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## **Cross-effects of cultural and gay capitals in access to refugee status on the grounds of SOGI in France: Study of the formal and informal preparations of West African men for asylum trials**

asylum; sexuality; gender; association backing; inequalities; gay capital; cultural capital

According to literature, ethnocentric representations of homosexuality structure the decision to grant asylum, or not, on the ground of sexual orientation. This ethnocentric criticism has recently led to a technicalization of evaluation practices by asylum judges, which are now based on a narrative and discursive mastery, a field in which respondents are unequal depending on their cultural and gay capitals. While the assessment as such appears to be more equitable, Western norms of gender and sexuality, and practicing self-narrative through their prism, continue to impose themselves in different ways, particularly in formal associative accompaniment or in informal preparation for the refugee status determination process. A twofold ethnographic approach, attentive to associative backing and the daily experience of exile as formal and informal spaces of asylum preparation and identity formation, is used to analyze the manner in which cultural and gay capitals influence identity formation, preparation for asylum trials, and chances of obtaining refugee status.

Asylum seekers who gain access to the national reception system are more likely to obtain recognition as refugees (Valluy 2009), than those who do not. This is mainly due to the social, administrative and legal support for the asylum application procedure, which they receive from the professional social workers who operate in these accommodation structures.

Administratively, asylum seekers on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI), who are the focus of this article, must prove that they are part of the LGBTIQ<sup>1</sup> social group and that there is a risk of persecution on this ground if they were to return to their country of origin. However, professional social workers in the asylum system, some of whom are unfamiliar with this specific reason for seeking asylum, tend to prefer referring asylum seekers on this ground to specialized LGBTIQ associations whose volunteers' expertise is recognized.

On the one hand, these associations offer festive, cultural and convivial activities, and on the other hand, they provide support for the procedure, the content of which will be detailed in the methodology section and the first part of the results. However, faced with the large influx of people seeking the help of associations and the inability of the latter to respond favorably to all of them, filtering practices must be implemented (Giametta 2020), making their support a "rare resource" (Fassin and Kobelinsky 2012).

This article studies the content of these associative accompaniments, as well as the conditions that must be met in order to access and maintain them. The analysis of the content of this backing is indirectly concerned with the criteria for granting refugee status on the grounds of SOGI. It thus questions the levels of distance and initial proximity of applicants with regard to these criteria, and the conditions for the potential access to associative support that promotes the identification and incorporation of the expectations of asylum institutions. Without discarding it completely, this contribution leads us to relativize the centrality of the ability of individuals to perform a Western homosexuality expected by asylum judges, which pertains to "gay capital" (Morris, 2018), incorporated through socialization within LGBTIQ spaces. It also highlights the role of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1986), acquired through education. While Bourdieu studies the influence of capitals on individuals' tastes and practices, Morris (2018) postulates that gay capital varies according to social origin.

This link between gay capital and social class has been highlighted in relation to gay men living in West Africa (Bouchet-Mayer 2023). Giametta (2017), who specifically studies asylum seekers on the grounds of SOGI, also identifies a lower ease among asylum seekers from disadvantaged social categories in identifying the implications of the procedure, but also in defining themselves as LGBTIQ, in integrating places of homosociability, and in telling their story through the prism of SOGI. This article aims to add a class lens to the gender perspectives dominating the literature. As Bourdieu shows, the social class effect here is of course not direct, but results from the inability of the support system to conceive and manage the discrepancies that may exist between the cultural capital of the applicants and the expectations of the asylum judges.

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<sup>1</sup> Acronym: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer. Although this empiric study is based on cisgender men defining or being defined as gay, the generic acronym LGBTIQ can sometimes be used to designate social and community networks which are not exclusively "Gay", and sometimes the scope of intervention of an association. It also allows to group together similar discrimination issues, which would however differ if looked into more specifically, as well as to extend the range of certain processes within the discussion.

## **From the imposition of a cultural norm to a selection depending on the cultural and gay capitals of the applicants?**

For around two decades, decision-making in SOGI asylum procedures has been precisely analyzed through the lens of the interaction between applicants and migration offices (Cesaro 2021), and from a gender normative perspective. Despite the differences between national asylum systems (Hamila 2020), the studies carried out within several Western countries converge in revealing the extent to which ethnocentric representations of homosexuality condition whether refugee status, on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI), is granted or not (Morgan 2006; Berg and Millbank 2009; Kobelinsky 2012a, Dustin and Held 2018). Through analyzing decision reports, authors highlight how middle or upper-class, as well as White, forms of homosexuality appear as norms of reference (Kobelinsky 2012a; Giametta 2017) to win over the judges' "inner conviction" (Fassin, 2013). In order to achieve this, coming out and *proudness* (Decena 2004), as well as public demonstrations and a stabilized identity (Dhoest 2019; Hamila 2020; Powell 2021), are the desirable ultimate steps (Rehaag 2008; Roy 2013), accelerated by asylum-related interviews and hearings (Murray 2011). The non-attendance to homo-social spaces, marriage, parenthood, the expression of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2020), or the non-identification to Western gender and sexual orientation categories, all sustain doubt about the claimant's homosexuality and provide grounds for decisions of rejection. Caught up in the imperative of proof administration (d'Halluin 2012), asylum seekers seem enjoined to stage a westernized homosexuality which is more or less distant from, or in phase with, the one that they actually experienced.

