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The International Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis: A Queer Feminist Analysis of Protection Gaps and the Needs of LGBTIQ Individuals in Refugee Camps

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Abstract: LGBTIQ individuals in Syrian refugee camps face discrimination, violence, and inadequate protection. Protection policies are often too generalized and fail to consider the specific vulnerabilities of LGBTIQ individuals, increasing the risk of gender-based violence and homophobia. The research titled The International Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis: A Queer Feminist Analysis of Protection Gaps and the Needs of LGBTIQ Individuals in Refugee Camps uses a qualitative method by conducting a journal review. The results show that healthcare services, legal assistance, and psychosocial support in refugee camps are often unresponsive to the specific needs of the LGBTIQ group, further hindering their access to protection and care. Although international organizations and civil society organizations have made efforts to provide support to LGBTIQ refugees, these responses are often poorly coordinated and limited by a lack of resources. Stronger advocacy, training for camp staff, and the implementation of more inclusive policies are needed to protect the rights of LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps. This study recommends a Queer Feminist approach to create protection policies that are more sensitive and responsive to LGBTIQ needs, with a focus on developing safe complaint mechanisms and improving access to healthcare and mental support services.

Kata Kunci: Immigrants, LGBTQI, Refugees, Syrians.

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian refugee crisis, which began in 2011 as a result of the civil war, has created one of the most significant humanitarian crises in modern history. The conflict has forced millions of Syrians to flee their homes, seeking refuge in neighboring countries like Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. According to UNHCR, as of 2024, more than 5.5 million Syrian refugees are registered in various countries, with many still internally displaced (Qalbi & Azzahra, 2024). In this situation, vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the elderly often become the focus of international relief efforts. However, one group that is frequently marginalized and overlooked in refugee protection policies is individuals who identify as LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer). Syrian LGBTIQ individuals face strong social stigma, discrimination, and violence based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (Rohmawati et al., 2023).

This situation worsens in times of war. Even before the war, the LGBTIQ community in Syria experienced various forms of persecution. Syria's conservative laws, based on traditional social values, criminalized LGBTIQ individuals, often leading to imprisonment. Social norms also forced LGBTIQ individuals to hide their identities to avoid violence or discrimination from both society at large and their own families. When the war broke out, the situation for LGBTIQ individuals became even more dire (Qalbi & Azzahra, 2024). Armed conflict often exacerbates pre-existing discrimination, and in the case of Syria, under the rule of both the Assad regime and various opposition groups, human rights violations against LGBTIQ individuals intensified (Rohmawati et al., 2023). Many have reported experiences of sexual harassment, extortion, rape, torture, and even execution solely due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In wartime, refugees typically seek shelter in camps established by neighboring countries or international organizations. However, LGBTIQ individuals often face new threats. They must not only deal with the trauma of war but also cope with a refugee camp environment that is often unsafe for them. Refugee camps are typically managed under standards that assume heterosexuality as the norm, leaving the specific needs of LGBTIQ individuals unrecognized and unprotected. Although international organizations like UNHCR have issued guidelines to protect LGBTIQ refugees, implementation on the ground is often hindered by various challenges. One major issue is the lack of training and awareness among refugee camp staff and local authorities regarding LGBTIQ issues. This often leads to LGBTIQ individuals being afraid to report the violence or discrimination they face for fear of even worse consequences.

Even when they report these issues, the response is often inadequate. LGBTIQ refugees also face difficulties in accessing LGBTIQ-friendly services, such as psychological counseling or healthcare, due to camp policies or discriminatory attitudes from healthcare workers. Moreover, they often lack access to social support or safe networks, leading to social isolation and further vulnerability to violence. The international community, despite good intentions to protect all refugees without exception, often fails to adequately understand or respond to the specific needs of LGBTIQ refugees. One of the main reasons is the lack of comprehensive data on the number and conditions of LGBTIQ refugees (Ulchairi, 2022), making them invisible in policy and aid programs. Queer feminist activists have sought to raise this issue, highlighting how gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity intersect with other factors such as ethnicity and refugee status to create complex and unique forms of vulnerability.

