Intimate Migrations

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender migrants in Scotland

FINAL PROJECT REPORT
APPENDIX 1: LIFE BEFORE MIGRATION

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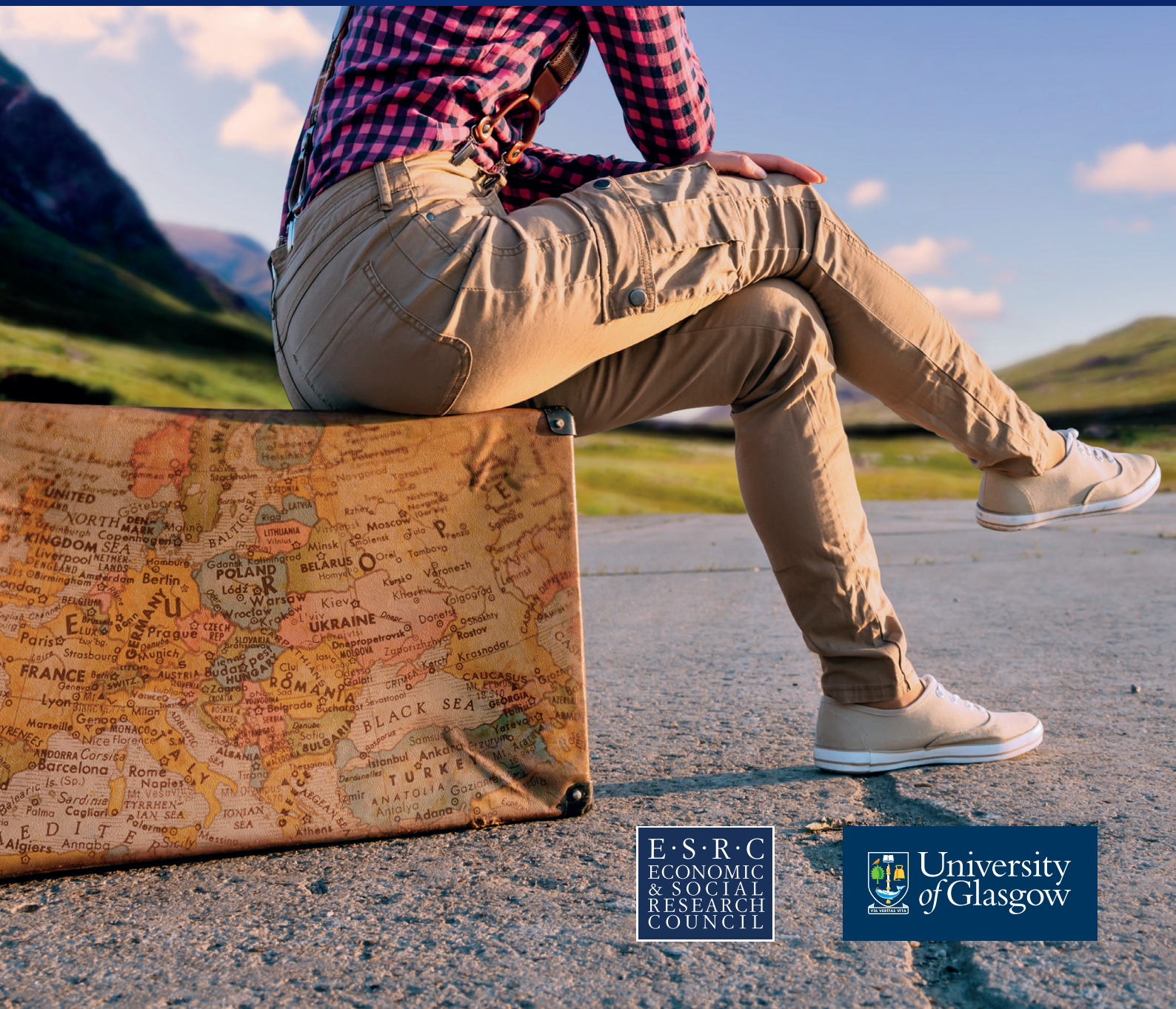

