranwell, 2024). More fundamentally, the UK needs to accept the responsibility for fairly and effectively processing any asylum claims submitted by queer refugees. This naturally means repealing the latest harsh legal instruments, namely the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, Illegal Migration Act 2023, and Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024. The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill – put forward by the Labour government and going through Parliament at the time of writing – does propose repealing the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024 and certain provisions of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, but also introduces a plethora of other highly problematic and restrictive provisions, which overall does not bode well for asylum applicants in the UK.[19]

Resettlement is also a key area of concern for our participants. The role of the UNHCR in Turkey and in resettlement programmes, as well as the limited resettlement quotas and political prioritization of war refugees over SOGIESC refugees, were forefront in many of our participants' minds. There was a keen sense that queer refugees' claims should be processed faster, as Ali, Karen, Taha, and Farhan highlighted. Nonetheless, it is governments at state level who ultimately decide on resettlement quotas, so Alireza, Minoo, Matt A., and Saghi Ghahraman pointed out that, in light of the chaotic situation in Turkey, it is crucial to increase resettlement opportunities for queer refugees currently in Turkey. As Pedram explained:

> The number of people who are accepted to come here [Canada] as refugees is really limited compared to the resources and land that this

> country has, and also compared to the need it has for the workforce. I think they can do much more. … the financial resources do exist … [they] only need to be managed well. … The ones who are in power need to be pursuing saving people's lives much more actively, since the main values and roots of this society are established on human rights.

In the specific case of Canada, there is the perception that the LGBTIQ+ community – in particular queer Iranians – can do more to join efforts and sponsor more queer Iranians currently in Turkey and hoping to be resettled in Canada. This is the case even if – as Saghi reminded us – one needs to remain critical of the way private sponsorship schemes privilege those with economic resources rather than prioritize those in the greatest need. For that reason, Pedram concluded that government-sponsored resettlement is the solution.

Ultimately, the situation in home countries also needs to improve, as the broader political contexts that lead individuals to seek protection elsewhere should not be obscured (Masri, 2017, p 40). Specifically, it is essential that queer individuals – like any other member of a society – be recognized and respected. Only then will they be free of the queerphobia that endangers their lives and often renders their existence in Iran unbearable. To reach that aim, a multi-layered and complex combination of diplomatic, political, socio-cultural, and legal measures is required. In the currently extremely polarized world, plagued with armed and ethnic conflicts, and with a weak international legal system, such an aim remains – at best – a long-term endeavour. Perhaps because of that, many of the hopes and suggestions shared by our participants and explored in this final section, mirror recommendations put forward by various other reports, pieces of scholarship and research projects (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; SOGICA, 2020; Danisi et al, 2021, chap 11). An emphasis on sexual and gender identity development – at an individual and Iranian level – through the lens of UCD, can indeed help us shed light on the politics and (in)justice of the international protection of queer Iranians.

For the time being, the truth remains that the combination of more restrictive asylum policies in Turkey, the UK, and Canada means that any refugee has increasingly less options and prospects. This means that queer Iranian refugees are the victims of a geopolitical matrix that leaves most of them restricted to a life of very limited rights and resources in Turkey. Only some selected few are able to benefit from resettlement schemes or successfully claim asylum elsewhere. This is reflective of widespread and ingrained shortcomings of the international protection system. Perhaps Shaya is indeed justified in asserting that '[t]hey need to demolish the whole thing and build it anew'. While Shaya is referring to the need for a new international protection system that is truly effective in protecting the rights and needs of those escaping persecution and discrimination, the current legal

and policy context is developing at pace towards the opposite direction, depriving millions of the right to protection to which they are entitled. Although writings on reforming – and improving – the international refugee system abound, especially from the perspective of responsibility-sharing (see, for example, Chimni, 2001; Jones, 2013; Aleinikoff and Zamore, 2019), it may well take decades to re-build enough political will to genuinely vindicate the right to non-refoulement.

8

# Conclusion

While them, chained to their high thrones
crowned with agency and adorned
with medals of potency on their chest,
cannot fathom
the rise of phoenix.

Hooman, Canada

## 1. Introduction

This book has developed an original account of the formation, evolution, and (re)negotiation of the queer identities of Iranians, both in Iran and in exile, offering innovative insights across all key aspects. Theoretically, it overcomes the tendency of postcolonial accounts to neglect, and performative accounts to exaggerate, the agency of non-Western actors in the wider processes of queer identity formation. And it enhances these influential accounts' explanatory potentials by putting them into critical conversation, for the first time, with the theory of uneven and combined development (UCD). Methodologically, it integrates poetry with the more conventional method of semi-structured life history interviews. This composite, collaborative methodology is applied through poetry workshops with queer Iranians in exile and extensive interviews with queer Iranians and their supporters across four countries: Iran, as country of origin; Turkey, predominately seen as a transit country; and the UK and Canada as countries of final destination and resettlement. This has imparted empirical rigour and comparative sensitivity to our research. Furthermore, this book has sought to uphold a normative commitment to queer politics. It historicizes the Iranian state's proactive legalization of queerphobia. It also foregrounds the agency, resilience, and praxis of queer Iranians in bravely combatting it in various, creative ways. In this concluding chapter, we recapitulate these contributions and reflect on their broader implications.

## 2. A new theoretical framework

We have enhanced postcolonial approaches to queer identity and sexuality through a sympathetic critique of their notion of 'queer imperialism' (for example, Massad, 2002; McGlynn, 2020). We have shown how the notion of 'queer imperialism' assumes the agential and discursive primacy of Western actors, an assumption that is in tension with postcolonialism's fundamental opposition to Eurocentrism. This circumstance has its roots, we have argued, in postcolonialism's unqualified rejection of the category of 'the universal' (Matin, 2013c). The result is a conception of colonialism (and imperialism) as exclusively Western. This circumstance in turn generates a 'methodological dualism' (Kermanian, 2024), which analytically and normatively foregrounds the West/non-West binary in which the West's imperial hyper-agency incites the would be non-Western queer subjects to 'discourse', according to Massad (2002). For some strands of postcolonial queer theory, therefore, Western imperialism discursively creates non-Western queer subjects to which non-Western (postcolonial) states react with legal and political violence. Postcolonialism's unqualified theoretical anti-universalism and the resulting methodological dualism therefore entail the neglect of the historical agency of non-Western states such as the Islamic Republic of Iran in legalizing and practicing anti-queer violence. This also obscures queer Iranians' proactive articulation of their sexual and gender identity through the selective adoption of Western queer discourse and the conscious recovery of key elements of the premodern culture of homosociality that prevailed in pre-national Iran, all while simultaneously resisting state-enforced heteronormativity through the strategic exploitation of loopholes within the legal framework that supports it.

Our contribution to performative queer theory is significantly indebted to Afsaneh Najmabadi's seminal account of queer identity formation in Iran (Najmabadi, 2014). We draw on her original conceptual and analytical insights and enhance it through a critical double movement. We have shown how Najmabadi's account undertheorizes 'international' dynamics, that is, phenomena that occur *because* of societal multiplicity (Rosenberg, 2022, p 19) and include, for instance, geopolitics, defensive modernization, and nationalism. International dynamics are therefore distinct from 'transnational' dynamics, which arise *despite* societal multiplicity and include, for example, globalization, cross-border diffusion of norms and discourses, trade, and migration (Rosenberg, 2022). The international deficit of Najmabadi's account, we have shown, generates a narrative of queer construction of selfhood as 'contingent, horizontal, situational conduct', in which extra-national dynamics are reduced to transnational dynamics. This elision of 'the international' also leads to the theoretical and analytical under-appreciation of the historical significance of modern nation-state formation in the state-led heteronormativization of Iran and queerphobic legislation and practices.

We have overcome postcolonial queer theory's 'methodological dualism' and performative queer theory's elision of international relations through conceptually synchronizing them with the theory of UCD, which this book has, for the first time, applied to the domain of gender relations and politics. We have demonstrated how UCD's plural and interactive social ontology enables us to move beyond postcolonialism's paradoxical 'Eurofetishism' (Hobson, 2020, p 20), which tends to render non-Western queer agency and non-Western states' queerphobia theoretically, analytically, and normatively illegible. UCD's ontologically plural conception of the social also overcomes the absence of 'the international' in performative accounts of queer identity and sexuality, thanks to the fact that inter-societal (international), trans-societal (transnational), and intra-societal (social) are all built into UCD's basic premises of unevenness and combination (for example, Matin, 2022b).

More generally, we have shown how UCD involves a theoretical holism that avoids incurring either the false universalism of Eurocentrism, or the cultural relativism and methodological dualism of postcolonialism. UCD's premise of 'unevenness' involves a notion of social totality that enables a genuinely historical account of different, yet interconnected, patterns of socio-cultural change of which gender relations and identity formation form a key dimension (for example, Matin, 2022b). More specifically, UCD integrates inter-societal relations and dynamics, or 'the international', into historical materialism's premise of 'double relationship', that is, the basic notion that social life rests on humans' metabolic relationship with nature and with each other (Marx, 2000 [1932], p 73). Thus, UCD transforms historical materialism's dialectics of the 'double relationship' into a socio-historical trialectic in which humans' interaction with nature takes place through interactive vectors of intra-societal (or social) and inter-societal (or international) relations (Matin, 2013b, pp 153–154). The international therefore enters the historical definition and transformation of societies, including their construction and organization of gender and sexuality. It is through empirical substantiating and historical concretization of UCD's triaxial framework that we have been able to recover the lost history of modern formation and transformation of queer sexual and gender identities in Iran, through the experiences of queer Iranians in Iran and in exile.

Our concretization of UCD has centred on a historical explanation of the radical shift from the premodern culture of homosociality, which prevailed in the Iranian plateau until the middle of the 19th century, to the contemporary, violently upheld dominance of heterosexuality. We have shown that this unprecedented shift was a key consequence of the geopolitically driven process of nation-state formation in response to industrial and political revolutions of modernity in Europe. Thus, the Qajar dynasty (1789–1925) and the Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1979) embarked on a top-down, selective modernization and Westernization for which modern Europe played the role

of a hostile tutor (Matin, 2012, 2013b). Combined development in UCD reflects the selectivity of this process, which involved the amalgamation of the foreign (Western) and the native (Islamic/Iranian). In the domain of gender and sexuality, this process centrally involved the uncritical adoption of the modern Europe's heteronormativity and the erasure of preexisting homosociality as a sign of comparative 'backwardness', while elevating and valorizing a *particular* preexisting (Persian) language and culture, bereft of its past homosociality, as the singular sinew of the emergent (*universal*) national culture. This meant that the formation of the modern nation-state advanced through 'inter-subaltern colonialism' (Matin, 2022a), a process involving the violent minoritization of non-Persian peoples and the criminalization of certain previously *de facto* established practices, most notably same-sex sexual relationships.

By the time of the 1979 revolution, however, liberal Western societies had partially reversed their heteronormativity in favour of socio-cultural, discursive, and legal tolerance of same-sex sexual relationships. However, the Islamist faction that ultimately dominated the 1979 revolution against the Western-backed Pahlavi monarchy defined itself ideologically and politically in opposition to the West. As a result, it vehemently rejected the emerging tolerance of same-sex desires in the West as a deviant foreign practice and violently upheld heterosexuality as a defining feature of native Islamic culture, despite the fact that heteronormativity itself had been imported from modern Europe by the modernizing state and political elites, and imposed on Iranians by governmental decree (Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016). Queer subjects' situational practices of self-identification and self-representation, foregrounded in performative accounts such as Najmabadi's (Najmabadi, 2014), occur within this broader context of modern nation-state formation, whereby 'the national' is constituted through its structural implication in and interaction with both transnational and international dynamics.

In addition to generating an international historical sociology of sexual and gender queer identities in Iran, our UCD-based framework has also offered crucial insights into the frictional negotiations of queer identity in exile. We have shown how key aspects of the constant renegotiation of queer identity in exile, namely, hybridity, (spatio-temporal) fluidity, (un) belonging, and interactive practices of home-making, all have elective affinity with UCD's conceptual topology. Indeed, UCD's central concept of 'combination' encapsulates key facets of the exilic praxis of unmaking and remaking of queer identity. It provides a parsimonious conceptual expression for the ways in which renegotiation of queer identity (or any form of identity) in exile centrally involves selective ruptures from and (re-)appropriation of Iran: rupture from Iran as a queerphobic state, and (re-)appropriation of Iran as a historical reservoir of a politically repressed culture of homosociality, whose artistic expression lives on in the classical

canon of Persian literature despite modern nation-state's violent project of heteronormativization over the past 150 years. We have analytically retrieved this complex circumstance through a novel integration of poetry workshops into our composite methodology. But before reflecting on our methodology, a word on our overall research design is in order.

