

THE INTERSECTIONAL INTEGRATION: EXAMINING THE INTEGRATION EXPERIENCES OF MIDDLE  
EASTERN LGBTQ+ REFUGEES IN CANADA AND SERVICE PROVIDERS RESPONSE

BY

YAZAN ALHAJALI

A MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER PRESENTED TO RYERSON UNIVERSITY IN PARIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATIONS IN THE  
PROGRAM OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATIONS.

TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA, 2020

© YAZAN ALHAJALI, 2020

## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this Major Research Paper and its accompanying Major Research Poster. This is a true copy of the Major Research Paper and the research poster, including any required final revisions, as accepted by examiners. I authorize Ryerson University to lend this Major Research Paper and/or poster to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I further authorize Ryerson University to reproduce this Major Research Paper and/or poster by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I understand that my Major Research Paper and/or poster may be made electronically available to the public.

## ABSTRACT

The intersectional identities of Middle Eastern LGBTQ+ (ME-LGBTQ+) refugees expose them to different forms of discrimination and persecution throughout the asylum experience, whether in their home countries, proxy countries or even in Canada, which results in increased difficulties and challenges in integration. By interviewing six ME-LGBTQ+ refugees and conducting a content analysis on 27 websites of refugee-serving organizations, this study explores how the intersectional identities of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees have shaped their integration, and examines the role of the services providers in response to their intersectional integration. The findings revealed that ME-LGBTQ+ refugees suffered intersectional forms of discrimination at the intersection of nationality with gender and sexuality, which resulted on aggravated mental stresses, in addition to gaps in access to services which ME-LGBTQ+ refugees mitigated through their personal solidarity networks. The content analysis revealed gaps in mental health service provision and representation of LGBTQ+ refugees coupled with a complex and overlapping structure of services that hindered the ability of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees to leverage these services. Recommendations include allocating more efforts to understanding the intersectional backgrounds of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, providing tailored orientation and guidance services in their native language and creating LGBTQ+ friendly housing communities and safe spaces that would allow ME-LGBTQ+ refugees to socialize, express their identities and feel safe, and, therefore, facilitating their successful integration in Canada.

**Keywords** LGBTQ+, Refugees, Immigrants, Canada, Toronto, Middle Eastern, Service providers, Resettlement organizations, Refugee organizations, intersectionality.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge that I am a guest on the traditional land of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Anishinaabe, the Haundenosaunee and the Wendat, in addition to all First Nations, Métis and the Inuit peoples and I'm grateful for that.

I am also grateful to few people whom I owe my success to. I thank my mother, Hala, the first to teach me English and critical thinking. I thank Don and Bill, my chosen family, whose belief allowed me to survive amidst the depression and trauma I endured in my first year in Canada. And lastly, I thank my partner, Laila, whose unconditional love and support gave me strength every day. I am also particularly grateful for my friend, Yousef Fadel, who generously donated much of his time to encourage me and provide important insights.

I am further grateful to the wonderful academics who drove my success: professor Greg Elmer, my supervisor, who was always positive and flexible and guided me every step of the way, professor Sibon Chen, my second reader, for the critical insights and guidance he provided, professor Matthew Thiesen, and the entire MPC team for their continuous support, flexibility and understanding, and whom with no doubt allowed me to the knowledge and tools I needed for this work.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this paper to Sarah Hegazi, who lived, and died, to help and inspire others.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Literature review.....	4
Methodology.....	16
Methods.....	18
Findings.....	24
Discussion.....	38
Conclusion.....	50

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Interview Participants.....	20
Table 2: The types of organizations in the final data sample.....	22
Table3: Content Analysis quantitative results.....	34

## LIST OF APPENDICES

Annex 1: Interview questions.....	56
Annex 2: Content Analysis.....	59

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years Canada has gained more visibility as a safe country that grants asylum for refugees of sexual and gender minorities. Integration is an important aspect of the resettlement of refugees that marks the start of their new lives. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2012), integration is an “ongoing process of mutual accommodation between an individual and society”, in contrast to settlement, which implies a shorter-term process where immigrants face the challenges of securing the basic requirements of accommodation, work and schools (Giwa and Chaze, 2018).

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Queer (LGBTQ+) refugees in Canada mostly come from a background of discrimination and violence. According to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), and as of 2019, there are still 68 states that criminalizes same-sex sexual activities, with at least four states that apply death penalty (Mendos, 2019) in contrast to only 28 countries that grants asylum for LGBTQ+ people (Hodge, 2019). LGBTQ+ refugee claims “form a significant proportion of decisions in Canada’s refugee determination system” (Rehaag, 2016, p. 286). In contrast to the resettlement challenges typically faced by cissexual/cisgender refugees, who’s subconscious and physical sexes line-up (Lee & Brotman, 2011), LGBTQ+ refugees have more complex experiences due to their gender and sexual identities (Giwa & Chaze, 2018) and they face additional risks of discrimination based on their identity or sexual orientation (Alessi et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2017; Karimi, 2019).

After the Arab spring in 2011, and due to several conflicts in Middle Eastern countries, there has been an increase in asylum seekers from the Middle East. Moreover, the increased violence

and extremism targeting LGBTQ+ people also resulted in an increase in the number of LGBTQ+ asylees from the Middle East. The region of the Middle East includes the countries of the Arabian gulf region and extends north to include Levant, Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Some definitions broaden the term to include Afghanistan and North African countries. LGBTQ+ people in many Middle Eastern countries are subject to discrimination, prejudice, bullying and violence in their home countries. Reportedly, LGBTQ+ people in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia face strict punishments up to death sentences. LGBTQ+ refugees who come from Syria, Libya, Yemen, or Iraq, for example, also come from a context of an on-going (to date of this study) civil war and persecution of extreme terrorist groups, which increased the threat on LGBTQ+ persons. In Yemen, for example, according to ILGA (2019), “the situation has become progressively worse for sexual and gender minorities since the takeover of much of the country by the radical Houthi militia in 2013” (p. 140). In countries like Syria and Egypt, where there are no clear laws that criminalizes same-sex practices in particular, several laws against public indecency, adultery, debauchery and “unnatural intercourse” are used to criminalize homosexuality, with imprisonment sentences that could extend to five years. In comparison, in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, where religious Sharia laws are applied, single people who are found to have had same-sex intercourse may be punished with 100 whiplashes along one year of imprisonment, while married people are punished with death by stoning. (ILGA, 2019).

In addition to persecution faced in their home countries, Middle Eastern LGBTQ+ (ME-LGBTQ+) refugees also face additional requirements to prove their gender identity and/or sexual orientation in order to receive approval on their asylum application to host countries like Canada (Khan & Alessi, 2017). During this process, refugees experience persecution in the form of

westernized, stereotypical perceptions imposed on asylum seekers by immigration officers (Rehaag, 2016) which differ widely from the perceptions and expression of gender identity and sexuality in the Middle East. Moreover, the differences in legal status of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees led to different integration experiences. Refugee claimants who applied for asylum inside Canada have access to less services and limited government benefits compared to refugees who apply for asylum from proxy countries and arrive in Canada with a permanent residency status. These different experiences lead to different integration experiences, and also present an additional mental stress that frame the integration experiences for ME-LGBTQ+ refugees.

When the services by refugee-serving organizations (e.g., resettlement agencies, refugee organizations and community service organizations) fail to recognize the complex intersectional background and experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees, they become ineffective, as these intersections become barriers against the ability of LGBTQ+ refugees to access and benefit from these services. In addition to that, settlement services in Toronto are rarely tailored to LGBTQ+ refugees (Yee et al., 2014), which further limits the access to services LGBTQ+ refugees have for services that respond to their needs.

This study aims to delve into the complex intersectional integration experiences of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees in order to examine the ways gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality, mental health, and legal status intersect and shape their integration. The case of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees represents a good example of the impact of multiple intersecting factors in hindering integration. My research applies a structural intersectionality approach (Shields, 2008), and argues that, in the case of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, the intersection of multiple forms of persecution and marginalization in relevance to multiple identity factors (like race, nationality, and gender)

result in an intersectional form of discrimination that amplifies the difficulties and set additional barriers against their integration. Furthermore, through conducting a qualitative content analysis on 27 websites of LGBTQ+ refugee-serving organizations, this study seeks to identify gaps, assess the response of refugee services to the intersectional experiences ME-LGBTQ+ refugees and identify recommendations that may improve their benefit from refugee services and, therefore, have better integration experiences.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this section, I will explore the studies that focused on LGBTQ+ refugees' experiences in the Canadian context. A manual research using academic databases, including Google Scholar, Ryerson's Library and JSTOR was conducted using different combinations and variations of the main keywords: LGBTQ+, refugees, Canada, Toronto, Middle Eastern, service providers, resettlement organizations, refugee organizations, intersectionality and integration.

The literature about the integration of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees is particularly scarce. Karimi's (2018, 2019a, 2019b) work on the integration experiences of gay Iranian refugees stands as the most prominent work relevant to ME-LGBTQ+ refugees. Due to the unique intersections of a wide range of factors, an intersectional approach has been repeatedly applied to examine the entanglement of sexuality and gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, and religion with the integration experience. In his work with 19 gay Iranian refugees, Karimi (2018) analyzes experiences of integration, which he views as a collective action, and examines the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, and nationality in their integration, underlining the importance of sexuality as a factor in governing their social interactions. In relation to their interaction with the

Canadian society, the author found that race and color were the most influential factors that governed the experiences of gay Iranian refugees, highlighting the stigmatization and racism they faced which eventually led to completely over-shadow their sexuality as a factor in this interaction, and ultimately produced alternative dynamics of integration that altered their view of the Canadian community. On the other hand, Karimi (2018) points that ethnicity, color, and nationality factors governed the interaction of gay Iranian refugees with the Canadian gay community and typically led to racial discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization. Unless for limited exceptions, negative memories mostly governed gay Iranian refugee's interaction with their community in diaspora, which in turn resulted on hindering their ability to belong to their national communities and ultimately led to complete disconnection (Karimi, 2018). Another important factor that affects ME-LGBTQ+ refugees' integration is their ties to their home countries, which continues to shape their interaction with the Canadian society. Karimi (2019b) also demonstrated how gay Iranian refugees' life in Canada is largely influenced by their home and past memories from their country of origin that shaped their interaction with society even after moving to Canada. For example, the author found that participants continued to keep strong ties with their families and social networks at home by adapting to hiding their sexual identities and keep a distance between their ties to home and their lives in Canada. Karimi (2019b, 2020) argues against the assumed homogeneity of the group of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees and recommended, as a response to their intersectional experiences, "the immediate creation of safe spaces in refugee welcome centers. I also recommend developing pre-arrival workshops about life in Canada for racialized LGBT refugees" (Karimi, 2020, p146). Such workshops provided in the native language of LGBTQ+ refugees by facilitators who also have the knowledge and

familiarity with their intersectional background can largely improve the integration of LGBTQ+ refugees. While Karimi's (2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020) work mainly focused on gay Iranian refugees, which does not constitute for the larger group of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, his findings can largely apply in their context and reveal similar implications and impacts of their intersectional identities on their integration experiences.

