

Master's Thesis – International Development studies
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A safe Haven? The legal and social challenges of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the Netherlands and their impact on mental health.

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FIGURE 1 SIGNS ON UNHCR'S BOAT DURING AMSTERDAM PRIDE 2023 ASKING FOR THE INCLUSION AND UNDERSTANDING OF LGBTQ+ ASYLUM SEEKERS, SOURCE: UNHCR WEBSITE

Abstract

This research investigates the legal and social challenges faced by LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the Netherlands and their impact on mental health. LGBTQ+ individuals often experience discrimination and persecution in their home countries, only to face similar struggles within the Dutch asylum system. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, the study explores how legal obstacles such as unequal procedures, long waiting times, and a lack of cultural sensitivity during interviews increase the psychological stress of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.

Findings reveal that many LGBTQ+ asylum seekers endure harassment, bullying, and violence within asylum centers, where they are often placed in unsafe environments. Some are forced to hide their identities to avoid conflict, effectively "going back into the closet." Legal discrimination, including inconsistent asylum procedures, further increases their mental health challenges. Institutional support from organizations like COA and VWN is insufficient, and while specialized LGBTQ+ units are intended to provide safety, they often increase the risk of discrimination due to heightened visibility.

Even after acquiring asylum status, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers continue to face mental health and financial difficulties, feeling less valued on the job market. Although some coping mechanisms exist, many still experience suicidal thoughts and significant mental health burdens. The research concludes that the Dutch asylum system, despite its strong stance on LGBTQ+ rights, fails to adequately help the mental health of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.

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I cannot leave out my family back in Lebanon, who have dealt with so much, especially with the threat of war hanging over them again. Your strength keeps me motivated, pushing me to keep going no matter what.

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And to everyone reading this, just a reminder: being a (LGBTQ+) refugee isn't something anyone chooses. With all the challenges we face(d) before, during, and after our asylum process a little bit of compassion and understanding can make a big difference. YOU can make a big difference.

Thanks to everyone who's been part of this journey.

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List of Abbreviations

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
COA Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum seekers
IND Immigration and Naturalization Service
NGOs Non-Governmental Organizations
VWN Vluchtelingen Werk Nederlands – Refugee work organization
PTSD Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
AEF Anderson Elffers Felix.
LGBTQ+ lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.

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Chapter 1 : Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the research topic

“I was almost killed by a random person and the safest place was to ask them (The COA) to put me in jail....I wanted him to stab me and finish it! I wasn't scared of death because I wanted to die!... I think I shouldn't exist anymore...I think I am a mistake.

This is a statement that Ahmad (a gay asylum seeker from Yemen) gave during my first interview with him. It captures some of the many struggles that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers¹ go through in the Netherlands. On top of the legal and social challenges he faced during his asylum process, Ahmad, like many LGBTQ+ asylum seekers had to endure cultural and social isolation, long waiting times during the asylum process, and a lack of proper support. On top of that, he had to manage serious mental health issues, feelings of worthlessness, and safety concerns while living in asylum centers. This environment, coupled with these overwhelming challenges, led Ahmad and many others to contemplate suicide.

Seeking asylum is a complex and uncertain process, and LGBTQ+ asylum seekers may face additional challenges and discrimination due to their sexual identity. LGBTQ+ individuals in many countries around the world face persecution and violence due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, leading many to seek asylum in other countries. (UNHCR, 2022).

In addition to the already challenging experience of being in a prolonged asylum process, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers face additional barriers in proving their credibility and sexual identity. However, the assessment of this evidence can be complex and subjective, as it relies on the judgment of the decision-maker regarding the authenticity of the individual's sexual orientation and the credibility of their claims. There may be cultural, linguistic, or legal barriers that can impact the assessment of this evidence, which can further complicate the decision-making process. (Danisi et al, 2021).

On top of that, many factors can contribute to the mental health challenges faced by LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. Social isolation is a significant issue, as asylum seekers often experience separation from family, cultural differences, and language barriers, which can increase feelings of loneliness and exclusion (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). Additionally, the lack of community support makes it difficult for them to find and build supportive networks in the host country (Schweitzer et al., 2006). Inadequate access to social services and mental health care specifically tailored to their needs further compounds these difficulties, leaving many without the necessary resources to cope with their situations (Miller et al., 2018).

Moreover, the uncertainty and legal insecurity inherent in the asylum process contributes to significant psychological stress. The lengthy and uncertain asylum application process itself can be a major source of anxiety and stress (Laban et al., 2004). This is often coupled with the persistent fear of deportation, as asylum seekers live with the constant threat of being sent back to dangerous conditions in their home countries (Steel et al., 2006). Together, these factors create a highly stressful and unstable environment that profoundly affects the mental health of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.

¹ An LGBTQ+ asylum seeker is an individual who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or another non-heteronormative sexual orientation or gender identity, seeking asylum due to persecution or discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. These individuals often flee their home countries to escape violence, legal penalties, or severe discrimination, seeking protection in nations where their rights are recognized and safeguarded.

Despite this, there have been limited attention and research given to queer refugees and there is an invisibility of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in policy discourse (Dankwort, 2021, Pérez-Fernández, 2021). This limited research presents a significant gap in our understanding of the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum and the specific barriers they face in navigating the asylum process.

The Netherlands is frequently regarded as a safe haven for people fleeing persecution because of its reputation for progressive principles and safeguards for queer people. However, individuals seeking asylum in the Netherlands on the grounds of their sexual orientation are often confronted with many legal and social challenges (Van der Pijl, et al 2018). According to a 2023 report by ILGA-Europe, there have been many reports of violence and harassment against LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in asylum centers across the country. In addition, three LGBTQ+ asylum-seekers tragically committed suicide and several others attempted suicide. More than half of the LGBTQ+ asylum seekers surveyed in this report said they felt unsafe during the asylum process. Due to this fear, three-quarters of them chose to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity to protect themselves. (ILGA-Europe, 2023)

1.2 Research objectives and structure :

This research aims to explore the legal and social challenges faced by LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the Netherlands, with a focus on understanding the implications of these challenges on their mental health. It does so by examining how LGBTQ+ asylum seekers experience the legal process of proving their sexual orientation, including the specific legal challenges they encounter and their experiences during their interviews with asylum officials and their preparation for these interviews. It will also explore the social experiences² of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers while living in asylum centers, focusing on their daily interactions and conditions. Finally, we will delve deeper into how these social and legal experiences in the asylum process impact asylum seekers' mental health through the minority stress and intersectionality framework.

Guided by this research aim, this research addresses the following questions:

1. What are the legal experiences and challenges that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers face during the asylum process in the Netherlands?
2. What social factors influence the experiences and well-being of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in asylum centers in the Netherlands?
3. What are the mental health implications of the asylum process on LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, and how are these influenced by their legal and social experiences?

The structure of this thesis is as follows: The next chapter presents the theoretical framework, discussing the debates and research specifically assessing the mental health impact of the legal and social experiences of asylum seekers through the lens of the minority stress and intersectionality models, positioning it within the current debates on the mental health of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. The third chapter outlines the methodology, covering the research design, limitations and reflection as a researcher and former refugee. The fourth chapter focuses on the context of applying for asylum in the Netherlands,

² By “social experiences”, we refer to the factors within asylum centers that influence their well-being. This will be explored through the following questions:

explaining the asylum process. The fifth chapter analyzes the primary data collected, delving into the life stories of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. In the sixth chapter, the findings are discussed in relation to the existing literature. Finally, the last chapter presents the conclusions, study limitations, implications for future research, and policy recommendations.

Chapter 2 :Literature review and Theoretical framework

This chapter explains the theoretical framework guiding this research and its relation to the Minority stress and Intersectionality models.