However, significant challenges remain, including resistance from host countries with negative attitudes towards LGBTIQ issues, as well as cultural and social barriers within refugee communities themselves. In many cases, LGBTIQ refugees face threats of violence and discrimination from fellow refugees. Queer feminist activism offers an important perspective in analyzing the response to the Syrian refugee crisis. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding intersectionality—how various aspects of identity (such as gender, sexual orientation, class, and ethnicity) interact to create unique experiences of oppression or injustice (Sulanjari, 2023). Through this lens, queer feminist activists argue that humanitarian responses must be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of LGBTIQ individuals.

This activism also demands broader policy changes at the international level, including official recognition and protection of LGBTIQ refugees, training for humanitarian staff, and the development of specialized services that respond to the unique needs of this group (Qalbi & Azzahra, 2024). In this way, the international response to the Syrian refugee crisis can become more equitable and comprehensive, providing adequate protection for all refugees, including those who have been marginalized.

The goal of this paper is to identify protection gaps, explore the impact of violence and discrimination, assess the international response, and apply a queer feminist approach. A case study on LGBTIQ Syrian refugees in Turkey examines the challenges and response strategies.

METHOD

Research Type

This study employs a qualitative method with a literature review approach, focusing on the case study of Syrian refugees in Turkish camps. The qualitative method involves analyzing journal articles, reports, and other relevant literature to understand the protection gaps and needs of LGBTIQ individuals in Syrian refugee camps within the context of the international response.

Population and Sample

The population in this study consists of scientific journal articles, international organization reports, and other literature sources that address topics such as Syrian refugees, LGBTIQ individuals, and the international response to the refugee crisis. The sample is selected purposively, targeting literature that is relevant and significantly contributes to the research theme. The sample comprises approximately 10-20 articles and reports published in the last five years (2019-2024).

Research Duration and Location

The research was conducted over a three-month period, from January to March 2024. The research is not limited to a specific location, as the researcher accesses literature online through digital libraries and official international organization websites.

Research Instruments

The primary instrument in this research is a literature review guideline, which includes criteria for assessing the relevance, validity, and contribution of literature to the research topic. This guideline ensures that only high-quality literature is selected for further analysis.

Research Procedure

The research begins with the literature collection phase, during which the researcher identifies relevant journal articles and reports from various sources such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and Wiley. The literature is then screened based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The next phase involves content analysis, where the researcher reads and analyzes the selected literature to identify key themes related to protection gaps and the needs of LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data obtained from the literature is analyzed using content analysis. The researcher identifies key themes and patterns that emerge from the literature concerning the protection and needs of LGBTIQ individuals and evaluates the extent to which the international response has succeeded or failed in addressing these needs. The analysis is conducted from a Queer Feminist perspective, allowing the researcher to interpret the information in this context.

Research Ethics

Since this research focuses on literature analysis, it does not involve human participants. However, the researcher adheres to academic ethics, including proper citation, respect for copyright, and ethical use of literature. All sources used in this research will be fully cited according to relevant guidelines.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Protection Gaps for LGBTIQ Individuals in Syrian Refugee Camps

LGBTIQ individuals in Syrian refugee camps face various forms of discrimination and violence, including from fellow refugees and camp staff. Legal protections are often inadequate, and reports of violence are rarely taken seriously by camp authorities or international organizations. For instance, LGBTIQ individuals are frequently ignored when reporting gender-based violence or sexual harassment, leaving them to live in fear and vulnerability (Nuraini, 2022).

These protection gaps reveal that existing policies are too generalized and fail to consider the specific vulnerabilities faced by LGBTIQ individuals (Rohman Hidayad, 2022). More inclusive protection policies, grounded in a Queer Feminist approach, are needed to ensure the rights of this group are safeguarded. This includes specialized training for camp staff on issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as the development of safe and responsive complaint mechanisms.

LGBTIQ individuals in Syrian refugee camps face serious challenges, including discrimination, violence, and inadequate protection. The discrimination they face often comes from both fellow refugees and camp officials, exacerbating their situation. Legal protections for LGBTIQ individuals in these camps are frequently insufficient, and reports of violence are seldom followed up seriously by authorities or international organizations.

A major issue is the lack of a legal and protective framework specifically aimed at safeguarding the rights of LGBTIQ individuals (Azhari & Ghozali, 2019). Many are excluded from the legal processes, leaving reports of gender-based violence or sexual harassment ignored. As a result, LGBTIQ individuals live in constant fear and face ongoing vulnerability. In the camps, they are often targets of both physical and psychological violence and experience social isolation due to fear of having their identities exposed. Moreover, their access to healthcare is limited. Transgender individuals requiring hormone therapy, for instance, often cannot continue their treatment in refugee camps, which can lead to serious health issues.

