"I just want to be free..."

Emerging evidence on the lives, experiences, and movement intentions of displaced sexual and gender minorities in Kenya

MMC Research Report,
August 2025

Acknowledgements

About MMC

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in the Danish Refugee Council's (DRC) regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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Acronyms

AHA	"Anti-Homosexuality Act" (in Uganda)
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
DR Congo	Democratic Republic of Congo
DRS	Department of Refugee Services (in Kenya)
FPB	"Family Protection Bill" (in Kenya)
GAHT	Gender Affirming Hormone Therapy
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RSD	Refugee Status Determination
RLO	Refugee-Led Organisation
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (care)

Summary and key findings

This research report focuses on the experiences of displaced sexual and gender minorities (hereafter SGM migrants) in Kenya. It examines the journeys of SGM migrants from countries of origin in East Africa; their movement drivers and decision-making; their future plans and intentions as they navigated anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI)+ policies and regulations linked to their legal status; and their enduring needs in Kenya not covered by available services. It also provides insights into how Kenya is positioned and perceived by sexual and gender minorities from the region who are seeking safety, protection, and community. This study used a participatory approach grounded in the establishment of a Steering Committee of SGM civil society members who provided input and advice throughout the project. It is based on 35 semi-structured interviews with SGM migrants living in Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kakuma refugee camps. The key findings are:

- **There is no single narrative that drives SGM migrants to leave their countries of origin in East Africa**. For most respondents, movement was triggered by a combination of factors related to their SGM identities. However, most had little choice but to leave their countries of origin. Hence, this report refers to them as displaced.

- **Movement was a survival strategy for some respondents, having experienced family violence, societal persecution, and marginalisation. Many felt forced to leave their country of origin in haste and with little preparation when they feared their life was at risk**. Others opted to move across borders when they felt they had run out of options in their country of origin and were thus better able to plan their movements. Several respondents migrated internally before ultimately leaving their country.

- **Respondents identified the hostile and discriminatory environments in their countries of origin as key factors in their decision to leave**. In particular, Ugandan respondents pointed to the Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA) which had emboldened society to persecute and marginalise them, worsening their overall quality of life and threatening their safety. Other respondents, including citizens of Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and Tanzania, left due to social and communal traditions that impeded their acceptance by society and limited their opportunity to live a life of dignity in their home country.

- **Despite finding relative safety and refuge in Kenya, SGM migrants continued to face discrimination and abuse after arrival**. Respondents recounted being monitored by their communities, arrested and detained by authorities, and facing social and economic exclusion. Ultimately, they were forced to devise strategies to hide their SGM identities. **Thus, in spite of signals to the contrary, Kenya is not a place where respondents can be themselves without risk linked to their identities**.

- **Most respondents aspired to move onward through regular channels** but were aware that there are limited pathways available to them. Their aspirations were rooted in the desire to live in countries where SGM people can access their rights and freedoms, as well as economic opportunities. Many reported lacking the funds necessary to pursue their movement objectives.

- **Respondents in general found it difficult to access documentation, livelihood opportunities, housing, and healthcare while in Kenya**. However, challenges and opportunities varied somewhat depending on respondents' location and their SGM identity. For example, while respondents in Kakuma had better access to asylum information and processes than those in cities, lack of anonymity in the camps led to abuse. In Mombasa cultural and language affinity could help respondents, but there were fewer SGM-led CBOs to assist than in Nairobi. In terms of identity, transgender respondents reported particular challenges, for instance in interacting with authorities.

Key thematic terms and acronyms

This research examines the lives and experiences of displaced sexual and gender minorities and, hence, it is crucial that the terminology employed in this paper is nuanced, reflecting the complex intersection of their identities. Moreover, language can serve as a tool for shaping perceptions. It is important to be aware not only of a term's historical context, but also how it has evolved and may continue to evolve. For instance, the term ''queer'', once a slur, has been reclaimed and is now predominantly used as an inclusive and affirming term.[1] Preferred language and terminology also may vary depending on geographic context. Interrogating language allows researchers to better unpack the complex marginalisation of target populations. Failure to do so would risk contributing to the marginalisation and misrepresentation of the individuals being researched.[2]

The following terms and abbreviations were applied throughout this research as used by the respondents themselves. This list is in no way exhaustive and neither does it represent the full glossary relating to sexual and gender minorities.[3] Still, it offers a blueprint and language that allows us to understand the multifaceted experiences of displaced sexual and gender minorities in East Africa.

Gender identity: a person's internal and individual perception of their own gender. The perception is derived from personal experiences and may not align with the sex characteristics of the individual or the sex that was assigned at birth.[4]

Gender expression: how a person outwardly manifests their gender identity by using behaviour and appearance such as clothing, body language, hair, make-up, and voice. Individuals also use pronouns and names as a show of their gender expression. A person can express one gender yet identify with another.[5]

SGM: sexual and gender minority/ies. These include (but are not limited to) individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, transgender, Two-Spirit, queer, non-binary, and/or intersex. Individuals with same-sex or same-gender attractions or behaviours and those with a difference in sex development are also included.[6] This study refers to 'SGM people' or 'SGM migrants' in an effort to avoid dehumanising phrasing which reduces people solely to their acronyms.

SOGIESC: sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.[7]

LGBTQI+: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and other people of diverse SOGIESC who fall outside the cisgender heterosexual category.[8]

ITGNC: intersex, transgender, and gender non-conforming.[9]

Trans/transgender: an umbrella term used to refer to people whose gender identity does not correspond to the sex assigned to them at birth.[10]

Non-binary: an umbrella term used by people whose gender identities sit within, across, and outside of the male-female dichotomy. Individuals who are non-binary might identify as gender-neutral, genderqueer, agender, or androgynous.[11]

Gender non-conforming (GNC): a term used by individuals whose gender expression does not align with prevailing cultural stipulation of gender. This term can be used by all individuals regardless of their SOGIESC.[12]

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1   Stewart, D. (2023, August 1). *The history of the word 'queer'*. La Trobe University.
2   Camminga, B & Marnell, J. (2022). *Queer and Trans African Mobilities: Migration, Asylum and Diaspora*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.
3   Refer to Child Family Community Australia, CFCA (2022). LBGTIQA+ glossary of common terms for an extensive breakdown of relevant terminologies.
4   CFCA (2022). Op. Cit.
5   The Annie E. Cassey Foundation (2023). Op. Cit.
6   CFCA (2022). Op. Cit.
7   Op. Cit.
8   Op. Cit.
9   Amka Africa (2022). A false safe haven.
10   JINSIANGU (n.d.). Trans-identity-guide.
11   CFCA (2022). Op. Cit.
12   Op. Cit.