2.1 Understanding the Minority Stress and Intersectionality models

The Minority Stress Model, developed by Ilan Meyer (2003), laid the foundation for understanding how individuals belonging to marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals, face additional mental health stressors. These stressors are divided into distal stressors and proximal stressors. Distal stressors such as discrimination, violence, and prejudice impact these individuals externally, while proximal stressors, such as internalized stigma, identity concealment, and expectation of rejection, work internally, contributing to chronic stress and anxiety. Despite these increased psychological distress, Meyer explains that individuals often develop coping mechanisms, such as seeking support from their minority group (e.g., LGBTQ+ community), activism, or finding meaning in their experiences. (figure 2)

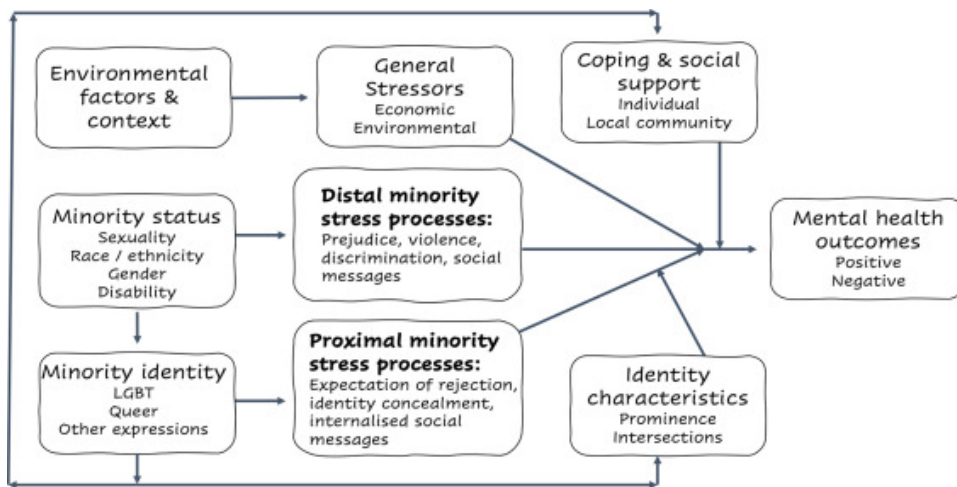


FIGURE 2 MINORITY STRESS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AS PRESENTED BY MEYER (2003)

The *Intersectionality framework*, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is a theoretical approach that examines how various social identities—such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability—intertwine to create unique systems of discrimination and mental health stressors. Instead of viewing forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia) as separate or isolated, intersectionality highlights how these identities intersect, leading to increased experiences of marginalization. By admitting that belonging to multiple marginalized groups can intensify mental health stressors, intersectionality helps explain why individuals in overlapping categories often experience more severe and multifaceted challenges.

2.2 Applying the models in the context of European LGBTQ+ Asylum seekers.

In the context of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, the first significant application of these combined frameworks started in the early 2000s, when researchers began exploring how LGBTQ+ asylum seekers experience multiple layers of marginalization. As an example, Shidlo and Ahola (2013) examined how LGBTQ+ refugees face dual marginalization; not only from their sexual or gender identity but also from their status as asylum seekers, leading to unique mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

Building on these findings, researchers across Europe have applied the combined framework in European countries to understand the complex challenges LGBTQ+ asylum seekers face. Jansen and Spijkerboer (2011) in the Netherlands and Dustin and Held (2018) in the UK showed how the expectation of rejection and identity concealment significantly increase psychological distress among LGBTQ+ refugees. In more recent research, Golembe et al. (2020) conducted a study in Germany that examined how LGBTQ+ refugees experienced mental health challenges through a combination of social discrimination, internalized stigma, and isolation during the asylum process through the combination of these frameworks.

2.3 Adapting the models to the Dutch asylum context

This research draws on the theoretical frameworks of minority stress and intersectionality, specifically focusing on their application within the Dutch asylum system. It examines the distal and proximal stressors that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers face, incorporating the concept of imposter syndrome into the analysis, as well as exploring the coping mechanisms (or lack thereof) relevant to this context (figure 3)

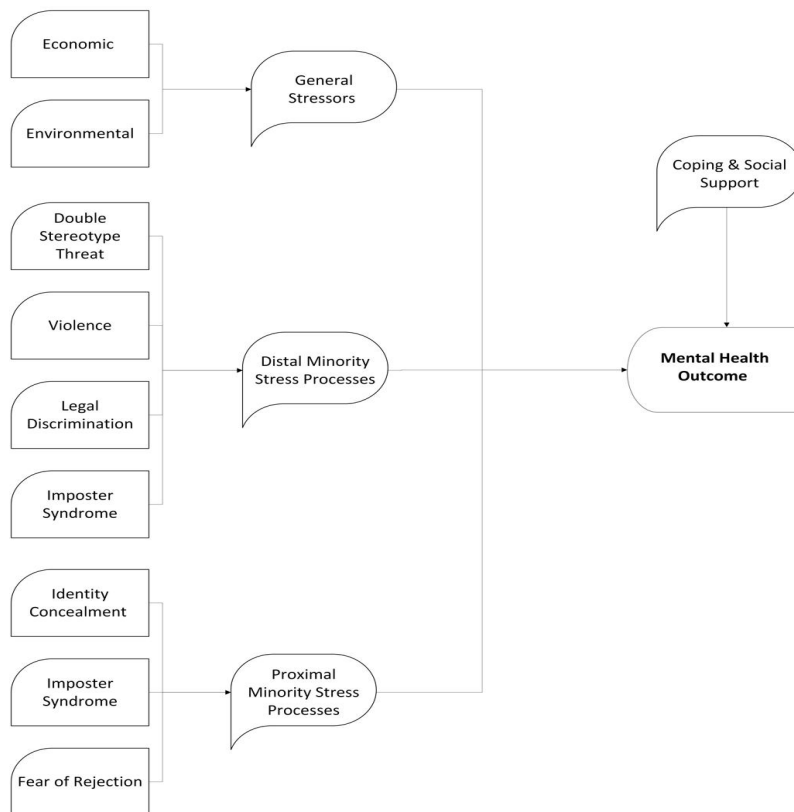


Figure 3 Adapted Minority Stress Framework – source : Author

2.3.1 Distal Minority stress processes:

Many distal factors affect the mental health of asylum seekers. Steele and Aronson's (1995) explains that Stereotype threat occurs when individuals fear being judged or treated unfairly based on stereotypes tied to their identity. In terms of the Minority Stress Model, stereotype threat is a distal stressor—an external force that worsens mental health challenges. Over time, exposure to this kind of external stress can lead to chronic psychological distress. Schmitt et al. (2014) emphasize that continuous exposure to stereotype threat increases anxiety and depression, especially for individuals who feel judged for their sexual identity. For LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, this constant external threat is intensified by their dual marginalized identities, creating a double stereotype threat—one related to their LGBTQ+ identity and another tied to their status as refugees. This combination of stressors produces a unique psychological burden linked to both their refugee status and LGBTQ+ identity. Crenshaw (1989).

Violence is another important distal stressor talked by Meyer (2003). For LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, violence can happen both in their country of origin and in asylum centers in the host country. In their home countries, many LGBTQ+ individuals face systemic violence, persecution, and criminalization due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, leading them to flee in search of safety. Upon arrival in asylum centers, however, they often encounter continued violence, including physical and verbal abuse from fellow asylum seekers, many of whom carry the same homophobic or transphobic attitudes from their shared cultural backgrounds. Studies show that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers frequently experience daily harassment and violence, including physical and sexual abuse, which worsens the trauma they have already endured. (Giacomozzi & Helberg-Proctor, 2022; Yarwood et al., 2022) This hostile environment contributes to severe mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Alessi (2016) notes that such ongoing exposure to violence reinforces their marginalized status, worsening feelings of exclusion and mental health distress.

Discrimination is the next big distal stressor that Meyer focuses on. In the context of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, one of the most significant external stressors is legal discrimination, particularly when combined with unequal waiting times in the asylum process. The combination of legal discrimination and unequal waiting times contributes to a unique mental health stress. The Minority Stress Model categorizes these as distal stressors, emphasizing how external factors such as unequal legal treatment and prolonged uncertainty contribute to deteriorating mental health. Kahn & Alessi (2017) and Shidlo & Ahola (2013) note that the feeling of being sidelined by the asylum system, especially when facing longer waiting times than others, deepens feelings of worthlessness, exclusion, and anxiety.

The psychological impact of these prolonged waiting periods is further compounded by the difference between different groups. Adam (1990) points out that unequal waiting times within a group create additional layers of stress and resentment, as those left waiting longer may feel forgotten or unfairly treated. So LGBTQ+ asylum seekers have unequal waiting times not only compared to the general refugee population but also between the LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. This sense of abandonment intensifies mental health challenges, leading to increased feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness. Schweitzer et al. (2006) argue that this state of limbo, where LGBTQ+ asylum seekers cannot plan for their future, creates a profound sense of despair that worsens their mental health struggles.

2.3.2 Proximal Minority stress processes

While external forces like stereotype threat and violence weigh heavily on LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, internal stressors—known as proximal stressors in the Minority Stress Model—also significantly impact their mental health. One of the most common proximal stressors for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers is internalized stigma, which arises when individuals absorb society's negative attitudes about their

LGBTQ+ identity. Meyer (2003) notes that this internalized stigma leads to feelings of shame and self-hatred, contributing to mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and self-isolation.

The pressure to conceal one's identity is another proximal stressor faced by LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. Shidlo & Ahola (2013) discuss the concept of re-closeting, where individuals are forced to hide their sexual or gender identity after already coming out, to avoid harassment or rejection within asylum centers. For LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, this concealment is often a survival strategy, as coming out in asylum centers may lead to violence or discrimination. This ongoing concealment worsens mental health problems and increases stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. The coming out dilemma presents a unique mental health challenge for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. Hopkinson & Keatley (2014) also emphasize that being forced back into the closet, or re-closeting, not only revives past traumas but creates new stressors, leading to chronic anxiety and depression. This dilemma sits at the heart of the internal proximal stressors, as LGBTQ+ asylum seekers must navigate their identities while fearing the consequences of visibility.