The application of intersectionality is common across studies that focused on mental health issues related to asylum and immigration. For instance, Alessi and Kahn, (2017) interviewed 26 refugees in the U.S. and Canada, explored their experiences with persecution in their home countries and the impact of these traumatizing experiences on their mental health. Consequently, mental health is a prominent factor that was highlighted in the research examining LGBTQ+ refugees' integration. Mental stresses faced by LGBTQ+ refugees during their integration stem from several sources: the prosecution they faced prior to their arrival in Canada, the traumatic stress during the refugee claiming (or asylum seeking) process, and lastly, the stresses of the resettlement (and integration) process itself. For instance, LGBTQ+ refugees arriving in Canada come with traumatic past experiences of severe discrimination, victimization and violence that result on many mental issues including anxieties, depression, fear and traumatic stress as a result of persecution (Alessi & Kahn, 2017; Kahn et al., 2018). Alessi et al., (2017) also explored the negative experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees prior to their arrival in Canada and concluded several themes that were the most common in these experiences in relation to mental health and well-being. These themes included hiding their identities and living on the margins of society, which did not completely prevent recurring incidents of harassment and violent aggression. Particularly, the fear of being victimized by authoritative protection providers was

among the most important themes which typically impacted LGBTQ+ refugees' perceptions and interaction with governmental actors and police. Therefore, the authors called for refugee services tailored to respond to these complex experiences (Alessi et al., 2017), which can better respond to the intersectional needs of LGBTQ+ refugees in their integration.

The intersections of multiple identities that each, is subject to particular types of discrimination (i.e. racism, homo/bi/trans-phobia, and xenophobia) can also multiply the negative impacts on LGBTQ+ refugee's mental health. Logie et al., (2016) conducted a narrative thematic analysis on the intersectional experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees they interviewed. The intersections of discrimination forms that are based on race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality were found to contribute not only to harming the mental health of LGBTQ+ refugees but also actively block their ability to access much needed mental health services (Logie et al., 2016). The authors also demonstrated how social support groups tailored for racialized LGBTQ+ refugees contributed to improving the mental health of LGBTQ+ refugees in many ways, like contributing the self-acceptance, reduce isolation and stigma and cultivate friendships. (Logie et al., 2016).

The determination process is an integral part of the asylum seeking for all refugees, whether they claimed asylum from inside or outside Canada. Immigration officers typically conduct interviews with LGBTQ+ refugees to verify their applications. The mental stresses imposed during these interviews on LGBTQ+ refugees were also criticized (Kahn and Alessi, 2018). Namely, the requirement to "come-out" and the burden of proving one's sexual identity, which "may leave an emotional imprint from which some LGBT forced migrants must heal" (Kahn & Alessi, 2018, p. 37). Similarly, LGBTQ+ refugees are faced "not only with the traumatic effects of violence and victimization, but also with day-to-day complications of resettlement." (Kahn et al.,

2018, p. 319), that amplify the stresses they face and hinders their ability to heal. These difficulties are particularly amplified at the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, immigration status, and finding mental health service providers that could understand and respond to these intersectional backgrounds (Kahn et al., 2018), which further demonstrates the importance of refugee and resettlement services that are tailored to LGBTQ+ refugees.

Likewise, many other researchers criticized the homonormativity, stereotypes and westernized views and requirements that are imposed on refugees during the determination process, and the burden to prove one's identity (Lee & Brotman, 2011, 2013; Aberman, 2014; Gaucher & DeGagne, 2016; Murray, 2014a; Fobear, 2014, 2016; Logie et al., 2016; Dearham, 2017; Mule & Gamble, 2018). For example, Lee and Brotman (2011) criticized the impacts of the interviews conducted by immigration officers during the determination process and their "retraumatizing" impacts on LGBTQ+ refugee claimants, and particularly, the burden of proving one's identity and the stereotypical views on gender and sexuality that refugee claimants had to abide by in order to fulfill this requirement.

During this interview, refugees are asked not only to retell their stories and prove their identity, but also to prove they have been victims of persecution (Murray, 2014a). Moreover, the narrative of the determination process was criticized due to the "westernized" and "stereotypical" perceptions on LGBTQ+ people that are imposed and the "neo-colonialist and neo-liberal" narratives where refugees reject their "primitive" countries of origin for the favor of the homo-nationalist, neo-liberal concept of the Canadian nation (Murray, 2014a, p. 22). This rejection translates, in the case of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees into a distorted identity where they are unable to fully identify with either their own national communities, nor their host community.

Such practices and dynamics could expose LGBTQ+ refugees to particular stresses that are not traditionally faced by non-LGBTQ+ refugees who undergo the determination process on the basis of political or humanitarian asylum (e.g., refugees of war-torn countries). In the interviews she conducted with LGBTQ+ refugees in Canada, which focused on home and belonging, Fobear (2016) highlighted similar post-colonialist narratives and westernized views imposed during the interviews, particularly when LGBTQ+ refugees were asked about why they were “forced” to leave their countries:

Devran’s response, “Kat, I chose Canada,” speaks to his educating me about his experiences as well as complicating the narrative around his migration. My initial question was informed by my experiences as a volunteer at Rainbow Refugee and observing refugee hearings. The IRB routinely asks, “Why were you forced to leave your country?” I usually ask this of refugee claimants while preparing for upcoming refugee hearings to ensure that they are ready to give a clear and concise answer. Devran’s response to my question pushed me to reconsider how I engage the participants in their stories and to think about the ways in which the language of being “forced” may create a flattened narrative that silences refugees’ agency in their migration. (Fobear, 2016, p. 104).

The determination process, therefore, was found to retraumatize LGBTQ+ refugees, particularly at the intersections of race, gender and sexuality, among other factors, which should be taken into consideration in the provision of mental health services (Mule and Gamble, 2018). Similarly, Hodge (2019) criticized the “precarious” status and argued the responsibility of the state on constructing the precarity of refugees, claiming this precarity is “less of a static categorization of persons, and more of a series of processes—of claims and counter-claims— involving individuals, states, policy, and policy execution which intersect on and within the bodies of queer, non-binary and transgender refugees” (Hodge, 2019, p. 84). LGBTQ+ refugees are subject to three ways, or “vectors”, of precarity; the precarity caused by the process of decision making by asylum granting authorities, the obligation to prove they are “good refugees” in the

host society, which includes openly expressing their identity and the possibility of “removing recognition” of their identities, which is a process that “has less to do with the refugee than it does with the cultural and social values, beliefs, and expectations of their interlocutors” (Hodge, 2019, p. 87). In other words, the processes of determination, asylum and integration, in one way or another, hold re-shaping impacts on the LGBTQ+ refugees’ identities.

The cumulative work of many scholars has led to major revisions in the IRB’s guidelines and determination process. As a result, the Chairperson's Guideline 9: Proceedings Before the IRB Involving Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression, became effective in May 2017. In their short review, Dustin and Ferreira (2018) examined the revision of the IRB’s guidelines 9 in contrast to other similar guidelines in other countries like the UK and the European Union. The issues the guideline 9 revisions addressed included the stereotypes in the determination process, the asylum seekers’ inability to seek state protection in their home countries where laws prohibit sexual minorities, and featured a positive articulation of terms that offer more recognition to the range of identities and their intersections with other identity factors like “race, ethnicity, religion, faith or belief system, age, disability, health status, social class and education” (Dustin and Ferreira, 2018, p. 81). Regardless to the shortcomings of the authors referred to, which included the need to use strict language that would lessen the LGBTQ+ refugees to stress during the interviews, this recognition of the intersectional experiences and the impact of intersectional identity factors on resettlement and integration was a highlighted improvement to the determination process.

Consequently, and unlike other studies that largely criticized the determination process, Holder (2017) findings contradict the hypothesis about the negative views of LGBTQ+ refugees

about this process. Instead, the author reports improved perceptions and a positive improvement in the determination process perceived by LGBTQ+ refugees (Holder, 2017). While these positive views could be linked to the improvements made to the process, there has also been a shift in the LGBTQ+ asylum seeker's adaptability: asylum seekers exchanged information and stories about their interviews and developed mechanisms to overcome these obstacles and improve their chances in getting their claims granted, and "perform the aspects of their identity which meet the stereotypical demands of the IRB and other heteronormative Canadian systems" (Holder, 2017, p. 63). Regardless to any improvements, the bottom-line remains that the refugee-claiming process, particularly for those who applied from within Canada, still contributes negatively to the mental health of LGBTQ+ refugee claimants (Kahn & Alessi, 2018). This process was repeatedly found to force refugees to recall traumatic events and pressure LGBTQ+ into openly expressing their sexual or gender identity in ways that had no regard to their different cultural backgrounds which eventually contributed to mental health complications for a long time after (Kahn & Alessi, 2018). Therefore, mental stresses can still be considered a major factor that impacts the experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees in asylum and integration.

Other recurring themes included home belonging to a community, which is an issue particularly faced by LGBTQ+ refugees coming from "unfriendly" environments and a background of discrimination and prejudice in their home countries, which lead to issues with belonging to the new environment which Fobear's (2016) described as the lingering in between two senses of (un)belonging. Fobear (2016) conducted extensive work around the experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees in belonging, physical and moral homes in the Vancouver area. At the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class and citizenship with the sense of home and belonging, LGBTQ+

refugees experienced several challenges and difficulties, including securing housing and employment, racism and heteronormativity during the determination process, in addition to racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism and classism that intersected with their day-to-day experiences and ultimately impacted their sense of belonging (Fobear, 2016, pp. 382-390). Fobear (2016) highlighted the feeling LGBTQ+ refugees have, of feeling like living in between two places, arguing that their sense of belonging in Canada was interrupted, at times, by racism. Therefore, home “lies in the in-between, as they negotiate the relationships between their current homes in Metro Vancouver and their previous homes in their countries of origin” (Fobear, 2016, pp. 99-100). The relationship between securing a “home” and improving this sense of belonging, therefore, holds a significant impact on the LGBTQ+ refugees’ integration experiences.

This “liberation nation” narrative was conveyed by the majority of the 62 LGBTQ+ refugee claimants Murray (2014b) interviewed in Toronto, who noted how home was not only a concern for refugees during integration, but home was an integral topic during the interviews themselves. In other words, the process forces claimants to recognize Canada as a “liberator” for LGBTQ+ refugees from their home countries, which are “backward and primitive”. LGBTQ+ refugees, therefore, need a home concept that can articulate the sense of multiple homes and belongings, which is the case with LGBTQ+ refugees, and recognize the complexity of these power dynamics and their impact on their lived experiences (Murray, 2014b).

Through interviewing 27 participants who identified as LGBTQ+ newcomer youth, Yee et al., (2014) identified several themes that regulated their access to settlement services, including a shortage in services to cover all the needs, gaps in these organizations’ efforts to reach-out to LGBTQ+ newcomers. The main issue raised, in relevance to neo-colonialist and neo-liberal politics

that guide the process of settlement, is the focus on individual support that could translate into numeric values, which in-turn govern the funding of these organizations and goes in-line with the type of evaluation conducted by Canadian immigration authorities, opposed to a collective approach to ensure a stronger community of LGBTQ+ newcomers. The authors, therefore, recommend a rehabilitation of the settlement service provision sector that would recognize the complex intersectional experiences of LGBTQ+ newcomers and promote practices that increase the sense of belonging on a community level (Yee et al., 2014), which further demonstrates the importance of the sense of belonging to a community to the positive integration experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees in particular.

In order to investigate LGBTQ+ refugees experiences and explore the links between their identities, their sense of belonging and their refugee status during settlement, Lee and Brotman (2011) interviewed participants from both sides, LGBTQ+ refugees and service providers. The importance of belonging to a community was highlighted as a keyway to support the integration of LGBTQ+ refugees. Support groups were also vital for their positive experiences in settlement (Lee & Brotman, 2011). In fact, LGBTQ+ refugees sense of belonging to a community, and forging their links to society was as important of a factor as the traumatic stresses they underwent through during every step of the process, and so “an integral aspect to how sexual minority refugees survive and thrive may be the degree to which they establish support networks within affirming communities” (Lee & Brotman, 2011, p. 259). This sense of belonging was articulated in the safe spaces offered by LGBTQ+ support groups and organizations which “broke social isolation, fostered self-affirmation, and built community” (Lee & Brotman, 2011, p. 261). Despite this positive contribution, the author notes that these spaces did not always offer the same

privilege equally for LGBTQ+ participants (Lee & Brotman 2011). Therefore, it is not enough, like service organizations often design their programs, to only offer a space, however positive that may be. On the contrary, Refugees require direction and guidance to meet tailored communities that can respond to what they need.