MSM: men who have sex with men. This term is used in public health and social research to describe sexual behaviour rather than sexual identity, encompassing all men who engage in sexual activity with other men, regardless of how they identify (e.g., gay, bisexual, heterosexual).

While conducting the research it became apparent that SGM identities are often fluid and intersect across various dimensions of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. They hinge on individuals' own social, cultural, linguistic, and personal contexts:

> *"I am intersex, and I identify as a woman. My pronouns are she/her. I rarely get romantic feelings though I am attracted to women. Those feelings of sexual attraction are not something that I feel."*
> **Burundian asexual intersex woman, 25 years old.**

> *"I am gender non-conforming, and I am a lesbian."*
> **Ugandan lesbian GNC, 30 years old.**

> *"My pronouns are she/he. I am trans."*
> **Egyptian transwoman, 25 years old.**

> *"I am bisexual. I don't really care about pronouns because I speak Kiswahili and there it does not matter."*[13]
> **Somali bisexual man, 24 years old.**

Turning to migration terminology, this study often refers to **displaced** sexual and gender minorities, recognising that even for respondents who described journeys marked by considerable agency, including their desire to engage in movement, they nevertheless had little choice in remaining in their countries of origin given the social, political, and economic persecution and exclusion they faced. This is used as a blanket term given that the majority of the sample could be considered as having been displaced, primarily for the abovementioned reasons, although it should be noted that there were a few respondents who left to seek better opportunities – and who did not report violence or persecution prior to leaving – who would not fit this characterisation.[14]

That said, this study refers to respondents as **migrants** to accommodate the different legal statuses that some have chosen to adopt and to acknowledge the fact that many have been unable to register as refugees and avail themselves of the rights that this protected status entails, for reasons which will be explored in this report, and are forced to live in legal limbo.

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13 Personal pronouns in Kiswahili are gender neutral.
14 Overall, 28 respondents cited moving due to SGM-phobic violence (either threatened or actual) and five additional respondents (from DR Congo, South Sudan and Somalia) moved due to conflict. Two respondents (from Rwanda and DR Congo) reported seeking economic opportunities as their primary driver of movement.

1. Introduction

In East Africa, the policy, legal, and sociocultural space for individuals of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) is shrinking as governments pass legislation discriminating against sexual and gender minorities (SGM).[15] This is exemplified by Uganda's "Anti-Homosexuality Act" (AHA), adopted in 2023. Kenya is the only country in East Africa where refugee status has been granted on the basis of persecution linked to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. Yet, over the last decade, asylum for SGM people has been under threat, with applications facing indefinite delays and cases pending for years. This has prompted civil society to highlight a gap between Kenya's commitments to human rights and international refugee law and practices.[16] In April 2023, the anti-SGM Family Protection Bill (FPB) was introduced in the Kenyan parliament. If enacted, this would firmly close the asylum channel for SGM people in East Africa.[17]

These worrying policy shifts have occurred alongside an increase in the arrival of SGM migrants in Kenya, largely owing to the adoption of the AHA in Uganda and enduring conflicts in the broader region, with Kenya traditionally serving as a major host for refugees. However, persecution does not end with departure from their countries of origin; rather it follows them throughout their migration experience. Upon arrival in Kenya, hate crimes, including homophobic and transphobic violence, are reported as rampant. Research on the Kakuma refugee camps specifically, where those seeking asylum are hosted, has emphasised that discriminatory attitudes towards SGM individuals are common on the part of other refugees, local authorities, and service providers, including the staff of UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as by host communities.[18] According to some respondents in this research, protests by SGM community leaders demanding greater safety in the camps increased their visibility and awareness of their identities. This in turn exposed them to further abuse.

The ever more intolerant climate in the region continues to limit the options and pathways available to sexual and gender minorities, and necessitates ongoing research, evidence, and engagement on their rights, needs, and aspirations. Taking a participatory approach through engagement with a Steering Committee of SGM civil society members, this research report focuses on the lives of SGM migrants in Kenya and the wider East Africa region. Its aim is to contribute to the protection of SGM migrants, and to provide evidence to a balanced narrative on the lives and experiences of displaced SGM people in Kenya and the region. As such, the study sets out to answer the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of SGM migrants on their journeys to Kenya?

- What factors drive SGM migrants to move to Kenya?

- How do the plans and intentions of SGM migrants change while navigating recent anti-LGBTQI+ measures and policies and mobility regimes?

- Which enduring needs do SGM migrants have in Kenya that are not covered by available services?

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15 Through its most recent Code of Conduct, the Danish Refugee Council has implemented the use of "people with diverse SOGIESC" across the organisation, replacing "LGBTQI+". In its work, MMC is using the terms SOGIESC and SGM to reflect current debates among the community in the region on inclusivity.
16 Okata. J. (2024). Hopes for LGBTQ+ asylum fade as Kenya snubs 'those letters'. *Thomson Reuters Foundation*.
17 Amnesty International (2023). Kenya: Kakuma refugee camp complex not yet safe for LGBTI refugees.
18 Amnesty International (2023). Kenya: "Justice Like Any Other Person". Hate Crimes and Discrimination Against LGBTI Refugees.

2. Background

In several East African countries, including in Kenya[19] and Tanzania,[20] legislation discriminating against sexual and gender minorities dates back to colonial penal codes that are still upheld by current legal frameworks. For instance, Kenya's penal code retains two colonial-era sections relating to "unnatural offences" involving "carnal knowledge [...] against the order of nature," and to "indecent practices between males."[21] In recent years, there has been a surge of activism by various community-based organisations (CBOs) calling for these sections to be repealed.[22] In 2019, three High Court judges unanimously ruled that the sections were not unconstitutional, ensuring they remained in the penal code.[23] With the exception of Rwanda[24] and Djibouti,[25] same-sex sexual activity is criminalised across the region.[26] However, SGM people in Rwanda[27] and Djibouti[28] still run the risk of arrest and detention if they are deemed to engage in "socially or morally undesirable activities".[29]

In recent years there has been a doubling down on social and religious conservatism in East Africa through the proposal and passage of anti-SGM legislation. This has significantly reduced the space for SGM people to exist in safety and dignity.[30] Marginalisation, discrimination, and hate speech were already widespread in 2023 when Ugandan legislators adopted the AHA, deemed to be one of the world's most stringent laws targeting LGBTQI+ people. The law restricts freedom of speech on "LGBTQI topics", dictates life imprisonment for sex between two individuals of the same biological sex, prescribes the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality", and issues severe penalties of up to twenty years imprisonment for any persons or organisations that provide support, either financial or in kind, to SGM people, which could be interpreted as ''promoting homosexuality''.[31] In 2024, most of its provisions survived a constitutional court challenge mounted by an array of rights organisations.[32]

