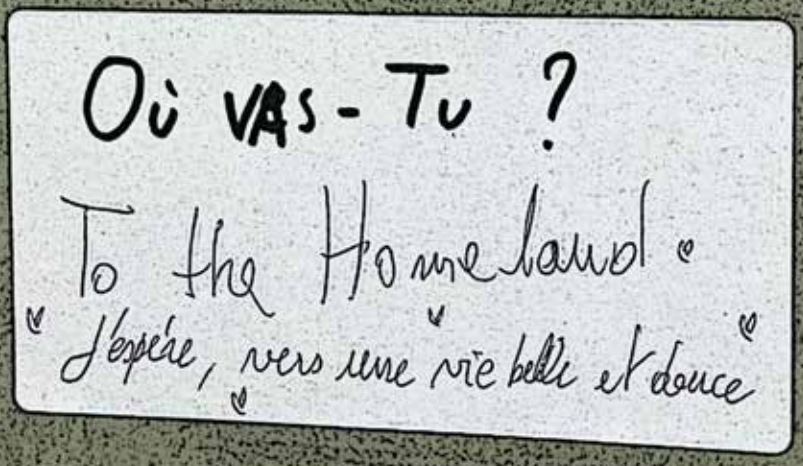
A STUDY
ON QUEER EMIGRATION
FROM GEORGIA



OTHERNESS
AND THE COST OF PROMISED FREEDOM

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OTHERNESS AND THE COST OF PROMISED FREEDOM

A STUDY ON QUEER EMIGRATION FROM GEORGIA

Otherness and the Cost of Promised Freedom
A Study on Queer Emigration from Georgia
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OTHERNESS AND THE COST OF PROMISED FREEDOM

A STUDY ON QUEER EMIGRATION FROM GEORGIA

NATALIA MCHEDLISHVILI

WOMEN'S INITIATIVES SUPPORTING GROUP (WISG)
2025

Women's Initiative Supporting (WISG) is a feminist organization that aims to help building a society based on the principles of social justice, through women's empowerment and political participation.

Women's Initiatives Support Group works with the communities of lesbian and bisexual women, transgender and intersex people and women representing other marginalized groups.

WISG works in the following directions: Advocacy for the integration of women's and LGBTQI+ issues in politics; Community empowerment for social and political participation; Creating publicly accessible critical knowledge about gender and sexuality through research and art projects; Developing practice of intersectional queer feminist organizing.

Women's Initiative Support Group is the author of the key studies and policy analysis on sexual orientation and gender identity in Georgia. Our research studies, shadow reports, policy documents, and information regarding other activities are available on the organization's official website: https://wisg.org/en

Cover photo: Duda Samkharadze

Brussels, Belgium

Inscription on the wall of a queer bar – an exchange between strangers:

- Where are you headed?

- To my homeland.

- to a beautiful and peaceful life, I hope...

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

The unstable socio-political environment in Georgia, along with the complex nature of homo/bi/ transphobia and its political instrumentalization, require the continuous reproduction of knowledge about both the community and its context. For this reason, the Women's Initiatives Support Group has, for many years, placed a strong focus on research and educational activities alongside its fieldwork. To develop a holistic approach to current challenges and formulate effective advocacy strategies, the organization's research and education efforts aim to describe and analyze the context and generate knowledge rooted in feminist perspectives and focused on the experiences of the community.

Many years of experience of working with the community have shown that the number of queer individuals leaving the country is steadily increasing. This trend has been particularly fuelled by the rise of ultra-right violent groups, repeated group attacks on queer individuals and organizational offices in recent years, openly xenophobic rhetoric from the ruling party, and the institutionalization of homo/bi/transphobia. Individual cases have revealed that, beyond direct experiences of violence and hostility, broader factors, such as the unstable political and economic climate and social conditions, also play a significant role in driving community members to emigrate.

It is worth noting that many queer individuals who have left the country continue to maintain contact with community organizations and the community itself, whether by receiving services remotely, engaging in collaborations, or offering mutual support. For this reason, it is important for us not only to analyse the factors that drive queer people to emigrate but also to understand the challenges they face in host countries due to their vulnerability.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to researcher Natalia Mchedlishvili for her work. She has gathered unique material and provided a nuanced analysis of the emotional, social, and political dimensions of queer emigration.

We hope this research will make a meaningful contribution not only to deepening existing knowledge around the intersection of gender, sexuality, and immigration status, but also to supporting organizations and initiative groups in Georgia as they work to address systemic challenges and incorporate relevant priorities into their advocacy efforts.

Women's Initiatives Supporting Group

INTRODUCTION

Migration is the indivisible part of human experience. Migration as a social phenomenon can be defined by multiple factors, such as political conflicts, economic instability, social inequity, or personal pursuits. Additionally, on the axis of human displacement, there are social characteristics such as race, ethnicity, class, sex, and gender. In such a context, for queer individuals in particular, migration is not simply a geographic relocation, but a complex process related to identity, belongingness and physical or psycho-social survival.

The modern intersection of dynamics of sexuality, gender migration, and politics has produced complex models of geographic relocation and adaptation that transcend the traditional theoretical understanding of migration. Despite the significant expansion of research into LGBTQ+ migration over the last decade, migration of queer individuals from post-soviet countries, particularly from Georgia, has not been studied. The present study investigates and explores multifaceted experiences of queer individuals migrated from homophobic and economically challenged Georgian environment to countries that are considered as the guarantors of a better life.

The subject of the present study becomes particularly relevant in the light of growing antidemocratic, authoritarian mobilization, which is characterized by radical restriction of human rights, their protection mechanisms, spaces for advocacy, and intense instrumentalization of LGBTQ+ issues. At the same time, ultra-right, neoconservative movements gain strength day by day. These parallel events create unique challenges for queer migrants, who in search for safety and self-realization, try to overcome different forms of marginalization. Therefore, the focus of the study is queer migration as a deeply personal experience, as well as – significant social and political phenomenon, that encompasses matters related to systemic oppression, personal choice, agency and global inequity.

Through in-depth interview method we surveyed 30 queer individuals of different legal status, including asylum seekers, labour migrants and students who stay in western countries to obtain legal residency. Among the respondents, there are both individuals engaged in Georgian LGBTQ+ activism and community work, and community members, which makes different perspectives on the

formation of migration experiences, activism, and community dynamics accessible.

In this process, we aimed to capture the premises and motivations for migration, the characteristics of home and belonging, and the specific challenges faced by Georgian queer migrants in host countries. Throughout the interviews, the themes of emotional well-being, social stigma, and emotional resilience consistently emerged, offering a more nuanced picture of queer individuals' identities and aspirations.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between gender and sexuality, and how the interplay of identity, community, and civic engagement shapes both individual experiences and collective strategies of resistance. Specifically, it examines how queer individuals who migrated from Georgia navigate systemic homophobia in their home country, adapt and integrate into host societies, and experience well-being. The study moves beyond traditional migration frameworks by highlighting the complex emotional, social, and political dimensions of queer migration.

The insights from this study will contribute to a better understanding of the characteristics of contemporary queer migration, enhance the effectiveness of support systems for LGBTQ+ migrants, and help the development of policies that more accurately respond to the needs of this vulnerable group. Moreover, by focusing on queer migrants from Georgia, the study fosters a broader discussion on marginalization, as well as individual and collective resistance and resilience in the context of rising right-wing, anti-democratic movements and increasingly hostile environments.

AIM AND METHODOLOGY

AIM

The study aims to enhance inclusive and progressive policies and support mechanisms by fostering a deeper understanding of queer immigration.

Its primary objective is to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals migrating from Georgia to Western countries, including an analysis of the preconditions for migration and the challenges faced in host countries. It focuses on the intersections between sexual and gender identity, systemic barriers, emotional distress, and socio-cultural adaptation, as well as respondents' retrospective reflections and future aspirations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What environmental factors influence the decision to leave Georgia?
2. How do environmental conditions in host countries affect the emotional well-being of queer immigrants?
3. How do queer migrants navigate socio-cultural and systemic barriers during the integration process?
4. What role does local and international political discourse play in the lives of queer individuals after migration?
5. How do queer migrants reflect on their experiences in Georgia after migration, and how does this shape their future plans?
6. What practical insights can be drawn from the life experiences of queer migrants to improve institutional mechanisms?

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employs a qualitative research methodology and an intersectional framework to analyse the complex experiences of queer individuals who have migrated from Georgia. By presenting participants' narratives, it explores the interconnections between sexual and gender identity, migration status, and socio-political factors, highlighting their impact on the everyday lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. Through thematic analysis, the study examines key issues related to queer migration in depth.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through 30 semi-structured interviews conducted between March and June 2024 via video calls on various online platforms (Zoom, Messenger, WhatsApp). The interviews followed a dialogue-based approach, allowing participants to freely share their experiences and reflections across the following key areas:

1. Life experiences in Georgia.
2. Interactions with immigration and other institutional units in host countries.
3. Emotional and psychological challenges and coping mechanisms.
4. Retrospective reflections and future aspirations.

SAMPLE

Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method, resulting in a final sample of 30 LGBTQ+ individuals who have emigrated from Georgia. The respondents self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender women, transgender men, non-binary, and queer. The majority (20) sought refugee status in their host countries, while the rest initially migrated for education or employment purposes. Most respondents settled in Western European countries, including Scandinavia, while some relocated to the United States.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study was conducted following ethical principles, prioritizing participants' autonomy, anonymity, and emotional well-being:

- All interviews were conducted based on informed consent.
- Anonymity was ensured through the encryption of personal data at the stage of secure storage and processing. The final report respects the preference of most respondents to remain anonymous, and references only their migration type (asylum seeker (AS) or migrant (M)), duration, and interview date.
- Participants were informed in advance that they could end the interview at any time or choose not to answer specific questions.
- When discussing emotionally sensitive topics, participants were provided with information about available support resources.

DATA ANALYSIS

We used thematic analysis to examine the data, enabling us to identify and gain a deeper understanding of recurring patterns and trends.

1. First, transcripts of video/audio recordings were prepared, after which the recordings were destroyed, and respondents' personal information was encrypted.
2. Thematic patterns were identified and coded within the interview transcripts.
3. The resulting codes were grouped into categories, allowing for a multidimensional interpretation of respondents' experiences.
4. In the final stage, thematic findings were contextualized within the appropriate theoretical and terminological framework.

LIMITATIONS

We acknowledge and consider the study's limitations, particularly in the following areas:

1. Study period: Data collection took place in the spring of 2024, before the ruling party in Georgia introduced and later adopted the Law on Family Values and the Protection of Minors, which directly or indirectly impacts the lives of queer individuals and communities in Georgia. As a result, the study does not capture queer perspectives on this specific repressive measure.
2. Sampling: Due to the use of snowball sampling, the analysis may reflect the experiences of individuals connected to specific networks and communities, potentially limiting the representation of the full diversity of queer migrants' realities.
3. Researcher positioning: The researcher's background, including past or present professional and personal interactions with respondents, may influence the interpretation of the findings.

KEY TERMINOLOGY

Survivor's guilt – A sense of guilt experienced by individuals who have survived a traumatic event, particularly when others have suffered severe harm.

Push-pull theoretical framework – A migration analysis model that examines the factors driving people to leave their place of residence (push factors) and those attracting them to a specific destination (pull factors).

Gender-affirming services – Medical, psychological, and social support services designed to align an individual's physical appearance and social identity with their gender, promoting the well-being of gender-diverse individuals. These services may include counselling, hormone therapy, surgery, and legal assistance.

Grassroots – Initiatives and movements that emerge from individuals or local communities rather than centralized or elite organizations. These efforts are often aimed at collective action, community empowerment, and bottom-up social, political, and environmental change.

Western countries – Nations historically and culturally linked to Western Europe and North America, characterized by political pluralism, free markets, inclusive societies, high standards of human rights protection, and strong democratic institutions.

Emancipatory fantasy – A term coined by sociologist, cultural theorist, and political activist Stuart Hall, referring to concepts of emancipation shaped by specific discourses in which the promise of freedom remains unattainable. These fantasies overlook the complexity of oppression, focus on individual rather than systemic change, and ultimately reinforce existing power structures and the status quo.

Emigration – In a global context, the act of leaving one's country of origin with the intention of staying abroad for more than one year (European Migration Network, 2023).

Asylum seeker – In the global context, a person who seeks protection from persecution or serious harm in a country other than their own and awaits a decision on the application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments. In the EU context, a third-country national or stateless person who has made an application for protection under the Geneva Refugee Convention and Protocol in respect of which a final decision has not yet been taken. (European Migration Network, 2023).

Self-actualization – The process of realizing one's potential, abilities, and aspirations. It represents a relatively high level of personal growth and development, though it can be shaped, encouraged, or hindered by social norms, systemic barriers, and access to resources.

Intersectionality – A concept describing how overlapping social categories or identities contribute to oppression, inequality, or increased vulnerability for individuals and groups. The term originated from the Black feminist movement in the United States in the 1980s and was coined by activist and scholar Kimberle Williams Crenshaw as an analytical tool to examine the interplay of structural, cultural, and personal factors in shaping experiences of marginalization. In this study, intersectionality refers to the intersection of gender, age, and socioeconomic status.

Refugee – In the global context, either a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, is outside the country of nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country, or a stateless person, who, being outside of the country of former habitual residence for the same reasons as mentioned before, is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it (European Migration Network, 2023).

Migrant – In the global context, a person who is outside the territory of the State of which they are nationals or citizens and who has resided in a foreign country for more than one year irrespective of the causes, voluntary or involuntary, and the means, regular or irregular, used to migrate (European Migration Network, 2023).

Belongingness – A sense of acceptance, appreciation, and connection with a group or community, as well as a personal identification with it, and a sense of being part of a larger whole. Belonging plays a crucial role in fostering emotional well-being.

Host countries – Also referred to in this research report as destination countries, these are states that receive and host migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers who are citizens of other countries, typically in search of safety, economic opportunities, or political stability. According to the European Migration Network (2023), host countries provide infrastructure and services to meet the immediate needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

Neoconservatism – A political ideology that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, initially in the United States, as a reaction to the perceived failures of liberalism and radicalism. Combining traditional conservative values with a commitment to a free-market economy, in different contexts, neoconservatism often advocates for limiting welfare programs, upholding cultural traditionalism, and emphasizing individual responsibility. In the American context, it is also characterized by a strong belief in promoting the American democratic model beyond its borders, including support for military interventions.

Neoliberalism – An economic and political ideology centred on economic growth and sustainability, supporting free markets, minimal state intervention, privatization, deregulation, and individual responsibility.

Precariat – A social class or group whose working conditions are characterized by instability, insecurity, and low income. Members of the precariat often hold jobs that lack financial stability, social protections, long-term contracts, and opportunities for development.

Social exclusion – A process in which specific individuals or groups are systematically marginalized, restricting their access to social, economic, and political resources and leading to their isolation from mainstream society.

Stigma – Social rejection, negative attitudes, or prejudices directed at a specific group or behaviour.

Stressor – An event, situation, or condition that triggers stress or hinders an individual's ability to cope, potentially leading to emotional, physical, or psychological difficulties.

Otherness – The process of identifying an individual or group as fundamentally different from the dominant group or perceiving oneself as such. This phenomenon can result in marginalization, exclusion, and isolation. The concept highlights the power dynamics that shape social hierarchies, collective identities, and cultural boundaries, determining who is included and who is perceived as an outsider.

Ultra-right – A spectrum of ideologies and movements positioned at the extreme end of right-wing political philosophy, characterized by ultranationalism, authoritarianism, and anti-democratic tendencies. These ideologies often promote the exclusion of specific groups through xenophobia, ethnonationalism, and opposition to progressive social policies.

Minority stress – A term first introduced in the 1990s by psychologist Ilan Meyer to describe the unique stressors experienced by sexual minorities due to social stigma, discrimination, and marginalization. Over time, the concept has expanded to include other marginalized groups, recognizing the chronic stress resulting from social position and systemic inequalities, which directly impact mental health.

Safe space – An environment where individuals, particularly those from marginalized or vulnerable groups, can feel accepted, valued, and protected from discrimination, harassment, and judgment. Safe spaces provide resources for open self-expression, mutual support, and inclusion, allowing individuals to share their experiences and reveal their identities without fear of exclusion.

Queer migration – The geographical movement of individuals whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or self-expression does not conform to heteronormative norms. This migration is often driven by discrimination, violence, or

prejudice in their home country. Queer migration can be forced (seeking refuge from homophobic or transphobic environments) or voluntary (motivated by the desire for a more supportive and inclusive setting). Beyond physical relocation, queer migration also involves shifts in personal and social identities as individuals seek safety, affirmation, and a sense of belonging.

Queer Efforts – A term used in research to describe both collective and individual actions aimed at resisting normative oppressive structures and advancing LGBTQ+ rights, inclusion, and well-being. These efforts include strategies for challenging systemic oppression, building supportive communities, and creating safe spaces.

Queer – A term that describes individuals whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or self-expression does not conform to traditional heteronormative norms. It encompasses a broad spectrum of identities and experiences that challenge conventional categorizations of gender and sexuality.

Heteronormativity – Also known as normative sexuality, heteronormativity is the subordination of sexuality and gender identity to the dominant heterosexual agenda, whether social, cultural, or political.

Hypervigilance – a state of constant and effortful alertness to potential threats and risks. This condition is often triggered by traumatic experiences, danger, or fear, leading to psycho-emotional tension. Hypervigilance can manifest as excessive focus on the environment, an inability to relax, anxiety, and unfounded fear or worry about what might or could happen.

Homonationalism – author of the concept is Jasbir Puar (2007), who studies the co-optation of LGBTQ+ rights by nationalist movements in the Western context, particularly in response to the marginalization of racial, religious, and migrant groups. The concept critically examines the connection between LGBTQ+ rights and nationalist agendas, highlighting how LGBTQ+ individuals are often used as symbols of modernity and tolerance in contrast to groups perceived as "other" or as threats.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. FACTORS LEADING TO MIGRATION

One of the most dominant issues revealed in respondents' narratives is the pervasiveness of homophobia in Georgia. Hostile attitudes, manifested in various forms, create an environment where queer individuals constantly face fear, marginalization, and a sense of unworthiness and rejection.

The systemic and widespread exclusion described by participants often highlights the forced nature of queer migration. However, the complex nature of the decision to migrate transcends a simple binary of choice versus coercion. Rather, it involves a complex interplay of factors, including identity, safety, relationships, health, and the fundamental pursuit of dignity and self-determination.