Additionally, it is important to note the impacts of the negative experiences LGBTQ+ refugees suffered in their home countries on their perception of their own nationalities. LGBTQ+ refugees often face issues with the heterosexist and cissexist practices in their home countries that extended to their communities in diaspora (Fuks et al., 2018). Unlike previous research which regarded the community in diaspora, family ties and religious beliefs as positive factors that supported refugees, LGBTQ+ identified the same support resources as stigmatization and discrimination (Fuks et al., 2018). This negative impact continued to practice influence on LGBTQ+ refugees during their integration and led to disconnection with their communities (Karimi, 2018) that impacted their sense of belonging, and ultimately hindered their integration.

Contrary to the extensive research on mental health and the determination process, very little research could be found on the actual services provided by service organizations that support LGBTQ+ refugees. The research on service providers was often either in the form of interviews (Yee et al., 2014; Fuks et al., 2018) or focused on the online presence of service providers and analyzing the services offered on their online websites, as well as their inclusivity and presentation of LGBTQ+ people (Giwa & Chaze, 2018; Flett, 2019).

Service organizations' websites are often the gateway to their services that LGBTQ+ refugees first come in contact with (Flett, 2019), which signifies the importance of these websites

as the main point of contact, in addition to their significance as one of the service providers' tools for communication, outreach and promoting their work (Giwa & Chaze, 2018). In their study, In order to conduct content analysis of the websites of organizations providing services to LGBTQ+ immigrants, Giwa and Chaze (2018) identified the list of organizations designated as positive spaces among the Positive Space Initiative (PSI) that was initiated by the Ontario Council for Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) in 2009. The authors conducted their content analysis on one third of the list (n=33) which was randomly selected. Their findings revealed that despite their designation as safe spaces, the majority of the organizations' websites offered very little to none recognition of LGBTQ+ people, the discrimination they face or their intersectional identities, which was interpreted by the researchers as a sign of exclusion (Giwa & Chaze, 2018).

Building on Giwa and Chaze's (2018) work, Flett (2019) conducted a similar website analysis that specifically targeted organizations that serve LGBTQ+ youth newcomers and also concluded that the majority of organizations "fail to represent youth as a diverse group ignore many knowledges and lived experiences, and thus exclude their voices" (p. 13). This exclusion translates into social marginalization which often leads LGBTQ+ refugees to feel reluctant to access the services offered by refugee-organizations who do not represent or offer friendly spaces for LGBTQ+ refugees.

The review of the existing literature regarding LGBTQ+ refugees reveals several themes. Mainly, there was a large focus on the topic of mental health and the legal aspects of the process and, particularly, how the asylum process impact mental health. Evidently, the focus on the determination process is well justified and up to date with the current state of asylum and immigration, which shows in the recent improvements made to the process. However, there

seems to be a gap in the research of actual mental health services provided by refugee-serving organizations and recommend frames to mitigate their shortcomings. Aside from that, while the topics of belonging and integration were also among the topics studied by several researchers, there also seems to be less work around the role of service providers in fostering their belonging and integration. Additionally, only two studies focused on examining the online presence of service providers. Few studies surveyed service providers perceptions and interviewed their staff, but in comparison, there were by far more studies that interviewed LGBTQ+ refugees/immigrants/newcomers than those who interviewed service providers or examined their structures, funding, and operations. In addition to that, studies that examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees tended to use a wide range of varying acronyms, including (LGBT, LGBTQ, Queer, Sexual minorities, SOGIE, LGBTQ!). The reasons to choose one of these acronyms over the other is still largely debated, or often ignored across the literature.

## **METHODOLOGY**

LGBTQ+ refugees' intersectional identity, particularly race and gender, played a role in shaping their interactions with their social surrounding, which in turn, led to complex intersectional integration experiences (Lee & Brotman, 2011). Recently, there has been more research around the intersections of race/gender/ethnicity and other factors of social identity with the experience of integration that is often disregarded by policy makers, government agents (immigration officers and social workers) and service providers (e.g., resettlement agencies and refugee organizations).

Rather than being an articulated theory, Collins (2015) conceptualizes the term "overarching knowledge project" to define intersectionality, to demonstrate its relevance to race

formation theory. Intersectionality appeared in Academia, despite its popularity as a framework for the human rights activism of black women in the United States that gained much popularity after Crenshaw (1991) arguably “coined” the term (Collins, 2015). The author also notes that while intersectionality is well known to have been “coined” by Crenshaw, which returns its creation to this point, intersectionality actually have a longer history in both academia and social justice struggles, and points out that Crenshaw herself criticized the wild understandings of her work that framed it in a particular form (Collins, 2015). Many other similar struggles of other racialized gender groups also highlighted the connection between race, gender sexuality and class and the impact of this connection on their lives (Collins, 2015). Therefore, the application of an intersectional approach is also extremely relevant in the context of racialized (in this case, Middle Eastern) LGBTQ+ refugees.

According to Shields (2008), the social identities, or categories, do not perform in silos but interact and correlate one to another. Intersectionality according to Shields (2008), therefore, is articulated in the “mutual constitution, reinforcing and naturalizing of these social identities one to another” (p. 302). As none of these social identities can accurately reflect how we perform or interact in our environment, the application of intersectionality can allow better understanding of how these factors come into play in our social identities and to how social identities are being constructed.

Intersectionality can be divided into two types: structural and political (Shields, 2008). Structural intersectionality focuses mainly on the marginalization that is caused to individuals due to particular intersections of their social identities. Structural intersectionality reflects the ways in which the individual’s legal status or social needs marginalize them, specifically because

of the convergence of identity statuses, whereas political intersectionality refers to the conflicts that are imposed by opposing realities of different groups. The case of black women's conflicts between their struggles as women and as black people represents a famous example that was brought by Crenshaw (Shields, 2008). Both types of intersectionality are applicable in the case of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, who are subject to marginalization due to their intersectional identities, and also suffer the duality of their belonging to conflicting communities (in this case, their national communities that opposes their gender and sexual identities). According to Lee and Brotman (2011), "sexual minority refugee experiences of the Canadian refugee regime can be conceptualized through an articulation and analysis of political and structural forms intersectionality (pp. 253-254). Therefore, this study applies structural and political intersectionality as the main theoretical approach and method of analysis.

## **METHODS**

The research questions guiding this study are the following:

RQ1: How does the intersection of the factors of gender, sexuality, race, nationality, ethnicity, mental health and legal status shape the integration experiences of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees in Toronto?

RQ2: What is the role of refugee-serving organizations in response to the intersectional experiences of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees during their integration in Toronto?

To answer the first question, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six ME-LGBTQ+ refugees who are located in Toronto and have arrived in Canada within the last three years. Participants were identified using a snowballing technique. I started from an LGBTQ+ social

support group that provide support to over 35 LGBTQ+ current and past refugees and provide a safe space for them which I am a member of. I posted an ad on this group's Facebook group and shared the study ad by Email with several ME-LGBTQ+ refugee contacts and eventually I identified a list of 12 candidates for participation. Even though privacy and confidentiality were carefully regarded in the design of this study, some candidates still refused to be recorded or speak about their experiences. One candidate refused to conduct the interview online or to be recorded online fearing hacking or infiltration by the government in their home country. Although some fears by candidates may have been exaggerated, the bottom line for the majority of participants was privacy. For instance, some of the candidates needed to verify my gender and sexual identity before accepting to conduct the interviews, stating they would not accept had not the research been conducted by a queer researcher.

The inclusion criteria applied to identify participants included a) Middle Eastern b) refugees c) currently residing in Toronto, Ontario, d) who have arrived in Canada within the past three years, e) identify as a sexual or gender minority, which includes but is not limited to: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer, Transsexual and Transgendered people, f) have sought from inside or outside Canada, on the basis of being sexual or gender minority. As this research focused on marginalized groups, trans folks were particularly encouraged to participate. Exclusion criteria that were applied included a) those whose asylum claim has not been yet granted by the REB, b) refugees who arrived in Canada earlier than three years ago, c) immigrants and newcomers who did not undergo the asylum/refugee application process and arrived on different basis (including express visa entry, student visa, visitor visa) unless they have applied for asylum after arrival, and d) refugees who were granted asylum on a basis other than gender/sexual orientation.

The final list contained six candidates who all confirmed their participation and signed consent forms. The list of participants is reflected in Table-1 below. Pseudonyms were used to identify participants. Five interviews were conducted in Arabic and one in English. All interviews were conducted online via Google Meets platform and were recorded using a separate audio recording tool. The interview questions explored the prior experiences of participants which led them to come to Canada, their life and integration in Canada, the impact of intersectional identity factors on their integration. Audio records were then translated and manually transcribed by the researcher.

Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality
Hadi	Gay man	Syria
Dana	Trans Woman	Yemen
Najm	Gay Man	Yemen
Omar	Gay Man	Egypt
Rudy	Gay Man	Egypt
Salma	Trans Woman	Egypt

Table 1: Interview Participants

The interviews started with questions that aimed to examine the past experiences of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees which led to their asylum in Canada, then moved to explore their views and perceptions about life and integration in Canada, their interactions with the society in and the challenges and difficulties they faced. The interviews then explored the interaction of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees with refugee-serving organizations, the role these services played in their integration and their perceptions about the value of these services.

Using an intersectional frame of analysis, I conducted an inductive qualitative analysis (Annex.1) on the interviews' transcripts. I compiled answers of all participants for each of the questions and then synthesized the answers. Upon compiling the syntheses of the answers, few themes started to emerge.

### **Data Sample**

To answer the second research question, the interviews also investigated the services that participants needed during their integration and the services that were provided to them by organizations. A quantitative content analysis was also conducted to 27 organizations in Toronto to explore the services they provided to LGBTQ+ refugees (Annex.2). I looked into each website individually first in order to examine the types of organizations and the streams of services provided.

To collect data for the content analysis, I identified two lists of organizations. The first was the list of refugee organizations that are members in the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR), which is available on the CCR's website. The full list of Toronto-based members contained 48 organizations.

The second list was identified through the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)'s Positive Space Initiative (PSI) which is available on the PSI's online website. The list of Toronto-based organizations included 47 members. I applied exclusion criteria on both lists, which included all the non-organization members (e.g. initiatives/projects, research institutions), all the organizations that did not provide direct services or programs to refugees, in addition to the organizations that did not have an active website. Additionally, considering the focus of this

research on ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, and in order to accurately examine the services that are available for this specific group, I excluded all the organizations that had a particular ethnic/racial/lingual mandate that fell out of this circle, even when these organizations had dedicated refugee, or LGBTQ+ programs and services and the international development organizations and organizations whose program oriented only toward asylum seekers and refugees residing outside Canada. The final data sample contained 27 organizations, including 19 organizations from the CCR list and eight from the PSI list. Table 2 reflects the different types of organizations in the final data sample.

Organization type	n=27
Resettlement agency	6
LGBTQ+ organizations	5
Community organizations	7
Refugee organizations	4
Refugee shelters	5

Table 2: The types of organizations in the final data sample.

I collected the data from the websites manually and included all the services relevant to refugees, newcomers, settlement, or immigration. Services that are dedicated to social groups outside the scope of this research were discarded (e.g. children, seniors). The data sample also included the homepage and the about pages (including the vision and mission statements, and/or who we are pages).