In Burundi, in late 2023, President Evariste Ndayishimiye advocated for "stoning gay people".[33] In Tanzania, MPs proposed that people convicted of 'homosexual acts' be castrated or subjected to the death penalty.[34] In Kenya, the FPB has been under review by parliament since April 2023, amidst heavy criticism from local and international actors. The bill seeks to introduce measures that emulate Uganda's AHA, with the primary difference lying in the severity of punishment.[35] Kenya's FPB prescribes "no less than ten years imprisonment" for sex between two male or two female persons. Furthermore, the bill dictates, among other clauses, "no less than ten years imprisonment" for ''grossly indecent acts", including "cross-dressing to portray that the person is of a sex different from the sex assigned at birth", as well as any assembly, demonstration, or parade while identifying as "LGBTQI+".[36] While existing anti-SGM policies have allowed for the monitoring and harassment of SGM people in various public spaces, these new laws would put them in increasingly perilous situations where they are exposed to aggravated state-sanctioned violence.

As mentioned previously, Kenya is the only country in East Africa where refugee status has been granted on the basis of persecution linked to sexual orientation.[37] In the early 2010s, small groups of Ugandans of diverse SOGIESC were granted asylum in Kenya, though involvement from the Kenyan authorities was limited as resettlement was the proposed pathway from the outset.[38] In recent years, most asylum seekers citing persecution based on their SGM identity have not received a positive refugee status determination (RSD). Instead, their claims remain pending with

19 Human Dignity Trust (2024). Kenya.
20 Human Dignity Trust (2024). Tanzania.
21 Refer to Kenyan Law Organisation (2023). Act Title: Penal Code, for a review of the stipulations under section 162 and 165.
22 Heinrich Boll Stiftung (2019). Is democracy on retreat? Kenya after the #Repeal162 ruling.
23 Refer to Kelin Kenya (2019). Justice Denied No to Repeal 162, for an extensive breakdown of the court proceedings during the repeal process.
24 The Conversation (2022). Rwanda: LGBT rights are protected on paper, but discrimination and homophobia persist.
25 Outright International (n.d). Country overview Djibouti.
26 Mambondiyani. A. (2023). The colonial legacy of anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Africa. *Thompson Reuters Foundation.*
27 Reid. G. (2022). Progress and Setbacks on LGBT Rights in Africa – An Overview of the Last Year. *Human Rights Watch.*
28 Rights in Exile Platform (2023). Djibouti LGBTQI+ Resources
29 Rights in Exile Platform (2023). Rwanda LGBTQI+ Resources.
30 Amnesty International (2024). Africa: LGBTI people face 'relentless' oppression after surge in discriminatory laws
31 The Republic of Uganda (2023). The Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023.
32 MMC (2024). Quarterly Mixed Migration Update ESA (Q2 2024).
33 Dahir, A.L. (2023, December). Burundi's President Says Gay People Should Be Stoned. *New York Times.*
34 Mamba Online (2023). Tanzania: MPs seek to tighten anti-LGBTQ+ laws with extreme measures.
35 Mokaya. K. (2023). The Family Protection Bill (2023) - Harmful Law. *The Network for Adolescent and Youth of Africa.*
36 The Family Protection Bill (2023). Arrangement of Clauses.
37 Camminga (2020) explains that SGM people received refugee status and protection from UNHCR in Kenya in the 2010s through a 'cordoned off' modality delinked from the Kenyan authorities, while the authorities' negative stance on the rights of SOGIESC (LGBTQI+) individuals did not change. See: Camminga, B. (2020). 'Go fund me'. LGBTI asylum seekers in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. In: C.M. Jacobsen, M-A, Karlsen & S. Khosravi (Eds.), *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration.* London, UK: Routledge.
38 Camminga, B. (2020). Op Cit.

Kenya's Department of Refugee Services (DRS), forcing them into a legal limbo. While there is no written directive which explains why these asylum claims would not be processed, in September 2024, the Kenyan Refugee Commissioner John Burugu said that Kenya is "not interested in anyone's sexuality", and that "it would not be a measure to determine someone's access to asylum".[39] The enacting of Kenya's FPB would provide such a directive on paper and would firmly close the asylum channel for SGM people in East Africa.[40]

While SGM people in Kenya continue to advocate for the recognition of their basic human rights and for an end to discrimination, legal debates continue on the topic and Kenyan policymakers' stances vary. Some see it as a non-issue, deeming legislation to be reflective of Kenyans' views.[41] Others have placed the discriminatory FPB draft bill at the centre of their policy agendas.[42] While divergent, both approaches potentially expose SGM people to state-sanctioned discrimination and violence, even without the introduction of more punitive legislation advocated by hardliners. Despite all this, activism in Kenya has made some headway, as reflected in the February 2023 Supreme Court ruling allowing LGBTQI+ rights organisations to register as associations.[43]

SGM migrants moving to Kenya are met with this divided policy climate. Under Kenya's encampment policy, all those seeking international protection, regardless of their vulnerability profile, must move to the Kakuma refugee camps, some 700 kilometres northwest of Nairobi, where living conditions, especially for sexual and gender minorities, are extremely precarious. In these camps, SGM people often face harassment related to their identities, prolonged RSD processes, and a generally hostile environment, with no safeguards.[44] As a result, staff at the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) – the main protection-focused international non-governmental organisation (INGO) providing support to SGM people – have observed that many leave the camps to move elsewhere in Kenya. Over the last years, reports have also emerged of SGM people whose asylum cases are stalled in Kenya choosing to move to unsafe conflict-affected countries in the region, including South Sudan. They hope that by doing so they may qualify for resettlement to a third country outside East Africa.[45]

39 Okata, J. (2024, 8 October). Op Cit.
40 Amnesty International (2023). Kenya: Kakuma refugee camp complex not yet safe for LGBTI refugees.
41 Daily Nation (2020). President Kenyatta says gay rights "of no importance" in Kenya.
42 BBC (2023). LGBT rights in Africa: Will Kenya be the latest to pass anti-gay law?
43 Majanga. J. (2024). Kenya's LGBTQ Ruling Stirs Debate. Voice of Africa.
44 Camminga, B. (2020). 'Go fund me'. LGBTI asylum seekers in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya. In: Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration, C.M. Jacobsen et al (p. 131-148). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
45 LGBTQ Refugees in Kakuma and Gorom (2024). LGBTQ Kakuma refugees decide to move to South Sudan camp in hope of repatriation.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative and participatory research design to examine the lives and experiences of SGM migrants living in Kenya. The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) established a Steering Committee comprised of SGM actors from various civil society organisations, CBOs, and refugee-led organisations (RLOs). The Steering Committee was involved in every phase of the research process, from project design to the dissemination of findings and recommendations (see Annex 1 for a detailed description of this participatory approach and the involvement of the Steering Committee).