1.1. PERVASIVE HOMOPHOBIA: ENDURANCE OR SURVIVAL?

Respondents' narratives reveal that homophobic attitudes in Georgia extend beyond isolated incidents of discrimination and reflect a systemic issue embedded in cultural, institutional, and interpersonal dynamics. The systemic nature of homophobia creates an environment that is profoundly hostile to queer individuals – where staying often becomes an act of endurance and leaving – an act of survival.

For many respondents, public life in Georgia is accompanied by a persistent sense of threat, sometimes due to direct confrontation, and at other times, coming from a fear of potential harm. While physical violence and verbal abuse in public spaces are frequently highlighted, respondents also describe fear of attack, implicit homophobia, and a constant expectation of hostility, which shape how queer individuals engage with their surroundings.

As a result, queer individuals often feel compelled to remain constantly vigilant in order to detect and avoid potential threats. While this hypervigilance serves as a mechanism of self-preservation, it also contributes to chronic stress, diminished self-esteem, and internalized stigma, which significantly hinder personal development and autonomous decision-making.

1.2. POLITICAL ALIENATION AND POWERLESSNESS

Queer migration is also closely tied to political alienation and a sense of powerlessness. The instrumentalization of gender and sexuality issues within political discourse reinforces the marginalization of queer individuals, leaving them feeling trapped and powerless. This deepens their exclusion and makes it impossible to envision a future in Georgia.

1.3. ECONOMIC HARDSHIP: PRECARIAT AND HOPELESSNESS

Respondents' narratives reveal that the intersection of economic hardship with social exclusion, and political neglect creates a broad and monolithic system of marginalization, leaving queer individuals with a pervasive sense of hopelessness.

Economic hardship and barriers to personal development are two closely interrelated and often central issues in the narratives of queer respondents, shaping both their perception of the future and their decisions to migrate. Many describe a sense of frustration and despair caused by limited opportunities for professional and personal growth, defined not only by the economic system but also by experiences of discrimination.

1.4. FACTORS LEADING TO MIGRATION: COMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY WORK

The experience of navigating between micro-societies, particularly the primary family and the queer community, is characterized by complexity and offers a certain illustration of queer life in Georgia. These interpersonal dynamics mirror broader societal power dynamics. Such an environment significantly hinders the formation of a sense of belonging and limits access to unconditional support for queer individuals.

For many respondents, the primary family and the queer community represent two opposing realities: the former often reflects hostile social dynamics, while the latter, despite its challenges, often serves as a refuge.

At the same time, while the queer community functions as a harbour for many, respondents also speak at length about problems and tensions within the community. Several describe critical dynamics within the community itself – such as exclusion, hierarchy, and inequality – based not only on sexuality and gender

identity, but also on social and economic class, place of residence, lifestyle, and identity.

In this context, the experiences of community workers and activists are distinct. Engaging in activism often coincides with a process of individual self-determination, inspired at times by an older generation of activists, and at other times by the belief in emancipatory ideas or academic interests. Along the way, activists and community workers encounter numerous pressures and complex challenges that lead to transformative personal and professional experiences – most commonly expressed through tensions with hierarchical organizational structures, professional burnout, and frustration.

Nevertheless, these respondents view their role not only in addressing the immediate needs of queer individuals or advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, but they see themselves as part of a broader movement for justice and equality.

1.5. DECISION TO LEAVE

A significant proportion of respondents describe their decision to migrate as driven by immediate necessity and/or impulsive reaction, rather than by long-term planning.

When reflecting on their decision to leave, some respondents, either explicitly or implicitly, express a sense of retrospective regret. When reflecting on the emotional toll of systemic marginalization and the barriers to psychological well-being, many respondents express regret over not having decided to leave earlier, even when their experiences of emigration have been far from ideal.

Across the narratives, chronic stress, anxiety, and depression caused by a homophobic environment and structural exclusion are frequently cited as decisive factors in the choice to leave, rather than the pursuit of opportunities abroad. Thus, migration for the queer individuals is viewed more as an act of bodily and psychological self-care than as a simple geographical relocation.

2. IN THE HOST COUNTRY

Respondents' narratives about transitioning to a new country reflect a mix of relief, a sense of freedom, and an unfamiliar opportunity for self-reflection and self-actualization, alongside a range of specific challenges. While migration is of-

ten driven by the expectation of safety and a dignified life, the journey, marked by complex bureaucratic procedures, socio-economic integration, and cultural adaptation, frequently results in frustration and distress for queer migrants.

2.1. IMMIGRATION BUREAUCRACY

Acquiring legal residency in a host country – whether through asylum, visas, or citizenship – creates numerous obstacles for migrants. These systems are often characterized by complex bureaucratic procedures and shifting policies, creating an uncertain environment for migrants.

In this context, respondents frequently criticize the assessment methodologies employed by international organizations, which often define immigration priorities of host countries. As a result, countries may be classified as "safe" for queer individuals based on the existence of anti-discrimination laws that, in practice, are insufficient to address systemic and intersectional oppression.

The experiences shared by respondents about refugee shelters are particularly interesting. These shelters typically serve as the initial space for socialization and contact with the realities of the host country, which is often in contrast with what they imagined. Within these spaces, residents frequently encounter homophobic, transphobic, racist, misogynistic, and other forms of prejudice.

2.2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

Socio-economic integration is a process shaped by both personal skills and the characteristics of the receiving society. Migrants begin life in a new country with individual goals, skills, and vulnerabilities, and their path to stability often depends on their ability to navigate a system that is rigid and supportive at the same time. In this process, individual flexibility and motivation are critical, as the capacity to adapt largely determines future opportunities. However, the ongoing need to prove one's capabilities and determination can also create pressure.

On this path, work, even when it is precarious, emerges as a central theme in respondents' integration experiences. While such work may distance some from their aspirations, for many it represents a long-term path toward self-development.

The integration process also includes a period of gender self-determina-

tion, since physical distance from Georgia and an increased sense of safety provide the space and emotional capacity to reflect identity and future aspirations. These findings suggest that integration is not only about adapting to a new environment but also about redefining one's identity and sense of belonging.

2.3. SOCIO-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

The social and cultural adaptation of queer migrants are shaped by the intersection of their identities, expectations, and the sociopolitical order of the host country. While the desire for safety and recognition is often a primary motivation for migration, adaptation to a new socio-cultural environment is a dynamic process, which is influenced by perceived safety, interpersonal relationships, and systemic challenges.

Although many host countries promote inclusivity, safety and recognition are not universally guaranteed. Rising anti-gender and anti-migrant movements pose risks of marginalization for queer migrants. Respondents' narratives indicate that anti-migrant sentiment is often racialized, disproportionately affecting individuals from the Middle East and Africa. However, these movements are politically driven, fuelling hostility in society. In this context, protective legislation and support services are essential in fostering a sense of security and validation.

It is particularly noteworthy that queer migrants from Georgia report easier adaptation in cultures where temperament is described as warm, hospitable, and collectivist, and more closely resembles their own. In contrast, integration into the more individualistic northern societies tends to be more challenging. Nevertheless, respect for personal boundaries and a general positive attitude remain important factors that facilitate adaptation.

2.4. TRAUMA AND HYPERVIGILANCE

Experiences of systemic violence, homophobia, and unstable living conditions, both in Georgia and in host countries, cause significant emotional distress. Several respondents describe symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as persistent hypersensitivity, distrust of social systems, and difficulty feeling safe, even in environments that offer support.

In summary, the sense of safety and capacity for adaptation among queer migrants is closely tied to the legal, social, and cultural situation in their host countries. While cultures that promote free and safe self-expression are essential to the psychological well-being of queer individuals, their everyday experiences are still largely shaped by broader political and social climate, as well as institutional protection mechanisms.

2.5. COMMUNITY, MUTUAL SUPPORT, AND RESILIENCE

The connection of queer migrants from Georgia to the queer community is fluid and situational, shaped by both the new environment and prior experiences. In host countries where the number of Georgian queer migrants is small, respondents often form communities with queer individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, united by shared experiences of marginalization.

In countries where the Georgian queer community is relatively larger, such as Belgium, peer support networks have emerged that focus on sharing information related to immigration procedures. Some of these initiatives extend beyond the queer community and address broader issues of discrimination, offering support and resources to a wider range of groups. In many cases, these relationships are built on past friendships or familial ties.

However, not all interactions with other Georgian migrants are positive. Some queer individuals actively distance themselves from fellow Georgians to avoid homophobic incidents, while others disengage from queer community groups due to interpersonal conflicts, which often hinders the development of a sense of belonging.

Following migration, some queer individuals experience "survivor's guilt," leading to an internal conflict between the desire to remain connected to their homeland and the need to distance from it. In this context, some respondents have begun engaging in LGBTQ+ advocacy within their host countries, working to make queer migrant communities more flexible in the face of both social and institutional challenges.

3. VISION OF THE FUTURE

A positive outlook on the future – the ability to plan and focus on long-term goals is closely tied to psychological well-being. As we've seen, queer migrants face numerous obstacles on that path, one of the most significant being the difficulty of establishing a sense of belonging.

For many respondents – especially those who have spent less time in emigration – the future feels uncertain and undefined. They often describe having no clear plans for the future. This uncertainty is closely tied to a lack of security and a deep sense of injustice or inequality, which continues to shape their lives regardless of whether they have support from family or friends.

Most respondents focus on their immediate priorities. Chief among them is personal and professional development, aimed at building a stable and sustainable daily life. In this context, focusing on self-growth serves both as a coping mechanism and a practical strategy for navigating precarious and uncertain living conditions. At the same time, these personal aspirations are often intertwined with care for others.

The aspirations of queer migrants are mostly shaped by fundamental human needs: having a home, feeling safe, and building meaningful human connections. These seemingly simple goals highlight not only the deep impact of systemic injustice on queer lives but also the strength and resilience required to find a sense of belonging and stability in a new social environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of sexuality and gender identity with migration and refugee status creates complex patterns of human experience. Studying this social phenomenon requires an intersectional approach that takes into account the following categories: gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity. While LGBTQ+ migration has increased significantly in recent decades, the experiences of queer individuals who have migrated from Georgia remain unexplored.

Unlike traditional migration models, which are primarily defined by economic factors and conflicts, queer migration also involves dimensions of identity, belonging, and self-actualization. Like other asylum seekers or voluntary migrants moving to Western countries, LGBTQ+ individuals from Georgia often seek not only economic stability but also an escape from systemic discrimination and a society where they can live with dignity and autonomy. However, in today's reality, the rise of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and movements unique barriers and challenges for them, both in Georgia and in their host countries.

THE CONTEXT OF GEORGIAN EMIGRATION

Emigration from Georgia is driven by various economic, political, and social factors. Migration patterns are often explained by post-Soviet economic instability, political tensions, and turbulent social transformations. The primary driver of emigration is economic hardship, including a high unemployment rate and low wages. According to the World Bank, Georgia's unemployment rate stood at 20% but had decreased to a historic low of 13.7% by 2024. However, this trend is inversely proportional to the emigration rate, as experts attribute the declining unemployment figures to the continuous outflow of the labour force to other countries (World Bank, 2023; National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024; IDFI, 2024).

Beyond economic factors, political discontent and distrust in the government also push a segment of the population to emigrate in search of a more stable political environment. Additionally, many Georgian students and professionals choose to emigrate for education and career advancement, seeking better opportunities abroad. This trend contributes to the "Brain Drain" phenomenon, leading to a shortage of highly skilled professionals in the country. The motiva-

tions and destinations of emigrants vary based on factors such as age, gender, and the period of migration (Hoffmann & Buckley, 2013).

The share and characteristics of asylum seekers in EU countries within overall emigration data are also significant, as they provide insight into the challenges associated with standard immigration procedures, the shortcomings of Georgia's socio-economic system, and the concerns of its citizens. For instance, in 2024, the number of asylum applications submitted by Georgian citizens to EU member states declined compared to the previous year. According to Eurostat, Germany – the most frequent destination for Georgian asylum seekers – received 1,395 applications in the first half of 2024, while in 2023 it received – 5,155. Experts attribute this decline to Germany's decision to add Georgia to the list of safe countries, which has made the asylum process more restrictive. This explanation is particularly relevant given that emigration rates from Georgia remain high and are largely driven by the strategies to escape poverty (Irish Press, 2024; Eurostat, 2024). The success of government economic policies is often measured by GDP growth and economic freedom indexes; however, these metrics fail to account for the concentration of economic benefits within a small elite (Chivadze, 2024). In Georgia, economic inequality – compounded by limited state services and social transfers – directly translates into unequal opportunities, further facilitating economically motivated emigration. This inequality is reflected not only in the country's Gini coefficient but also in the distribution of land, property, and other assets (Centre for Community Research, 2022). Such disparities are not merely a byproduct of low economic growth but also a consequence of Georgia's institutional structure, which remains dominated by elite groups.

This situation has a particularly severe impact on marginalized social groups, including queer individuals, who face systemic exclusion (Jalaghania, 2020). Like others, queer individuals struggle with poverty, unemployment, and limited access to basic necessities (Aghgomelashvili et al., 2018, 2021). However, these challenges are further exacerbated by the rise of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and the political instrumentalization of gender and sexuality-related issues in contemporary Georgia. Despite some changes over the past five years, homophobic sentiments remain pervasive, targeting members of the LGBTQ+ community, with even greater hostility directed at LGBTQ+ activists (Aghgomelashvili, 2016, 2022; Jalaghania, 2024).

Moreover, while economic hardship and the pursuit of a better quality of life are traditionally viewed as the primary drivers of emigration, the past decade has

seen an increasing diversification of motivations and destination countries. This shift is influenced not only by economic but also by social and cultural factors, such as the desire for personal autonomy, freedom of choice, and greater social participation (State Commission on Migration Issues [SCMI], 2015).

QUEER MIGRATION: BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL PUSH AND PULL FACTOR FRAMEWORK

Traditional migration models, such as the push-pull framework, often fail to capture the complexity of queer migration. While economic and political factors are undoubtedly relevant for LGBTQ+ individuals, research suggests that queer migration is shaped by unique motivations and challenges. These include distinct emotional and intimate dimensions that require a more nuanced analytical approach for a more comprehensive understanding. (Mai & King, 2009; Luibhéid, 2017)

SYSTEMIC HOMOPHOBIA AND ABUSE

According to multiple studies on migration preconditions, systemic homophobia is the primary driver of queer migration. Unlike the classical understanding of economic migrants, LGBTQ+ individuals often leave environments where their very existence is criminalized or socially unacceptable. According to Murray (2014), government-encouraged homophobia – manifested in discriminatory legislation and institutional practices – creates conditions where migration becomes more of a survival strategy rather than a free choice.

In Georgia, while members of the LGBTQ+ community frequently cite economic hardship as a major challenge, their exclusion is not characterized by only economic factors, and the complexity of pull factors is particularly highlighted (Jalaghania, 2020). Alongside indirect social and economic oppression, political attacks on the queer community have intensified. This is evident in escalating anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and legislation, violent crackdowns on public events over the past decade,[1] and institutional neglect that weakens advocacy efforts by limiting human rights protections, further exacerbating social exclusion (Manalansan, 2006; Jalaghania, 2024).

1 May 17, 2013; July 5, 2021; July 8, 2023

Rodriguez (2017) describes how heteronormative social structures in queer migrants' countries of origin, along with the fear of identity disclosure, keep them in a state of constant vigilance – also known as hypervigilance – and self-censorship. In these conditions, often compounded by traumatic experiences, LGBTQ+ individuals seek safety by connecting with other members of the community. For many, the community serves as a refuge – a safe space to retreat from a homophobic society. However, access to such spaces is not equally available to everyone and often requires meeting certain criteria or making significant efforts to adapt (Shiukashvili & Kankia, 2022). Self-isolation, whether collective or individual, is a defining characteristic of queer existence. This psychological burden, combined with limited access to support networks and resources, is a key factor that distinguishes queer migration from other forms of migration.

PULL FACTORS AND AN IDEALIZED DESTINATION

The pull factors that attract LGBTQ+ migrants to specific destinations involve complex interactions between perceptions, expectations, and realities. While Western countries are often viewed as liberating and inclusive spaces, research presents a more nuanced picture. Cantu (2009) and others describe how migration to Global North countries, driven by the pursuit of a dignified future, is shaped by public perceptions of LGBTQ+ inclusion – perceptions that are reinforced by objective factors or media portrayals.

MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND THE PROMISE OF FREEDOM

Media representation – particularly through social media and LGBTQ+ cultural products – plays a significant role in shaping queer migrants' idealized perception of potential realities in destination countries. Research highlights key factors that influence these perceptions:

- **LGBTQ+ rights and media representation of Pride celebrations:** Coverage of improvements in LGBTQ+ legal rights, Pride events, and inclusive policies creates an appealing image of destination countries;
- **Legal recognition of same-sex marriage and queer family rights:** Media representation of marriage equality and family rights legislation serves as a crucial factor for queer individuals considering migration;

- **Visibility of openly queer public figures:** The presence of openly LGBTQ+ individuals in positions of power and influence in media and popular culture is often perceived as a marker of a more inclusive society;
- **Coverage of anti-discrimination protections:** Reports on legal safeguards against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity further contribute to the perception of destination countries as inclusive.

However, this idealized representation often disguises the complex realities that queer migrants encounter in their destination countries. May and King's (2009) study, Love, Sexuality, and Migration: Mapping the Issue(s), along with other sources, highlights how mainstream media narratives construct "fantasies of emancipation," which often lead to disillusionment and frustration upon arrival in host countries. (Mai & King, 2009; Mole, 2018; Murray, 2015; Shield, 2019; Tschalaer, 2020; Shield, 2019).

LEGAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Spijkerboer's (2021) work, Gender, Sexuality, Asylum, and European Human Rights, examines the legal and policy factors that influence LGBTQ+ individuals' choice of destination countries. Based on research, these factors may include:

- **Recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) as asylum criteria:** Countries that acknowledge SOGI as grounds for asylum provide a legal pathway for individuals facing persecution and discrimination in their home countries;
- **Legal recognition of same-sex relationships:** Nations that recognize same-sex marriages or civil partnerships offer LGBTQ+ migrants and their families both social acceptance and legal protection;
- **Access to trans-specific healthcare:** The availability of gender-affirming[2] healthcare services is a crucial factor influencing migration decisions for transgender and gender-diverse individuals;
- **Established anti-discrimination mechanisms:** A robust legal framework prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, and other areas significantly improves LGBTQ+ migrants' well-being and integration prospects;

2 Gender-affirming

- **Inclusive family reunification policies:** Policies that allow queer individuals, their partners, and families to migrate together foster a sense of stability and support in their new communities (Mole, 2021; Spijkerboer, 2018; Tschalaer, 2020; Murray, 2015; Hopkinson et al., 2017).