Meyer (2003) defines expectation of rejection as another proximal stressor where individuals from marginalized groups anticipate discrimination or rejection based on their minority status. This constant caution leads to heightened anxiety and stress, as individuals often expect negative treatment, even in neutral or supportive environments. The fear of being rejected or judged becomes internalized, increasing feelings of vulnerability. Research by Alessi (2016) also links this fear to the broader asylum process, where LGBTQ+ refugees often expect that they will not be believed or adequately supported, contributing to increased psychological distress. Kahn & Alessi (2017) highlight that this fear is intensified when asylum seekers must prove their sexual orientation in highly bureaucratic systems, adding to their expectation of being misunderstood or rejected. This connection between the fear of legal rejection and the internalized expectation of rejection underscores the intersectionality and impact of minority stress on LGBTQ+ asylum seekers' mental health.

Imposter Syndrome, first introduced by Clance and Imes (1978), was initially used as a psychological pattern primarily affecting high-achieving women who, despite their accomplishments, felt like frauds and feared being exposed as "impostors." Although there is limited direct research linking imposter syndrome to LGBTQ+ asylum seekers or refugees, some studies like Cokley et al. (2013) demonstrated that imposter syndrome is closely tied to minority stress, with individuals from marginalized groups experiencing higher levels of imposter feelings. For LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, the intersectionality of two marginalized identities—sexuality and refugee status—creates a unique blend of stressors, intensifying the imposter syndrome.

Stout et al. (2013) also note that imposter syndrome can be worsened when individuals feel they do not belong in dominant cultural spaces. In these cases, societal pressures and unfamiliar environments trigger feelings of fraudulence, anxiety, and depression, further amplifying the psychological impact. Moreover, the portrayal of refugees in the media as dependent or unqualified often influences the development of imposter syndrome. When refugees are depicted in negative or stigmatized ways, they may internalize these views, deepening feelings of inadequacy and undeservingness (Cuddy et al., 2015).

While imposter syndrome primarily functions as a proximal stressor due to its internal nature, external forces like media portrayals of refugees and societal prejudice can also transform it into a distal stressor. For LGBTQ+ refugees, the intersection of these external and internal pressures contributes to a heightened sense of being an imposter, further intensifying the challenges they face during the asylum and integration processes. Although Meyer and, to our knowledge, other researchers have not considered imposter syndrome as a factor in minority stress, this research will incorporate it into the Dutch context, as it impacts the mental state of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.

2.3.3 Economic stressors and discrimination to the Job market.

Economic stressors, such as limited financial opportunities and barriers to accessing the job market, are significant challenges for refugees, particularly during the asylum process. In the original Minority Stress framework, these stressors were discussed primarily in the context of discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals (Meyer, 2003). However, in this context, we will focus on the broader systemic discrimination faced by refugees, particularly in accessing the job market. Financial difficulties often begin early, as asylum seekers are restricted in their ability to work and must rely on limited allowances. These challenges are added by systemic barriers and the uncertain nature of their asylum status, resulting in financial instability (Cuddy et al., 2015). Even after gaining asylum, refugees often face difficulties securing employment, leading to prolonged periods of economic hardship. These ongoing financial challenges contribute to heightened stress, increasing feelings of anxiety and low self-worth (Alessi et al., 2020; Shakya et al., 2010) as they try to rebuild their lives.

2.3.4 Coping Mechanisms and the Importance of Social Support

Despite the overwhelming stressors they face, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers often develop coping mechanisms to manage their mental health. Meyer (2003) emphasizes the role of community and social support in helping individuals cope with minority stress. Similarly, Cohen and Wills (1985) highlight the importance of support from official institutions in maintaining mental health. For LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, the absence of adequate legal and social support from these organizations leaves them feeling isolated and vulnerable. This lack of institutional support increases their situation, significantly increasing the risk of anxiety and depression.

Beiser's (2009) research underscores how the absence of formal support is a key factor contributing to poor mental health outcomes among refugees. Studies by Nickerson et al. (2014) and Schweitzer et al. (2006) further demonstrate that the lack of support from official institutions can severely affect mental health, leading to increased rates of PTSD, anxiety, and depression among asylum seekers.

Moreover, the lack of support from these institutions can create a sense of insignificance among LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. When their needs are neglected or overlooked, it can reinforce feelings that they do not matter, which in turn contributes to feelings of worthlessness and depression. Over time, this persistent lack of support can have a profound impact on their mental health, potentially leading to chronic conditions such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Ryan et al., 2008; Kelleher, 2009).

Chapter 3 : Methodology

This chapter will outline the research design and methods used. It will also explain the data collection process and provide reflections on the researcher's role throughout the study.

3.1 Research design:

This research took a qualitative method approach, using in-depth interviews and participant observations. Qualitative research is important to understand complex and nuanced experiences because it allows for a deep understanding of different perspectives and the factors influencing participants' lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The original aim of this research was to only understand the legal and social experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the Netherlands; however, it became evident during the first interviews that including mental health analysis was crucial for the study and took a central point. A bottom-up approach was then adopted. This bottom-up approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the complex and sensitive issues concerning the asylum process and the challenges that the LGBTQ+ refugee community faces (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Using this method also allowed for the identification of unexpected challenges, such as those faced after obtaining their asylum status, which were not initially planned in the interview guide but were later incorporated in the findings. While this bottom-up method was beneficial for the research, it ended up being challenging and time consuming since the theoretical framework had to be adapted several times after each data analysis round.

3.2 Methods :

The secondary data for the contextual framework and analysis of the Dutch asylum process based on sexual orientation were primarily obtained from local and national governmental organizations websites, local NGOs, and online sources. For the primary data collection, two qualitative methods were used: in-depth interviews with LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and an expert, as well as participant observations. This section details each method and discusses their limitations.

3.2.1 In-depth interviews : LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and expert

In-depth interviews are important because they allow to explore participants' experiences and gather detailed information that might not come out through other methods (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In this research in-depth interviews were scheduled with LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and an expert in the field. Conducting these interviews this way allowed to get different perspectives that complimented each other's.

A total of 11 interviews were conducted with LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. The participants consisted of ten gay cisgender male asylum seekers who applied for asylum based on their sexual orientation. Seven had completed the asylum process and were living independently, while one had recently completed the process but remained in an asylum center. Two participants were still in the process of seeking asylum and residing in an asylum center. Including participants at different stages of the asylum process was important to capture a broad and fresh range of experiences.

Among those who had received asylum status, five had their interviews conducted by the special task force created to address the backlog in the asylum process (further details on this will be provided in the next chapter). The inclusion of participants who underwent interviews with the task force was critical in understanding the impact this had on their mental health. Appendix 1 provides basic information about the LGBTQ+ asylum seekers interviewed.

Most of the interviews were conducted in one setting and lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, except with one asylum seeker where two interviews were conducted: one before he concluded his main interview with the IND and another directly after to gain a direct understanding of his experiences post-interview. This allowed to ask him the questions related to the main interview with the IND and if his perception changed after the interview. Interviews were conducted face-to-face (in Utrecht) or online, depending on participant availability and preference. The language used was either Arabic or English to ensure that participants expressed themselves comfortably and accurately. All interviews were conducted alone with the asylum seeker to ensure confidentiality.

When it comes to sampling strategy, participants were recruited through the Inclusion program at Utrecht University, personal networks, and referrals. Although I was familiar with some participants and their stories, I strictly focused on gathering information shared explicitly during the interviews to ensure data integrity. The limitations of this sampling was that most of the participants were gay cisgender men and did not cover the different spectrum of sexual orientation.

Initially, I intended to interview the IND and COA to gain insights into their interactions with LGBTQ+ asylum seekers but did not receive responses from either organization. As a result, I conducted an online expert interview with Elie Karam, the Program Manager of Secret Garden, an organization supporting LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. This interview offered valuable insights into the systemic issues and support mechanisms available to LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, as well as the role of government organizations in the asylum process, complementing the personal narratives collected.

In-depth interviews are most effective when they combine structure with flexibility (Legard et al., 2003). Therefore, interviews with both LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and experts were conducted using a semi-structured, open-ended format. The interview guide was divided into two sections: the first focused on the general legal and social experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, and the second addressed the mental health implications of these experiences. It began with questions about their legal and social experiences in the asylum center and the support they received, then explored their mental health state and the major stressors during the asylum process.