This situation is worsened by the lack of training among camp staff regarding the issues faced by the LGBTIQ community, leaving them ill-prepared to handle cases of violence or discrimination. In 2019, UN human rights experts called for increased protection for LGBTIQ refugees, recognizing the specific vulnerabilities they face during their journey to destination countries and in refugee camps (UN Human Rights Mechanism, 2019). They emphasized the need for asylum procedures that are sensitive to the needs of LGBTIQ individuals and involve individualized assessments that are not based on stereotypes.

Between 2019 and 2024, awareness of the importance of providing safe spaces and healthcare services designed specifically for the needs of the LGBTIQ community increased (Saleh & Latakia, 2020). However, many refugee camps in Syria and other transit countries still fail to provide adequate protection, and LGBTIQ individuals continue to experience violence and exclusion in environments meant to offer protection.

Access to Basic Services

LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps often face difficulties in accessing basic services such as healthcare, legal assistance, and psychosocial support (UNHCR Assessment and Monitoring Resource Center, 2024, March 9). Reports show that many service providers in

refugee camps lack the awareness or sufficient training to understand the specific needs of LGBTIQ individuals, resulting in inadequate care or support. The stigma associated with LGBTIQ identity also causes many individuals to refrain from accessing available services due to fear of discrimination.

Barriers to accessing these basic services reflect structural discrimination that exacerbates the situation for LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps (Halim & Herning Sitabuana, 2021). To address this issue, it is necessary to increase training programs for service providers in the camps and implement policies that ensure equal access for all refugees, including LGBTIQ individuals. Policies supporting inclusive and gender-sensitive services should be a priority to improve the well-being of LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps.

LGBTIQ individuals living in refugee camps often face serious challenges in accessing basic services, including healthcare, legal aid, and psychosocial support. Many of these challenges are linked to stigma and discrimination, both from fellow refugees and service providers who often lack adequate training to handle their specific needs. Research shows that LGBTIQ refugees frequently experience discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation (Sudrazat, 2021), further worsening their access to healthcare services. For instance, service providers in refugee camps often fail to understand or address the specific needs of LGBTIQ individuals, such as more inclusive sexual health services, particularly for transgender or non-binary individuals. This creates significant barriers to receiving proper care, including mental health care, which is crucial given the high rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD among the LGBTIQ population.

The social conditions in refugee camps further exacerbate the situation. Many LGBTIQ individuals choose not to access available services out of fear of stigma or persecution. In certain cases, they even conceal their identities to protect themselves from physical or psychological violence, which is more common in collective shelters (Moussawi, 2022). These factors lead to dual marginalization, both as refugees and as LGBTIQ individuals.

A study revealed that most services offered in refugee camps are not designed to support individuals with LGBTIQ needs (Nematy et al., 2023). As a result, these individuals often have to rely on support from fellow refugees who also face the same risks, ultimately limiting their access to essential services that could help them recover from trauma. To address this issue, many international organizations have called for service providers to enhance their training and awareness of the specific needs of LGBTIQ refugees. Some humanitarian organizations have also started implementing more inclusive approaches, providing safe spaces and services designed to reduce stigma and discrimination against LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps (Daigle, 2022).

International Response to the Needs of LGBTIQ Individuals

Although there have been some efforts from the international community to respond to the needs of LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps, these responses are often poorly coordinated and do not adequately consider their specific needs. Many existing aid programs tend to be general and fail to recognize the complexities of the situations faced by LGBTIQ groups. For example, mental health services provided to refugees are often not designed to address trauma related to gender-based violence and homophobia experienced by LGBTIQ individuals.

Discussions about the conditions of LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps highlight how international aid responses are frequently insufficient in meeting their needs (Pincock, 2021). Although some efforts have been made to integrate services for the LGBTIQ community, the available services remain generalized and fail to address the specific issues faced by this group. They are often subjected to discrimination and gender-based violence, as

well as homophobia, which worsens their psychological condition. Refugees, in general, face significant mental health challenges, including depression, stress, and trauma from the dangerous journeys they have endured. Reports from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicate a rise in cases of depression and suicide risk among refugees, driven not only by their displacement but also by previous experiences of discrimination and violence (Sudheer & Banerjee, 2021). However, available mental health services are often not specifically designed to address trauma related to homophobia and gender-based violence, which LGBTIQ individuals frequently experience.