URBAN CENTRES AS QUEER HARBOURS

Gorman-Murray and Nash's (2016) study identifies key factors that make urban centres more attractive destinations for LGBTQ+ migrants compared to smaller settlements. These factors include:

- **Established LGBTQ+ communities and cultural spaces:** Cities often have well-developed LGBTQ+ communities that provide a sense of belonging, social support, and access to cultural events and spaces;
- **Concentration of support services and organizations:** Urban centres offer greater access to LGBTQ+-specific services, including community centres, healthcare clinics, and legal aid organizations, which are more accessible in cities compared to smaller settlements.
- **Perceived anonymity:** Compared to smaller settlements, cities offer a greater sense of anonymity and privacy, which can help mitigate the risks of discrimination and social stigma (Gorman-Murray & Nash, 2016; Mole, 2018; Manalansan, 2006; Hopkinson et al., 2017).

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As previously mentioned, although migration driven by the pursuit of a better life is multidimensional, economic factors are considered a primary determinant. Kassan and Nakamura's (2013) study, This Was My Only Option, highlights how the intersection of economic needs with gender and sexuality influences migration decisions. Key economic factors shaping these decisions include:

- **Access to employment free from discrimination:** The availability of job opportunities in host countries with strong legal protections against workplace discrimination is a crucial factor for LGBTQ+ migrants;

- **Opportunities for professional unionization in LGBTQ+-friendly workplaces:** The ability to join professional networks and access to opportunities in inclusive environments that support LGBTQ+ rights;
- **Educational opportunities in inclusive academic spaces:** Access to quality education in academic institutions that provide an inclusive, discrimination-free environment;
- **Entrepreneurial opportunities in diverse urban markets:** The presence of a dynamic and inclusive business ecosystem that allows LGBTQ+ individuals to receive support and succeed.

REALITY VS EXPECTATIONS

As previously mentioned, idealized perceptions shaped by "emancipatory fantasies" can lead to frustration after migration. The primary reason for this frustration is the discrepancy between expectations and reality. Key areas where LGBTQ+ migrants often experience these discrepancies include:

- **Unexpectedly high levels of racism within LGBTQ+ communities:** Many migrants anticipate support and inclusion but instead encounter racism within local queer communities, contradicting their expectations;
- **Economic barriers to participation in queer spaces and culture:** Financial hardship can limit access to LGBTQ+ spaces, events, and cultural life, leading to a sense of exclusion and isolation;
- **Challenges in accessing mental health and healthcare services:** LGBTQ+ migrants often struggle to navigate unfamiliar healthcare systems, particularly when seeking specialized mental health or medical care;
- **Navigating bureaucratic systems:** Complex immigration procedures, accessing social services, and obtaining legal documents can be overwhelming for LGBTQ+ migrants.
- **Isolation from both national and LGBTQ+ communities:** Many migrants experience social isolation, either due to rejection from their own ethnic/national communities or barriers to integrating into LGBTQ+ spaces in the host country. This often results in loneliness, alienation, and a lack of support networks (El-Tayeb, 2011; Mole, 2018; Mai & King, 2009; Murray, 2015; Hopkinson et al., 2017).

QUEER MIGRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF RISING FAR-RIGHT MOVEMENTS

In recent years, far-right movements have gained renewed momentum in Western democracies, characterized by anti-immigrant rhetoric, opposition to gender ideology, and nationalist populism (Wodak, 2021). Their electoral success and growing mainstream legitimacy have enabled them to influence political discourse and social attitudes, even in countries considered safe harbours for LGBTQ+ migrants (Mudde, 2019).

The rise of these movements coincides with what scholars describe as "anti-gender campaigns," which target both LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). These campaigns position themselves as defenders of traditional values and national identity, portraying gender and sexual rights as an "ideology" imposed by global elites. Moreover, in the context of queer migration, these movements not only demonstrate increasing local influence but also maintain strong transnational connections and share strategic approaches across borders (Verloo & Paternotte, 2018).

Judith Butler (2020) provides a critical theoretical framework for understanding the rise of anti-democratic movements, particularly their targeting of gender and sexual minorities. According to Butler, emerging authoritarianism fundamentally threatens queer existence by portraying it as a populist challenge to the "natural order" and "traditional values." Their analysis reveals that anti-gender campaigns, which depict LGBTQ+ individuals as a societal danger, serve to justify the restriction of their fundamental rights and condemn them to a precarious existence. This perspective helps explain why queers submit to specific patterns of exclusion – both as migrants and as queer individuals.

INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF LGBTQ+ RIGHTS AND HOMONATIONALISM

Far-right forces in Western countries often adopt a selective approach to LGBTQ+ rights. While they may advocate for the expansion of these rights, they simultaneously use the same rhetoric to target migrants, as well as racial and ethnic minorities. Poirier's (2007, 2017) concept of "homonationalism" highlights how discourses on LGBTQ+ rights are instrumentalized, and thus, intertwined with nationalist ideologies and imperialist projects. The instrumentalization of sexual politics not only reinforces hierarchies within the LGBTQ+ community but also legitimizes nationalist and imperialist ambitions.

IMPACT ON POLICY AND SERVICE RESTRICTION

The resurgence of far-right movements has directly influenced policies and immigration services, leading to several concerning trends:

1. Increased scepticism toward asylum seekers who claim persecution based on sexual orientation and gender identity.
2. Reduction of funding for LGBTQ+ migrant support services, as part of broader anti-immigration policies.
3. Asylum procedures with stricter controls disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including LGBTQ+ individuals and communities.

In summary, the rise of contemporary far-right movements combines anti-migrant and anti-gender policies, placing LGBTQ+ migrants at heightened risk of marginalization and exclusion. These policies not only restrict the rights and support available to LGBTQ+ communities but also instrumentalize gender and sexuality issues to serve nationalist and imperialist agendas (Puar, 2007; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018; Tschalaer, 2020; Spijkerboer, 2018).

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING, COPING AND RESILIENCE

The individual dimension of queer migration involves complex psycho-emotional processes that go beyond the physical act of geographic displacement. As discussed, queer individuals must navigate numerous systemic and structural barriers in pursuit of a better life abroad. In this experience, maintaining psychological well-being – an essential foundation for self-actualization and resilience -becomes even more critical.

MINORITY STRESS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Migration often provides LGBTQ+ individuals with opportunities for self-validation and personal growth that were previously constrained by societal barriers in their home countries. In a less restrictive environment, queer migrants may explore their gender and sexual identity, cultivate authentic relationships, pursue educational and professional aspirations, and plan for their future without the fear of hiding who they are (Luibhéid & Cantú, 2005). However, as previously

noted, access to these opportunities is often obstructed by structural and systemic barriers, such as economic hardship, legal status restrictions, racism and xenophobia within local LGBTQ+ communities (El-Tayeb, 2011), and the rise of anti-migrant and anti-gender policies among others. As a result, specific psycho-emotional responses and coping mechanisms emerge within the queer migrant community.

Research on LGBTQ+ well-being consistently highlights the unique challenges faced by this population and the correlation of their prevalence with minority stress (Meyer, 2003). For LGBTQ+ migrants, stressors specifically include:

- **Pre-migration trauma** resulting from structural and interpersonal homophobia, often manifested through family rejection, discrimination, and violence (Hopkinson et al., 2017).
- **Migration-specific stressors,** such as navigating documentation procedures, overcoming language barriers, and the lack of a social support network in the host country (Murray, 2014).
- **Marginalization,** not only due to sexual and gender identity but also because of their position as migrants (Luibhéid & Cantú, 2005).
- **Complex family dynamics,** where migrants must balance relationships with family members across borders while adjusting to the realities of their new environment, often in the context of a newly revealed sexual or gender identity (Manalansan, 2003; Luibhéid & Cantú, 2005).

It is important to note that the research also highlights inspiring examples of queer migrants' resilience and agency, showing that migration can offer powerful opportunities for meaningful connections, even in the face of structural challenges. Queer migrants often build complex, multi-layered support networks that address both practical and emotional needs (Cantu, 2009; Mole, 2021; Hopkinson et al., 2017; Manalansan, 2006; Murray, 2015; Mole, 2018).

BELONGINGNESS, RESILIENCE, AND RESISTANCE

Belonging to a group is especially significant for queer migrants, as it alleviates feelings of exclusion and isolation. The relationships they cultivate are grounded in intersectional support, offering a safe space for self-expression and promoting

psychological well-being. Tamar Shatberashvili's research (2023), which focuses on the experiences of queer migrants from Georgia, highlights that the formation of a sense of belonging is a complex psychosocial process that unfolds between the "home" and host country. This process involves reflection on past feelings and experiences of freedom, recognition, adaptation, isolation, separation, and loss in the pursuit of self-determination. A key aspect of this process is the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal and community connections, both within the home and host countries, and across borders.

These connections not only help queer migrants meet their needs but also serve as a source of recovery and self-validation in a challenging environment. Below, we explore the ways in which queer migrants maintain meaningful and supportive connections.

Schild's (2019) study, Immigrants on *Grindr: Race, Sexuality, and Belonging Online,* using the online dating app Grindr as a case study, highlights the role of **digital platforms** in supporting the everyday lives and resilience of queer migrants. Digital social platforms allow queer migrants to exchange practical information about asylum procedures and safe spaces, as well as maintain connections with their communities back home. These platforms also create virtual support networks that, despite geographical distance, foster an important sense of belonging and unity.

The role of **formal organizations and referral networks** is also crucial for queer migrants. Various studies we have already discussed outline four models of formal support: 1. LGBTQ+ migrant-led organizations that operate on peer contributions and provide migrants with information and cultural adaptation services; 2. Collaboration between mainstream LGBTQ+ organizations and immigration services that offer support to queer individuals based on intersectional needs; 3. Specialized mental health services that address both the trauma of migration and challenges related to gender and sexuality; 4. Legal services that specifically address the barriers faced by queer migrants.

As we have seen multiple times before, in addition to formal support networks, **informal connections** are critically important for the well-being of queer migrants. Kasani and Nakamura's (2013) study, along with many other sources, describes how queer migrants build strong informal connections to cope with their new reality. These include **shared housing,** which can alleviate economic burdens and offer social benefits; the formation of **cultural-linguistic commu-**

nities, which foster open self-expression while maintaining a connection to their native culture; and **mentoring newly arrived migrants,** which provides a sense of meaning for many as they guide newcomers and offer practical support. These models of informal connections highlight the resourcefulness and collective resilience of queer migrants in their new environments (Mole, 2018).

In addition to local connections in host countries, Richard Mole (2021), in his work *Queer Migration and Asylum in Europe,* discusses the important role of transnational connections in the formation of queer migrant communities. The study highlights the significance of maintaining connections with selectively supportive family members and friends in home countries, creating advocacy networks in the host country, developing multinational support groups to share resources and information, and engaging in diasporic building practices that include migrants from different countries. These transnational networks play a crucial role in providing social support, strengthening a sense of belonging, and facilitating access to resources for queer migrants as they adapt to new social and political environments.

Fatima El-Tayeb (2021), a researcher of minority countercultures in Western Europe, focuses on activism and art in her work *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postcolonial Europe,* presenting contradictory yet queer-supportive practices rooted in racial and ethnic belonging within the context of Eurocentric nationalism. El-Tayeb emphasizes the importance of various **intersectional communities,** including organizations that create specific cultural spaces alongside LGBTQ+ services; religious groups that recognize and celebrate both religious beliefs and queer identities; artistic associations that position themselves with diverse cultural and sexual identities; and political organizations that advocate for issues related to migration, race, and ethnicity, alongside LGBTQ+ rights. According to the author, these associations act as a counterbalance to nationalist exclusionary policies that portray minorities as enemies, contributing to their marginalization and exclusion (Mole, 2018, 2021; Manalansan, 2006; Murray, 2015; Cantu, 2009; Hopkinson et al., 2017).

STUDY INSIGHTS: PRECONDITIONS FOR EMIGRATION

SOCIAL ATTITUDES AND PERVASIVE HOMOPHOBIA

One of the most dominant issues revealed in the respondents' narratives when discussing the preconditions for leaving Georgia is the pervasiveness of homophobia. Hostile attitudes, manifested in various forms, create an environment where queer individuals constantly face fear, marginalization, and feelings of unworthiness and rejection. For the majority of respondents, it is precisely these social attitudes that constitute the most significant precondition for migration, as they contribute to an existence defined by both visible and invisible risks.

* * *

Homophobia is most tangibly manifested in direct interactions with primary family members, institutions, and public spaces. For some respondents, the primary family is the main source of disagreement and harm. In some cases, conflict arises from the respondents' revealed or perceived identity, while in others, it stems from a clash of worldviews. These respondents speak of the burden of reconciling their beliefs or way of life with strict conservative and traditional values, which sometimes turn into increased control or violence. In all cases, the degrading attitude and pressure from the family are largely rooted in heteronormative expectations, leading respondents to experience isolation and apathy. The experiences described highlight that, for many queer individuals, it is often within families – intimate, personal spaces – that the weight of rejection from loved ones and the pressure of public opinion combine.

> *"If I had to name the main reason for leaving, it was probably more about society and family. Because if your family accepts you, you can kind of ignore what society thinks. But when both are against you, it just makes everything so much harder. I couldn't see any hope that things would get better – that maybe if I waited, something would change, or that I could help make things better, create more accepting environment for us, for queers, in Georgia" (R16, tm, 1 year, 07.04.2024)*

> *"The reason I left was definitely homophobia – at home and out in the street. [...] Even something as simple as using a bus every day felt dangerous. Later, things got worse – my family didn't like the people I was friends with, even if they were from the same community. If a friend came over, or I went out with someone, it was always, ' Maybe you're going to that person,' and comments like that." (R24. TM. 5 years. 27.05.2024)*

A social and public space saturated with rigid norms and widespread prejudices further amplifies the challenges described. For many respondents, public life in Georgia is accompanied by a persistent sense of threat, sometimes due to direct confrontation, and at other times, coming from a fear of potential harm. While physical violence and verbal abuse in public spaces are frequently highlighted, respondents also describe fear of attack, implicit homophobia, and a constant expectation of hostility, which shape how queer individuals engage with their surroundings.

> *"At first, even the smallest things – like in the subway or public spaces – people would just look at you strangely and stare, almost like hitting you by that stare." (R23. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)*

> *"[On May 17, 2013] I remember what my colleagues, friends, and family were writing. They sent horrifying messages. For example, I heard at home them saying like "they deserve to be killed." I constantly heard such things, and it created fears that never left me. Everyone – society, my brothers, family members – absolutely everyone." (R28. Tm. 5 years. 06.06.2024)*

> *"In Batumi, they beat a DJ in front of me, dragged him away, just because of his earring. They beat him badly. I was very stressed, and I wasn't sober that day. It was not very often for such things to happen in Georgia, and I realized then that I had been working so hard, believing in things […], but my existence felt like a drop in the ocean. I looked at it a little philosophically, asking myself, 'Why are you even trying?'" (R3. Tm. 3 years. 14.03.2024)*

Institutional homophobia, particularly as expressed by the police, is another pressing issue that emerges in the narratives of the interviewees. According to respondents, regardless of whether they have had direct encounters with law enforcement, police officers are generally perceived not as protectors, but as potential threats. Several participants described experiences of being treated inappropriately by the police – ignored, ridiculed, humiliated, or even verbally abused when they sought help. One respondent even recounted a case in which a police officer threatened to disclose their identity. Some interviewees also emphasized that police abuse their authority not only toward queer individuals but frequently toward other oppressed or oppositional groups as well. Nonetheless, the experiences of queer people are distinct in that the absence of institutional protection further deepens their vulnerability within an already hostile social environment.

> *"It was that incident that finally made me decide to leave. Before that, I didn't pay much attention to the passive aggression – I kept to myself, and where I lived, everyone kind of knew me there. Nothing had happened directly, but one guy started threatening me that they would call me out. The actual attack happened in Tbilisi. I don't even know what he wanted – he was drunk and just came at me on the street. It was because of how I looked. I hadn't done anything. I wasn't planning to report it, but I got so angry. [...] And the way the police acted – their cynicism, like it was no big deal." (R30. Tm. 2 years. 09.06.2024)*

> *"When it comes to a change, nothing has really changed. The law says we're members of society and that we have the right to hold Pride. The state says, on paper, that we can. But then it turns around and violates that same constitution by enabling people who harass us, and those people never face consequences. [...] On the second day of Pride, I went to the rally, and the police attacked us, transgender women. One of the police officers himself was hitting a trans woman." (R19. Tm. 3 years. 01.05.2024)*

The psychological and emotional toll of the social conditions described is profound. Queer individuals often feel the need to remain constantly vigilant to

threats. This state of hypervigilance, while serving as a self-preservation strategy, becomes a prerequisite to chronic stress, low self-esteem, and self-stigmatization. In addition, repeated experiences of rejection and violence significantly limit individuals' capacity for decision-making, as well as their personal and professional opportunities. Many respondents spoke about altering their appearance, avoiding specific public spaces, and concealing their identities as strategies to reduce the risk of conflict or confrontation.

> *"The fear was so intense and overwhelming – it was honestly the only reason I couldn't openly speak about my orientation." (R28. Tm. 5 years. 06.06.2024)*

> *"Eventually, as you grow older, your life enters a different phase. Living a double life and constantly hiding who you are takes a toll – it blocks you from real self-actualization. I chose to distance myself from my homophobic relatives and keep that relationship behind the screen. That's what ultimately pushed me to leave." (R10. Tm. 2 years. 06.04.2024)*

> *"Back in Georgia, going out felt like playing a role all day. I had to act masculine just to avoid some random outburst of aggression – on the street, at work. Here you can let go of the control of how you smoke a cigarette, how you sit, how you talk, how you walk, even how you adjust your hair. Here, I don't have to think about any of that. I can sit, smoke, hold someone's hand – just be myself. But in Georgia, you live in constant fear. You're always wondering if someone might not like the way you walk and suddenly come out of nowhere, say something, or shout at you. Maybe they won't hit you, but even the shouting ruins your whole day. That was the biggest reason I left." (R16. Tm. 1 year. 07.04.2024)*

> *"You don't actually live your life – you live as someone else. When you're at home, you're you. But outside, at work, you're around people who are openly homophobic and make no effort to hide it, and it makes communication so hard. You feel like a mouse, always hiding. That's not really living, if you ask me. It's like you're two different people, always wearing*

> *a mask. And then there's the pressure: you've got a kid; you were once married. People ask, 'Why aren't you married now? You're young – why are you single?' You can't explain everything to everyone. Those questions – so pointless – are exhausting. Why am I not married? Come on..." (R14. Tm. 2 year. 11.04.2024)*

In this context, migration comes not only as a practical means of escaping harm but also as a symbolic act of reclaiming autonomy and restoring dignity. For many respondents, the pervasive homophobia they experienced while living in Georgia felt like a daily assault on their fundamental sense of well-being. As a result, leaving the country was not merely a pursuit of better opportunities, but a search for a place free from fear, judgment, and attacks.