APPENDIX 1: LIFE BEFORE MIGRATION

INTRODUCTION

This section of the report explores migrants' life in their country of origin, focussing in particular on their experiences as LGBT persons. It should be read in conjunction with the main report 'Intimate Migrations: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Migrants in Scotland' (December 2016), available at https://intimatemigrations.net/outputs/

All our research participants were from countries that generally offer less comprehensive legal and policy protection to their LGBT citizens compared to Scotland and the UK. Very significant variations exist across Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Former Soviet Union (FSU) in this respect. For more detailed information about individual countries we refer the reader to ILGA Europe's annual reports.[1] Compared to Scotland and the UK, CEE and FSU countries offer less comprehensive protection against discrimination, hate crime or hate speech on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (ILGA Europe 2017). While some CEE and FSU countries have introduced civil partnerships, none have opened up marriage to same-sex couples. Some countries in the region have amended their constitution to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, as a way to prevent the introduction of same-sex marriage; this is an indication that family rights for LGBT individuals remain contentious (Carrol 2016). Public opinion surveys also generally show more limited support for LGBT rights, and more negative attitudes towards LGBT individuals in CEE and FSU countries compared to Scotland and the UK (Bolzendhal and Gracheva 2017; Piekut and Valentine 2016).

[1] Available at https://rainbow-europe.org/

Perceptions of attitudes towards the LGBT community

- Our research participants acknowledged a diversity of attitudes in their country of origin, however many characterised the socio-political context as negative or quite negative towards LGBT people.
    - Politicians and the media were often seen as propagating negative views. Participants noted that debates about LGBT rights were often polarised and aggressive, and that the use of disrespectful language in public debates reproduced negative stereotypes about LGBT people. They also noted that LGBT rights and lifestyles were sometimes presented as a corrupting Western influence and pitted against national traditions and values.
    - Some participants ascribed sexual conservativism in their country of origin to the legacy of communism, or the influence of organised religion on social and political life. Some participants described themselves as religious or Christians (Catholic or Orthodox). Many had actively participated in the life of their faith communities, however these were sometimes experienced as unwelcoming or intolerant of LGBT people, or hypocritical on issues of sexual morality.
- Participants had different opinions about the direction and pace of change in their country of origin with regards to the political context and attitudes towards LGBT people.
    - Many participants expressed hope about the future, and felt that positive change was already occurring: for example, they thought young people were becoming more open, and felt that attitudes were gradually changing in their country of origin. Some participants also felt that the attitudes they had personally experienced did not match the characterisation of their country of origin as a place hostile to LGBT people.
    - Some were pessimistic or sceptical about positive change occurring, and thought the situation was getting worse because of the growing influence of far-right and nationalist groups.

Experiences of prejudice and discrimination

- The vast majority of participants experienced or witnessed prejudice or discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity in their country of origin. Only a minority of participants experienced outright discrimination or violence; however, they often experienced more subtle and 'everyday' forms of marginalisation that were still prejudice-based in nature. This most commonly took the form of casual jokes and comments where LGBT people were portrayed as sick, deviant, unnatural, disgusting, sinful, shameful, or as an object of contempt or prurient curiosity.

- Prejudice and discrimination were experienced in a variety of settings, including:
  - On the street and in public spaces;
  - At work;
  - Within the family of origin.
- Many participants reported that they personally had never experienced significant episodes of victimisation or discrimination as LGBT persons in their country of origin. However, a significant number also explained that this was because they were not 'out' in certain environments, or deliberately hid their sexual orientation or gender identity, or did not look visibly 'LGBT'.
- Many participants explained that LGBT issues were not an open subject in their country of origin, and that living openly was 'not the done thing'. Coming out could have negative consequences, be frowned upon as being 'in your face', or be an uncomfortable experience. Many of our participants had disclosed their sexuality or gender identity only to a selected group of close friends and family in their country of origin.
- Many participants spoke of censoring their behaviours and speech in their country of origin, as a way to 'fit in', to avoid trouble, and to protect themselves from potential marginalisation or victimisation. This involved, for example, refraining from holding hands with a partner, avoiding certain topics of conversation or taking pains not to reveal the gender of one's partner.
- For some, awareness of homo-, bi- and transphobia in their surroundings created a sense of insecurity, and fed into a state of constant alertness. For some, the insecurity they experienced as LGBT persons was central or important to their decision to migrate or not to return to their country of origin after migration. **(see pp. 12-13 and 24, main report)**