## 3. A hybrid and dynamic methodology

The research project that has led to this book brought together researchers from multiple academic fields, including International Relations (IR), Law, Gender Studies, Persian Literature, Media Studies, and Philosophy. Furthermore, a considerable number of our research participants contributed to the project by writing poetry through our poetry workshops, which we have collected in a collection (Shidmehr, 2024) and partially used in this book. The diversity of our disciplinary backgrounds, combined with the poetry component of our methodology, rendered a conventional research design unsuitable. Specifically, a tightly organized (inter-)disciplinary theoretical framework that explicitly frames both historical and empirical accounts was not fit for purpose. Thus, we have developed a more flexible alignment between theoretical framework and empirical analysis by deploying our UCD-based theoretical framework as an orientating intellectual device that accommodated, amplified, and crystallized multiple, shifting vantage points and intellectual synergies (Ortega et al, 2023). These revolved around key themes such as agency, belonging, contingency, fluidity, hybridity, and transgression, all of which are conceptually in tune with UCD. As a result, Chapters 2 and 3, focusing, through UCD's theoretical lens, on theory and history, serve as contextual background against which the specific themes and narratives of the subsequent empirical chapters gain resonance and contrast. Prominent themes of this contextual background include societal multiplicity and its consequences of developmental multilinearity, cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 2012), polyphonic self-knowledge (Renedo, 2010), and 'identity fluidity' (Saperstein, 2024). The orientating nature of the theoretical chapter means that each of the other chapters of this book has a certain degree of relative autonomy, allowing it to be read individually. The overall coherence of the narrative and the strategic alignment of chapters have been ensured through regular review of each research team member's draft work by other team members, as well as feedback from our Advisory Board members.

The transition from our contextual chapters to the empirical chapters has been mediated by an innovative methodology (Chapter 4). Aligned with our heterodox research design, we have combined several qualitative research methods, namely, semi-structured interviews with supporters, and life history interviews and poetry workshops with queer Iranians, to reflect

and implement the intersectional and interdisciplinary character and aims of our research project.

Our methodological deployment of poetry composed by some of our research participants through guided poetry workshops and published separately as a collection (Shidmehr, 2024) has been motivated by two primary reasons. The value and efficacy of poetry in working with traumatized participants is increasingly recognized in various branches of social sciences (Bracegirdle, 2011; Eshun and Madge, 2012; Apol, 2020). Poetry also enables a mode of emotional articulation and the representation of the self and lived experience that eludes the prose of structured narratives. Moreover, poetry is arguably the most prominent literary form of Iranian culture that ramifies into almost every aspect of social life (Afary, 2009). Our use of poetry therefore enabled us to methodologically tap into our participants' poetic sensibility, to express emotional and bodily experiences that were inexpressible in prose.

The reflexive aspect of life history interviews (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis, 2014; Denzin, 2014) and poetry (Eshun and Madge, 2012; Apol, 2020) has reinforced the articulation of the self-representational agency of our queer participants, while the semi-structured interviews involving open questions have facilitated our theoretically informed interpretive analysis. Although the use of qualitative methodologies in research on queer Iranians is relatively common (for example, Abdi and Van Gilder, 2016; Peyghambarzadeh, 2024), the incorporation of poetry into our mixed qualitative methodology is the first of the kind in the study of the lives of queer Iranians at home and in exile. This has generated a poetry collection (Shidmehr, 2024) which should ideally be read in conjunction with this book.

The reflexive dynamic of our methodological and interpretive approaches was animated by the diversity of the researchers' cultural backgrounds and their gender/sexual subject positions, as well as by our consistent commitment to adhering to the hermeneutic principle of the 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 1989). These circumstances have elective affinity with the polyphonic and multi-disciplinary character of our research design. We extended this strategic reflexivity to our method of analysis through an inductive approach sensitized to the contingencies of our research participants' lives and embracive of the ambivalences and uncertainties transpired during interviews (Zisakou, 2024). This has contributed to a tighter alignment between our analysis and our polyvocal research design. This configuration has significantly advanced our theoretical goal of transcending the methodological dualism in existing accounts of queer migration. Such configuration highlights the real-life conditions of queer (migrant) Iranians, which are not defined by cultural or discursive dichotomies of 'the West versus the East' or 'host country versus home country'. Instead, those conditions have revealed a strategic and selective amalgamation of the 'native' and the 'foreign' that creates a

space and practice of normative ambiguity, cultural and discursive hybridity, and fluidity of identity.

## 4. Empirical contributions

The core themes of the ambiguity, hybridity, and fluidity of queer migrant identity prominently emerged from, and naturally framed, our empirical enquiry guided by our composite methodology and theoretical framework of UCD. Our first empirical chapter (Chapter 5) documented how queer Iranians in exile navigate their sexual and gender identities and self-expression through and against their linguistic resources. It highlighted the shifting and evolving nature of understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression among queer Iranians, as they acquire new vocabulary and cultural insights during migration. A prominent thread that ran through our participants' self-narratives was the record of their instinctive discomfort with fixed labels of identity and sexuality. Many participants purposefully rejected the notion of 'norms' of sexual and gender identity as such. There was also a reconstructive moment to this conscious refusal to be categorized in ways that did not resonate with their lived experiences. Our participants proactively crafted a new language of dynamic self-expression that combined and transmuted aspects of Western cultural and scientific discourses on SOGIESC, and Iranian cultural and literary nomenclature. In this manner, our participants' discursive self-professing embodies a form of self-liberatory queer resistance in, through, and against language. The specifically transnational aspect of this linguistic resistance and innovation was partly embodied in the way in which our participants used and continue to use online platforms and social media to foster new forms of community and identity often linked with transnational networks of queer activists. Our research has revealed how migration and exile create critical space for reflexivity, and offer original materials and discursive resources for personal self-discovery and public self-representation through new, hybrid, and polysemic vocabulary. This critical reflexivity and dynamic self-representation reflect the hybridity, fluidity, and ambiguity of queer subjectivities that our research project communicates and is crafted by.

Our empirical research has further highlighted the dynamic and non-fixed nature of queer gender and sexuality through demonstrating the formative significance of socio-cultural contexts and environmental conditions in shaping queer migrants' evolving sense of identity at home and in exile. These contexts and conditions include familial, religious, and educational settings and social interactions at university, online, and within queer communities. Shaped by an intersectional approach and ethos (Luibhéid, 2008; Luibhéid and Chávez, 2020), our analysis in Chapter 6 has highlighted how intersecting circumstances contribute to queer Iranians' individual identity formation.

Moreover, our field work has shown the key role of oppressive and violent circumstances, such as social and governmental discrimination and sexual violence at home, within the community, and during compulsory military service, in many of our participants' decision to migrate. Our participants' narratives of their formative experiences when living in Iran have highlighted the way in which the impact of these violent circumstances and experiences is compounded by the Islamic Republic of Iran's punitive legal environment, which emboldens violence against queer Iranians, leading many of them to seek a safer and freer place through migration. These narratives also show how difficult and often traumatic the actual process of migrating out of Iran is. While some participants received support from family members, many others received no help or faced conditional assistance, adding to the emotional toll of leaving loved ones behind. While foregrounding the complex interplay of social, legal, and familial dynamics shaping the migration experiences of queer Iranians, our empirical research has shown that the decision to emigrate is ultimately a self-protective logical response to a violently queerphobic environment and a natural desire for a life free(er) from fear and stigma.

The book has also delineated the legal aspects of queer life in Iran and following migration, in particular, the often-challenging course and outcome of queer Iranian migrants' interaction with international and domestic legal frameworks and institutions. In Iran, queer individuals face severe challenges stemming from oppressive laws, societal expectations, and religious dogma. Some choose to stay in Iran due to cultural, familiar, and community ties, while others flee due to the constant violence and harassment. Our analysis in Chapter 7 has shown that once in exile, queer Iranians face new challenges in their migratory processes in countries like Turkey, the UK, and Canada. When applying for international protection, the asylum process is often lengthy and traumatic, characterized by bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of understanding from officials about their plight and social and cultural aspects of the politics of gender in Iran. Prominent themes in our participants' stories are feelings of isolation and despair in Turkey, aggravated by the privatization of the refugee system in Canada, which leaves vulnerable individuals without assistance.

The complexity and protracted nature of the legal aspects of claiming international protection causes much frustration and anxiety among queer Iranians in exile, who are also negatively affected by inadequate legal representation and insensitive questioning during interviews. The emotional toll of navigating multiple legal systems is substantial, as many recount trauma from reliving their past experiences. Our participants highlight the importance of personal connections and social networks in the integration process. We therefore call for systemic changes to better support queer refugees and a more compassionate and informed approach to asylum claims

that recognizes the ongoing struggles faced by queer Iranians who are seeking safety, dignity, and freedom.

Finally, this book makes a normative contribution to the literature on queer migration by advancing queer ethics and politics in two main ways: through theoretical recovery and articulation of queer Iranians' proactive agency in defining and expressing their identity and sexuality beyond Eurocentrism's rigid and fixed categories, including through a critical appropriation of radical Western queer discourses; and through analytically and empirically foregrounding queer Iranians' reflexive accounts of queerphobia in Iran, their inner journey of self-recognition, their outward journey of self-representation and migration, and reflexive praxis of making home and community in exile. The poetry element of our research, which has been selectively deployed throughout this book, also has a normative quality, in that it allows an emotional queer voice unmediated and unburdened by scientific categories and assumptions.

## 5. Wider implications

Beyond its contributions to the critical study of queer sexual and gender identities and migration experiences in a predominantly Muslim country such as Iran and its diaspora, this book makes two broader contributions. First, it opens a new avenue for enhancing the explanatory and normative power of UCD through a critical dialogue with queer studies and gender theory. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it has significant implications for advancing decolonization agendas within the social sciences.

Given the subject matter of our research, the application of UCD in this book has primarily focused on its critical, enhancive implications for postcolonial and performative accounts of queer identity and sexuality. Consequently, we have not explored how postcolonial and performative gender theories might contribute to the analytical and normative strengthening of UCD. One significant area for such contributions could be the role of gender and agency within UCD. There is currently no systematic engagement with gender from a UCD perspective. And a persistent theme in existing critiques of UCD is that it privileges structure over agency (Teschke, 2014; Rioux, 2015; Matin, 2022b). This critique is reinforced by the fact that most applications of UCD have concentrated on large-scale, socio-historical transformations, such as social revolutions, (nation-) state formation, and divergent patterns of capitalist development (but see Matin, 2013a). As this book and the wider literature have shown, queer constructions of identity have a profound agential dimension, one which is strongly delineated in performative approaches to gender and sexuality. Yet, as we have shown, these performative approaches are vulnerable to the same criticism levelled against UCD, namely, that they overstate agency relative

to structural dynamics, international relations in particular. It can therefore be seen how a critical dialogue between UCD and performative theories of gender can be mutually beneficial for both. This book has shown only one axis of this mutuality. Further research within the UCD research programme is needed to more systematically explore the intellectual enhancement that UCD can attain through a more fundamental engagement with gender and queer theories.

Decolonizing social sciences, a prominent and expanding agenda in academia, is the second area of critical scholarship for which this book has implications. The decolonizing agenda has its intellectual roots and resources in postcolonial theory. But as this book has shown, postcolonial theory suffers from the consequences of its unqualified rejection of the category of the 'universal' and hence general theory. The analytical pitfalls of this rejection are, as we have argued, especially embodied in postcolonialism's 'methodological dualism', 'orientalism-in-reverse', and the elision of non-Western colonialisms. We have shown how UCD can overcome these problems. But does UCD have the intellectual qualities required for a decolonial theory? Can it function as a decolonial epistemology?

This book suggests an affirmative answer. Indeed, it can be argued that UCD involves all three 'manoeuvres' which, according to Robbie Shilliam (Shilliam, 2021), decolonizing knowledge involves: recontextualization (of thinkers), reconceptualization (of thought-systems), and reimagination (of canons and voices) (Matin, 2022b). Recontextualization as a decolonial manoeuvre involves situating thinkers within their imperial and colonial contexts, showing how they influence knowledge production (Shilliam 2021, p 15). UCD's fundamental critique of internalism, grounded in its premise of 'unevenness' as a plural social ontology, enables precisely the kind of recontextualization that Shilliam calls for and has in fact demonstrated (Shilliam, 2009). Moreover, UCD's non-dualistic conception of interactivity enables a form of recontextualization that is conceptually and normatively sensitive to all forms of socio-political hierarchies, including those within non-Western societies, a quality that is arguably lacking in, or marginal to, many strands of postcolonialism. In this book, we have shown how Iran's modernist and nationalist intellectuals' attempt to overcome the country's semi-colonial status involved a selective and uncritical adoption of modern European countries' heteronormativity as a sign of 'progress' and the erasure of preexisting culture of homosociality as a sign of 'backwardness'. This demonstration was conceptually enabled by UCD's anti-internalist, inter-societal conception of social change.

Shilliam's second decolonial manoeuvre of 'reconceptualization' centrally 'involves tracking the connecting tissue that arranges concepts and categories in a logical fashion', so that their imperial and colonial dynamics are delineated (Shilliam, 2021, p 16). The 'connecting tissue' of 'Eurocentric'

epistemologies, as we have shown, consists of an internalism that presents extrapolations of (White/Western) particulars as universals. UCD's ontological premise of societal multiplicity already involves a fundamental 'reconceptualization' of modern Western thought. And it has the added quality that, unlike postcolonialism, it can also subject non-Western thought to the same reconceptualizing manoeuvre that decolonial thought tends to limit to Western epistemologies.

Our deployment of UCD in this book provides an example of this normatively expanded form of 'reconceptualization', as described by Shilliam. We have shown how contemporary discourses of heterosexuality and homophobic legislation in Iran, which are purportedly culturally native and authentic, are the historical result of (geo)political, cultural, and ideological interaction between Iran's modernizing political and intellectual elites with colonial Europe.