Site selection and access

In-person data collection was carried out in the Kakuma refugee camps, as well as in the greater Nairobi and Mombasa metropolitan areas. The sites were selected in collaboration with the Steering Committee and DRC. In the Kakuma refugee camps, MMC was able to access respondents through DRC programming staff, who referred respondents from their caseload. In Nairobi, MMC worked alongside the Steering Committee, whose members helped facilitate access to SGM migrants. In Mombasa, MMC relied fully on referrals from the Steering Committee to local civil society actors, who helped identify respondents in the area and arranged safe interviewing spaces.

Data and sampling strategy

MMC conducted 35 in-depth qualitative interviews with SGM migrants in Kenya, including 14 in Mombasa, 12 in the Kakuma refugee camps (including Kalobeyei settlement), and nine in Nairobi. Respondents were identified through snowball sampling and purposive sampling using the following criteria:

- Respondents must be at least 18 years old.
- Respondents identify as being of diverse SOGIESC.
- Respondents shall be of diverse East African nationalities.[46]

The size of the research sample was not established at the outset of data-gathering; rather it was deemed to be adequate once all the key themes had been satisfactorily addressed by the interviewees. MMC's sampling criteria focused on recruiting respondents drawn from the diverse categories of the SGM/SOGIESC/LGBTQI+ umbrella, with priority given to underrepresented categories of SGM migrants who may identify as LBTQI+,[47] to counter the overrepresentation of men who have sex with men (MSM) in SGM migration and forced displacement research.[48] To obtain a balance of diverse profiles, respondents' countries of origin were also considered as part of the sampling criteria (see Annex 2 for an overview of respondent demographics). With most recent research and advocacy activities in Kenya focusing on Ugandan SGM migrants, feedback and support from the Steering Committee allowed MMC to diversify the sample and identify voices of underrepresented East African nationals.

Finally, the MMC team gained additional qualitative insights from a focus group discussion with SGM community leaders in the Kakuma refugee camps, participant observations in the research sites documented in a logbook, Steering Committee discussions, and informal conversations with civil society actors and DRC programming staff. Conducting the qualitative interviews in spaces that are ordinarily navigated by SGM migrants allowed the MMC researchers to make verbal and non-verbal observations, forming another source of the study's primary data.

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46   While the sampling strategy targeted East Africans, one Egyptian respondent was also interviewed.
47   As part of the participatory research process, further deliberations on sampling were brought up with Steering Committee members during the data collection period to ensure the research met their evidence needs and objectives. Interviews in Nairobi were conducted last, and with guidance from the Steering Committee, the sampling focused on reaching respondents with diverse gender identities and gender expressions who had been less represented in the other two sites.
48   Camminga, B. & Marnell, J. (2023). 'Framing Queer and Trans African Mobilities. Absences, Presences and Challenges'. In: B. Camminga & J. Marnell (Eds.), *Queer & Trans African Mobilities. Migration, Asylum and Diaspora* (p. 5). London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Qualitative data collection, positionality, and analysis

While this study does not strive to represent the perspectives of all displaced SGM, it was designed to provide a rich evidence base on the journeys, lives, and experiences of those displaced in Kenya and the wider East Africa region. MMC interviewed SGM migrants with a semi-structured interview guide, covering themes including their profiles and identities, movement drivers, journey experiences, future intentions and aspirations, and navigating life in Kenya. Following feedback from the Steering Committee, a lesser focus was given to understanding the needs of SGM migrants for services and support in Kenya, as this was considered to be well covered in previous research. The interview guide was finalised with the Steering Committee during a feedback and validation session.

In line with sector best practice calling for SGM research to be conducted by SGM researchers to increase its value and relevance,[49] two researchers who identify as SGM carried out the data collection and analysis, and as such had greater access to respondents and a more nuanced perspective on the data collected. They were, however, conscious that their positionality may have shaped the data collection and their interpretation of the findings, given that they did not share the respondents' experiences of displacement. As such, the researchers sought to remain reflexive throughout the research process and incorporate multiple reviews of the findings when drafting this report.

MMC analysed the qualitative data from both the interviews and the observations logbook through thematic analysis, following an inductive approach (arising from the data itself) within the broad themes of the research objectives. The thematic analysis involved reviewing interview transcripts, identifying patterns in meaning, and drawing from these potential theories and explanations of observed dynamics.[50] Where possible, the research team analysed various themes arising from the data across locations, genders, and countries of origin. To interrogate the data and internally validate it, the researchers cross-referenced findings with secondary literature and discussed them with Steering Committee members during monthly meetings.

Ethics

Prior to conducting each qualitative interview, MMC obtained informed consent while introducing the research and objectives of the interview to respondents. Furthermore, the research team ensured that safe, private, and comfortable locations were chosen to carry out the interviews. The interviews were one-on-one (except when an interpreter was required) and were conducted in spaces agreed to by respondents.[51] Respondents were informed of their right to pause or terminate the interview at any point, and to skip questions, as well as to withdraw their data up until the point of publication. The interviews were only recorded when the respondents consented.[52] Respondents were not asked to provide any personal or identifiable information, and responses were recorded in a way that preserves confidentiality. In the Kakuma refugee camps, where MMC collaborated closely with DRC in accessing respondents, and in Mombasa, where MMC collaborated with local civil society organisations, it was made clear that participating in the study was voluntary and was not linked to receipt of services or assistance. Moreover, it was stressed that the information provided by respondents would not be shared with the organisation who helped to make contact.

Limitations

While the research sought to reach respondents of various East African nationalities, Ugandan nationals (9) were still the most frequently sampled, likely in line with larger numbers of arrivals from Uganda since the implementation of the AHA and due to its proximity to Kenya. To ensure varied accounts, the sample of Ugandan respondents consisted of individuals with diverse SOGIESC and not just MSM. As such, in Nairobi, the research team opted not to sample Ugandan respondents unless they were of diverse gender identities and expression, to avoid saturation among interviewed MSM and to contribute to a broader representation of other SGM identities.