By making the protection of LGBTIQ identities a feature of nationalist ideology, the asylum attribution system is qualified as homo-nationalist (Puar 2007, 2013; Lee and Brotman 2013; Murray 2014; Dhoest 2019; Mulé 2020) in that it makes it possible to justify the exclusion of individuals who are supposedly homophobic, or who are not in line with the norms that would allow them to win the intimate conviction of the asylum judges. Beyond this discriminating process, it is a re-colonial criticism (Wright 2017; Mulé 2020), denouncing LGBTIQ imperialism which imposes self-definition according to Western cultural norms (Haritaworn et al. 2008; Jaunait et al. 2013; Rebucini 2013; Fassin 2014; Fassin and Salcedo 2015; Awondo 2019) if there is to be any hope of obtaining refugee status.

In this context, several ethnographic studies have shown the role played by LGBTIQ associations supporting asylum seekers in integrating sexual and gender norms, and ultimately, the incorporation of Westernized self-staging. Murray (2011) observed, within LGBTIQ asylum associations in the United Kingdom, focus groups in which the words that make up the LGBTIQ acronym are explained one by one, in order to encourage each person to adopt a category of identification. Awondo (2011) described a French associative accompaniment organized around the exploration of gay neighborhoods and French gay culture, in which applicants are encouraged by the volunteers to act like a "fairy"<sup>2</sup> in front of asylum agents.

At the same time, reports have been produced on the European level (Jansen and Spijkerboer 2011; Jansen and Le Déroff 2014), and more recently on the French one (Borrillo, Salcedo and Havkin 2020), in order to define good practices concerning the assessment of asylum claims on the grounds of SOGI. Insisting on the need to end the use of psychological and medical tests that are supposed to evaluate homosexuality (Hamila 2017, 2019), they take up the suggestions of Mulé (2020) or Dustin and Ferreira (2021), to no longer focus on conformity to Western sexual or gender categories, or proof of activism. Indeed, the emphasis should rather be put on persecution, experienced or feared. In accordance with European recommendations (Hamila 2020), the questions of French asylum judges no longer concern the experience of

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<sup>2</sup> Translation of "folle" in French (Le Talec 2008).

homosexuality since the applicant's arrival in France, but exclusively about life in their country of origin and the conditions of their migration.

Rejection decisions can no longer, in France as in the United Kingdom (Powell 2020), be based on highlighting the efforts made by individuals to conceal their sexual orientation or their lack of homosociability. Decisions to grant refugee status must take into account the diversity of forms of homosexuality, depending on the local context after arrival in Europe (Held 2022; Powell 2023; Bouchet-Mayer and Ferez 2023). They must also consider the life trajectories and singular experiences of homosexuality leading to the incorporation of different ways of defining and managing one's sexual orientation (Bouchet-Mayer 2023).

In line with these recommendations, the expectation of asylum judges for applicants to perform "Western" gender and sexuality norms seems to lose its centrality. This is mainly obvious in the way in which associative volunteers accompany and prepare the asylum seekers for the asylum trial tests. The content of their counselling, which will be presented and analyzed in the first part of the results section, lies more in the learning of narrative and discursive techniques situated in space and time, coherent and decent, than in the teaching of Western homosexual norms as observed by Murray (2011) and Awondo (2011) at the turn of the 2010s in France and the United Kingdom. In addition, the argumentative texts accompanying the asylum rejection decisions and the transcribed interviews do not include references to the experience of homosexuality in France.

Did these evolutions lead to a reduction of the impact of gay (Morris 2018) – and indirectly, of cultural (Bourdieu 1984, 1986) – capitals on the chances of obtaining refugee status? We hypothesize a process that is spread out over space and time, rather than reduced to the sole interaction between the judges and asylum seekers. This leads to the selection of respondents with the best cultural and gay capitals, to the detriment of those who have the least.

To test this hypothesis, the article first analyses the content of the asylum seekers' formal associative preparations for the interview with asylum judges in order to evaluate the proximity, or indeed the distance, between this content and the academic (Bourdieu 1984, 1986) and gay (Morris 2018) capitals of the applicants. The second part studies the way in which these same capitals weigh upon the access to these formal preparations, but also to more informal spaces of preparation.

## **Context of research**

The data used to answer these questions originates in doctoral ethnographic research funded by the National Agency for Research on HIV/AIDS and the Sidaction association, and backed by the associations which granted us access to the field, as well as the asylum seekers who accepted to take part in this research. It was carried out between 2018 and 2022, and documents the life courses of male African SOGI asylum seekers, from country of origin to asylum request experience, and their uses of sexual health prevention schemes.

