The Impact of Homonationalism

Analyzing the Dutch government's self-identity
in relation to violence against queer asylum seekers

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Abstract

In the last decades, there have been numerous cases of violence against queer asylum seekers in Dutch reception facilities. This contradicts the image of the Netherlands as a progressive safe haven for queer people. This raises questions about this image and the identity of the Dutch government. By employing homonationalism, developed by Jasbir Puar, I have analyzed government documents and conducted interviews with people working in the field of queer asylum to explore the interaction between violence against queer asylum seekers and the Dutch government's self-identity. My findings show that there is a discrepancy between the general discourse and practice. The general discourse, which is mostly constructed in parliamentary debates and documents, establishes a homonationalist narrative. This narrative portrays non-queer asylum seekers as inherently queerphobic and queer asylum seekers as vulnerable victims. The Dutch government is depicted as the savior of queer people. This narrative results in a shift in responsibility. The Dutch government focuses on perpetrators and victims as the sole responsible actors in relation to violence. However, the structural problems in the Dutch asylum contribute to the unsafety that queer asylum seekers experience. This factor in violence is rarely acknowledged by the Dutch government, which is why violence against queer asylum seekers can be sustained. Consequently, the homonationalist narrative is dangerous and contributes to violence. However, in practice this narrative is regularly opposed. Several of the people I interviewed acknowledged the nuanced and complex reality of the Dutch asylum system and violence against queer asylum seekers. Therefore, the interaction between violence and the Dutch government's self-identity is mostly in line with homonationalism, but also encompasses blurry components that show the complexity of this interaction.

Keywords: queer asylum; violence; homonationalism; Netherlands

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List of abbreviations

AZC	Asielzoekerscentrum (asylum seekers' center)
COA	Centraal Orgaan Opvang Asielzoekers (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers)
D66	Democraten 66 (Democrats 66)
EU	European Union
GGD	Gemeentelijke Gezondheidsdienst (Public Health Service)
GZA	GezondheidsZorg Asielzoekers (Asylum Seeker Healthcare)
IDAHOT	International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia
IND	Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst (Integration and Naturalisation Service)
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
NCDR	Nationaal Coördinator tegen Discriminatie en Racisme (National Coordinator against Discrimination and Racism)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PSG	Particular social group
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom)
SOGI	Sexual orientation and gender identity
UN	United Nations
VVD	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy)
ZBO	Zelfstandig bestuursorgaan (independent administrative body)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In conflict-related environments, queer people experience insecurity and violence in relation to their sexual orientation and gender identity (Hagen, 2016, p. 313). One of those environments is the asylum system in which many queer refugees end up after fleeing their country of origin. For example, Dutch media and NGOs have reported on violence against queer asylum seekers in Dutch reception facilities (LGBT Asylum Support, 2020; Pauwels, 2023; Wijnsema, 2016). These violent events range from verbal abuse to physical assault, perpetrated mostly by other asylum seekers (LGBT Asylum Support, 2023; Pauwels, 2023). The situation in the Dutch asylum system opposes the image of the Netherlands as a queer safe haven and a progressive state (Bracke, 2012; Mepschen & Duyvendak, 2012). The contradiction between the experiences of queer asylum seekers and the image of the Netherlands is puzzling. My research will focus on this contradiction.

My research is based on the theory of homonationalism. This concept was conceived by Jasbir Puar (2017) to analyze how Western states portray themselves as superior to non-Western states and society. Western states include queerness in the national identity by promoting queer rights in law and practice, such as 'gay marriage'. This is how Western entities present themselves as queer-friendly (Bracke, 2012, p. 245; Puar, 2017, p. 2). This discourse portrays the queer people in 'queerphobic' societies as victims, while other people in these societies are seen as inherently queerphobic. The theory of homonationalism is useful for understanding how the Western actors portray themselves as 'tolerant', in relation to the Other as 'intolerant'.

The Netherlands is one of the most prominent examples of a country that employs homonationalism, because it is widely known as a queer-friendly country. Dutch society is seen as a society that tolerates several identities, habits, and lifestyles that may be frowned upon in other societies (Kaplan, 2019, p. 204). Since the 1960s, sexuality has become an important part of Dutch national identity (Mepschen & Duyvendak, 2012, p. 3). As the first country in the world to build a monument for homosexual victims of the Holocaust, in 1987, and the first to legalize same-sex marriage, in 2001, the Netherlands has built an international reputation that is based on sexual liberation, tolerance, and acceptance (McNeal & Brennan, 2021, p. 166). The emancipation of queer people has continued in recent years. Since 2023, Article 1 of the Dutch constitution, which forbids discrimination, explicitly mentions 'sexual identity' (NOS, 2023). Additionally, the Dutch capital, Amsterdam, is known as a 'gay capital' and is often associated with queer emancipation, because it was the setting for the first 'gay marriage' and hosts the annual Pride Festival (Buijs et al., 2011, p. 633). These normative, legal, and symbolic reforms have resulted in an identity that is strongly connected with tolerance and progressiveness.

This ‘tolerant’ Dutch identity has been used in debates regarding immigration and globalization (McNeal & Brennan, 2021, p. 167). The right-wing columnist Pim Fortuyn, who founded his own political party in 2002, connected xenophobia and anti-immigration rhetoric to the progressive element of Dutch identity. According to Fortuyn, migrants, especially those with an Islamic background, threatened this Dutch identity, because they originate from ‘backward’ countries (McNeal & Brennan, 2021, p. 167). This narrative resonated with a lot of people, because Fortuyn was very successful in the polls for the national elections of 2002. However, Fortuyn was assassinated by a Dutch environmental activist six days before the elections. Since Fortuyn’s assassination, several other political actors have integrated his views into their narratives. Anti-immigrant parties argue that Dutch culture will ‘Islamize’, which, in their eyes, would result in a ban on freedom of expression, individual autonomy, and emancipation of gender and sexual minorities (Akkerman, 2015, p. 341). These political parties claim that the Islam threatens ‘Western’ or ‘Dutch’ norms and values, which is why they argue for strict anti-immigration measures. In relation to sexuality, these actors often argue that the Netherlands is a tolerant country that protects the rights of queer people, while other (Islamic) societies are seen as highly conservative and homophobic (Akkerman, 2015, p. 341).

Despite the anti-immigration sentiment, the Netherlands allows queer refugees to request asylum based on their sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). This is based on the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, which defines a refugee as someone who is migrating based on “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010, p. 14). These five grounds still form the foundation of the Dutch asylum procedure. SOGI-based asylum claims fall under the category of membership of a particular social group (PSG). The Netherlands was the first country to grant asylum and refugee status to queer refugees, based on the PSG ground, in 1981 (Danisi et al., 2021, p. 9). In the following decades, more countries started granting asylum to SOGI-based applicants. However, this was a long and contentious development. Many governments, including the Dutch government, aim to emancipate and liberate queer people, but also attempt to stop migrants, including refugees, from coming to Europe (Danisi et al, 2021., p. 10). This has resulted in stringent queer asylum policies. For example, until 2013, the EU argued that queer refugees could return to their countries of origin if they were deemed able to prevent persecution by acting ‘discreetly’ in their home country (Mole, 2021, p. 7).

In addition to these stringent measures, the Dutch asylum system is quite complex and there are many different problems with it. When (queer) refugees enter the Netherlands to seek asylum, they must apply for asylum at the central reception center at Schiphol Airport or in Ter Apel, a small village close to the border with Germany (McNeal & Brennan, 2021, p. 171). The *Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst* (Integration and Naturalisation Service, IND) will conduct the ‘registration

hearing', during which asylum seekers are asked general questions about their identity, family, documents, and reason for migrating (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, n.d.). Asylum seekers are only meant to stay in Ter Apel for a few days. However, sometimes people are obligated to stay for weeks, because of a lack of room in other reception facilities. After their stay in Ter Apel, asylum seekers are moved to another location, where they will stay during their asylum procedure (COA, n.d.-c; McNeal & Brennan, 2021, p. 171). The IND is the government agency tasked with assessing people's asylum applications. In an interview with the IND, asylum seekers have to tell the interviewer about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, as well as their experiences in their country of origin. The IND will judge if this story is credible (IND, n.d.). Queer refugees, therefore, have to convince the IND in an interview that they identify as queer and that they are "justifiably fearful of persecution in their home country" (McNeal & Brennan, 2021, p. 171).

Besides the IND, the *Centraal Orgaan Opvang Asielzoekers* (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, COA) is another important government agency. The COA is responsible for the reception and guidance of all asylum seekers in the Netherlands (COA, n.d.-b). The COA is an independent administrative body (Zelfstandig bestuursorgaan, ZBO). This means that the management board of the COA is responsible for its daily management. The Ministry of Justice and Security, especially the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, is politically responsible for the activities of the COA (COA, n.d.-a). The housing situation differs quite a lot depending on the reception facility. Some asylum seekers have to share their room and other facilities, while others have their own room (McNeal & Brennan, 2021, p. 171). Some reception facilities are located in rural areas that are difficult to access, while others are located in urban areas. Besides housing asylum seekers, the COA is responsible for protecting them. Some reception facilities try to protect specific groups, such as queer asylum seekers, by housing them in separate units. However, despite the efforts of the COA, many queer asylum seekers have experienced bullying, intimidation, or physical violence in reception facilities (LGBT Asylum Support, 2020). A Dutch NGO, LGBT Asylum Support, has reported on violence and discrimination against queer asylum seekers. Queer asylum seekers often feel unsafe and socially isolated in reception facilities. Additionally, there have been several cases of physical violence against queer asylum seekers, ranging from spitting to attacks with boiling water (LGBT Asylum Support, 2020, p. 6). These violent events in Dutch reception facilities contradict the constructed image of the Netherlands as a safe haven for queer people. This leads to a puzzling relationship between the Dutch government's self-identity and the violence against queer asylum seekers in the Dutch reception facilities.

1.1 Research question

My research aims to increase the understanding of this relationship. To do so, I have formulated the following research question:

> *How does the self-identity of the Dutch government interact with violence against queer asylum seekers through the government's policies and discourse, from 2013 onwards?*

I have chosen to focus on violent events and Dutch asylum policy since 2013, because a Dutch NGO, COC Nederland, published a report on the situation of queer asylum seekers in 2013, which highlighted reports of violence against queer asylum seekers (Luit, 2013). Since 2013, there has been more research by scholars, media, and NGOs on this topic (LGBT Asylum Support, 2020; Quinan, et al., 2021; Ter Rele, 2020). Additionally, I have chosen to use the term 'queer', as this is a catch-all term, which includes all queer identities (McNeal & Brennan, 2021, p. 166). Throughout my research, terms such as 'LGBTQ' will be used when I am quoting interviewees or parts of analyzed documents. Additionally, the COA sometimes uses 'LGBTQ contact person' when referring to employees who work with queer asylum seekers. In those cases, I have decided to follow the terminology used by the COA. In the rest of the text, I will use 'queer'.

I will answer my research question by focusing on three general themes. Firstly, I will focus on the perpetrators of violence. I will analyze how the Dutch government depicts (potential) perpetrators by employing the concepts of racialization and Othering. This will increase my understanding of the relationship between the Dutch government's discourse and its policies, in relation to perpetrators of violence. Secondly, I will elaborate on how the Dutch government portrays queer asylum seekers. I will especially focus on the victim/agency binary, which shapes how the Dutch government views itself in relation to queer asylum seekers. Thirdly, I will focus on the issue of responsibility. Although this moves beyond the theory of homonationalism, it became a recurring theme throughout my analysis. I will elaborate on how the Dutch government views its own responsibility in relation to violence against queer asylum seekers.

1.2 Relevance

My research will primarily contribute to queer migration and asylum scholarship, which has developed since the 1990s (Luibhéid, 2008, p. 169). Queer asylum scholarship is a specific focus within queer migration studies, which focuses, among other things, on the experiences of queer asylum seekers (Dhoest, 2019; Fassin & Salcedo, 2015; Singer, 2021), and on the requirement to 'prove' their sexual or gender identity (Giametta, 2020; Spruce, 2014). Additionally, several scholars have connected queer asylum with homonationalism (Lewis, 2019; Quinan et al., 2021). However, the policies and discourse related to queer asylum have remained understudied. My research will

contribute to the growing body of literature on queer asylum by focusing on how a Western government identifies itself in relation to queer asylum seekers and the violence they experience. I will elaborate on this in the next chapter.

Additionally, my research is socially relevant, because my research might contribute to the reflection on the current policies and discourses that are created by the Dutch government. Although a reception facility is not necessarily seen as a conflict situation, many (queer) asylum seekers experience violence, even after they have fled a conflict situation. 'Post-conflict' situations, such as a reception facility, deserve to be researched. I hope my research will contribute to a safer asylum system for queer asylum seekers. Additionally, I aim to increase the visibility of the experiences of queer people and the policies that impact them. Throughout academic and societal debates on migration and asylum, queer people remain overlooked. By focusing my research on this group, I hope to raise awareness about how the Dutch asylum system and the Dutch government's policies impact them.

1.3 Methodology

I will research how the Dutch government's self-identity interacts with violence against queer asylum seekers. My broad methodological strategy is therefore focused on tracing this interaction. Through analyzing the words and actions of the Dutch government, I aim to explore how violence against queer asylum seekers shapes and changes existing narratives and ideas within the Dutch government. To understand how the contradiction of violence against queer people in a 'tolerant' country, as discussed earlier, is sustained, it is necessary to understand how the Dutch government deals with these violent actions and how this influences existing discourse and policy.

I have analyzed 76 documents of the Dutch government. These can be split into four categories. Firstly, transcripts of parliamentary debates. These debates often focus on issues related to migration or asylum, but only snippets focused on queer asylum. During the coding process, I focused on these snippets, but the rest of the debates gave me a general impression of the asylum debate in Dutch politics. Secondly, answers to written questions in parliament. These are answers by the government to questions asked by members of the Dutch Parliament. Thirdly, parliamentary letters. These documents give a clear view of the discourse and policy that the government tries to push. Finally, I have analyzed web pages from the website of the COA on queer asylum seekers, safety, and their general policies. Besides the COA website, all documents were found on the website of the Dutch Parliament (tweedekamer.nl). All the documents that are referred to throughout my thesis are included in *Appendix 1*.

I have conducted nine interviews. Seven interviews were conducted with an individual participant. The interview with policy advisors from the national office of the COA and the interview with

LGBTQ contact persons at the reception facility in Dronten were conducted with two participants. I aimed to interview a wide range of actors in the field of queer asylum. As I am researching an interaction, it is important to generate data through a relevant range in relation to the broader phenomenon (Mason, 2018, p. 57). Practically, this means that I aimed to interview people active in reception facilities, who are in direct contact with queer asylum seekers, but also people who are involved with the general policy and discourse. Besides government employees, I have also interviewed people who are active in volunteer organizations, as they had a different perspective on violence against queer asylum seekers. A list of the interviews is included in *Appendix 2*.

I have decided not to conduct interviews with asylum seekers or people who have been through the asylum process. Conducting interviews with queer asylum seekers might be harmful, as there is the possibility of triggering traumatic experiences. Although it might be valuable to increase the understanding of my case study, there are other ways to generate data without the risk of triggering emotions or traumatic experiences. To still include the experiences and perspectives of queer asylum seekers, I have read *De waarheid zal me bevrijden*, an autobiography of a transgender woman in the Dutch asylum system. Additionally, I attended an event at a reception facility for COA employees and queer asylum seekers, where people could speak out about their experiences.

Before the interview, I explained the context and goal of my research through the information form and during an (informal) conversation. I have asked each participant through an informed consent form to record the interview and to use the data for my research. The data is stored on Yoda, a research data management service recommended by Utrecht University. In regard to the issue of anonymity, I have decided to ask what the participant prefers. I included two questions in the informed consent form, giving them the option to consent to use their name and/or the name of their organization.

To analyze the data, I will be using integrative logic. Different elements of the methods and the data I generated will be useful for different elements of my research. The analysis of parliamentary documents focuses more on the broader policy of the Dutch government, while the interviews shed light on the government's policy in practice. However, during my research, the two elements also intersect/overlap. I will read the data in an interpretive way (Mason, 2018, p. 190). The Dutch government constructs a specific narrative about queer asylum seekers; it is my task to interpret how the government integrates violence against asylum seekers in that narrative. For example, I need to focus on how the government and COA employees frame this violence, what do they say about it, and what do they not disclose about these violent events?

Regarding my positionality, it is important to reflect on my own identity as a queer person. Concepts such as sexuality and queerness are socially constructed and can therefore be interpreted differently by different people. My views and experiences regarding my sexuality might be vastly different from the views and experiences of queer asylum seekers or people working with queer asylum seekers. To me, sexuality and violence against queer people is a very personal topic, which is why I have avoided it for most of my academic career. However, during the past year, I have become more aware of my privileged position as a queer person. Despite the fact that there is discrimination against queer people all over the world, I have had the opportunity to fully develop myself without experiencing a lot of violence or discrimination. This realization motivates me to do research on the topic of queerness, because I hope to contribute to a world where all queer people are able to develop themselves and live in peace.

The structure of this thesis is set up as follows. In *Chapter 2*, I will elaborate on the existing literature on queer asylum. Additionally, I will construct my theoretical and conceptual framework, which I will do by drawing on homonationalism. *Chapter 3* focuses on the portrayal of perpetrators of violence in relation to the role of the Dutch government. *Chapter 4* elaborates on the victimization/agency binary by studying the portrayal of queer asylum seekers. *Chapter 5* moves beyond the theory of homonationalism and discusses the issue of responsibility. I will elaborate on different conceptions of violence and the structural problems in the Dutch asylum system. Finally, in *Chapter 6*, I will answer my research question and discuss the implications of my research and suggestions for further research and theorization.

Chapter 2: Theory

2.1 Literature review: Queer migration and asylum scholarship

Although queer people are everywhere, they have been overlooked by many academic fields and disciplines, including fields related to migration and conflict studies. Many (queer) scholars, including myself, aspire to increase the visibility of queer people, including queer migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, by focusing their research on the lives, experiences, and identities of queer people. Applying a queer lens to migration and asylum sheds light on how migration studies and policies have relied on heteronormative assumptions and practices, which has caused queer experiences and challenges to be overlooked (Luibhéid, 2004, p. 227; Manalansan, 2006, p. 225). Since the 1990s, queer migration and asylum scholars have explored the relationship between sexuality and migration by connecting the fields of queer theory and migration studies (Cantú, 2009; Epps et al., 2005; Luibhéid, 2008). Eithne Luibhéid rightfully describes the literature on queer migration as "an unruly body of scholarship", as it is hard to identify a common denominator among the various publications in this field (2008, p. 169). Many queer migration scholars try to challenge the dominant ideas and frameworks that exist in the field of migration. Scholars address various topics, ranging from a focus on border controls (Holzberg et al., 2021) to legal and political analysis of the relationship between migration and sexuality (Ferreira, 2021; Wintemute, 2021). Several queer migration scholars have researched the experiences of queer migrants who have already arrived in a new country (Fassin & Salcedo, 2015; Marnell et al., 2021). Related to this, other queer migration researchers focus on integration (Mole, 2021; Patterson & Leurs, 2019) and queer diaspora (Manalansan, 2003; Stella & Gawlewicz, 2021; Wesling, 2008).

Within the field of queer migration, there has been an increasing focus on the asylum procedure that queer migrants have to go through in order to receive asylum. Several (Western) states offer queer migrants the opportunity to request asylum based on their sexual or gender identity (Mole, 2021, p. 2). This is based on the assumption that queer people are not safe in their country of origin, leading them to request asylum in a country that is assumed to be more accepting of their identity. Although this development seems to improve the safety of queer refugees, many academics have criticized the policies regarding queer asylum seekers (Giametta, 2020; Spruce, 2014). Several scholars address the issue of the 'credibility assessment', which requires queer asylum seekers to prove their sexuality and forces them to adjust to Western ideas of queerness and sexuality (Lopes Heimer, 2019; Perego, 2021). In line with this issue, queer asylum scholars have researched how the credibility assessment impacts queer asylum seekers and their identities (Dhoest, 2019; Singer, 2021). Although there has been increasing focus on queer asylum seekers, many academics solely address the legal aspects of asylum procedures and systems. Another important issue, the reception of queer asylum seekers,

which includes housing and support, remains understudied. My research will contribute to the body of literature focused on the reception of queer asylum seekers.