> *"The first reason I left was because of my queerness. I remember the feeling – I just couldn't take it anymore. I felt like I had to run away, to go to any country where things were even a little better, and where I knew there was a queer community." (R12. M. 12 years. 08.04.2024)*

The respondents' narratives reveal that homophobic attitudes in Georgia extend far beyond isolated incidents of discrimination; they reflect a systemic issue embedded in cultural, institutional, and interpersonal dynamics. This systemic nature of homophobia creates an environment that is profoundly hostile to queer individuals – where staying often becomes an act of endurance, and leaving becomes an act of survival.

POLITICAL HOMOPHOBIA

According to in-depth interviews, political homophobia in Georgia is also a significant factor influencing migration decisions. Respondents often connect social homophobia and hostile attitudes to a broader political context that has, over time, become increasingly shaped by conservative, anti-gender, and right-wing ideologies. This political climate not only reinforces homophobia in the public sphere but also deeply undermines any sense of hope for a safe and dignified future, contributing to a growing feeling of despair and disillusionment.

> *"Some people might say that public attitudes are changing, but I don't see it. For me, it's still the same. It makes no difference whether I walk down the street and get attacked by five people or three – either way, it doesn't matter. And when it comes to politics, the general mood – whether among politicians or the public – hasn't changed either. They make statements, but they're the same ones we heard four or five years ago. Honestly, I don't care which party it is, even the opposition – none of them openly support or even acknowledge the rights of queer minorities in their basic promises. And when politicians don't talk about these issues, society doesn't care either." (R16. Tm. 1 year. 07.04.2024)*

> *"In terms of real, tangible change for LGBT people, the only major thing that's happened is the adoption of the anti-discrimination law – and people still cling to that like it's enough. Everyone talks about it like it's a huge win, but the actual changes are minimal, and they only came about because of the massive efforts of community organizations. And even those small wins can easily be taken away." (R26. M. 7 years. 11.06.2024)*

One of the most concerning trends highlighted by respondents is the instrumentalization of queer individuals by political actors. According to some interviewees, the government's use of gender and sexuality-related issues serves to distract from broader social and economic problems, while simultaneously dividing and polarizing society. By portraying queer individuals as a threat to traditional values, political leaders appeal to conservative segments of the population and contribute to an environment where homophobia is not only normalized but encouraged.

> *"There's also this tactic of distraction. In the end, people turn on each other – and of course, the state benefits from that. We say we don't want to be used, but honestly, we're making ourselves prey to them." (R8. Tm. 2 years. 20.03.2024)*

Reflecting on their own experiences and those of queer individuals still living in Georgia, respondents emphasize that this rhetoric – combined with the gradual disappearance of safe spaces – has tangible and harmful consequences for the LGBTQI community. They express deep concern and frustration over the grow-

ing aggression of ultra-right conservative groups, whose actions, they argue, are encouraged by the government and institutionally protected by the police. This escalating hostility poses an increasing threat to the community's right to assemble and protest. Given these experiences, respondents express profound distrust toward state policy, which cannot be eased by legal instruments such as the anti-discrimination law. In fact, some argue that under such conditions, it is illegitimate to frame this law as either progressive or protective of queer individuals.

> *"Last year, there was an attempt to hold a Pride festival, but it ended in a crackdown. This year, there wasn't even an attempt – the situation has gotten so much worse in just one year that people can't even organize a closed event anymore. Right now, everyone in Georgia is focused on the elections, and it feels like the country's future will be decided by that. […] When the entire state turns homophobic, and homophobia is used as a tool during the election period to attract votes, it makes activism difficult as well." (R24. Tm. 5 years. 27.05.2024)*

Some respondents, particularly activists, draw a connection between local political homophobia and broader global conservative, anti-gender movements. They emphasize that the Georgian government's alignment with ideologies opposing liberal discussions of gender and sexuality signals a shift from progressive governance. These ideologies claim that traditional family structures and national identities are under threat, framing queer individuals and movements as agents of foreign influence and moral decay. Such narratives not only marginalize queer people but also deepen social divisions, making inclusive coexistence increasingly difficult.

> *"From around 2010, at the time when queerness became more visible, that's when the aggression really began. But this wasn't happening in a vacuum. Christian fundamentalism was already gaining strength globally, and those same right-wing, fundamentalist groups were active in Georgia too. The Union of Orthodox Parents and others were involved – they were formed during that time and were very public about their agenda. So it wasn't just local – it was part of a broader, global political process. The Patriarchate was involved, the government too, along with their affiliated NGOs. And that's when a different kind of aggression really started to emerge." (R27. M. 11 years. 07.06.2024)*

As we can see, respondents' frustration with the political landscape stems not only from the rise of anti-gender movements and government policies but also from the actions of opposition parties, which similarly instrumentalize queer issues for political gain. While the ruling party weaponizes homophobia to appeal to conservative voters, the opposition often invokes LGBTQI rights rhetorically to attract liberal segments – without offering meaningful or tangible support to the queer community. At this macro level, such negligence leads to deeper frustration and a sense of alienation from political processes, that demonstrates a systemic form of marginalization of the queer community.

> *"I have no idea what can change in Georgia right now – because nothing ever changes for queers. The opposition doesn't even mention us, they don't care. On the contrary, in most cases, they use us in the regions as a weapon before elections, just to mobilize voters and get more support." (R16. Tm. 1 year. 07.04.2024)*

> *"You know how it works? Both parties use us as instruments. I was there in 2020, during Gavrilov's Night. I came to Pride, I was supposed to participate. But I also went to other political rallies. They marched to Bidzina's house, and there, they refused to wave the LGBT flag. When it suits them, they bring out their clowns." (R4. M. 18 years. 16.03.2024)*

> *"They use LGBTQ issues to fight for power against each other. I don't know who it'll be in the end, but it affects all of us. They persecute us, harm us – and they are just fine, right? What about us?" (R15. Tm. x. 12.04.2024)*

This political context leaves many queer individuals feeling powerless and trapped. For some respondents, political homophobia emerges as the decisive factor in their decision to migrate. The shrinking space for activism, combined with ongoing political exclusion, fosters a deep sense that migration is the only viable path to a dignified life.

> *"I couldn't see any hope anymore – not even now, looking at it from here. I tell my friends to think ahead and leave as soon as possible. The opposition is useless, and I have no faith in the activists either – they*

are chasing pointless stuff. I had nothing left to believe in. I didn't even know what I could do. I couldn't see any hope – only the worst. And I just became desperate." (R29. Tm. 1 year. 10.06.2024)

In summary, the intersection of political homophobia, hostile social attitudes, and systemic neglect or denial creates a vicious cycle that perpetuates the marginalization of queer individuals. The instrumentalization of their identities for political gain further deepens their exclusion, making it nearly impossible to envision a future in Georgia. Under these conditions, migration becomes not only an act of escape, but also an act of dissent – a refusal to remain complicit in a system that is both neglectful and manipulative.

ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND BARRIERS TO PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Economic hardship and barriers to personal development are two closely interrelated and often central issues in the narratives of queer respondents, shaping both their perception of the future and their decisions to migrate. Many describe a sense of frustration and despair caused by limited opportunities for professional and personal growth, defined not only by the economic system but also by experiences of discrimination.

* * *

During the interviews, the issue of stable employment frequently emerged, as respondents shared both their own and others' experiences. Several participants reported facing discrimination in temporary, low-paid jobs due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or non-conforming self-expression. Even in the absence of direct discriminatory incidents, many described a persistent sense of exclusion in the workplace, rooted in prevailing social prejudices. For some of the transgender women interviewed, sex work was mentioned as one of the few viable options for securing an income.

"We both worked in cleaning, but it wasn't stable. I was sent wherever they reassigned me – sometimes it was entrances, newly built buildings. We got paid once, and then they had us scrubbing balconies in the rain. They didn't even pay us for that job. [...] What really pushed

me to leave was that I couldn't keep going to job interviews anymore. I couldn't do it anymore. That was the main reason for me – it just felt like nothing was ever going to work out." (R22. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)

"I worked at Spar, Nikora, Two Steps – I even worked in a restaurant. But I still didn't have any money. And then I met someone, got introduced to it... and I got involved in sex work. To this day, it feels like madness to me – something terrible. In the end, I just got up and left." (R18. Tm. 1 year. 30.04.2024)

"I didn't want to leave like this. I stayed as long as I could. But then it got really hard – everything got more expensive, and nothing was changing. My life just became work and home, work and home. That's when I realized I had to get out." (R6. Tm. 2 years. 19.03.2024)

"There were so many cases where people had homophobic attitudes just because of tattoos, piercings, or someone's style. Even before interviews, they'd say, 'Send us your Facebook link – we want to see what you're like,' and based on that, they'd decide whether to call you in. It was like that even for simple jobs, like selling ice cream on the go. I ended up working there, and he worked there too, but now he works at a nightclub – where your appearance is not as much of an issue – but even there, they told her to dress more like a woman." (R23. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)

According to respondents, precarious, low-wage jobs – primarily in the service sector – are often the only available means of earning a basic income. These positions are typically marked by instability, difficult working conditions, and limited prospects for professional growth. Within this context, some respondents see employment in nightclubs and bars as a partial solution. However, those with experience of working in such environments emphasize that these spaces are not necessarily safe, healthy, or protective either. While clubbing and nightlife venues have played a meaningful role in offering social freedom and a sense of community for queer people, many respondents expressed concern over emerging harmful trends. Over time, they note, financial profit has become the primary focus of these establishments. As a result, these venues have become less protective of queer individuals, and cases of ex-

cessive working hours have reportedly increased. Additionally, respondents raised concerns about the lack of regulation around substance accessibility and use within these spaces, which contribute to the spread of addiction and patterns of co-dependency between the community members.

> *"This whole club space brought drugs into our lives – big time – and it just became normal. The bigger the line you sniffed, the bigger the joint you rolled, it was like you were a bigger shot. But if that's what's considered cool, how are you supposed to grow or develop in that environment? I realized I wasn't going anywhere – I was stuck, just sinking deeper into it all. Eventually, it became too much. I think I was part of that scene, sure, but once I saw that none of it was helping anyone, least of all myself, I knew I had to leave while I still could. If I hadn't changed my environment, the same thing would've happened to me too. That's how Tbilisi is – it has this closeness, this network of friends, it can lift you up, but it can also push you down." (R8. Tm. 2 years. 20.03.2024)*

> *"When I worked in bars, I was always lifting heavy stuff. Like at [a queer-friendly club in Tbilisi] – we were all girls working there, constantly dragging heavy things up and down. And the owner? We kept asking him to install an elevator to get everything to the second floor. He did everything except that. He did not care. He looked at us as just machines doing the work. But we were the ones creating the vibe. Sure, I get that business owners look at things differently, but at least respect people's health, right? And on top of that, we weren't even registered. So, when COVID hit, we didn't get any support – not from the state, nor the club. We were just left hanging for two whole years. And even if it had been a guy doing the job, why would anyone be expected to carry massive crates of beer and water? The state doesn't value hard work, but what hurts is that we stood next to those same friendly owners at the protests after the police raids – and they don't even want to lift a finger for us. And don't even get me started on the pay. If you were there for 45 minutes instead of an hour, they didn't want to give you the full 10 GEL. Like, come on – if even your own circle is like that, then seriously, just leave me alone!" (R6. Tm. 2 years. 19.03.2024)*

Some respondents note that economic hardship is a widespread issue among young people living in Georgia. On the job market, they are often hired for short-term roles under informal and unstable agreements.

Even for those respondents who consider themselves relatively fortunate – particularly those with experience working in their field or roles aligned with their interests, such as within non-governmental organizations – the situation remains far from easy. Queer activists and community workers are also familiar with the limitations in realizing their personal and professional aspirations. For many queer professionals, NGOs and queer-focused organizations offer one of the few relatively safe, and sometimes the only viable paths to employment. However, this reliance can also restrict their growth and development, both professionally and personally.

These shared experiences leave many respondents with a sense of a blocked future. Some described how they were unable to imagine a path toward personal or professional development in Georgia at all – and in some cases, they hadn't even considered the possibility of having a future prospect, as their lives had become so focused on daily survival. This sense of stagnation is not limited to those in precarious work; it is also expressed by respondents with higher education, professional skills, and seemingly other advantages against systemic barriers and unjust social attitudes.

> *"I mostly worked in markets and places like that in the beginning, where it was easy to make some money. I also worked at McDonald's for about two years, or something like that. [...] The last job I had was at a club. But by then, nothing really interesting was happening anymore. Life just felt like it was running on autopilot. You know, when you actually love something and enjoy doing it – well, that feeling was gone. And with all the hatred, the lack of freedom, and just being without everything... it all became too much. And I left." (R6. Tm. 2 years. 19.03.2024)*

> *"If I stayed in Georgia, I'd probably always have to work in some kind of non-governmental sector. Because even in public sector, you can't really be open – like, you can't identify yourself, speak freely, and definitely not come out as queer. That's a huge challenge. I felt like I'd be*

stuck in this really monotonous space. I'd need to stay in a bubble just to feel relatively safe – and outside of that, there weren't really any other spaces where I could feel both safe and free. Even things like choosing where to work felt limited." (R24. Tm. 5 years. 27.05.2024)

These narratives illustrate how the intersection of economic hardship, social exclusion, and political neglect generates a profound sense of hopelessness in queer individuals. Together, these forces form a broad and deeply entrenched system of marginalization.

QUEER COMMUNITY – A SAFE HAVEN?

In the face of social, economic, institutional, and political rejection, queer individuals often navigate various micro-societies in their search for belonging. For many respondents, the primary family and the queer community represent two opposing realities: the former frequently reflects hostile social dynamics, while the latter – despite its own internal challenges – often serves as a refuge.

* * *

As noted earlier, a significant number of respondents spoke about the lack of support from their primary families. This tension becomes especially acute when one's identity is publicly revealed or when individuals become involved in activism. In such cases, families themselves may become targets of societal exclusion, gossip, or even direct confrontation. These experiences highlight the ostracizing effects of homophobia, which extend beyond queer individuals to their primary families. At the same time, they reveal the absence of unconditional support from those closest to them. This emotional void is often recalled with heartbreak, disappointment, and in some cases, profound anger.

"For me, it was mostly about family. And honestly, the first difficulty was internal. I had to hide everything I was doing – my activities, who I was, all of it. If I hadn't been hiding, I think I would've been stronger, and maybe I could've been a stronger support for others too. Having support from my family would've meant everything – because at the end of the day, nothing else is as important." (R25. M. 2 years. 14.06.2024)

> *"Aside from my sister, no one supported me. She was the only person who stayed in touch every single day. Back then, we had these phones – you'd give them a coin and call – and I'd use mine to call home. I'd talk to my sister for hours when our mom and dad were at work. [...]*

I was afraid of my father. All my life, he'd say, 'I am being punished because I used to make fun of people like that, and now I have a child like you.' I always told him, 'You shouldn't mock anyone because you never know what life will hand you.' I told him, 'I'm completely normal – I'm not sick, like some people have made you believe. They've put those ideas in your head.' I also said, 'I never interfered in your life as your child, and now, as a parent, don't interfere in mine.'" (R19. Tm. 3 years. 01.05.2024)

In contrast to the intense conflicts and ambivalent relationships experienced within their families of origin, the queer community serves as a vital space of support and belonging for many respondents. Many of the participants described the positive impact of being able to express themselves freely, share experiences, and form non-judgmental relationships within the community, which significantly contributed to their social and psycho-emotional well-being.

In this context, respondents of various ages, identities, and backgrounds consistently highlighted the important role played by community-based non-governmental organizations. These organizations provide essential healthcare, legal, and psychosocial support to queer individuals – both during their time in Georgia and afterwards. Beyond practical services, they also foster spaces for genuine connection and solidarity. Informational and educational sessions, group therapy, and club events were frequently mentioned to be sources of belonging, which also made it easier for many to cope with the pressures of living in a homophobic society.

> *"In the early stages of my life as an LGBT person, the community gave me huge moral support – even if it was not fully conscious on the part of the community at the time. The office [of one of the community organizations, early 2010s] was the only place where I actually felt free. It helped me recharge and gather the energy I needed to keep living that double life outside the office." (R14. Tm. 2 years. 11.04.2024)*

"At first, I visited the place quite often – I pretty much attended every meeting – and I always felt calm when I was there. The only thing is, I had this habit before walking in... I'd always glance over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching. Before going in and after leaving, I'd check if some idiot was following me. But inside the office, I always felt calm and tried to take part in everything that was going on." (R10. Tm. 2 years. 06.04.2024)

"That office [one of the community organizations, early 2010s] was where I found self-realization. The first time I went, I finally felt like a person, because I didn't have to pretend. I could just be who I was, and I wasn't ashamed of it. I wasn't afraid someone would treat me differently or say something hurtful. But after three months... I went through something horrible there. It was like a nightmare." (R1. Tm. 3 years. 11.03.2024)

"Most of the time – and there were whole weeks like this – I'd stay in Tbilisi with my friends. That meant a lot. At the time, the only real support I had came from the community – people from the community and no one else." (R24. Tm. 5 years. 27.05.2024)

"It was those queer events – just knowing you could go and feel supported – that really made a difference for me. Some places actually felt safe." (R16. Tm. 1 year. 07.04.2024)

However, while the queer community serves as a harbour for many, respondents also speak at length about problems and tensions within the community. Several describe critical dynamics within the Georgian queer community – such as exclusion, hierarchy, and inequality. Examples given by participants include transphobia, biphobia, and misogyny. Yet even within subgroups defined by gender identity or sexuality, conflict and disagreement are common, often shaped by other factors.

One such factor is economic inequality, which some respondents refer to as a major dividing line within the community. They emphasize that wealth and social status can create tension and reinforce hierarchical dynamics, mirroring the inequalities present in wider society. For some, this undermines the sense of solidarity that is often expected within the community. These concerns are

voiced not only by individual community members but also by those involved in queer activism and community work in Georgia.