3.2.2 Participants observation:

This method was not initially intended for this study. However, after receiving final feedback on my thesis draft from my supervisor, who asked if I had conducted any participant observations, I realized that I had passively observed participants during two social events over the past year. The first event was the Canal Pride in Amsterdam on August 4, 2023, where I was on board of the UNHCR refugee boat. The second event was a dinner for Inclusion students in April 2024 at Utrecht University. These observations allowed me to link some of the findings to a broader group. However, since they were thought of recently, they limit the depth of this method in relation to this research.

3.3 Data Collection and analysis

Ethical considerations were central due to the sensitive nature of the participants' experiences. All participants provided verbal informed consent, were assured of their right to withdraw, were briefed on the research, and were informed of the confidentiality measures in place (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000). Pseudonyms were used (except for the expert interview) to protect identities, and all interviews were recorded, transcribed with the help of an app, and subsequently deleted to uphold confidentiality commitments as per the recommendation of Wiles (2013). Using the app allowed faster transcription and therefore quicker access to the data and gave the possibility to search faster for pattern for the coding that

was done manually. During each data analysis round, the transcripts were read several times and new patterns, codes, theories were identified and studied.

3.4 Reflexivity and positionality

As a former refugee, I had a unique insider perspective that allowed me to connect deeply with the experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. However, I was also aware that my background could influence the research process. Early on, I noticed that some of the questions I asked were leading, potentially steering participants' responses. Realizing this, I adjusted my approach to ensure that the questions were more open-ended, minimizing bias and ensuring the authenticity of the data collected. It also made me feel like a "Hybrid Insider-Outsider" (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati, 2014). I shared significant experiences with the participant group but have also integrated into the host society. This combination of insider knowledge and an outsider's analytical distance was key in building trust with participants while maintaining the critical distance necessary for the important analysis. This combination allowed me to gain more honest in-depth answers from my interviewees while maintaining my objectivity as the researcher.

Chapter 4 : Contextualizing the asylum journey for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers

Since this research focuses on the legal and social experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, this chapter will begin by explaining the legal process they go through to be granted asylum, as well as the role of the VWN in providing legal support. Following that, the chapter will discuss their social experiences and the role of the COA.

4.1 The legal asylum journey

The asylum process in the Netherlands begins with registration at Ter Apel for most applicants, including those from unsafe countries. Asylum seekers from these regions may enter fast tracks 3 or 5 designed for individuals fleeing conflict or war. LGBTQ+ asylum seekers applying at the airport may enter the border procedure, where they stay in a secure reception center for up to 28 days while the IND processes their application. Those not applying at the airport are placed in track 4 or the General or Extended Asylum Procedure for a more thorough review of their case. (AIDA, n.d.) (Figure 4).

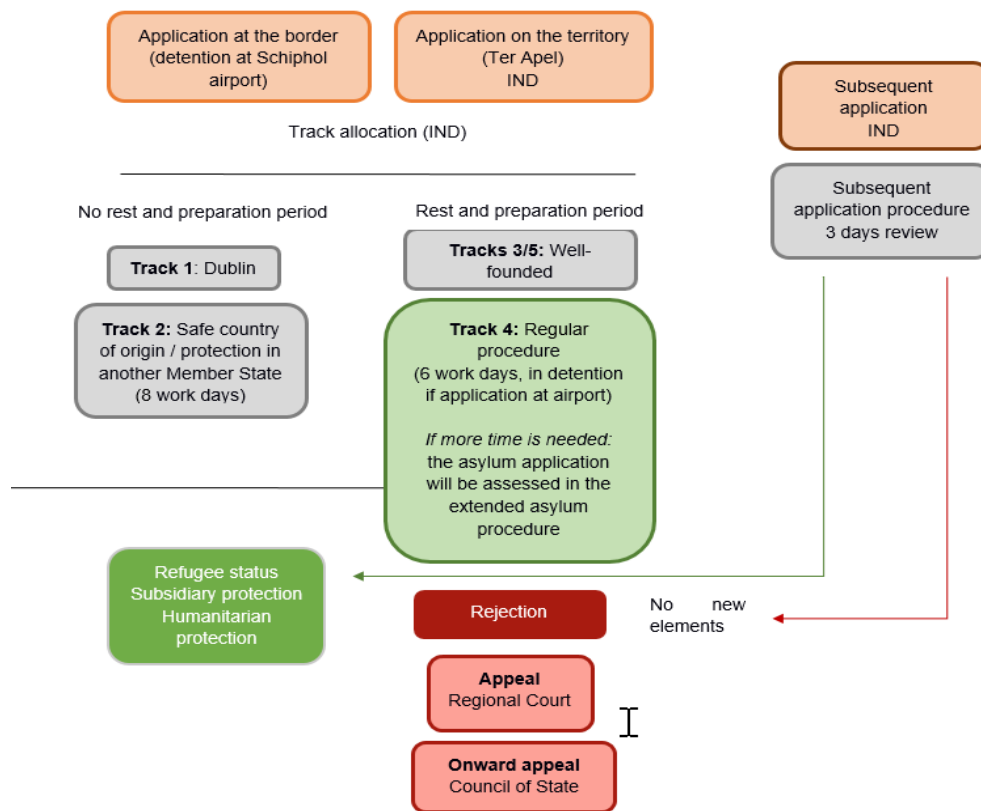


Figure 4 flowchart about the asylum process in Holland, source *Asylum in Europe* website

Moreover, Ukrainians benefit from the Temporary Protection Directive, allowing them to navigate the asylum process more quickly, a privilege not extended to all nationalities. This introduces a legal discrimination right from the start, highlighting how the system prioritizes certain groups over others based on geopolitical factors (AIDA, n.d.).

In addition to these tracks and in April 2020, the IND created a special Taskforce to clear backlogs of asylum applications submitted before April 1, 2020, aiming to process these by the end of 2020. The report by (AEF), addressed to the Ministry of Justice and Security and the IND, outlined the task force's activities, measures taken to manage backlogs, and their impact on the asylum process, highlighting the effectiveness of a project-based approach in managing backlogs and enabling innovative and less bureaucratic methods. According to the report, the task force operated until December 2021, after which its activities were discontinued due to many problems including lack of efficiency.

In the asylum process, VWN assists asylum seekers by explaining procedures, coordinating with organizations, and assigning free lawyers to represent them, though asylum seekers can also choose government-funded lawyers through external organizations. Asylum seekers typically have two interviews with the IND: an application interview and a detailed interview, both conducted in Dutch with translators provided by the IND. Applicants can request a male or female interviewer and translator. LGBTQ+ asylum seekers must prove their sexual orientation during the detailed interview through a series of questions. A review of an interview transcript with the IND of one of the asylum seekers that I interviewed highlighted the nature of the questions asked. For example, the interviewee was questioned about his earliest memories of feeling different, the reactions he faced from his family, and specific incidents where he was targeted for their sexuality. He was also asked about his current involvement with LGBTQ+ groups and how he continues to express and live his identity.

4.2 Access to work and financial support

Refugees in the Netherlands are allowed to work, but specific conditions apply. They must wait at least six months after submitting their asylum application before becoming eligible to work, and they require a work permit (TWV) which only special organizations provide. During this period, they are restricted to working up to 24 weeks within a 52-week span. Ukrainian refugees, on the other hand, are allowed immediate access to the Dutch job market without the need for a work permit (Yacht, 2023).

While waiting for asylum, individuals receive financial support from the COA. This includes a weekly allowance of approximately €59.50 per adult for food if they need to cook themselves, or €40.04 if dinner is provided. (RefugeeHelp, 2024; European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2024).

4.3 The social support for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.

COA provides accommodation, guidance, and (social) support during their asylum process. This includes safe housing, access to medical care, and assistance during the asylum process. The COA manages the reception and care of asylum seekers, providing essential services like accommodation, food, medical care, and education. Additionally, COA offers specialized support for vulnerable groups, such as LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors. For LGBTQ+ individuals, COA provides specialized shelters (LGBTQ+ units) and guidance on issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, collaborating with external organizations for comprehensive support. Additionally, COA coordinates the transfer of asylum seekers between different types of reception centers depending on their needs and the stage of their procedure. Usually asylum seekers don't have the option of choosing the location of the asylum center they are assigned to (COA, 2023)

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 The legal experiences of the asylum process:

5.1.1 Choosing the Netherlands and Navigating legal support:

LGBTQ+ asylum seekers chose the Netherlands for its reputation as a safe haven and presumably easier legal process for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, where they could live openly and free from the persecution they faced in their home countries. The presence of friends or family who had already settled there, or successfully navigated the asylum process, also made the country an attractive option.

While the VWN serves as the official organization providing legal support and information, the majority of interviewees reported obtaining information from friends, other asylum seekers, the internet, and NGOs. Many interviewees also preferred to seek legal help and representation from external organizations rather than relying on the VWN. This preference comes from a lack of trust and the VWN's poor reputation. As one interviewee noted, asylum seekers often hear that the VWN is overloaded, leading to delays in arranging interviews. Some interviewee also expressed concerns that the VWN does not provide the best lawyers, particularly for the LGBTQ+ community.