The final decolonial strategy according to Shillliam is 'reimagination', that is, '[imagining], at least in principle, that those who dwell in [disciplinary cannons'] marginalized positions have traditions of thought that are generally edifying' (Shilliam, 2021, p 17). UCD has no inhibition to internalize this normative injunction. Indeed, this quality is built into UCD's fundamental emphasis on the creative potential of interactive difference as a key vector of world development. But, once again, UCD has arguably a comparative advantage over postcolonialism thanks to the 'combination' moment of its epistemic dynamic. Specifically, the combination of coexisting instances of collective difference – whether organized hierarchically or horizontally – means that the distinction between them is an analytical device rather than an essentializing ontological claim. This is at the heart of UCD's anti-essentialist ethos, an ethos which has been, perhaps unwittingly, suspended or diluted in some of the canonical works of decolonial and postcolonial thought (Said, 1978, 1994; Choi, 2003). This ethos partly transpires in our book's historical and empirical demonstration of the historical and contemporary significance of the normative homosociality pervading classical Persian literature and poetry. This significance, our book shows, has been politically eclipsed following the discursive and cultural hegemony of the modern, heteronormative Europe. The anti-Western ideological thrust of the 1979 Iranian revolution mis-construed this heteronormativity as a pillar of Iran's cultural authenticity to be protected from the implications of a considerable and growing shift in the liberal West's idea and practice of queerness.

This book's primary aim has been the development of a non-Eurocentric account of the formation of queer identities in Iran, as well as the negotiation of queer sexual and gender identity following migration and in exile. It has sought to foreground – theoretically, methodologically, and analytically – both the agency, voice, and resilience of queer Iranians and the structural (social, political, cultural, and legal) constraints and opportunities under and

through which they struggle for freedom, rights, and dignity. We hope this book's reflexive decolonial framework contributes to decolonizing agendas in the wider social sciences and to fostering further interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research programmes through critical dialogues between and among critical International Relations, Law, Migration Studies, and Queer Studies.

# Notes

## Preface

1 https://iranqueerefugee.net/#advisory-board.
2 https://iranqueerefugee.net/events/.

## Chapter 1

1 In this chapter and the rest of the book we use the terms 'West' and 'Europe' interchangeably and follow Chakrabarty (Chakrabarty, 2007, pp 3–4) in using these terms not as static geographical categories but as historical spaces where key categories and concepts for thinking about 'political modernity', that is, 'the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise', have their deep genealogical and theological roots. In this sense, these terms also include European overseas settlements such as the USA and Australia. Furthermore, words like West/East and Global North/Global South are used without speech marks for ease of reading, but we wish to problematize and question their use and conceptualization in line with critical scholarship (Nasser-Eddin and Abu-Assab, 2020, p 194).
2 See discussion about 'Choice of terminology' later in this chapter.
3 The poetry collection has been published separately (Shidmehr, 2024), while informing the work of this book.
4 Available on YouTube: https://youtu.be/cULwbhVdusY?si=-Uce-LzfjIgPL1gG.
5 *Stories of Queer Iranians*, available on Spotify: https://open.spotify.com/show/1Ptb0UyN7B23VaR4z655Nb.
6 For an overview of the project's outputs, see https://iranqueerefugee.net/outputs/.
7 The project 'LGBTQ migration, diaspora and asylum in Europe' (2017–2020), led by Richard Mole (UCL) and the project 'Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Claims of Asylum: A European Human Rights Challenge' (2016–2020, www.sogica.org), led by Nuno Ferreira (University of Sussex).

## Chapter 2

1 Following Sankaran Krishna (2022), we consider decolonial theory a part of the wider field of postcolonial theory. Thus, henceforth our use of 'postcolonialism' encompasses both decolonial theory and postcolonial theory (see Bhambra, 2014).
2 We believe Massad's argument is applicable to non-Arab, majority Muslim countries in the Middle East, including Iran and Turkey.
3 We use the notion of 'overdetermination' in its Althusserian sense of the way in which a 'complex contradiction' is 'determining … and determined by the various *levels* and instances of the social formation it animates' (Althusser, 1969, emphasis in original). These 'levels' include intersocietal relations which remain theoretically undigested in classical Marxism (Rosenberg, 2006).

[4] By 'society' we refer to 'all historical forms of social coherence in mutually recognised integrities' (Matin, 2013b, p 3).

[5] 'Uneven and combined development' is different from 'uneven development'. The latter is derived from the internal dynamics of capitalism and therefore excludes the causal significance of societal multiplicity (unevenness) and sociological hybridity (combination), which are central to the theory of uneven and combined development.

[6] For an extensive bibliography, visit www.unevenandcombined.com.

[7] Abdullah Öcalan (2007) has coined the term 'democratic modernity' as an egalitarian and non-hierarchical anti-thesis of 'capitalist modernity' (see also Gerber and Brincat, 2021).

[8] The term 'backwardness' has had extensive use in Iran's post-revolutionary intellectual and political discourses (Matin-Asgari, 2004).

[9] For the Greek pedigree of this circumstance and the cultural, legal and normative issues this generated, see, inter alia, Cantarella (1992) and Davidson (2007).

[10] Translation rendered by Google Translate.

## Chapter 3

[1] There are numerous words in Persian literature to describe a prepubescent beardless boy as the passive sexual partner for an older man. These include *shahed*, *manzur*, *no-khatt*, *sadeh*, and *sadhe-zanakh* (Floor, 2008, p 294). Importantly, *amrad* as a subject problematizes the dualism of modern European conceptions of gender and sexuality, as it represents a particular 'mode of maleness … that were distinct from manhood, but not in reference to womanhood' (Najmabadi, 2006, p 14).

[2] The records of the prophet Mohamad's deeds and words.

[3] Al-Tabrizi, Book 1, Hadith 82.

[4] Note 2 to Article 234 defines *ihsan* 'as a status that a man is married to a permanent and pubescent wife and while he has been sane and pubescent has had a vaginal intercourse with the same wife while she was pubescent, and he can have an intercourse with her in the same way [vaginal] whenever he so wishes' (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2014).

## Chapter 4

[1] https://iranqueerefugee.net/#advisory-board.

[2] This is the latest such figure available, as this statistic has been discontinued after June 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

[3] The materials included two short videos shared across NQIfFM's social media platforms: Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/iranqueerefugee), Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/Iranqueerefugee-108642575090761), YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/@iranqueerefugee6193) and X (https://twitter.com/Iranqueeref).

[4] Farhan's story was released on the social media channels of the project, for example, here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xFDTWXtdIE. Some social media platforms used the video for fundraising, like Daadkhast: https://www.instagram.com/officialdaadkhast/p/Cme4Gddu-Dq/?img_index=1. Farhan's story of rescuing from Turkey has been covered by Iran International TV: https://youtu.be/ZizoZvHKqa0.

[5] The video was released on many platforms, including Simorgh's Instagram account, which is the main social media of some queer Iranians organizing Pride events for Iranians in Toronto: https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8YgjMqO_Oi/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

[6] As mentioned in this book's acknowledgments, the pertinent activists were: Zeynab Peyghambarzadeh, Elham Malaki, Amira Zolghadri, Arghavan Shamsara, and Saghi Ghahraman.

[7] Both in relation to this table and all other tables and figures in this book, percentages may not add up to 100 per cent owing to rounding up or down of individual figures.
[8] https://iranqueerefugee.net/.
[9] Gadamer explains, in the context of legal discourse in Germany, that prejudice means what he calls 'provisional verdict before the final verdict' (Gadamer, 1989). It is not a negative word, and nobody can avoid it. We can consider it as pre-understanding caused by the positionality of the research-subject.

## Chapter 6

[1] See Choi (2022) for discussion of the relationship between global migration and economic capital.
[2] This connects to the earlier point about marriage: 'Marriage constitutes a rite of passage to adulthood; it is an expectation that everyone must fulfil to be considered fully grown. Unmarried persons are incomplete, unfinished stories, not in any simple utilitarian sense (for instance, in order to have a child or not to grow old alone). Without a child, a married person has a problem to solve, but without marriage one has failed to achieve adulthood' (Najmabadi, 2014, p 269).
[3] Mehran Rezaei-Toroghi will offer a more in-depth analysis of our findings on 'Life' in a future, discrete piece of research. See https://iranqueerefugee.net/outputs/ for more details in due course.
[4] However, there are inconsistent accounts about the basis on which trans people may now be exempted from military service. According to an Outright report, as of 2007, 'trans individuals would, from now on, be exempted under diabetes classification or other endocrine-related disorders' (OutRight Action International, 2016, p 31). A later Amnesty International publication states that the 'exemption clause for gay, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals is listed under section 5 (7) of the military regulations, under the category of "mental illnesses"' (Amnesty International, 2021).
[5] The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory was developed in the 1940s to assess mental health problems (Butcher, 2010).

## Chapter 7

[1] BVerwGE, 15 March 1988, C 278.86 (see also Thielen, 2006).
[2] Administrative Court, Case Number 16937/2019, 19 February 2020, https://caselaw.euaa.europa.eu/pages/viewcaselaw.aspx?CaseLawID=1489.
[3] Re GJ Refugee Appeal No. 1312/93, 30 August 1995 (NZ Refugee Status Appeals Authority), https://www.refworld.org/cases,NZL_RSAA,3ae6b6938.html.
[4] UN Committee Against Torture in *K.S.Y. v The Netherlands*, Communication No. 190/2001, 15 May 2003, CAT/C/30/D/190/2001.
[5] This is noticeable in the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (for example, *Shahram Sobhani v Sweden*, Application no. 32999/96, 10 July 1998; *F. v United Kingdom*, Application no. 17341/03, 22 June 2004; *I.I.N. v the Netherlands*, Application no. 2035/04, 9 December 2004; *O.M. v Hungary*, Application no. 9912/15, 5 July 2016; *M.I. v Switzerland*, Application no. 56390/21, 12 November 2024), as well as discussed in scholarly work (for example, Camminga, 2024).
[6] *HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2010] UKSC 31 (for a discussion of the significance and shortcomings of this decision, see Verkaik, 2009; Lewis, 2010, 2013, pp 181–182; Dustin, 2018; Raj, 2020).
[7] See Section 3 of this chapter.
[8] See Section 5 of this chapter.

[9] See https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/long-term-solutions/resettlement.

[10] Applications to this programme were suspended as of 29 November 2024 (Refugees and Citizenship Canada Immigration, 2024).

[11] See, for example, the figures available in the Marjan Foundation website: https://www.marjanfoundation.org/Home/SponsorshipCost?MemberFamily=1.

[12] IRQO, also known as the Persian Gay and Lesbian Organization.

[13] For an overview of the asylum legal process in Turkey, see the Law on Foreigners and International Protection ('Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanunu').

[14] This appeal can be based on Article 17 of the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, on the rights to personal inviolability, corporeal and spiritual existence of the individual: official translation published by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Department of Laws and Resolutions, May 2019, https://www.anayasa.gov.tr/media/7258/anayasa_eng.pdf.

[15] GBP 1,630 as of 10 April 2024: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fees-for-citizenship-applications/fees-for-citizenship-applications-and-the-right-of-abode-from-6-april-2018#fees-table.

[16] See https://www.icmc.net/what-we-do/resettlement-and-complementary-pathways/.

[17] Rainbow Refugee Society (Canada), https://www.rainbowrefugee.com/.

[18] Rainbow Railroad (Canada), https://www.rainbowrailroad.ca/.

[19] Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, Government Bill, originated in the House of Commons, Session 2024–2025, https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3929/publications.

# Bibliography


Abdi, S. and Van Gilder, B. (2016) 'Cultural (in)visibility and identity dissonance: Queer Iranian-American women and their negotiation of existence', *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 9(1), pp 69–86. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2016.1120850.

Abrahamian, E. (1979) 'The causes of the constitutional revolution in Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 10(3), pp 381–414. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800000179.

Adams, T.E., Holman Jones, S., and Ellis, C. (2014) *Autoethnography*. Oxford University Press.

Afary, J. (1996) *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution: 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy and the Origins of Feminism*. Columbia University Press.

Afary, J. (2009) *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*. Illustrated edition. Cambridge University Press.

Afary, J. and Anderson, K.B. (2005) *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*. Annotated edition. University of Chicago Press.

Afary, J. and Anderson, K.B. (2023) 'Woman, life, freedom: The origins of the uprising in Iran', *Dissent*, 70(1), pp 82–98. Available at: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/895927.

Aghabikloo, A., Bahrami, M., Saberi, S.M., and Emamhadi, M.A. (2012) 'Gender identity disorders in Iran: Request for sex reassignment surgery', *International Journal of Medical Toxicology and Forensic Medicine*, 2(4), pp 128–134. Available at: https://journals.sbmu.ac.ir/ijmtfm/article/view/IJMTFM-4289.

Ahmad, A. (2000) *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. Repr. Verso.

Ahmed, S. (2011) 'Problematic proximities: Or why critiques of gay imperialism matter', *Feminist Legal Studies*, 19(2), pp 119–132. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-011-9180-7.

Ahmed, S. (2013) *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. Taylor and Francis.