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49 Organization for Refugee, Asylum & Migration (ORAM) & Rainbow Railroad (2021). The challenges facing LGBTQI+ refugees in Kakuma Refugee camp, Kenya.

50 Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K. & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22.

51 Remote interviews were considered as an option to reach respondents, especially in Nairobi, where some respondents expressed constraints regarding an in-person conversation. While this was successful in the case of one interview, it became apparent that the other two respondents found it difficult to openly describe experiences that tied directly to their SGM identity in a virtual format. This further confirms the value of in-person interviews with SGM people over remote data collection when possible.

52 Where respondents declined to be recorded, the MMC researchers took notes during the interview.

4. Mixed drivers of mobility, grounded in identity

Respondents reported discriminatory and violent reactions from family and community based on their SGM identities as the main reason they left their countries of origin.[53] In many cases, this reflected a credible fear for their lives in an environment where anyone – even family members – could perpetrate SGM-phobic violence, and where societal institutions would not provide protection or aid. Such hostile reactions from respondents' communities were exacerbated by the enshrining of anti-SGM sentiment in legislation and policy and political discourse in countries around the region. Along with the societal rejection experienced by respondents came corresponding challenges in realising basic social needs and obligations such as education and employment. **Thus, while their SGM identity was the basis for most respondents' departures, it often resulted in a complex constellation of obstacles, abuses, and indignities which combined to force them out of their countries of origin.**

Discrimination and exclusion from family and society as drivers of movement

For the majority of respondents,[54] **the primary driver of movement was the reaction of their families and communities to their diverse SOGIESC,**[55] **which manifested in SGM-phobic violence or the threat thereof.**[56] This violence could be physical or emotional and had far-reaching impacts on respondents' lives. Respondents reported having faced exclusion as well as both experiencing and being threatened with physical violence, sexual violence, forced conversion therapy, attempts at forced marriage, neglect, and movement restrictions. Rejection from family rendered some respondents homeless and cut off from any financial support. Most of the respondents' families were described as living in contexts defined by heterosexism, social and religious conservatism, and anti-LGBTQI+ bias. Such prejudices were too deeply seated to overcome when respondents' family members became aware of their SGM identities.

> *"I felt like I was not free. My father was very restrictive about what I could and could not do. I was living with my father and stepmother in Somalia. My parents are separated and my mother lives here in Kenya. When my father found out that I am gay he started restricting my freedom even more than before. He would also discriminate against me and beat me."*
> **Somali gay and queer respondent, 20 years old.**

> *"My family reached out and asked me to attend my grandfather's funeral. After the burial, everyone gathered, and they told me that how I was living was not good and I couldn't shame them by being a prodigal child. They kept on telling me how I should be, and they took me to a native doctor [a traditional healer who practises medicine and spiritual healing]. They thought that he could remove all of these feelings inside me. The doctor told them that he had the power to fix me, but I had to stay there for the night. They left me there and that night he raped me. He said that I did not know what I was missing by not sleeping with men. I was helpless."*
> **Ugandan lesbian woman, 40 years old.**

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53 Seven respondents expressed other primary drivers for their migration out of countries of origin. Five of these respondents reported leaving situations of generalised conflict in DR Congo, South Sudan, and Somalia. Two moved primarily to seek better economic opportunities. This underscores the diversity of experience of SGM migrants, while not precluding that these respondents experienced anti-SGM discrimination and/or abuse as migrants or prior to migration. It should also be noted that while respondents' initial drivers were not linked to their SGM identities.

54 Nineteen respondents (from Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Egypt) reported having experienced one or more types of SGM-phobic violence. Nine respondents (from Tanzania, Somalia, Burundi, and Ethiopia) indicated that the credible threat of SGM-phobic violence was what spurred them to leave.

55 In a few cases (see below) respondents' identity remained hidden, but having observed SGM-phobic violence perpetrated against others in their community, they opted to leave to avoid potential outing and corresponding violent reactions against themselves.

56 Overall, the SGM-phobic violence reported by respondents encompassed physical violence, verbal violence, sexual violence, psychological/emotional abuse, economic abuse, attempts to change sexual orientation/gender identity, hate crimes, community violence, institutional violence, and cyber abuse. See Annex 3 for a detailed overview.

> *"I started getting attacked by everyone. My parents, aunts, uncles, the entire family. They would talk about how I was a disgrace; that this was not our culture and that I needed to change. They would constantly pray for me. They decided that there was something wrong with our bloodline and they needed to do something to change me."*
> **Ugandan trans man, 26 years old.**

In some cases, family members outed respondents to other relatives and their communities. Such "outing" heightened respondents' risk of facing violence and harm and drove them (further) into hiding. In the case of four respondents (from Uganda, Burundi, and Ethiopia), the outing took place at a larger scale, as their families had used national media outlets to publish their names and photos and to call for their arrest and detention. This made exile their only option.

> *"My sisters found out and outed me. Once I was outed, I only spent five days in Rwanda before I left. I hid myself for those five days. I was afraid of what my family would do to me, and I was also afraid of being arrested."*
> **Rwandan gay man, 34 years old.**

> *"When Mom got this information, she could not keep it to herself. She shared with Dad. So, when he got the information, that was the end of me. He never 'came direct', but he wanted to cut off my genitals. I have a wound here… [*points to upper leg*]. Because if I would be using them, he thought it would be better to remove them, so I would have nothing, and I could live my life OK. I saved myself, the knife cut me… Then I had to run and that was the end of me and my family."*
> **Ugandan gay man, 34 years old.**

> *"In our community there was something called the August Revolution.[57] It was a time when we would get up and someone would have posted our pictures or videos on social media. I was scared that it was going to reach to family, or something was going to happen. I was scared that I would be outed. Many people were scared to go home. Everyone was trying to escape from the country… for several days I could not even leave my house. I finally sold my bajaj [motorised rickshaw] and left Ethiopia."*
> **Ethiopian queer non-binary respondent, 25 years old.**

In other cases, respondents' families forced them to conceal their identities from the larger society. Such measures were adopted to prevent the collective ostracism of the family, and not to safeguard the respondent. While hiding their identities allowed respondents to remain in their societies, it became a source of extreme stress. Respondents ultimately found that remaining in their communities while hiding who they were was not tenable.