According to Elie Karam, the VWN fails to adequately inform asylum seekers about their rights, especially those seeking asylum based on sexual orientation. Karam explained that unless asylum seekers are not cisgender or non-gender conforming, the VWN often fails to identify them as part of the LGBTQ+ community. This gap in information means that only those who explicitly state their asylum claim based on sexual orientation are aware of their rights, potentially leading to some asylum seekers not knowing their rights.

5.1.2 Fear of Judgement and being stereotyped.

Even though almost everyone that I interviewed felt that the interviewers conducted themselves professionally during their interviews with the IND and knew they needed to discuss sensitive material with them, many asylum seekers felt uncomfortable sharing personal information if the interpreter comes from the same country or region. They worry about discrimination, stereotyping or prejudice which affected both their interviews and mental health. For example, Walid a gay person who fled Lebanon because he was being stereotyped as gay person all the time, said :

“I was uncomfortable having an interpreter with the same cultural background, a Moroccan Muslim man. I was afraid that the interpreter would not pronounce his words correctly, whether intentionally or not, due to cultural or personal prejudice. This only added to the stress during my interview”

Walid continue by saying : *“I was also forced to only speak in Arabic, as you already know we speak 3 languages in Lebanon and most of the gay dialect is in English so I was always hesitant what to say”*

Wael, another gay person from Lebanon who fled because of the conservative views of his Muslim background had a similar problem. He asked for a female interpreter, but was initially given a male one. He felt so uncomfortable that he insisted that they switch interpreters, which delayed the interview. His choice for a female interpreter made him feel less stereotyped as he mentioned.

Fahed, a gay cisgender male from Egypt who escaped Egypt because the bad treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals in his country felt uncomfortable when he was assigned a Middle Eastern translator. He was concerned about possible homophobia due to cultural reasons, which made the interview process more

stressful. He said: *"A translator from the Middle East was triggering. I didn't know how to talk about my sexuality with someone who might be homophobic."*

All these challenges added to the already significant stress of the interview and intensified their fears of not being understood or fairly represented in the process. The combination of linguistic barriers and cultural biases created a sense of isolation, leaving many LGBTQ+ asylum seekers feeling unsupported during one of the most critical phases of their asylum journey.

The fear of being stereotyped expanded outside the legal context. During my observations during the canal pride, I noticed a lot of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers requesting not to be photographed on the boat and shown on social media. And during the inclusion event, the same thing happened but this time some LGBTQ+ students preferred not to be photographed because of their refugee status since inclusion is specifically tailored for refugee students. This shows that both identities impact the stereotype fear and in social events as well.

5.1.3 Sense of unequal treatment :

When asked if they thought the Asylum process was fair, it became evident that everyone, except Wael, who finished his asylum process in two weeks, felt that the asylum process was unfair and unpredictable. Some interviewees mentioned the preferential fast tracks for Syrians and Ukrainians as stated by two of my interviewees:

"I had a lot of Syrian friends living with us in the room. They were bragging about how fast some of them got their approval while we (referring to the LGBTQ+ community) might have stronger cases and were really in danger but had to wait longer"

Fahed,34, Egypt

Yeah! Since Ukrainians come from the EU, they are treated differently. They even opened a special shelter for them in Utrecht. But the worst part is they can freely work while we need a special permit.

Jad,30,Lebanon

In an analysis of the waiting times for two similar asylum applications, a significant gap between the timelines became evident. Both applications were submitted by gay individuals from Lebanon around the same time (February and March 2020), with the key difference being the asylum track. The first application was submitted at the airport, while the second was submitted at Ter Apel. In the airport case, the asylum seeker had their main interview within 10 days. However, for the application submitted at Ter Apel, it took 17 months before the main interview was conducted. (figure 5)

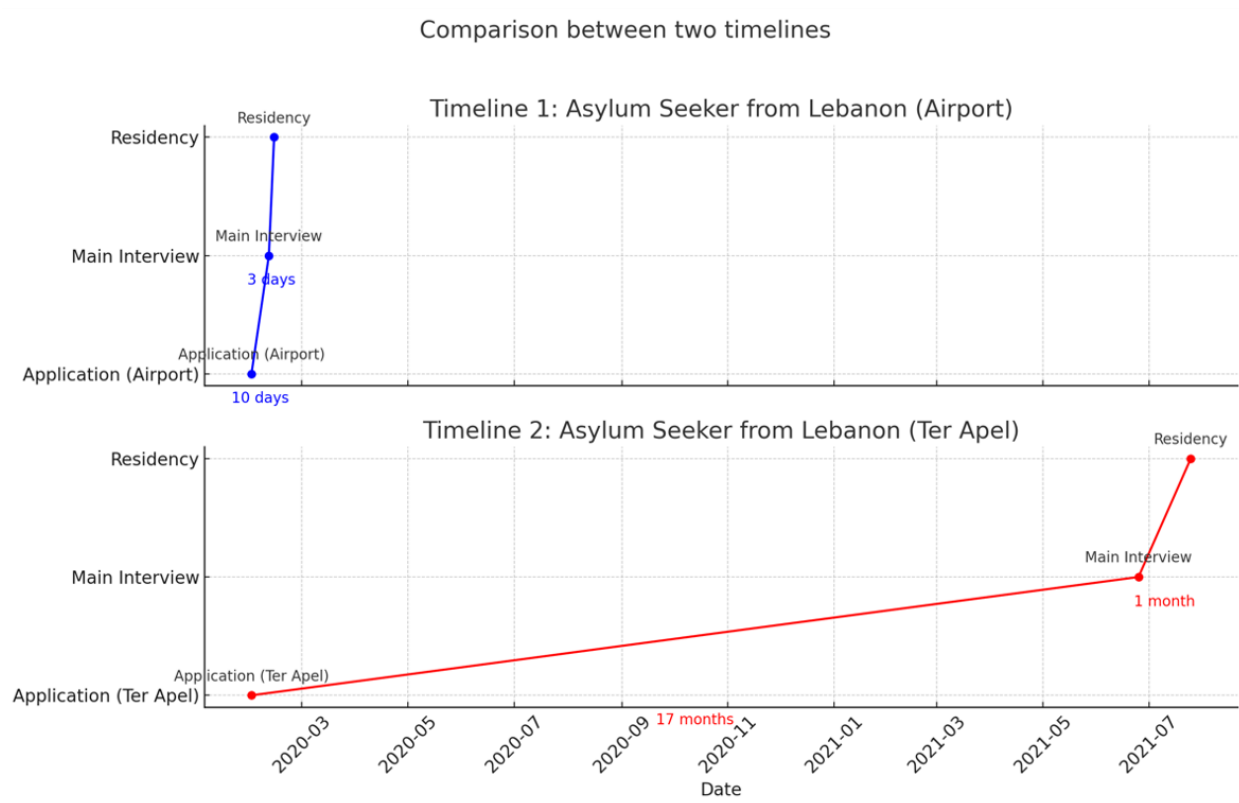


FIGURE 5 COMPARISON BETWEEN TWO ASYLUM APPLICATION TIMELINES - SOURCE : AUTHOR

It's interesting to point out not only the gap between the time the application was submitted and when asylum was granted but also the gap between when the IND gave a decision after conducting the main interview. For the application submitted at the airport, it took the IND 3 days to provide a decision, while it took a month in the second case. Some asylum seekers felt that the different tracks were unfair, while others mentioned that, even within the same track, it was unpredictable to know when the next interview would take place, as the rules kept changing. This was highlighted by Vassili, a gay refugee from Russia, who has been waiting 17 months for his first interview:

“My roommate, who is also gay and from Russia, arrived six months ago and got his asylum in five months. because the procedure in his case was already changed. He arrived way later than I did. We both applied at Schipol But he ended up having the interview first, and I waited more”

This unfairness and unpredictability created a deep sense of frustration and inequality among LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, leading to a sense of anxiety and insecurity. While the gap in waiting times was a major contributor in these feelings of inequality, another reason that became clear was the lack of proper communication from the IND and abiding by its deadlines. Vassili continue by saying :

“I was told my maximum waiting time would be until February 2024. Now it's the 2nd of April, and I haven't heard anything from IND. They can't even comply with their own promises”

This lack of transparency from the IND did not only deepen the sense of frustration but also led to a growing distrust in the system. Some asylum seekers began to feel unsure of where their applications

stood or when they would hear back. This led to a feeling of paranoia, who feared that the silence from the IND might indicate that their application might be rejected.

“I was living in constant fear of rejection for almost 2 years! This killed the person I was and created this insecure, destroyed person!”