This underscores the importance of designing mental health services that are more inclusive and responsive to the specific needs of the LGBTIQ community (Osman et al., 2024). Such services should be capable of addressing homophobia- and gender-based trauma, as well as creating a safe environment for LGBTIQ individuals to receive psychological support. Additionally, healthcare workers and humanitarian staff need to be trained to better recognize and respond to the needs of LGBTIQ individuals.

Globally, some initiatives have begun to address these needs, but further development is required in terms of coordination and funding. The lack of an adequate response highlights the importance of developing more specific and inclusive policies and programs for LGBTIQ individuals. A Queer Feminist approach can provide better guidance in understanding and responding to their needs. Moreover, collaboration between international organizations, governments, and LGBTIQ communities is essential to create more coordinated and effective aid programs.

Stigma and Social Isolation

Stigma and social isolation are major challenges faced by LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps. This stigma often comes from fellow refugees, camp officials, and local communities, causing LGBTIQ individuals to feel isolated and reluctant to reveal their identities. These conditions can worsen their mental health and increase the risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

To reduce stigma and social isolation, awareness campaigns focused on eliminating stigma and programs that create safe spaces for LGBTIQ individuals are needed (Moagi et al., 2021). Additionally, it is important to establish support groups within the camps that can help LGBTIQ individuals feel more accepted and supported. This approach will help reduce tensions in refugee camps and increase solidarity among refugees. LGBTIQ individuals often flee from violence and persecution in their home countries, including physical abuse, sexual violence, and illegal arrests, only to face similar or even worse conditions in refugee camps (Garcia et al., 2020). In countries where LGBTIQ rights are still ignored or even criminalized, refugee camps run by governments or international organizations often fail to provide adequate protection for the LGBTIQ community.

Stigma against LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps arises from various sources, including fellow refugees, camp officials, and local communities. Research from the *Journal of Refugee Studies* indicates that refugees from countries with conservative or patriarchal values tend to harbor negative attitudes toward LGBTIQ individuals. In stressful and uncertain situations, these attitudes are often exacerbated, with LGBTIQ individuals becoming targets of intimidation, discrimination, and violence. Additionally, camp officials who are supposed to protect all refugees are often untrained in handling issues faced by LGBTIQ groups. A lack of understanding about LGBTIQ rights and an inability to recognize their specific needs lead to neglect or, in some cases, further persecution. A 2020 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) revealed that many LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps often feel unsafe even within the camp due to stigma from camp authorities (Yarwood et al., 2022).

The impact of this stigma is significant, especially on the mental health of LGBTIQ individuals. They often feel isolated and fearful of disclosing their identities to others, including healthcare workers and psychologists in the camps. This social isolation worsens their psychological condition. Research published in *Global Health Action* shows that LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps are at much higher risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and acute stress disorder compared to the broader refugee population (Moagi et al., 2021). A study by *Mental Health and Human Rights* (2021) identified that LGBTIQ individuals living in prolonged uncertainty in refugee camps are more likely to develop severe mental health problems. This is due to a combination of past trauma, ongoing discrimination, future uncertainty, and a lack of social support (Arnold & Arnold, 2023). These mental health issues are often exacerbated by limited access to mental health services that understand the unique situations of LGBTIQ individuals.

Beyond mental health concerns, physical and sexual violence against LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps is a significant issue. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in its 2022 annual report also noted the high number of cases of violence against LGBTIQ groups in refugee camps, many of which go unreported or unaddressed due to a lack of effective protection mechanisms (Pincock, 2021). This violence not only affects their physical well-being but also worsens social isolation, as victims feel more vulnerable and afraid to seek help. Many victims of violence feel that there is no safe space for them, either within the refugee camps or in the local community.

Protection for LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps remains minimal. A Human Rights Watch report states that many refugee camps lack mechanisms to protect LGBTIQ rights, and the absence of clear policies leaves this group vulnerable (Pincock, 2021). In addition to protection, access to adequate mental health services is also very limited. LGBTIQ individuals often feel uncomfortable accessing mental health services in refugee camps due to fears of further stigma and discrimination.