Life history interviews, lasting from two to six hours each, and repeated from two to ten times with each participant throughout the asylum procedure, until officially becoming or not a refugee, were conducted with sixteen French-speaking cisgender men from West African countries, and took place in parks, bars, restaurants, and at the participant's or researcher's home. Interviews focused on retrospective narratives of the experience of homosexuality in their own country, migration experience, and life conditions in France during the asylum procedure, including survival conditions, as well as administrative and sexual experiences. This allowed us to analyze several aspects of SOGI applicants' experience of asylum preparation: their fears, their perception of judges' expectations, the ways in which they are socialized to

homosexuality, and finally the implication of the formal and informal expectations of SOGI asylum for individuals.

Recruitment was aided by a SOGI asylum seekers' network of acquaintances created before the beginning of the research – indeed, before this PhD research project was accepted – working as an employee of an HIV prevention association, followed by “snowball sampling” (Sulaiman-Hill and Thompson 2011) through “key informants”<sup>3</sup>. Aged between 25 and 55 years old, the interviewees presented social, educational, and economic dispositions, as well as strongly varying migratory trajectories. Diversity can also be found in their financial, administrative and accommodation situations once in France, or in sexual and gender trajectories in terms of identification, practices and involvement in homo-social venues. Certain participants were LGBTIQ activists in their country of origin, frequented homo-social spheres in big cities and identified with Western gender and sexuality categories before their exile. Others were married, parents, engaged in a “practical” form of homosexuality (Gueboguo 2006) with an exclusive partner.

This ethnography of gay exile is completed by the study of two Parisian associations: the first association promoted HIV awareness and was studied while working there as an employee and student with a doctoral research project; while the second one, involved alongside men seeking asylum in France on the grounds of SOGI, was studied as a PhD candidate. The data used in the present article mainly comes from “participant observation” (Soulé 2007; Seim 2021), conducted as apprentice-volunteer in the second association which provided individual backing to thirty-five asylum seekers. This consisted in a series of meetings to prepare for the interview at the French Protection Office of Refugees and Apatrides (OFPRA) or for an audience at the National Court of Asylum Rights (CNDA). In case of rejection by the OFPRA, and after an interview with a “protection officer”, the asylum seeker may appeal the decision to the CNDA, where a panel of judges (sometimes a single judge since the so-called "Asylum and Immigration" law in 2018) may decide to annul the OFPRA's rejection decision and thus grant refugee status.

The collected data was then subjected to a content analysis following the principles of the « Grounded Theory » (Glaser and Strauss 1967), in order to identify recurring themes within the interviews and observation notes, so as to compare their variations depending on the interviewees and their social characteristics.

This article will first use the content of these formal “associative preparations”, and then focus on the way in which daily life also weighs on informal preparations, and dispositions for life experiences during the entire time of the procedure.

### **Be prepared to exchange with decision-makers: the associative backing**

The people backed by the LGBTIQ association specialized in asylum are attributed a volunteer for the duration of the procedure. The latter can intervene on several levels<sup>4</sup>, often acting as a substitute for social workers paid to accomplish these missions of administrative and social accompaniment for asylum seekers. Overstretched, their main role consists in helping asylum seekers over the course of three steps in the procedure, also observed by Cesaro (2021): 1) writing an account of the reasons for their asylum request; 2) preparing for the interview at OFPRA; 3) preparing for their audience with the CNDA. According to one volunteer, the final

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<sup>3</sup> Asylum seekers frequenting the HIV association as volunteers at the beginning of the research.

<sup>4</sup> Access to discounts for travel passes, to the *Complémentaire Santé Solidaire* (CSS, state-funded health insurance), material living conditions, medical care, etc.

decision depends “30% [on] the quality of their account and 70% [on] the quality of the interview”. Writing the account being less important, and the audition with the CNDA being overseen by a lawyer<sup>5</sup>, volunteers focus on preparing for the OFPRA through individual interview simulations.

The volunteers begin this individual “OFPRA preparation” by describing the spatial-temporal organization of the interview, the people who will be in attendance, their role, and the main themes that will be broached:

*“So, at the OFPRA, you will be in an office quite similar to the one you were in yesterday. There will be a protection officer and a translator if you have requested one. They will ask you questions in three parts. First, your family, brothers, sisters, where you went to school, what your parents’ occupation was ... Next, the reasons that pushed you to leave your country, so your sexual orientation. And then, they will go back a little... How did you realize you were attracted to boys? How, with the first boy, did it go? (...) What precautions did you take so as to not get caught? How did you get caught? Who knows? How did they know? And then, how did you leave? How did you pay? How did you travel? What do you fear, if ever you had to go back there? (...) To get refugee status, you must prove you’re part of the social group of LGBT people and personally in danger if you go back in your country. You! Not LGBT people in general. (...) They are aware of the situation, the laws and customs concerning LGBT people in your country. You must talk about YOU! Really, and precisely!”*