Authors that do focus on reception and asylum management issues mainly discuss the experiences of queer asylum seekers (McNeal & Brennan, 2021; Ropianyk & D'Agostino, 2021; Van der Pijl, et al., 2018). McNeal and Brennan (2021) emphasize the intersection of homonationalism and Islamophobia by comparing the experiences of queer Caribbean and Muslim asylum seekers in the Netherlands. In a similar vein, Ropianyk and D'Agostino (2021) focus on queer asylum through an analysis of how queer asylum seekers navigate Belgian reception centers. On the one hand, queer asylum seekers need to prove they are queer in order to receive asylum, but on the other hand, they often have to hide their sexuality from other asylum seekers, because they fear queerphobia (Ropianyk & D'Agostino, 2021, p. 62). The work of Van der Pijl et al. (2018) is different from other literature, because it focuses on a specific subgroup of queer migrants, namely transgender asylum seekers. They argue that transgender asylum seekers are often victimized, rather than being given equal rights and full citizenship (p. 2). In line with the findings of Ropianyk and D'Agostino, the authors find that transgender asylum seekers experience violence from other asylum seekers as well as from personnel in different ways (Van der Pijl et al., 2018, p. 14).

Although articles focusing on the experiences of queer asylum seekers contribute greatly to the academic debate, more research is needed to study how these experiences impact and are impacted by the policies and underlying discourse related to Western asylum systems. Research that connects violence against queer asylum seekers with broader societal discourses remains scarce. One exception is Quinan et al. (2021), who connect violence with securitization and homonationalism. They conducted five in-depth interviews with (former) queer asylum seekers and people working or volunteering for LGBTQ organizations. The authors argue that the Dutch government, Dutch media, and Dutch NGOs have created a narrative that depicts queer refugees as 'particularly vulnerable'. Additionally, the researchers argue that the Dutch government places the responsibility to prevent violence on queer asylum seekers themselves. The respondents perceive the Dutch state and people as tolerant and believe that others should receive education on Dutch values of acceptance (Quinan et al., 2021, p. 352). The authors argue that by framing queer asylum seekers as 'particularly vulnerable', the Dutch government reifies the homonationalist discourse of the Dutch government as savior of non-Western queer people (Quinan et al., 2021, p. 355). Finally, Quinan et al. argue that many (Dutch) people believe that full queer emancipation has already been achieved in the Netherlands, which makes it difficult to address queerphobia and heteronormative structures in Dutch society (p. 355). Their findings are relevant to my research, because they provide more insight into the relationship between violence against queer asylum seekers and Dutch identity.

Besides Quinan et al. (2021), few scholars have connected violence against queer asylum seekers with homonationalism. Their research is a first step towards filling that gap in the literature. However, there still remains a lot to be researched. They base their results mostly on interviews with non-governmental actors, such as volunteers (Quinan et al., 2021, p. 349). I will contribute to the work of Quinan et al. by focusing on the narratives of the Dutch government. By analyzing government documents and conducting interviews with COA employees, my research will be helpful in increasing the understanding of the relationship between violence against queer asylum seekers and the Dutch government's self-identity. Additionally, I will focus on the general narratives created by the government on a national level and on the policies in practice. By focusing on both elements, I will gain insight into the practical consequences of homonationalist discourse. One of the questions the research of Quinan et al. raises is how the Dutch government's self-identity interacts with violence against queer asylum seekers and how this interaction is reflected in the discourse and policies constructed by the government. Queer asylum seekers have experienced different forms of violence in Dutch reception facilities. Besides physical violence, queer asylum seekers can suffer from social isolation or other psychological issues, because they do not feel free in reception facilities (LGBT Asylum Support, 2020; Quinan et al., 2021, p. 348). My research will explore how these violent events shape the Dutch government's self-identity and how the self-identity shapes these violent events through discourse and policy. By focusing on the broader policy discourse that is constructed by the Dutch government, I broaden the current body of literature on queer asylum by steering the debate in the direction of how policy and discourse related to queer people are constructed. In order to increase the visibility of queer people in migration and conflict studies, it is essential to move beyond analyzing queer experiences by focusing on how these experiences relate to policy discourses and the actions of political actors.

2.2 Theoretical framework: Homonationalism

In order to connect violence against queer asylum seekers with Dutch policy discourses and the construction of the Dutch government's self-identity, I will be using the theory of homonationalism. This theory has been used by several queer migration and asylum scholars to analyze asylum procedures and the experiences of queer asylum seekers in 'Western' states (Hiller, 2022; Llewellyn, 2016; Lopes Heimer, 2019). Homonationalism, coined by Jasbir Puar (2017), refers to how Western societies employ 'sexual exceptionalism' to distinguish themselves from the Other. Through promoting queer rights in law and practice, for example through the legalization of gay marriage, some Western governments present themselves as queer-friendly. They promote an exceptional national homonormativity, which includes a particular ideal of queerness in the national identity. Although this identity is perceived as tolerant and inclusive, it excludes non-normative forms of queerness (Puar, 2017, p. 2). This form of 'sexual exceptionalism' distinguishes these societies from 'queerphobic' societies and presents Western societies as superior, which legitimizes xenophobic and

imperial activities. Puar employs the concept of homonationalism to analyze the construction of U.S. sexual exceptionalism in relation to the War on Terror. The conceptualization of homonationalism is based on two critical theories, namely queer theory and Orientalism.

Queer theory is critical in its aim to question the foundations of sexual identity, while simultaneously applying it to other phenomena, such as race, class, globalization, and migration (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 4). Many prominent queer theorists, such as Butler (1999) and Sedgwick (1991), have been influenced by the work of philosopher Michel Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1976), Foucault argued that "the society that emerged in the nineteenth century … put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning [sex]" (Foucault, 1976, p. 69). Rather than viewing sexual and gender identity as pre-existing classifications, Foucault claimed that these identities were constructed through discourse, knowledge, and power. The created norms confined sexuality within particular boundaries that excluded anything that 'deviated' from these norms (Foucault, 1976; McCann & Monaghan, 2020, pp. 24-27). The created norms were used to categorize sexual acts and connect them with 'invented' sexual identities. Although sexual acts between people of the same sex have always existed, homosexuality as an identity has not. Therefore, sexual identities such as homosexuality and heterosexuality are invented categorizations (Downing, 2008, p. 86; Foucault, 1976; McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 29).

Queer theorists have expanded on Foucault's theorization of sexuality by emphasizing that gender and sexual identity are fluid (Butler, 1999, p. 10; McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 123). By challenging ideas, norms, and power relations that constitute the status quo, queer theory positions itself as a fundamentally critical theory. Queer theory aims to challenge identity itself by challenging the assumption that there is unity and harmony within society, groups, and individuals (Phelan, 1997, p. 2). Queer scholars try to challenge normative dichotomies, such as heterosexuality/homosexuality and man/woman. Additionally, queer theorists criticize the hierarchical categorization of heterosexuality as 'natural' and homosexuality as 'deviant' (Browne & Nash, 2016, p. 5). Similar to Foucault, queer scholars argue that the existing norms and ideas regarding gender and sexuality are created through discourse. McCann and Monaghan (2020) explain that a discourse is a "way of talking that shape[s] how we think about and understand the world" (p. 24). By portraying sexual acts between people of the same sex as 'unhealthy' and 'sinful', and sexual acts between people of the different sex as 'normal' and 'morally permissible', a discourse is constructed that creates hierarchical identities and normative bodies (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 27).

Besides challenging normative assumptions that construct heterosexuality as superior to other sexualities, queer scholars have also criticized normative assumptions that construct a particular idea of what queerness should be. For example, 'homonormative' assumptions construct the image of the

‘normal gay’ who conforms to Western norms such as (gay) marriage (Puar, 2017, p. 29). The ‘normal gay’ is included in Western society, whereas queer people who do not conform to these norms are excluded (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 157). Through this homonormativity, ‘equality’ and ‘freedom’ become narrow concepts that only exist for a specific group of queer people (Duggan, 2002, p. 190). The norms that inform the homonormative ideal are based on white, Western, neo-liberal, and secular ideas about sexuality and queerness. This often excludes non-White and non-Western queer people from the dominant narrative (Puar, 2017, p. 29; Santos, 2013, p. 59). Some queer people are included in Western societies and are granted ‘sexual citizenship’, as they are now sexual-rights bearing citizens. Other, non-conforming, queer people remained excluded and invisible (Puar, 2017, pp. 11-13).

Western states present themselves as superior to other states by including a particular idea of queerness in their identity. This framing that distinguishes Western societies from other societies has been coined ‘sexual exceptionalism’ (Puar, 2017). Several queer scholars, including Bracke (2012), Sabsay (2012), and Puar (2017), have connected homonormativity and sexual exceptionalism with the theory of Orientalism, which was developed by Edward Said (1978). Orientalist thought distinguishes the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident’, which has impacted the way Orientalist scholars think about these regions (Said, 1978, pp. 12-16). Said showed how Orientalism has influenced the way the Global South, especially Asia and the Middle East, have been studied from a specific, often Eurocentric, perspective. The Occident and the Orient are often portrayed as opposing entities, in terms of good/evil, civilized/barbaric, rational/irrational, and progressive/backward respectively (Khalid, 2011, p. 17). These binaries have resulted in a particular understanding of race, gender, and sexuality in relation to the Orient. The Orient and the Occident are often defined in relation to masculinity, femininity, and sexuality (Khalid, 2011, pp. 18-20). Jasbir Puar connects Orientalism with homonormativity and queer theory by arguing that Western societies and governments justify imperial activities by framing (some) queer bodies as worthy of protection by Western states (Puar, 2013, p. 337).

Homonationalism is an analytical frame that can be used to research why (Western) states desire to be seen as ‘queer-friendly’ and how they construct this portrayal (Puar, 2017). Western discourse has pushed an Orientalist thought that constructs Western societies as tolerant and queer-friendly, while non-Western societies are constructed as intolerant and queerphobic. Western constructions, such as ‘coming out’, become markers for progressiveness and civilization (Dhawan, 2016, p. 54). While this narrative legitimizes increasing liberties and rights for a specific group of queer people, namely those in the West who conform to Western homonormative ideals, it hurts racialized Others who do not conform to these ideals. If they do not conform to these norms, they are rendered invisible. A prominent example, highlighted by Puar, is the queer Muslim. Puar emphasizes how queer Muslims

are often portrayed as victims of a ‘fundamentalist religion’ or as irrational actors. The constructed narrative assumes that queer people who live in an Islamic nation-state are oppressed and subjugated people who do not have any agency. Puar shows how the homonationalist discourse portrays Islam as a fundamentalist religion that is inherently queerphobic (2017, p. 13). The image of the oppressed queer body in a state that is inherently queerphobic legitimizes the ‘saving’ of queer people by the West. According to the homonationalist discourse, queer people are in desperate need of liberation and saving by the West. Homonationalism portrays Western countries as tolerant, progressive, and queer-friendly, while the Other, often the Global South, is portrayed as intolerant, conservative, and queer-phobic. This discourse reduces queer Others to passive victims who are in need of saving (Murray, 2020, p. 75; Sabsay, 2012, p. 610).

Despite the fact that Puar’s conceptualization of homonationalism has been used by a large number of scholars (Bracke, 2012; Colpani & Habed, 2014; McNeal & Brennan, 2021), Nikita Dhawan (2013, 2016) has criticized how Puar and others apply homonationalism. Similar to Puar, she problematizes how a discourse of sexual freedom has been used to stigmatize (religious) minorities in the West and even entire societies in the Global South. However, Dhawan criticizes Puar for only focusing on homophobia, queer racism, and homonationalism by Global North actors. Dhawan is of the opinion that the current queer academic discourse has made it difficult for scholars to address homophobia and heteronormativity in the postcolonial world and diasporic communities (2016, p. 51). She states that queerphobia in diasporic and postcolonial contexts is constructed as a consequence of and a reaction to Western imperialism and racism (Dhawan, 2013, p. 192). This has led Dhawan to argue for an anti-imperialist and antiracist critique that is accompanied by a critique of heteronormative structures in a postcolonial context (Dhawan, 2016, p. 51).

Dhawan argues that homonationalism is based on a unidimensional understanding of power and violence. She argues that Puar only acknowledges power and violence flowing from Western liberal states to the Global South, while, according to Dhawan, power and violence are deeply entangled and flow from multiple sources (Dhawan, 2016, p. 56). The focus on violence and power from the West ignores violence experienced by queer people in (or from) the Global South. According to Dhawan, this becomes visible in migration. Queer migrants seem to be caught between queerphobia and heteronormative assumptions in their own communities and the "racialized, classed, Orientalist, and heterosexist attitudes and practices” in the country they have migrated to (Dhawan, 2013, p. 209). This critique is important, because violence against queer asylum seekers is often perpetrated by other asylum seekers who are from the Global South. Although I will mostly look at the role of the Dutch government, the involvement of perpetrators from the Global South is not to be overlooked. This relates to Dhawan’s criticism of ‘state-phobia’. She argues that Puar does not only critique the state, but rejects any involvement with the state. According to Dhawan, any negotiation by queer people

with the state is seen as homonationalism. Dhawan finds that this state-phobia is too radical, because, although the state reproduces hetero- and homonormative structures, it can play a prominent role in protecting queer people (2016, p. 62). Therefore, it is necessary to critique state institutions, without fully rejecting the state. I argue that Dhawan's critique is essential to the case I am researching. Although homonationalism scholars might critique Western governments, these governments also play an important role in protecting queer asylum seekers, which should not be ignored.

Kehl (2020) aims to bridge the gap between Puar, who argues for a 'radical' approach regarding hetero- and homonormative assumptions, and Dhawan, who illustrates the importance of 'pragmatic' politics and the role of the state in protecting queer people (p. 22). One of the solutions Kehl proposes is to take a broader approach to power that would allow scholars to analyze the imperial and racist aspects of homonationalism, while emphasizing that both the imperial and the anticolonial are both heteronormative in nature. Kehl argues we need to move beyond binaries, such as normative/non-normative, because someone or something can not be understood through one fixed definition or meaning (2020, p. 27). Kehl's nuanced approach argues for awareness of ambivalence and complexities, while analyzing the implications of homonationalism (2020, p. 28). Similar to Kehl (2020), Weber (2016) argues that these binaries are less stable than they appear to be, which is why it is necessary to move beyond them (p. 16, 21). I argue that employing the theory of homonationalism should be done in a nuanced way. Throughout my research, it has become clear that this nuanced approach is useful to grasp the complex case of violence against queer asylum seekers.

In conclusion, homonationalism is a useful theory, because it helps me with understanding how the Dutch government portrays itself in relation to queer and non-queer asylum seekers. It is important to recognize the complexities and nuances that some homonationalism scholars seem to overlook. Although the work of Puar is essential to my research, the works of other critical scholars inspire me to explore the messy complexities of homonationalism and of violence against queer asylum seekers. I will highlight these nuances by not only focusing on the narratives that are constructed by the national government, but also by interviewing people who work in reception facilities and with queer asylum seekers. Their views will increase my understanding of how the interaction between violence and the Dutch government's self-identity operates in practice. In the conceptual framework, I will elaborate on how I will employ different concepts related to homonationalism to analyze this interaction.

2.3 Conceptual framework

To employ homonationalism as an analytical frame, I will elaborate on a few concepts that form the foundation of homonationalism. First, I will discuss racialization and sexual exceptionalism. Then, I will move on to the issue of agency and victimization, which relates to the depiction of queer people by homonationalist discourse.

Racialization, one of the fundamental elements of homonationalism, shows how a particular kind of queerness is included in the homonationalist discourse, in order to construct a dangerous and backward Other. Racialization is a process that extends a racial meaning to a social relationship, social practice, or group (Gans, 2017, p. 342; Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 111). Racialization often has negative consequences for the racialized entity, for example the stigmatizing or demonizing way immigrants are treated by a host state or society (Gans, 2017, p. 346). In the case of homonationalism, people, societies, and states in or from the Global South are often racialized. The rights of queer people are used to 'measure' how civilized a society is and to portray the often non-white Other as uncivilized, conservative, and queerphobic. This renders queer people from the Global South invisible (Kehl, 2020, pp. 29-30). I will use this concept to analyze how the Dutch government portrays asylum seekers from the Global South. A homonationalist discourse portrays asylum seekers as inherently queerphobic and dangerous. An important element that I will look out for is the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Representatives of the Dutch government referring to asylum seekers as intolerant or conservative, while simultaneously highlighting 'the Dutch tolerance', can be seen in the context of racialization.

Bracke (2012) shows how a homonationalist narrative is used to frame Others as dangerous to Western society. To illustrate this, she elaborates on 'homonostalgia', coined by Gloria Wekker (2016), which entails "a longing for a time when gay liberation could, allegedly, be taken for granted, that is, before it was under threat by Islam" (Bracke, 2012, p. 245). This connects the sexual exceptionalism of the Western identity, which Puar also discusses, with security: the Western identity is threatened by the Other (Puar, 2017, p. 20). I will use the concept of sexual exceptionalism to analyze if and how the Dutch government presents itself as superior to asylum seekers. A representative of the Dutch government who indicates that asylum seekers should be educated about Dutch values could be an example of sexual exceptionalism.

Homonationalist discourse pushes a narrative that victimizes queer people. Homonationalism emphasizes the sexual exceptionalism of 'gay-friendly' states: these states have 'liberated' queer people. Queer people in 'intolerant' states are portrayed as victims of oppressive and conservative regimes, which is why they need to be liberated by 'gay-friendly' states. This legitimizes imperial activities, such as the US War on Terror (Puar, 2017). Bracke (2012) shows how the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were justified based on a narrative that argued Middle Eastern women and queer people needed to be 'saved' (Bracke, 2012, p. 244). This narrative portrays women and queer people as passive victims of oppressive regimes. I will use the victimization concept to investigate how the Dutch government portrays queer asylum seekers and how it relates itself to queer asylum seekers.

The racialization and victimization of (queer) Others often block their agency. Throughout my research, I will use Connell's (1997) definition of agency: "the exercise of any measure of resistance and self-determination [...] to regain control in her life and in her attempt to stop the abuse she experiences" (p. 118). Connell focuses on violence against black women in Engels, however, her definition is applicable to my research as well. This definition is most closely related to how people deal with violence and violent situations. Several scholars have argued that racialization and victimization limit the agency of the racialized and victimized (Quinan et al., 2021; Raboin, 2016). Binaries such as victim/villain, tolerant/intolerant, and progressive/backward construct a social reality without any room for nuance. As Sabsay (2012) argues, Othering creates fixed cultural and sexual identities and binaries (p. 612). An example is the 'homosexual Other as white' and the 'racial Other as straight' (Puar, 2017, p. 32; Sabsay, 2012, p. 613). This results in the invisibility of queer people who do not conform to these categorizations. According to Wekker (2016), this is especially the case for queer migrants and refugees (p. 118). Although there are many examples of queer migrant and refugee movements, their work remains ignored by the dominant narratives. The constructed binaries impede queer Others' opportunity to share their own social reality, and therefore to claim their agency (Mainwaring, 2016, p. 290). I will use the concept of agency to analyze how the Dutch government views queer asylum seekers. Are they seen as passive victims or as autonomous agents? Or as something in between? I will especially focus on narratives that create a binary reality, which impacts the agency of queer asylum seekers.