Gender and Sexuality-Based Violence

LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps often fall victim to gender- and sexuality-based violence, including sexual harassment, rape, and physical assault. This violence frequently goes unreported due to fear of stigma, retaliation, or distrust of camp authorities. Reports indicate that LGBTIQ individuals are more vulnerable to such violence compared to other refugees, largely because they lack a strong support system (Kiss et al., 2020). LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps face higher levels of vulnerability to gender- and sexuality-based violence, experiencing not only physical violence but also sexual violence such as harassment and rape. Several reports reveal that much of this violence remains unreported due to fear of social stigma, threats of retaliation, or distrust in the camp's authorities (Schaefer et al., 2024).

Globally, there is a need for increased awareness and advocacy for LGBTIQ groups in refugee camps (Gottlieb et al., 2020). More inclusive policies and robust support systems must be developed to protect them from violence based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Stronger and clearer policies are required to address gender- and sexuality-based violence, ensuring protection for LGBTIQ individuals (Matebeni et al., 2019). Safe and confidential reporting mechanisms must be available in refugee camps, and authorities must respond quickly and decisively to all reports of violence. Additionally, empowerment programs for LGBTIQ individuals, including skill-building and legal support, should be expanded to help them face violence and discrimination.

Advocacy and the Role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Advocacy for the rights of LGBTIQ individuals in refugee camps remains limited, although some CSOs strive to raise awareness and provide targeted assistance (Aygün, 2019). This support is often poorly coordinated, and the lack of resources restricts CSOs' ability to reach all LGBTIQ individuals in need. However, the efforts of CSOs are crucial in advocating for policy changes and providing direct aid to the most vulnerable LGBTIQ individuals.

Advocacy for LGBTIQ rights in refugee camps faces numerous challenges, including limited coordination and adequate resources. Although some efforts by NGOs and international organizations, such as UNHCR, have been made to support LGBTIQ refugees (Bariani, 2023), much more remains to be done to ensure their protection and the recognition of their rights.

Challenges and Obstacles:

1. **Limited Coordination and Resources**: Efforts made by CSOs are often poorly coordinated, and the lack of resources limits their ability to reach all LGBTIQ individuals in need (Fried & Morton, 2023). Many CSOs struggle with limited funding and a lack of political support, making advocacy efforts more challenging.
2. **Psychological Conditions and Stigma**: LGBTIQ refugees often suffer from severe trauma due to persecution in their home countries, compounded by discrimination and violence in refugee camps (Camelo, 2019). Research shows that their mental health is frequently neglected in the context of humanitarian aid, as the main focus is still on basic needs rather than individual rights based on sexual orientation or gender identity.
3. **Legal and Security Conditions**: Legal conditions in host countries often do not support LGBTIQ individuals. LGBTIQ issues remain illegal in 63 countries, with the death penalty enforced in 7-12 countries. This worsens the situation for LGBTIQ refugees seeking protection, as they continue to face threats even after leaving their home countries.

Efforts and Opportunities:

1. **Special Initiatives and Programs**: Some initiatives, such as the Newcomers group in Sweden, provide special support for LGBTIQ refugees, offering a safe and supportive environment to overcome trauma, facilitate integration, and improve psychological well-being.
2. **Policy Approach and Global Advocacy**: During the 2021 UNHCR-IE SOGI Global Roundtable, various parties discussed the need for a global structure supported by the UN to protect LGBTIQ refugees (Pincock, 2021). Including LGBTIQ protection in existing humanitarian policies could be a more sustainable long-term approach, although there are challenges in gathering political support.

CONCLUSION

LGBTIQ individuals in Syrian refugee camps face discrimination and violence from fellow refugees, camp staff, and local communities, which exacerbates their mental and physical health issues. Key challenges include a lack of training for camp staff, weak reporting systems, and social stigma that isolates them. Although there are international efforts to enhance protection, humanitarian responses remain poorly coordinated and insufficiently sensitive to the specific needs of LGBTIQ individuals. More inclusive solutions, such as training, safe reporting systems, and legal and mental health support, are urgently needed, along with collaboration between governments, international organizations, and the LGBTIQ community.

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