A list of six questions was developed in order to examine the services of the refugee-serving organizations in relation to intersectional identity factors, including gender and sexuality, race, nationality, mental health and legal status. The questions, which were partially based on the list of content analysis questions developed by Giwa and Chaze (2018), are the following:

Q1: Does the organization's website display LGBTQ+ friendly content (e.g., rainbow flags or positive space images)?

Q2: Does the website offer any services/programs that relate to sexuality and gender of refugees?

Q3: Does the website offer any services/programs that respond directly to the mental health issues of refugees?

Q4: Does the website offer services/programs that respond to a particular racial, ethnic, or national refugee group?

Q5: Did the organization's website offer content in languages other than English and French?

Q6: Does the website offer services that respond to the legal status of refugees?

The content analysis questions aimed to investigate the services provided by service providers and their relevance to intersectional identity factors of LGBTQ+ refugees. The first two questions focused on gender and sexuality in terms of representation and services that relate to gender and sexual identity. Displaying LGBTQ+ friendly content on the organization's website is one of the most important ways to express inclusivity of LGBTQ+ refugees (Giwa and Chaze,

2018). Additionally, providing gender and sexuality related services appeals to LGBTQ+ refugees and provides them with spaces to express their identities.

The third question focused on exploring the services toward the mental health of LGBTQ+ refugees. The fourth and fifth questions aimed to explore services related to race, nationality and ethnicity. In particular, language was the main factor that reflected inclusiveness of particular nationalities, racial and ethnic groups (Giwa & Chaze, 2018; Flett, 2019). The last question focused on the response of service-providers to the legal status of LGBTQ+ refugees.

## **FINDINGS**

### **1. Interviews Findings**

#### **Pre-arrival:**

All participants reported traumatic experiences of violence and discrimination in their home countries. These experiences ranged from beatings, detention, interrogation, prison time and death threats. Participants who lived in proxy countries also reported similar experiences, in addition to discrimination based on their nationality or race. For instance, two participants stated that, while living in Saudi Arabia, they received prison sentences due to their sexual orientation, spent prison time that exceeded the original sentence and were eventually deported back to their home countries, where they also faced severe conditions of persecution and death threats by extremists.

"They arrested us, and I was sentenced for six months in prison, but they kept me for a year. After that I was deported to Yemen. After I was released, I was deported to Yemen. The war was beginning in Yemen so I could not stay there. Al Qaida also started spreading there and they killed LGBT people. Two of my friends died and I received a threat, so I left immediately" (Dana, June 22, 2020).

At the same time, all participants suffered traumatic experiences, state-persecution and instances of violence and aggression prior to arriving in Canada, whether in their home countries or in proxy countries where they applied for asylum. For instance, participants who applied for asylum from Indonesia reported instances of racism and xenophobia that intersected with homophobia and transphobia during their stay. Participants stated that they were arrested by Indonesian police for attempting to express their gender identity even though the Indonesian police protected the Indonesian LGBTQ+ community. Participants who lived in Indonesia also reported travel sanctions and being banned from work without having received any governmental or non-governmental support.

“I noticed that Indonesian trans women are comfortable here so I thought I could wear what I want. At that point I did not keep a feminine look because I was still afraid, and I was trying to hide my identity. After two or three months in Indonesia I felt comfortable to appear more feminine and be comfortable. When the police noticed me, I was arrested. They detained me for one night. I received beating and insults. They took my phone, my money and my passport, which is still in Indonesia.” (Dana, June 22, 2020).

The cumulative impact of these experiences on the mental health of participants, particularly in proxy countries where some participants reported spending over four years pending approval, reportedly continued even long after their arrival in Canada. In fact, these experiences shaped the perceptions of participants, in most cases, of their own nationalities and continued to influence their relationship with their national identity.

#### **Determination process:**

Half of the participants arrived in Canada directly from their home countries while three applied for asylum from proxy countries, four were granted asylum from outside Canada and arrived in Canada as permanent residents, while two were granted asylum upon arrival in

Canada. Two participants were privately sponsored while four were sponsored by the government. Participants who applied for asylum from inside Canada reported receiving temporary visas that allowed them to enter Canada and apply for asylum here. Other participants who arrived as permanent residents went through the UNHCR registration process in their home country or proxy countries and interviewed with immigration officers in the Canadian embassy.

The experiences of participants during the asylum-seeking process varied. Some participants were able to apply for asylum based on their gender identity, but others reported that despite reporting their gender identity repeatedly, the interviewing officers only recognized them as asylum seekers based on their nationality.

“When I told the officer I’m a gay guy she didn’t seem convinced. She looked surprised which was kind of traumatizing for me because I had been mentioning the things I have been going through as a homosexual guy in Syria and I thought she would know about it because that is what I presented to them in the application. She either did not get my application or she did not go through it or thought I was not the one who wrote this for some reason. I don’t know what it was exactly, but she was surprised, and I was surprised that she was surprised” (Hadi, June 23, 2020).

As a result, the determination process itself, similar to what Kahn and Alessi (2018), Murray (2014a) and Lee and Brotman (2011) found, continued to contribute mental stresses on LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. The fact that such incident was reported strongly refers to the continuous shortcomings of the determination process and the lack of immigration officers’ understanding to the intersectional realities of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees (Murray 2014a), which contributed to shaping their integration, later on.

### **Post arrival in Canada:**

Upon arrival in Canada, participants described widely differing experiences. Participants who had private sponsors were notably able to leverage these personal and individual

connections in order to secure housing, employment and other services they needed, while other participants who were either sponsored by the Canadian government or applied for asylum inside Canada faced more difficulties in securing their basic needs, including primarily stable housing.

Participants associated their perceptions about living in Canada mainly with safety, comparing the safety they currently enjoy to the discrimination and fear they experienced at home and in proxy countries. However, the instability they experienced due to mental stresses was an important aspect of their experience in Canada so far. Additionally, two participants who reported negative perceptions about Canada said their perceptions improved after the first year living here, which was directly related to their ability to form social bonds with a community.

Participants also referred to minor incidents of racism, mainly expressed in unwelcoming gazes and comments. Some participants referred to the current COVID-19 lockdown as a factor that resulted in freezing the activities they were engaged with like English learning or volunteering. One participant recognized his positive experience being a part of several communities due to their intersectional identity and considered that among the advantages of living in Canada. However, participants reported that despite their increased safety, they still experience lingering fears from the past which prevented them from properly socializing.

“Fear. I felt the fear of persecution even after I arrived in Canada. Outside Canada I have no protection, and anyone could harm me, and that fear lingered. I even faced some incidents here, so I still feel that fear. Someone came to my building and asked about me once. I did not recognize who he was or what he wanted. He could be a transphobic and he could be there to harm me” (Dana, June 22, 2020).

The meaning of integration varied widely among participants. Two participants associated integration with healing from past trauma and others saw that integration meant safety and their ability to lead their lives in freedom, engage productively in their society and

form social bonds with their communities. One participant criticized the term integration and proposed the term merging and defined integration as being an individual part of a diverse whole.

In particular, participants who considered themselves integrated, related their integration to their sense of safety. For instance, two participants stated that they felt similar to other Canadian citizens and that they enjoyed the same privileges. Another participant claimed that their ability to communicate in English helped them engage in their surroundings, and feeling equal with Canadians, which in turn contributed positively to their integration experience. Participants also referred to the language barrier and the need to socialize and communicate with their surrounding more to fully achieve integration. Two participants said that due to their different cultural background, they may fully integrate but will not become "fully Canadian" in the sense that they assimilate and identify as Canadians only or fully.

Securing stable housing was the most important challenge and need participants identified in order to integrate. The majority of participants highlighted that due to their traumatic experiences, and having arrived from unstable environments, they were not able to fully engage with the Canadian community at large at the first connection and needed a buffer time to heal. This situation was particularly highlighted when participants were exposed to non-LGBTQ+ refugee communities and their communities in diaspora, where they were again reminded by past incidents of persecution and rejection which resulted in their inability to engage with their environments. One participant described their situation in resettlement as moving from one crisis to another with no break. This also applies to participants who had to live in shelters or shared housing with non-LGBTQ+ refugees who sometimes shared their nationality or ethnicity. As a result, participants were unable to express themselves openly or form the social

bonds they needed to help them integrate. Additionally, Language learning, employment, guidance and support in the first years were also highlighted as important needs to help their integration. Specifically, several participants referred to their need for guidance in their language when they first arrived, that would point them to the right direction. This further confirms the recommendations of Karimi (2018) of language-tailored workshops that would be provided to LGBTQ+ refugees prior to their arrival. Among other needs that were identified included mental health support, the need to socialize with a community, finding a partner and medical needs. Participants also identified the confusion and loss they felt after they first arrived as a major challenge, stating that they had very little language skills to communicate, and highlighting the need of translation and guidance in their language that would have allowed them better integration experiences.

In general, the experiences of ME-LGBTQ+ in asylum and integration were highly influenced by their intersectional identities. Particularly, ME-LGBTQ+ asylum seekers were exposed to additional forms of discrimination related to their nationality as well as their gender identity during their stay in proxy countries. These factors also painted their integration experiences; nationality continued to play a major role in their integration in the form of racism and discrimination from the Canadian society, but most importantly homo/bi/trans-phobia and persecution they were particularly exposed to due to their national ties with their communities in diaspora. On the other hand, the participants expressed grievance impact of these combined factors on their mental health during integration. Whether the persistent fears from past experiences of persecution and discrimination in their own countries or in proxy countries, these

factors continued to negatively impact ME-LGBTQ+ refugees even after their arrival, and resulted in aggravating the mental stresses they had to endure during their integration.

**Friends and community:**

There was a consensus about the importance of the role played by personal connections with community peers, not only to meet the basic needs but also to find relevant services and receive guidance. Notably, participants resorted to personal connections and friendships they formed with their peers, either in the LGBTQ+ refugee community or the Canadian LGBTQ+ community to secure housing, employment, and meet their needs. Hadi stated he utilized his personal connections with Canadian LGBTQ+ community to connect to possible employers and did in fact find employment. Another participant identified hosts that helped them secure housing through their LGBTQ+ refugee peers. Two participants confirmed that services of resettlement organizations helped them meet their needs and find subsidized housing programs, but also referred to the role their friends and peers played in supporting them to connect with these organizations in the first place. The participants also identified their friends as an important source of emotional support that substituted therapy and contributed to improving their mental health and helping them express themselves openly. This emotional support from LGBTQ+ refugee peers, according to one participant, helped them feel much safer and less lonely.

Other sources of support which helped participants overcome the challenges of integration included the financial support provided by the government, the financial and emotional support of private sponsors and the mental health support they received through the interim federal health insurance during the first year was also a source of support. The mental

health support of the interim federal health insurance was, however, noted to be mainly aimed to help them deal with the challenges and difficulties during resettlement in Canada, but did not support them to heal from past traumatic experiences. One participant highlighted the leverage they enjoyed due to their sexual identity in securing a job, jokingly describing the network of the gay community as “the gay mafia” to convey the close ties among the gay community and its strong solidarity.