Through employing the concepts outlined above, I am able to analyze the interaction between the Dutch government's self-identity and violence against queer asylum seekers. These concepts are derived from the theory of homonationalism, which informs the broader framework of my research. In the next chapters, I will discuss the analysis by employing this theory and these concepts. In *Chapter 3*, I will mostly employ racialization and sexual exceptionalism to analyze the portrayal of perpetrators of violence. *Chapter 4*, which is based on victimization and agency, is focused on the depiction of queer asylum seekers. In *Chapter 5*, I will connect these concepts with the Dutch government's view on its own responsibility in relation to violence against queer asylum seekers.

Chapter 3: Establishing a binary between perpetrators and saviors

In this chapter, I will focus on the Dutch government's self-identity in relation to (potential) perpetrators of violence against queer asylum seekers. Throughout the parliamentary documents and interviews, many different actors connect queerphobia with the 'conservative' religious and cultural identity of non-queer asylum seekers. This framing racializes non-queer asylum seekers, as they are portrayed as inherently queerphobic, which is why they are seen as (potential) perpetrators. This is contrasted by the depiction of the Dutch government and Dutch society as progressive and tolerant. The Dutch government constructs an identity based on sexual exceptionalism: 'We' do not tolerate discrimination and accept queer people, while 'they' are inherently queerphobic and therefore uncivilized. This homonationalist narrative results in policies aimed at educating asylum seekers about Dutch norms and values: the 'backward and dangerous' Other should be taught about what is normal in the Netherlands. Violence against queer asylum seekers is used to reify these constructed portrayals and identities. Although this is the constructed dominant narrative, I will argue that the reality is more blurry. Dutch employees can be insensitive to queer asylum seekers as well. In practice, several employees and volunteers acknowledge this complex reality. However, the members of the Dutch Cabinet present an oversimplified homonationalist narrative.

3.1 Constructing a racialized narrative

In the Dutch discourse on discrimination against queer asylum seekers, non-queer asylum seekers are often depicted as intolerant and backward. Their cultural and religious background is connected with intolerance. Representatives of the Dutch government, including the COA, as well as non-governmental actors, often refer to the religious background of perpetrators. In an interview in *Vreemdelingenvisie*, the COA magazine, an employee states that "[n]ine out of ten residents are not open to LGBTQ's, because of their religion." (Vreemdelingenvisie, 2018).[1] Especially the Islamic background of many refugees is associated with intolerance. A representative of a Dutch LGBTQ organization argued discrimination against queer people continues in reception facilities, because of the background of many asylum seekers:

> Most refugees come from countries where there has been war. You can guess which countries are active, those are often in the East, so Arab countries, people are often Muslim. Religion and lifestyle are often intertwined. So when they meet each other in reception facilities, they don't see that they are all victims. The discrimination continues. (Djedje, 2023).[2]

[1] "[n]egen op de tien bewoners staan niet open voor LHBTI's vanwege hun geloof."

[2] "De meeste vluchtelingen zijn mensen uit landen waar oorlog is geweest. Je kunt zo raden welke landen actief zijn, dat is vaak in het Oosten, dus Arabische landen, mensen zijn vaak moslim. Geloof en levensstijl is vaak verweven met elkaar. Dus als zij elkaar tegenkomen in zo'n azc, zien zij niet dat ze beiden slachtoffer zijn. De discriminatie gaat door."

This connection between religious background and violence against queer asylum seekers is made throughout the interviews and parliamentary documents. This connection racializes Islamic asylum seekers as a homogeneous group that is inherently queerphobic and dangerous (Gans, 2017, p. 346; Rahbari, 2021, p. 48). This connection is also made by the national government. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science, tasked with emancipation policy, argued that group norms can threaten individual freedom. She made an explicit connection to religious groups: "I focus my activities on supporting women and LGBTQs who want to break away from (religious) group norms." (Bussemaker, 2016).[3] The narrative that connects the religious background of the perpetrators with queerphobia presents perpetrators as a homogeneous group. Althoff (2020) researched the narratives about the sexual violence against women by refugees during New Year's Eve of 2015 in Cologne. She argued the narratives depicted the perpetrators as a homogeneous group that symbolizes all male refugees (p. 270). Similarly, the narratives in my case depict all Islamic asylum seekers as queerphobic, because the religious background of the perpetrators is connected with queerphobia.

The assumption that religion and intolerance are intertwined relates to Puar's focus on an 'Islam versus homosexuality' narrative, which portrays religious and racial communities as homophobic (2017, p. 15). According to Puar, the (white) secular norms about queerness contrast Western ideas about the Islam. She calls this 'queer secularity'. Homonationalists argue that there is no room for religion within queerness and no room for queerness within religion (Puar, 2017, p. 13). This binary narrative, that vilifies Islamic communities, is often used by right-wing politicians to reinforce their Islamophobic and anti-immigration rhetoric (Puar, 2017, p. 20). In parliamentary debates that focused on queer asylum seekers, this frame was repeatedly used by right-wing parties. A member of parliament for the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) stated the following:

> What is happening in reception facilities shows exactly what kind of evil culture this administration is bringing to the Netherlands. We see aggression against Christians. We see aggression against homosexuals. We see aggression against women. We see aggression against anyone who is not a Muslim. (Dutch House of Representatives, 2015c).[4]

There is a clear distinction made between 'us' (the Netherlands) and 'them' (Muslims). By referring to an 'evil culture' and aggression, asylum seekers with an Islamic background are presented as a threat. According to Pope (2017), this can be seen as Othering: the Other, in this case Islamic asylum

[3] "Daarom richt ik mijn activiteiten op het ondersteunen van vrouwen en LHBTI's die zich los willen maken van religieuze groepsnormen."

[4] "Wat er in asielzoekerscentra gebeurt, geeft precies aan wat voor kwaadaardige cultuur dit kabinet naar Nederland haalt. Wij zien agressie tegen christenen. Wij zien agressie tegen homoseksuelen. Wij zien agressie tegen vrouwen. Wij zien agressie tegen iedereen die geen moslim is."

seekers, is seen as a dangerous threat that needs to be feared (p. 59). Discrimination and violence against queer people, and other minorities, are directly connected with the Islam. The same politician used these Islamophobic representations to justify expelling migrants: "[T]he aggressors who attack and threaten gays and Christians in the asylum centers. Get rid of them immediately." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2016b).[5] The use of violence against queer asylum seekers to legitimize the vilification of Islamic migrants is in line with Puar's argument that racialized communities are put up against queer people (2017, p. 15). According to this homonationalist and Orientalist discourse, Islamic communities are inherently a threat to queer people. Violence against queer asylum seekers is used to perpetuate the black-and-white narrative of 'Islam versus homosexuality'.

Although Cabinet members do not explicitly make the same connection between religion and violence, as some right-wing parties do, they do contribute to the portrayal of perpetrators of violence as irrational, dangerous, and backward. For example, when a member of parliament suggested placing queer asylum seekers in separate facilities, the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration responded: "I think we would be rewarding the people who do not understand these times and who still need to improve in terms of modern attitudes." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2015d).[6] The Secretary of State argues that perpetrators of violence are backward and irrational. This frame presents the perpetrators as inferior to Dutch society (Pope, 2017, p. 59). Throughout several debates, Cabinet members speak negatively of perpetrators of violence. For example, the Secretary of State uses terms such as "morons" or "retarded" to describe the perpetrators (Dutch House of Representatives, 2015d, 2016b).[7] By using these offensive terms, the Secretary of State implies they are acting irrationally. These depictions of asylum seekers as irrational and backward relate to the Orientalist binaries that are often created by Western actors to illustrate their domination over non-Western entities. This creates an image of asylum seekers, and people from the Global South in general, that portrays them as inherently dangerous (Khalid, 2011, p. 20). In this way, violence against queer asylum seekers is used by the Dutch government, and other actors, to reinforce this negative depiction of migrants from the Global South.

Besides referring to violence against queer asylum seekers to portray other asylum seekers as a threat, the Dutch government also repeatedly argues that violence against queer people is not in line with Dutch culture and Dutch norms and values. An important value that is often associated with the Dutch identity is non-discrimination. In a debate in 2015, the Secretary of State pointed out that discrimination is something 'we' do not do: "I just want it to be clear to everyone that we do not

[5] "[D]e agressievelingen die in de azc's homo's en christenen belagen en bedreigen. Onmiddellijk weg ermee

[6] Ik denk dat we de mensen die deze tijd niet begrijpen en bij wie er qua moderne opvattingen nog een tandje bij moet, daarmee zouden belonen."

[7] "achterlijke hoofd"; "mentaal op een manier in elkaar"

discriminate here in the Netherlands, even to the people who have trouble accepting that and have to adapt." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2015d).[8] By emphasizing 'Dutch values', the Secretary of State argues the Netherlands is modern and civilized, in contrast to (potential) perpetrators, who are seen as backward. This homonationalist representation makes a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Lopes Heimer, 2019, p. 178). The government clearly states that violence against queer asylum seekers goes against everything the Dutch government stands for, namely values such as freedom and equality. According to the Minister of Security and Justice, discrimination does not match Dutch values: "As far as we are concerned, Dutch norms and values apply to everyone who stays in the Dutch reception as a refugee, in which, among other things, no distinction is justified on the basis of sexual orientation or gender." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2015c).[9] Discrimination and violence are not a part of the Dutch government's self-identity. This narrative is similar to Khalid's findings on gendered Orientalism in the War on Terror (2011). She argues the discourse on the US War on Terror depicts a 'dehumanized barbarian' and the 'paternalistic Western' (p. 21). This corresponds to my findings. The government's narrative creates the inherently queerphobic and dangerous non-queer asylum seeker and the progressive and protective government.

The 'us-versus-them' binary establishes the idea that (potential) perpetrators should not only be seen as a threat to just queer people, but to Dutch society as a whole. Violence against queer asylum seekers is used as an instrument by anti-immigration politicians to illustrate that asylum seekers cause problems in the Netherlands: "Because if there are more foreign intruders from Africa and the Middle East, there will be more violence, more crime, more unsafety, and therefore more violence against women, gays, Jews, and everything that makes our country beautiful and free" (Dutch House of Representatives, 2022).[10] According to this depiction, non-queer asylum seekers can also be dangerous outside of reception facilities. This reifies the frame of asylum seekers as a threatening homogeneous group (Althoff, 2020, p. 270; Khalid, 2011, p. 20) According to Puar, anti-Muslim prejudice and anti-immigrant rhetoric can be used to further the 'Islam versus homosexuality' narrative (2017, p. 19). Repeatedly, the Dutch government, and other actors, insist on Dutch values, such as equality. Consequently, political parties that are against immigration argue that non-queer asylum seekers do not have these same values, which is why they are seen as a threat to Dutch society.

[8] "Ik wil gewoon dat het voor iedereen duidelijk is dat wij hier in Nederland niet discrimineren, ook voor de mensen die moeite hebben om dat te accepteren en zich moeten aanpassen."

[9] "Wat ons betreft gelden voor iedereen die als vluchteling in de Nederlandse opvang verblijft, de Nederlandse normen en waarden, waarbij onder meer geen onderscheid gerechtvaardigd is naar seksuele geaardheid of geslacht."

[10] "Want hoe meer van die buitenlandse indringers uit Afrika en het Midden-Oosten, hoe meer geweld, hoe meer criminaliteit, hoe meer onveiligheid, hoe meer islam en dus hoe meer geweld tegen vrouwen, homo's, joden en alles wat ons land zo mooi en vrij maakt"

This ‘us-versus-them’ narrative corresponds to the findings of Quinan et al. (2021). They argue that the narrative that is created constructs a depiction of the general migrant as “inherently homophobic” (p. 346). Because of their cultural and religious background, many asylum seekers are seen as a threat to queer people, especially to queer asylum seekers. Based on the analyzed documents and conducted interviews, I argue that many different actors, including Cabinet members, COA employees, and politicians draw a connection between queerphobia and cultural or religious background. This narrative creates a racializing and generalizing portrayal of asylum seekers as intolerant and backward. This portrayal contrasts the image of the Dutch state and Dutch society as tolerant and progressive. Discrimination and violence against queer people oppose the values that the Dutch government supports. This rhetoric creates a binary reality. On the one hand, there are (potential) perpetrators, whose cultural and religious background supposedly explain their ideas about sexuality and gender identity. On the other hand, the Dutch government is presented as a beacon of progressiveness and acceptance. This binary informs the self-identity of the Dutch government that is based on ‘sexual exceptionalism’ (Bracke, 2012; Puar, 2017). According to this narrative, the Dutch government is inherently progressive, while the Other is inherently conservative (Quinan et al., 2021, p. 346). Bracke argues that this sexual exceptionalism is used to portray the Dutch government as superior to the Other, in this case to asylum seekers (2012, p. 245).

The constructed frame, informed by violence against queer asylum seekers, corresponds to broader anti-immigration rhetoric. Duffield (2008) argues that there is a distinction made between ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘developed’ life. Part of the ‘underdevelopment’ frame is depicting the Global South as an intolerant, conservative, and queerphobic world. This ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘uncivilized’ world forms a threat to the ‘civilized’ West. Migration towards the Global North is therefore seen as a threat, which legitimizes tight immigration control in the Global North (Duffield, 2008, pp. 152-154). Violence against queer people in the Global South or by people from the Global South is seen as an example of this ‘uncivilized’ world. Queer rights are increasingly seen as a benchmark of civilization, which means that the more rights queer people have, the more civilized a country or society is (Lopes Heimer, 2019, p. 178). According to this frame, violence against queer asylum seekers indicates how civilized other asylum seekers are, which is how it becomes part of a larger discourse concerning migration, human rights, and the relation and dynamics between the Global North and the Global South. In the next section, I will focus on how these constructed narratives are translated into actual policy and concrete measures.

3.2 ‘Sexual exceptionalism’ and educating asylum seekers

The contrast between the depiction of the Dutch government as an inherently tolerant actor and of the non-queer asylum seekers as inherently queerphobic reoccurs in the measures focused on asylum

seekers. These policies reflect how the Dutch government views itself as the civilized actor that should educate the 'conservative' and 'backward' non-queer asylum seekers.

Primarily, the Dutch government in general, and especially the COA, try to propagate that discrimination is against the law in the Netherlands. A national policy advisor of the COA highlighted that in reception facilities, the COA tries to "raise awareness about how we, in the Netherlands, think about being LGBTQ" (Anonymous D, 2023).[11] In many different locations, there are posters and flyers about events and organizations that are focused on the queer community. Another example is the pride flag. Officially, there are two days a year when every reception facility hoists the pride flag, but several reception facilities hoist the flag all year long. The LGBTQ contact person in Heerhugowaard explained why it is so important to the COA: "The goal is to show: we are also here for you, so if you have a question, come to us. We make it more visible, because the symbol of the pride flag is really important." (Kossen-Merse, 2023).[12] The pride flag and other symbols show to queer asylum seekers, but also to other asylum seekers, that it is normal and okay to identify as queer in the Netherlands. These symbols reinforce the sexual exceptionalism that constitutes the Dutch government's self-identity. The Dutch government sees itself as a progressive and benevolent actor that protects queer people (Bracke, 2012, p. 245).

Another measure is the organization of activities, which increases the visibility of queer people. On May 17, the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT), the COA organized an event for employees and queer asylum seekers throughout the Netherlands. The main objective was to inform and connect queer asylum seekers. On top of that, the contact person in Heerhugowaard emphasized that awareness and visibility towards other people was also an important objective: "One of the goals of IDAHOT was to show [people in] the surrounding area that a lot of queer people exist." (Kossen-Merse, 2023).[13] Furthermore, a contact person at the reception facility in Dronten explained that the role of the LGBTQ contact person is to increase awareness and visibility: "[T]hat is a part of [the role of] the LGBTQ contact person, normalizing it. We are in the Netherlands and this is normal, this is okay. It might not be normal or okay to you, but you are in the Netherlands and this is okay." (Cassidy, 2023).[14] The education of asylum seekers is based on the Dutch self-identity of acceptance and progressiveness. De Leeuw and Van Wichelen (2012) studied the

[11] "je ook medebewoners bewust laat zijn dat we in Nederland op deze manier kijken naar LHBTI"

[12] "Het doel ervan is eigenlijk om alleen maar te laten zien: we zijn er ook voor jullie, dus als je vragen hebt, kom, dat maken we dan zichtbaar, want de symboliek van de regenboogvlag is echt heel groot."

[13] "Dat was wel een beetje een van de doelen voor IDAHOT, om ook aan de omgeving te laten zien dat er heel veel LHBTI mensen bestaan."

[14] "[D]at is eigenlijk ook wel een deel van de contactpersoon LHBT, het normaliseren ervan. We zijn in Nederland en dit is gewoon, dit is oké. Het mag voor jou misschien niet gewoon zijn of oké, maar je bent in Nederland en dit is oké."

Dutch Integration Exam, which employs sexual freedom, individuality, gender equality, and freedom of speech as symbols of Dutchness (p. 195). Similarly, I have found that asylum seekers are taught about these Dutch values. This form of informing and educating asylum perpetuates the us-versus-them binary of civilized/uncivilized (Khalid, 2011, p. 20).

Besides these informal ways, there are also more structural and formal ways how the COA informs asylum seekers about Dutch norms and values. Especially on the national level, the COA and the Dutch government emphasize that asylum seekers receive information and education about Dutch values through conversations with employees in reception facilities. The focus is often on Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution, which forbids discrimination. For example, a national policy advisor stated the following: "What we do is emphasize Article 1 of the Constitution, this often happens in the first conversations with asylum seekers. We also propagate the values in the Netherlands and emphasize that discrimination is not allowed on any ground." (Anonymous D).[15] Orientalism and homonationalism literature often discuss that the constructed narratives result in a 'civilizing mission' (Khalid, 2011; Puar, 2017; Said, 1978). A prominent example is the War on Terror, which was legitimized on the grounds of 'saving' women and queer people (Khalid, 2011; Puar, 2017). Similarly, the Dutch government feels the need to 'save' queer asylum seekers and wants to educate non-queer asylum seekers.

The house rules of the COA, which have to be signed by all asylum seekers, are part of the education process:

> Article 1 of the Dutch constitution states that discrimination is prohibited. Discrimination on the grounds of religion, belief, political preference, race, gender, sexual orientation or any other reason is prohibited. This is a very important law for the COA, because many different people with various backgrounds should be able to live together at COA locations safely. (COA, 2020).[16]

All asylum seekers have to sign and agree with this prohibition of discrimination. The obligation to explicitly agree with the 'Dutch values' shows that the government wants to educate them (Bracke, 2012, p. 246; De Leeuw & Van Wichelen, 2012, p. 197). However, several participants argued that

[15] "Wat we doen is heel erg wijzen op Artikel 1 van de Grondwet, dat komt eigenlijk in de eerste gesprekken met bewoners altijd terug en dus ook dat we die waarden in Nederland hier uitdragen en dat we het ook belangrijk vinden dat discriminatie niet toegestaan is op welke grond dan ook."

[16] "In Artikel 1 van de Nederlandse grondwet staat dat discriminatie is verboden. Discriminatie vanwege godsdienst, levensovertuiging, politieke voorkeur, ras, geslacht, seksuele geaardheid, of welke grond dan ook, is niet toegestaan. Voor het COA is dit een heel belangrijke wet, omdat op COA-locaties heel veel verschillende mensen met verschillende achtergronden veilig moeten samenleven."

this formal education is not as elaborate as it appears to be. Two representatives of Dutch queer NGOs both stated that the COA does not focus enough on the education of asylum seekers: “When you enter an asylum center, there is not some kind of presentation about our country, like ‘when you come here in the Netherlands, you have to adapt’, no.” (Djedje, 2023).[17] Another representative argued that the signing process of the house rules is not as extensive and strict as it sounds: “Yes, they have to sign, but they sign without reading the document.” (Anonymous B).[18] According to this representative, there are voluntary activities, but there is barely any mandatory education about “how we live here, how we treat each other, what our laws are, what our duties are” (Anonymous B).[19] In conclusion, there seems to be a focus on informing asylum seekers, but this does not happen very elaborately in every facility.