> *"It's actually really common in the community – people who have more are seen as somehow better, and those who don't have much are treated like they're nothing. That difference definitely exists among us too. It's very real." (R23. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)*

> *"Some people have more, some have less – it's like that in every group, in every area. But the ones who have more, it gets to their heads. They think it's always going to be that way. But I've seen people fall, and then they regret the way they acted. For someone who's only ever known a good life, when that bad part finally hits – it hits hard." (R19. Tm. 3 years. 01.05.2024)*

The divide between the centre and the periphery is also cited as a barrier to building a stronger network of solidarity. Resources and opportunities concentrated in Tbilisi are often unavailable in other regions, including in larger cities with queer community centres. As a result, respondents with experience living outside of Tbilisi often felt feeling isolated and disconnected from central queer networks. That said, several respondents also shared extremely positive experiences in larger cities, particularly in community centres located in Batumi and Kutaisi. These spaces were described as vital hubs for raising awareness, socializing, and forming meaningful relationships.

> *"I used to go to organizations, like in Kutaisi, when 'Idendoba' had meetings, or when they were holding educational events. I went to Batumi too, when they organized lectures. It was interesting to me, I wanted to learn something. But at those meetings and rallies, I realized they were not even aware of what they were doing in Tbilisi, sorry to say that. That's why I lost interest in getting involved." (R23. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)*

Some respondents take a more critical view, questioning whether the queer community in Georgia truly exists as a cohesive or supportive social entity. They

attribute this scepticism to toxic disagreements and internal conflicts, many of which stem from the inequalities mentioned earlier, which in turn reflect power dynamics within broader society.

> *"Even within the community, sometimes it's hard for people to understand someone who's different from the crowd – like a nonbinary person, for example. There've been plenty of times when I was surrounded by gay people and still felt like an outsider. I couldn't figure it out at first, but it's like they have these unwritten rules: if you're gay, you're this; if you're a lesbian, you're that – and they put you in these boxes. [...] I noticed homophobia within the queer community. I never imagined that. I mean, hatred between gay men and trans people, trans people and lesbians – just this hostility between each other. I saw so much of it. It shocked me." (R8. Tm. 2 years. 20.03.2024)*

> *"I used to identify as transgender, but I had problems in relationships because of it, so I started saying I was a lesbian instead. Now that I'm single, I feel like I can finally talk about what I'm going through and say openly that I'm transgender. This December will be two years since I left." (R23. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)*

> *"In Tbilisi, most of the queer spaces are filled with gay men and trans women. Lesbians are more often in bars of people of colour." (R22. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)*

> *"The interesting thing for me is that I never really felt part of the community in Georgia – probably ever. I just didn't feel welcome. I had some negative experiences that I associate with that time. Back then, I identified as bisexual, and I got comments like, 'If you're dating a man, you're just trying to be interesting.' It was all kinds of biphobia, and because of that, I didn't want to be around those people, that so-called queer community. For a long time, I was just stuck in this place of wondering – like, what is even going on? Who am I? What label should I be using for myself?" (R5. M. 4 years. 19.03.2024)*

> *"I've never felt a real sense of belonging to a community – or that there even is a community in Georgia. From afar, through friends or random info, I could never really see people helping each other. Queers here have never been truly united as a community, and they still aren't. What I've mostly seen is conflict and drama – people getting tangled up in personal motives, doing shady or hurtful things behind each other's backs, or sometimes even right to their faces." (R7. Tm. 3 years. 20.03.2024)*

For some respondents, the lack of unity and inclusiveness within the queer community is a source of deep frustration and disillusionment. While they recognize the importance of belonging and connection, they also highlight the need for greater inclusion, equality, and intersectional collaboration within queer spaces.

The experience of navigating between micro-societies, particularly the primary family and the queer community, is characterized by complexity and offers a certain illustration of queer life in Georgia. These interpersonal dynamics mirror broader societal power dynamics. Such an environment significantly hinders the formation of a sense of belonging and limits access to unconditional support for queer individuals.

EXPERIENCES OF QUEER ACTIVISTS AND COMMUNITY WORKERS

As previously discussed, the work of queer activists and community workers plays a vital role in the lives of many LGBTQ+ individuals. However, it also comes with its own set of unique challenges. According to the narratives of queer migrants with experience in activism and community work in Georgia, their primary motivation was to build safe and supportive networks, create spaces for knowledge-sharing, and compensate for the harm caused by systemic injustice to a marginalized community. For many, activism was also part of self-determination; some were inspired by older activists, others by a belief in emancipatory ideals, or driven by academic curiosity. Yet, along this path, they encountered significant pressures and complex obstacles. These often translate into personal and professional challenges – frequent clashes with organizational structures, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and frustration.

"The main motivation for getting involved in activism and community work was that I genuinely enjoyed making even a small contribution to improving the everyday lives of people in the community." (R24. Tm. 5 years. 27.05.2024)

"Back in 2003–2004, I had this feeling that we were going to solve some of these problems together – that things would finally start getting better. That was right after a really rough time: the poverty of the 90s, the constant blackouts... our generation had lived through that for so long. But during that period, I really believed that even though the country was struggling, there was a shared sense of purpose. It felt like we, the younger generation – after everything our parents had endured – were ready to take on those problems together and move toward Europe." (R26. M. 7 years. 11.06.2024)

"As a gay activist, I always say it out loud – everything started for me after May 17, 2013. I felt this deep shame. I remember thinking, how come those people were the first to get hit, and not me? That really stuck with me. And then I saw the film Mom, Dad, I'm Gay. That was the first time I actually saw real, living gay people. That was it. That was my motivation. " (R28. Tm. 5 years. 06.06.2024)

"For me, it was about connecting with others and creating a safe space. Also, providing information to the community that reflected their shared concerns. I always saw it as something that would grow, like a snowball effect. It wasn't just about being part of an organization. It was about sharing knowledge with people who were truly ready to do this kind of committed work for their community. People who had leadership, not because someone handed it to them, but because they claimed it themselves. That felt powerful. They came together to build even more strength." (R20. M. 6 years. 10.05.2024)

> *"The motivation for me was seeing that there are queer women, trans, and non-binary people who aren't connected to the existing organizations or activism. I felt like they needed to become politicized. If we want to create a real community and build a movement." (R27. M. 11 years. 7.06.2024)*

> *"Working with the community was incredibly important to me – it was close to my heart. Yes, I also represented an organization internationally and did other things. But my real passion was always the work in the community itself." (R9. M. 6 years. 23.03.2024)*

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The dynamics of inequality that exist within the broader queer community are often replicated within community-based NGOs, creating what respondents describe as unhealthy and sometimes toxic conflict. Activists and community workers frequently spoke with frustration, anger, and hurt about the discrimination they experienced within these spaces, based on gender, social status, geographic location, and age. In activist environments that many had envisioned as micro-models of inclusion and equality, the reality of marginalization and unfair treatment is often deeply frustrating.

Throughout the interviews, respondents identified different forms of domination within queer spaces: **The dominance of cisgender gay men,** often linked to a pursuit of resources and influence. In more extreme cases, this control manifests through micromanagement of employees, blackmail, and restrictions on opportunities for personal and professional development. **The dominance of legalist feminists,** who are perceived as less solidaristic toward queer individuals. Their approach is seen to dismiss or abandon informal, grassroots, and radical queer and feminist activism. **Hierarchies within queer feminist organizations,** where informal and radical work is valued, yet the individual struggles and needs of colleagues or employees are often neglected. When these concerns are voiced, they may be interpreted as signs of weakness or betrayal, leading to judgment and condemnation. **The dominance of the geographic centre,** particularly Tbilisi, where NGOs and groups have greater access to funding and visibility, results in the control of regional offices, visible power imbalances, and limited autonomous decision-making.

* * *

Respondents also point to another harmful dynamic within queer activist spaces: competition over limited resources. The scarcity of funding creates a climate of rivalry, often fuelling unhealthy conflicts between different groups and individuals. These tensions not only undermine the effectiveness of queer activism but also leave a lasting impact on the motivation and emotional well-being of individual activists.

In this context, activism in Georgia takes on the characteristics of a distinct form of labour, shaped by limited funding, economic hardship, and a shared commitment to fighting for better conditions. Several respondents noted that even when engaged in formal activism – as employees of NGOs – they are often forced to juggle multiple jobs. Full-time positions, especially within regional NGOs, tend to be poorly paid, and the workload can be overwhelming.

The overwhelming nature of activist work is a recurring theme in the narratives of activists and community workers. Respondents often described the constant demands placed on them, which created a sense of internal pressure to always be working. For some, this drive stemmed from a personal sense of responsibility and purpose – activism became not only a result-driven effort but also a form of resistance. In cases where project-based, task-oriented work wasn't enough to meet the goals, respondents felt compelled to go beyond the formal scope of their roles – putting in extra hours and personal effort. This often took place beyond the constraints of organizational hierarchies, some participants described it as a source of autonomy and fulfilment, and satisfaction.

> *"When the manager writes a project, they don't really care, and you can't interfere. You're independent in your work, and you're not obligated to the donors, but still, I had to go out on the field myself. I realized pretty quickly that my working hours had to be much longer to get everything done. The goals that were set couldn't be met with the funding from the donor – there was just no way. The working conditions back then were really tough – not just the budget, but the time as well. Still, the time issue could be solved... but only by taking on more and more work. That's what I did almost every day. Months went by where I worked 10, 12, even 14 hours a day. Sometimes weekends, too, because I was working in two or three cities at once. But this was necessary work if you wanted to build*

trust. You had to be safe. And back then, safety was even more important than it is now. In those early days, even the smallest mistake could be seen as a really big problem." (R20. M. 6 years. 10.05.2024)

The dedicated effort – driven by a strong sense of purpose and belief in the possibility of change – is, in hindsight, perceived by some respondents as a form of self-exploitation; others, however, see it as a natural part of the work. In all cases, when combined with the broader organizational and community challenges described earlier, as well as chronic resource scarcity, the toll on both psycho-emotional and physical health is often inevitable.

"This work gives you a lot – it doesn't leave you feeling alone in the world… But then bigger questions start to come up: can your nervous system actually handle it? And what would your nervous system want if it were stronger? At some point, you realize it just can't take it anymore – and that answer becomes clear." (R20. M. 6 years. 10.05.2024)

"Almost everyone in the organization was juggling several projects at once. And of course, that leads to burnout. On top of that, you're constantly thinking about how to bring in new projects, because if you don't, you can't keep your team. Honestly, that's probably what hurt the most – on top of everything else going on in the background." (R26. M. 7 years. 11.06.2024)

"From my experience, there is no work-life balance, because there are never enough resources. You're always chasing deadlines. I remember sending emails on New Year's Eve. There's this expectation that you're always available, always ready to jump into a discussion, always wearing your armour. You can't relax. It really affected me, mentally. And the truth is, it's not realistic to expect anyone to be available 24/7. Those eight hours in a day are for you, and the rest – they need time to themselves, they have other things to do. But still, a lot of us push through – either because we need the income, or because we genuinely care about the work and want to give it everything we've got." (R5. M. 4 years. 19.03.2024)

> *"The burnout wasn't just from doing the work itself, say, as an officer. There were also internal problems in the organization that really added to it. Honestly, I think even if I hadn't planned to leave Georgia, I still would've quit the job [at the community organization], sadly." (R9. M. 6 years. 23.03.2024)*

The absence of clear boundaries between work and personal life creates additional challenges. Activists and community workers often struggle to separate personal relationships from professional ones, leading to complex and sometimes difficult interpersonal dynamics.

> *"There was basically 24/7 contact with community members – both in person and later on, online. It meant constant interaction with a lot of people. And that also meant direct exposure to their problems, up close and personal, which is a heavy load to carry. You really need to do some internal work for it not to affect you negatively." (R9. M. 6 years. 23.03.2024)*

> *"It's really hard to separate certain relationships – those boundaries just kind of disappear. Even when I was working and offering support to a friend, those lines blurred. In everyday life, the boundaries between how you talk to a friend and how you're supposed to communicate with a beneficiary – or even a colleague – completely broke down." (R24. Tm. 5 years. 27.05.2024)*

A specific challenge faced by activists and community workers is the difficulty of separating their personal and professional roles. While some do not see this as a necessary goal, most acknowledge its emotional toll, often leading to secondary traumatization and professional burnout.

> *"For me personally, the hardest part was probably emotional. It was the lack of boundaries – and this thing I call empathy – maybe mine was a little unhealthy, or it was just burned out, I'm not sure. I struggled to stay grounded emotionally, to know where I ended, and others began. It was like I completely switched into this mindset that I had*

> *to help, no matter what. That was my mistake, my issue. The hardest thing was being fully emotionally invested – taking on other people's experiences, opening up to them completely. And while that can be good, in my case, it often meant losing touch with my own emotional space. I became overly receptive to other people's emotions and carried them all inside me. And it wasn't always a healthy process." (R25. M. 2 years. 14.06.2024)*

Many interviewees shared that they began working in this field with an idealistic drive – to improve the social environment, support the queer community, and make a difference in individual lives. But over time, that passion often gave way to deep exhaustion and a sense of powerlessness.

For some, burnout is closely tied to feeling undervalued and unrecognized. This sentiment, expressed by nearly all respondents, reflects the invisibility of activist labour, especially when it doesn't follow mainstream approaches – and instead focuses on community-building at the micro level.

These experiences of burnout often lead to disappointment and self-doubt. Respondents question whether their individual efforts truly mattered, whether it was worth investing so much of themselves in the cause. For some, there is a lingering sense of regret about "lost" years and the feeling that their resources may have been spent in vain.

Despite experiencing burnout, disappointment, self-doubt, or regret, many respondents remain grounded in the convictions that initially drew them to activism. As previously noted, their primary motivation lies in offering support to queer individuals, nurturing hope in various forms, and contributing to the creation of a more inclusive society. These idealistic meanings are often driven by an acute awareness of the importance of queer activism as a vital, critical force. Respondents view their role not only in addressing immediate needs but as part of a broader movement committed to justice and equality.

THE COMPLEX DECISION TO LEAVE

For queer individuals navigating personal, social, and systemic challenges in Georgia, the decision to migrate is rarely simple, or fully thought out. Many of the interviewees describe their departure not as an emotional or clear-cut choice, but rather as a reaction to mounting pressure, inertia, or external circumstances. While for some, migration was a long-considered decision or an urgent necessity, a significant number of respondents described it as a spontaneous act – **a response to escalating challenges rather than the result of careful planning.** This pattern reflects the broader structural issues and pressures that ultimately push individuals to migrate.

> *"In my case, it wasn't planned at all. I just improvised and said, 'I'm leaving – I don't belong here,' and started saving money to go." (R19. Tm. 3 years. 01.05.2024)*

> *"I left pretty spontaneously. Sure, something had been brewing inside me for a while, but the actual moment I made the decision – it was sudden." (R8. Tm. 2 years. 20.03.2024)*

> *"Honestly, I just trusted myself. At that time, I really needed to leave. Even if I'd ended up doing nothing here and had to go back to Georgia, I probably would've left again. I wasn't thinking about some big, long-term future. My head was in a different place – there was love involved, and it felt kind of naive, like, 'I'll go, study or do something." (R11. M. 07.04.2024)*

> *"I didn't really know what was happening. It was only after I arrived that the thing started to make sense. All I knew back then was that I had to leave. I didn't have a plan, I didn't know where I'd live or what would happen. I just knew I needed to go, and I did. The rest? I said to myself – whatever happens, happens." (R6. Tm. 2 years. 19.03.2024)*

A significant number of respondents describe their decision to migrate as driven by immediate need or impulse, rather than by careful planning. The urgency to leave is often linked to direct experiences or threats of violence and discrimination. Notably, this perceived threat is present across all groups of respondents

– regardless of how safe someone's daily life appears, how fulfilled they are professionally, how financially stable they might be, or what kind of support they have from family or community. It also applies regardless of how gender-conforming their self-expression is, or whether they are open about their identity. The absence of a clear plan further highlights the reactive nature of these migration decisions, and this is often reflected in a limited understanding of asylum procedures. Still, migration is widely seen by respondents as an urgent way to escape threats – a practical response to systemic obstacles.

In this context, some respondents recall collective traumatic events – particularly July 5, 2021 – as a turning point in their decision to migrate. For several respondents, this date is associated with their final decision to leave – the realization of safety risks and a sense of insecurity, not only due to violent attacks by homophobic groups but also institutional indifference. While many respondents view Pride events as an expression of fundamental rights, some highlight the privilege associated with initiating such activities, which are often seen as coming from a more empowered, urban centre. In some cases, this criticism extends beyond the specific organizers to a broader scepticism toward LGBTQ+ organizations.

> *"I left in August 2021, after the July events, Pride, the attacks on journalists, and all of it. Things were really tense in Tbilisi at the time, and within a week, I was physically attacked twice. Not during a rally or anything like that – just near a local shop. Someone hit me in the head with a stone. Then there was another altercation in a club... Stuff like that had happened before, but that whole atmosphere – the protests, the hatred pouring out of the media – it didn't directly cause me to leave, but it gave me a push." (R2. Tm. 3 years. 13.03.2024)*

> *"I had tried to leave Georgia many times before – whether to study or relocate – but for one reason or another, it never really worked out. Then everything led up to that moment after July 5. From the outside, my life looked ideal: I had a good job, solid income, a house – all the basics were in place. Anyone looking at me would've thought, 'What more could this person want?' But those things weren't my driving force. What I didn't have – what I desperately needed – was a sense of safety. I couldn't even be fully myself." (R7. Tm. 3 years. 20.03.2024)*

"For me, the reason for regret, disappointment, and anger is that none of this was my choice. I had to leave because of the environment that was created around me. It was a spontaneous, impulsive decision – I realized in the second half of 2021 that I just couldn't take it anymore, and that's why I left. I still don't know what would've been better – living in secret or being out and choosing to fight. But the truth is, what happened wasn't my decision. [...] The saddest and most frustrating part of starting over from scratch is that it wasn't even because of economic hardship, which is usually the reason – it was about basic survival, about safety. And yes, safety is also basic. But why did I have to give everything up just so some people could have careers built on that? It's really sad and unfair." (R3. Tm. 3 years. 14.03.2024)

"When all the Pride stuff was happening – July 5 – a man confronted me, saying things like, 'You're like that because you've never felt the warmth of a man.' [...] At that time, we were in Batumi, but that wave eventually reached Batumi too. Organizations warned us not to go out because of the attacks. We tried to lay low. But still – like, I was working in a bar, and two transgender people were beaten up just like that. There are a lot of people in these organizations who are secure, you know? They act like no one will touch them because they've got some kind of protection. But the people standing behind them, us, we're the ones who end up taking the hits. They provoke aggression and then disappear, and the people behind them end up getting hurt." (R23. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)

When reflecting on the emotional toll of systemic marginalization and the barriers to psychological well-being, many respondents express regret over not having decided to leave earlier, even when their experiences of emigration have been far from ideal:

"I had a tough time here, too. I had to live in a shelter during quarantine, during the whole COVID period, and that made everything even harder. Eventually, I developed mental health issues. I needed medical help and ended up being hospitalized – I spent 40 days in a mental

> *health centre and was on medication. Even with all of that, during these four years, I never really thought about going back. I just kept telling myself, 'Five years will pass quickly, and I'll be busy with other things soon.' Sometimes I do think, though, that I should've left earlier, when I was younger, would be better." (R24. Tm. 5 years. 27.05.2024)*

Even in cases where respondents had been thinking about leaving for a long time, migration was often driven more by inertia than by a preconceived plan. Some described their lives in Georgia as going with the flow of circumstances that left little room for autonomy or active decision-making, with the idea of migration gradually taking shape, almost unconsciously. For those with caregiving responsibilities – especially individuals who had experienced cisgender socialization – the decision to leave was often postponed due to family and childcare obligations.