Akbari, A. (2021) 'The threat of automating control: Surveillance of women's clothing in Iran', in A. Završnik and V. Badalič (eds) *Automating Crime Prevention, Surveillance, and Military Operations*. Springer International Publishing, pp 183–199.

Akoka, K. (2020) *L'asile et l'exil: Une histoire de la distinction réfugiés/migrants*. La Découverte.

Al- Tusi, M. ibn al-Ḥasan (1980) *The Last Word on Basic Islamic Jurisprudence and Edicts*. Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī.

Al-'Azm, S.J. (1980) 'Orientalism and orientalism in reverse'. Available at: https://libcom.org/article/orientalism-and-orientalism-reverse-sadik-jalal-al-azm.

Al-e Ahmad, J. (1997) *Gharbzadegi [Weststruckness]*. Translated by J. Green and A. Alizadeh. Mazda Publishers.

Aleinikoff, T.A. and Zamore, L. (2019) *The Arc of Protection: Reforming the International Refugee Regime*. Stanford University Press.

Alessi, E.J., Alexander, L., Lee, Y.G., Fletcher, C., Aziz, A., and Zadeh, L. (2024) 'How do legal aid cuts in England and Wales impact LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum? Perspectives from providers and directly affected people', *Sexuality Research and Social* Policy, 22(2), pp 787–802. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-024-01011-5.

Ali, K. (2006) *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence*. Oneworld Publications.

Alipour, M. (2017) 'Essentialism and Islamic theology of homosexuality: A critical reflection on an essentialist epistemology toward same-sex desires and acts in Islam', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(14), pp 1930–1942. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1289001.

Almasy, S. and Simon, D. (2017) 'A timeline of President Trump's travel bans', *CNN*, 30 March. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/10/us/trump-travel-ban-timeline/index.html.

Almond, I. (2007) *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*. I.B. Tauris.

Althusser, L. (1969) *For Marx*. Translated by B. Brewster. Penguin.

Althusser, L. (2001) *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Monthly Review Press.

Amin, S. (1977) *Imperialism and Unequal Development*. Harvester Press.

Ammaturo, F.R. (2017) *European Sexual Citizenship: Human Rights, Bodies and Identities*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Amnesty International (2007) 'Iran: Execution of child offender Makwan Moloudazdeh is a mockery of justice', Amnesty International. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2007/12/iran-execution-child-offender-makwan-moloudazdeh-mockery-justice-2007120/.

Amnesty International (2019) 'Turkey: Sent to a war zone: Turkey's illegal deportations of Syrian refugees', Amnesty International. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/1102/2019/en/.

Amnesty International (2021) 'Iran: Murder of 20-year-old gay man highlights urgent need to protect LGBTI rights', Amnesty International. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/4129/2021/en/.

Amnesty International (2022a) 'Iran: Ill-treated Iranian LGBTI defender at risk: Zahra Sedighi-Hamadani', Amnesty International. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/5180/2022/en/.

Amnesty International (2022b) 'Iran/Turkey: Fleeing Afghans unlawfully returned after coming under fire at borders', *Amnesty International*. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/08/iran-turkey-fleeing-afghans-unlawfully-returned-after-coming-under-fire-at-borders/.

Andreassen, R. (2021) 'Social media surveillance, LGBTQ refugees and asylum: How migration authorities use social media profiles to determine refugees as "genuine" or "fraudulent"', *First Monday*, 26(1). Available at: https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i1.10653.

Anievas, A. and Matin, K. (2016) *Historical Sociology and World History: Uneven and Combined Development Over the Longue Durée*. Rowman & Littlefield International.

Anievas, A. and Nişancıoğlu, K. (2015) *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*. Pluto Press.

ANSA (2018) 'UNHCR ends asylum seeker registration in Turkey', *Info Migrants*, 17 September. Available at: https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/12025/unhcr-ends-asylum-seeker-registration-in-turkey.

Anzaldúa, G. (2009) *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. Duke University Press.

AP News (2022) 'Rights group: Iran executes 2 gay men over sodomy charges', *AP News*. Available at: https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-iran-crime-dubai-united-arab-emirates-e3d7108441665c40982329f26ff07fc9.

Apol, L. (2020) *Poetry, Poetic Inquiry and Rwanda*. Springer Nature.

Aras, N.E.G. and Mencütek, Z.S. (2020) 'Refugee protection – Turkey report', *Global Migration: Consequences and Responses*. Available at: https://respondmigration.com/wp-blog/refugee-protection-regimes-turkey-country-report.

Ardalan, P. (2021) 'Iranian women in struggle: The nightmare of the Islamic regime', *Multitudes*, 83(2), pp 103–109. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3917/mult.083.0103.

Arghavan, M. (2017) *Postcolonial Justice: A Study of the Anti-Imperialist Rhetoric of Middle Eastern Intellectuals in Diaspora*. Edited by A. Bartels, L. Eckstein, N. Waller, and D. Wiemann. Brill Rodopi.

Ashaolu, O.O. (2023) 'African woman and ecology: Unpacking the complexities of eurocentrism and othering in Le Clezio's Onitsha', *Akofena*, 2(9). Available at: https://doi.org/10.48734/akofena.n009v3.09.2023.

Assa, S. (2023) 'Unveiling a feminist strike: The case of "woman, life, freedom" in Iran', *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, 44(2), pp 53–71. Available at: https://doi.org/10.7202/1109372ar.

Atabaki, T. and Zürcher, E.J. (2016) *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah*. I.B. Tauris.

Atkinson, C. (2020) 'They don't really talk about it "cos they don't think it's right": Heteronormativity and institutional silence in UK primary education', *Gender and Education*, 33(4), pp 451–467. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2020.1773410.

Aytaçoğlu, Ö. (2023) 'A migration journey between vulnerability and agency: The case of queer exiles in Istanbul', in J. Freedman, A. Latouche, A. Miranda, N. Sahraoui, G.S. de Andrade, and E. Tyszler (eds) *The Gender of Borders*. Routledge, pp 119–135.

Azadi, B. and Saeidzadeh, Z. (2022) 'Trans subjectivities in Iran: Epistemic misrecognition', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 32(7), pp 671–682. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2068517.

Baban, F., Ilcan, S., and Rygiel, K. (2021) *The Precarious Lives of Syrians: Migration, Citizenship, and Temporary Protection in Turkey*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Babayan, K. and Najmabadi, A. (eds) (2008) *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*. Harvard University Press.

Badran, M. (2009) *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. Oneworld.

Baer, B.J. and Kaindl, K. (eds) (2017) *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer: Theory, Practice, Activism*. 1st edition. Routledge.

Bagri, N.T. (2017) 'In Iran, there's only one way to survive as a transgender person', *Quartz*, 19 April. Available at: https://qz.com/889548/everyone-treated-me-like-a-saint-in-iran-theres-only-one-way-to-survive-as-a-transgender-person.

Bahreini, R. (2008) 'From perversion to pathology: Discourses and practices of gender policing in the Islamic republic of Iran', *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 5(1), pp 1–49. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2202/1554-4419.1152.

Bahri, M.T. (2023) 'Understanding Iranian refugee discourse in Turkey on Twitter by using social network analysis', *Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava*, 23(1), pp 7–33. Available at: https://doi.org/10.31297/hkju.23.1.5.

Ballin, S. (2023) 'Four challenges, three identities and a double movement in asylum law: Queering the "particular social group" after Mx M', *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 49(1), pp 141–157. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13200968.2023.2187527.

Balslev, S. (2019) *Iranian Masculinities: Gender and Sexuality in Late Qajar and Early Pahlavi Iran*. Cambridge University Press.

Barker, C. (2006) 'Extending Combined and Uneven Development', in B. Dunn and H.K. Radice (eds) *100 Years of Permanent Revolution: Results and Prospects*. Pluto Press, pp 72–87.

Barrett, R. (2017) *From Drag Queens to Leathermen: Language, Gender, and Gay Male Subcultures*. Oxford University Press.

Beckett, S. (2010) *Waiting for Godot*. Faber and Faber.

Berg, B.L. (2001) *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Allyn and Bacon.

Bhabha, H.K. (2012) *The Location of Culture*. 2nd edition. Taylor and Francis.

Bhambra, G.K. (2007) *Rethinking Modernity*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Bhambra, G.K. (2014) 'Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues', *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(2), pp 115–121. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.966414.

Bloch, E. (1977) 'Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics', *New German Critique*. Translated by M. Ritter. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/487802.

Boellstorff, T. (2005) 'Between religion and desire: Being Muslim and *Gay* in Indonesia', *American Anthropologist*, 107(4), pp 575–585. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2005.107.4.575.

Bolt, D. (2017) 'An inspection of the Home Office's production and use of Country of Origin Information (April–August 2017)', Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/677556/An_inspection_of_the_production_and_use_of_Country_of_Origin_Information.pdf.

Bolt, D. (2020) 'An inspection of the Home Office's use of language services in the asylum process: May–November 2019', Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-the-home-offices-use-of-language-services-in-the-asylum-process.

Bracegirdle, C. (2011) 'Writing poetry: Recovery and growth following trauma', *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 24(2), pp 79–91. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2011.573285.

Briant, P. (2002) *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*. Translated by P.T. Daniels. Eisenbrauns.

Broyles, L.M., Rodriguez, K.L., Price, P.A., Bayliss, N.K., and Sevick, M.A. (2011) 'Overcoming barriers to the recruitment of nurses as participants in health care research', *Qualitative Health Research*, 21(12), pp 1705–1718. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732311417727.

Bucar, E.M. and Shirazi, F. (2012) 'The "invention" of lesbian acts in Iran: Interpretative moves, hidden assumptions, and emerging categories of sexuality', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 16(4), pp 416–434. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2012.681263.

Butcher, J.N. (2010) 'Minnesota multiphasic personality inventory', in I.B. Weiner and W.E. Craighead (eds) *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology*. 1st edition. Wiley, pp 1–3. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479216.corpsy0573.

Butler, J. (2006) *Gender Trouble: feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

Butler-Kisber, L. (2012) 'Poetic inquiry', in S. Thomas, A.L. Cole, and S. Stewart (eds) *The Art of Poetic Inquiry*. Backalong Books.

Camminga, B. (2024) 'Withholding the letter: Transgender asylum seekers, legal gender recognition, and the UNHCR mandate', *Journal of Refugee Studies*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae058.

Cantarella, E. (1992) *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*. Yale University Press.

Carrillo, H. and Fontdevila, J. (2014) 'Border crossings and shifting sexualities among Mexican gay immigrant men: Beyond monolithic conceptions', *Sexualities*, 17(8), pp 919–938. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714552248.

Carson, A. (2016) '"I do not believe in art as therapy"', *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/30/anne-carson-do-not-believe-art-therapy-interview-float.

Cass, V.C. (1979) 'Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4(3), pp 219–235. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v04n03_01.

Chakrabarty, D. (2007) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press.

Chatterjee, J. (2012) '"Whose imagined community?"', in G. Balakrishnan (ed) *Mapping the Nation*. Verso, pp 182–191.

Chatterjee, P. (1986) *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* Zed Books for the United Nations University.

Cheong, N., Johns, A. and Byron, P. (2023) 'Queering the "resourcing" of LGBTQ+ young people in the Asia Pacific', *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(12), pp 2439–2456. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2249970.

Chimni, B.S. (2001) 'Reforming the international refugee regime: A dialogic model', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 14(2), pp 151–168. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/14.2.151.

Choi, J.-B. (2003) 'Mapping Japanese imperialism onto postcolonial criticism', *Social Identities*, 9(3), pp 325–339. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1350463032000129957.

Choi, S.Y. (2022) 'Global multiple migration: Class-based mobility capital of elite Chinese gay men', *Sociology*, 56(5), pp 946–966. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385211073237.

Cohen, R.A. (ed) (2015) *Identities in Crisis in Iran: Politics, Culture, and Religion*. Lexington Books.

Cranwell, G. (2024) 'A primer on trauma-informed practice in refugee law', *Bond Law Review*, 36(1), pp 37–53. Available at: https://doi.org/10.53300/001c.123295.

Dabashi, H. (2006) *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. Transaction Publishers.

Dalacoura, K. (2014) 'Homosexuality as cultural battleground in the Middle East: Culture and postcolonial international theory', *Third World Quarterly*, 35(7), pp 1290–1306. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.926119.

Danisi, C., Dustin, M., Ferreira, N., and Held, N. (2021) *Queering Asylum in Europe: Legal and Social Experiences of Seeking International Protection on grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*. Springer.

Darawsheh, W. (2014) 'Reflexivity in research: Promoting rigour, reliability and validity in qualitative research', *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, 21(12), pp 560–568. Available at: https://doi.org/10.12968/ijtr.2014.21.12.560.

D'Augell, A.R. (1994) 'Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development', in E.J. Trickett, D. Birman, and R.J. Watts (eds) *Human Diversity: Perspectives on People in Context*. Jossey-Bass, pp 312–333.

Davidson, J. (2007) *The Greeks and Geek Love: A Radical Reappraisal of Homosexuality in Ancient Greece*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Davidson, R.A. (2015) 'Integrating disciplinary contributions to achieve community resilience to natural disasters', *Civil Engineering and Environmental Systems*, 32(1–2), pp 55–67. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10286608.2015.1011627.

De Beauvoir, S. (2011 [1949]) *The Second Sex*. First Vintage Books ed. Translated by C. Capisto-Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier. Vintage Books.