**Intersectional factors:**

Participants felt that intersectional identity factors have impacted them both negatively and positively. Particularly, while few participants referred to instances of homophobia and transphobia they suffered, they also agreed that gender and sexuality had by far more positive impacts on their integration. For instance, gender and sexuality allowed participants access to the Canadian gay community that supported their integration. The recognition some participants received by the Canadian LGBTQ+ community to their gender identity was reportedly a source of empowerment that also contributed positively to their experiences. In contrast, race, nationality and ethnicity were regarded among the factors that contributed negatively. Participants described incidents of racism and violence based on their race or nationality. One participant reported being continuously shouted at by a drunk neighbor in the shared housing they stayed in during their first days. Other participants reported hearing negative comments about their nationality from Arab Canadians and/or immigrants. Except for the above-mentioned incident, most of the examples of racism that participants reported did not exceed unwelcoming gazes and uncomfortable comments. For example, one participant mentioned receiving comments that they did not look or sound as their nationality or ethnicity and that their skin looked “whiter”

than their ethnicity. Another participant reported a security person singled them out of tens waiting in-line in front of a shop to request their ID. Among the factors that helped them integrate, participants identified love, friends' support and fluency in English as contributing factors. Legal status as a refugee was perceived to have no impact on the experience of integration in general, whereas the legal status of a permanent residency was specifically mentioned as a positive factor that also contributed to increase the sense of safety and fostered integration. However, participants referred to instances where they were unable to receive services for reasons related to their status. For instance, one of the participants stated that due to their status in Canada as a permanent resident, which was granted upon arrival in Canada upon refugees, was unable to receive services from an LGBTQ+ organization in Toronto that claimed their services are directed towards asylum seekers who have not yet granted the status.

Except for one participant who maintained a limited connection with their family, most participants maintained strong ties with their direct family members and close circles of friends but had no connection with their home otherwise. One participant identified strongly with their home country and reflected the desire to continue maintaining this tie with their home country. In contrast, most of the participants did not maintain any tie with their community in diaspora. Participants reflected unwillingness to interact closely with their communities in diaspora and criticized its lack of respect and openness towards LGBTQ+ community, even in Canada. Some participants described their community in diaspora as hypocrite for leading open lifestyles but rejecting and condemning LGBTQ+ people.

Mental health was highly regarded as having a negative impact on the integration experience of all participants. Participants reported lingering memories, trauma and fears that

add to their difficulties. Participants reported feeling severe depression, Isolation, confusion and helplessness as a result of past trauma and current stresses they were exposed to during their integration. Three participants reported recurring suicidal thoughts that they experienced during that time. One participant confirmed they had attempted suicide and was hospitalized for over two months.

### **Role of services:**

Participants' perceptions on the services provided by refugee-serving organizations reflected stark differences. While two participants reported positive experiences receiving valuable services from resettlement and LGBTQ+ organizations to secure most of their needs, including housing, English learning, skills development and socializing, the rest of participants stated that, despite making several attempts, they failed to receive any kind of services they needed.

Participants identified two refugee serving organizations on average. While two participants made connections with LGBTQ+ organizations, which in turn referred them to other services upon their arrival, the majority of participants identified services mostly through their peers and friends and depended less on online and social media. Despite the consensus of the importance of these services for LGBTQ+ refugees, and their potential to contribute positively towards better integration experiences, the majority pointed that they failed to receive any services from resettlement organizations despite their repeated requests. One participant, who was in their first year of arrival, explained that they were informed by one LGBTQ+ organization in Toronto that they did not qualify to receive any services because they were not an asylum

seeker, and another one noted continuously seeking mental health therapy or medication but being either turned down or referred to other entities that also gave them the same answer.

Most participants agreed that resettlement organizations need to provide more support towards housing, which was regarded as the highest priority. Participants envisioned subsidized LGBTQ+ refugee-friendly housing where newly arriving refugees could socialize and provide emotional support to one another. Other recommendations included continuous and ongoing follow up and outreach by organizations and providing more effective programming that focuses on nurturing the skills and facilitating the engagement of LGBTQ+ newcomers with their new community.

## 2. Content Analysis Findings

Code	Question	n=27	%
Q1	Does the organization's website display LGBTQ+ friendly content (e.g. rainbow flags or positive space images)?	11	41
Q2	Does the website offer any services/programs that relate to sexuality and gender of refugees?	7	26
Q3	Does the website offer any services/programs that respond directly to the mental health issues of refugees?	10	37
Q4	Does the website offer services/programs that respond to a particular racial, ethnic, or national refugee group?	7	26
Q5	Did the organization's website offer content in languages other than English and French?	9	33
Q6	Does the website offer services that respond to the legal status of refugees?	15	56

Table3: Content Analysis quantitative results

In regard of the second research question, the findings of the content analysis reveal a wide range of services provided by refugee-serving organizations, but also several gaps in services needed the most by ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, like mental health services.

Service providers offered 4 services/programs on average. Two organizations offered up to eight different programs and services while two provided only one program/service. The services included primarily basic resettlement services, including temporary housing (shelters, shared housing and referral to subsidized housing), language learning (one-on-one, language circles, ESL courses and class), employment services (resume, networking, orientation to market, learning skills, computer skills, mentorship and bridging programs), settlement workers who provide orientation and interpretation/translation services, youth, seniors, children and women programs and service (women housing, youth settlement in schools, recreational, sport and educational programs). Other services included mental health counseling, peer-support groups, orientation to nature and environment and family and children programs, and some organizations offered employment-related services (e.g. mentoring programs). Regarding gender and sexuality, LGBTQ+ organizations offered educational and empowerment programs and workshops about gender and sexuality, in addition to sexual health and dedicated programs to Trans people, and 11 organizations out of 27 (%41) displayed LGBTQ+ positive images and symbols on their websites. Non-LGBTQ+ organizations tended to offer very basic to no representation of LGBTQ+ refugees. This presentation is translated in displaying LGBTQ+ friendly banners on the homepage or in services pages. Although several organizations were identified from the PSI website, only organizations displayed PSI logos on the homepage. It also is notable the complexity and structure of services provided online varied widely between different organizations, and in many cases, overlapped with other sectors and services. For example, LGBTQ+ organizations did provide refugee-specific programming, and, in turn, refugee

organizations tended to provide basic resettlement services (e.g., language learning or temporary housing).

Only 37% (n=10) of the organizations examined offered mental health services to refugees. Mental health services varied between resettlement organizations, with some offering private and one-on-one counselling services by professional staff, and others offering “wellbeing” activities and group activities which mainly consisted of safe spaces and group support. Some mental health services targeted particular groups, including families, men or women. None of the organizations offered mental health services in languages other than English except one organization that offered mental health counselling in one European language.

Additionally, only 26% (n=7) of the organizations examined provided services that addressed specific racial groups, nationalities or ethnicities. These organizations offer services carried out by settlement workers who can communicate with the refugee’s native language. Three of these organizations offered services in a variety of languages for European, Asian, Middle Eastern and South American nationalities and one organization offered services only in one language other than English and French. Other than interpretation and translation services, there have been very few services that responded to race/ethnicity of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees. Although not many organizations offered services tailored for particular racial or national communities, a larger number of organizations did adapt their website to offer content translation into many languages and/or offered services in refugee’s native languages. For example, some organizations offered a google translate link on their website with the ability to translate to over 60 languages and another website enlisted the contact information of their staff in several languages.

The findings also reveal that the services provided by organizations focused more on the legal status and language of refugees (which associates with nationality) but had less focus on gender and race/ethnicity or nationality (directly). Notably, the majority of services (%56) addressed the legal status of refugees, with services tailored to refugee claimants and persons with precarious statuses. These services ranged between supporting the application and hearing process, temporary housing and educational workshops. In general, the majority of organizations directed services broadly to newcomers of all statuses, while few recognized specific categories including convention refugees, government assisted refugees and refugee claimants, along with immigrants and privately sponsored refugees.

The findings of the content analysis came consistent with the findings from the interviews findings; the content analysis revealed an inclusion gap of LGBTQ+ refugees in the shelter and temporary housing services, and a total absence for LGBTQ+ friendly housing services. Instead, these services tended to cater more for refugees based on their nationalities. This is evident in the fact that more organizations, particularly shelters and refugee organizations, tended to provide services that are tailored in variety of languages, than they offered LGBTQ+ inclusion and representation, or services tailored specifically to LGBTQ+ refugees. Additionally, the findings reveal that, while mental health services are actively provided by resettlement agencies and LGBTQ+ organizations, there is still a noticeable gap in providing mental health services, especially in consideration of the additional mental stresses reported by LGBTQ+ refugees, compared to non-LGBTQ+ refugees.

## **DISCUSSION**

In regard to the first research questions, the findings reveal that the integration experiences of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees are heavily impacted by their intersectional identities. As a result, the effect of the discrimination and persecution they faced outside and inside Canada toward their racial, national, gender and sexual identities have been amplified, leading to more barriers and less access to services and resources, and eventually hindering their integration. The analysis of the interviews' transcripts revealed four themes: Intersectional discrimination, a gap in (mental health) services, aggravated mental stresses and personal solidarity networks.

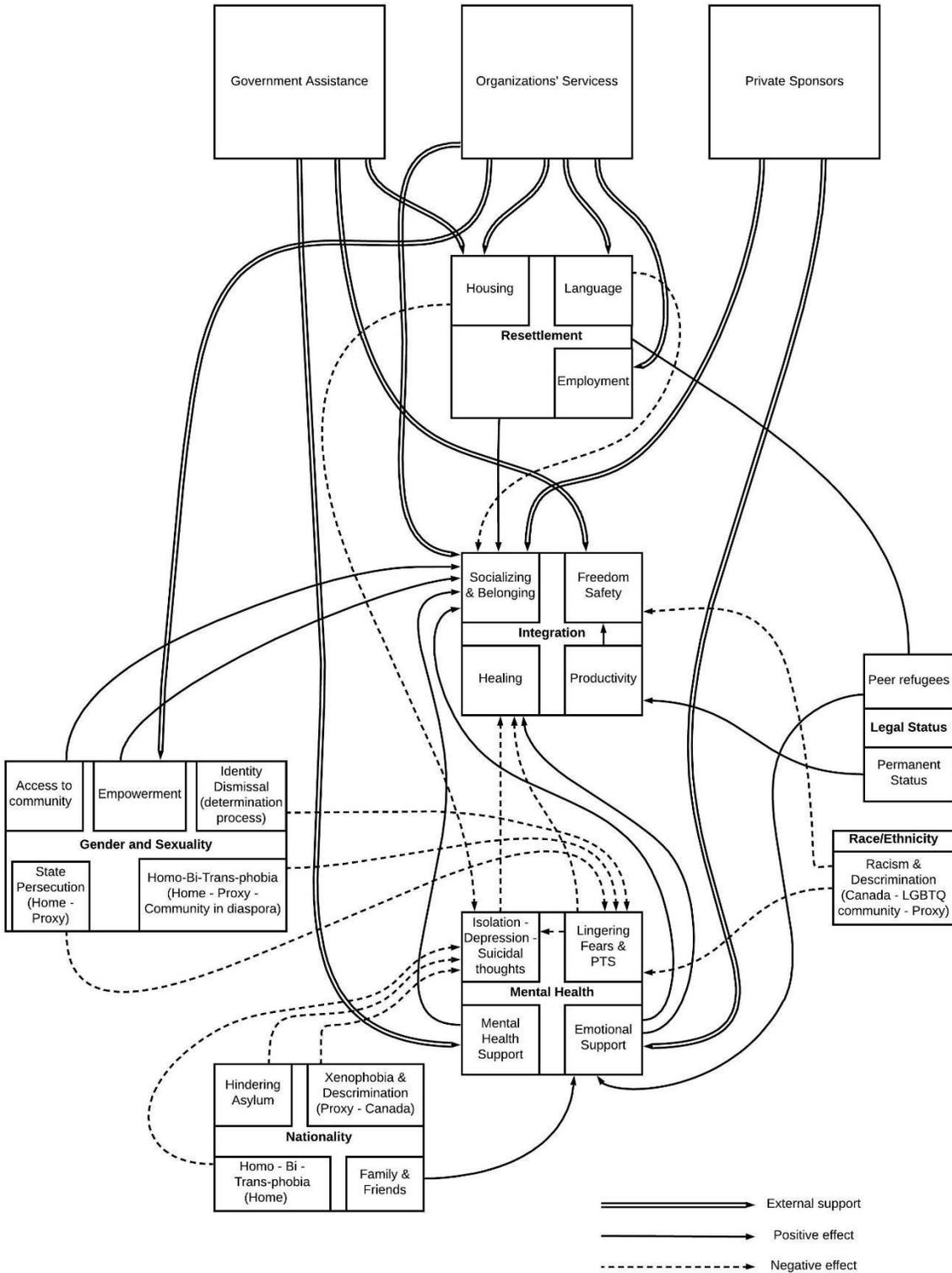


Diagram 1: The effect of intersectional identity factors on integration and the contribution of service providers.