Each story must be individualized since this is a frequently cited reason for rejection. Generalized stories cast a veil of doubt, among volunteers (Cesaro 2021) or decision-makers, over the truth of the candidate’s sexual orientation within a context marked by suspicion (D’Halluin-Mabillot 2012; Kobelinsky 2012b). Precise and detailed stories are encouraged in order to convince the officer that the story is not made up, as noted by another volunteer:

*“You have to imagine that the officers, they haven’t seen what you experienced, so you must tell them precisely, a little like how you would describe a film or what you see in a museum to a person who is blind. (...) You must narrate what happened because they hear many stories and they want to hear yours. (...) You, your life, you know it in your head. Us, we don’t know, and we want to imagine the scene, to understand. Where was it? What time was it? More or less, ok, not to the minute. Where were you going? There, like a film, a story. Alright? This is very important. Often, at the OFPRA, when the application is rejected, the reasons are: ‘Because it is not personal enough’, ‘Because there are not enough details...’ (...) You must prove that there is only you who lived this and can recount what happened. This is the story of no one else, you must give us YOUR story.”*

In a context that mixes suspicion with concurrence, details aim to induce the interviewer to travel through the memory of the seeker, to differentiate his from the numerous other stories, and to provide authenticity. While details and personalization are encouraged, discourse on sexuality and engaging bodies is regulated and follows strict norms. Applicants are invited to go to the limits of what can be said, but without ever exceeding them:

*“So, you must know that we don’t want sexual details, no one is allowed to ask you that. However, we are going to be right at the limit. This means, how did the second time go...? Where did it take place and what precautions did you take so as not to be caught? (...)”*

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<sup>5</sup> In France, as Giametta (2020) described for the UK, the low jurisdictional help prevents lawyers from correctly preparing their files and cases. The associations depend on lawyers who are sensitive to LGBTIQ issues, who in turn use the volunteers to incite the applicants to speak and structure their pleas.



*How did you feel that...? Who made the first step to...? There, no sexual details, but what happened for you two to get close.”*

Still welcome, the details must concern feelings, physical attraction, emotions or pleasure in spending time with the partner; but never sexuality in its actions and embodiment. Any description of sexuality that is overly crude, the exhibition of their naked body – in situ or on photo, while taking part in sexual relations or to present traces of aggression – are banned. The physical traces of violence can only be certified medically and added to the seeker’s file. The definition of good practices at the European level, in particular to outlaw phallometric tests which were practiced in the 2000s in some European countries (Jansen and Spijkerboer 2011; Jansen and Le Déroff 2014), invites to focus on writing or speaking. A just balance between linguistic abstraction and objectivation must be found. In this balancing act, the applicants are also bound to answer any questions relating to sexuality, even those about heterosexual experiences which applicants often try to avoid, sometimes because of the trauma of a coerced experience, sometimes for fear of the effects that a heterosexual symbol could produce for the interviewer (Giametta 2017). The risk is to create doubt, if the dissimulation is spotted, in an exchange where the inner conviction of the judges concerning the sincerity of the applicant is crucial.

Preparation sessions are also the occasion to anticipate questions that might be unsettling. What to answer if the officer asks why the door wasn’t locked when they were caught having sexual relations? Or if they are asked to position themselves as both homosexual and devout? Or again, if they require explanations as to the presence of LGBTIQ associations in a country where homosexuality is outlawed?

By preparing the person for this type of question, which is otherwise decried, the goal is to prevent hesitations or the risk of misinterpretation. A recurring question, for instance, concerns the moment of “becoming aware” of same-sex attraction, which is often mistaken for the first sexual relation itself and actually not always concomitant. Although a misunderstanding of this type is not dooming in itself, it can lead to discrepancies within the story’s timeline. Additionally, the accumulation of hesitations and other ill-adapted responses can generate doubt. The necessity of rephrasing questions or the lack of fluidity of the interview can become vectors of weariness and influence the decision. An exercise is often used to help the applicants organize their story in time:

*“What I advise everyone is this... In fact, at the OFPRA, they are very serious about dates and time. So, on this paper, you will draw a chronological line. (...) You can put as many lines as you want... (...) I’ll write “born on...” and then, right up until now. And here, you’ll fill in when you entered high school, when you met your first, how long it lasted for, the year, the age, the year, the age...”*

Beyond the facilitation of comprehension, this temporal structuration of the story can avoid confusion and inconsistency between the year and the age – upon which the officers may base their rejection decision. Preparation helps the seeker to provide clear and organized memories, in accordance with the expected formalism and rules. It does not so much aim to shape the contents of the answers to be given, as if there was a magical formula, but rather to teach the implicit rules of formulating a story that will allow them to obtain refugee status. Whether due to historic changes or not, associative backing appears very different from the one described by Murray in the UK and Awondo in France in 2011. The teaching content appears, in a general discursive and narrative capacity, closer to academic abilities than to performing life experiences that are close to the judges’ representation of homosexuality, including adhesion to Western categories, proudness (Decena, 2004), stabilized identity (Powell 2021) and public demonstration (Held 2022; Powell 2023).

