

# Recognising the Needs of Queer Iranian Migrants

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**New research shows that queer Iranian migrants require enhanced logistical, legal and medical support in host countries, and faster asylum processing by SOGIESC-aware staff.**

## About the research

Rights relating to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) face persistent threats globally, with many countries criminalising consensual adult same-sex relations. Queer Iranians endure particularly harsh persecution. The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) criminalises 'sodomy' as a capital offence and suppresses all non-conforming sexual and gender practices. Beyond state repression, queer Iranians also grapple with family rejection, social stigmatisation, and everyday violence. These conditions force many from Iran's sizable queer community to seek refuge in safer countries. However, upon migrating, queer Iranians encounter new challenges in both transit countries like Turkey, and destination countries, such as Canada and the UK, rendering them an especially vulnerable and underserved social group.

This briefing is based on the project *Negotiating Queer Identities Following Forced Migration (NQIfFM): A Comparative Study of Iranian Queer Refugees Living in Turkey, the UK, and Canada*. Between 2022 and 2024, 57 interviews were conducted with queer Iranian individuals and supporters on their experiences with asylum and migration.

Participants identified the necessary changes to improve the social, psychological, and legal experiences of SOGIESC asylum applicants and migrants. The project employed a critical postcolonial framework, sensitised to the significant role and agency of non-Western actors, and an innovative methodology that combined semi-structured life history interviews and poetry workshops. This approach provided deep insights into how queer Iranians' experiences of seeking international protection, migration, and resettlement are shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, sexuality, religion, class, age, 'race', ethnicity, and nationality, as well as the assumptions, perceptions, and priorities of the international organisations, agencies, and authorities with which they have to interact.

## Key findings

1. The decision-making process for queer Iranians' asylum claims in Turkey lacks consistency and remains lengthy, which deepens social isolation and exacerbates mental health struggle.
2. Turkish officials involved in this process often display insufficient understanding of the social and legal conditions queer individuals face in Iran, leading to negative decisions on the purported grounds that (parts of) Iran is safe for queer individuals, especially if they act 'discreetly'.
3. Gender-based and other forms of violence against queer Iranians are often overlooked by Turkish police and law-enforcement authorities.
4. Queer Iranian asylum applicants often struggle to access legal and social support in Turkey despite considerable funds offered by the EU and other international actors. Organisations dedicated to helping queer asylum applicants are typically underfunded and lack sufficient staff and resources.
5. Information on where and how to find legal, medical and financial assistance is not always readily available, making it difficult for queer Iranians to secure timely appointments.
6. Access to adequate medical and psychological care in Turkey for queer asylum applicants and migrants is often hindered by their invisibility within the system, social isolation, discrimination, and the scarcity of multilingual therapists trained in SOGIESC issues. This increases the likelihood of mental health problems, which can negatively impact their asylum and resettlement claims.

7. The resettlement process of recognised refugees to host countries is hampered by the lack of sufficient funding, forcing many refugees to rely on private sponsorship schemes involving lengthy periods required for fund-raising.
8. Following resettlement to Canada queer Iranian migrants often experience discrimination during the induction period and in dealing with authorities.
9. In both Canada and the UK, queer Iranians receive insufficient support, inadequate accommodation and lack of information upon arrival. Moreover, the language and citizenship education is offered in environments that are not always queer-friendly. Educators in these settings often lack sufficient knowledge of queer issues and the conditions faced by queer people in Iran.

## Policy implications

To support queer Iranian migrants in their pursuit of a safer, more dignified life, their experiences of asylum and migration should be improved in the following ways:

1. The asylum system in Turkey, a key transit country for the majority of queer Iranian migrants, should be reformed to provide a safe environment, adequate housing, and legal support upon registration.
2. Forcing queer asylum claimants to live in conservative or rural parts of Turkey should be discontinued to prevent intense experiences of isolation, loneliness, high rates of homophobia, discrimination, and limited queer-specific support.
3. Registration and screening interviews in Turkey require an urgent overhaul. Responsibility for them should either be transferred back to the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or conducted with substantive oversight and/or involvement of SOGIESC-aware and trained UNHCR staff.

4. Turkish officials, interpreters and translators involved in the asylum process need comprehensive and regular training on SOGIESC issues. Queer asylum applicants should be treated with respect and empathy, including in relation to their SOGIESC.
5. The decision-making process in Turkey must be significantly expedited. Queer asylum applicants should receive free and adequate legal representation and legal advice on their rights, protections, and procedures from the initial stages of the asylum process.
6. Queer migrants should receive work permits to facilitate their social integration and economic independence. More frequent and thorough inspections of their working environment and employment conditions are needed.
7. More resources are urgently needed to improve the provision of mental and physical healthcare to queer Iranian migrants in Turkey.
8. Canada and the UK should increase their resettlement quotas for queer asylum claimants, which would help alleviate the bottleneck in Turkey.
9. UK Home Office officials handling queer Iranian asylum cases should be better educated about the realities of queer life in Iran, including the country's regional and cultural diversity, and should place less emphasis on 'consistency' in asylum claims, given the trauma queer Iranians have experienced and the cultural barriers that hinder expressions of non-cis/heteronormative genders and sexualities.
10. Home Office 'country policy and information notes', critical to the refugee determination status process, are often influenced by shifting political and economic relationships with the countries of origin of queer refugees. These reports should be written and reviewed by independent experts.
11. Support for Gender Affirmation Surgery (GAS) in the UK should be improved through the extension of NHS coverage beyond primary, maternity, and emergency care to GAS.
12. Currently, those asylum claimants whose applications have been rejected may lose access to NHS services. Access to healthcare should be delinked from the status and outcome of asylum applications.
13. Canada should improve the quality of the initial accommodation and offer it for longer periods. Resettlement support, including English language education in a queer-friendly environment with SOGIESC-aware educators, must be made available.
14. The private sector's role in the provision of accommodation to queer migrants in Canada should be significantly limited and/or subject to oversight of public authorities to ensure adherence to high standards currently compromised by 'outsourcing' practices.
15. In the UK and Canada, queer-only accommodation should be provided for queer asylum applicants and refugees who request it, funded by savings made from removing private sector companies from the process. Similar arrangements should be made by UNHCR, in cooperation with Turkish authorities, for queer asylum claimants in Turkey.

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## Intellectual contributions and implications

This research pioneers the application of the theory of uneven and combined development (UCD) to the field of queer and gender studies. It conceptualises the (trans-) formation of queer identity and sexuality in Iran through a multidisciplinary framework that foregrounds national, transnational, and international dynamics. Through a critical engagement with postcolonial queer theory, the project charts new avenues for critical research on queer migration and identity (trans-)formation, avoiding the pitfalls of methodological nationalism, cultural essentialism, and Eurocentric universalism. It thus highlights the analytical potential of UCD in overcoming the normative binary of the West and non-West in queer studies and beyond. Methodologically, the research combines semi-structured interviews and life histories with poetry workshops, showcasing the value of mixed methods.

## Further information and contact details

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Further information is available on the website

<https://iranqueerefugee.net>

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