### **Intersectional discrimination:**

The stark differences in the asylum experiences of participants confirms that ME-LGBTQ+ refugees are far from being a homogenous group. In fact, the term Middle Eastern includes several nationalities, races, ethnicities and languages. LGBTQ+ gender identities also vary and legal statuses of people who are identified as “refugees” may also vary, which further increases the complexity and intersectionality of this group and lead to widely varying experiences. The studies that focused on the group of refugees typically “take ‘refugee’ as a homogenous category and fall short of discussing the issues mentioned above at the intersection of the researched–researcher’s ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other empirically relevant factors” (Karimi, 2019a, p. 16). For instance, due to less restrictions on the LGBTQ+ community and more presence of LGBTQ+ related events, Egyptian participants of this research were able to contact Canadian LGBTQ+ organizations directly from their country and had relatively more space for activism toward LGBTQ+ rights that mounted to the ability to raise the rainbow flag in a public concert in Cairo and organize other civil activities. In contrast, participants of the Yemeni and Saudi nationality, who come from more intensely restrictive and conservative environments, did not have the same advantage and, consequently, had to move in between several proxy countries in order to apply for asylum. Moreover, due to geographic proximity, Syrian LGBTQ+ refugees were able to contact the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from Lebanon or Turkey, which share borders with Syria, while Yemeni participants did not have this privilege either and had to travel to Indonesia in order to contact the UNHCR authorities.

Diagram 1 reflects the complex relations between a variety of intersecting factors that contribute to shaping the integration experience of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees. In particular, the

pattern reveals complex intersections between the factors of nationality, gender and sexuality, and mental health. For instance, the dismissal of sexual identity some participants faced contributed to their fears and doubts even after arriving in Canada. Hadi pointed out that despite his explicit statement in regard to his sexual orientations in his asylum application, the immigration officer who interviewed him was completely oblivious to this fact and treated his application on the basis of nationality only. The same issue was pointed out by Najm, whose sexual orientation has been completely discarded in the asylum process and only his nationality as a Yemeni was recognized. This dismissal contributed to the mental stresses they faced after their arrival. Other participants, particularly trans women, also pointed out the “confusion” they felt about their gender identity even months upon arrival, which was mainly caused by society and state persecution, both at home and proxy countries.

The intersection of nationality-related discrimination with gender and sexuality also translated into differing experiences of asylum-seeking for ME-LGBTQ+ refugees. While some nationalities had the advantage of visa-free entrance to neighboring countries that allowed access to UNHCR offices, other nationalities added to travel constraints, hindered the asylum-seeking process and eventually contributed to more mental stresses. Different Middle Eastern nationalities also had different access to Canadian immigration authorities and LGBTQ+ refugee organizations. For instance, participants from Egypt had activism profiles and police arrest reports that helped them gain recognition from immigration authorities, whereas, Yemeni participants spent longer times in prison and received harsher punishments, but they could not receive the same recognition.

The intersectional discrimination continued to be a major influence on the integration of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, even after their arrival in Canada. In contrast to non-LGBTQ+ refugees who resort to their national communities to draw support, ME-LGBTQ+ refugees suffered discrimination from their communities in diaspora and the Middle Eastern community in Toronto that extended to racism in addition to homo/bi/trans-phobia, which contributed negatively towards their integration and added to the barriers on their ability to socialize, express their identities and enjoy the safety and freedom they need. This was also evident in the clear preference of all participants to maintain little-to-no connection with their community in diaspora, partly because they did not feel safe, but also partly because they didn't feel they belonged and they were looking forward to connecting with Canadian communities that are more open to connect with, which also resonates with the findings

Moreover, while participants confirmed they did also face incidents of racism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia from Canadians, they were not as affected by these incidents. These incidents were perceived as either racist, or sexist, but not both. In other words, the incidents received by Canadian hosts perceived by participants as “single” type discrimination, where the discrimination the participants felt in their contact with other Arab communities in Toronto was perceived as an intersection of nationalism, racism, homophobia and transphobia. As a result, the majority of the participants related more to their sexual orientation and gender and less to their national identity.

This intersection of discrimination based on multiple identity factors was evident in the experiences of participants, whether in their home countries or proxy countries, and continued even after their arrival in Canada. Participants faced aggressive instances of homo/bi/trans-

phobia in their home countries as well as proxy countries. In addition to that, participants faced racism and xenophobia based on their color and nationality in proxy countries and in Canada, particularly by their own diaspora communities, which reiterates the findings of Karimi (2018), where gay Iranian refugees were also found to disconnect from their communities in diaspora, and further demonstrates the stigmatization and discrimination imposed by the community in diaspora (Fuks et al., 2018). Participants seemed less affected by racist incidents they witnessed from the Canadian community and more affected by similar incidents committed by Arab-Canadians, and Arab LGBTQ+ refugees. While Dana did not face any issues with Canadians or white people regarding any aspect of identity, she described many incidents of racial slurring and trans-phobia by people from other Arab nationalities in Toronto. This stands as an example of the amplified effect of intersectional discrimination, in this case, nationality, gender and sexuality and race.

**Aggravated mental stresses:**

The intersectional forms of discrimination ME-LGBTQ+ refugees faced due to the intersection of their nationality, gender, sexuality and race led to what several participants called “lingering” fears and post traumatic stresses (PTS) that prevented them from socializing, accessing services and immersing in their host society. Additionally, while homo/bi/trans-phobia and gender-based discrimination they endured at home was no longer a factor, the participants continued to be exposed to the impacts of their national identities, whether from their communities in diaspora, the loss and separation from their families and social ties, or the continuing fear of their gender and sexual identities being exposed to their nationals, in Canada and at home. As a result, half of the participants reported they have either attempted suicide or

considered suicide during the first two years. Specifically, the feeling of not belonging to either of the two worlds (home versus host) was among the most identified reasons. Participants reported feeling rejected at home and unable to engage in Canada and feeling stuck in between the past and the future, and the sense of (un)belonging Fobear (2016) referred to, which led them to isolation and despair.

### **Gaps in services:**

According to participants, the main sources of support available to them were mainly refugee organizations, private sponsors and government assistance. While the services participants received from refugee organizations contributed immensely to their positive experiences, they mostly focused on the basic resettlement needs but tended to ignore mental health and other needs described by participants. All participants identified a gap in their access to mental health services and support, claiming the available services were either inaccessible to them or not suitable for their situation. For example, Salma explicitly stated that she attempted to receive services several times from many organizations but was unable to receive any, and instead was repeatedly referred to other organizations. For instance, participants described being referred from one organization to another in what was described as a loop in addition to being asked to meet multiple requirements like registration and attending orientation workshops. While this lack of access could be returned partially from the language barrier and lack of guidance, one could also assume certain services that is needed by LGBTQ+ refugees is not provided in the first place. This further supports the argument of Yee et al., (2014) in regard of the nature of services themselves that is more focused on maintaining the numeric values of

participation, which will in turn guarantee a sustainable fulfillment of governmental requirements to receive funding.

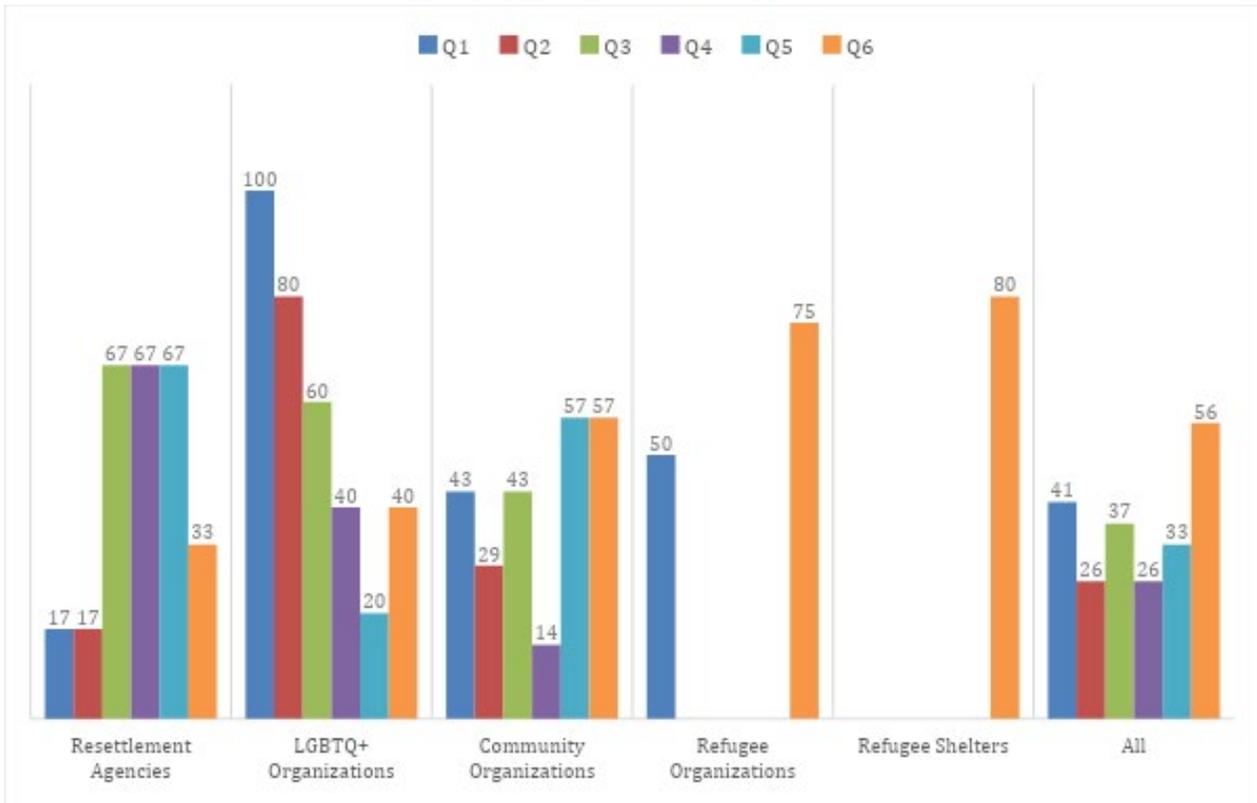
Participants repeatedly referred to the difficulties they faced particularly in the first few weeks upon their arrival, stating the need they felt for guidance and orientation in their language, and noting the gap in providing this service by refugee-serving organizations. While the content analysis of this study revealed that several organizations do provide services of orientation in the national language of refugees and provide language-related services or services customized in refugees' national languages, very few organizations did offer services in Arabic language. Only seven organizations (of the total of 27) provided services in Middle Eastern languages (including Arabic and Farsi) while the rest either provided automated website translation or interpretation/translation services but did not provide services in any specific language. This also reflects a gap in the response to the intersectional identity of ME-LGBTQ+ refugee and could count for another reason ME-LGBTQ+ felt disoriented and helpless during the first few weeks.

### **Personal solidarity networks**

Many participants stated that their personal network of friends, peer LGBTQ+ refugees and personal contacts was the most important factor that allowed them support, whether toward improving their mental health or facilitating their integration. All participants stressed how peer support and connections they made with LGBTQ+ communities or peer LGBTQ+ refugees have helped them on many levels, whether with the resettlement needs, mental health and emotional support or even getting access to desired and needed social services. This support was sometimes deemed more important than family support.