The volunteers thus act as « cultural ferrymen » (Memmi 2014), transmitting the codes of the institution, through the alternation of questions and explanations, in order to divulge certain subtleties. They prepare the candidates so that they might be better armed in the face of the asylum process. Not all applicants, however, have access to this intensive preparation. A selection is made during half-day opening times at the association premises. People who wish to obtain help wait in the entrance hall, before being seen by the association's volunteers in the offices.

The interviews, lasting from ten to forty minutes, have several goals. Firstly, making sure the person is indeed concerned by a request for asylum on the grounds of SOGI. Secondly, assessing their administrative and social situation in order to immediately provide advice on social, healthcare and administrative issues<sup>6</sup>. Thirdly, to guide the collective discussion devoted, at the end of the half-day, to designating those who will benefit from an individual backing. Then, each volunteer attempts, with more or less acuity, to evaluate the story of their interlocutor. A volunteer involved in these half-day reception time, explained to the researcher as an apprentice-volunteer:

*“You see, I assail them with questions really. I go around a little bit, I question several moments in the story. It's to check whether their answers are spontaneous, if the story is consistent. Because there are many people who come here with fake stories. This was the case for the person who was here just before. It's like a sort of mini-OFPRA interview that I do, but even tougher really. (...) If I sense any cracks or things that I don't understand, I interrogate them to see what they'll answer. If the story stays strong, then I think to myself that it's ok. (...) So, him, you see, we'll help him, well we'll try to, but the guy before, we won't be dealing with him. In any case, we are very limited in the number of people we can help: today, I only have one single place and I am seeing eight people, so well... We can't take on people whose story isn't convincing.”*

By questioning the seeker's experience of SOGI in their country of origin, the volunteers aim to identify any hypothetical “false stories”, referred to as “fake refugees” (Kobelinsky 2012b). Spontaneity, fluidity, the absence of dissimulations or hesitations, precision and location in time are considered proof of credibility, as these narrative qualities are the ones taught during “preparation sessions”. As stated by Giametta (2020), associative filtering consists in a “merit-based” (Jakšić 2008) selection of those closest to the decision-maker's expectations. This process of adapting associative selection procedures to the expectations of institutions is also observed by Pette (2015) in migrant camps situated on the border with the United Kingdom. These filters contribute to the construction of an ambivalent dimension to these associative spaces (Held 2022), with the adoption of a vision of « authenticity » which is actually quite close to the one promoted by official institutions, in order to distinguish those who deserve to be helped from those who do not.

The *a priori* possession of these narrative and discursive capacities results from incorporated dispositions, which are for an important part linked to academic experience in developing oral expression skills. It can also be linked to the frequentation of homosexual spheres in the country of origin, as places where dispositions for self-narrative through the prism of SOGI are deployed (Bouchet-Mayer 2023). In a longitudinal perspective we know that levels of economic, educational and homosocial dispositions favor proximity to institutional expectations, and increase the chances of being backed by associations and thus being recognized as a refugee (Bouchet-Mayer and Ferez 2023). This filtering fits with Giametta's statement (2020) concerning the proximity with administration expectations, considering that

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<sup>6</sup> This can involve: presenting public transport discounts, access to state funded health insurance, the functioning of SAMU social (French humanitarian emergency services), offering help in re-establishing material living conditions that were unjustly removed, providing orientation for medical assistance, etc.

these are the narrative and discursive techniques taught by the associations. However, this consideration calls into question the imposition of the White Western model of homosexuality.

Diverse assumptions can be formulated. The first one is the evolution of decision-makers' criteria under activist association pressure (Jansen and Spijkerboer 2011; Jansen and Le Déroff 2014; Borrillo, Salcedo and Havkin 2020), following the recommendation to take better consideration of persecution rather than gender and sexual identity (Mulé 2020; Dustin and Ferreira 2021). The second is that an informal filtering process of people arriving at the association and selected to be backed by volunteers works. The second part of this article shows that those with less cultural and gay capitals, in addition to being more distant from the narrative expectations of asylum institutions at the outset, are confronted with immediate life contexts that complicate their recourse to specialized associative support. In other words, it is a question of highlighting the variety of social constraints that weigh on individuals according to their capitals, and the way in which these variations affect the use of associative support and other more informal spaces of preparation for asylum.