Dehghan, S.K. (2013) 'Iranian human rights official describes homosexuality as an illness', *The Guardian*, 14 March. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/mar/14/iran-official-homosexuality-illness.

Denzin, N.K. (2014) *Interpretive Autoethnography*. 2nd edition. SAGE (Qualitative research methods, 17).

Di Feliciantonio, C., Gadelha, K.B. and DasGupta, D. (2017) '"Queer(y)ing methodologies: doing fieldwork and becoming queer" – guest editorial', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(3), pp 403–412. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2017.1314950.

DiCicco-Bloom, B. and Crabtree, B.F. (2006) 'The qualitative research interview', *Medical Education*, 40(4), pp 314–321. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x.

Dustin, M. (2018) 'Many rivers to cross: The recognition of LGBTQI asylum in the UK', *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 30(1), pp 104–127. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eey018.

Dustin, M. (2022) 'Pathways to refugee protection for women: Victims of violence or genuine lesbians?', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 41(3), pp 393–419. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdac013.

Dustin, M. and Ferreira, N. (2021) 'Improving SOGI asylum adjudication: Putting persecution ahead of identity', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 40(3), pp 315–347. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdab005.

Ehrkamp, P., Loyd, J.M. and Secor, A.J. (2022) 'Trauma as displacement: Observations from refugee resettlement', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 112(3), pp 715–722. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2021.1956296.

El-Rouayheb, K. (2005) *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800*. University of Chicago Press.

El-Tayeb, F. (2012) '"Gays who cannot properly be gay": Queer Muslims in the neoliberal European city', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 19(1), pp 79–95. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506811426388.

Eng, D.L., Halberstam, J., and Muñoz, J.E. (eds) (2005) *What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?* Duke University Press.

Erdal, M.B. and Oeppen, C. (2018) 'Forced to leave? The discursive and analytical significance of describing migration as forced and voluntary', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6), pp 981–998. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384149.

Ergin, A.D. and Kader, Y. (2021) *On the Difference that Turkey's Geographical Limitation to the 1951 Convention Makes in the Protection of Non-European Refugees*, *Refugee Law Initiative Blog*. Available at: https://rli.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2021/06/22/on-the-difference-that-turkeys-geographical-limitation-to-the-1951-convention-makes-in-the-protection-of-non-european-refugees/.

Eshun, G. and Madge, C. (2012) '"Now let me share this with you": Exploring Poetry as a Method for Postcolonial Geography Research', *Antipode*, 44(4), pp 1395–1428. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00968.x.

Espinosa, A., Hamptin, K., Nathwani, N., Powell, K., Sereneo, M., and Wackett, C. (2024) 'Extrajudicial border enforcement against LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers', *Journal of Refugee Studies*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae031.

EUAA (2023a) *COI LGBTIQ Research Guide*. EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum. Available at: https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/euaa-coi-lgbtiq-research-guide.

EUAA (2023b) 'Jurisprudence on LGBTIQ applicants in international protection – Fact sheet EUAA/IAS/2023/21'. EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum. Available at: https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2023-09/AR2023_factsheet21_case_law_LGBTIQ_applicants_EN_0.pdf.

EUAA (2024) *Practical Guide on Interpretation in the Asylum Procedure*. Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2024-02/2024-Practical-Guide-Interpretation-Asylum-Procedure-EN_0.pdf.

Fanon, F. (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth*. MacGibbon & Kee.

Faulkner, S.L. (2009) *Poetry as Method*. Routledge.

Fawcett, L. and Payne, A. (2023) 'Stuck on a hostile path? US policy towards Iran since the revolution', *Contemporary Politics*, 29(1), pp 1–21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2022.2029239.

Fee, M. (2022) 'Lives stalled: The costs of waiting for refugee resettlement', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(11), pp 2659–2677. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1876554.

Ferdowsi, A. (2008) 'The "emblem of the manifestation of the Iranian spirit": Hafiz and the rise of the national cult of Persian poetry', *Iranian Studies*, 41(5), pp 667–691. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860802518327.

Ferguson, N. (2011) *Civilization: The West and the Rest*. Allen Lane.

Ferreira, N. (2022) 'Utterly unbelievable: The discourse of "fake" SOGI asylum claims as a form of epistemic injustice', *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 34(3–4), pp 303–326. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eeac041.

Ferreira, N. and Venturi, D. (2018) 'Testing the untestable: The CJEU's decision in Case C-473/16, F v Bevándorlási és Állampolgársági Hivatal', *European Database of Asylum Law*, 28 June. Available at: https://www.asylumlawdatabase.eu/en/journal/testing-untestable-cjeu%E2%80%99s-decision-case-c-47316-f-v-bev%C3%A1ndorl%C3%A1si-%C3%A9s-%C3%A1llampolg%C3%A1rs%C3%A1gi-hivatal.

Fischer, M.M.J. (1982) 'Islam and the revolt of the petit bourgeoisie', *Daedalus*, 111(1), pp 101–125.

Floor, W. (2008) *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran*. Mage Publishers.

Foran, J. (1993) *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*. Routledge.

Fortier, A.-M. (2001) '"Coming home": Queer migrations and multiple evocations of home', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4(4), pp 405–424. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/136754940100400403.

Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. 1st American edition. Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (2003) *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*. Picador.

Foucault, M. (2009) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*. Edited by M. Senellart. Translated by G. Burchell. Palgrave Macmillan.

Frada, R. (2024) 'Refugee identities at the mercy of legal determination', *Saint Louis University Law Journal*, 68(2). Available at: https://scholarship.law.slu.edu/lj/vol68/iss2/8.

Frank, A.G. (1967) *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil*. Monthly Review Press.

Freedom House (2021) *Iran: Freedom on the Net 2021 Country Report*. Freedom House. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2021.

Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. Hamish Hamilton.

Gadamer, H.G. (1989) *Truth and Method*. Crossroad.

GAMAAN (2020) 'Secularization and religious diversity in Iran'. YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UiIUbXNWeU.

Gamson, J. (2000) 'Sexualities, queer theory, and qualitative research', in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. SAGE, pp 347–365.

Ganji, A. (2008) 'Hamjensgerai: Aghaliati Nahagh? Ya Faghid-i Hoghoogh' (Homosexuality: un-right minority? Or without right). Available at: https://radiozamaaneh.com/idea/2008/06/post_327.html.

García Rodríguez, D. (2023) 'Critiquing trends and identifying gaps in the literature on LGBTQ refugees and asylum-seekers', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 42(4), pp 518–541. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdad018.

Gartner, J.L. (2015) '(In)credibly queer: Sexuality-based asylum in the European Union', in A. Chase (ed) *Transatlantic Perspectives on Diplomacy and Diversity*. Humanity in Action Press, pp 39–66.

Garvey, J.X.K. (2011) 'Spaces of violence, desire, and queer (un) belonging: Dionne Brand's urban diasporas', *Textual Practice*, 25(4), pp 757–777. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2011.586779.

Gayatri, G. (2005) *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press.

Gerber, D. and Brincat, S. (2021) 'When Öcalan met Bookchin: The Kurdish Freedom Movement and the political theory of democratic confederalism', *Geopolitics*, 26(4), pp 973–997. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1508016.

Ghazal Aswad, N. (2023) 'The U.S. American left and reverse moral exceptionalism: When do villains become heroes?', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 109(4), pp 354–375. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2023.2250580.

Giametta, C. (2017) *The Sexual Politics of Asylum: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the UK Asylum System*. Routledge.

Giametta, C. (2020) 'New asylum protection categories and elusive filtering devices: The case of "Queer asylum" in France and the UK', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(1), pp 142–157. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1500172.

Gkliati, M., de Lange, T. and Mantu, S. (2023) 'Progress in migration and asylum law scholarship: International, intersectional, and interdisciplinary', *Law and Method*, 2023(September), pp 1–22. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5553/REM/.000077.

Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Routledge.

Goodman, S. and Speer, S.A. (2007) 'Category use in the construction of asylum seekers', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 4(2), pp 165–185. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/17405900701464832.

Government of Canada (2022) *CIMM – The Situation in Iran and Support for Iranian Refugees*. The Government of Canada. Available at: https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/committees/cimm-nov-29-2022/situation-iran-support-iranian-refugees.html.

Government of Canada (2024) 'How privately sponsoring a refugee works'. Available at: https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/sponsor-refugee/private-sponsorship-program.html.

Gramsci, A. (1986) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Lawrence and Wishart.

Greatrick, A. (2023) 'LGBTQ+ asylum and transformative accommodations between religion, faith and sexuality in the UK', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46(9), pp 1919–1939. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2072175.

Gritten, D. (2022) 'Iran sentences two LGBT activists to death', *BBC News*, 5 September. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62793573.

Guha, R. (ed) (1983) *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Oxford University Press.

Habib, S. (2007) *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East Histories and Representations*. Routledge.

Halperin, D.M. (2002) *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*. University of Chicago Press.

Hamlin, R. (2021) *Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move*. Stanford University Press.

Hantrais, L. (2008) *International Comparative Research*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Harlan, S.L., Brazel, A.J., Jenerette, G.D., Jones, N.A., Larsen, L., Prashad, L., and Stefanov, W.L. (2008) 'In the shade of affluence: The inequitable distribution of the urban heat island', *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy*, 15, pp 173–202. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/s0196-1152(07)15005-5.

Hashemi, K.C. (2018) 'Divergent identities in Iran and the appropriation of trans bodies', *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 4(Winter), pp 139–150. Available at: https://doi.org/10.36583/2018040203.

Hautefeuille, D. (2017) *Iranian and Queer: Online Identities in Constant Negotiation between Iran and the United States, Observed Through the Lens of Grindr*. Thesis. University of Southern California. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/36009516/Iranian_and_queer_online_identities_in_constant_negotiation_between_Iran_and_the_United_States_observed_through_the_lens_of_Grindr.

Heiskanen, J. (2019) 'Spectra of sovereignty: Nationalism and international relations', *International Political Sociology*, 13(3), pp 315–332. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olz007.

Helenelund, M. (2023) '"How would you define your sexuality?" Analyzing the questions asked in asylum interviews involving sexual minorities'. Åbo Akademi University. Available at: https://www.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/188509/helenelund_mia.pdf?sequence=3.

Herlihy, J., Cameron, H.E. and Turner, S. (2023) 'Psychological research evidence in refugee status determination', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 37(4), pp 938–953. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fead043.

Hernroth-Rothstein, A. (2018) 'The girls of revolution street, waving their veils', *National Review*. Available at: https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/03/the-girls-of-revolution-street-waving-their-veils/.

Hêvî LGBTI Association (2019) *Education Program on Fighting Racism in the Field of LGBTI*. Hêvî LGBTI Association.

Higgins, P.J. (1985) 'Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Legal, social, and ideological changes', *Signs*, 10(3), pp 477–494. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174262.

Hobson, J.M. (2020) *Multicultural Origins of the Global Economy: Beyond the Western-centric Frontier*. Cambridge University Press.

Home Office (2022a) 'Asylum claims on the basis of sexual orientation 2021'. Home Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-june-2022/asylum-claims-on-the-basis-of-sexual-orientation-2021--2.

Home Office (2022b) 'Country information and guidance Iran: Sexual orientation and gender identity'. Home Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/iran-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-or-expression-iran-june-2022-accessible.

Home Office (2024) 'Asylum claims on the basis of sexual orientation 2023'. Home Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2024/asylum-claims-on-the-basis-of-sexual-orientation-2023.

Hosseini-Lewis, A. (2015) 'Persian literature and Iranian LGBT'. Internet Archive. Available at: https://archive.org/details/PersianLiteratureandLGBT/page/n1/mode/2up.

Hughes, S.S. (1992) 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Developing world women's studies', *Feminist Studies*, 18(2), pp 389–404. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/3178236.

Human Rights Watch (2010) 'Iran: Discrimination and violence against sexual minorities'. Human Rights Watch, 15 December. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/12/15/iran-discrimination-and-violence-against-sexual-minorities.

Human Rights Watch (2024a) 'Submission by Human Rights Watch on Türkiye to the Human Rights Committee'. Human Rights Watch. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/23/submission-human-rights-watch-turkiye-human-rights-committee.

Human Rights Watch (2024b) 'World Report 2024: Rights trends in Iran'. Human Rights Watch. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/iran.

Ibn Sina (1945 [1021]) 'A treatise on love by Ibn Sina', *Mediaeval Studies*, 7(1), pp 208–228. Translated by E.L. Fackenheim. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1484/j.ms.2.305873.

IGHLRC (2015) *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights in Iran. Analysis from Religious, Social, Legal and Cultural Perspectives*. International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGHLRC). Available at: https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/LGBTRightsInIran_0.pdf.

ILGA World, Ramon Mendes, L., Botha, K., Carrano Lelis, R., de la Peña, E.L., Savelev, I., and Tan, D. (2020) *State-Sponsored Homophobia 2020: Global Legislation Overview Update*. ILGA. Available at: https://ilga.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2019.pdf.

Ioannides, G. (2014) 'Queer travels: Intersections for the study of Islam, sexuality, and queer theory', in Y. Taylor and R. Snowdon (eds) *Queering Religion, Religious Queers*. Routledge, pp 117–136.

Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (2014) *Books I & II of the New Islamic Penal Code*, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. Available at: https://iranhrdc.org/english-translation-of-books-i-ii-of-the-new-islamic-penal-code/#45.

IRCC Canada (2025) *Resettled Refugees – Monthly IRCC Updates by Country of Citizenship and Immigration Category*. Available at: https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/4a1b260a-7ac4-4985-80a0-603bfe4aec11/resource/c1ba9278-9bbf-4823-b90a-dbab3e9d4187.

Jacobsen, C.M., Karlsen, M.-A. and Khosravi, S. (eds) (2020) *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*. Routledge.

Jafari, F. (2013) *Silencing Sexuality: LGBT Refugees and the Public-private Divide in Iran and Turkey*. Doctor of Philosophy. The University of Arizona. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10150/311697.

Jansen, S. and Spijkerboer, T. (2011) *Fleeing Homophobia: Asylum Claims Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Europe*. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam/COC Nederland. Available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/4ebba7852.html.

Jaspal, R. (2016) 'Muslim LGB people', in A.E. Goldberg (ed) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies*. SAGE. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483371283.n278.

Jazayery, M.A. (1973) 'Aḥmad Kasravî and the controversy over Persian poetry: Kasravî's analysis of Persian poetry', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 4(2), pp 190–203. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800027446.

Jhang, J. (2019) *'She Did Not Come Out, But We've Come to Terms' – Family Reconciliation of Challenged Expectations When a Young Adult Child is Gender and Sexual Minority/Tongzhi: Multiple Perspectives*. University of Texas at Austin. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/7709.

Jones, J. (2013) '"If you are not with us, you are against us": A political sequel to HJ (Iran)', *European Public Law*, 19(2), pp 263–270. Available at: https://doi.org/10.54648/euro2013016.

Jung, D. (2007) 'Islam and politics: A fixed relationship?', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 16(1), pp 19–35. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920601148596.

Kadivar, M. (2023) 'Same sex sexual relations'. Available at: https://kadivar.com/13043/.

Kapur, R. (2010) 'De-radicalising the rights claims of sexual subalterns through "tolerance"', in L. Robert and K. Brooks (eds) *Queer Theory: Law, Culture, Empire*. Routledge, pp 37–52.

Kapur, R. (2017) 'The (im)possibility of queering international human rights law', in D. Otto (ed) *Queering International Law: Possibilities, Alliances, Complicities, Risks*. Routledge, pp 131–147.

Kara, H. and Çalik, D. (2016) *Waiting to be 'Safe and Sound': Turkey as LGBTI Refugees' Way Station*. Kaos GL. Available at: https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/2016multeci-raporu2016.pdf.

Karimi, A. (2018) 'Hamjensgara belongs to family: Exclusion and inclusion of male homosexuality in relation to family structure in Iran', *Identities*, 25(4), pp 456–474. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2017.1286921.

Karimi, F. (2025) *Women of Komala: Gender and Politics in Kurdistan of Iran*. Pluto.

Kashani-Sabet, F. (2011) *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran*. Oxford University Press.

Katyal, S. (2002) 'Exporting identity', *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 14(1), pp 97–176. Available at: https://openyls.law.yale.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.13051/6879/07_14YaleJL_Feminism97_2002_.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y.

Kaviraj, S. (2005) 'An outline of a revisionist theory of modernity', *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie*, 46(3), pp 497–526. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23998994.

Keddie, N.R. (2000) 'Women in Iran since 1979', *Social Research*, 67(2), pp 405–438. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40971478.

Keddie, N.R. (2003) *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Yale University Press.

Keenan, S. (2015) *Subversive Property: Law and the Production of Spaces of Belonging*. Routledge.

Kermanian, S. (2024) 'Geopolitics of inter-subaltern colonialism and gender: Challenging methodological dualism through "woman, life, freedom" journey from Kurdistan to Iran', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 123(4), pp 779–802. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-11381001.

Khaqani, A. al-Din (n.d.) *Khaqani (Ghata'at), fragment 351*, *Ganjoor*. Available at: https://ganjoor.net/khaghani/divankh/ghetekh/sh351.

Khatami, M. (2006) 'On Homosexuality, Part of a speech entitled Ethics of Tolerance delivered on September 10th 2006'. Kennedy (J.F.) School of Government, Harvard University. Available at: https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4536556/user-clip-khatami-homosexuality.

Khomeini, R. (1981) 'Islamic Government', in A. Hamid (ed) *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941–1980)*. Mizan Press, pp 27–166.

Kinch, P. (2016) *The US-Iran Relationship: The Impact of Political Identity on Foreign Policy*. I.B. Tauris.

Kirkup, J. and Winnett, R. (2012) 'Theresa May interview: "We're going to give illegal migrants a really hostile reception"', *The Telegraph*, 25 May. Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/9291483/Theresa-May-interview-Were-going-to-give-illegal-migrants-a-really-hostile-reception.html.

Kjaran, J.I. and Martino, W. (2019) 'In search of queer spaces in Tehran: Heterotopias, power geometries and bodily orientations in queer Iranian men's lives', *Sexualities*, 22(4), pp 587–604. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717713383.

Knei-Paz, B. (1978) *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky*. Clarendon Press.

Koçak, M. (2020) 'Who is "queerer" and deserves resettlement?: Queer asylum seekers and their deservingness of refugee status in Turkey', *Middle East Critique*, 29(1), pp 29–46. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2020.1704506.

Korkut, U. (2016) 'Pragmatism, moral responsibility or policy change: The Syrian refugee crisis and selective humanitarianism in the Turkish refugee regime', *Comparative Migration Studies*, 4(1), p 2. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-015-0020-9.

Korn, M. (2009) 'Iran Internet Censorship Second to China', *Huffpost*. Available at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/iran-internet-censorship_n_226953.

Korycki, K. and Nasirzadech, A. (2014) 'Desire recast: The production of gay identity in Iran', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 25(1), pp 50–65. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2014.889599.

Koser Akcapar, S. (2010) 'Re-thinking migrants' networks and social capital: A case study of Iranians in Turkey', *International Migration*, 48(2), pp 161–196. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00557.x.

Krishna, S. (2001) 'Race, amnesia, and the education of international relations', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 26(4), pp 401–424. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540102600403.

Krishna, S. (2022) 'What is … postcolonial theory?', Voices: The EISA Podcast. Available at: https://voices-the-eisa-podcast.podigee.io/9-what-ispostcolonial-theory.

Kristeva, J. (1993) *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Columbia University Press.

Kugle, S.S. al-Haqq (2011) *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*. Oneworld Publications.

Kurzman, C. (2005) *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*. Harvard University Press.

Labman, S. (2022) 'Canada's resettlement programs: Framework and tensions', in E. Martani and D. Helly (eds) *Asylum and Resettlement in Canada: Historical Development, Successes, Challenges and Lessons*. Genova University Press, pp 141–157.

Labman, S. (2024) 'Adding, naming, sustaining, and spreading: Canada's private sponsorship of refugees program', in C.R. Clark-Kazak (ed) *Forced Migration in/to Canada: From Colonization to Refugee Resettlement*. McGill-Queen's University Press, pp 250–261.

Labman, S. and Cameron, G. (eds) (2020) *Strangers to Neighbours: Refugee Sponsorship in Context*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Lacan, J. (1977) *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by A. Sheridan. Tavistock Publications.

Lakemfa, O. (2023) 'The homosexuality of cultural imperialism', Premium Times. Available at: https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/602240-the-homosexuality-of-cultural-imperialism-by-owei-lakemfa.html?tztc=1.

Lama, M. and Norman, K.P. (2020) 'Transforming refugees into migrants: Institutional change and the politics of international protection', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26(3), pp 687–713. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119883688.

Lamble, S. (2021) 'Queer theory and socio-legal studies', in M. Valverde, K.M. Clarke, E. Darain Smith, and P. Kotiswaran (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Law and Society*. Routledge, Chapter 9.

Landman, T. (2017) *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics: An Introduction*. Routledge.

Lazarus, N. (2011) 'What postcolonial theory doesn't say', *Race & Class*, 53(1). Available at: http://doi.org/10.1177/0306396811406778.

Leap, W. (1999) 'Language, socialization and silence in gay adolescence', in M. Bucholtz, A.C. Liang, and L.A. Sutton (eds) *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*. Oxford University Press, pp 259–272.

Lee, S.-W. (2015) 'The paradox of racial liberation: W.E.B. Du Bois and Pan-Asianism in wartime Japan, 1931–1945', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 16(4), pp 513–530. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2015.1103012.

Lenegan, S. (2024) 'What safe and legal routes are available for refugees to come to the United Kingdom?', *Free Movement*, 31 May. Available at: https://freemovement.org.uk/what-safe-and-legal-routes-are-available-for-refugees-to-come-to-the-united-kingdom/.

Lewis, R. (2010) 'The cultural politics of lesbian asylum: Angelina Maccarone's Unveiled (2005) and the case of the lesbian asylum-seeker', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 12(3–4), pp 424–443. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2010.513112.

Lewis, R. (2013) 'Deportable subjects: Lesbians and political asylum', *Feminist Formations*, 25(2), pp 174–194. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2013.0027.

Lopes Heimer, R. dos V. (2020) 'Homonationalist/orientalist negotiations: The UK approach to queer asylum claims', *Sexuality & Culture*, 24(1), pp 174–196. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09633-3.

Luibhéid, E. (2008) 'Queer/migration: An unruly body of scholarship', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14(2–3), pp 169–190. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2007-029.

Luibhéid, E. and Chávez, K.R. (2020) 'Introduction', in E. Luibhéid and K.R. Chávez (eds) *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation*. University of Illinois Press, pp 1–15. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctv180h78v.

Madandar Arani, A., Navid, M., and Ranaei, M. (2019) 'A comparative study on the position of formal education system of Islamic republic of Iran among its neighboring countries', *Iranian Journal of Comparative Education*, 1(3), pp 1–35. Available at: https://doi.org/10.22034/ijce.2019.194969.1031.

Mahdavi, P. (2012) 'Questioning the global gays(ze): Constructions of sexual identities in post-revolution Iran', *Social Identities*, 18(2), pp 223–237. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2012.652846.

Mahdavy, H. (1970) 'The patterns and problems of economic development in rentier states: The case of Iran', in M. Cook (ed) *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*. Oxford University Press, pp 428–467.

Manaert, C. (2003) *Irregular Migration and Asylum in Turkey*. Working Paper No. 89. UNHCR - UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/media/irregular-migration-and-asylum-turkey-celia-mannaert.

Marx, K. (1993) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Penguin Books.

Marx, K. (2000 [1932]) *German Ideology*. Electric Book Company.

Masri, H. (2017) 'A liberated life? Thoughts on the paradoxical binds of queer refuge', *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 3(Summer), pp 36–40. Available at: https://doi.org/10.36583/kohl/3-1-6.

Massad, J. (2002) 'Re-orienting desire: The gay international and the Arab world', *Public Culture*, 14(2), pp 361–386. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-2-361.

Massad, J.A. (2008) *Desiring Arabs*. University of Chicago Press.

Matin, K. (2007) 'Uneven and combined development in world history: The international relations of state-formation in premodern Iran', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13(3), pp 419–447. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066107080132.

Matin, K. (2012) 'Democracy without capitalism: Retheorizing Iran's constitutional revolution', *Middle East Critique*, 21(1), pp 37–56. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2012.658497.

Matin, K. (2013a) 'International relations in the making of political Islam: Interrogating Khomeini's "Islamic Government"', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 16(4), pp 455–482. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/jird.2012.15.

Matin, K. (2013b) *Recasting Iranian Modernity: International Relations and Social Change*. Routledge.

Matin, K. (2013c) 'Redeeming the universal: Postcolonialism and the inner life of Eurocentrism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(2), pp 353–377. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066111425263.

Matin, K. (2019) 'Deciphering the modern Janus: Societal multiplicity and nation-formation', *Globalizations*, 17(3), pp 436–451. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1673615.

Matin, K. (2022a) 'Decolonizing Iran: A tentative note on inter-subaltern colonialism', in A. Mohammadpour and K. Soleimani, 'Silencing the Past: Persian Archaeology, Race, Ethnicity, and Language', *Current Anthropology*, 63(2), pp 185–210, at pp 199–200. Available at: https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/719886.

Matin, K. (2022b) 'Is "Uneven and Combined Development" White?', in J. Rosenberg, A. Zarakol, D. Blagden, O. Rutazibwa, K. Gray, O. Corry, K. Matin, F.A. de Oliveira, and L. Cooper (eds) 'Debating Uneven and Combined Development/Debating International Relations: A Forum', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 50(2), pp 291–327, at pp 316–320. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298211064346.

Matin-Asgari, A. (2004) 'The intellectual best-sellers of post-revolutionary Iran: On backwardness, elite-killing, and western rationality', *Iranian Studies*, 37(1), pp 73–88. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860420000232947.

Matin-Asgari, A. (2018) *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity*. Cambridge University Press.

Maxwell, J. (2008) 'Designing a Qualitative Study', in L. Bickman and D.J. Rog (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods*. SAGE, pp 214–253.

McConville, M. and Chui, W.H. (2017) *Research Methods for Law*. Edinburgh University Press.

McCormack, M. (2014) 'Innovative sampling and participant recruitment in sexuality research', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(4), pp 475–481. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407514522889.