Another way of educating asylum seekers happens after discrimination or violence has taken place, when the COA attempts to educate the perpetrator about what is and what is not allowed in the Netherlands. When an asylum seeker does not conform to Dutch norms and values, the government wants to teach them. This will often take place in the form of a conversation. In response to parliamentary questions in 2020, the Secretary of State explains that “in case of signals that may indicate unfair treatment, discrimination, etc., a conversation will be initiated with those involved in order to convey Dutch norms and values.” (Broekers-Knol, 2020a).[20] The LGBTQ contact person in Dronten explained that it is up to the COA to educate the non-queer asylum seeker after a conflict: “Why are you doing something? Why are you going up to that person and why do you react like that? But do you know what is and what is not allowed in the Netherlands? And do you know what the norm is here?” (Cassidy, 2023).[21] To stop and prevent violence against queer asylum seekers, the COA focuses on educating asylum seekers about Dutch values. This can be done by creating awareness through conversations and sanctions.

The emphasis on creating awareness and educating asylum seekers on Dutch values is in line with the constructed narrative that depicts asylum seekers as uncivilized people who threaten Dutch society. Violence against queer asylum seekers legitimizes an Orientalist narrative that instrumentalizes sexuality and gender identity as markers of civilization and modernity. The apparent lack of queer

[17] “Het is niet alsof wanneer je in een azc komt, dat er een soort presentatie wordt gegeven van dit is ons land, je komt hier in Nederland, je moet je aanpassen, nee.”

[18] “Ja, ze moeten tekenen, ze gaan het tekenen zonder te lezen.”

[19] “hoe wij hier leven, hoe we met elkaar omgaan, wat onze wetten zijn, wat onze plichten zijn”

[20] “bij signalen die erop kunnen duiden dat er sprake is van onheuse bejegening, discriminatie, etc. zal het gesprek met betrokkenen worden aangegaan om de Nederlandse normen en waarden over te brengen.”

[21] “Waarom doe jij iets? Waarom ga je op die persoon en waarom reageer je daar zo op? Maar weet je ook wel wat er in Nederland wel en niet mag en wel en niet kan. En wat hier de norm is?”

emancipation in non-Western cultures is used to prove the superiority of the Western world (Dhawan, 2013, p. 202). This leads to the need for a civilizing mission. The 'barbaric Other' needs to be taught how to be modern and civilized. When migrants from the Global South arrive, the Dutch government finds it important to inform them what Dutch norms and values are and how they should behave in the Netherlands. This should be seen in a broader, post-9/11 context. The Global South, especially the Islamic world, is seen as an uncivilized world that threatens the 'enlightened' West (Khalid, 2011, p. 26). Western actors argued they should civilize this world, which legitimized military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Additionally, all people from the Global South are seen as inferior and less emancipated, while the West is already civilized and fully emancipated. In the next section, I will discuss how this discourse oversimplifies the situation in reception facilities. The narrative that legitimizes 'civilizing' asylum seekers overlooks and ignores anything that opposes this constructed reality.

3.3 Complexities in practice

In the previous sections, I focused on how the Dutch government, together with other actors, creates a binary reality. Non-queer asylum seekers are depicted as inherently queerphobic threats, whereas the Dutch government is portrayed as a benevolent and progressive actor. The general discourse and policies align with the theory of homonationalism. However, I will argue in this section that the situation in reception facilities knows more complexity than the general discourse and policies.

The oversimplified narrative portrays the Netherlands and the Dutch people as inherently progressive and accepting, but this is not always the case. Several participants highlighted how people sometimes have unrealistic expectations of the Netherlands. A volunteer, who fled to the Netherlands himself stated: "Of course your rights here as a gay person are enshrined in the Constitution, but that is the Constitution. And this is reality." (Anonymous B).[22] Although queer people are protected by the Dutch constitution, there is still queerphobia in the Netherlands. The homonationalist narrative of the Netherlands as a safe and accepting country seems to be an oversimplified portrayal. This is in line with the argument by De Leeuw and Van Wichelen (2012) that the constructed Dutch identity is a homogenization of the many different people, identities, and cultures that constitute Dutch identity (p. 199). The contact person in the reception facility in Dronten illustrated that she has to disappoint queer asylum seekers sometimes:

> A queer resident who arrives here with the idea: 'I am in the Netherlands, I am in Europe, I am safe, I can and am allowed to do anything', will be disappointed, because that is not the

[22] "Tuurlijk zijn je rechten hier als homo verankerd in de grondwet, maar dat is de grondwet. En dit is de realiteit."

> case. The Netherlands is open and friendly and accepting, in general, but not everywhere. (Cassidy, 2023).[23]

Her statement reflects the constructed homonationalist narrative of the Netherlands as a progressive country, but also shows nuance. The recognition of Dutch queerphobia opposes the generalizing way that homonationalism operates (Puar, 2017, p. 19). Some of the people that work with asylum seekers are able to steer away from the oversimplified narrative by acknowledging the complex and messy Dutch identity.

The recognition of complexities also occurred during conversations about the insensitivity of COA employees. In the interviews that I conducted, several participants talked about how some COA employees can be insensitive when it comes to dealing with queer people. The contact person at the reception facility in Heerhugowaard argued that "[t]here are still groups of people within the COA, COA employees, who find it difficult that there exist gay, lesbian and transgender people." (Kossen-Merse, 2023).[24] The insensitivity of some COA employees contradicts the Dutch government's self-identity, which includes progressiveness and tolerance. De Leeuw and Van Wichelen (2012) found that the construction of Dutch identity ignores the plurality of the Dutch people (p. 199). Similarly, I have found that the 'us' in the us-versus-them narrative is not as homogeneous as it is made out to be in the general discourse. The heterogeneity of Dutch identity can be seen in the different approaches of COA employees. The LGBTQ contact person explained that this can sometimes cause conflict between employees who have different ideas about sexuality and gender identity: "[T]hat is a thing that can clash. Within the COA, there still exist strict Christian notions, or Islamic notions. As LGBTQ people, we still have to work a lot on this to get them on board." (Kossen-Merse, 2023).[25] Despite the official policies of the Dutch government and specifically the COA, some COA employees do not feel the same way about sexuality or gender identity as the Dutch government propagates. This reflects the heterogeneity of what constitutes 'Dutchness' (De Leeuw & Van Wichelen, 2012, p. 199). By acknowledging this heterogeneity, some of my interviewees emphasize the complexity of the situation in the reception facilities. This contrasts the generalizing and oversimplified narrative that I discussed in the previous sections.

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[23] "Een LHBTI bewoner die hier binnenkomt met het idee: 'ik ben in Nederland, ik ben in Europa, ik ben veilig, ik mag hier alles en ik kan hier alles', komt van een koude kermis thuis, want dat is niet zo. Nederland is open en vriendelijk en accepterend, over het algemeen, maar niet overal."

[24] "[e]r zijn nog steeds groepen mensen binnen het COA, COA-medewerkers, die het moeilijk vinden dat er homo's en lesbische mensen bestaan, en transgenders, en ook hoe je daarmee om moet gaan."

[25] "[E]n dat is best wel een dingetje wat kan botsen. Dus er heersen ook binnen het COA gewoon nog zware christelijke denkbeelden, of islamitische denkbeelden, waar wij als LHBTI'ers nog een slag moeten slaan om hun mee te krijgen."

While discussing how to address queerphobia among Dutch employees, several participants highlighted that Dutch government actors are a reflection of Dutch society. The national policy advisors of the COA argued that solving the issue of indifference and ignorance among COA employees is not easily done: "[I]n Dutch society there are still people with particular ideas [about queer people], you cannot immediately solve that." (Anonymous D).[26] Additionally, a spokesperson for 'Pink in Blue', which is the LGBTQ network within the Police Department, argued that there are still problems within the police: "The police is a reflection of society of course … There are quite a few colleagues who do not even realize how much discrimination is still taking place and how many distressing situations there actually are." (Anonymous A).[27] These examples contradict the Dutch government's identity as a 'savior' of queer people, which is an important element of homonationalism (Bracke, 2012, p. 247; Quinan et al., 2021, p. 347).

The insensitivity and indifference did not receive a lot of attention in parliamentary debates or parliamentary questions. One time a member of parliament addressed the issue of the insensitivity of some employees: "Even COA employees are not always as gay-friendly in their treatment of these asylum seekers." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2015b).[28] However, rather than asking the Minister to address this, she said: "So we have the task to teach essential values to newcomers, to asylum seekers." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2015b).[29] Although she did acknowledge that COA employees might be queerphobic, she did not question if the Dutch government would do something about this. In the dominant discourse, the issue of queerphobia in Dutch society remains overlooked. The focus on discrimination by the Other makes it difficult to address discrimination by the Dutch government or other Dutch actors. This is a consequence of homonationalism and sexual exceptionalism. As Puar states "the projection of homophobia onto other spaces enacts a clear disavowal of homophobia at 'home'." (2017, p. 95). By emphasizing the queerphobia of non-queer asylum seekers, the queerphobia of Dutch people is ignored and denied. The lack of attention to queerphobia among Dutch people reflects how the Dutch government and other political actors view the Netherlands as an inherently tolerant state.

Although the general discourse ignores these insensitivities, people 'on the ground' do acknowledge it. Some COA employees and volunteers of queer organizations acknowledge that not all employees

[26] "[H]et is in de Nederlandse maatschappij ook nog steeds zo dat mensen bepaalde opvattingen hebben over, dat kun je ook niet één, twee, drie oplossen."

[27] "De politie is natuurlijk ook een afspiegeling van de maatschappij … Er zullen zeker een aantal collega's zijn die zelf soms niet eens doorhebben hoeveel discriminatie er eigenlijk nog plaatsvindt en hoeveel schrijnende situaties er eigenlijk nog zijn."

[28] "Zelfs de COA-medewerkers zijn niet altijd even homovriendelijk in de bejegening van deze asielzoekers."

[29] "We hebben dus een taak om essentiële waarden bij te brengen aan nieuwkomers, asielzoekers."

are as accepting of queerness, which shows that there is room for accepting complexities. While they acknowledged Dutch people can be queerphobic, they also elaborated on the violence that queer asylum seekers experience. During the interviews and while reading and hearing about media reports and personal accounts of (former) queer asylum seekers, I have come across quite some horrific stories of queer asylum seekers being bullied and assaulted by other asylum seekers from the Global South: "A few got bullied, even in their own bungalow, they were being attacked with knives through the windows … these are real life-threatening situations." (Djedje, 2023).[30] Because of their sexuality or gender identity, queer asylum seekers sometimes are not able to live safely in reception facilities: "One boy, he said that I could share it, one time … two police officers were waiting for him. They said he should stay somewhere else that night, because sixteen men were waiting for him. Sixteen! Because he is homosexual." (Djedje, 2023).[31] These accounts show that the situation in reception facilities can be unsafe for queer asylum seekers. A policy advisor at the Dutch foundation Victim Support, who focuses on hate crimes, argued that queer refugees can be met with a lot of resistance: "The fact that you as queer refugee come to live here and think you are finally free is met with resistance from other refugees in a reception facility: 'my religion does not allow this' or 'I don't like this' or 'this is gross' or whatever." (Wagemakers, 2023).[32] The stories and experiences of some people working in the field or from queer refugees themselves seem to correspond to the constructed homonationalist narrative that racializes non-queer asylum seekers and depicts them as queerphobic.

Although there is queerphobia in diasporic and post-colonial communities, such as in reception facilities, homonationalism scholars focus on Orientalism, racism, and imperialism (Dhawan, 2013, p. 207). The homonationalism framework that was developed by Puar focuses on how Western actors portray themselves as enlightened and Global South actors as queerphobic. However, this framework does not seem to address queerphobia by people who are in or from the Global South. This difficulty relates to Dhawan's critique of homonationalism. Dhawan (2013) argues that many scholars, such as Puar, overlook queerphobia in post-colonial and diasporic communities by only focusing on Western states. She argues that queer scholarship has solely focused on homonationalism in the Global North and has remained silent on queerphobia in minority communities, such as migrant communities (p. 195, 207). Ritchie argues that the concept of homonationalism consists of several oversimplifications. He argues that within the homonationalism framework, power is reduced to a universalized

[30] "Een paar werden gepest, en zelfs in hun eigen bungalow werden ze via de ramen aangevallen met messen … het zijn echt levensbedreigende situaties."

[31] "Een jongen, hij zei ook van vertel het maar, een keer … werd hij opgewacht door twee agenten. Die zeiden dat hij ergens anders zou moeten logeren deze nacht, omdat zestien mannen hem stonden op te wachten. Zestien! Ja, omdat hij dan homoseksueel is."

[32] "Het feit dat jij als LHBTI vluchteling hier bent komen wonen en denkt nu ben ik vrij, dat stuit ook op weerklank van andere vluchtelingen in zo'n azc: 'maar dat mag niet van m'n geloof', of 'ik pik dit niet', of 'dit is vies', of whatever."

conception of racism (2015, p. 632). According to Dhawan's (2013, 2016) and Ritchie's (2015) critiques, homonationalism scholars seem to create an oversimplified depiction of state actors as monolithic, imperialist, and Orientalist actors.

These ideas about the power of the state take away the agency of diasporic communities from the Global South and portray them as people that are "passively moved" (Dhawan, 2013, p. 207). Although Western states target people from the Global South and contribute to their racialization, these people have agency and are thus capable of making their own decisions. This seems to be overlooked by homonationalism scholars. Homonationalism and the critiques of homonationalism both can create an oversimplified depiction of the people in and from the Global South. I agree with the critique of Dhawan and Ritchie, because my findings reflect the complex reality that they try to emphasize. Still, the framework of homonationalism remains useful to critique the homonationalist narrative that is constructed. The general discourse aligns with the theory of homonationalism, but the personal accounts of interviewees leave room for more complexity. This discrepancy between discourse and practice reflects the complex relationship between violence against queer asylum seekers and the Dutch government's self-identity.

3.4 Chapter conclusion

In conclusion, the Dutch government constructs an image of non-queer asylum seekers as a dangerous threat to queer asylum seekers and Dutch society. In the general discourse, non-queer asylum seekers are racialized and portrayed as irrational, backward, and conservative. Especially those with an Islamic background are depicted as a threat to queer people and Dutch values. Simultaneously, the Dutch government views itself as an actor that is accepting of and welcoming to queer asylum seekers. This self-identity is a form of sexual exceptionalism: the government sees itself as superior to (potential) perpetrators, because of its progressive and tolerant discourse and policies. This homonationalist narrative creates a black-and-white reality that is based on an us-versus-them binary. The discourse has resulted in policies aimed at informing and educating asylum seekers on Dutch norms and values. Although the way these measures are implemented is not the same in all reception facilities, it shows how the Dutch government sees itself as an actor that needs to civilize others. This is based on the Orientalist thought that the West is superior to other regions in the world. In contrast, many people working with asylum seekers realize this constructed binary is an oversimplified reality. The situation in reception facilities is more blurry than it is made out to be. For example, employees can be insensitive or indifferent. Therefore, I have argued that the complexities in practice move beyond the homonationalist narrative. However, this nuanced reality is not the narrative that the Dutch government tries to construct. In public statements, such as on the COA website or in parliamentary documents, the Dutch government paints a black-and-white picture. Violence against queer asylum seekers is used to reinforce a frame of migrants from the Global South as dangerous and threatening

and Dutch society as tolerant and accepting. This narrative portrays a binary image of the asylum system, while reality is more nuanced. In the next chapter, I will focus on how the Dutch government views queer asylum seekers. The way that the Dutch government depicts itself and non-queer asylum seekers raises the question of how queer asylum seekers themselves fit into this narrative.

Chapter 4: Finding the balance between victimization and agency

While the previous chapter focused on the Dutch government's self-identity in relation to the (potential) perpetrators of violence, this chapter focuses on how the identity of the Dutch government is shaped by its interactions with (potential) 'victims', namely queer asylum seekers. I will argue that there is a tension within the self-identity of the Dutch government. The government sees queer asylum seekers as vulnerable victims. This frame legitimizes the Dutch government as a 'savior' of these people. Contrastingly, the government emphasizes the individuality of Dutch society and identity. This individual approach recognizes queer asylum seekers as a heterogeneous group of autonomous agents. The struggle between victimizing queer asylum seekers and acknowledging their agency reflects the tension between the Dutch government as a protective savior and as an advocate for individual freedom. Firstly, I will focus on how the Dutch government constructs a victimization narrative. Secondly, I will elaborate on the aim to respect the agency and heterogeneity of queer asylum seekers, which is a result of the room for individual assessment in COA policy. Thirdly, I will focus on how the discourse and policies reflect the broader tension of individuality and protection. Finally, I will discuss the issue of separate facilities, which illustrates how the Dutch government struggles with this tension.

4.1 Victimization of queer asylum seekers

The constructed discourse emphasizes the vulnerability of queer asylum seekers. For example, when asked about the safety of queer people in the asylum system, the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration responds that the government pays extra attention "[t]o vulnerable groups, including the LGBTs" (Teeven, 2013a).[33] Quinan et al. (2021) state that this portrayal of vulnerability is instrumental in making a distinction between 'vulnerable' bodies (victims) and 'threatening' bodies (perpetrators) (p. 350). Because of their identity, queer asylum seekers are seen as vulnerable victims. The Secretary of State explained that the COA looks out for potential vulnerability of asylum seekers: "This potential vulnerability can be present as a consequence of age, gender, health, belief, sexual orientation, et cetera." (Broekers-Knol, 2020b).[34] The sexual orientation or gender identity of an asylum seeker is a clear reason for government employees to keep an eye on them.

Throughout parliamentary debates and documents, Cabinet members often portray the entire group of queer asylum seekers as potential victims. While discussing the safety of queer asylum seekers and asylum seekers that converted to Christianity, the Secretary of State claimed:

[33] "[a]an kwetsbare groepen, waaronder LHBT's"

[34] "De mogelijke kwetsbaarheid kan aanwezig zijn als gevolg van leeftijd, sekse, gezondheid, levensovertuiging, seksuele geaardheid, etc."

> I recognize the observation that in the reception facilities of the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) there are categories of asylum seekers who are more at risk than others of becoming victims of incidents and/or discrimination. (Teeven, 2013b).[35]

Quinan et al. argue that this constant connection with vulnerability is dangerous, as it is often associated with victimhood and dependency (2021, p. 350). This frame of victimization erases the heterogeneity of asylum seekers. Their different identities, experiences, and perspectives are actively removed in the constructed narrative. Van der Pijl et al. (2018) argue that violence against particular minorities, such as transgender asylum seekers, is rendered invisible due to this homogenizing narrative (p. 20). This narrative can also be seen in a debate about international negotiations on migration. The Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation explained that the Dutch government advocated for "the position of vulnerable refugees, including religious minorities, people from the LGBTQ community, and women and children in a vulnerable position." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2019).[36] The victimization narrative generalizes queer asylum seekers as a group that is inherently vulnerable.

The position of queer people as 'vulnerable' distinguishes them from other asylum seekers. Quinan et al. (2021) argue that this is essential to the broader narrative that the government tries to construct. In order to construct a victim/perpetrator binary, there needs to be a clear distinction between queer asylum seekers and other asylum seekers (p. 350). The classification of queer people as vulnerable is a part of the constructed homonationalist narrative. Queer asylum seekers are portrayed as vulnerable and potential victims, while non-queer asylum seekers are seen as dangerous and as potential perpetrators. Mainwaring (2016), who researched narratives regarding migration across the Mediterranean, argues that a polarized victim/perpetrator narrative is constructed. This narrative erases migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers who do not fit with this narrative. In the case of queer asylum seekers, the narrative portrays them as a homogeneous group of passive victims.

The construction of the 'vulnerable victim' frame is necessary for the construction of a homonationalist narrative with the Other as a dangerous perpetrator (Puar, 2017, p. 43; Raboin, 2016, p. 43). Consequently, the homonationalist narrative legitimizes the Dutch government, the COA specifically, as an actor that should protect queer asylum seekers. In an interview on the website of the COA between a COA employee and a lesbian asylum seeker, the COA is presented as an actor that

[35] "Ik herken de constatering dat zich in de opvanglocaties van het Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers (COA) categorieën asielzoekers bevinden die meer dan anderen een risico lopen om slachtoffer te worden van incidenten en/of discriminatie."