### **Providing the evidence of homosexuality at the intersection of contradictory sexual scripts**

We will now focus on the difficulties involved in comprehending the expectations of the asylum judges on the applicants' part. First of all, we observe a willingness of the applicants to distance themselves from heterosexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1973). Although associative volunteers encourage them to not dissimulate heterosexual experiences, marks of heterosexuality appear as potential sources of rejection, or at least they are feared to be so, as evidenced by Aliou<sup>7</sup> concerning Christian:

*“Aliou: He told me yesterday that he was summoned to OFPRA... (...)”*

*Researcher: Great! I'll call him then to get some news. Not too stressed?*

*Aliou: Yes, you're always a little stressed because sometimes you see people who are gay and who are not (granted asylum). Some activists even, who are not. And he has kids, and he's a fire-fighter... So it doesn't mean anything, but...”*

Although, according to the interviewees, the majority of homosexuals live married and with children in their country of origin, any heterosexual symbol is feared when applying for asylum (Giametta 2017). Regardless, Christian obtained refugee status from the OFPRA. His marriage and paternity were compensated by a great oral ease, as well as by his involvement with several Afro-Caribbean LGBTIQ and asylum-related associations over the last two years of procedure. His associative involvement was documented with regular reports sent by post. The symbols of marriage and parenthood were counterbalanced by an activist involvement, allowing Christian to incarnate the figure of a combative refugee, politicized and involved in homo-social spheres (Kobelinsky 2012a), fueling the myth of a sexual liberation movement enabled by migration (Chossière 2022).

The issue, shared by all the participants and specifically those who are linked to heterosexual symbols, is to operate a compensation, such as for instance an attested implication within LGBTIQ associations. Associative volunteers are often requested to deliver written statements, which is sometimes difficult, such as for Valentin:

*“I don't know what to do with him! All of a sudden, we need to provide certification to prove... To prove what? Pfff... I don't have anything to write about him. The guy never*

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<sup>7</sup> In order to guarantee the anonymity for the participants, all the names used in the article are pseudonyms and any identifying information was omitted.

*came. I think he's a liar! So, they aren't under any obligation to come either, right, but I don't have anything to write about him! And even more, it could turn out to be counter-productive, because if they say: 'Ok, so what do you do there, at the association?' Well nothing!"*

In fact, statements can only attest to involvement in the association's activities. It is often misunderstood by applicants, leading sometimes to the harassment of volunteers, who in turn might doubt the seekers' intentions and honesty. Although the conviction of OFPRA goes through - in the applicants' imagination - the distinction between signs of heterosexuality and the performance of homosexuality, homosociabilities are not officially expected, but they can become necessary in order to prove homosexuality to decision-makers and engage the inner conviction of their designated volunteer.

Aside from obtaining an attestation from a LGBTIQ association intended to help provide evidence, homosociabilities can also lead to informal learning in matters of Western gender and sexuality norms and practices, as Ousman explains:

*"It's thanks to this that I met Aliou and friends. (...) He installed Romeo and Grindr<sup>8</sup> for me. He showed me how it works. He also told me about the saunas. (...) I never would have imagined that it could exist. (...) But I used to limit myself back then, because I didn't have the means. With Grindr, I started meeting people, and little by little I started understanding how things work, I spoke with people. That's how I integrated certain things here in Paris."*

Community-based activities provide an opportunity to meet peers, to learn about dating channels through apps or clubs. Although homosociabilities in the hosting country are not supposed to guide decision-making, they provide evidence, and thus become an informal expectation: firstly to convince volunteers of their sincerity, and secondly, to develop narratives staging integration in case some questions are asked by the decision-makers concerning their life since they arrived in France, or even to take advantage of the question at the end of the interview, when the judges ask the applicant if they have anything to add.

The candidates' belief in the need to convince associative volunteers of their homosexuality by demonstrating integration into LGBTIQ communities is important in the application for certification, but also for receiving a complete backing, as Christian explains:

*« Concerning the association, the backing is done in such a manner that when you aren't gay, there are limits to it, it doesn't go through to the end. But when you are gay, then we really see it through, we give advice, motivation, we boost you up so that you can reveal what is hidden inside you that is gay. (...) And even if you are in denial, because many are in denial of their sexual orientation and their sexuality. But here, we ask you not to deny anything, you mustn't hide, you must expose yourself, learn to defend yourself for the day at the OFPRA. And for these people to be able to heal, to express themselves, to say what they think and to defend themselves. »*

Like most of the participants, he considered the participation in association activities as part of a larger process that consists in "exposing yourself, learning to defend yourself". This identity affirmation is considered by the applicants as an expectation beyond the mere granting of refugee status. In a suspicious context, maintained by the doubt and the responsibilities linked to the filtering process, this involvement in homosociabilities is also important to maintain the volunteer's belief in the applicant's homosexuality, by demonstrating "acculturation". This logic is consistent with the analysis of volunteer work, which reveals the tendency of volunteers to reduce their investment in an applicant when they doubt the veracity of their homosexuality and

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<sup>8</sup> Planetromeo and Grindr are meeting applications devoted to LGBTIQ people

history (Cesaro 2021). Identity claims appear as a form of individual learning in a context where South-North migration is often seen as a liberation that leads to a "progression of identity" (Murray 2014; Camminga and Marnel 2022; Chossière 2022). The associative incitation to homosociabilities and the formal learning which consists in expressing life-course experiences through the lens of sexuality, lead applicants to feel encouraged towards a community-based involvement.