> *"I had been planning to leave for a really long time. I just couldn't take that step for some reason, mostly because I had kids, and they were still small back then. But when they both became students, I had their full support, and that was such a strong foundation for me to finally do it. They even said to me, 'Shouldn't you take care of yourself too? Is this how it's supposed to be – always helping others?" (R1. Tm. 3 years. 11.03.2024)*

> *"My grandmother's condition got worse. Someone had to stay at home with her, because one time she ran away – I was alone, and I hadn't locked the door. I thought my brother would be home that night, and I didn't want to wake him, but she left, and we couldn't find her. The police got involved, it was a whole thing, and we could hardly find her. After that, we kept switching, since someone always had to be home to keep an eye on things." (R14. Tm. 2 years. 11.04.2024)*

Such cases clearly illustrate how deeply queer migration is intertwined with systems of social expectations and caregiving responsibilities. They highlight the personal complexity of the decision, which is often shaped by multiple dimensions of life, obligations, and responsibilities.

In the interviews, we also encountered a pragmatic approach to the decision to migrate. While some respondents speak of emotional attachments to their hometown, country, family, or friends, the core of their dilemma is not whether to leave, but where to go. These individuals, who had a defined plan, prioritized destinations with fewer barriers to integration or more inclusive immigration procedures for queer people. This relatively strategic thinking further emphasizes that migration, for them, was more a necessity shaped by external realities, and not a voluntary choice.

For some respondents, the decision to leave was supported and encouraged by friends or family members. As with others, their migration was primarily driven by external factors such as safety risks, health concerns, or emotional distress. In these cases, well-meaning loved ones often urged them to leave Georgia's homophobic environment, pointing to the real or perceived toll it was taking on their psychological or physical well-being.

> *"I arrived without any problems and registered as a refugee. My mother helped me financially – she was the one who told me to leave. [...] Of course, transphobia was the main reason, but it was also my family urging me, saying, 'Leave while you can!' And I don't regret it. Looking at things now, the situation in Georgia has only gotten worse. It's not that I don't want to be there – on the contrary, I really do. It's just that after I arrived here, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and another mental health condition. Luckily, my insurance covers all kinds of medications. In Georgia, that would've been nearly impossible. They would've just locked me in a psychiatric hospital, like they often do, and in terrible conditions. So, in that sense, I'm lucky to be here." (R21. Tm. 5 years. 14.05.2024)*

Such cases reveal that homophobic environments cause distress not only for queer individuals but also for their loved ones, and that migration is often a forced step for survival rather than a voluntary pursuit of a better life.

Health and well-being concerns frequently emerge in the narratives surrounding the decision to leave. Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression – often linked by respondents to homophobic environments and systemic marginalization – are commonly cited as decisive factors. As a result, the decision to migrate is less

about seeking opportunities abroad. In this context, migration becomes an act of bodily and psychological self-care, rather than simply a geographical relocation.

To summarize, the narratives analysed in this study clearly show that queer migration from Georgia is more often an urgent necessity than an act of autonomy. It is rarely a planned or practical choice, and while it may offer queer individuals protection and the potential for healing, it is not a luxury or an idealistic pursuit.

The systemic and widespread exclusion described by participants often highlights the forced nature of queer migration. However, the complex nature of the decision to migrate transcends a simple binary of choice versus coercion. Rather, it involves a complex interplay of factors, including identity, safety, relationships, health, and the fundamental pursuit of dignity and self-determination.

STUDY INSIGHTS: QUEER LIFE IN THE HOST COUNTRY

Respondents' narratives about relocating to a new country reflect a mix of relief and significant challenges. While migration is often driven by the expectation of safety and a dignified life, the journey, marked by complex bureaucratic procedures, socio-economic integration, and cultural adaptation, frequently results in frustration and distress for queer migrants.

For queer asylum seekers, these difficulties are further compounded by their legal status, which affects their interactions with state institutions, local communities, the LGBTQ+ community, and their ability to fully realize their potential. Additionally, many also speak of a sense of freedom, space for self-reflection, and self-actualization, which has a transformative impact on their lives.

NAVIGATING THE BUREAUCRATIC SYSTEM

Acquiring legal residency in a ry – whether through asylum, a visa, or citizenship – creates numerous obstacles for migrants. These systems are often characterized by complex bureaucratic procedures and shifting policies, creating an uncertain environment for migrants. While most respondents are navigating asylum processes, others describe difficulties related to obtaining standard visas, residence permits, or citizenship. For example, many note that long-term legal residency is often refused to those with backgrounds in informal or precarious work, which is a common reality for queer people in Georgia. As a result, queer migrants – and, as they emphasize, not only them – can remain stuck in cycles of **short-term** residence documentation, which continually delays their ability to pursue personal goals and forces them back into precarious labour. Nevertheless, even within the context of low-paid or high-stress jobs in host countries, respondents say they feel more dignified due to the labour regulations, which, in turn, contribute to a tangible improvement in their overall quality of life.

> *"I work in an ice cream factory. The finished ice cream comes to me, and I arrange it on trays. It's pretty time-consuming, and my knee started to hurt. My boss called a doctor, they examined me, and then called a car to take me home. When the driver looked at me, he had a kind of rough attitude and asked, 'Are you working?' I said, 'Yes.' As soon as he heard that I had a job, he came over and said, 'Come on in, the air conditioner's on.' They don't like unemployed people. They don't like immigrants who don't work and rely on the state. […] My friend, for example, is officially staying in a hotel, but he works as a cleaner. There's always free time left, because it's the law – they won't make you work more than 8 hours. If they need you on an extra day, they pay you double. And they ask you first if you're available. No one forces you. For instance, I have a 40-hour contract per week – two days off, five days of work, 8 hours a day. Exactly when those 8 hours are up, the next shift arrives, and we leave. No one asks you to stay overtime." (R1. Tm. 3 years. 11.03.2024)*

For queer asylum seekers, bureaucratic obstacles are even more pronounced. Respondents' experiences are often shaped by the timing of their migration, clearly illustrating how immigration policies can shift drastically based on geopolitical priorities. Several respondents noted the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on EU immigration policies, where the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees became a priority, and procedures, despite the severity of others' situations, became significantly more complicated.

Criticism of EU immigration policies also extends to the way international organizations assess a country's safety. Some respondents raised concerns about the formal indicators used to designate a country as "safe" for queer individuals. For instance, Georgia's anti-discrimination law – often cited as a marker of protection – is, in reality, the only legal safeguard for queer individuals, and it remains largely ineffective in addressing systemic and intersectional oppression. This creates a misleading narrative about the actual conditions for LGBTQ+ people in Georgia and undermines the recognition of their personal and urgent needs in asylum processes.

"It's measured very unfairly, because I think our government simply doesn't show the real internal problems to the European community. As a result, I think they lack accurate information. Just because we have an anti-discrimination law doesn't mean it's actually enforced – it's just a piece of paper." (R21. Tm. 5 years. 14.05.2024)

"It's also really important to note that they're starting to impose these restrictions where, if you don't have a personal case of someone literally chasing you down to beat or kill you, they'll be more inclined to say, 'Well, there's an anti-discrimination law in that country.' So what does that mean – now we just stop fighting to make the situation better?" (R26. M. 7 years. 11.06.2024)

"The problem for me isn't that ILGA[3] is doing this – it's how they're communicating it. That's the bigger issue. What right do you have, sitting in Brussels – even if you're queer – to tell me how safe it is to live in Georgia as a queer person? To me, that feels like a white supremacist approach. And unfortunately, when Georgian asylum seekers are rejected, these ILGA-Europe reports are often used as a justification." (R12. M. 12 years. 08.04.2024)

In this same context, some respondents also reflect critically on the role of local LGBTQ+ organizations in Georgia. In their view, these organizations often present an overly optimistic picture to international partners and remain disconnected from the fundamental needs of the community. Respondents point to examples such as club events, public attitude studies, and anti-homophobia campaigns that, in their opinion, fail to reflect the real situation of LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly the social and economic hardships they face. By promoting such narratives, LGBTQ+ NGOs – especially the larger, Tbilisi-based organizations – contribute, whether intentionally or not, to an unrealistic perception of queer safety in Georgia and hinder the asylum process for those seeking refuge.

3 The ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map and Index is an annual measurement tool that assesses 49 European countries based on LGBTQ+ equality laws and policies.

"What's stopping us from getting a positive response from this government is that one of the points they mention is that Georgian queer NGOs give a positive report to the European Union. They say the population in Georgia accepts the queer community and that there are no problems – but any queer person who comes here knows that's not the reality. Yes, there are a few organizations genuinely trying to help, but their budgets are so small and limited that they can't do much. [...] It's understandable – they get funding from the EU to change public attitudes toward these issues. And it honestly breaks my heart to say this, but the reports they send just aren't accurate. Because no matter how many queers come here, out of ten, maybe one has benefited from the services they offer." (R16. Tm. 1 year. 07.04.2024)

"They act like Georgia is only transphobic. Like, if you're lesbian or gay, you won't face any problems – and that attitude comes from the organizations. [...] I'm not saying they're not doing good work – maybe they are – but the reality is, most of the community doesn't see it. The organizations do. If you just go on the Pride page, everything looks perfect – it's all glowing, like great things are happening. But what's really going on behind that? People can't get jobs, can't find housing because landlords refuse to rent to them. [...] If you're not close with someone in the organization – if you're not friends, or even if you were – you don't have any access to benefits. Some people just get more support than others. And there are so many queers in Georgia who are simply left out like us. [...] And even going to events – if you don't have money, you can't go. I remember someone wrote, 'I can't come because I can't afford it.' And then people say, 'But you used to go before.' Yeah, I did – because my friends paid for me. But there's discrimination there too – if you don't have money, you're treated like you're nobody." (R23. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)

"It started more recently, in 2023, and I think it's probably tied to political issues and the WISG's study[4]... Everything is connected. When Ger-

4 This refers to From Prejudice to Equality. Vol. 2, which, according to respondents, is often cited as a basis for denying legal status to LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum from Georgia. It is also important to note that the findings of this study are, according to respondents, frequently subject to arbitrary reinterpretation by immigration authorities.

many began deporting non-queer asylum seekers, for example... The European Union can't deport a refugee if the receiving country doesn't agree. They face the same issue with some African and Middle Eastern countries – they can't send people back because those governments won't accept them. But Georgia does. And then they send additional information claiming everything is fine here, that we're protected and safe... I think all of this is related to the increase in negative responses to Georgian queer asylum seekers." (R2. Tm. 3 years. 13.03.2024.)

Beyond systemic and organizational challenges, queer asylum seekers face equally significant difficulties in immigration centres. Since administrative institutions and shelters typically serve mixed demographic groups, queer individuals often find themselves living alongside people from different cultural backgrounds – including conservative Georgian families. Respondents shared experiences of conflicts and even attacks stemming from homophobia and cultural tensions. Even in the absence of overt hostility, such environments – particularly shared living spaces – can lead to emotional distress during the bureaucratic process. In these situations, the most basic form of safety is access to a private room, which is hard to obtain due to rigid procedures.

"The heteronormativity and binary thinking in the system are very obvious – when people are placed in camps, it's usually six women or six men per room, or rooms assigned for 'families.' These camps might hold 100, 300, 500, or even 1,000 people, but there are no efforts to foster social cohesion. How can you expect 500 people to live in one housing unit with shared bathrooms, kitchens, toilets, and other common spaces, and just assume they'll get along? It's like, 'Come on, we'll just throw you together and magically, social cohesion will happen just like that.' But no actual activities or resources are invested in things like anti-racism or queer awareness. Georgian non-queer asylum seekers aren't necessarily more accepting of queer individuals. Meanwhile, queer people in these camps – especially trans people – face aggression and harassment daily, trans people are especially vulnerable." (R12. M. 12 years. 08.04.2024)

> *"You can never be fully prepared for this, but I thought I was – somehow. When you're a queer person placed in a dorm with mostly Iranians and Arabs, and you're with your partner, it's really hard. It's not unusual for the conditions in these dorms to be like this. It was just an 8-square-meter room – we could barely move. That was the first shock. I had my first panic attack there. I didn't know where to go. Eventually, based on a psychologist's recommendation, they moved us to a social housing unit – but that was in this tiny village. Everything was a five-minute walk away, and buses only ran twice a day, tied to the school schedule. You couldn't go anywhere." (R23. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)*

> *"I had Somali roommates who were extremely noisy. I tried to switch rooms. The immigration organization was terrible, in my opinion. They kept lying to me, saying they were looking for a new room for me. That went on for two months. Then I was finally moved to a room with fewer people – there were four of us – but it was more of the same. Nothing really changed." (R6. Tm. 2 years. 19.03.2024)*

From what has been described, it is clear that immigration bureaucratic systems – whether for visas, asylum, or residency – often fail to adequately address the specific vulnerabilities of queer individuals. Due to structural, cultural, and institutional factors, these systems can themselves become a source of distress for queer individuals.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

Socio-economic integration is a complex and nuanced process, shaped by individual skills and the characteristics of the host society. Migrants begin life in a new country with their own goals, capacities, and vulnerabilities. Their path to stability often depends on their ability to navigate a system that can be both strict and supportive.

Respondents frequently describe integration as a multifaceted journey where success is not guaranteed but largely depends on personal resources. Unsurprisingly, language skills are cited as the most critical of these resources. The ability

to communicate effectively serves as a foundation for employment, social connection, and access to essential services. For many respondents, language courses offered by immigration services are invaluable. However, the time and effort required to learn a new language can feel overwhelming. While some respondents find the process exhausting, others see it, especially when combined with housing and financial support, as a generous opportunity for personal growth.

> *"There are people who arrive here with a basic knowledge of English, and others who don't, or hardly speak any language. That really shapes everything. If you don't speak English, you're trying to learn the local language at the same time – it becomes really difficult to engage with the local, cosmopolitan society." (R2. Tm. 3 years. 13.03.2024)*

> *"Those who have an education, or at least know some English, have already won half the battle. And then there are people who, back in Georgia, already knew how to survive – how to Google a queer organization, who to contact, where to offer their performance, whether it's a web show, a painting, or something else. It's about having that resourcefulness. It's very much connected to gender too." (R3. Tm. 3 years. 14.03.2024)*

> *"Everyone I know has had a hard time. I did too, because I wasn't familiar with other countries before. People who've travelled, who are more educated, who already know someone here – it's definitely easier for them. I think working also really helps, because it gives you daily access to locals. But for me, I keep discovering things I didn't even know existed. And when you don't know, and you're trying to learn, it's hard to just integrate smoothly, especially in a foreign country." (R6. Tm. 2 years. 19.03.2024)*

> *"I think for me, adaptation was easier because I had travelled a lot before. Some people didn't even have the most basic skills to deal with bureaucracy. Even here, where people don't speak much English, if you can go out, socialize, and meet people, it helps. But for many, the language barrier is still a huge obstacle." (R7. Tm. 3 years. 20.03.2024)*

According to the respondents' narratives, flexibility and motivation are both critical in the process of socio-economic integration: more opportunities open up for those who are resilient and adaptable. At the same time, this constant need to prove one's readiness and capability – while also coping with trauma and systemic barriers – creates a certain pressure.

> *"Whether the commissariat grants you the right to stay or not – residency – it all depends on the information you provide and how well you can explain why you're in danger in your home country. A lot of people don't have the resources to do that – to even gather their thoughts, articulate their experience, and express it clearly. And everyone coming from Georgia is in a fragile mental state." (R7. Tm. 3 years. 20.03.2024)*

Immigration services in host countries offer varying levels of support to queer migrants, from temporary housing to employment programs. While most asylum-seeking respondents recognize the crucial role of institutional assistance, the effectiveness of these services varies from person to person. In this context, personal qualities – such as motivation, courage, and having clear goals – significantly shape both how queer migrants engage with these services and their ability to benefit from them.

> *"Those under 30 usually come with a specific purpose – they want to build a good life here. What happens after that is a different story, but it's about their identity and all. But the older ones, just like they kept it hidden back home, keep it hidden here too." (R4. M. 18 years. 16.03.2024)*

> *"It's not that hard to get the chance to stay in the country – you just need to know one of the local languages at a basic level. There's also an integration course you have to take here, and then you go to a centre and take an exam. It's not too difficult, and they even let you take it in English, Russian, and in some cities, even in Georgian. [...] From Georgia, it all seemed simple – take two courses, get a job, and suddenly you're a citizen. But here, the bureaucracy is full of hidden challenges and long procedures. It takes a lot more time." (R24. Th. 5 years. 27.05.2024)*

Work – even precarious work – emerges as a central theme in conversations about integration in the host country. For migrants, jobs in the service sector or on temporary contracts are not just a means of income, but also a marker of progress. While the instability that comes with such work can lead some to feel disconnected from their aspirations and experience frustration, for many, it represents a necessary first step toward growth and the start of a long-term path toward self-development.