[36] "de positie van kwetsbare vluchtelingen, waaronder religieuze minderheden, mensen uit de lhbtq-gemeenschap en vrouwen en meisjes in een kwetsbare positie."

tries to protect queer asylum seekers. The interviewees argue that the COA does a lot for queer asylum seekers: "We hoist the rainbow flag, we invite LGBTQs for a conversation, … help them out when they struggle with something." (Vreemdelingenvisie, 2018).[37] The victimization of queer asylum seekers is used to highlight the progressive stance of the Dutch government. By promoting a queer-friendly identity, the Dutch government tasks itself with 'liberating' queer people across the world (Sabsay, 2012, pp. 609-611). On its website, the COA presents itself as an accepting actor that allows queer asylum seekers to be themselves.

This progressive portrayal of the COA and the Dutch government becomes visible in parliamentary documents as well. In 2016, several political parties proposed to install an external confidentiality counselor. For example, a member of parliament of the liberal party D66 stated in a motion: "[D66] calls on the government to ensure that such specific, specialized, independent confidential counselors and complaints officers are present at every (emergency) reception location for asylum seekers." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2016a).[38] However, the government refused to meet their request. The Secretary of State argued that every COA employee could be trusted by asylum seekers. According to the Secretary of State, this should be sufficient:

> In this way, in my opinion, the confidentiality function at COA locations is adequately safeguarded. Therefore, I see no need for the establishment of one independent confidentiality counselor. This would be at the expense of the expertise already present at the facilities and would not be in the interests of the residents. (Dijkhoff, 2016c).[39]

This statement implies that all COA employees are able to protect queer asylum seekers. This is based on the assumption that the Dutch government and its employees are enlightened and benevolent (Quinan et al., 2021, p. 353).

When queer asylum seekers are constantly portrayed as potential victims, the Dutch government creates an image of itself as a savior of queer people. According to the government, this group deserves specific attention from the COA, as they are seen as exceptionally vulnerable. The COA finds it important to make sure that queer asylum seekers are safe in reception facilities. As a national policy advisor pointed out: "So we do think it is very important that LGBTQ residents can come to all

[37] "Wij hangen de regenboogvlag op, nodigen LHBTI's uit voor een gesprek, … staan voor ze klaar als ze ergens mee zitten."

[38] "[D66] verzoekt de regering, ervoor te zorgen dat er op elke (nood)opvanglocatie voor asielzoekers dergelijke specifieke, gespecialiseerde, onafhankelijke vertrouwenspersonen en klachtenfunctionarissen aanwezig."

[39] "Op deze wijze is naar mijn mening de vertrouwensfunctie op COA-locaties adequaat geborgd. Ik zie dan ook geen noodzaak in het instellen van één onafhankelijke vertrouwenspersoon. Dit zou ten koste gaan van de expertise die reeds aanwezig is op de locaties en niet in het belang zijn van de bewoners."

employees" (Anonymous E, 2023).[40] Representatives perceive the COA as an actor that should protect all queer asylum seekers. Through this narrative, the victimization of queer asylum seekers becomes part of a broader discourse of saviorism. As Bracke (2012) argues, the Dutch government constructs a 'saving gays' narrative that portrays the Dutch government as the savior of queer people (p. 245). This saviorism relates to sexual exceptionalism, as coined by Puar (2017, p. 3). Homonationalism constructs Western entities as exceptional and superior, because of their acceptance of queerness. In this case, the Dutch government is seen as exceptional because it is seen as a savior of queer people. The victimization of queer asylum seekers is an important factor in how the Dutch government sees itself as a benevolent actor that tries to rescue queer people.

4.2 Vulnerability in practice: Room for individual assessment

The victimization narrative is a generalizing narrative that contributes to a black-and-white victim/perpetrator/savior discourse. This raises the question how the victimization narrative shapes the policies in practice. Scholarly debates often discuss the victimization/agency binary (Ghorashi, 2005; Quinan et al., 2021; Rostami Povey, 2003). Rostami Povey researched women in Kabul to analyze how women experience conflict and violence. She describes a contrast between Afghan women as 'active social participants' and 'passive victims' (2003, p. 266). Similarly, Quinan et al., argue that the victimization of queer asylum seekers makes them dependent on others and strips them of their agency (2021, p. 350). This is based on the work of Raboin (2016), who argues that feelings of sympathy can legitimize support for a specific group, but it also takes away their agency (p. 144). Based on these arguments, I expected that the general discourse, as constructed by the Dutch government, would erase the agency of queer asylum seekers. However, I will argue that there is room for agency within the victimization narrative.

Despite the generalizing victimization narrative, the COA does not have many national measures in regard to queer asylum seekers. The COA has a general policy for all 'vulnerable' groups, but not specifically for queer asylum seekers. A policy advisor stated:

> In principle, the COA does not have a target group policy, so LGBTQ is not a specific target group, but we do look at people who are in an extra vulnerable position for certain reasons, so that includes children or unaccompanied minors, for example, and LGBTQ also falls in the category of that extra vulnerable position. (Anonymous E, 2023).[41]

[40] "Dus we vinden het wel heel belangrijk dat LHBTI bewoners bij alle medewerkers terecht kunnen"

[41] "Het COA heeft in principe geen doelgroepenbeleid, dus LHBTI is geen specifieke doelgroep, maar we kijken wel naar mensen die om bepaalde redenen in een extra kwetsbare positie staan, dus dat zijn bijvoorbeeld ook kinderen of alleenstaande minderjarigen en LHBTI valt ook onder die extra kwetsbare positie."

The absence of a clear set of rules or measures aimed at this group results in more freedom for COA employees to decide how to deal with the assumed vulnerabilities of queer asylum seekers. Through this flexible policy, the generalizing effect of the victimization narrative is limited. This aligns with the argument of Allsopp (2017), who researched masculinity among refugees. She problematizes the generalizing power of the victim/agency binary (p. 169). The Dutch government's policy moves beyond this binary and shows there is room for vulnerability and agency simultaneously. The Secretary of State explains that the COA recognizes the vulnerability of queer asylum seekers, but it is assessed on an individual level: "[T]here must be individual characteristics or circumstances that put a person at particular risk." (Broekers-Knol, 2021).[42] The fact that there is room for individual assessment seems to oppose the victimization of queer asylum seekers. This might be a reflection of a broader tension in how the Dutch government deals with queer asylum seekers. On the one hand, the Dutch government sees itself as the savior of queer people, which is why queer asylum seekers are victimized. On the other hand, the Dutch government sees itself as a liberal government that holds autonomy and individuality in high regard, which is why there is no policy for specific 'vulnerable' groups.

This tension is reflected in the installment of 'LGBTQ contact persons' at every reception facility, which is one of the few examples of a national measure related to queer asylum seekers. This contact person has a wide variety of tasks and roles. The contact person in Heerhugowaard explained that once the COA finds out an asylum seeker identifies as queer, they will be invited to an introductory interview:

> In that introductory interview, we give different kinds of information, … we mainly do referrals, when it comes to medical issues to the GZA, and we explain about the GGD, so that you can go there for vaccinations, for tests, for explanations about taking medicine. (Kossen-Merse, 2023).[43]

This is a reflection of the victimization narrative, which distinguishes victims from perpetrators (Quinan et al., 2021, p. 350). Because of their 'different' identity, they get a different treatment. The function of the contact person is inherently connected with the assumed vulnerability of queer asylum seekers.

[42] "[E]r dient daarvoor sprake te zijn van individuele kenmerken of omstandigheden waardoor een persoon een bijzonder risico loopt."

[43] "In dat kennismakingsgesprek geven we verschillende soorten informatie, … dus we verwijzen vooral door, als het gaat om medisch naar de GZA, en we leggen uit over de GGD, dus dat je daar terecht kan voor vaccinaties, voor testen, voor uitleg over medicijngebruik."

Despite this connection with the assumed vulnerability, the role of the LGBTQ contact person leaves room for the autonomy and agency of queer asylum seekers. One of the national policy advisors stated:

> So we do not say: LGBTQ is a vulnerable group, we have a particular policy for them. However, we do look at what an individual needs. So, when we know that someone is extra vulnerable, and there is a preference to be placed with other LGBTQ persons, for example, then we are going to attempt to take that into account as much as possible (Anonymous D, 2023).[44]

This shows that there is room for individual assessment. Ghorashi et al. (2018) state that a lack of resources and knowledge limits the agency of asylum seekers (p. 385). Through the LGBTQ contact person, queer asylum seekers are able to gain more knowledge and resources. Therefore, queer asylum seekers gain more autonomy and opportunities to make their own decisions. The COA creates possibilities for them to get information, attend events and develop their identities. The idea of an 'LGBTQ contact person' is tied to the assumed vulnerability of queer asylum seekers, but the presence of individual assessment is based on their autonomy and individuality.

The flexibility of the LGBTQ contact person position creates room for the contact person to support queer asylum seekers in an individual way. For example, the LGBTQ contact person in the reception facility in Dronten said:

> We really act based on the questions that the resident has. One question is very different from another. One [resident] wants to talk to the contact person, for example, about all kinds of things, then we are going to look at what we can facilitate." (Cassidy, 2023).[45]

The LGBTQ contact persons are aware of the diverse requests and needs that queer asylum seekers can have. The way that the COA tries to take into account individual needs seems to contradict the argument that victimization denies the agency or autonomy of the 'victims'. Authors such as Quinan et al. (2021), Mainwaring (2016), and Agustín (2003) argue that a victimization narrative erases the agency of queer people, because it is a generalizing narrative that produces how 'victims' should act and feel. However, the position and functioning of the LGBTQ contact person, which is a product of

[44] "Dus we zeggen niet: LHBTI is een kwetsbare doelgroep, we hebben daar een bepaald beleid voor. Maar we kijken wel naar wat een individu nou nodig heeft. Dus als we weten van iemand dat die extra kwetsbaar is en bijvoorbeeld dat er een voorkeur is om samen geplaatst te worden met andere LHBTI personen, dan gaan we proberen daar zo veel mogelijk rekening mee te houden"

[45] "En we gaan echt uit op de vragen die de bewoner heeft. De ene vraag is echt heel anders dan de andere. De ene wil heel graag met bijvoorbeeld de contactpersoon praten over van alles, dan kijken wat we daarin kunnen faciliteren."

the vulnerability/victimization narrative, creates room for queer asylum seekers to claim their agency and for COA employees to counter the victimization narrative. Allsopp (2017), who researched depictions of male refugees, argues that male refugees cannot be cast as "either victims or soldiers" (p. 155). Although refugees might be vulnerable, they can still be agentic. Similar to Allsopp, I argue that even within the victimization frame, there is room for the agency of queer asylum seekers.

In conclusion, my research shows that one of the main consequences of the victimization narrative, namely the LGBTQ contact person, contradicts this narrative. The general discourse portrays queer asylum seekers as inherently vulnerable, which is why they need extra attention. This has resulted in the installment of the LGBTQ contact person. However, this contact person has space to provide queer asylum seekers with tailored support. Therefore, the policy in practice is more respectful of the agency of queer asylum seekers. The way the Dutch government tries to balance victimization and agency shows a tension in the policy and identity of the Dutch government. The Dutch government sees itself as the savior of queer people, but also tries to respect their individual identities and agency. In the next paragraph, I will elaborate more on this tension by delving into the balance between protection and individual freedom.

4.3 Tension between individuality and protection

The COA employees who were interviewed recognize and encourage the individual freedom and autonomy of queer asylum seekers. These employees try to support queer asylum seekers by connecting them with other queer asylum seekers and with the queer community in the Netherlands. The contact person in Dronten explained that they help queer asylum seekers with building a network in the Netherlands:

> [B]ut also just socializing, just sitting together, having a drink together, just bonding. People who may have decided 'I am part of the club, but I do not dare to express it yet, but I do want to go to a gathering where everyone has the same mindset'" (Cassidy, 2023).[46]

By organizing activities, the contact person tries to respect the differences among queer asylum seekers as much as possible. The individual needs and requests illustrate the heterogeneity of queer asylum seekers. This connects with the argument of Fineman (2008) that vulnerability is individual. Although queer people might be more at risk of experiencing discrimination, or violence in reception facilities than others, this 'vulnerability' is experienced individually. Vulnerability is influenced by the resources, experiences and identities a person possesses (Fineman, 2008, p. 10). This is reflected in

[46] "[M]aar ook gewoon gezellig, gewoon gezellig met elkaar zitten, iets met elkaar drinken, gewoon binding. Mensen die misschien voor zichzelf al wel hebben besloten 'ik hoor bij de club, maar ik durf het nog niet te uiten, maar ik durf wel naar een bijeenkomst, waar iedereen dezelfde mindset heeft'."

the COA policies. For example, in the reception facility in Dronten queer asylum seekers can be placed together in a special 'LGBTQ unit', but not all queer asylum seekers want to make their identity known in that way. The contact person stated: "[A]nd we also have around ten or twenty 'quiet residents'. So the COA knows it, but for the rest it is enough like this: 'let me take a small step'." (Cassidy, 2023).[47] The COA employees in this facility try to support people in expressing their queerness in the way they prefer. With this policy, these employees create room for non-normative queer bodies to develop and express themselves in the way they desire. These employees move beyond homonormative assumptions of queerness. Duggan (2002) argues that homonormativity narrows 'equality' to a particular form of queerness. Only queer people who conform to Western, white, and secular assumptions of queerness are accepted (p. 190). However, the way that the COA addresses non-normativity moves beyond this narrow scope of what sexuality and queerness entails.

The focus on individual freedom reflects the individualistic nature of the Dutch government's identity. Several of the most influential Dutch political parties are liberal parties; they advocate for individual self-development in Dutch society (Voerman, 2019, p. 84). According to these liberal voices, people should be able to make their own decisions without interference from the government. This is reflected in the way that the COA respects the individual choices of queer asylum seekers regarding self-expression. The contact person in Dronten emphasized the importance of self-expression:

> They are all asylum seekers, but there is a click [among queer asylum seekers]: 'You are the same as me. We kind of go through the same process, because where you came from [queerness] is not okay, where I came from it's not okay. Now we can be ourselves.' We try to emphasize the bit about being yourself. You can be very much yourself." (Cassidy, 2023).[48]

The contact person argued that queer asylum seekers are free to be themselves. They can decide how they express themselves, which shows how the COA respects their agency. This fits with the homonationalist narrative that these queer people have been 'saved' by the Dutch government and can now express themselves fully (Bracke, 2012, p. 244). Although the Dutch government acknowledges the agency of queer asylum seekers by respecting their individual autonomy and freedom, it is in line with the victimization narrative. According to this narrative, these queer people were victims, but are

[47] "[E]n dan hebben ook wel tien tot twintig stille bewoners. Dus voor COA, jullie weten het, maar voor de rest is het zo even genoeg. Laat mij een klein stapje zetten'."

[48] "Ze zijn allemaal asielzoeker, maar die klik is er dan [bij LHBTI asielzoekers]: 'Jij bent hetzelfde als mij. We gaan eigenlijk een soort van hetzelfde proces door, want waar jij vandaan kwam is het niet oké, en waar ik vandaan kwam ook niet. Nu kunnen we onszelf zijn.' Het stukje nu kunnen we onszelf zijn proberen we ook te benadrukken. Je mag heel erg jezelf zijn."

now ‘saved’ by the Dutch government, which means that they are now able to express themselves in any way they want.

The room for individuality in the behavior of queer asylum seekers also impacts how the Dutch government addresses the consequences of this behavior. Several participants expressed that queer asylum seekers should not be surprised when they experience violence or intimidation, because of the way they dress or behave. A volunteer stated: “[S]o maybe you shouldn’t walk with painted nails, not with make-up, not with a dress and in heels, as a guy. … [I]f you wear a short skirt as a gay man … maybe that’s asking for difficulties.” (Anonymous B, 2023).[49] The individualistic nature of Dutch society gives people the freedom to express themselves, but it also means they will have to face the consequences by themselves. A contact person also expressed that queer asylum seekers shouldn’t expect the COA to solve this:

> You can be yourself, it’s great that you feel comfortable [with yourself], but you are going to get a reaction. Be aware of that and don’t come and complain to us. Yes, of course you can come and complain, … but you don’t have to come and expect anyone to have no reaction to that.” (Cassidy, 2023).[50]

This rhetoric shifts the responsibility to queer asylum seekers: they should not expect the COA to prevent any negative reactions. Quinan et al. (2021) noticed this ‘rhetoric of culpability’ as well. They argue that queer asylum seekers are tasked with keeping a ‘low profile’ and being ‘discreet’. This individualization of violence reinforces isolation and self-blame, which in turn reinforces feelings of unsafety (p. 354). The interviews show that some COA employees respect the individual freedom of queer asylum seekers, but also try to inform them about the possible consequences of expressing their queer identity visibly. A volunteer explained: “But they [COA] also say to LGBTQs: take into account that this is not our society and that these people have to adjust” (Djedje, 2023).[51] It seems that some COA employees argue that queer asylum seekers should express their identity discreetly, in order to prevent violence. Similarly, Ropianyk and D’Agostino (2021) found that many queer asylum seekers decide to stay discreet. Although this is a decision made by the asylum seekers themselves, they are forced into a situation where that is the only way to stay safe (p. 64). This shifts the responsibility of

[49] “[D]us misschien moet je niet met gelakte nagels lopen, niet met make-up, niet met een jurkje en op hakken als kerel. … [A]ls je met een kort rokje als homo, dan is het misschien toch vragen om moeilijkheden.”

[50] “Je mag jezelf zijn, heel goed dat jij je comfortabel voelt, maar hier ga jij een reactie op krijgen. Wees je daarvan bewust en kom dan ook niet bij ons klagen. Ja, natuurlijk mag je komen klagen, [...], maar dan hoef je ook niet meer te komen verwachten dat iemand daar geen reactie op heeft.”

[51] “Maar ze zeggen ook wel tegen LHBTI+’s: houd ook rekening met het feit dat dit niet onze samenleving is en dat die mensen ook moeten adjusteren”

preventing violence and providing safety from the government to queer asylum seekers themselves. I will further explore the shift of responsibility in the next chapter.

The 'individualistic' approach to queer asylum seekers opposes the 'protective' nature of the victimization narrative. This discrepancy suggests a broader tension in the identity of the Dutch government and the Dutch identity overall. From 2013 until 2023, there have been five political parties in power. The largest political party, the VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), is an outspoken liberal party that advocates for self-development and individuality. For example, Malik Azmani, member of parliament for the VVD, argued: "One thing that we stand for is the freedom to be who you are allowed to be. This includes respect for all LGBT people in this country." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2015c).[52] The VVD clearly views individuality and freedom as core values of the Dutch identity. These core values can be understood as the Dutch government respecting individual freedom, but leaving queer asylum seekers to face the consequences of expressing their queerness on their own. The way that individuality and freedom are connected with sexuality shows how sexuality is incorporated into Dutch identity. According to this narrative, an essential part of Dutch identity is freedom of self-expression (Mepschen & Duyvendak, 2012, p. 6). Other political parties, such as the social democrats or Christian parties, have a more communal and social identity. Joël Voordewind, a member of parliament for the ChristenUnie (Christian Union), emphasized that the Dutch government should do more to protect minorities:

> There comes a time when we have to protect these people and there may have to be separate shelters for women, gays, and Christians. … My heart goes out to the people who are threatened and harassed and taken from their beds at night." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2016c).[53]

These calls for protection reinforce the vulnerability frame, which frames queer asylum seekers as vulnerable people that need to be saved by the Dutch government (Quinan et al., 2021, p. 350). The different political beliefs about the role of the Dutch government reflect the inconsistency of a policy that tries to encourage individual freedom, but also victimizes queer asylum seekers.