The applicants who are the most involved in this identification/acclulturation process promote a merit-based approach, like Paul:

*“There are some people who don’t deserve the status... (...) once they get it, we never hear about them again, we don’t know about their sexual life. When LGBT activities are going on, often we don’t see African people, asylum seekers, massively attending the meetings... (...) So, for me, these people aren’t deserving. (...) A community is like an association: it feeds on its ‘active members’ and its ‘ordinary members’. But if a person is a lambda, that doesn’t mean they have to get lost in nature! Because the day you have a problem, this is where you will come back to, but then it’ll be too late.”*

Adherence to Western norms of gender and sexuality is also promoted by asylum applicants among themselves. The most involved ones act as “moral entrepreneurs“ (Becker 1963), also using filters to select their relationships based on their proximity and distance with the myth of identity progression, partly to avoid being associated with people about whom a doubt persists over their homosexuality, and to reinforce the image of a meriting figure. Conforming to Western homonormativity is also promoted within groups of peers, in which new arrivals are encouraged to adopt a lifestyle that symbolizes their integration and matches the story of an identity and sexual progression. Homonormativity must be distinguished here from the term established by Duggan (2002), used to qualify the conformism of homosexual people to dominating heterosexual norms, notably through notions of engagement within a couple and faithfulness. Here, it aims to qualify the stereotyped norms associated with homosexuality, such as easy sex, whether or not it is linked to having multiple partners and/or to the use of dating apps – norms which are notably used in campaigns to promote pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) in the fight against HIV (Trachman and Girard 2018). Upon arrival in France, Aliou was lodging with a couple of gay friends who urged him to meet people, and to do it often. As with other interviewees, he previously followed a sexual script associated with faithfulness to one single partner. He did not feel comfortable with dating applications, nor with prompts to engage in multi-partner activities. The applicants are thus often caught between their individual aspirations and the expectations of their entourage, in a context where having their sexual orientation recognized is the main concern.

Certain applicants deplore the labelling that is linked to SOGI asylum seeking, such as Aliou:

*“My roommate talks too much about me. (...) Really, there are certain things that should be said by me! (...) During her birthday, all the friends that were there knew that I’m gay, that I was an asylum seeker, that I’ve got the status. It’s true. But well, we don’t know who is who. Now, her boyfriend has left her, I know absolutely nothing about his life and he knows everything about me. You see?”*

Researcher: *What worries you?*

Aliou: *(...) There are people, when they come here, they start to accept who they are, they change their hairstyle, they do what they want and everything, so it does you good sometimes. But we’re always discreet, we are always hidden, because well... Paris-Dakar is not far, and everyone knows each other here. Paris is very small... Everyone travels nowadays.”*

This outing, linked to the inextricable nature of the refugee status and homosexual figure (Chossière 2021; Held 2022), is a problem for several applicants. Although their homosexuality needs to be proven within the context of asylum seeking, many do not wish to publicly claim this aspect of their identity, often afraid of repercussions within ambiguous relationships with the diaspora (Andrade 2019; Wimark 2019). Paul was insulted and assaulted in the underground because he was effeminate and Black. Aliou was struck by a taxi driver, originating from the same country as him, in front of a nightclub for the same reasons. Once granted refugee status, both had to quit their first jobs because of the discriminations experienced there. The majority of participants wish to maintain a public heterosexual identity outside of homo-social spaces, and even more so within diaspora cultural spaces, notably in fear that their family might hear about it. Indeed, Christian expresses the speed of the information flow via transnational diasporic communication networks with the following expression: “*when it rains in Paris, Abidjan is wet*”. When integrating a conversation within the context of an ethnography, the researcher must take care to identify those present before broaching subjects relating to homosexuality, in order to avoid breaching borders which were carefully established by the applicants between their different social spheres. A breach of these borders is very much feared, as explained Aliou:

*“Yesterday I went to the association to be the translator for someone who doesn’t speak French very well. But I was annoyed, because I knew... I could feel... I had doubts about his homosexuality. (...) Really, the problem is that... a Senegalese hetero, he’s always... well most of the time he’s homophobic in fact. He doesn’t accept... even if he isn’t aggressive or anything, he’ll discriminate against you in his own way. Religiously, culturally, or he’ll look at you with an eye... or he’ll talk about it publicly, do your coming out in front of everyone, and even those who shouldn’t have known will know! That’s it really, the problem. The problem with the association [LGBTIQ and specialized in asylum seeking], there are many there who are not gay.”*

This extract evidences the impermeability wished by applicants between the different social spheres of their lives, fearing any porosity. These different universes relate to oppositions such as homosexual/heterosexual, White/Black, wealthy/poor, French/migrant. In short, they are linked to sexual, racial, social and national distinctions.

During the entire procedure, the participants seemed to be submitted to contradictory expectations and norms coming from the different social worlds they frequent, and upon which are dependent their daily chances of survival, and obtaining refugee status. On the one hand, they are urged to express their homosexuality unambiguously, “*to bring out what is hidden inside you and that is gay*” as Christian indicated. On the other hand, they are enjoined to the public pretense of heterosexuality and the dissimulation of a homosexuality which is socially discriminated against.