Fahed,34, Egypt

“The worst is not knowing if you are staying or leaving, I was in constant fear that my application will be rejected

Ala,22,Iraq

This persistent fear of rejection added to the psychological impact of the asylum process, leaving many feeling helpless and emotionally drained.

5.1.4 Role of the task force

On the other hand, five asylum seekers had interviews with the task force hoping that this would help speed their process. (Appendix 1) This was not the case. When asked to explain the interview they had with the task force, all 5 asylum seekers mentioned that they were surprised to learn that after finishing this interview, they were informed that it was just to listen to their story and not to make a decision. They were told that the person who conducted the interview was not qualified to ask the right questions, and they would have to do another interview with an LGBTQ+ officer. The questions during this initial task force interview did not focus on significant aspects such as coming out or discovering their sexual identity but were only aimed at listening to their story and why they asked for asylum.

This approach left many asylum seekers feeling frustrated and depressed, as they expected the interview to be a decisive part of their asylum application process. To the point that 2 asylum seekers had suicidal thoughts after conducting this interview.

“I started crying because I was informed that the interview would be split into two days, meaning I’d have to wait another month for the second part. I couldn’t believe that after waiting for almost two years, they brought an unqualified person to do the interview. I felt like they just wanted to interview me for me to wait even more and push me to withdraw my application.

Walid,43, Lebanon

Mohamad, a stateless person who lived all his life without a nationality in Dubai adds by saying :

“The main feeling in this interview was that the interviewer had six questions, asked them and wanted to leave”.

The task force’s mishandling of these interviews, combined with the already lengthy waiting periods, further increased the emotional distress experienced by the asylum seekers.

Based on the above findings and to answer the first research question *“What are the legal experiences and challenges that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers face during the asylum process in the Netherlands?”* we can state that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the Netherlands face several legal challenges. While Many chose the country for its reputation as a safe haven and while the VWN provides legal support, many seek help from external organizations due to mistrust and perceived inadequacies in supporting LGBTQ+ individuals. Access to information is limited, with some asylum seekers unaware of their rights. Fear of

prejudice during interviews, especially when interpreters share the same cultural background, adds stress. Additionally, many feel the asylum process is unfair, with preferential treatment for certain nationalities and inconsistent waiting times, further effected by delays with the IND's task force.

5.2 The Social experiences during the Asylum process :

5.2.1 Coming out Dilemma and safety within the Asylum Center:

The creation of LGBTQ+ units by the COA aims to gather a sense of community among LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, but the effectiveness of these units varies significantly. This research revealed a range of perspectives on this issue.

Some interviewees felt a sense of safety and preferred living in an LGBTQ+ unit while residing in the asylum center. They found that such units provided an open environment where they could express their identities without fear of discrimination. However, they also reported encountering aggression and discrimination from other asylum seekers outside the unit. Many other interviewees were not comfortable being placed in LGBTQ+ units due to the potential risks associated with being labeled as LGBTQ+ individuals. They feared that this label would make them targets for aggression and violence within the asylum centers.

One interviewee, who had not been openly gay before being placed in the LGBTQ+ unit, remembered a particularly difficult situation: Once others knew he was gay, he was subjected to verbal abuse. He recalled, *"This guy knew me from before but didn't know I was gay. Once he discovered I was living in the LGBTQ+ unit and while I was walking, he shouted, 'I didn't know that you are a f* who sucks ***.'*

Similar situations happened with other asylum seekers. Many faced either some kind of verbal abuse, harassment, or physical threat. Almost everyone I interviewed felt unsafe at some point during their time in the asylum center.

"I was bullied all the time and even threatened to the point that one roommate choked me with his hand. When I went to the COA and reported this because I was afraid he would use a knife next time, and begged them to transfer me to an LGBTQ+ unit, they informed me that this was not possible and advised me to leave the camp for a few days until they find a solution, but unfortunately, no solution was given."

Walid, 31, Lebanon

This uncertainty about coming out or retreating back into the closet created a lot of stress for many asylum seekers, leaving them feeling anxious and insecure. The mental impact of navigating this environment, where safety is uncertain, significantly impacted their mental health.

According to Elie Karam, the existence of LGBTQ+ units can indeed be very dangerous. New asylum seekers often arrive from countries where being gay is not accepted, and they may not be properly educated about the laws and norms in the Netherlands. This lack of understanding and acceptance can lead to higher risks for those in LGBTQ+ units, further contributing to their mental health struggles.

Many of the interviewees also reported significant financial difficulties during their time in the asylum centers, as they were unable to work due to restrictions placed on asylum seekers. This forced them to rely on minimal financial assistance provided by the COA, which barely covered their basic needs. Living on such limited resources created an additional layer of stress, and feeling of Humiliation. As Mohamad mentioned :

“I had this amazing job in UAE and now I am living on 50 Euros per week. It is humiliating”

5.2.2 Role of institutions during the Asylum process

COA serves as the primary point of contact for asylum seekers upon their arrival in the Netherlands, offering essential daily interaction and support. Despite the critical nature of its role, a considerable number of individuals interviewed expressed negative encounters with the COA, highlighting their perception that the organization failed to provide adequate support throughout the asylum process. This lack in support directly impacted the mental well-being of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, increasing feelings of isolation and neglect.

One interviewee remembered their initial experience at the camp, noting that a COA employee handed them a set of regulations and emphasized the consequences of not following the rules, creating an atmosphere similar to a prison. This sentiment was echoed by multiple asylum seekers, underscoring the lack of personalized support from the COA.

My research brought to light numerous similar testimonies, each emphasizing the lack in tailored support experienced by many asylum seekers. One individual expressed frustration at being unable to afford transportation to attend a university course and noted the COA's repeated refusal to relocate them to a more accessible camp. Although this challenge is not exclusive to LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, it underscores the additional mental health burdens faced by this group due to the intersection of their sexual orientation and asylum status. These adding challenges, coupled with the absence of personalized support, had a cumulative detrimental effect on their mental well-being, resulting in emotions of helplessness and frustration.

According to Elie Karam, the lack of support can be attributed to the COA's perception that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers are more integrated into Dutch society than other asylum seekers, owing to the presence of numerous organizations dedicated to supporting this marginalized group. This assumption has led to a neglect of the specific needs and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, resulting in inadequate support and guidance. Consequently, many LGBTQ+ asylum seekers find themselves without the requisite psychological and emotional support, contributing to increased feelings of stress and alienation. When it comes to activities outside the center, some NGOs did organize activities and events meant to engage LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, but some interviewees thought that these initiatives are sometimes more about visibility than about addressing the actual needs of the community and they lacked cultural sensitivity. For example, Vassili recounted how he felt pressured into participating in a drag queen festival organized by an NGO in his camp. While such events might be embraced in some parts of the LGBTQ+ community, they can feel isolating to those who do not identify with this form of expression. Vassili felt disrespected and uncomfortable, highlighting how the cultural differences among asylum seekers are often overlooked.

Based on the findings in this section and to answer the second question: *What social factors influence the experiences and well-being of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in asylum centers in the Netherlands?* several social factors significantly influence the experiences and well-being of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in asylum centers in the Netherlands. Safety concerns within the centers are apparent, as many face harassment, bullying, and even violence from other asylum seekers. The creation of LGBTQ+ units, intended to provide safe spaces, sometimes inadvertently makes individuals more visible targets for discrimination, increasing their vulnerability. Social isolation and the dilemma of whether to disclose one's sexual orientation contribute to mental health challenges, as hiding one's identity leads to psychological strain while being open can invite hostility. Additionally, there was a lack of support from institutional sources, such as the COA and local NGOs. Financial difficulties also played a significant

role, as many LGBTQ+ asylum seekers struggled with living on minimal financial assistance, further exacerbating their feelings of isolation and helplessness.

5.3 Post-Asylum Challenges and Lingering Effects

For the seven asylum seekers who had completed their asylum process and were living independently, many continued to struggle with both new and persistent stressors. The uncertainty shifted from their asylum status to questions about what to do next, alongside a lack of continued support. As Fahed puts it, *“The challenge was basically what’s next. You take your papers, but you don’t necessarily have a clear plan. More mental health support was missing, both during and after the process.”*

Wael echoed this sentiment, describing the exhaustion of starting over: *“The house, the bills, the challenges—it was a great struggle. I didn’t want to start over, but I had to.”* Antoine, who fled Lebanon in 2019 because his uncle tried to kill him after discovering he was gay, added, *“I went home and found myself alone. I didn’t know where to start or how to start. I felt emptiness.”* These ongoing uncertainties continued to affect their mental health.