> *"My background doesn't match what I'm doing today at all – it doesn't align with my values – but because I'm from Georgia, I had to do something related to my bachelor's degree, so I ended up studying communications. It's not the best, but ok. Then I got a job at a corporation and worked in marketing for two years. When I got my passport, literally within the first hour or two, I wrote my resignation letter and left the next morning. That was a really happy day. I finally started doing something that aligns with my interests." (R12. M. 12 years. 08.04.2024)*

> *"Here, I learned patience and self-control. Back in Georgia, I couldn't maintain it – if someone said something out of line or touched me, I'd explode and lose it. But here, I've grown. You learn to get along, and the state really gives you everything you need to start a new life. Sure, in the beginning, you have to wake up early, go to interviews, even at 6 in the morning, and it's hard, but it matters for the future. It's very hard, but then you see the results." (R19. Tm. 3 years. 01.05.2024)*

> *"I worked in a regular factory for months – sometimes illegally in different places. It was really hard, especially because my health isn't great. But from the beginning, I told myself, 'This is what will help me.' I needed it to make it." (R17. Tm. 4 years. 14.04.2024)*

For many respondents, the integration process – whether accompanied by active social life or a passive wait for legal procedures – also marks a period of self-reflection and self-actualization, including gender self-determination. It becomes a kind of pause, allowing space to think through past decisions and future possibilities. Most respondents emphasize that physical distance from the real-

ity of life in Georgia – especially when accompanied by supportive institutional care and basic security – offered a rare opportunity to reflect on their authentic aspirations, which they couldn't afford while living in a constant state of survival back home.

> *"Here, at first, I had to live for six months in a village where there were only two houses. I had never felt that calm before. I realized that I had spent my whole life struggling, protecting myself, fighting. And suddenly, in that stillness, I understood that I didn't even know how to relax and just be. I am always tense, and it is now that I'm trying to heal from it all. It was such a stressful environment. [...] In Georgia, I thought about these things too, as much as it was possible. But when you step out of that environment and gain some distance, that's a different story. Back there, not even two days would pass without me having contact with that society. It's very hard to rethink your life in that environment." (R8. Tm. 2 years. 20.03.2024)*

> *"My [trans] identity was always on my mind. I was always sure of who I was. But I didn't want to tell anyone. First of all, I didn't even know how to say it. That's one thing. Back then, we didn't even have the words. You couldn't just start talking... Then, of course, there was the issue of trust – I didn't trust anyone at all. I did not have that self-determination moment. [...] It was like I was on pause – knowing I had to do something, but not just yet. Then, when I finally got close to the goal and saw it within reach... I had expected everything to be difficult. But it wasn't. I went to a community psychologist, talked to him... they followed the standard protocol, ran the necessary tests, and prescribed what was needed. Then I went to my family doctor, and he treated me like any other person and gave me a referral. Then I saw a psychiatrist – again, just a normal conversation. And then the endocrinologist – same thing. That's when I thought: why didn't I start this earlier…" (R4. M. 18 years. 16.03.2024)*

> *"Peace came from not having to witness that same swamp anymore – the one I used to see and step into every single day in Georgia. My life here is completely different. Back in Tbilisi, it was different. [...] Here, my day starts*

with a cup of coffee. I spend time with myself and go out with friends. I never had that in Georgia. There, you had to hustle constantly. 'Rent's due,' 'What if I end up on the street!' and so on... I don't have those problems here. That's why I finally feel at peace." (R18. Tm. 1 year. 30.04.2024)

"At some point, it got really hard. Honestly, I didn't even want to interact with anyone. I was completely drained – I was trying to wash away all that stress. I was in therapy, and I was doing my best just to adjust – mentally and physically – to being here, before I started building friendships or even professional connections, because the trauma I carried from Georgia stayed with me emotionally for a very long time." (R7. Tm. 3 years. 20.03.2024)

These findings suggest that the process of socioeconomic integration cannot be reduced to simple definitions of either individual or institutional responsibility. Instead, it reflects a dynamic interplay between the two. Moreover, the narratives of the interviewed queer migrants reveal that integration is not only about adapting to a new environment – it also involves the ongoing redefinition of identity and belonging.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION

The process of social and cultural adaptation for queer migrants is shaped primarily by the intersection of their identities, expectations, and the structures of the host countries. As we've seen, for most respondents, the decision to migrate stems from a deep desire for a different reality, safety, and recognition. However, adapting to a new sociocultural environment is a complex and dynamic process. It involves navigating personal safety and interpersonal relationships, systemic and cultural challenges.

EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

As we have already seen, one of the first realizations many respondents have after beginning life in a host country is that safety and recognition are not universally guaranteed, even in stereotypically more inclusive EU countries. The rise of

anti-gender and anti-migrant movements and rhetoric continues to leave queer migrants feeling insecure and marginalized. When reflecting on these issues, respondents often point out that anti-migrant sentiments are primarily racialized, targeting those arriving from the Middle East and Africa more heavily than queer migrants from Georgia. However, understanding that such movements are politically driven, respondents highlight their impact on micro-societies and overall social dynamics. The more actively gender and migration issues are manipulated in political discourse, the more space is created for hostility, discrimination, and violence in everyday life. As a result, many respondents are not indifferent to the experiences of other migrant groups and express solidarity towards them.

> *"In that respect, things have been really good for me. It's like no one here really looks at how I express my gender. Everyone's just doing their own thing. But when I go back to Georgia, I feel like people start, 'Who even is this, with tattoos, unshaven legs?' And then it is like kids asking their parents, 'Mom, is that a boy or a girl?' You just don't get that here. But there's something else that's really important to say, and I think I've been lucky in that regard – I have pretty light skin. The people who really struggle here are those with darker skin shade; they're much more likely to be targeted. For example, during the last election period, my colleague – who's from Armenia, was handed a flyer that literally said, 'Migrants, go home!' – she is a Spanish citizen. That kind of thing is becoming more common. It's gotten worse since the new government came in – they're openly racist and homophobic. And as a result, people who are more racialized struggle more." (R26. M. 7 years. 11.06.2024)*

> *"They signed me up for a course called 'How to Use a Computer,' and I told them I didn't need it. I said, there are people who've never used a computer before, why should I take it from someone who actually needs it, right? Then one day I get this really aggressive phone call—this woman's like, 'Miss, where are you? Why didn't you come to the meeting?' I asked, 'What meeting?' And she says, 'The one where we teach you how to use a computer.' So, I called my social worker and said, 'Didn't I tell you I didn't need that course? Why didn't you cancel*

> *it?' And she straight-up tells me, 'Most people haven't seen a toilet or a washing machine before – we should've taught you how to turn one on too!' That's the level racism starts at. If you're Georgian and white, then yeah, you might benefit from white privilege later on – like at university, for example. If I mess something up, they're more likely to let it slide. Compared to a black student. But at first, we're all just seen as 'Arabs.'" (R3. Tm. 3 years. 14.03.2024)*

However, this solidarity is accompanied by an awareness of the intersectional nature of systemic discrimination. For some, their attitudes toward other migrant groups are shaped by the same beliefs they hold about gender and sexuality.

> *"Georgians aren't perceived as white – they're seen as Arabs. Unfortunately, racism is so deeply ingrained in this country, the environment treats them differently, and so do the social workers. But I also find it very difficult, and still do, to share space with many Georgian queer migrants. When I hold meetings to offer support, I often hear racist remarks from them. And honestly, it shouldn't matter – yes, someone insulted you, and that's awful – but why bring race into it? Why emphasize that, especially when we're not even friends, and I'm just here as a volunteer trying to offer collective support? There's a lot of racism within us too, and because we don't really understand what racism is, because it's so embedded, we don't recognize it in ourselves. I think a lot of Georgians don't see that their struggle is intensified by the racial struggle. They themselves carry racist attitudes, even when they're being mistreated by social workers or not being treated with the respect they deserve. They can't connect that this might also be about racism." (R12. M. 12 years. 08.04.2024)*

In all cases, the prejudices between different migrant groups create tensions and make it difficult to build supportive relationships based on solidarity. **These contradictions highlight how structural and interpersonal forms of discrimination are deeply interconnected, shaping both the experience of oppression and the potential for solidarity.**

LOCAL CULTURES

Experiences of adapting to local cultures vary among respondents. Many queer migrants report finding it easier to adjust in cultures where the temperament of the people feels similar to that of Georgians – often described in terms of warmth, hospitality, and a collectivist mindset. In contrast, adaptation in more northern, highly individualistic societies is characterized by greater challenges. That said, across all cases, a shared respect for personal boundaries and the general attitude of people in host cultures are frequently mentioned as key factors contributing to a sense of safety, validation, and autonomy – qualities many respondents felt were lacking in their lives back in Georgia.

> *"As for society, my grandmother used to joke, 'You must be from here,' because somehow a lot of people don't like locals here. But I actually like it here, because people are like me – they don't interfere in anyone's business, they try to be diplomatic, and so on. I like that. To me, that's a sign of culture. They don't start pressuring you like in Georgia; that's a really good thing" (R21. Tm. 5 years, 14.05.2024)*

> *"When we first arrived and people were smiling at me, I was honestly shocked. I was like, what's going on? Where are we? When someone approaches you and your first instinct is to think they're being aggressive – and then they're not. It's such a different feeling. It's very different." (R23. Tm. 2 years, 15.05.2024)*

> *"For me, adapting here was easy because of the mentality of the people. They're very tolerant. You know there are fascist types here too, people who say things like 'these gays, these Blacks, these Arabs', but even those people, if you told them, 'I'm gay,' or 'I'm Black,' or 'I'm Arab,' they might still invite you home. On a human level, they're like that. Politically, some groups are influenced by certain ideologies, but in personal relationships, their mindset is really open. They're warm, soft people. That made it very easy for me." (R4. M. 18 years. 16.03.2024)*

> *"To be honest, this has always been the main focus for me. We've been here for two years and three months, and it's still a bit hard to believe,*

given everything – but only recently have I started to feel like I can actually hold my partner's hand without thinking about it. I had internalized homophobia because I was so used to how things were in Georgia. I had forbidden myself from doing so many things, and only now am I beginning to open up. Sometimes you might get a certain look or a weird vibe, but no one says anything out loud or acts aggressively, because they know you're protected." (R10. Tm. 2 years, 06.04.2024)

At the same time, the presence and effectiveness of protective legislation and support services play a significant role in fostering a sense of safety, validation, and autonomy. Respondents often describe instances of mistreatment based on homophobia or racism, sometimes from other migrant groups, such as those from North Africa and the Middle East, and other times from local Europeans. These encounters often contrast sharply with the inclusive ideals presented by the host countries. In such contexts, the rule of law and institutional support become essential.

"I'm not asking anyone to think the way we do, that's fine. Go home, believe in whatever you want. But when you're out in public, you show respect. I know for sure there are probably 14 million Nazis sitting around me on the train, I'm certain of it, but they can't say a word." (R13. M. 9 years. 08.04.2024)

"When they brought me to the shelter, I didn't look like a Georgian. I was sitting on a bench outside, and two Georgians sat down next to me. They started talking about how they had stolen chocolates, laughing about it, and they didn't realize I was Georgian. Then they found out someone had been caught, and it was so interesting. And when they realized we were Georgian too, they gave us this look, like, 'If this were Georgia, we know exactly what we'd do to you, and what you'd do?' I left Georgia so I wouldn't have to deal with people like that, and here I am, forced to deal with the same kind of people again. But I feel different here. We resist more, we're ready to argue, because we know they wouldn't dare do the same here. And if they try, maybe that is exactly what I want them to do."(R16. Tm. 1 year. 07.04.2024)

"I feel safe here, because if anyone harasses me too much, I know the police will take action. Not just the police, but organizations too. If I just send a quick message saying, 'help me,' they'll find me and take care of it." (R22. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)

"Before that, my friend and I went to a Pride parade. One of our friends had an LGBT flag, another had a Georgian flag, and some Georgians passed by at that moment. Even if they didn't like us or felt aggressive, they couldn't say anything, because they knew they'd be the ones in trouble if I wanted to. Whether they like it or not, they have to follow the law." (R1. Tm. 3 years. 11.03.2024)

"If you had a really visibly trans look out on the street here, someone who doesn't look like a man or a woman, even if you were basically horrible to look at, walking around with unshaven legs and high heels, no one would point a finger, no one would stare, no one would say, 'Why are you dressed like that?' Society here just doesn't care. Maybe one in a thousand might react, and even then, it might be an Arab, a Turk, a Georgian, but not a German – there's no real chance of aggression. It just doesn't happen. It's much calmer and much safer here, because the laws are very strict." (R18. Tm. 1 year. 30.04.2024)

"Whatever the situation is, that sense of security really matters, you may not be able to morally demand anything, but you can defend your rights. Yes, sometimes the police might mock you or show their own subjective attitude, based on what kind of person they think you are, but it's rare. They're not allowed to do that. And if you do file a complaint and see it through, there will be serious consequences." (R8. Tm. 2 years. 20.03.2024)

Despite these clear advantages, being a migrant still carries a stigma for many, which can affect both social interactions and the general sense of belonging. This stigma often surfaces in everyday situations, such as inappropriate attitudes in both social and institutional contexts.

"Once, we were sitting in a park when two police officers came up and started searching us, so thoroughly that they even opened our wallets. Georgians have this ingrained fear of the police, and I immediately panicked. I thought they were going to kick us out. When you first arrive here, you don't really know your rights, you still feel like you're back home, where whatever's supposed to happen just happens. If they started searching us, and I'd realized in that moment that they had no right to do that – what does it even mean to take my wallet? They assumed we were dealers, just because of the way we were dressed. I listen to hip-hop, and I dress accordingly, so they were biased, and stressed us out. Right away, they started speaking to us disrespectfully: 'Oh, you're refugees, right?' Stuff like that. I felt horrible. I started crying because I was so overwhelmed, but they still didn't stop. Eventually, they realized we had nothing and let us go." (R8. Tm. 2 years, 20.03.2024)

"We surrendered ourselves to the authorities on the very first day. I even texted you yesterday that really important information about asylum seekers and undocumented people, because here, you're only considered a person once you have official papers. As long as you're an asylum seeker, as long as you're standing in that line, you're nobody. Even if you're dying, you don't have the right to call an ambulance." (R3. Tm. 3 years, 14.03.2024)

"The situation here in terms of healthcare, especially mental healthcare, is a disaster. It's getting worse and worse. The system is under-resourced, and you might have to wait for months. It wasn't being queer that made me vulnerable within the healthcare context, it was being a migrant. I preferred to come back home and just see a doctor there." (R9. M. 6 years, 23.03.2024)

"When it comes to security, it depends on what country you're coming from, what it meant to be queer there. For some, it's just surviving, not getting killed on the street. But for me, that's not where the bar should be. Real safety is about the feeling of belonging. And in this country,

that's incredibly hard to feel as a queer migrant. It's not just the system and institutions constantly making you feel worthless; it's also the daily harassment. And then there's the constant label: refugee. That label follows you everywhere. I've talked to a lot of people who I've asked for a job. One time, I asked a fellow queer person who i think is a kind person, for a job for my refugee friend, and he said, 'If your refugee friend wants to message me...' Emphasizing 'refugee.' Even when services and programs come from a good place, they're always branded as 'for refugees.' You're a refugee at the shelter, you're a refugee to the social worker, you're a refugee to everyone around you. You go to an interview; it's the same thing. You try to study, and even the teachers look at you like, 'So, how are things in your country?' And I know so many queer people who've been dealing with this for years. I think it's essential, for both safety and belonging, that these changes. But that kind of change would require a huge shift, both systemic and societal, because the discrimination is that deeply rooted." (R12. M. 12 years. 08.04.2024)

TRAUMA AND HYPERVIGILANCE

Experiences of systemic violence, homophobia, and unstable living conditions, both in Georgia and in host countries, cause significant emotional distress. Several respondents describe symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as persistent hypersensitivity, distrust of social systems, and difficulty feeling safe, even in environments that offer support.

For some, trauma is not confined to the past, and it becomes a recurring state in their daily lives. They describe a constant state of hypervigilance, driven by the fear of being attacked or discriminated against. This ongoing anxiety affects their ability to build trust, move freely in public spaces, and integrate into local communities. Even in countries with strong legal protections, many respondents struggle to feel secure, as their long-standing history of marginalization continues to shape their behaviours and emotional responses.

In summary, the sense of safety and capacity for adaptation among queer migrants is closely tied to the legal, social, and cultural situation in their host countries. While cultures that promote free and safe self-expression are essential to

the psychological well-being of queer individuals, their everyday experiences are still largely shaped by broader political and social climate, as well as institutional protection mechanisms.

COMMUNITY, MUTUAL SUPPORT, AND RESILIENCE

Respondents' engagement with the LGBTQ+ community and their experiences of belonging vary depending on the host country, cultural environment, and individual circumstances. According to the research data, the concept of community is fluid and situational for queer migrants, for whom a sense of community includes both solidarity and the process of adapting to a new cultural context.

Among respondents who migrated from Georgia to countries with fewer Georgian queer migrants, "community" sometimes includes LGBTQ+ individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and less privileged countries. In these cases, shared experiences of marginalization, whether due to gender, sexuality, or migrant status, often serve as a unifying bond. In other instances, community is defined by a small group of fellow Georgians, often consisting of former friends or relatives. These relationships are based on mutual support.

> *"Cultural differences are a big deal. For me, they've been a barrier for a long time, and they still are, when it comes to the idea of socially integrating into different circles. So, my core group of people, my community, are folks I mostly met in Georgia. Some of them worked there, my partner and another friend who's also Georgian, lives here now, and is queer too. A few more people like that, plus some coworkers who've become close friends and are queers from Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Basically, we're kind of building a little diaspora circle from the Eastern Partnership countries in my chosen family." (R9. M. 6 years. 23.03.2024)*

> *"That's what a safe space means to me. A safe space is being around queer people, queer in the broad sense, LGBTQI+, but especially, more often than not, non-cis men. Though sometimes cis men are lovely too. I have them in my wider circle, but when it comes to close friends,*

> *they have to be queer. That's key. And then, I usually prefer if they're also migrants or BIPOC. But I do have some white American friends too, now that I think about it. Still, I feel like I've moved past identity politics in a way. What matters most to me now is that someone is a good person, with strong values, and not just in theory, but that they actually live by them. I really don't care anymore if you're straight or white or whatever." (R27. M. 11 years. 7.06.2024)*

In countries where asylum seekers form a Georgian queer diaspora, and most notably in Belgium, where the Georgian queer community is relatively large, we see various forms of collective organization and activism. Many respondents report being actively involved in peer support networks and advocacy initiatives that specifically address the needs of Georgian queer migrants. The primary focus of these networks is sharing information about immigration procedures, challenges, and available support. Some respondents are engaged in translating and distributing official informational materials about legal procedures and residency requirements, tailored for Georgian queers who, unlike migrants from EU countries, often face significant institutional and integration barriers. In addition to formal resources, most participants also share their personal experiences informally, by word of mouth, within broader queer networks.