> *''You don't have anywhere to go. So, you are like, 'let me keep quiet, let me hide myself.' So, you live a life of hiding. They are like… they think, 'ok'… she has left that behaviour. They call that [what we are] behaviour. When they see you are not together with anyone, you are not moving with anyone… when they get information, when they have done their research, whatever… They will think that you are alone. In fact, their punishment has made you live your life alone. […] So, you are thinking… up to when… when are these things going to stop? That's where, then… you do something, and you decide. […] So, you just go, and you run away.''*
> **Burundian lesbian woman, 42 years old.**

Some Somali and Ethiopian respondents described SGM-phobic violence as culturally sanctioned, meaning they could not turn to local institutions for protection. Indeed, as these respondents started facing societal exclusion and backlash because they were seen to be transgressing accepted norms, schools, religious institutions, and other social establishments became inaccessible to them. Six respondents (from Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Sudan) reported that **institutions that could have played a mediating role were in fact complicit in perpetrating violence**

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57 Schwikowski, M. (2023). LGBTQ+ Ethiopians flee in the face of sudden crackdown. Deutsche Welle.

against them. In the case of three Ugandan respondents, their families colluded with the authorities to have them detained. Upon witnessing societal outrage and violence in their clans directed towards other SGM people, two Somali respondents planned their departure. Even though no direct physical harm had been inflicted on them, they feared what could happen to them were they to be outed. Respondents noted that the mental strain of existing in societies that would not accept their identities was severe.

> *"These people [SGM individuals] are treated with no respect, with no dignity. So, if some of them have been caught by the clan, they get to be whipped. I remember an experience that I've seen with my own two bloody eyes. A bisexual man like me got whipped by the older men of the clan. The older men of the clan usually get a bamboo stick, and they whip the hell out of them. In these cases, they say it's like a demonic spirit that has possessed the guy. So, they believe if they whip that person so hard, it's like a form of disciplining him to get back to where he's supposed to be. To get back to his roots of discipline. They believe that it is not your call [to identify with a diverse SOGIESC]. That it is something that has just come and possessed you. So, they whip you real hard. You just end up there having some bruises, some pain."*
> **Somali bisexual man, 25 years old.**

> *"When they caught us one time, the first time, they started to explain to me what this is, and how this is called in our religion. People there [in Sudan] believe in religion more than anything, it is called tradition. They told me what happened, and what the consequences were from this. This was our families telling us this, the community. I was surprised, and I became more stressed. They told us that when we would be no longer underage, and we would do this, they would go with us and kill us, from the mountain… They would throw us from the mountain, that is what would happen. But because we were children, they just beat us, and we could go. They said we should not do this again."*
> **Sudanese gay man, 22 years old.**

Policy climate driving movements out of countries of origin

Respondents reported that anti-SGM legislation, policy, and political statements in their countries of origin heightened their insecurity. These emboldened their societies to engage in greater SGM-phobic violence as a form of moral policing. For instance, a 49-year-old Ugandan gay man explained that as the AHA came into effect, his house was raided by neighbours coming to rob him. He was not able to go back home, and fled with only the possessions he had on him at the time. In general respondents described feeling constantly monitored, being unable to access safe spaces (both physically and virtually), and having a diminished quality of life. Respondents with diverse gender identities found it particularly difficult to hide their identity and fearing exposure, engaged in a high degree of self-censorship, both in person and on social media. Some reported moving away from home to other places within their countries, although this failed to deliver respite; for others, that was never an option. SGM people also face arrest and detention due to the criminalisation of their identities. With other countries in the region considering legislation similar to the AHA, a domino effect of movements out of countries of origin, and eventually out of the region, could occur.

> *"Okay, the thing called LGBTQI in South Sudan is like you have committed a very big crime. So, it is very rare for a person to be one. When somebody finds out […] they can just come and beat you up or even kill you and nobody's going to talk about it once they find out you're this kind of person."* [58]
> **South Sudanese lesbian woman, 20 years old.**

> *"Before passing the [AHA], it could be a little bit easier because no one would come attacking you, doing something, taking you to the police, you know, saying anything against you. But when the law was out, they started to… they started actually killing their people, burning them. They come to your house, and they know about you. They crowd around your house, and they burn you. Or maybe they find you along the way, they burn you. Or maybe they beat you."*
> **Ugandan lesbian GNC respondent, 22 years old.**

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58 South Sudan's penal code prescribes a sentence of ten years imprisonment for 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature'. The Penal Code Act 2008 (2009, 10 February). *Southern Sudan Gazette* 1 (1).

Access to education and livelihood opportunities driving the decision to move

Another key driver of displacement cited by respondents was their exclusion from education and livelihood opportunities in origin countries. Respondents described how they experienced discrimination at home, within their neighbourhoods, at school, and at work following public awareness or suspicion of their identities. Three trans men from Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda noted that discrimination based on their physical appearance, both from students and teachers, made it difficult to continue and excel in their studies. A 25-year-old Burundian intersex respondent identifying as a woman was barred by her family from continuing school when her identify became apparent as a teenager.

''In my village, I was the only one who was born like this and growing up I was a boy but then when I became a teenager my breasts developed and immediately my father started discriminating against me. He did not understand what was wrong with me so he would beat me. My father disowned me and told my mother to take me to my biological father because it could not be him. I was not allowed to continue with school.''
Burundian intersex respondent, 25 years old.

Several respondents spoke about the lack of workplace or employment protections as factors in their departure, noting their only chance to secure and maintain employment was to keep their identities hidden. In the long term, this often proved infeasible, as workspaces were interlinked with private social and communal spheres. As such, in contexts where respondents' SGM identities were made apparent, either through their choice of partner, their gender expression, or after being "outed", they struggled to access economic opportunities and to make a living. For instance, a 34-year-old gay man from Rwanda detailed how he lost his job and had to flee from his family when his sexuality was exposed in his workplace. **The difficulty maintaining a stable job due to their identity became another reason – coupled with their identity – for the community to reject them**, which in turn further limited respondents' livelihood opportunities and ability to sustain their basic needs.

"My mom asked what happened and why I was not going back to work. She was called by the CEO of the organisation I was working for. [He told her] 'We dismissed your son because he is this and this… and we caught him in the office doing this and this.'"
Ugandan gay man, 34 years old.

The barrier to accessing formal work posed by their diverse SOGIESC ultimately relegated the majority of respondents to the informal sector. Three respondents from Uganda and Rwanda said they were forced to leave their formal jobs and seek informal ones after their identities became known. In the informal sector, respondents faced further precarity as they were vulnerable to various forms of labour exploitation that they could not report to authorities both due to their identities and to the unauthorised nature of their employment. Two respondents noted their exploitation was linked to their sexual identity.

"I started doing odd jobs so that I could save for the trip. Working was very hard for me because I would get bosses who would request for sexual favours before they paid me. The harassment was too much. I left so that I could be free."
Rwandan trans man, 31 years old.