In addition to new challenges, many asylum seekers dealt with lingering mental health issues from their time in the asylum centers. Walid explained, *“You finally reach the light after the tunnel, but with it comes all your traumas.”* Fahed, even in his own home, kept locking his doors due to the ongoing sense of insecurity he developed while in the camp. As he explained, *“Even in a nice camp, I always felt unsafe, and that feeling still affects me now.”*

At least two of the asylum seekers who completed the asylum process were still struggling to find suitable employment or had to settle for jobs that did not match their qualifications. Thein, who earned a master’s degree in Business Administration from Rotterdam in 2017 and later returned to Myanmar to start his own business, was forced to flee after the coup in 2021. Now waiting for his second interview and a special work permit, Thein expressed that he had requested a manual job that wouldn’t demand much mental effort. He shared that working in his professional field felt out of reach because, as an asylum seeker, he perceived himself as being “small” compared to other professionals. This feeling came because how the media perceive asylum seekers being less.

This sentiment of inadequacy is not unique to Thein. Jad, who studied Human Resources and worked at a bank in Lebanon before fleeing to the Netherlands, also shared feelings of diminished value in the job market. Despite their qualifications and experience, both Thein and Jad face the internal struggle of imposter syndrome, compounded by the societal pressures they encounter as asylum seekers.

These challenges also underline a broader issue: the negative portrayal of refugees in the media. In the Netherlands, asylum seekers are frequently depicted as burdens, criminals, or threats to national security. Such negative frames not only erode their self-esteem but also deepen their sense of inadequacy. Even the most educated and skilled individuals may begin to internalize these perceptions, feeling that they don’t belong or that they’re inherently less capable. This combination of imposter syndrome and societal stigmatization makes it even more difficult for asylum seekers to rebuild their lives and realize their potential in a new country.

5.4 Coping mechanism or breaking point

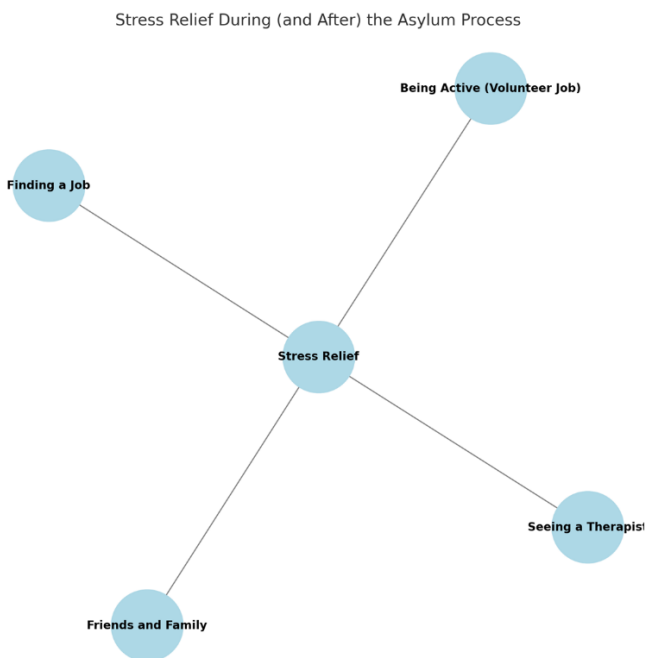
While previous sections have focused on the mental health stressors experienced by LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, it is equally important to explore the ways in which they coped with these challenges. Although

no direct questions were asked about support mechanisms, the interviewees often shared details of how they managed to relieve their emotional burdens during their asylum journey.

One of the primary coping mechanisms for many LGBTQ+ asylum seekers was relying on their friends and building a supportive community. Several interviewees emphasized the importance of having people around them who understood their struggles. As Walid explained, *“Like no one would understand it unless they went through the same process. Because no matter how you're going to speak to a therapist or a partner, they won't understand.”* Another interviewee found help in the support of a Dutch friend who helped them feel more comfortable with their sexuality, saying, *“With the support of this Dutch lady, I felt more relaxed and began to embrace myself and my sexuality.”* For others, having a close circle of friends was essential in preventing them from giving up, as Fahed explained, *“I had thoughts of scrapping everything and going back. But thankfully I had my friends, especially one friend, who kept me from making that decision.”*

Engaging in meaningful activities such as volunteering or working was another key coping strategy. Staying busy helped LGBTQ+ asylum seekers manage their mental health by reducing feelings of helplessness and giving them a sense of purpose during the long and uncertain asylum process. One interviewee shared, *“I volunteered six days a week in the laundry room every morning. This helped me a lot to keep my mind off things.”* For another, securing employment was a turning point: *“It took 22 months from the time I applied for asylum until I got a job. This job marked the end of my long wait and the beginning of a new phase in my life in the Netherlands.”* For Antoine staying productive also helped them avoid negative situations such as drug use, *“I was introduced to drugs. It wasn't until I found a job that I managed to escape that situation.”*

Finally, many asylum seekers found relief through therapy. Although not all interviewees had positive experiences, those who did highlighted the importance of therapy in helping them manage the emotional challenges they faced. Therapy provided a safe space for them to process their trauma and navigate the difficult emotions that arose during their asylum process.



The picture on the left highlights the findings and the main strategies LGBTQ+ asylum seekers use to manage stress during and after the asylum process. Building a supportive network of friends and family played a crucial role in offering emotional relief and a sense of belonging. Staying active, particularly through volunteer work, helped many asylum seekers maintain a sense of purpose and distract themselves from the overwhelming uncertainty of their situation. Finding a job was another crucial step, as it provided stability and marked a new phase of their life. Additionally, seeking therapy allowed some individuals to process trauma and navigate their emotional challenges in a safe, supportive environment.

Despite these coping mechanisms, many LGBTQ+ asylum seekers experienced severe mental health challenges during their asylum journey. Four interviewees admitted to having suicidal thoughts at some point. For Ahmad, suicidal thoughts emerged after he was physically attacked in the asylum center, an experience that deeply affected his sense of belonging and self-worth. He expressed feeling like a mistake, questioning his right to exist.

Two other interviewees developed suicidal thoughts after learning that their interviews with the task force were not the final steps in their process. The realization that they would need to endure further delays and retell their traumatic stories placed an unbearable strain on their mental health. As one participant reflected, “I had suicidal thoughts, but I didn’t want to mention them. It was between the first and second main interviews.” Another added, “After the first interview and learning I had a second one, I felt that there was no meaning to my life. I didn’t want to be humiliated again.”

Ala’, who had to apply for asylum twice, found himself in a dark place after his first application was rejected. He felt hopeless, trapped with no viable options, and admitted to contemplating suicide. He recalled, “I thought of suicide because I didn’t have anywhere else to go. I felt stuck, and if I didn’t get asylum after the second application, I thought I’d better die.”

Other participants shared their most challenging moments during the asylum process. Fahed mentioned that while he didn’t have suicidal thoughts, the time after his interview with the task force was the most difficult. The idea of having to repeat the process and relive painful memories was overwhelming for him.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This chapter connects the mental health implications of the legal and social experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the Netherlands with the Minority Stress and Intersectionality models. Guided by the third research question, *"What are the mental health implications of the asylum process on LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and how are these influenced by their legal and social experiences?"*, it explores how the asylum process increases mental health challenges and how the intersection of marginalized identities intensifies these stressors.

6.1 Fear of Judgment, Violence, and Legal Discrimination

When applying the findings to the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003), it became evident that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers experience many distal stressors. One of the clearest examples of distal stress is the double stereotype threat, where asylum seekers fear judgment not only based on their sexual orientation but also their refugee status. This double stereotype threat is particularly apparent during legal proceedings, such as interviews with interpreters from similar cultural backgrounds. Many asylum seekers felt uncomfortable during these interviews, fearing cultural bias, stereotypes, or prejudice, which increased their stress and mental health burdens (Schmitt et al., 2014).

This stereotype threat extends beyond legal proceedings. It also manifests in social settings, including public events and activities that involve both LGBTQ+ and refugee communities. The fear of being stereotyped, judged, or targeted highlights the ongoing psychological effect asylum seekers face, even in apparent safe or supportive spaces (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This shows the intersectionality between LGBTQ+ identity and refugee status, as their overlapping marginalized identities lead to intensified stress (Crenshaw, 1989).

Additionally, multiple interviewees reported experiencing verbal harassment and even physical violence within the asylum centers. Violence, both physical and verbal, represents another critical distal stressor that worsens the mental health of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers (Meyer, 2003). These experiences of violence only heightened their feelings of isolation, fear, and vulnerability. (Giacomozzi & Helberg-Proctor, 2022; Yarwood et al., 2022).