McFadyen, G. (2016) 'The language of labelling and the politics of hospitality in the British asylum system', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18(3), pp 599–617. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148116631281.

McGlynn, R. (2020) 'They hate our freedoms: Homosexuality and Islam in the tolerant west', in M. Lehti, H.-R. Pennanen, and J. Jouhki (eds) *Contestations of Liberal Order*. Springer International, pp 151–174.

McMichael, P. (2000) 'World-systems analysis, globalization, and incorporated comparison', *Journal of World-Systems Research*, pp 668–690. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2000.192.

Meyer, L.D. (ed) (2016) 'Professing selves: Transsexuality and same-sex desire in contemporary Iran by Afsaneh Najmabadi (review)', *Journal of Women's History*, 28(4), pp 154–185. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2016.0040.

Mignolo, W.D. (2007) 'Introduction: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking', *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3), pp 155–167. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162498.

Mill, J.S. (1991) *Considerations on Representative Government*. Prometheus Books.

Millbank, J. (2009) 'From discretion to disbelief: recent trends in refugee determinations on the basis of sexual orientation in Australia and the United Kingdom', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 13(2–3), pp 391–414. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13642980902758218.

Mills, C.W. (2000) *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford University Press.

Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2006) 'Muslim women's quest for equality: Between Islamic Law and feminism', *Critical Inquiry*, 32(4), pp 629–645. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1086/508085.

Mirsepassi, A. (2000) *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*. 1st edition. Cambridge University Press.

Moghissi, H. (1999) *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*. Zed Books.

Moghissi, H. (2008) 'Islamic cultural nationalism and gender politics in Iran', *Third World Quarterly*, 29(3), pp 541–554. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590801931504.

Mohammadi, R. (2024) 'Silenced voices, rising movement: The fight for LGBTQ+ rights in Iran', *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*. Available at: https://www.boell.de/en/2024/04/02/silenced-voices-rising-movement-fight-lgbtq-rights-iran.

Mohammadpour, A. (2024) 'The invention of Iran: From "Iranianness" to "Persianness"', *Asian Studies Review*, 49(1), pp 1–21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2024.2355110.

Mojab, S. (1997) 'Crossing the boundaries of nationalism, patriarchy, and Eurocentrism: The struggle for a Kurdish women's studies network', *Canadian Woman Studies*, 17(2), pp 68–72. Available at: https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/8899.

Mojab, S. (2001) 'Theorizing the politics of "Islamic feminism"', *Feminist Review*, (69), pp 124–146. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01417780110070157.

Mojab, S. and Hassanpour, A. (2021) *Women of Kurdistan: A Historical and Bibliographic Study*. Transnational Press.

Moralli, M. (2023) 'Research as care: Positionality and reflexivity in qualitative migration research', *Qualitative Research*, 24(3), pp 51–770. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941231176946.

Mulla Sadra (1981) *The Transcendental Wisdom in The Four Intellectual Travels*. Dar Ehia Altoras Alarabi. Available at: https://lib.eshia.ir/71465/7/1.

Murray, S.O. and Roscoe, W. (eds) (1997) *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*. New York University Press.

Naeimi, M. and Kjaran, J.I. (2022) 'Schooling (hetero)normative practices in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Sex Education*, 22(3), pp 243–259. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2021.1911797.

Nafisi, A. (2008) *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. Random House.

Najjar, J. (2020) *The Experiences of Iranian Sexual Minority Refugees and Asylum Seekers: A Phenomenological Study*. PhD. The University of Nebraska – Lincoln. Available at: https://www.proquest.com/docview/2428493588.

Najmabadi, A. (2001) 'Gendered transformations: Beauty, love, and sexuality in Qajar Iran', *Iranian Studies*, 34(1/4), pp 89–102. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860108701998.

Najmabadi, A. (2005a) 'Mapping transformations of sex, gender, and sexuality in modern Iran', *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, 49(2), pp 54–77. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23178872.

Najmabadi, A. (2005b) 'Truth of sex', *The Iranian*. Available at: https://www.iranian.com/Najmabadi/2005/January/Sex/.

Najmabadi, A. (2005c) *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. University of California Press.

Najmabadi, A. (2006) 'Beyond the Americas: Are gender and sexuality useful categories of analysis?', *Journal of Women's History*, 18(1), pp 11–21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2006.0022.

Najmabadi, A. (2008a) 'Teaching and research in unavailable intersections', in J.W. Scott (ed) *Women's Studies on the Edge*. Duke University Press, pp 69–80.

Najmabadi, A. (2008b) 'Transing and transpassing across sex-gender walls in Iran', *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, 36(3–4), pp 23–42. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.0.0117.

Najmabadi, A. (2008c) 'Types, acts, or what? Regulation of sexuality in nineteenth century Iran', in K. Babayan and A. Najmabadi (eds) *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geography of Desire*. University of Michigan, pp 275–298.

Najmabadi, A. (2011) 'Verdicts of science, rulings of faith: Transgender/sexuality in contemporary Iran', *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 78(2), pp 533–556. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2011.0020.

Najmabadi, A. (2012) 'Is another language possible?', *History of the Present*, 2(2), pp 169–183. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.2.2.0169.

Najmabadi, A. (2014) *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*. Duke University Press.

Naraghi, A. (2015) 'The Quran and human rights of sexual minorities', in IGLHRC (ed) *The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community of Iran: Examining Human Rights from Religious, Social, Legal and Cultural Perspectives*. IGLHRC, pp 27–55.

Nasser-Eddin, N. and Abu-Assab, N. (2020) 'Decolonial approaches to refugee migration: Nof Nasser-Eddin and Nour Abu-Assab in conversation', *Migration and Society*, 3(1), pp 190–202. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3167/arms.2020.030115.

O'Brien, F. (2024) '"Watch out because we're coming for you": An RSF report on unprecedented transnational repression of Iranian journalists in the UK'. Reporters without Borders (RSF). Available at: https://rsf.org/en/watch-out-because-we-re-coming-you-rsf-report-unprecedented-transnational-repression-iranian.

Öcalan, A. (2007) *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilization*. Pluto Press.

Office for National Statistics (2021) 'Population by country of birth and nationality'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/Peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationality.

OHCHR (2022) 'Iran: UN experts demand stay of execution for two women, including LGBT activist', *OHCHR*. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/09/iran-un-experts-demand-stay-execution-two-women-including-lgbt-activist.

Ooryad, S.K. (2020) 'Conquering, chanting, and protesting: Tools of kinship creation in the girls of Enghelab Street (Non-)Movement in Iran', in G. Bauer, N. Hirschfelder, N. Lippe, A. von der Heise, and K. Luther (eds) *Kinship and Collective Action in Literature and Culture*. Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, pp 129–150.

Orne, J. (2011) '"You will always have to 'out' yourself": Reconsidering coming out through strategic outness', *Sexualities*, 14(6), pp 681–703. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711420462.

Ortega, Y., Passi, A.L., Cruz, D., Wayne, J.N., Cale, B., and Mela, S. (2023) 'Beginning the quilt: A polyvocal and diverse collective seeking new forms of knowledge production', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231186131.

Otto, D. (2017) 'Resisting the heteronormative imaginary of the nation-state: Rethinking kinship and border protection', in D. Otto (ed) *Queering International Law: Possibilities, Alliances, Complicities, Risks*. Routledge, pp 236–257.

OutRight Action International (2016) *Being Transgender in Iran*. OutRight Action International. Available at: https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/human-rights-research/human-rights-report-being-transgender-iran.

Papoli-Yazdi, L. and Dezhamkhooy, M. (2021) *Homogenization, Gender and Everyday Life in Pre- and Trans-modern Iran: An Archaeological Reading*. Waxmann.

Parent-Chartier, C., Santamaria, N., and Van Haren, I. (2022) 'Civil society organizations and collective sponsorship of refugees in Quebec', in E. Martani and D. Helly (eds) *Asylum and Resettlement in Canada: Historical Development, Successes, Challenges and Lessons*. Genova University Press, pp 262–281.

Patton, C. and Sanchez-Eppler, B. (eds) (2001) 'Queer diasporas', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 60(3). Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/2700117.

Peumans, W. (2018) *Queer Muslims in Europe: Sexuality, Religion and Migration in Belgium*. I.B. Taurus.

Peyghambarzadeh, Z. (2020) 'The untellable bisexual asylum stories', in R. Baumgartner and E. Maliepaard (eds) *Bisexuality in Europe: Sexual Citizenship, Romantic Relationships, and Bi+ Identities*. 1st edition. Routledge, pp 21–35.

Peyghambarzadeh, Z.A. (2024) *The Construction of Narratives of Sexual Orientation in Persian-Speaking Communities in the Context of Seeking Asylum in Turkey*. PhD. University of Huddersfield. Available at: https://pure.hud.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/the-construction-of-narratives-of-sexual-orientation-in-persian-s.

Pillar, P.R. (2016) 'The role of villain: Iran and U.S. foreign policy', *Political Science Quarterly*, 131(2), pp 365–385. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12479.

Plummer, K. (1981) 'Building a sociology of homosexuality', in K. Plummer (ed) *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*. Barnes & Noble Books, pp 17–29.

Powell, A., Rifath, R., Ferreira, N., Ziegler, R., Raj, S., Bantleman, Z. et al (2024) *Statement of Consensus*. ILPA. Available at: https://ilpa.org.uk/statement-of-consensus-february-2024/.

Powell, A. and Rifath, R. (2023) 'Sexual diversity and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022', *Legal Studies*, 43(4), pp 757–761. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/lst.2023.21.

Presidency of Migration Management (2025) *Conditional Refugee*. Available at: https://en.goc.gov.tr/conditional-refugee.

Puar, J.K. (2017) *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Tenth Anniversary edition. Duke University Press.

Pulvirenti, R., Lalor, K. and Jaquiss, C. (2024) 'The "Asylum Partnership" Memorandum of Understanding with Rwanda and LGBTQI+ Asylum Seekers: An analysis of vulnerability in the Equality Impact Assessment and the European Convention on Human Rights', *Journal of Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Law*, 38(1), pp 16–31.

Raboin, T. (2016) *Discourses on LGBT Asylum in the UK: Constructing a Queer Haven*. Manchester University Press.

Raeesi, H. (2015) 'Same-sex "crimes" in revised Iranian Code of Criminal Procedure', in IGHLRC (ed) *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights in Iran. Analysis from Religious, Social, Legal and Cultural Perspectives*. International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGHLRC), pp 13–18. Available at: https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/LGBTRightsInIran_0.pdf.

Rahbari, L. (2022) 'Queering Iran, digitally: Implicit activism and LGBTQI+ dating on Telegram', *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, 25(2), pp 141–157. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGN2022.2.003.RAHB.

Raj, S. (2020) *Feeling Queer Jurisprudence: Injury, Intimacy, Identity*. Routledge.

Raj, S. (2024) 'Legal hostilities: Navigating queerness, emotion, and space in asylum law', *Crime, Media, Culture*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590241290441.

Rao, R. (2010) *Third World Protest*. Oxford University Press.

Rao, R. (2020) *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*. Oxford University Press.

Refugees and Citizenship Canada Immigration (2024) 'Temporary pause on intake of refugee sponsorship applications from groups of five and community sponsors', Government of Canada. Available at: https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/temporary-pause-intake-refugee-sponsorship-applications-groups-five-community-sponsors.html.

REIC, Research Ethics and Integrity Committee (2022) 'Codes of Practice for Research'. Available at: https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=code-of-practice-for-research-june-2018.pdf&site=377.

Renedo, A. (2010) 'Polyphony and polyphasia in self and knowledge', *Papers on Social Representations*, 19(1), pp 1–21. Available at: http://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/3878/.

Repko, A.F. and Szostak, R. (2017) *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory*. SAGE.

Rezaei, M. (2015) 'Review – Najmabadi, Afsaneh. Professing selves: Transsexuality and same-sex desire in contemporary Iran. xii + 418 pp. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014', *Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia*, 3(2). Available at: http://acmejournal.org/index.php/ACME/article/view/97.

Rezaei-Toroghi, M. (2019) 'The politics of un-truth and the assemblage of sexuality: Revisiting the Foucauldian methodology in studying sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran', *Sexuality, Gender & Policy*, 3(1). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/sgp2.12010.

Richter-Montpetit, M. (2018) 'Everything you always wanted to know about sex (in IR) but were afraid to ask: The "queer turn" in international relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46(2), pp 220–240. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829817733131.

Rioux, S. (2015) 'Mind the (theoretical) gap: On the poverty of international relations theorising of uneven and combined development', *Global Society*, 29(4), pp 481–509. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2014.983047.

Robertson, D.C. (2017) 'Trudeau government under fire for ending LGBT Iranian refugee program', *Xtra Magazine*, 10 February. Available at: https://xtramagazine.com/power/trudeau-government-under-fire-for-ending-lgbt-iranian-refugee-program-72999.

Rogers, S.A. and Rogers, B.A. (2022) 'Advantages and challenges of queer scholars doing qualitative queer criminology and criminal justice research', *Crime & Delinquency*, 69(2). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287221108702.

Rosenberg, J. (2006) 'Why is there no international historical sociology?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(3), pp 307–340. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067345.

Rosenberg, J. (2022) 'The problem of internalism in social theory', at *9th European Workshops in International Studies*, EISA.