Whether services were available or not, newly arriving ME-LGBTQ+ refugees felt “estranged” from the society. The barriers of mental stresses, intersectional discrimination and the language barrier made mental health services inaccessible to them. Friends played the role of the mediators between them and the new community and allowed them to share their problems with people who faced similar issues, which led to forging strong bonds that constituted the most important safety network participants had, which further complies with the findings of Lee and Brotman (2011) about the role of support networks. On the other hand, While the online presence was identified by similar studies as the “first point of contact” to services (Flett, 2019), this finding does not seem to apply on ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, who, due to the language barrier, depended mostly on their personal connections with peers to identify suitable services. The ME-LGBTQ+ refugee’s intersectional identities, while exposing them to particular forms of intersectional discrimination, also made possible new forms of support. Hadi jokingly described this network as “the gay mafia”, which articulated the feeling of solidarity he sensed, that contributed to his sense of belonging and facilitated his integration. Most of the participants reflected the same need to belong to a community in order to feel safe, free to express their identity and receive emotional support which ultimately improved their integration.

In regard of the second research question, service providers tended to play a role mainly in response to the legal status and revealed several gaps in the response to the intersectional identities of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees.



Graph 1: Service provision of organizations (by Type).

Refugee-serving organizations tended to vary in type and focus. The data sample for the content analysis (n=27) included five main categories of organizations: Resettlement agencies (n=6), LGBTQ+ organizations (n=5), community organizations (n=7), Refugee organizations (n=4), and refugee shelters (n=4). The services of these organizations also tended to vary based on the type and focus of the organization. Resettlement agencies provided services to a broad audience immigrants and newcomers which typically included refugees with permanent resident statuses but did not include refugee claimants (except for one resettlement agency that included refugee claimants in its services). LGBTQ+ organizations provided various types of programming across a wide range of areas including mental health and asylum seeking, in addition to gender and sexuality related programming. Community organizations also tended to vary in type and focus, which extended to specific neighborhoods, racial, national and ethnic groups, and, due to this

variety, tended to cover a wider range of services that responded to all identity factors, but also reflected a gap in contrast to resettlement agencies and LGBTQ+ organizations. Refugee organizations (n=4) offered services for both refugees with permanent status and refugee claimants that supported settlement, the determination process, temporary housing and employment support, but notably offered fewer services than resettlement agencies and LGBTQ+ organizations. Finally, refugee shelters offered mainly temporary and emergency housing in addition to supporting the refugee claimants with the application and determination process but did not extend their services beyond that.

The services these organizations offered tended to overlap in many areas. An example of that is the resettlement services provided by refugee organizations and refugee shelters, and the refugee programming offered by LGBTQ+ organizations. One of the organizations, which, for the purpose of this research fell under the LGBTQ+ organizations, was also a refugee organization. This overlapping, in addition to the variety in types and mandates of refugee-serving organizations, resulted in a complex web of services, programs and offerings by refugee-serving organizations. These organizations also had different requirements for registration and eligibility criteria for some of the services and programs offered, which further increases the complexity of this web of services. Such complexity would not be easily overcome by newly arriving refugees who lack the resources and knowledge about the structure of these organizations, particularly with many ME-LGBTQ+ refugees lacking the language skills to read through the requirements and identify the services they can benefit from and which they are eligible for.

## **The Gaps:**

Notably, resettlement agencies provided a range of services that responded to multiple identity factors, including race, nationality, mental health and legal status. However, there has been a notable gap in displaying LGBTQ+ friendly representation with only one organization doing that and providing gender and sexuality related programming. This gap in presentation by resettlement agencies could contribute to the lack of access interview participants referred to. Additionally, the lack of language content in the LGBTQ+ organizations also contributed to this lack of access; in both cases refugees felt discouraged, or unable to access the services regardless of whether it is provided or not. Community organizations, in comparison, and due to their diverse nature, did reflect better representation and gender-related services than resettlement agencies but also lacked the services that related to race or nationality, while half of the refugee organizations (n=4) displayed LGBTQ+ friendly content on their websites. In contrast to resettlement agencies, which typically provided services to refugees with permanent status only, refugee organizations directed their services to refugees and refugee claimants, but did not provide any services that related to gender, sexuality, nationality or race. In addition to that, none of the refugee organizations offered any content in languages other than English and French that could help LGBTQ+ refugees access services in their native languages. Similarly, there was a notable absence in providing any mental health services. The same findings apply to refugee shelters (n=5) which only addressed the legal status of refugees, and provided basic services that supported the legal status, but did not respond to any other identity factors. While this type of emergency and temporary housing option is usually offered only on the basis of legal status (i.e. refugee claimants with no permanent status), LGBTQ+ refugees count as one of the main groups

among refugee claimants. The lack of displaying any LGBTQ+ refugee inclusive content can be an indicator of the lack of inclusiveness ME-LGBTQ+ refugees reportedly faced when they resorted to emergency housing organizations. In fact, one of the main gaps identified in this analysis is the lack of organizations providing temporary housing particularly for LGBTQ+ refugees. In general, the services provided by refugee organizations and refugee shelters revealed a gap in presentation and services related to gender and sexuality, race, nationality and mental health. Finally, with only 37% (n=10) organizations providing mental health services, the gap in mental health, in particular, was evident. Resettlement agencies and LGBTQ+ organizations tended to provide mental health services the most, but very few of the services provided included professional counselling and mostly provided emotional and well-being support through workshops and group sessions.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how the intersectional identities of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees are shaping their experiences of integration and examined the gaps in services provided by refugee-serving organizations. ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, in contrast to the homogenous perception about them (Karimi, 2019), come from diverse backgrounds, nationalities and ethnicities. These differences, mainly in nationality, translated into different advantages and disadvantages during the asylum-seeking process. Before arriving in Canada, ME-LGBTQ+ refugees suffered intersecting forms of discrimination, based on gender, sexuality, nationality and race. This intersectional discrimination persisted even after they arrived in Canada, particularly from their communities in diaspora. This persisting intersectional discrimination eventually led to aggravated mental stresses and blocked the ME-LGBTQ+ refugees' ability to interact with their society, leading to

isolation, depression and suicidal thoughts. Particularly, the findings revealed an aggravated mental stress at the intersection of gender/sexuality and nationality. Reportedly, the support of refugee-serving organizations in most of the cases was either inaccessible or unavailable. Instead, ME-LGBTQ+ refugees depended on their personal connections to form a network of solidarity that enabled them access to services and resources that contributed to their integration, which they associated with safety and freedom to express their identities, the ability to be a productive member of society, the ability to socialize and belong to a community, and healing from the traumatic experiences they endured in the past.

The content analysis of 27 websites of refugee-serving organizations revealed, in contrast, a high level of complexity and overlapping in these organizations' structure, areas of focus and provided services, which contributed to rendering these services more inaccessible for ME-LGBTQ+ refugees. Additionally, the analysis revealed gaps in housing services that accommodate LGBTQ+ refugees, mental health services and inclusivity of LGBTQ+ refugees on the refugee-serving organizations' websites.

The gaps identified by the content analysis suggest that, while service providers did actively respond to the intersections of several identity factors of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, the fact remains that much more emphasis is still being given to nationality over gender and sexuality factors. Whether during the process, or when accessing services, nationality continues to play a vital role in shaping the integration experiences of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees. This emphasis on nationality, directly opposes the expression of gender and sexuality in many instances, and evidently hinders the ability of LGBTQ+ refugees to integrate. This is particularly significant in the light of Murray's (2014a) findings; LGBTQ+ refugees arrive in Canada through a process that

distorts their national identity and continue to struggle to seek integration in their host community within this identity struggle that continues to add stresses and decrease the value of the services that aim to foster their integration.

Finally, ME-LGBTQ+ refugees in Canada are subject to multiple forms of structural and political intersectionality (Shields, 2008). ME-LGBTQ+ refugees' intersectional identities did not only expose them to intersectional forms of discrimination related to several factors of their social identities, but also were subject to conflicting agendas at the intersection of gender/sexuality and nationality. Traditional response that aim to boost resettlement and ignore the contradictive intersectional identities in this case renders the value of these services meaningless, where ME-LGBTQ+ refugees long for meaningful integration that recognize and empower their identities, but also celebrates their autonomy as a distinct community, in contrast to non-LGBTQ+ refugees.

## **Recommendations**

Understanding the intersectional complexity of the LGBTQ+ refugee's background, and tailoring services to respond to this complexity is key to improve the integration of LGBTQ+ refugees and increase the efficiency of the refugee-serving organizations work. Service organizations, therefore, need to adapt their services to better accommodate the unique needs of LGBTQ+ refugees, in consideration to their intersectional realities and the challenges they face due to that. The need to socialize, belong to a community and express one's identity were repeatedly highlighted by participants of this study, and related their sense of stability with their ability to socialize and belong. Contrary to non-LGBTQ+ refugees who benefited from their

connections with their communities in diaspora to support their integration, exposing LGBTQ+ refugees to their national communities would hinder their ability to socialize and express themselves. The lack of LGBTQ+ housing services and a meaningful support to forming LGBTQ+ refugee communities confirms the findings of Yee et al., (2014) in regard of the current approach of service provision, which focuses on the numeric value of the services (i.e., the number of participants/registered beneficiaries) opposed to a collective approach that dedicates efforts to foster an LGBTQ+ refugee community that could further strengthen individuals in their integration. A shift, therefore, from this approach to a collective one is particularly vital in facilitating the integration of LGBTQ+ refugees. This could be translated in housing services/communities that could provide safe environments and allow socializing and gender expression, which could host LGBTQ+ refugees upon their arrival and serve as a "buffer-zone" that would allow LGBTQ+ refugees time and space to heal and find their true identities, and therefore, result in more positive integration experiences.

The current complex network of services, with different requirements, conditions and criteria, and the overlapping of mandates and areas of focus of different types of organizations alone represent an additional challenge LGBTQ+ refugees are yet to face. It is vital, therefore, to increase the accessibility and inclusiveness of LGBTQ+ refugees on these organizations' websites. This could be done by providing more services in native languages of refugees, including orientation and guidance on their website, in addition to increasing the representation of LGBTQ+ refugees on their websites. The orientation and guidance of newly arriving LGBTQ+ refugees in their native language was also repeatedly suggested by participants of this study. Opposed to the recommendations of Karimi (2018), of providing pre-arrival workshops, this

orientation, as reflected in the interviews, can play a significant role upon arrival where LGBTQ+ refugees are in a transitional phase and are introduced to the challenges of integration. This orientation should aim to explain the available services, the current structure of these services and their providers and the different categories and requirements, in order to maximize their ability to benefit from service-providers services. Tailored guidance, which allows LGBTQ+ refugees to identify their individual interests and resources that respond to their unique needs can also boost their ability to integrate and face challenges. Finally, providing more mental health services is on the top of the list of recommendations of this study. Mental stresses have been a major factor in the integration of ME-LGBTQ+ refugees, who arrived in Canada with long history of discrimination and persecution, only to face new barriers and challenges. Mental health support, in the form of one on one counselling services, emotional and well-being support groups that are tailored to ME-LGBTQ+ refugees would also foster their ability to heal and socialize, and therefore boost their resilience and integration.

### **Limitations and further research**

During the preparation of this study, the global COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an immediate and permanent lockdown. Therefore, this study was done within the constraints of this lockdown and was limited to online interviews. Reportedly, the lockdown has also resulted in limiting the ability of participants to socialize and benefit from available services and resources even further. While this study did not examine the difficulties and challenges presented by the lockdown, the findings revealed that many participants lost these benefits either partially or completely. On the other hand, the content analysis of service providers' websites also revealed that many organizations suspended either all or a part of their services and resorted to providing

online services only. As the COVID-19 pandemic persists and new measures develop, more research that examines the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on the integration of LGBTQ+ refugees is needed.