Some respondents found that they could not support themselves sufficiently on their informal sector earnings, and this drove several of them to partake in sex work. Existing literature has pointed out that the double stigmatisation of sex work and SGM identities leaves SGM people open to exploitation, serious physical and emotional harm and, in some cases, death.[59] This vulnerability was borne out in the findings. Two respondents who had worked as sex workers in their countries of origin encountered violent clients who sexually abused them. In other cases,

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59   The Africa Sex Worker Alliance (2021). Advancing Sex Workers' Health and Welfare Programming in East and Southern Africa.

respondents who used mobile dating apps for sex work encountered SGM-phobic individuals who lured them out so that they could violently attack them. They had no legal redress against such violent clients as sex work is criminalised across East Africa, and also due to the prevailing laws against same-sex sexual activity in the region.[60]

Timing of departures

Some respondents departed suddenly from their countries of origin following experiences of extensive abuse. Two respondents from Sudan and Egypt left their countries of origin without any plans or even a destination in mind because they felt the risk of staying outweighed any harm they could face by leaving. In two other cases, supportive relatives of a 25-year-old Somali bisexual man and a 23-year-old Tanzanian gay man helped secure transport, by either paying for their journey or introducing them to smugglers who facilitated their movements.

However, not all respondents began their journeys with the intention of leaving their countries of origin: five respondents first moved internally to escape proximity to their families and close-knit communities. In all cases, however, this strategy was only short-term and eventually failed when their identities were revealed in the new location by individuals from their home communities. Furthermore, moving internally did not prevent scrutiny by neighbours or harassment by authorities suspicious of their identities. **While these respondents initially sought safety internally, continued SGM-phobic violence eventually forced them to seek refuge outside their countries of origin**.

"You don't get persecuted once; it happens over time. But sometimes you think you will get used to it. You move from one community to another place. You keep moving. I used to do this there [in Burundi]. But, one day, you feel that it is coming to an end."
Burundian lesbian woman, 42 years old.

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60   Ibid.

5. Diverse – and often risky – journeys to Kenya

Respondents undertook diverse journeys from their countries of origin to Kenya, reporting varying lengths of time in transit, modes of transport, and (ir)regularity of movement. Types of journey depended on multiple factors, including respondents' fear of being identified, financial resources, access to travel documents (passports and visas), possession of documents aligned with gender identity/expression, access to various types of transportation, and the strength of respondents' social connections (i.e. their social capital). **Often, obstacles posed by respondents' SGM identities compounded challenges inherent to migration more generally, particularly as it could increase vulnerability to exploitation**. Respondents financed their journeys either with their own savings or, in case of hasty departures, by borrowing money from their peers. In the event they did not have sufficient funds, several reported having to enter into arrangements with smugglers and drivers, at times resulting in respondents being maneuvered or coerced into transactional sex. A few respondents managed to travel in whole or part without paying, although often in risky conditions as they were stowed away in lorries amidst cargo.

Obstacles of documentation and identity

Respondents who did not travel with required documentation[61] largely described their departures as sudden and unplanned and were generally fleeing SGM-phobic abuse or persecution, or conflict and violence not related to their SGM identities. In most cases, they did not have the time to bring their travel documents, or they did not have the time and/or ability to apply for the necessary travel authorisation.[62]

Those travelling without the requisite documentation faced more dangerous and difficult journeys. While many respondents from neighbouring Uganda and Tanzania, as well as Rwanda and Burundi, described bus journeys rarely taking more than a day, with entry permits upon arrival[63] for those with identification documents, respondents without the requisite documentation described reserving funds to bribe drivers or immigration officials or engaging in or being forced into transactional sexual activities for drivers. A 28-year-old Ethiopian gay man described how he paid a Kenyan lorry driver with *khat*[64] and alcoholic beverages in return for being stowed in the back with cargo. Some respondents described alighting from buses ahead of immigration checkpoints before crossing the border irregularly on foot or on motorbikes, using back roads to circumvent such checkpoints, or paying bribes to border officials.

> *"I was moving while using trailers and I paid with sexual favours. I met the first driver at a bus stop and begged him to take me on his trailer. At first, he refused, but he agreed to bring me along when I accepted to help him with sexual favours."*
> **Egyptian trans woman, 25 years old.**

Some who travelled without appropriate documents had longer journeys due to frequent changes in transportation to avoid notice and exposure of their identity. A 20-year-old trans man from Ethiopia hitchhiked in different small passenger vehicles to avoid scrutiny of his appearance by the authorities or other travellers. The journey from Ethiopia to Kenya took him two weeks. A 25-year-old trans woman from Egypt travelled for several months using lorries, having to engage in transactional sex to make drivers take her, and she stayed in Dillo (Oromia region) in Southern Ethiopia for a year. After experiencing localised conflict in Ethiopia and watching clips about Kenya on social media, she decided to move onward.

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61 Fully valid and correct documentation may prove a challenge to migrants in the region for a variety of reasons, with additional barriers faced by SGM migrants. Respondents could face multiple documentation obstacles: lack of any documentation (which could be linked to their diverse SOGIESC, for instance needing to depart suddenly due to SGM-phobic violence); possession of documents but not a valid authorisation to enter Kenya; and/or possession of documents that are valid for Kenyan entry but don't match their gender identity/expression.

62 Respondents' specific reasons for lacking required documentation often coalesced along nationality lines. All Congolese respondents, who departed before DR Congo became a member of the EAC (see also below footnote), noted their departures were sudden and were therefore not able to access travel documentation prior to departing. While Somali respondents did not explicitly talk about their issues with accessing documentation, their departures were sudden and linked to either their families finding out about their SGM identities, or to experiences of conflict and violence. Ethiopian respondents described how they were ostracised from their families prior to departure, making it more difficult to access government institutions to obtain documentation, and prompting their departure along irregular routes.

63 EAC nationals (Burundians, Congolese (DR Congo), Rwandans, Somalis, South Sudanese, Ugandans, and Tanzanians) can enter Kenya for tourism or business for up to 90 days without a visa. They receive an entry permit upon producing their identification documents at the border. SGM respondents noted that border officials gave a varied number of days with some having been given one week and others 90 days.