Public spaces

- Several participants experienced or witnessed casual homophobic abuse on the street or on public transport, particularly in situations where they were identifiable as LGBT (for example, when leaving a gay club, holding hands with a partner, attending Pride parades). Sometimes this escalated to more persistent verbal harassment, intimidation (including threats of physical and sexual violence) or physical violence (gay bashing). **(See case study 1)**
- In a few cases, participants felt that homophobic harassment was ignored or condoned by police, security staff or passers-by.
- Pride marches were mentioned by several participants to illustrate the potential dangers involved in being visibly LGBT in public spaces in their country of origin. They explained that Pride participants are routinely targeted by counter-demonstrators, resulting in episodes of verbal confrontation, threats and physical violence. Only a handful of our participants, however, had experienced this first hand when taking part in Pride events; others considered Pride marches too dangerous or unproductive.

Workplace

- For many of our participants, employment in their country of origin was characterised by job insecurity, low pay and a lack of opportunity for progression. They spoke about how salaries were not enough to live on, or not commensurate with qualifications and experience; some of our participants needed financial support from parents, or worked several jobs just to make ends meet. Material insecurity was often also experienced by other family members (e.g. parents), and reflected insecurities brought by periods of economic transition and crisis in their country of origin. For the majority of our participants, employment opportunities, higher salaries and prospects of greater material security were key reasons for moving. **(see pp. 12-14 main report)**
- Homophobia at work was reported by many participants as an everyday occurrence, for example in the form of rumours about their sexual orientation, comments or jokes.
- Some participants spoke about how their sexual orientation or gender identity could negatively affect their career opportunities, particularly in caring professions (such as teaching and social work) and the army. Some of our participants saw these careers as difficult to pursue as an LGBT person in their country of origin, and felt pushed to either leave their chosen career altogether or move abroad to pursue it.
- Several participants spoke about keeping their sexual orientation or gender identity under wraps at work for fear this may jeopardise opportunities for progression, or compromise relationships with colleagues. One participant was fired by a particularly homophobic manager after being unintentionally 'outed' by a colleague.
- Other participants were open about their sexual orientation in the workplace, and had experienced positive or neutral reactions from colleagues and bosses. Some saw comments and jokes about their sexuality as part of workplace camaraderie, rather than reflecting malicious intentions or hostile attitudes.

Family

- Participants came from a variety of family structures (e.g. dual parent, single parent, extended family). Relationships with their families of origin varied greatly, and often could be simultaneously positive and negative. Participants also had different relationships and degrees of closeness to different family members.
- Coming out, or being outed to family members was often a source of conflict, particularly with parents. A common reaction was initial shock and arguments; in the most extreme cases, disclosure resulted in being disowned by one's parents, fleeing the family home or ceasing all contact for an extended period of time. **(See case study 2)**

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- For many participants, tensions eased with time and reconciliation eventually followed; however, for some, relationships with family members could remain strained, or become irreparably damaged. Reluctance to accept a family member's sexual orientation or gender identity could have consequences for family relations even after they had moved out of the parental home and were living independently. There were instances of parents or siblings refusing to acknowledge their children's partners or declining invitations to same-sex weddings or civil partnership ceremonies; a few participants had not been asked to be godparents for their children's siblings, as traditional in their country of origin, because their siblings disapproved of their sexuality or gender identity.
- Negative reactions to coming out from family members reflected prejudiced views of same-sex relations as sinful or unnatural, and of LGBT people as deviant, ill, unable to live a happy life, to have healthy relationships or to have children. A widespread concern among family members was that having an LGBT relative would bring shame on the family: they didn't want others (extended family, neighbours, friends) to know about this.
- Even after disclosure to family members, silence often continued to surround participants' sexuality or gender identity as an awkward topic. This silence was generally experienced as disapproving or painful by participants, especially when they wanted to be open about themselves and their relationships. Sometimes, however, silence was interpreted more positively as a way to get along with family members and avoid potentially uncomfortable topics.
- A significant number of participants were not out to their parents. They were wary of potentially negative reactions and their consequences, such as rejection, loss of support, and a rift in their relationship with parents. Some were also concerned about the consequences coming out would have for their parents' reputation (e.g. jokes, disapproval from extended family and village communities) and on their health, particularly for elderly and ill parents.
- Many positive stories of 'coming out' also emerged. Siblings were often a good source of support and acceptance; this was often explained with more open attitudes among the younger generations. Some parents also offered acceptance, validation and support, although this rarely happened straight away; initial negative reactions sometimes could evolve into more positive attitudes with time, although acceptance could sometimes be qualified or grudging.