This study explored the services provided by a wide range of refugee-serving organizations by examining their online websites and content. While this can be considered a reliable resource of information on the types and quantity of services these organizations provide, it does not go further into exploring the quality of the service provided in reality, nor does it aim to assess the quality of the service provision. Future studies should include the perspective of service providers' staff, social workers and administration of service providers in order to examine the difficulties and challenges in the process of refugee-service provision and the ways to improve this process. Additionally, this study interviewed 6 participants who come from three countries in the Middle East, which does not constitute an inclusive example of other nationalities in the Middle East. More research on other Middle Eastern nationalities is paramount, particularly with the notable scarcity of research that focused on Middle Eastern LGBTQ+ refugees. Future studies may further draw comparisons between different asylum experiences of different nationalities and the impact of the nationality factor on integration.

Finally, this study was limited to interviewing four gay men and two trans women, which excluded lesbian women, bisexual women and men, and other genders on the spectrum. Middle Eastern women, in particular, suffer high levels of oppression, sexism and violence. More research that is inclusive to Middle Eastern women, therefore, is definitely required, particularly those of gender and sexual minorities.

## APPENDICES

### Annex 1: Interview questions

Main question	Follow up question	Clarification question
Initial questions	How have you been doing during the lockdown? How have you been keeping busy?	
Integration		
1. How has been living in Canada so far?	1.1 What is it like to live in Canada compared to your country? 1.2 In three words how can you describe the challenges	1.1.1 How was your perception about life in Canada after you arrived? 1.2.2 How did you face these challenges?
2. What does integration mean from your point of view?	2.1 Can you give an example	2.2 Could you tell me more about that?
3. What was your biggest source of support during the integration in Canada?	3.1. How strong is your relationship to your family and home country?	3.2. Can you explain?
4. What other factors helped you integrate?	4.1. For example, did you previously know family members or friends who live in Canada?	4.2. How did those additional factors help you integrate?
Probe: Many ethnicities and nationalities have diaspora communities. Those are people of a certain nationality forming a	4.2. How do you describe this relationship in one sentence?	4.3. Why? Please explain.

<p>smaller community abroad. Like little Italy and Chinatown – the most famous in Toronto.</p> <p>5. From 1-10 how close are you to your community in diaspora?</p>		
<p>Intersectional identities/experiences</p>		
<p>6. Can you arrange the following factors, from most to least help to your integration?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Race:</li> <li>• Gender:</li> <li>• Sexuality:</li> <li>• Nationality:</li> <li>• Mental health:</li> <li>• Legal status:</li> <li>• Ethnicity:</li> </ul> <p>(Give numbers: 1 is the least and 7 is the most)</p>	<p>6.1. How did (the three factors that were ranked the most) contribute to your integration?</p> <p>6.2. How did your mental health play a role in your integration?</p> <p><i>6.3. How did your refugee status affect you during your integration?</i></p> <p><i>6.4. Describe your experience as a person of color in Toronto. (e.g., your Iranian/Syrian/Yemeni nationality).</i></p>	<p>6.1.1. Why did you give this score? Please explain.</p> <p>6.2.1. How did you manage the effects of your mental health on your integration?</p> <p>6.2.2. What type of mental health services were available for you?</p> <p>6.3.1. How would your situation change if you were no longer a refugee (i.e. you became Canadian citizen)?</p> <p><i>6.4.1. Can you give me examples of responses/comments you get about your racial/national/ethnic identity?</i></p>
<p>Service providers</p>		

<p>7. What Resettlement organizations can you identify in Toronto?</p>	<p>7.1. How did you learn about these organizations?</p>	<p>7.1.1. How important is the work of these organizations for the integration of LGBTQI+ refugees?</p>
<p>8. What are the services you received from these resettlement organizations?</p>	<p>8.1. What were the most valuable services that helped you integrate?</p>	<p>8.1.1. How did these services contribute to your integration?</p>
<p>9. What were the three most important needs you had for your integration? (for example: financial support, language support, employment, friends, etc.)</p>	<p>9.1. How did you manage to meet these needs?</p>	<p>9.1.1. What services do you think would increase your ability to integrate in Canada if they were provided? (Examples of services: Social groups, English courses, employment services, LGBTQI+ services, mental health services, etc.)</p>
<p>Closing</p>	<p>Did we cover everything? Would you like to add anything?</p>	

## Annex 2: Content Analysis

Research Question	Category	Questions	Instructions
Coder			
Date			
Link			
What are the services provided by resettlement agencies?	What is the organization's type?		(Settlement/Resettlement services, shelter, community center, refugee org, LGBTQ+ org, etc.)
	What is the organization's service focus?		
	Which community groups are targeted with services?		e.g. Refugees, newcomers, immigrants, youth, etc.
	What are the services/programs provided by the organization to refugees?		List all the services
	number of services		count of the above services
What is the role of resettlement agencies services in response to the intersectional experiences of Middle Eastern LGBTQI+ refugees during their integration in Toronto?	Gender and Sexuality	Does the organization's website display LGBTQ friendly images (e.g., rainbow flags or positive space images?)	If yes, describe the visual cues or images that relate to LGBTQ+ people
	Gender and Sexuality	Does the website offer any services/programs that relate to sexuality and gender of refugees?	list all the services that corresponds to gender or sexual orientations of refugees
	Mental Health	Does the website offer any services/programs that respond directly to the mental health issues of refugees?	List all the mental health services provided to refugees.

	Race, Ethnicity Nationality	Does the website offer services/programs that respond to a particular racial, ethnic or national refugee group?	list all the services that corresponds with the race, nationality or ethnicity of refugees
	Ethnicity, Nationality	Does the website offer any services/programs in languages other than English and French?	if yes, list the language options
	Legal Status	Does the website offer services that respond to the legal status of refugees?	For example - services to benefit refugee claimants, asylum seekers, or newcomers. List the services associated with each status
<b>Summary</b>			

## REFERENCES

- Aberman, T. (2014). Gendered perspectives on refugee determination in Canada. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 30(2), 57-66.
- Alessi, E. J., & Kahn, S. (2017). A framework for clinical practice with sexual and gender minority asylum seekers. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 4(4), 383.
- Alessi, E. J., Kahn, S., & Van Der Horn, R. (2017). A qualitative exploration of the premigration victimization experiences of sexual and gender minority refugees and asylees in the United States and Canada. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 54(7), 936-948.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2012). Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration 2012. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/migration/ircc/english/pdf/pub/annual-report-2012.pdf>
- Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 1-20.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241.
- Dearham, K. K. (2017). "We just know who we are": lesbian refugees in the Canadian immigration system. *York Space Institutional Repository*.
- Dustin, M., & Ferreira, N. (2017). Canada's Guideline 9: improving SOGIE claims assessment?. *Forced Migration Review*, 56.
- Flett, J. (2019). Youth-Serving Organizations' Inclusivity of LGBTQ Newcomers-A Content Analysis. *York Space Institutional Repository*.
- Fobear, K. (2014). Queer settlers: Questioning settler colonialism in LGBT asylum processes in Canada. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 30(1), 47-56.
- Fobear, K. M. (2016). Accordion homes: lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) refugees' experiences of home and belonging in Canada [Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia]. *University of British Columbia Library*.

- Fuks, N., Smith, N. G., Peláez, S., De Stefano, J., & Brown, T. L. (2018). Acculturation Experiences Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Immigrants in Canada. *The Counseling Psychologist, 46*(3), 296-332.
- Gaucher, M., & DeGagne, A. (2016). Guilty Until Proven Prosecuted: The Canadian State's Assessment of Sexual Minority Refugee Claimants and the Invisibility of the non-Western Sexual Non-Citizen. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 23*(3), 459-481.
- Giwa, Sulaimon, and Ferzana Chaze. (2018). "Positive enough? A content analysis of settlement service organizations' inclusivity of LGBTQ immigrants." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services 30*(3) 220-243.
- Hodge, E. (2019). Making Precarious: The Construction of Precarity in Refugee and Migrant Discourse. *Borders in Globalization Review, 1*(1), 83-90.
- Holder, A. T. (2017). You're Not Gay Enough: The Experiences and Challenges of LGBTQ Refugees During the Asylum Determination Process in Toronto. *Ryerson Digital Library*.
- Kahn, S., & Alessi, E. J. (2018). Coming out under the gun: Exploring the psychological dimensions of seeking refugee status for LGBT claimants in Canada. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 31*(1), 22-41.
- Kahn, S., Alessi, E. J., Kim, H., Woolner, L., & Olivieri, C. J. (2018). Facilitating mental health support for LGBT forced migrants: a qualitative inquiry. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 96*(3), 316-326.
- Karimi, A. (2019a). The Role of Intimate Relationship Status, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Doing Fieldwork among Sexual–Racial Minority Refugees: An Intersectional Methodology. *Sociological Inquiry*.
- Karimi, A. (2019b). Sexuality and Integration: Gay Iranian Refugees Navigating Refugee Status and Integration in Canada. *University of Alberta Education and Research Archive*.
- Karimi, A. (2018). Sexuality and integration: a case of gay Iranian refugees' collective memories and integration practices in Canada. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 1*-19.

- Karimi, A. (2020). Refugees' Transnational Practices: Gay Iranian Men Navigating Refugee Status and Cross-border Ties in Canada. *Social Currents*, 7(1), 71-86.
- Lee, E. O. J., & Brotman, S. (2011). Identity, refugeeness, belonging: Experiences of sexual minority refugees in Canada. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne De Sociologie*, 48(3), 241-274.
- Lee, E. O. J., & Brotman, S. (2013). Speak out! Structural intersectionality and anti-oppressive practice with LGBTQ refugees in Canada. *Canadian Social Work Review/Revue Canadienne De Service social*, 157-183.
- Lee, E. O. J., Hafford-Letchfield, T., Pullen Sansfaçon, A., Kamgain, O., Gleeson, H., & Luu, F. (2017). The state of knowledge about LGBTQI migrants living in Canada in relation to the global LGBTQI rights agenda. *Middlesex University Research Repository*.
- Logie, C. H., Lacombe-Duncan, A., Lee-Foon, N., Ryan, S., & Ramsay, H. (2016). "It's for us newcomers, LGBTQ persons, and HIV-positive persons. You feel free to be": a qualitative study exploring social support group participation among African and Caribbean lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender newcomers and refugees in Toronto, Canada. *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 16(1), 1-10.
- Mendos, L. R. (2019). State-sponsored homophobia. Geneva: Switzerland.
- Mulé, N. J., & Gamble, K. (2018). Haven or precarity? The mental health of LGBT asylum seekers and refugees in Canada. In 908515636 715427404 N. Nicol (Author), *Envisioning global LGBT human rights: (neo)colonialism, neoliberalism, resistance and hope*, 205-220. London: University of London Press.
- Murray, D. A. (2014a). Real queer:" Authentic" LGBT refugee claimants and homonationalism in the Canadian refugee system. *Anthropologica*, 21-32.
- Murray, D. A. (2014b). The challenge of home for sexual orientation and gendered identity refugees in Toronto. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 48(1), 132-152.
- Rehaag, S. (2017). Sexual Orientation in Canada's Revised Refugee Determination System: An Empirical Snapshot. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 29(2), 259-289.

Shields, S. A. (2008). Gender: An intersectionality perspective. *Sex roles*, 59(5-6), 301-311.

Yee, J. Y., Marshall, Z., & Vo, T. (2014). Challenging neo-colonialism and essentialism: Incorporating hybridity into new conceptualizations of settlement service delivery with lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer immigrant young people. *Critical Social Work*, 15(1), 88-103.