To summarize, the government's policy of respecting the individual freedom and agency of queer asylum seekers contradicts the victimization narrative. COA employees acknowledge and respect that

[52] "Een ding waarvoor wij staan is de vrijheid om te zien wie je mag zijn. Hiertoe hoort respect voor alle LHBT'ers in dit land."

[53] "Er komt een tijd dat we deze mensen moeten gaan beschermen en dat er wellicht een aparte opvang voor vrouwen, homo's en christenen moet komen. … Mijn hart gaat echter wel uit naar de mensen die bedreigd en getreiterd worden en 's nachts uit hun bed worden gehaald."

queer asylum seekers can express their identities in different ways. This reflects the individualistic nature of Dutch identity. Queer asylum seekers can make their own choices, but they will also have to suffer the consequences on their own. This opposes the victimization narrative, which focuses on protecting 'vulnerable' groups, including queer asylum seekers. This contradiction is a result of a broader tension between 'individualistic' and 'protective' representations of the identity of the Dutch government.

In the next paragraph, I will elaborate on a controversial topic within the Dutch asylum system, namely if there should be separate reception facilities specifically for queer asylum seekers. The political and societal debate on this issue is at the intersection of tensions in the self-identity of the Dutch government.

4.4 Separating 'vulnerable' groups

In Dutch society, there are several actors, including political parties and NGOs, that advocate for the separation of queer asylum seekers from other asylum seekers. This could be done by placing queer asylum seekers in a separate reception location or by obligating COA employees to install specific 'LGBTQ units' at every reception facility. In 2015, when the number of asylum seekers increased, the Dutch social-democratic party asked in written questions about a separate facility: "Are you prepared to take appropriate measures to protect LGBT asylum seekers in the reception? If so, what is your stance on proposals such as a separate categorical reception facility for LGBT asylum seekers and the installment of a confidential advisor?" (Dijkhoff, 2015).[54] In 2016, several members of parliament proposed motions to house queer asylum seekers separately. For example, the social-liberal party D66 stated: "[D66] [r]equests the government to actually give substance to the possibility of separate, safe shelter for LGBT people and other vulnerable groups, when it appears that their safety cannot be guaranteed" (Dutch House of Representatives, 2016a).[55] This request is based on the fact that there have been reports of bullying and threats directed at queer asylum seekers. The idea that queer asylum seekers are in danger if they stay in regular facilities, because they would live among (potential) perpetrators, illustrates the victimization narrative. Consequently, proponents of separate facilities, such as NGOs and various political parties, argue that separating these 'vulnerable' groups would increase their safety (LGBT Asylum Support, n.d.). The advocates for separate facilities base their argument on the assumed vulnerability of queer asylum seekers. Thus, separating 'vulnerable' groups from other asylum seekers would be a measure that is based on the victimization narrative.

[54] "Bent u bereid passende maatregelen te nemen ter bescherming van de LHBT asielzoekers in de opvang? Zo ja, hoe staat u tegenover gedane voorstellen zoals een aparte categoriale opvang voor LHBT asielzoekers?"

[55] "[D66] [v]erzoekt de regering, daadwerkelijk invulling te geven aan deze mogelijkheid van aparte, veilige opvang voor lhbt'ers en andere kwetsbare groepen, wanneer blijkt dat hun veiligheid niet gegarandeerd kan worden"

Despite calls from political parties and NGOs, the Dutch government has multiple reasons why it is not willing to install a separate facility for queer asylum seekers. The Secretary of State argued a separate facility could be stigmatizing and is not in line with the Dutch way of living: "This does not fit with the way that we in the Netherlands live together, nor does it do justice to the position of these groups. Isolation of vulnerable groups or victims from those groups sends the wrong signal and can have a stigmatizing effect." (Dijkhoff, 2016c).[56] This argument reflects how the Dutch government sees Dutch society as a place for everyone to live freely. The argument I will primarily focus on relates to the heterogeneity of the group of queer asylum seekers. Although there are many queer asylum seekers who say they would feel safer in a separate facility, the Dutch government emphasizes there are also those who would not want to be placed in a separate facility. For example, the LGBTQ contact person in Dronten argued that some queer asylum seekers do not want to express their queerness visibly. A separate facility would force them to do so:

> The residents who have indicated on their first application that they identify as LGBTQ are put on the spot. You choose to be LGBTQ, so you have to be in a visible reception facility where everyone can see: you are gay, lesbian, transgender or non-binary, or whatever … You are forcing someone to come out of the closet." (Cassidy, 2023).[57]

A separate facility would force queer asylum seekers to make their queerness a visible part of their identity. If there would be separate facilities, queer asylum would have to choose at the beginning of their procedure if they want to 'come out'. Ideas like 'coming out' and being part of the 'queer community' are normative and Western ideas about queerness. Ropianyk and D'Agostino (2021) explain that the Western idea of 'coming out' is seen as a way to truly be yourself. Therefore, it is seen as superior to 'hiding in the closet' (p. 61). Separate facilities would force queer asylum to take on a homonormative identity of queerness, which conforms to Western (and Dutch) assumptions of what queerness should be (Duggan, 2002, p. 190).

Separate facilities would further stimulate homonormativity, because queer asylum seekers might believe that staying in a separate facility might impact their asylum procedure. Tschalaer (2020) argues that queer asylum seekers who conform to the Western image of 'The Gay', which includes being 'flamboyant' and 'outspoken', are more likely to be granted asylum (p. 1271). Queer asylum

[56] "Dit past niet bij de wijze waarop wij in Nederland samenleven en doet ook geen recht aan de positie van deze groepen. Isolatie van kwetsbare groepen of slachtoffers uit die groepen is een verkeerd signaal en kan een stigmatiserend effect hebben."

[57] "De bewoners die wel LHBTI zijn en dat hebben aangegeven bij hun eerste aanmelding zet je ook voor het blok. Jij kiest om LHBTI te zijn, dus jij moet in een zichtbaar AZC zijn waar iedereen kan zien: jij bent homo, lesbienne, transgender of non-binair, of wat dan ook, heel de groep. Je dwingt iemand om uit de kast te komen."

seekers can prove their identity by telling about personal experiences in their country of origin, but many asylum seekers also refer to their experiences in the host country (Fassin & Salcedo, 2015, p. 1120). For example, queer asylum seekers go to Pride events or talk to queer organizations, in order to show that they belong to the Western idea of the 'queer community' (Singer, 2021, p. 244; Tschalaer, 2020, p. 1271). Separate facilities might lead queer asylum seekers to think that staying in this facility would make their queer identity more 'credible'. They might feel forced to conform to homonormative ideas about queerness, in order to get asylum.

The decision not to organize the separation of queer asylum seekers reflects the individualistic identity of the Dutch government. By not choosing to force queer asylum seekers to make a decision on where they would want to stay, the Dutch government acknowledges the heterogeneity of queer asylum seekers. As a policy advisor of the COA explained:

> In addition, there are people who don't want [separate reception] at all. 'LGBT', all the letters already say it: it's not a homogeneous group, so that doesn't mean that [separate reception] is necessarily the solution, or that that would necessarily go well. I think what we do, by looking at the individual vulnerability and at what someone needs and how we can best respond to that, works better than putting them all together." (Anonymous D, 2023).[58]

This stance of these COA employees acknowledges the many different experiences and identities that exist within the group of queer asylum seekers. By acknowledging non-normative queer identities, COA employees respect the agency of queer asylum seekers in creating their own identities. There is a focus on individual freedom and individual vulnerability. The Dutch government's stance on separate facilities for 'vulnerable' groups reflects the tension in the identity of the Dutch government. These groups are seen as inherently vulnerable, but the Dutch government tries to acknowledge their individuality and agency. Consequently, there are few strict measures, such as separate facilities, aimed at protecting these groups.

Although there are no separate locations for queer asylum seekers, some reception facilities have 'LGBTQ units'. The units exist in many different forms, such as specific rooms, hallways, or bungalows. An LGBTQ contact person explained that these units create a more flexible way to separate queer asylum seekers from non-queer asylum seekers:

[58] "[D]aarnaast heb je nog mensen die dat [aparte opvang] helemaal niet willen, en LGBT, alle letters zeggen het al: het is ook geen homogene groep, dus dat wil ook niet zeggen dat dat [aparte opvang] per definitie de oplossing is, of dat dat per definitie heel goed zou gaan samen. Ik denk dat wat wij doen, door te kijken naar de individuele kwetsbaarheid en wat iemand nodig heeft en hoe we daar het beste op in kunnen spelen, beter werkt dan met z'n allen samen plaatsen."

> If they ask: 'I would like to go [to an LGBTQ unit]', we will look if there is room, then we can place someone there. There are also residents who are placed there, but indicate: 'I don't feel comfortable here, this is not who I am, this is too much for me', then we place them back in a 'regular' room." (Cassidy, 2023).[59]

In this more flexible situation, there is more room for queer asylum seekers who do not necessarily want to be associated with normative ideas about queerness or the 'queer community'. However, a policy advisor of the National Coordinator against Discrimination and Racism argued that LGBTQ units do not guarantee safety: "[T]hen you're still isolated in that little room of course. You can still encounter discrimination or racism in the whole building or whole area." (Anonymous C, 2023).[60] The LGBTQ units seem to increase the agency of some queer asylum seekers, but do not guarantee safety. This reflects the tension between agency and individuality on the one hand, and safety and victimization on the other hand.

Although some facilities have specific LGBTQ units, many queer asylum seekers still feel unsafe. LGBT Asylum Support, a Dutch NGO, did a survey among 71 queer asylum seekers. It is unclear how representative this survey is, but it does signal that there are queer asylum seekers who feel unsafe in these units. Additionally, 89% of the participants thought a separate facility, rather than just units, might be a good solution (LGBT Asylum Support, 2020, p. 24). Their performance of agency, which includes calling for a 'safe space', is in line with the homonationalist victimization narrative (Bracke, 2012, p. 245). They feel unsafe and see themselves as vulnerable, which is why they call for a separate facility. This is puzzling, because research on homonationalism problematizes this narrative and argues that the agency of 'victims' is taken away by homonationalist discourse (Quinan et al., 2021, p. 350). However, these queer asylum seekers are able to voice their discontent and claim their agency within the victimization narrative.

Based on my findings, it seems that there is room for agency within the victimization narrative. Connell argues agency includes any attempt to stop abuse (1997, p. 118). Queer asylum seekers who advocate for separate facilities resist the abuse in the system they are currently living in. By voicing their wish for separate facilities, they are claiming their agency. Although their wish is in line with the victimization narrative, they are still able to voice their agency. However, these queer asylum seekers are denied the freedom to make that decision by the Dutch government. These asylum seekers are

[59] "Vragen ze erom: 'ik wil graag daarheen [naar een LHBTI unit]', dan gaan we kijken zodra er plek is, kunnen we iemand daar plaatsen. Er zijn ook bewoners die daar worden geplaatst, maar geven aan: ik voel me hier niet prettig, dit ben ik niet, dit is te veel voor mij, dan plaatsen we ze uit naar een 'gewone' kamer."

[60] "[D]an ben je alsnog geïsoleerd natuurlijk in dat kamertje. Je kunt alsnog in aanraking komen met discriminatie of racisme in het hele gebouw of hele gebied"

denied the possibility to stay in a place where they would feel safer. By rejecting the idea of separate facilities, the Dutch government ignores their individual needs and wishes, and therefore their agency. The individualistic identity of the Dutch government denies the agency of queer asylum seekers who would prefer a separate facility.

4.5 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I elaborated on the concept of 'vulnerability' to analyze how the Dutch government constructs a narrative that victimizes queer asylum seekers. This narrative is used to legitimize the Dutch government as an actor that should save these queer people. However, this narrative is opposed by the room for individual assessment in the existing policies. COA employees are able to assess the 'vulnerability' of individual queer asylum seekers, which acknowledges the agency of queer asylum seekers who do not conform to homonormative queerness. This contradiction in policy and discourse reflects a broader tension in the self-identity of the Dutch government. The government's victimization narrative seems to erase the agency and individual freedom of queer asylum seekers, while the flexibility in the policy is based on individuality and autonomy. Additionally, the individualistic approach denies the agency of queer asylum seekers who do conform to the victimization narrative. The constant struggle between victimization and agency shows how the Dutch government's identity is paradoxical. Does the Dutch government respect the individual freedom and agency of queer asylum seekers, when they are victimized and portrayed as inherently vulnerable? How can queer asylum seekers be protected and 'saved', when they are forced to fend for themselves in the asylum system? The tension in the Dutch government's identity is reinforced by violence against queer asylum seekers, but also reinforces a system in which queer asylum seekers are left in the cold. In the next chapter, I will focus on the issue of responsibility. How does the government view its own responsibility in contributing to a violent system? And how does that shape the interaction between violence and the Dutch government's self-identity?

Chapter 5: Exploring the consequences of homonationalism

In the previous chapters, I focused on different elements of the theory of homonationalism. In this chapter, I will move beyond the theoretical framework of homonationalism to explore the consequences of homonationalist narratives. Rather than acknowledging how the organization of the Dutch asylum system might contribute to violence against queer asylum seekers, the general discourse fixates on visible 'personal' violence. As a result, the Dutch government presents violent events against queer asylum seekers as 'incidents'. This individualization of violence leads the Dutch government to propose punishing perpetrators or adjusting the behavior of victims as solutions to violence. The homonationalist narrative legitimizes a focus on perpetrators and victims as the responsible actors in violence. Consequently, the Dutch government disregards its own responsibility in creating a system in which violence takes place and is normalized. The self-identity of the Dutch government as a 'progressive' actor results in a refusal to acknowledge the responsibility of the Dutch government.

5.1: Individualizing violence: The responsibility of the victim

I interviewed a coordinator of Cocktail, which is a project that connects queer asylum seekers with Dutch queer people. After the interview, he sent me a list of articles and videos about queer asylum seekers and refugees. One of the articles tells the story of a transgender asylum seeker. She was raped with a sharp object by two men in a reception facility (AD, 2018). Another article illustrated how impactful violence can be. An asylum seeker was assaulted multiple times and did not feel supported by the COA employees in his facility. After two suicide attempts, an NGO sheltered him outside of the reception facility (Wijnsema, 2016). In a more recent article queer asylum seekers explain that they feel unsafe and isolated (Pauwels, 2023). These violent events can be seen as a form of 'personal violence' (Galtung, 1969). This conception of violence is characterized as very visible and spectacular. There is a clear action and actor (Berry & Lake, 2021, p. 468; Galtung, 1969, p. 169). The opposite of this visible form of violence is 'structural violence', a conception of violence that includes broader systemic conditions, such as racism or poverty in its definition. Structural violence is built into the system and structures (Christian & Dowler, 2019, p. 1069; Galtung, 1969, p. 171; Nixon, 2011, p. 6). This broader conception of violence, which inspired postcolonial, feminist, and queer scholarship, illustrates how violence can be experienced in everyday, banal, and routinized ways (Christian & Dowler, 2019, p. 1067). I will use these two conceptions of violence to explore the issue of responsibility.

Throughout parliamentary documents and debates, members of the Dutch government primarily focus on personal violence. Personal and structural violence are deeply intertwined (Christian & Dowler, 2019, p. 1072; Galtung, 1969, p. 181). However, members of the Dutch government often argue that

these violent events are an incidental problem. In August 2020, a lesbian asylum seeker was doused in boiling water by another asylum seeker, because of her sexual identity (RTL Nieuws, 2020). When members of parliament asked the Secretary of State about this event and about potential measures the government could take to improve the safety of queer asylum seekers, the Secretary of State answered:

> The safety and livability of all residents and staff at locations are of great importance. This is what the COA is responsible for and committed to. Although this is a terrible incident, overall I consider the reception of asylum seekers to be safe and livable for anyone entitled to reception. (Broekers-Knol, 2020b).[61]

The Dutch Cabinet did not feel extra measures were necessary. By stating that the overall reception is safe and describing violent events as 'incidents', the Dutch government refuses to view these violent events as a structural issue of the Dutch reception system. By perceiving personal violence against queer asylum seekers as incidental, the connection between personal and structural violence is denied.

The framing of violence against queer asylum seekers as 'incidental' instead of structural means that violence is individualized. Violent events are seen as singular, involving two individuals: a perpetrator and a victim. In the parliamentary documents, the Dutch government does not seem to connect the violence with the identity of the victims. In response to a report by LGBT Asylum Support on feelings of unsafety among queer asylum seekers (LGBT Asylum Support, 2020), the Secretary of State did not view the (un)safety of queer asylum seekers in the same way and argued that the COA was not to blame: "Signs of discrimination, aggression or violence against anyone are unacceptable and are taken seriously by COA. Therefore, I do not recognize the conclusions drawn in the report." (Broekers-Knol, 2020c).[62] The Dutch government refuses to acknowledge structural problems in the Dutch asylum system and argues that cases of violence are mere 'incidents'. This illustrates how the Secretary of State views the Dutch government's responsibility. The government is deemed responsible for the general reception of asylum seekers, but not for any wrongdoings or cases of violence or discrimination. Rather than trying to change the asylum system as a whole, the Dutch government treats violence as an incident. By only paying attention to visible, personal forms of violence, structural violence is rendered invisible (Christian & Dowler, 2019, p. 1068; Galtung, 1969, p. 173).

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[61] "De veiligheid en leefbaarheid van alle bewoners en personeel op locaties is van groot belang. Dat is waar het COA voor verantwoordelijk is en zich ook voor inzet. Alhoewel dit een vreselijk incident is, beschouw ik de opvang van asielzoekers in zijn algemeenheid als veilig en leefbaar voor eenieder die recht op opvang heeft."

[62] "Signalen van discriminatie, agressie of geweld tegen wie dan ook zijn onacceptabel en worden door het COA serieus genomen. De conclusies die in het rapport worden getrokken herken ik dan ook niet."

One way of individualizing violence happens by focusing on the behavior of the victim. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, some volunteers and COA employees shift the responsibility for preventing violence to queer asylum seekers themselves. According to these employees, queer asylum seekers should not be surprised that they get negative reactions from other asylum seekers if they decide to behave in a non-normative way: "[A]nd as a transgender person you can walk around in a very short skirt, that's fine, but you'll get a reaction to that. And a non-binary person in a dress with a beard, you'll get a reaction to that." (Cassidy, 2023).[63] Thapar-Björkert and Morgan (2010) argue that these kinds of attitudes and statements shift the blame toward the victims and normalize violence. They researched narratives among volunteers for Victim Support, a British charity, about violence against women. They argue that women are burdened with the responsibility to prevent violence, which erases the responsibility of perpetrators or other actors (Thapar-Björkert & Morgan, 2010, p. 33). By focusing on the behavior of victims, victims are made to be responsible for the violence they experience.

Some of the volunteers and COA employees I interviewed struggled with the issue of responsibility. All participants agreed that queer asylum seekers should be able to express themselves freely, but some also placed the responsibility on the victims. A volunteer argued that the behavior of queer asylum seekers can be provoking: "It's just, I don't want to use the word provoke, but it can be provocative behavior, and of course you can never say that that girl wore a skirt that was too short, no, no, that's wrong." (Anonymous B, 2023).[64] Although these employees and volunteers are not explicitly trying to blame victims of violence, their statements are in line with a victim-blaming discourse. The COA and volunteer organizations offer support to victims of violence, but also maintain a narrative that sees the behavior of the victim as the cause of violence. The victim is burdened with the choice of changing their behavior or facing the consequences of not changing their behavior. Violence is individualized, because violent events are portrayed as incidental and (easily) preventable: if the victim would have behaved differently, violence could have been prevented. This directly relates to the individualistic nature of the Dutch government's identity. The commitment to individual freedom ensures that individuals are seen as free and responsible for their own actions, but this also includes the consequences of their actions (Dilts et al., 2012, p. 205). By putting the responsibility on the individual, other potential underlying causes, such as the way the asylum system and reception system are organized, are ignored. Individual responsibility emphasizes the behavior and actions of individuals, rather than the violence that is built into the structures and systems in

[63] "[E]n als transgender zijnde kan je prima in een heel kort rokje gaan lopen, maar daar krijg je reactie op. En als non-binair in een jurk met een baard, daar krijg jij een reactie op."