CASE STUDY 1:
Personal safety in public spaces

> In Lublin, I went to gay clubs... and leaving these venues was always risky... because there were always some people, some gangs who waited to give people a beating... So, I was beaten once... I was with my [female] friend and she wasn't even a lesbian... and she was beaten too. So, you had to be extra careful when leaving a club. These gangs would appear immediately... and were ready to 'beat the faggot'. I was very much aware that I needed to be careful. And also jokes... people used to tell jokes about 'faggots' a lot and I was too tired to confront them. I would just stay silent and do nothing.
> **Hania (Polish, female, lesbian, 25-29)**

With my boyfriend we were walking on a street in Hungary late in the night and we were holding hands, and then this police car appeared and then they stopped us and we had to identify ourselves and stuff like this. This would never happen to a heterosexual couple holding hands.
Janos (Hungarian, male, gay, 19-24)

I was with my girlfriend ... holding hands in the evening. That was a time when I didn't feel very confident, but I couldn't imagine hiding at the corners. And... Two guys walked us yelling that they would rape us... They laughed – "Ha, ha, ha, ha... We are joking". So, we just sped up. That was the situation. Nothing happened, they didn't run after us, but still that was one of the... I was really scared at the time.
Sandra (Polish, female, lesbian, 30-34)

CASE STUDY 2:
Coming out and family relations

I started to contact [gay] men [through personal ads]. And, these people wrote letters to me. My mother read those letters. And she found out [that he was gay]. The result was – I was kicked out of home. They closed the doors behind my back. Well, I actually had to run through the window – we lived on the ground floor. My father disowned me. So did my mother. My father said that he regretted that I didn't die in Auschwitz, because the people like me should be taken to Auschwitz. So, harsh words were used. It was a very tough, a very unpleasant moment.
Krzysztof (Polish, male, gay, 45-49)

My father and I started to have lots of arguments ... all of them they were connected to my sexuality. He never spoke about it like openly, but this, actually, this is the main point. [...] He was really physically abusive to my mother, you know, he has [too much] to drink and then he starts - he would only do this when he was drunk. He started pointing to things and asking the question, you know, "are you gay, do you, you know, like guys?" I was still refusing, I was still saying "No. It's not like that, I'm not gay." Because I was scared. I was scared about my life and... the life of my mother.
Blagoy (Bulgarian, male, gay, 30-34)

My mum cried, of course. She blamed herself. She blamed me for not telling her earlier. She said that if I had told her earlier, we would have gone to a doctor. She thought it was her fault. Iza didn't visit our home for another year... and now – my mum cooks dinner for her... and my dad asks about her and is interested – we've got a normal family relationship.
Ola (Polish, female, bisexual, 30-34)

We sent them [her parents] an invitation to our wedding. My parents didn't come. My mum said a very unpleasant thing – I mean, she wrote... [a very unpleasant letter]. I think she didn't know what to say. She didn't know how to react... I don't know if she regrets it now... However, my attitude towards my parents has changed – we've got a child now. And this is the most important thing for them [her parents]... and everything seems so good and so great now... Although my mum still maintains that my wife will always remain my best [female] friend... She'll treat her as a daughter, but will never accept us as a family.
Nadya (Ukranian/Polish, female, lesbian, 30-34)

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