The more or less implicit expectations of homosociability come up against the identity dispositions of the applicants, and their management of the social exposition of their homosexuality (Giametta 2017; Powell 2020, 2021). They must compose with the risk of discrimination and assault, which is strengthened by their phenotype (Trawalé and Poiret 2017). The profile of interviewees who are more likely to maintain coherence between intra-psychic and inter-personal sexual scripts are those who, thanks to their financial, educational and socio-community based dispositions, are the least dependent on non-declared work, lodging with members of their diaspora group, or social worlds whose reaction is to be feared.

## **Conclusion**

This article questions the existing literature analyzing associative SOGI applicant backing as a place for learning the hegemonic Western gender and sexuality norms expected by asylum judges (Murray 2011; Awondo 2011), reproducing the filtering processes exercised by the administrations governing the right to asylum (Giametta 2020). Indeed, based on the ethnography conducted, formal associative backing seems to consist more in teaching narrative and discursive techniques in order to prepare the applicant to provide a clear, situated in space and time, life-history interview, than to act-out a Western stereotype of homosexuality. The clear, precise and detailed expression of emotions and feelings appears as a filtering criterion, referring: 1/ on the one hand, to community-based dispositions based on the habit of formulating self-narratives through the lens of homosexuality, 2/ on the other hand, to educational ones – often in conjunction with economic dispositions within this sample – which prepare for oral expression.

The study of the modalities of maintaining intensive associative support shows the need for applicants to convince their volunteer of their homosexuality, as also noted by Cesaro (2021). This includes frequenting homosociability spaces, at least the LGBTIQ association providing support, but also, ideally, festive and convivial ones. This makes it possible to practice self-narrative through the prism of SOGI, as expected in the procedure, but also to attest to homosociability to the asylum judges. All these elements, without being considered as decisive criteria, weigh on the final decision.

Whether in the context of preparation for the asylum application procedure or in a more festive or convivial setting, frequenting such places appears to be less easy for respondents who have no experience of homosociabilities in their country of origin, and often also those who are most involved in migrant communities once in France. Those who are less inclined to homosociability are likely to be in even greater difficulty in a context of cultural transformation marked by hypersexualization and multi-partnership (Poon et al. 2017; Chbat 2017), but also by racializing practices alternating between rejection and fetishization, widely reported in the literature on racialized LGBTIQ people (Kawale 2003; Held 2017, 2022; Lee and Brotman 2011; Adam and Rangel 2015; El Hage and Lee 2016; Fuks et al. 2018; Karimi 2021; Fournier et al. 2018, 2021; Corneau et al. 2016; Plummer 2007).

Applicants involved in migrant communities – often also the least endowed in educational and economic resources - are particularly afraid of being seen in the vicinity of places of homosociability, and of being excluded from these environments of mutual aid that are essential to their survival. In addition to reducing access to an informal preparation space for self-narrating through the prism of SOGI, this low attendance leads to suspicion among volunteers and other applicants who are more involved in these specialized LGBTIQ associations. Access to specialized associative support requires educational and homosocial provisions in order to be selected, but also to maintain the accompaniment, which itself contributes to strengthening these provisions. However, the study of the construction of these provisions in the country of origin shows the extent to which they promote the use of homosocial spaces and the acquisition of gay capital (Bouchet-Mayer 2023).

The movement to technicalize the criteria for the decision of asylum judges in France in the 2010s, seeking to overcome an explicit inequality, finally introduces another one, linked to the unequal social distribution of gay capital (Morris 2018). Gay imperialism thus seems to be maintained in the shadows by the combined effect of selection processes and successive socializations.

Finally, studying the SOGI asylum seekers' preparation for interviews with asylum judges, in the French context, allows to complexify the process and the implications of imposing Western gender and sexuality norms in an asylum context. The analysis of the filtering processes which

condition access to teachings and their content allows us to identify the specific academic and gay capitals to which they appeal, as well as the distance or proximity to the latter of the capitals which had previously been constituted by the individuals. Of course, these gay and academic capitals are linked to cultural capitals, which in turn are linked to social class. Although the latter does not intervene as a direct explaining variable, it does contribute to the production of cultural capitals, as well as the gay and academic capitals which will facilitate or not the access to backing programs and assimilation of their content. The approach through the lens of class led, on the scale of this ethnography, to highlight new kinds of inequality on the grounds of preexistent dispositions, reinforced all along the preparation process and including, in the last stages, the refugee status attribution.

These results invite researchers to more systematically adopt the class lens to confirm that asylum decision-making is closely influenced by the educational and economical dispositions of the applicants. A better understanding of the specific role played by gay capital – and its articulation with other types of capital– in obtaining refugee status, would probably imply considering, in the future, a comparative approach with women SOGI asylum seekers, people coming from other diasporas or those seeking asylum on other grounds that would take into account social class and the different types of capitals held.

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