Another significant distal stressor is legal discrimination and the unequal treatment experienced throughout the asylum process. The existence of multiple asylum tracks and unequal waiting times even within the same group added another layer of stress to LGBTQ+ asylum seekers' mental health. Many interviewees expressed frustration with how inconsistent the asylum system was, with some asylum seekers receiving decisions within a few months, while others waited over a year. The unpredictability and inequality in waiting and processing times, combined with the overall lack of transparency, created an environment of anxiety and helplessness (Kahn & Alessi, 2017). This legal discrimination, categorized as a distal stressor, contributes to deteriorating mental health as LGBTQ+ asylum seekers are left in a state of limbo without clear information or support (Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011)

6.2 Identity Concealment, Fear of Rejection, and Imposter Syndrome

In addition to external pressures, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers experience significant proximal stressors, known as internal stressors. One of the most important proximal stressor is identity concealment, which asylum seekers are often forced to practice both in their countries of origin and in asylum centers. Upon arriving in the Netherlands, they expected to live openly, but instead, they were often forced back into the closet due to the hostile environments in asylum centers (Meyer, 2003). This re-closeting process has

serious mental health implications, as asylum seekers were compelled to conceal their identities to avoid violence or discrimination. The constant pressure to hide one's identity led to chronic stress, anxiety, and feelings of worthlessness, increasing mental health challenges like depression and PTSD (Alessi et al., 2017).

Another significant proximal stressor is the expectation of rejection. Many asylum seekers expressed fear that their asylum applications would be rejected due to the lack of transparency in the process. The subjective nature of the asylum timeline, where some individuals had their interviews months before others despite applying at the same time, contributed to this fear (Kahn & Alessi, 2017). This expectation of rejection not only increased anxiety but also created a deep sense of insecurity, where asylum seekers felt they were constantly at risk of being denied asylum and sent back to dangerous situations in their home countries.

Imposter syndrome was another prevalent proximal stressor for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. Many felt unworthy and out of place in Dutch society, particularly when it came to finding suitable employment. As one interviewee expressed, they felt "small" compared to other professionals in the Netherlands, even though they had advanced degrees and professional experience in their home countries (Cokley et al., 2013). This feeling of failure, tied to both their refugee and LGBTQ+ status, is a clear example of the internalized stress that comes from the intersection of their marginalized identities. Imposter syndrome led many asylum seekers to doubt their qualifications and ability to succeed.

6.3 Economic Stressors and Lack of Coping Mechanisms

Economic stress is another factor that increased the mental health challenges faced by LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. During the asylum process, many were forced to live on minimal financial resources, which left them feeling powerless and vulnerable. After receiving asylum status, some asylum seekers struggled to find employment, often settling for low-paying or manual labor jobs, despite being highly qualified (Ager & Strang, 2008). The difficulty in accessing the job market only worsened their sense of isolation and inadequacy, further adding to their mental health struggles.

According to the Minority Stress Model, coping mechanisms such as community support and organizational assistance are essential to managing minority stress (Meyer, 2003). However, for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the Netherlands, these coping mechanisms were often absent or insufficient. Many asylum seekers expressed a lack of trust in the organizations meant to support them, such as COA, VWN, or local NGOs. The lack of available LGBTQ+ units in asylum centers meant that individuals often could not find safe spaces where they could openly express their identities (Beiser, 2009). Even in cases where LGBTQ+ units were available, they sometimes increased the risk of violence, further intensifying feelings of unsafety and isolation. As a result, while some coping mechanisms existed, they were not enough to counter the negative effects of the asylum process, leaving many asylum seekers without the proper support. This failure of support systems contributed to heightened mental health challenges and, in some cases, led to suicidal thoughts (Nickerson et al., 2014).

Chapter 7 : Conclusion

This thesis explored the legal and social challenges faced by LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the Netherlands and the impact these experiences have on their mental health. The research has shown how various external and internal stressors both legal and social contribute to the psychological distress experienced by LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, highlighting the complexity of their lived experiences in the asylum process.

The findings revealed that external pressures, such as violence, legal discrimination, and unequal waiting times, significantly worsen mental health challenges. A key factor identified is the double stereotype threat, where asylum seekers are feared to be judged not only on their sexual orientation but also their refugee status. This dual pressure emerged during both legal proceedings and social interactions, making even safe spaces feel unsafe.

Internal stressors, such as the need for identity concealment and the expectation of being rejected asylum, further intensified the emotional burden. Many LGBTQ+ asylum seekers feel forced to hide their identities, both in their countries of origin and within the asylum centers in the Netherlands. This constant pressure to conceal their true selves, combined with feelings of inadequacy, led to increased anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.

Despite the Netherlands often being seen as a "safe haven" for LGBTQ+ individuals due to its progressive laws, this research demonstrates that for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, the experience is far more complex. The lack of adequate institutional support within asylum centers, along with the risks involved in LGBTQ+ units, increases their struggles, leading to greater isolation and mental health challenges, including suicidal thoughts for some.

This research positions itself within the intersection of legal, social, and psychological studies on LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. By highlighting the double stereotype threat faced by these individuals coming from both their sexual orientation and refugee status, it proves the current discussion on the unique vulnerabilities of this group.

7.1 Recommendation and policy advice

On September 13, 2024, the Dutch government announced a new, stricter asylum policy that includes tougher border controls, limits on family reunification, and reduced legal options for asylum seekers. The plan also aims to expedite deportations and lengthen the wait time before refugees can apply for permanent residency or citizenship (Politico, 2024).

Since LGBTQ+ individuals are part of the broader refugee population, they will inevitably be affected by these policies. LGBTQ+ asylum seekers already face unique challenges due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, and stricter asylum regulations could further exacerbate their vulnerabilities. With fewer legal options and increased uncertainty, it is critical to ensure that future policies provide adequate protection for this marginalized group.

7.1.1 Integration from the start and designated asylum centers

To address the issues of danger in asylum centers for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, there should be asylum centers designated exclusively for LGBTQ+ individuals, where they can be themselves without being forced back into the closet and where risks of stereotyping, discrimination, or aggression are minimized.

In cases where an asylum seeker does not want to be placed in an LGBTQ+ unit or a designated center, COA should be aware not to place them with people from the same country or region, where the risks of trauma can resurface. LGBTQ+ asylum seekers usually don't have a choice of where to stay within the asylum center, so there should be an open discussion with them to better understand their needs.

The current integration policy requires all asylum seekers, including heterosexual refugees, to begin their integration process after receiving their asylum status. During this phase, they are taught about the legal rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in the Netherlands and the laws concerning discrimination and abuse. However, this approach comes too late and should be initiated as soon as an individual arrives at the asylum center. Most refugees come from countries where discrimination and even aggression against LGBTQ+ individuals are allowed and even in some countries legal, and they may not be aware that in the Netherlands, this behavior is forbidden. Implementing mandatory cultural and legal education about LGBTQ+ rights and protections in the Netherlands is crucial from the start. Therefore, explaining to everyone early on that such actions are not acceptable in the Netherlands could help prevent discrimination or, at the very least, reduce the physical threat to LGBTQ+ individuals in asylum centers.

7.1.2 Understanding the nuances in LGBTQ+ asylum cases.

The majority of asylum seekers felt that the LGBTQ+ officer from the IND was professional and asked the right questions during the final interview, so in this regard, the IND is excelling in making LGBTQ+ comfortable during their interviews. However, A one-size-fits-all does not work for all asylum seekers and there should be a nuanced approach for LGBTQ+ cases. While choosing the sex of the translator might be enough for hetero asylum seekers, many individuals from conservative countries, particularly from the Middle East, find it difficult to open up or discuss sensitive issues in front of someone from the same country or region. This can cause stress and negatively impact their mental health, potentially affecting the outcome of their interview, as many had issues with translators.

For LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, there should be an option to choose the background of their translator. While it might be challenging to find someone who speaks a specific language, like Arabic for example, and who does not come from the Middle East, it is important to minimize cultural biases as much as possible. The IND should consider offering the option of a translator who is part of the LGBTQ+ community and who understands the cultural and personal nuances specific to LGBTQ+ from that region. I for example would have loved to have the option of choosing an LGBTQ+ translator from Lebanon or the Middle East during my asylum process.

In addition, forcing the asylum seeker to speak only in their native language can add stress as we have seen in this research. Many LGBTQ+ asylum seekers might feel more comfortable expressing themselves in a second language, especially when it comes to LGBTQ+ terminology. For example, many Lebanese individuals, including myself frequently combine 3 languages; Arabic, French, and English.

7.2 Limitations and Future Research

This research provides valuable insights but has certain limitations. Although 8 out of the 10 interviewees were from the Middle East, this study did not specifically focus on the experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers from that region. The cultural and legal cisgender challenges faced by these individuals were not deeply explored and were only briefly mentioned. Additionally, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. The study also touched on life after asylum but did not comprehensively examine the long-term mental health impacts or the integration of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.

Future research could delve more deeply into the experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers from the Middle East, with a focus on the unique cultural and legal challenges they face. Expanding the sample to include a more diverse range of asylum seekers from different regions would provide a broader perspective. Additionally, future studies could focus on long-term mental health outcomes and social integration post-asylum. Exploring stressors like imposter syndrome and comparing national asylum systems could further contribute to understanding the mental health challenges and support mechanisms for LGBTQ+ refugees.

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