[64] "Het is gewoon, ik wil het woord provoceren niet gebruiken, maar het kan als provocerend gedrag, en natuurlijk kan je nooit zeggen dat meisje had een te kort rokje, nee, nee, dat is verkeerd."

which queer asylum seekers have to survive, which shows that individualizing responsibility ties into both conceptions of violence.

5.2: Individualizing violence: A fixation on the perpetrators

The individualization of violence can also be seen in the focus on perpetrators. One way in which the Dutch government addresses violence against queer asylum is by talking to and punishing perpetrators. The LGBTQ contact person at the facility in Heerhugowaard explained how they deal with perpetrators of violence:

> The first time we are going to talk [with the perpetrator], the second time we are going to talk again, the third time we are already taking punitive measures, and the fourth time it's probably going to be a transfer to another reception facility, but there need to be multiple incidents. (Kossen-Merse, 2023).[65]

The focus on individual perpetrators is how COA employees try to prevent and stop violence. This individualizes violence, because the perpetrator is seen as solely responsible for their actions (Dilts et al., 2012, p. 205). I will argue that the focus on perpetrators overlooks how the organization of the asylum might contribute to personal violence.

The emphasis on punishing perpetrators is clearly visible in the government's policy. In a discussion about separate reception for queer asylum seekers, the Secretary of State rejected the idea and reified the importance of punishing the perpetrator of violence: "The guiding principle is that incidents should be prevented as much as possible and perpetrators should be punished. Separate reception is out of the question." (Dijkhoff, 2016b).[66] The focus on violence as 'incidents' establishes a hyperfocus on personal violence. By only focusing on this visible form of violence, the perpetrators are solely responsible, while the structural components of violence remain overlooked (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). The focus on perpetrators can also be seen in the answers of the Secretary of State to parliamentary questions about how the COA deals with violence: "Residents who do not wish to abide by the rule of law, and/or COA's house rules or who exhibit threatening behavior toward LGBT persons will be dealt with severely in order to make it clear that such behavior will not be tolerated." (Dijkhoff,

[65] "De eerste keer gaan we praten [met de dader], de tweede keer gaan we nog een keer praten, de derde keer wordt het eigenlijk al een soort van straffen, en de vierde keer wordt het waarschijnlijk al een overplaatsing naar een ander azc, maar er moet wel meer gebeuren."

[66] "Het uitgangspunt is dat incidenten zoveel mogelijk moeten worden voorkomen en dat de daders moeten worden gestraft. Categoriale opvang is niet aan de orde."

2017).[67] This is a continuation of the homonationalist narrative; the dangerous Other is depicted as inherently queerphobic. This legitimizes policies targeting the Other (Quinan et al., 2021, p. 352). Through this narrow lens, the responsibility of the Dutch government in creating a system in which violence takes place is ignored.

In debates, the measure of transferring perpetrators was discussed a lot. The Minister of Security and Justice stated:

> I do want to reiterate that for the Cabinet the main line is that it is not the LGBT people who should be transferred for the discrimination they experience, but the perpetrators who should be dealt with. The perpetrators should be the ones who are transferred to other facilities. (Dutch House of Representatives, 2015c).[68]

By focusing on the perpetrators of violence and how they should be punished, the Dutch government narrows the issue of responsibility. The Dutch government only focuses on the 'symptoms', rather than the structural causes of violence. A policy advisor of the National Coordinator against Discrimination and Racism explained that they advocate for structural solutions for discrimination within organizations: "In everything we do, we find it very important that it is structurally embedded in an organization as well, rather than only treating the symptoms, to put it very bluntly." (Anonymous C, 2023).[69] This broader conception of responsibility seems to be missing in the discourse and policies of the Dutch government.

In conclusion, violence against queer asylum seekers is individualized. By viewing violence as 'incidental' and solely focusing on the behavior of the victims and the perpetrators, violence becomes normalized. The individualization process places the responsibility on the individuals involved in violence, while the role of the Dutch government remains out of scope. The issue of individualization and responsibility should be understood in the context of homonationalism. In the previous chapters, I have illustrated how violence against queer asylum seekers shapes the Dutch government's self-identity through homonationalism. Violence against queer asylum seekers is used to construct a narrative consisting of potential perpetrators (non-queer asylum seekers), potential victims (queer

[67] "Bewoners die zich niet wensen te houden aan de regels van de rechtstaat, en/of de huisregels van het COA of die bedreigend gedrag vertonen richting LHBT-personen worden streng aangepakt, teneinde duidelijk te maken dat dergelijk gedrag niet wordt getolereerd."

[68] "Ik wil wel nogmaals herhalen dat voor het kabinet de hoofdlijn is dat niet de lhbt's overgeplaatst moeten worden voor de discriminatie die zij ondervinden, maar dat de daders moeten worden aangepakt. De daders moeten degenen zijn die worden overgeplaatst naar andere opvang."

[69] "Eigenlijk bij alles wat wij doen, vinden we het heel belangrijk dat het structureel ook wordt ingebed in een organisatie, en niet alleen symptoombestrijding is om het even heel kort door de bocht te zeggen."

asylum seekers), and a savior (the Dutch government). The Dutch government is seen as a benevolent actor that provides queer asylum seekers with safety and individual freedom. The homonationalist construction of the Dutch government's self-identity legitimizes a focus on perpetrators and victims and takes the Dutch government's responsibility for contributing to a violent system out of the equation.

5.3 Overlooking Dutch queerphobia

In addition to the emphasis on the behavior of perpetrators and victims, the homonationalist narrative also impacts how the Dutch government views its own actions. As I discussed in *Chapter 3*, several of the people I interviewed acknowledged that not all people working in reception facilities are able to deal with queer asylum seekers in a sensitive way. The LGBTQ contact person in Heerhugowaard explained how these employees often do not know a lot about sexual and gender identities and that they do not want to increase the visibility of queer people. For example, some reception facilities refuse to hoist the rainbow flag, because "they are of the opinion that that would increase the difference between 'regular' residents and LGBTQ residents" (Kossen-Merse, 2023).[70] Although this employee discusses the insensitivity of some COA employees, this insensitivity is barely acknowledged in the discourse constructed by the Dutch Cabinet. The Dutch government sees itself and Dutch employees as progressive and tolerant, which is why possible queerphobia among Dutch people does not conform to the narrative that is constructed. This corresponds to Puar's argument that a focus on queerphobia by the Other results in the repudiation of queerphobia by Dutch people (2017, p. 95). The homonationalist narrative establishes a black-and-white reality, where there is only room to acknowledge queerphobia by the Other (non-queer asylum seekers) and no room to acknowledge queerphobia by 'us' (the Dutch government and Dutch society). On the other hand, the LGBTQ contact person opposes this binary narrative by acknowledging some of their colleagues might not be as progressive as is expected. Ritchie argues the theory of homonationalism sometimes works in an oversimplifying way that ignores complexity and nuance (2015, p. 632). The statements of the LGBTQ contact person and other interviewees recognize this nuance. Corresponding to the findings from the previous chapters, there seems to be a discrepancy between the general discourse, which is in line with what the theory of homonationalism suggests, and the practice, in which employees are able to recognize nuance and complexity.

The erasure of Dutch queerphobia and insensitivity is problematic, because the way that an employee treats queer asylum seekers might impact their experiences and feeling of safety in a reception facility. A volunteer explained that the experiences and feeling of safety of queer asylum seekers can differ per reception facility:

[70] "want dan vinden ze dat je dan weer te veel verschil maakt tussen gewone bewoners en LHBTI bewoners"

> Some are suddenly transferred to another reception facility where it is really terrible. They felt reasonably safe at this reception facility and had built a small network, a buddy. And then they are suddenly transferred. Then they find themselves somewhere in the middle of nowhere. (Rutgers, 2023).[71]

Additionally, not all reception facilities have separate units for queer asylum seekers, as this is not a national policy. Another volunteer for a queer NGO explained how there might be differences between 'progressive' cities and more religious regions in the Netherlands. He described a reception facility in Amsterdam as an example of how all facilities should be, while people working in reception facilities in rural areas might be "xenophobic or homophobic" (Anonymous B).[72] The homonationalist narrative depicts the Dutch government and Dutch people as accepting (Bracke, 2012, p. 245). Dutch queerphobia cannot be part of this identity, which is why it is not included in the homonationalist narrative. The lack of a uniform policy and the differing ways how reception facilities treat queer asylum seekers indicate that the generalizing depiction of the Dutch government as progressive and tolerant does not hold up in practice.

The lack of uniform, national policy increases the dependency on employees being sensitive towards. For example, a coordinator of Cocktail argued that some LGBTQ contact persons are more active than others: "[B]ut you also need someone who puts the effort in. For a long time, I had a contact person in Apeldoorn, who just wasn't active at all and didn't really do anything about it. I had to constantly raise the alarm" (Rutgers, 2023).[73] The place and reception facility where queer asylum seekers stay seems to be quite influential in their experiences and relations with the COA. Although this impacts the safety and the experiences of queer asylum seekers, the differences among reception facilities are not acknowledged in the parliamentary documents and debates. Similarly, De Leeuw and Van Wichelen (2012) argue that the Dutch government would rather portray secular liberalism as a Dutch identity than acknowledge the complexity of the Dutch identity (p. 200). Kehl (2020) argues it is important to recognize these complexities (p. 25). The complexities of the treatment of queer asylum seekers in reception facilities do not conform to the homogenizing narrative that is constructed. Therefore, reality is more complex and blurry than the homonationalist narrative makes it out to be.

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[71] "Sommigen worden in één keer overgeplaatst naar een ander azc waar het echt verschrikkelijk is. Dat terwijl ze bij ons gewoon zich redelijk veilig voelden op het AZC en ook hier een beetje netwerk hadden inmiddels, een maatje. En die worden dan in één keer overgeplaatst. Ja, en dan zitten ze ergens in the middle of nowhere."

[72] "xenofobisch of homofobisch."

[73] "[M]aar je moet ook iemand hebben die ervoor gaat. Ik heb ook heel lang een aandachtsfunctionaris in Apeldoorn gehad, die was gewoon totaal niet actief of zo en die deed er eigenlijk helemaal niks aan, dan moest ik telkens aan de bel trekken"

The queerphobia and insensitivity of some COA employees contradict the homonationalist narrative. However, the general discourse constructs a hyperfocus on the perpetrator/savior dichotomy. This is based on 'us-versus-them' rhetoric, which creates an oversimplified binary (Puar, 2017, p. 19). In this black-and-white reality, there is little room to acknowledge anything that opposes this reality (Mainwaring, 2016, p. 290). Dutch queerphobia is barely mentioned or acknowledged in the general discourse, which corresponds to Puar's argument that projecting queerphobia on others leads to a disregard of queerphobia 'at home' (2017, p. 95). By focusing on the queerphobia of asylum seekers, the queerphobia of Dutch people is overlooked. This is how homonationalism is used in shifting responsibility.

5.4: Issues in the Dutch asylum system

This section elaborates on the perpetrator/savior binary by focusing on the connection between the 'high influx' of asylum seekers and violence against queer asylum seekers. Instead of proposing to solve structural problems in the Dutch asylum system, mainly a lack of room and lack of personnel, representatives of the Dutch government argue that the influx of asylum seekers contributes to violence.

Throughout the parliamentary documents and debates, the Dutch Cabinet often refers to the 'high influx' of asylum seekers to explain the problems in the Dutch asylum system. This was especially the case during the 'refugee crisis' in 2015 and 2016. During a debate in 2015, the Secretary of State immediately referred to the number of asylum seekers:

> Since mid-August, we have faced a historically high influx of asylum seekers. Not only the Netherlands is experiencing a big increase, but all of Europe. Throughout Europe we see that it has exceeded all estimates and expectations. The number in itself demands a lot from all our staff … but especially the fact that it comes all at once so fast and is so concentrated in the second half of the year presents us with great challenges. (Dutch House of Representatives, 2015a).[74]

These references to a 'high influx' should be understood in a broader context of anti-immigration rhetoric. Several scholars have explained how migration to Europe is often presented as dangerous (Hammerstadt, 2014; Huysmans, 2006; Korac-Sanderson, 2017). For example, according to Hammerstadt, migrants were treated as a "hostile invasion force" after 9/11 (2014, p. 269). With this

[74] "Sinds half augustus worden wij geconfronteerd met een historisch hoge instroom van asielzoekers. Niet alleen Nederland ziet een flinke sprong, maar heel Europa. In heel Europa zien we dat het alle ramingen en verwachtingen te boven is gegaan. Het aantal op zichzelf vraagt al veel van al onze medewerkers … maar vooral het feit dat het in één keer zo snel komt en zo geconcentreerd is in de tweede helft van het jaar stelt ons voor grote opgaven."

frame, European states legitimize harsh security measures to 'defend' Europe (Korac-Sanderson, 2017, p. 25). Blaming the problems in the Dutch asylum system on the 'high influx' of asylum seekers perpetuates this security frame. In 2022, the Secretary of State connected the number of asylum seekers with the kind of treatment asylum seekers receive from the COA: "The higher influx of asylum seekers and the longer stay of status holders in reception make it very difficult for the COA right now to provide adequate shelter for everyone who is entitled to it." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2021).[75] The Dutch government perpetuates anti-immigration rhetoric by describing refugees and asylum seekers as a threat to the Dutch asylum system and ultimately to queer asylum seekers. Through this framing, the Dutch government can blame the inadequate asylum system on asylum seekers, rather than connecting it with actions taken by the Dutch government.

Larruina et al. (2019) argue that the 'refugee crisis' should be seen as an asylum system crisis, because European governments were unable to deal with the number of refugees who arrived in Europe (p. 54). This was also the case in the Netherlands, as the COA lacked the capacity to host the increased number of asylum seekers, which resulted in ad hoc measures. The coordinator of the Cocktail Project in the region of Deventer stated:

> [A]nd then came that large refugee influx in 2015 with lots of Syrians. Then the emergency shelters were created and a lot of things went wrong there. For example, here in Apeldoorn we had a large emergency shelter. The LGBT people were placed in a kind of small cabin with eight others. If someone was a little too feminine, they were immediately bullied. And that's just how violent things happened, because safety couldn't be guaranteed. There were too many asylum seekers, too crowded. (Rutgers, 2023).[76]

The violent events that happened in these facilities, which are related to the COA's lack of capacity, can be categorized under personal violence. Christian and Dowler (2019) argue that personal and structural violence interact (p. 1072). I argue the same in the case of violence against queer asylum seekers. While personal violence might be more visible, broader systems and structures shape these forms of personal violence. In this case, the lack of room in reception facilities created a space in which personal violence was able to take place.

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[75] "De hogere asielinstroom en het langere verblijf van statushouders in de opvang maken dat het voor het COA op dit moment heel moeilijk is om voor iedereen die daar recht op heeft, passende opvang te bieden."

[76] "[E]n toen kwam die grote Vluchtelingenstroom in 2015 met heel veel Syriërs. Toen werden de noodopvangen en gecreëerd en daar zijn heel veel dingen misgegaan. Dus we hadden bijvoorbeeld hier in Apeldoorn een grote noodopvang en daar waar daar werden de LHBTIers in een soort kabinetje geplaatst met acht anderen. Als iemand een beetje te vrouwelijk was, werd die gelijk gepest. En zo zijn er gewoon ook heftige dingen gebeurd, omdat men niet in kon staan voor de veiligheid. Er waren te veel asielzoekers, te veel op elkaars lip."

The emergency measures were a result of the decisions of the Dutch government. Boersma et al. (2018) explain that the lack of capacity was caused by the decision to decrease the COA's budget (p. 732). This ad hoc approach continued after the number of asylum seekers decreased. In May 2017, the COA announced that its capacity would be reduced due to the lower occupancy and the decrease in influx (Larruina et al., 2019, p. 58). The Dutch government decided to cut back on reception facilities and personnel. In 2017 and 2018, 46 reception facilities were closed and hundreds of employees did not receive new contracts (Teeven, 2023). In 2021 and 2022, the Dutch government struggled with housing all asylum seekers and processing their asylum requests. At the peak of this reception crisis, in August 2022, asylum seekers had to sleep outside of the reception facility in Ter Apel (NOS, 2022). According to a Dutch NGO, Vluchtelingenwerk, this is the result of political choices, such as decreasing the budget of the COA (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, 2022). According to two independent advisory councils, the Dutch government's reception policy sustains a constant 'crisis approach', which is focused on short-term solutions (Adviescommissie voor Vreemdelingenzaken & Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur, 2022, p. 2). This approach creates an unstable asylum system that does not respect the right to reception and support.

The two core responsibilities of the COA are the reception and guidance of all asylum seekers in the Netherlands (COA, n.d.-b). I argue that it is difficult for the COA to fulfill these tasks and provide queer asylum seekers with adequate guidance and reception. Employees are not always able to provide the proper support, because of the way the asylum system is organized. This was reiterated by a volunteer who works with queer asylum seekers: "The COA always tries to do its best. If they don't succeed, it's really due to a lack of time." (Djedje, 2023).[77] Although the COA says it wants to protect queer people, it does not always have the capacity to do so. When I asked about insensitivity among employees, one of the COA policy advisors connected this with the high influx of employees:

> I think we do recognize signs of that. It's tricky right now, also with the influx. An increased influx of residents also means additional staff. So there are a lot of new employees and a lot of them haven't had training yet. We have less visibility on the information on this topic that we want to give [to employees], how it reaches them and whether it reaches them. So I think it's a growing problem, also because of the capacity issues and staffing issues. (Anonymous E, 2023).[78]

[77] "De COA's proberen altijd hun best te doen. Als het niet lukt, komt het echt door tijdsgebrek."

[78] "Ik denk dat we daar wel signalen van herkennen inderdaad. Het is nu het lastige, ook met de instroom. Een verhoogde instroom aan bewoners betekent ook extra medewerkers. Er zijn dus heel veel nieuwe medewerkers in dienst en heel veel hebben nog niet training gehad. Je hebt minder zicht op de informatie over dit onderwerp die we mee willen geven, hoe die hen bereikt en of ze die bereikt. Dus ik denk dat het een groter wordend probleem is, ook door de capiciteitsproblemen en personeelsproblematiek."

This leads to challenges for LGBTQ contact persons, as they struggle with providing their colleagues with the right tools and knowledge, which impacts the time and skills employees have to provide queer asylum seekers with adequate support. The policy advisor acknowledges the insensitivity of some employees, which opposes the generalizing homonationalist narrative, but also makes a connection with the high influx, which relates to the homonationalist narrative (De Leeuw & Van Wichelen, 2012, p. 199; Kehl, 2020, pp. 25-26).

Another problem in the Dutch asylum system is related to a lack of enough room for all asylum seekers. A COA policy advisor explained that it is currently difficult to place queer asylum seekers in special LGBTQ units, due to the 'reception crisis':

> I think you are aware of the reception crisis at the moment in the Netherlands. We're short of reception places, so if there is a situation where you have quite a bit of space on location, then you can shift people around a little bit easier and look at their preferences. … [S]ometimes that works, but also very often, now it doesn't. So we also have to be honest about that, unfortunately that's part of it now" (Anonymous D, 2023).[79]

Not all reception facilities have LGBTQ units, but those that do cannot guarantee there will only be queer asylum seekers in those units. The limited capacity of the asylum system results in a situation in which safe spaces for queer people cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, the lack of capacity, which is something the Dutch government is responsible for, contributes to an unsafe environment for queer asylum seekers. However, the government's emphasis on personal violence obscures the consequences of structural violence. Personal and structural violence interact, but personal violence is more visible (Berry & Lake, 2021, p. 471; Christian & Dowler, 2019, p. 1072). Additionally, another volunteer argued the lack of support for queer asylum seekers is related to the crowdedness in reception facilities: "The COA does its best, but you know, it's just so overcrowded everywhere." (Rutgers, 2023).[80] The Dutch asylum system contributes to an unsafe environment, because the COA is not able to provide everyone with a safe room. In a different example, the Secretary of State does acknowledge that the lack of room and personnel causes problems in reception facilities: "In a shelter, many people live together in a relatively small area, often in an uncertain period of their lives, which puts pressure on interpersonal relationships. This can cause incidents in which the differences between

[79] "Ik denk dat je wel op de hoogte bent van de opvangcrisis op dit moment in Nederland. We komen opvangplekken tekort, als je dus in een situatie zit waarin je best wel wat ruimte hebt op locatie, dan kun je iets makkelijker schuiven met mensen en erg naar de voorkeur kijken. … [S]oms lukt dat, maar ook heel vaak, nu niet. Dus daar moeten we ook eerlijk in zijn, dat dat helaas er nu bij hoort."