Rosenberg, J. and Kurki, M. (eds) (2023) *Multiplicity: A New Common Ground for International Relations?* Routledge.

Ross, L.E., Kinitz, D.J. and Kia, H. (2022) 'Pronouns are a public health issue', *American Journal of Public Health*, 112(3), pp 360–362. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306678.

Rostow, W.W. (1959) 'The stages of economic growth', *The Economic History Review*, 12(1), pp 1–16. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0289.1959.tb01829.x.

Ryan, H. (2018) 'Crush notes: What can an eighth-century islamic poet tell us about queer desire?' *The Poetry Foundation*. Available at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/147569/crush-notes.

Saeidzadeh, Z. (2019) 'Understanding socio-legal complexities of sex change in postrevolutionary Iran', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 6(1), pp 80–102. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7253510.

Saeidzadeh, Z. (2023) 'Trans women's status in contemporary Iran: Misrecognition and the cultural politics of aberu', *Sexualities*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231200552.

Sahinkaya, E. and Aslan, A. (2021) 'LGBT people fleeing harassment in Iran find life no easier in Turkey, *VOA*. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_lgbt-people-fleeing-harassment-iran-find-life-no-easier-turkey/6204685.html.

Said, E.W. (1978) *Orientalism*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Said, E.W. (1991) 'Edward Said, an American and an Arab, writes on the eve of the Iraqi-Soviet peace talks', *London Review of Books*, 13(5).

Said, E.W. (1994) *Culture and Imperialism*. 35th edition [reprinted]. Vintage.

Sajjad, T. (2018) 'What's in a name? "Refugees", "migrants" and the politics of labelling', *Race & Class*, 60(2), pp 40–62. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396818793582.

Saleh, F. (2020) 'Resettlement as securitization: War, humanitarianism, and the production of Syrian LGBT refugees', in E. Luibhéid and K.R. Chávez (eds) *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation*. University of Illinois Press, pp 74–89.

Sameh, C. (2014) 'From Tehran to Los Angeles to Tehran: Transnational solidarity politics in the one million signatures campaign to end discriminatory law', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 42(3/4), pp 166–188. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2014.0062.

Saperstein, A. (2024) 'Recognizing identity fluidity in demographic research', *Population and Development Review*, 51(1), pp 519–538. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12670.

Sarı, E. (2020a) 'Lesbian refugees in transit: The making of authenticity and legitimacy in Turkey', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 24(2), pp 140–158. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1622933.

Sarı, E. (2020b) 'Unsafe present, uncertain future: LGBTI asylum in Turkey', in E. Luibhéid and K.R. Chávez (eds) *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation*. University of Illinois Press, pp 90–105.

Sarı, E. and Dinçer, C.G. (2017) 'Toward a new asylum regime in Turkey?', *movements: Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies*, 3(2). Available at: http://movements-journal.org/issues/05.turkey/05.sari,dincer--new-asylum-regime-turkey.html.

Sayer, D. (1991) *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber*. Routledge.

Schacht, J. (1982) *An Introduction to Islamic Law*. Oxford University Press.

Schiller, N.G., Basch, L. and Blanc, C.S. (1995) 'From immigrant to transmigrant: Theorizing transnational migration', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68(1), pp 48–63. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/3317464.

Seldin, J. (2012) 'Iranian homosexuals speak out, voice of America'. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/iranian-homosexuals-speak-out/1145592.html.

Shahidian, H. (1999) 'Gender and sexuality among immigrant Iranians in Canada', *Sexualities*, 2(2), pp 189–222. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/136346079900200203.

Shahrokni, N. (2020) *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran*. University of California Press.

Shakhsari, S. (2012) 'From homoerotics of exile to homopolitics of diaspora cyberspace, the war on terror, and the hypervisible Iranian queer', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 8(3), pp 14–40. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2979/jmiddeastwomstud.8.3.14.

Shakhsari, S. (2013) 'Transnational governmentality and the politics of life and death', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45(2), pp 340–342.

Shakhsari, S. (2014) 'The queer time of death: Temporality, geopolitics, and refugee rights', *Sexualities*, 17(8), pp 998–1015. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714552261.

Shakhsari, S. (2020a) 'Displacing queer refugee epistemologies: Dreams of trespass, queer kinship, and politics of miseration', *Arab Studies Journal*, 28(2), pp 108–134. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/27099788.

Shakhsari, S. (2020b) *Politics of Rightful Killing: Civil Society, Gender, and Sexuality in Weblogistan*. Duke University Press.

Sharif, R. (2015) 'White gaze saving Brown queers: homonationalism meets imperialist Islamophobia', *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, 21(1), pp 32–50. Available at: https://onesearch.library.uwa.edu.au/view/delivery/61UWA_INST/12456953860002101.

Shidmehr, N. (ed) (2024) *Rainbows on Rugged Terrains: Poetics of Queer Iranians in Exile*. Transnational Press London.

Shilliam, R. (2009) *German Thought and International Relations: The Rise and Fall of a Liberal Project*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Shilliam, R. (2021) *Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction*. Polity Press.

Shojaie, M. (2014) 'How Hijab became compulsory after the revolution?', *Deutsche Welle Persian*. Available at: https://p.dw.com/p/1B2j8.

Skjærvø, P.O. (2012) 'Homosexuality in Zoroastrianism', *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 12(4), pp 440–441. Available at: https://iranicaonline.org/articles/homosexuality-i.

Skocpol, T. (1982) 'Rentier state and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian revolution', *Theory and Society*, 11(3). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00211656.

Skribeland, Ö.G. (2021) 'Turkey: Party or non-party state?', *Forced Migration Review*, (67), pp 46–48. Available at: https://www.fmreview.org/issue67/skribeland/.

SOGICA (2020) 'Final recommendations', SOGICA. Available at: https://www.sogica.org/en/final-recommendations/.

Solnit, R. (2014) *Men Explain Things to Me*. Haymarket Books.

Soloaga, I. (2021) 'Exploring social remittances and transnational activism amongst transgender refugees', *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 3. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2021.675536.

Soltani, B. (2014) 'Hafiz: The spirit of Iran', *International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Research*, 1(12), pp 114–118. Available at: https://www.ijramr.com/sites/default/files/issues-pdf/066.pdf.

Spijkerboer, T. (ed) (2013) *Fleeing Homophobia: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Asylum*. Routledge.

Spijkerboer, T. (2018) 'Gender, sexuality, asylum and European human rights', *Law and Critique*, 29(2), pp 221–239. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10978-017-9219-2.

Spivak, G. (2015) 'Can the subaltern speak', in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds) *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Routledge, pp 66–111.

Stoffel, A. and Birkvad, I.R. (2023) 'Abstractions in international relations: On the mystification of trans, queer, and subaltern life in critical knowledge production', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29(4), pp 852–876. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661231176907.

Sulaiman-Hill, C.M. and Thompson, S.C. (2011) 'Sampling challenges in a study examining refugee resettlement', *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 11(1). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-698x-11-2.

Summerskill, C. (2016) *Rights of Passage*. Tollington Press.

Táíwò, O. (2022) *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously*. Hurst & Company.

Tamer, R. and Sadrolodabaee, N. (2023) '"Queer, life, freedom": The voices at Victoria's Pride March that were silenced – until now"', *SBS News*. Available at: https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/queer-life-freedom-the-voices-at-victorias-pride-march-that-were-silenced-until-now/849c7xl7f.

Tellis, A.J. and Bala, S. (eds) (2015) *The Global Trajectories of Queerness: Rethinking Same-sex Politics in the Global South*. Brill Rodopi.

Tenbruck, F. (1994) 'Internal history of society or universal history?', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11(1), pp 75–93. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/026327694011001006.

Teschke, B. (2014) 'IR theory, historical materialism, and the false promise of international historical sociology', *Spectrum: Journal of Global Studies*, (1), pp 1–66. Available at: https://dergipark.org.tr/spectrum/issue/35030/388549.

Tewksbury, R. (2009) 'Qualitative versus quantitative methods: Understanding why qualitative methods are superior for criminology and criminal justice', *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology*, 1(1). Available at: http://www.jtpcrim.org/January_Articles/Qualitative_Vs_Quantitave_Richard_Tewksbury.pdf.

The Center for Nonviolent Communication (2025) 'The Center for Nonviolent Communication', *Center for Nonviolent Communication*. Available at: https://www.cnvc.org/.

Thielen, M. (2006) 'Trügerische Sicherheit: Homophobie als Quelle problematischer Lebenssituationen schwuler Flüchtlinge aus dem Iran im deutschen Asyl', *Feministische Studien*, 24(2), pp 290–302. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1515/fs-2006-0211.

Troiden, R.R. (1979) 'Becoming homosexual: A model of gay identity acquisition', *Psychiatry*, 42(4), pp 362–373. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1979.11024039.

Trotsky, L. (1985) *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Pluto Press.

UKLGIG (2019) 'Submission to the ICIBI Inspection of Interpreters', UKLGIG. Available at: https://www.sogica.org/database/uklgig-submission-to-the-icibi-inspection-of-interpreters-june-2019/.

UN Fact-Finding Mission on Iran (2025) 'Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran (A/HRC/58/63)'. UN Human Rights Council. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session58/advance-version/a-hrc-58-63-AV.pdf.

UNHCR (2012) 'Guidelines on International Protection No. 9: Claims to Refugee Status Based on Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity within the Context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or Its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (HCR/GIP/12/09)'. UNHCR - UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/media/guidelines-international-protection-no-9-hcr-gip-06-07-23-october-2012.

UNHCR (2016) 'Guidelines on International Protection No. 12: Claims for refugee status related to situations of armed conflict and violence under Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees and the regional refugee definitions (HCR/GIP/16/12)'. UNHCR - UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/5ddfcdc47.pdf.

UNHCR (2019a) 'Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees'. UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/publications/legal/5ddfcdc47/handbook-procedures-criteria-determining-refugee-status-under-1951-convention.html.

UNHCR (2019b) 'Resettlement: Key facts and frequently asked question'. UNHCR - UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: https://help.unhcr.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2019/07/TurkeyResettlementleaflet2019-EN.pdf.

UNHCR (2022) 'Asylum in the UK, UNHCR', UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/uk/asylum-uk.

UNHCR (2023) 'Statement on UK Asylum Bill', UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/statement-uk-asylum-bill.

UNHCR (2024) 'UNHCR Resettlement Handbook', UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement-handbook/.

UNHCR Canada (2024) 'Refugee resettlement in Canada', UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: https://www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/unhcr-role-resettlement/refugee-resettlement-canada/.

United Against Nuclear Iran (2024) 'Iran's war on LGBTQ citizens', UANI. Available at: https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/irans-war-on-lgbtq-citizens.

United States Department of State (2023) '2022 country reports on human rights practices: Iran'. Available at: https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/iran/.

Verkaik, R. (2009) 'Asylum for lesbian on the run from Iran', *The Independent*, 16 February. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/asylum-for-lesbian-on-the-run-from-iran-1622991.html.

Waites, M. (2009) 'Critique of "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" in human rights discourse: Global queer politics beyond the Yogyakarta Principles', *Contemporary Politics*, 15(1), pp 137–156. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13569770802709604.

Walby, S. (2003) 'The myth of the nation-state: Theorizing society and polities in a global era', *Sociology*, 37(3), pp 529–546. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385030373008.

Wallerstein, I. (1974) *The Modern World-System, Volume 1: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. Academic Publishers.

Wallerstein, I. (1997) 'Eurocentrism and its avatars: The dilemmas of social science', *Sociological Bulletin*, 46(1), pp 21–39. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022919970102.

Walsh, A. (2019) 'Iran defends execution of gay people', *Deutsche Welle*. Available at: https://www.dw.com/en/iran-defends-execution-of-gay-people/a-49144899.

Wesling, M. (2008) 'Why queer diaspora?', *Feminist Review*, 90(1), pp 30–47. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.35.

Wessels, J. (2021) *The Concealment Controversy: Sexual Orientation, Discretion Reasoning and the Scope of Refugee Protection*. Cambridge University Press.

Wimmer, A. and Glick Schiller, N. (2002) 'Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation-state building, migration and the social sciences', *Global Networks*, 2(4), pp 301–334. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00043.

World Health Organization (2019) 'Moving one step closer to better health and rights for transgender people'. Available at: https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/17-05-2019-moving-one-step-closer-to-better-health-and-rights-for-transgender-people.

Yarshater, E. (1986) 'Persian poetry in Timurid and Safavid Periods', in P. Jackson (ed) *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Cambridge University Press, pp 965–994.

Young, R.J. (2001) *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Blackwell.
Zapparoli-Manzoni-Bodson, A. (2015) 'The making of the Iranian refugee: From revolution to asylum', *The Kiessling Papers*. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/1807/70185.
Zia-Ebrahimi, R. (2011) 'Self-orientalization and dislocation: The uses and abuses of the "Aryan" discourse in Iran', *Iranian Studies*, 44(4), pp 445–472. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2011.569326.
Zisakou, S. (2024) 'Feeling queer, feeling real: Affective economies of truth in queer asylum politics', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, pp 1–22. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2374897.

# Index

References to figures appear in *italic* type; those in **bold** type refer to tables.
References to endnotes show both the page number and the note number (173n1).