Several of these initiatives extend beyond the queer community and address broader issues of discrimination. As the stories illustrate, sharing first-hand experiences of asylum processes, residency applications, and bureaucratic difficulties not only helps newcomers navigate the system more easily but also alleviates feelings of isolation.

> *"I wasn't really part of the community back then. I knew people, but I wasn't close with anyone, and I was still very much on my own. Here, though, I feel a lot of support from my friends and the people close to me. They still help me with so many things, and I honestly wonder what I'd do without them. That's exactly how it is. Other queer people here are also really supportive of each other, more so than back there, in my opinion." (R6. Tm. 2 years. 19.03.2024)*

"I had to start organizing information, because I knew a lot of things and I had my own life, I am studying, working, I couldn't reach everyone on my own. So, I found people who'd lived here longer, who were writing projects and running their own platforms, and we started organizing everything. [...] At first, we only helped Georgians. We'd go to shelters where men were staying on the streets, same as now – if you're a single man, gay or not, it doesn't matter, there's no space in shelters, and you can end up on the streets for months. In such cases, there is a kind of emergency service, like an ambulance. If it is freezing out and you are living on the street, they will take you to a hotel. If not, they will just cover you with a blanket. At the very least, we connected people to places where they could warm up or get food during the day. I translated a lot, even just using Google Translate, but sometimes they didn't even know how to read the responses. [...] People from Turkey or Middle Eastern countries go through such brutal discrimination, it really shocks me. So we started translating materials into Arabic, Turkish, and other languages, and this platform went public. [...] I've never had issues lending money, whether it's 5 euros or 200, people pay it back at the end of the month when they get their salary or support. No one's been left on the streets. We all feel responsible for each other." (R3. Tm. 3 years. 14.03.2024)

"That's exactly my goal – to focus as much as possible on that I have really close relationships here. We've created group chats and small networks, especially with younger community members, and we're trying to make steps towards integration in terms of integrating with local youth. [...] A lot of people in the community, myself included, say they're interested in other things too, or just want to meet new people. There are tons of projects happening here, including in the LGBTQ+ field, and I try to share information about them. [...] Honestly, I'd say the community here is even more active than back home. When we organize protests, 90% of the people who show up are community members. And if someone here is active, it's community members. And they've got all these wild, amazing ideas – things they couldn't do back there, and now we're trying to do them together, here." (R28. Tm. 5 years. 06.06.2024)

It's also important to note that not all interactions with fellow Georgian migrants are perceived as positive. Some respondents shared that queer individuals from Georgia often distance themselves from the broader Georgian migrant community – mainly to avoid potential homophobic incidents, whether in immigration facilities or daily life. Relationships within Georgian LGBTQ+ circles can often be complicated. Some respondents report that they deliberately avoid these groups due to frequent hostility, a lack of empathy, and competition, all of which create a tense and unpleasant dynamic.

> *"What sets members of the LGBT community apart from other migrants is that, while most migrants arrive and immediately seek out other Georgians, LGBT people do the opposite – they avoid Georgians at all costs." (R4. M. 18 years. 16.03.2024)*

> *"It's homophobia, again. I came here to live freely, not to fall into the same trap I was stuck in back in Georgia. If I wanted that, I would've stayed." (R1. Tm. 3 years. 11.03.2024)*

> *"The reality is that most Georgians who have come here, including members of the community, will eventually turn against you. It happens within the community, too. Plus, everyone talks about everything, whatever they hear. In both Georgia and here, the circle of people you can truly trust, and call friends is extremely small. Personally, I don't want contact with community members. Even though I'm part of the same community, their behaviour often crosses lines that are just unacceptable to me. I'd rather be friends with someone I know thinks and communicates well. Sometimes they insult you, sometimes they threaten you, and sometimes they even beat you, and they don't even know why they're doing it. They don't even understand what they're reacting to. Back in Georgia, it was straight people bullying me; here, I don't even know why the community members are doing it. There are serious fractures within the community. Some think they're better than others. Me? I would never step on someone else to get ahead. But many people here act like they're above everyone else, when in reality, they lack basic humanity, conscience, or anything at all." (R23. Tm. 2 years. 15.05.2024)*

The relationships described underscore the challenges of community-building within this small diasporic group, where hierarchies and interpersonal conflicts often hinder respondents' ability to form a sense of belonging.

In this challenging context, the concept of safe spaces emerges as central to conversations about community dynamics in host countries. Several respondents speak about their personal desires or existing efforts to create collective spaces for free self-expression, mutual support, and healing. These spaces take on various forms – mostly informal gatherings or creative initiatives such as music studios, cultural events, and collaborative art projects. Some of these spaces are created specifically for queer people who have migrated from Georgia, while others are more broadly intended for Georgian immigrants or marginalized queer groups in general. Respondents emphasize that creative collaboration can transcend national and cultural boundaries, and for this reason, they believe it's important for such initiatives to be broadly inclusive. These artistic and social spaces bring together queer migrants from different regions and offer a platform for cross-cultural exchange. Beyond fostering free expression and solidarity among diverse LGBTQ+ migrant communities, they also play a vital role in supporting queer migrants.

> *"In Georgia, I was actually less involved in activism, but after coming here, I started to understand more clearly what it means and how necessary it is. That's when I began to grow as an activist – to seek out more information and explore the different forms activism can take. At this stage, for me, art is the medium through which I express myself. Even all my DJ sets carry a message, it's never just music for people to dance to. I always embed something, a text, a sound, an idea, related to social justice, whether it's war, queerness, or whatever issue is on my mind. […] I know how much we need to empower and help one another. That's why I came to believe that a group has more power than an individual in this country. This inspired me to form a collective, to root ourselves together in a new city and work toward our shared goals and creative passions. Our collective brings a lot of things together." R7. Tm. 3 years. 20.03.2024*

> *"After July 5, something unexpected happened – within two weeks, six Georgian queer people reached out to me. I still don't know how they got my contact info, because I've never worked directly on migration or asylum issues. But I guess word spread – 'they're Georgian, they're queer, maybe this person can help.' When I met these six people, every single one of them was a queer Georgian asylum seeker, and they all had one thing in common: they were living on the streets. And for me, that was it. I thought, if this is the situation, how can I be doing anything else right now? We threw everything we had into it. And even now, we still do everything on a volunteer basis – social work, translating, therapy, whatever we can to help people not lose themselves. Because if you leave me on the street for two or three days, I wouldn't survive either. That's how it all started. Every project we had, cultural or socio-cultural, has now turned toward queer migration, either working with queer migrants or for them." (R12. M. 12 years. 08.04.2024)*

The way individual respondents perceive activism also highlights a post-migration complexity within the LGBTQ+ community. One notable pattern – while present in other queer migrant narratives – emerges with particular intensity and frequency in the stories of activists and community workers: **a form of survivor's guilt.** This feeling often arises after migrating to countries with better living conditions and, in some cases, lingers for years. These conflicting emotions create a kind of inner dissonance – respondents describe the difficulty of reconciling two opposing desires: **the wish to remain connected to Georgia, and the need to distance themselves from the very systems that caused their marginalization and harm.**

> *"When you're an activist, there's this guilty conscience about leaving. I felt it – that as someone active and visible, I could be open, keep pushing... In other words, you realize you're leaving behind a space, and you wonder what will happen to it, how it will evolve without you. It feels like you're betraying the community, the organization, and your comrades. [...] The truth is, I was walking away from the community, from its members, at a time when nothing had really improved. And then you think, well... if not me, then who?" (R26. M. 7 years. 11.06.2024)*

"The first time I left, I found myself in a total information vacuum – especially when it came to the political situation in Georgia or what was going on in queer activism. Everything felt so unfamiliar. It was intense – just being suddenly cut off like that. I wasn't even sure if I liked it or not. At times, I felt guilty for being so unaware of everything. But on a mental health level, I needed that break. Still, I often found myself surrounded by people who were completely gender blind. And even though I needed to step back and take care of myself, I couldn't help reacting to those moments – I couldn't just become apolitical overnight. Apart from a few guests, I was very much in the minority there, with my queerness." (R9. M. 6 years. 23.03.2024)

Some of these respondents have continued their work on broader platforms for LGBTQ+ advocacy in their host countries, often through international donor organizations, while still supporting the local community in Georgia. They note that they now use these new platforms to amplify the voices of marginalized groups that are often excluded from international institutional frameworks. In this context, their work primarily involves providing institutional or volunteer support to small, self-organized initiative groups within Georgia's NGO-dominated queer activist field. They also aim to bring greater flexibility to the visions and approaches of international organizations – challenging the limits of legalistic, mainstream frameworks by highlighting the diversity of queer experiences and realities.

"At first, of course, I had a lot of survivor's guilt – it was such a contrast, suddenly being safe and at peace. Just the fact of being safe, in principle. I'm working through it and trying to understand it – I know what it is and why it's there. Now I just feel more responsible, like I have to do something. I volunteer; I try to help where I can. Even when I was still there, I was constantly on the streets, active on social media. The bare minimum I can do now is donate to other initiatives. I carry this sense of responsibility – what can I do from here?" (R27. M. 11 years. 7.06.2024)

"What we've tried to do [at the donor organization] is provide funding to institutionally strong organizations, while also maintaining a group

> *of partners. At the same time, we've opened up a small grants program for groups that are smaller in scale, working with specific segments of the community, or based outside the capital. In some cases, we've even managed to fund unregistered groups." (R26. M. 7 years. 11.06.2024)*

Some respondents, once in the host country, begin to regain a sense of purpose and appreciation for their own efforts by reflecting on past experiences. Through this process, they begin to identify ways they can contribute to activism and recognize the importance of engaging in socio-political processes.

In some cases, respondents describe difficulties in connecting with the local LGBTQ+ community. While protective legislation and institutional support offer a critical sense of security, cultural and social barriers can make integration into local communities challenging. For example, in the more individualistic cultures of Northern European countries, there is often a weaker sense of communal belonging, and emotional connections can be harder to establish. In such environments, the warm, emotionally expressive interactions that are familiar in Georgia are often replaced by a sense of disconnection. By contrast, as mentioned earlier, queer migrants tend to find it easier to engage with both broader society and the LGBTQ+ community in cultures where social relationships are more open and expressive. This is often seen as a supportive factor in the adaptation process and helps foster a sense of belonging.

Overall, LGBTQ+ community dynamics for queer migrants are marked by resilience, adaptability, and mutual support. Through peer information networks, safe creative spaces, and international advocacy efforts, respondents actively contribute to building community structures that respond to both practical and emotional needs. At the same time, their experiences also highlight the challenges of cultural adaptation, navigating interpersonal relationships, and maintaining meaningful connections.

„HOME" AND VISION OF THE FUTURE

A positive outlook on the future – the ability to plan and focus on long-term goals is closely tied to psychological well-being. As we've seen, queer migrants face numerous obstacles on that path, one of the most significant being the difficulty of establishing a sense of belonging.

Belonging, in this context, can be understood as the feeling of being "at home" – a deep emotional connection to a place, community, or a group where one feels accepted, safe, and seen. This sense of home directly influences psychological stability and well-being, shaping how individuals understand, plan for, and envision their future.

* * *

For the queer migrants interviewed, the concept of home is deeply personal and multifaceted. It is often tied to specific spaces, like a friend's apartment or the family home, or to meaningful connections built with others. For many, the idea of home remains connected to Georgia, seen as a homeland to which they automatically belong. However, this perception often shifts after experiencing trauma tied to a place, or through the process of assimilation with a new culture.

In short, reflections on home are filled with contradictions. They are shaped by an ongoing sense of otherness, the complexity of belonging, and a sense of safety.

For many respondents – especially those who have spent less time in emigration – the future feels uncertain and undefined. They often describe having no clear plans for the future. This uncertainty is closely tied to a lack of security and a deep sense of injustice or inequality, which continues to shape their lives regardless of whether they have support from family or friends.

Some respondents do not entirely rule out the possibility of returning to Georgia in the future. However, in nearly all cases, this idea is distant and conditional, linked either to old age or to significant improvements in the situation back home.

> *"I can't really see the future clearly. I see myself getting stronger and maybe traveling back and forth a lot, but the idea of settling down feels like it's disappeared. I'm not sure if that's because of emigration or something else... I don't really know what caused it. Maybe it's more about what I'd call queerness in Georgia – never having stability, never being able to feel it or trust it. I can't picture myself settling anywhere." (R25. M. 2 years. 14.06.2024)*

> *"Right now, everything feels kind of messy. I imagine myself more involved in art, music, club spaces, and shows – rather than anything else, but I haven't made any specific choices yet. So yeah, it's still pretty unclear." (R6. Tm. 2 years. 19.03.2024)*

"I don't see the future at all. I just follow my days and see what happens. If I want to think about the future, I first need to figure out – where am I, who am I?..." (R29. Tm. 1 year. 10.06.2024)

"When I think about the future, I want to grow and establish myself here first – as an independent, adult person. Then, if I have the opportunity and the means – and by means, I mean if it's safe for me to go back to Georgia- I'd like to return, at least as a tourist, maybe for two or three months, to live there temporarily. But I don't think I'll ever go back to living permanently. That's how I feel for now, but I don't know, things might change." (R16. Tm. 1 year. 07.04.2024)

Most respondents focus on their immediate priorities. Chief among them is personal and professional development, aimed at building a stable and sustainable daily life. In this context, focusing on self-growth serves both as a coping mechanism and a practical strategy for navigating precarious and uncertain living conditions. At the same time, these personal aspirations are often intertwined with care for others.

"I want to work as a social worker. Ideally, I'd love to work directly at the commissariat, where asylum cases are reviewed, or in migration management. I find it really interesting. Right now, I'm at the stage where I need to go to the employment agency, where they assess everyone individually based on their skills. I'll try to find a way to start working in a social work position. If something is missing from my qualifications, they provide the training I need here to get the job. In five years, I see myself working in a shelter, protecting queer migrants, that's my main motivation." (R24. Tm. 5 year. 27.05.2024)

"In the future... honestly, I just see it as freedom. I see myself as someone who will always be a changemaker, even on a small scale. What I mean is: the people who interact with me, those I connect with – our conversations and how we influence each other – will always be focused on helping each other grow. It won't just be standard – 'how are

you?' That's the kind of person I imagine myself to be. I don't think I'll go big, I don't have such a desire. [...] I'll have my own tasks, a few people in difficult situations I'll support, and my activism will focus only on that. I can't reach for more than that." (R20. M. 6 year. 10.05.2024)

The aspirations of queer migrants are mostly shaped by fundamental human needs: having a home, feeling safe, and building meaningful human connections. These seemingly simple goals highlight not only the deep impact of systemic injustice on queer lives but also the strength and resilience required to find a sense of belonging and stability in a new social environment.

"If I told you the prospects look great, no, not at this stage. But if something happens and I manage to settle in this country, I won't go back to Georgia for at least 15 years. My goal in life is to have my own house and a small business that lets me support myself, so I don't have to worry about expecting someone to pay me 100 GEL or 50 GEL, you know? That's my goal, and I don't know – I trust in God, I hope I'll achieve everything." (R18. Tm. 1 year. 30.04.2024)

"My future is what I've dreamed about all my life – and that's what it is, really. I've started the process, I want to raise a child as a foster parent. Of course, I'll keep doing my social work, and through the organization I've founded, I plan to take on a lot more. But my future, what I'm fully committed to, what I deeply want, is to have a child as soon as possible." (R28. Tm. 5 years. 06.06.2024)

"I gradually realized I want to study here. I've started researching universities and programs to figure out what I want. One thing I love here is that they don't limit you by age. In Georgia, once you hit 30, it's like people treat you as if you're retired already, as if life is over. It's not like that here. People in their 30s apply for bachelor's degrees. I really appreciated that mindset. At first, you might not know that, and you feel stuck, thinking, 'Isn't it too late?' But it's not like that. And you slowly let go. Instead, you can focus on what you actually want and what interests you, and that brings you peace." (R8. Tm. 2 years. 20.03.2024)

CONCLUSION

The situation of queer individuals in Georgia, including those who leave the country due to social and political homophobia, demands a multi-layered approach that integrates activism, research, and political engagement. While LGBTQ+ activism has made significant contributions to visibility and policy improvements over the past two decades, challenges remain deeply embedded in hierarchical structures and socio-political inequalities. Based on the findings of this study, for building a more sustainable and inclusive movement, it is essential to consider:

1. **Confronting Social and Political Homophobia:** Homophobia in Georgia is not only a social issue but also a politically instrumentalized tool used to strengthen a conservative nationalist agenda. In this context, eliminating the oppression and injustice perpetuated by discriminatory legislation requires advocacy efforts focused on holding state institutions accountable and strengthening legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals. Additionally, targeted campaigns should highlight the intersection between anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and broader authoritarian tendencies.
2. **Strengthening Queer Efforts:** Alongside ensuring strategic effectiveness, queer efforts must be organized through both formal and informal networks to preserve the grassroots initiatives and spirit of the movement. This includes establishing inclusive structures that actively address power imbalances and work to dismantle internal hierarchies, thereby preventing the exclusion of enthusiastic, marginalized individuals. Advocacy networks should aim to represent the diversity of the queer community, with particular attention to those who experience additional discrimination based on socio-economic status or other marginalized identities.
3. **Research and More Careful Representation of Queer Life in Georgia in International Reports:** The expertise and experience of local activist groups and community-based NGOs – as well as political achievements – are critical markers of progress for the daily lives of queer individuals. However, to provide a more sensitive and comprehensive assessment of the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia, research must also focus on the lived realities of queer

individuals. This includes producing and representing qualitative data that captures the depth of everyday experiences with discrimination, economic vulnerability, and social exclusion. Such representation would contribute to the revision and enhancement of the currently limited criteria used at the international level to assess queer life.

4. **Introducing an Intersectional Approach to Migration and Advocacy:** It is impossible to understand queer migration separate from broader socio-economic and political factors. To ensure that future interventions are better aligned with the specific needs of queer migrants, advocacy efforts should be developed in collaboration with organizations/groups focused on labour rights, refugee support, gender equality, and economic justice. These partnerships are essential for creating a more comprehensive and effective approach to addressing intersecting vulnerabilities, such as workplace discrimination, housing insecurity, and legal obstacles related to asylum and residency, among others.

By adopting such strategies, LGBTQ+ advocacy in Georgia can become more representative, inclusive, resilient, and impactful. Sustainable partnerships, intersectional analysis, a strong commitment to grassroots initiatives, and the facilitation of their engagement will be essential to ensuring that queer voices are not only represented and heard, but also actively shape the policies that affect their daily lives.

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