[80] "Het COA doet z'n best, maar weet je, het is gewoon zo overvol overal."

people are sometimes magnified." (Broekers-Knol, 2020a).[81] However, the Secretary of State does not aim to improve this. Due to the overemphasis on perpetrators that is caused by the homonationalist narrative, the solutions that the Dutch government proposes (such as punishing perpetrators) focus too much on the individual and are too short-term to solve the structural problems of the Dutch asylum system.

The organization of the asylum system shapes the experiences of queer asylum seekers in reception facilities. The lack of (skilled) personnel and the lack of room in reception facilities result in an environment that is insecure and unsafe for queer asylum seekers. Saunders and Al-Om (2022), argue that the UK asylum system enacts a form of 'slow violence' on asylum seekers. Slow violence and structural violence both hold that systems and structures can constitute violence of themselves and can contribute to personal violence (Saunders & Al-Om, 2022, p. 530). My findings underwrite this relationship between personal and structural violence. The Dutch asylum system creates an unsafe environment for queer asylum seekers. This environment gives rise to personal violence against them. This means that the responsibility goes beyond victims and perpetrators, because the Dutch government plays an important role as well. Therefore, the violence that queer asylum seekers experience should be understood in the context of the broader asylum system. However, this form of structural violence is less visible than the physical forms of violence queer asylum seekers experience.

In a letter to the Dutch Parliament, the Secretary of State explained how he viewed the responsibility of the COA and the Dutch government:

> Socially unsafe situations unfortunately occur everywhere, and despite all the efforts of those involved, it is impossible to eliminate them completely. This does not alter the fact that everyone living or staying in the Netherlands should be able to do so in a safe manner. This also applies to those staying at COA's reception locations. The Dutch government is responsible for the reception of asylum seekers and should ensure that this safety is properly safeguarded for the residents of asylum seekers' centers. (Harbers, 2018).[82]

[81] "In een opvanglocatie wonen veel mensen bij elkaar op een relatief klein oppervlak, vaak in een onzekere periode van hun leven, dat legt druk op de intermenselijke verhoudingen. Hierdoor kunnen incidenten ontstaan waarin soms de verschillen tussen de mensen uitvergroot worden."

[82] "Sociaal onveilige situaties komen helaas overal voor en ondanks alle inspanningen van betrokkenen is het onmogelijk om deze helemaal weg te nemen. Dit neemt niet weg dat iedereen die in Nederland woont of verblijft dat op een veilige manier zou moeten kunnen doen. Dat geldt ook voor de personen die verblijven op de opvanglocaties van het COA. De Nederlandse overheid is verantwoordelijk voor de opvang van asielzoekers en dient er voor te zorgen dat deze veiligheid goed is geborgd voor de bewoners van asielzoekerscentra."

Although the Dutch government recognizes its responsibility in creating a safe asylum system, it does not acknowledge how the asylum system impacts the safety of queer asylum seekers. Despite the many cases of violence, the Dutch government maintains that the reception of (queer) asylum seekers is generally organized well. When a member of parliament referenced the number of reports of unsafe situations, the Secretary of State answered: "Neither COA nor I recognize these figures. In our experience, the guidance and reception of LGBTI asylum seekers generally go well." (Dutch House of Representatives, 2020).[83] The stance of the Dutch government is that the reception of asylum seekers is organized well, which is why reports of violence are seen as mere 'incidents'. The Dutch government does not draw the connection between personal violence and the structurally unsafe environment in the asylum system.

Throughout the parliamentary documents, the Dutch government has constructed a homonationalist narrative that constructs perpetrators, victims, and saviors. This legitimizes a fixation on the responsibility of perpetrators, as well as victims, in causing violence. Within the homonationalist narrative, it seems impossible to blame the savior. While many of the debates and documents refer to the number of asylum seekers and connect this with violence, the insensitivity of some COA employees is not mentioned. This is a result of the black-and-white binary that is an integral part of homonationalism (Kehl, 2020; Puar, 2017; Weber, 2016). The constructed reality fixates on the role of the perpetrators and erases the role of the savior in allowing violence to happen. Through the homonationalist narrative, the Dutch government manages to evade any responsibility for the system in which violence is taking place. This is dangerous. Violence against queer asylum seekers is sustained in the Dutch asylum system, because the Dutch government does not acknowledge that the system contributes to violence. This shows the interactive relationship between violence against queer asylum seekers and the self-identity of the Dutch government. On the one hand, violence shapes the individualistic and protective identity of the Dutch government. On the other hand, this identity ensures the rejection of responsibility, which sustains a violent system.

The theory of homonationalism suggests the creation of a black-and-white narrative. However, the statements and ideas of several participants show a more blurry reality. As I have discussed in this chapter, several interviewees acknowledged that COA employees can be insensitive. Another example of an LGBTQ contact person shows how not all COA employees agree with the visibility of queer people: "I know of a reception facility … where a COA employee is still fighting to be allowed to be married as a gay man and have a child, because they don't think he should share that with the

[83] "Zowel het COA als ikzelf herkennen die cijfers niet. In onze ervaring verloopt de begeleiding en opvang van lhbti-asielzoekers in de regel goed."

residents" (Kossen-Merse, 2023).[84] Additionally, other interviewees argued that not all queer asylum seekers are necessarily vulnerable, which goes against the homonationalist narrative that depicts queer asylum seekers as a homogeneous group of inherently vulnerable victims. For example, a policy advisor stated: "Yes, as [the other policy advisor] said, every person is just different, so we start with the needs of each individual and try to connect with that as much as possible" (Anonymous E, 2023).[85] Additionally, in practice, there is room for COA employees to act in a more nuanced way, which also does not align with the black-and-white reality constructed in the parliamentary documents. This is puzzling, because according to Puar (2017), homonationalism creates a binary with little room to oppose it (p. 19). My findings oppose this reductive way of looking at homonationalism. As other scholars (Dhawan, 2013, 2016; Kehl, 2020; Ritchie, 2015; Weber, 2016) have argued, the theory of homonationalism creates a binary itself. By portraying Western actors as inherently Orientalist and imperialistic, the theory leaves no room for Western actors that construct more nuanced narratives. For example, some COA employees show how they can acknowledge the vulnerability of queer asylum seekers, but also respect their agency. While the discourse constructed in the Dutch Parliament can be seen as a form of homonationalism, the people working in reception facilities are more nuanced in their approach.

The findings of my research move beyond the relationship between queerness and the role of the state. The case of violence against queer asylum seekers contributes to the broader scholarly debates on homonationalism, power, and Orientalism. The hurt of queer people is reduced to an instrument in sustaining the unequal relationship and power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South. The Dutch government portrays violence against queer people as something 'we' do not do. This legitimizes Dutch sexual exceptionalism (Bracke, 2012; Puar, 2017). Dutch people and society are seen as superior to the Other, because of their assumed accepting and progressive identity. In response to the popularity of homonationalism among scholars, Puar wrote a new article. She states:

> [H]omonationalism is fundamentally a deep critique of lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses and how those rights discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to citizenship - cultural and legal - at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations" (Puar, 2013, p. 337).

Homonationalism sustains the distinction between the 'developed' West and the 'underdeveloped' Other. Through this binary lens, Dutch queerphobia is overlooked and anti-immigration rhetoric and

[84] "Ik weet van een azc … waar een COA medewerker nog steeds aan het vechten is om gewoon getrouwd homo te mogen zijn met een kind, want zij vinden niet dat hij dat moet delen met de bewoners"

[85] "Ja, wat jij zegt, iedere persoon is gewoon anders, dus wij gaan uit van de behoefte per individu en daar zo veel mogelijk bij aansluiten"

punitive measures are encouraged. The hurt of queer people, and other minorities, is instrumentalized to distinguish between civilized and uncivilized societies. This shows that homonationalism and discourse can be dangerous and violent in and of itself.

5.5 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I connected homonationalism with the issue of responsibility in relation to violence against queer asylum seekers. Homonationalism literature has not touched on this topic extensively yet, which is why I have drawn upon literature regarding different conceptions of violence to make sense of the Dutch government's refusal to acknowledge its own responsibility in violence against queer asylum seekers. I argue that the structural problems in the Dutch asylum system, including the COA's lack of capacity and room to host the number of asylum seekers, can be seen as a form of 'structural violence'. This form of violence creates an unsafe environment for queer asylum seekers. The Dutch government bears responsibility for this environment, but does not acknowledge this. Rather than admitting its own role in creating a violent system, the Dutch government normalizes violence by portraying violent events as 'incidents'. This individualizes violence, because the Dutch government focuses on punishing individual perpetrators and protecting individual victims. This individualization of violence should be understood in the context of homonationalism. The constructed homonationalist narrative legitimizes a hyperfocus on perpetrators and victims as the sole responsible actors in violence against queer asylum seekers. The responsibility of the Dutch government is erased by presenting the government as a savior. This shows the interactive relationship between the Dutch government's self-identity and violence against queer asylum seekers.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

At the start of my research project, I sought to explore the puzzling contradiction between 'Dutch tolerance' and violence against queer asylum seekers. In the last decade, there have been numerous cases of physical, verbal, and psychological violence against queer asylum seekers in Dutch reception facilities. How could this happen in a state that is well-known for its progressive and accepting attitudes toward queer people? This led me to question the relationship between the Dutch government's self-identity and violence against queer asylum seekers, which resulted in the following research question:

> *How does the self-identity of the Dutch government interact with violence against queer asylum seekers through the government's policies and discourse, from 2013 onwards?*

To answer this question, I have employed the theory of homonationalism, developed by Jasbir Puar. Homonationalism critiques how the discourse of queer liberation produces narratives of modernity, in order to depict Western societies as superior to other societies. By analyzing government documents and conducting interviews with people in the field of queer asylum, I aimed to gain more insight into the Dutch government's discourse and policies. I have analyzed the discourse and policy to study the interaction between violence and the self-identity of the Dutch government through a homonationalism lens.

The structure of my analysis is based on three subthemes. Firstly, I focused on the portrayal of (potential) perpetrators of violence against queer asylum seekers. In the general discourse, the Dutch government depicts non-queer asylum seekers as a threat to queer asylum seekers and Dutch society. This reinforces the self-identity of the Dutch government as an accepting and progressive actor. However, in practice, employees construct a blurry reality that recognizes complexities, such as Dutch queerphobia. Secondly, I elaborated on the portrayal and treatment of (potential) victims of violence. The general discourse leads to a victimization narrative that portrays queer asylum seekers as a homogeneous group that is inherently vulnerable. In contrast, the actual policies and employees create room for individuality. This tension shows a struggle in the Dutch government's self-identity between protection and individual freedom. Finally, I explored the issue of responsibility in relation to homonationalism. The homonationalist narrative constructs a hyperfocus on perpetrators and victims, while simultaneously overlooking the responsibility of the Dutch government. By viewing violence as incidental, the responsibility shifts to perpetrators and victims. The insensitivity of some employees and the structural problems in the Dutch asylum remain out of scope. Although some employees and

volunteers do try to recognize these complexities, the general discourse rarely acknowledges the wrongdoings of the Dutch government.

6.1 Answer to research question

Violence against queer asylum seekers contributes to existing narratives and ideas about the identities of and relationships between Western and non-Western societies and states. Asylum seekers, especially those with an Islamic background, are portrayed as inherently queerphobic. This relates to racialized ideas about the Global South, Islam, and migrants. In contrast, the Dutch government is portrayed as a benevolent and accepting actor. This legitimizes the Dutch government as the savior of queer people, which results in measures aimed at educating asylum seekers. Additionally, queer asylum seekers are portrayed as victims. Although they are often depicted as a homogeneous group, the Dutch government recognizes their individual autonomy as well. This tension reflects the government's self-identity. On the one hand, the Dutch government sees itself as a savior and victimizes queer people. On the other hand, the Dutch government sees itself as a liberal actor that respects the agency and individual freedom of queer people. The violence against queer asylum seekers reinforces this paradoxical self-identity. The general discourse perpetuates homonationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric, while the policies in practice reflect the liberal component of the Dutch government's self-identity.

At the beginning of my research project, my research question aimed to explore a one-sided relationship. I aimed to analyze how violence against queer asylum seekers shapes the Dutch government's self-identity. However, throughout my analysis, I have come to find that the relationship goes both ways. This relates to the issue of responsibility. The Dutch government's self-identity, which is shaped by homonationalism, impacts how the Dutch government views its own responsibility in stopping and preventing violence. The homonationalist narrative reduces asylum seekers to victims or perpetrators and portrays the government as a savior. This makes it seemingly impossible to acknowledge how the Dutch government contributes to a system in which violence against queer people takes place. Because of the generalizing effect of homonationalism, the impact of the Dutch asylum system and Dutch queerphobia is hardly recognized. The Dutch government's self-identity is not only shaped by violence against queer asylum seekers, it is a factor in sustaining violence. This exploration of the consequences of homonationalism illustrates how homonationalism can be dangerous in and of itself. Homonationalism affects queer and non-queer Others.

Homonationalism often works in a generalizing way, which is why it remains important to emphasize the need for complexity. Although the general discourse created oversimplified portrayals, such as 'perpetrators', 'victims', and 'saviors', several actors illustrated room for nuance. While interviewing people who are working with queer asylum seekers, it became increasingly clear that not all

employees and organizations view the Dutch government as a monolithically benevolent actor. Several interviewees highlighted the issue of Dutch queerphobia and insensitivity. Additionally, many employees operate in an individual way. They contrast the homogeneous and oversimplified binaries of homonationalism. Although the theory of homonationalism often suggests that homonationalism works in a generalizing way, the views and actions of some government employees suggest there is room for nuance. This illustrates the complexity of conflict and 'post-conflict' situations. Social phenomena are rarely simple, which is why it is important to emphasize and illustrate the complex and messy components of these phenomena. Therefore, I conclude that the interaction between violence against queer asylum seekers and the Dutch government's self-identity operates in a way that is mostly in line with homonationalism, but also consists of blurry components that show the complex relationship between violence and self-identity.

6.2 Implications and further research

For future research on queer asylum, I suggest a few improvements to the research design and use of methods. I am of the opinion that the variety of methods and the diverse sample of documents and interviews has contributed greatly to my findings and conclusions. However, a missing piece is the voice of queer asylum seekers themselves. To further analyze the interaction between the government's self-identity and violence, the experiences and perspectives of queer asylum seekers would be a valuable contribution. Their stories would especially be relevant in relation to the issue of victimization and agency. How do they experience the victimization narrative? What do they think about the asylum policy and about the possibility of separate reception? Additionally, more interviews with government representatives would be beneficial. The interviews with COA employees, on the national level and in reception facilities, were very insightful. More interviews with employees in facilities or representatives of the Ministry of Justice and Security would have increased the variety of participants and data. This would have given even more insight into the discrepancy between policy and discourse and the workings of homonationalism.

The findings of my research open up multiple avenues for further research. One suggestion is to connect queer asylum with broader research themes in relation to migration and asylum studies. I have explored the relationship between the Dutch asylum system and violence against queer asylum seekers. This leads me to question the impact of general migration and asylum policy on queer migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. How do tight immigration measures and underfunding of the asylum system impact queer refugees and asylum seekers? In order to increase the visibility of queer people, further research on the impact of general policies on this specific group is necessary. Another possible research topic relates to the issue of separate reception for queer asylum seekers. Although a few scholars, such as Hiller (2022) and Quinan et al. (2021), have touched upon this issue, further research is necessary. How does the measure of a separate facility relate to the homonationalist

narrative? How does this shape the agency of queer asylum seekers, especially in relation to homonormativity? Further research would shed light on the consequences of separate reception on queer asylum seekers and would be able to further theorize the relation between homonationalism and concepts such as 'vulnerability' and 'safety'. Finally, a possible issue for future studies could be the relationship between asylum procedures and the asylum system. Ropianyk and D'Agostino (2021) have elaborated on the interaction between the asylum procedure, which forces queer asylum seekers to express their identity visible, and the asylum system, which forces queer asylum seekers to 'tone it down'. While this interaction was beyond the reach of my research, further research could explore this interaction more thoroughly and research how violence in the asylum system impacts that relationship.

On a final note, I would like to elaborate on two theoretical implications of my research. Firstly, it is important to recognize how Puar's theory of homonationalism can work in a generalizing way. As other scholars, including Dhawan (2013, 2016), Kehl (2020), Ritchie (2015), and Weber (2016), have noted, the theory of homonationalism presents its own oversimplifications. Puar sometimes seems to reduce the queer rights discourse to a form of Orientalism. She critiques Western states and societies for perpetuating imperial and colonial frames. Although I agree that this discourse is used to exclude non-white and non-Western populations, I argue that nuance and complexities are important facets of queer and conflict studies that should not be ignored. For example, my findings show some interviewees challenge the government's narrative and acknowledge forms of insensitivity or even queerphobia among Dutch people. Additionally, employees move beyond the victimization/agency binary by acknowledging the agency of victims. The social phenomena that queer scholars research are often messy, which makes them complex and difficult to make sense of. Rather than ignoring these complexities, it is essential to acknowledge them. Further theorization on nuance within homonationalism would contribute to the development of the theory.

Secondly, research on the consequences of homonationalism could shed more light on the impact of homonationalism. Although Puar explains that homonationalism can be used to exclude certain populations and queer bodies (2013, p. 337), my research raises new questions regarding the impact of homonationalism. I have argued, similarly to other scholars (Kehl, 2020; Puar, 2017), that homonationalism can be dangerous and can contribute to violence. This aspect of homonationalism is in need of further theorization. What kind of measures and policies are legitimized through homonationalism? How do those measures impact queer (and non-queer) populations from the Global South? Homonationalism contributes to queer scholarship by connecting queer theory with theories on discourse and other critical theories, such as Orientalism. The scholarship on homonationalism could be further developed by focusing on the practical implications of homonationalism. The relation between homonationalism and concepts such as agency and responsibility could be further theorized.

Besides viewing homonationalism as a discourse, we need to ask ourselves what homonationalism looks like in practice. My research has started exploring this aspect of homonationalism by studying the responsibility of the Dutch government and the connection between homonationalism and the Dutch asylum system. Further theorization is needed to understand how homonationalism impacts the world we live in. The case of violence against queer asylum seekers shows the dangers of homonationalism. Ideas and narratives, that are informed by homonationalism, keep a violent system intact.

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Appendix 1: List of documents

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Appendix 2: List of interviews

Anonymous A. (2023, April 17). Interview by Joost van Ommeren. A representative of Pink in Blue, the LGBTQ department of the Dutch police.

Anonymous B. (2023, May 30). Interview by Joost van Ommeren. A volunteer for a rainbow organization.

Anonymous C. (2023, May 31). Interview by Joost van Ommeren [WebEx]. A policy advisor for the National Coordinator against Discrimination and Racism.

Anonymous D. (2023, June 5). Interview by Joost van Ommeren. A policy advisor for the COA.

Anonymous E. (2023, June 5). Interview by Joost van Ommeren. A policy advisor for the COA.

Brandwacht, L. (2023, June 6). Interview by Joost van Ommeren. A LGBTQ contact person at the reception facility in Dronten.

Cassidy, H. (2023, June 6). Interview by Joost van Ommeren. A LGBTQ contact person at the reception facility in Dronten.

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