64 A narcotic plant that is popular in the Horn of Africa; chewing *khat* (also *qat*) produces a stimulant effect.

Respondents whose gender expression differed from the sex indicated on their travel documents –especially transgender respondents – elicited particular scrutiny from bus operators, bus conductors, and border officials. These included questions about their identity and the nature of their journey that were not necessarily posed to fellow passengers. While some travelled with what officials deemed to be conflicting documents, others tried to consciously align their gender expression to the sex stated on their identification so as to go under the radar. In some cases, individuals strategically emphasised other aspects of their identity, such as physical impairments, knowingly risking alternative forms of discrimination to divert attention from their diverse SOGIESC. Some trans respondents opted to travel irregularly due to the risks posed by the mismatch between their documents and gender identity, and some who had taken public transportation to the Kenyan border had to use irregular means to cross into the country or pay bribes at the border.

> *"I was scared when I was coming to Kenya, but in Egypt the discrimination was worse. When I was travelling from Ethiopia, I had to act manly. I let my beard grow so that they would not know I was trans. The journey to Nairobi was scary but it had to be done."*
> **Egyptian trans woman, 25 years old.**

> *"I usually know how to act manly, so people rarely know I am trans. They can mainly discriminate me because of my hand [which has a congenital deformity]. They look at it and get distracted and don't scrutinise my other business. [*laughs*]"*
> **Ethiopian trans woman, 20 years old.**

In addition to the various coping mechanisms mentioned above, **respondents reported various strategies to avoid notice and remain undetected in order to stay safe while on the move**. This included hiding their SGM identities, limiting conversations with other passengers, and wearing loose clothes which would cover up any revealing identity markers or traits. This was the case for all respondents, regardless of whether they were using regular or irregular pathways. For those engaging in regular movements, the experience was reportedly less stressful for LGB respondents whose SGM identities were imperceptible; they could literally hide in plain sight, in contrast to SGM migrants with diverse gender expressions and identities. Such respondents recounted feeling especially vulnerable while crossing borders due to the scrutiny their identities elicited (see also above section). While some respondents were willing to detail their experiences about the journey, others declined to do so, saying they were too painful to recall during the interview.

> *"At the stops people would stare at me while I was trying to use the restroom. I was completely covered with a hoodie, and I would not look at anyone or speak to anyone. I just kept to myself."*
> **Ugandan trans man, 26 years old.**

> *"I was arrested on the way in from Ethiopia and had to bribe the police because I did not have the proper border passes. The driver bribed them."*
> **Ethiopian gay man, 28 years old.**

> *"I was mainly stressed because I didn't know where I was going. I masked my identity while travelling. I would not speak so that they couldn't suspect that I was trans."*
> **Tanzanian trans woman, 19 years old.**

Using smugglers to navigate the journey

Another key strategy in navigating the journey was the use of smugglers. **Many SGM respondents without the necessary documents moved irregularly to Kenya by entering into arrangements with smugglers or truck drivers to transport them across borders**. Some noted that bus drivers or their assistants helped them navigate border crossings, mostly in exchange for payments, so that they would not be stopped and subjected to document checks.

> *"I gave the bus conductor some small money. In Kenya shillings it was around something like 3,000 [± 20 USD]. And then he walked me past the border, like the whole custom thing… without getting interrogated or anything. I crossed to the other side, sat in the bus and waited for my fellows to get checked up and everything at the immigration. I didn't go through immigration."*
> **Rwandan trans woman, 23 years old.**

Respondents from EAC countries who travelled irregularly enlisted smugglers because they had limited time to plan their journeys and/or gather resources to facilitate their movement. They described irregular movement as a generally faster means of leaving their countries of origin than seeking out and paying for regular cross-border transport requiring a passport and ticket(s). In general, most respondents who travelled irregularly undertook journeys which in whole or part entailed stowing away in freight vehicles and crossing borders through uncharted routes.

> *"The bus ride from Dar es Salaam to Tanga was alright and I faced no challenges. The challenges started in Tanga because I did not have the documentation needed to cross the border. At the border, I got off the bus and used a motorbike to cross into Kenya using back roads. After crossing to the other side, I could get back on the bus."*
> **Tanzanian gay man, 21 years old.**

Respondents had mixed accounts of their smugglers, some positive, and others marked by hardship and abuse. Some respondents noted their experiences with smugglers had been (mostly) positive as the smugglers had supported them in reaching their goal of arriving in Kenya. Moreover, they described how their smugglers, though unaware of their clients' SGM identities, became a critical resource for them. They helped them to cross borders and provided advice on how to navigate life in Kenya as a migrant or asylum seeker. Others had adverse experiences with their smuggler(s), such as being abandoned in unfamiliar locations and having to make their own way to their destination. A number of respondents reported their smugglers had abused them, at times but not always due to their SGM identity, for example by forcing them to steal or smuggle drugs in return for transportation. A 25-year-old Egyptian trans woman described how the smugglers who facilitated her journey from Moyale to Nairobi forced her and fellow passengers to pack marijuana in boxes as payment for the trip before riding with the drugs in the back of the vehicle. Two respondents (a gay man and a trans woman) noted that upon revealing that they were fleeing SGM-phobic discrimination, their smugglers forced them to have sex in exchange for transportation.

Payment modalities varied among the respondents who travelled with smugglers, and risks increased for those who did not have the resources to pay. Some reported paying their smugglers in cash. In cases where respondents were not required or not able to pay, some noted their smugglers empathised with their desperate need to travel and offered them free passage. However, some others had to engage in transactional sex to ensure the smuggler would still take them. In most cases, smugglers remained unaware of their clients' SGM identities, as respondents had represented their departure as motivated by economic factors or other personal reasons. Respondents worried that revealing their identities would lead to the smuggler discriminating against them and cancelling their travel arrangements. Hiding one's identity was described by these respondents as their main strategy to keep safe while travelling with smugglers.

> *"I was able to trade sex for a ride, and I came from Uganda to Mombasa. He [the smuggler] was driving a personal car and told me that he also lived in Mombasa, but he would not tell me where exactly. He just left me in the city centre when we arrived.''*
> **Rwandan gay man, 32 years old.**

> *"I was afraid that the trailer truck drivers would decline to help me if they realised I was bisexual, so I would tell them that I was travelling to find better living conditions. This made them open to assisting me because they could see I was a young person who was trying to better himself."*
> **Somali bisexual man, 24 years old.**

6. The promise and disappointment of Kenya: hostile policies, enduring needs, and onward movement aspirations

Many respondents were attracted to Kenya as a destination, and had a variety of reasons to see it as a desirable location. These were largely grounded in notions of greater acceptance and support for their diverse SOGIESC. However, the policy and social climates in Kenya are also discriminatory, and respondents faced prejudice, abuse, and other difficulties due to their SGM identities as they had in their countries of origin and over the course of their journeys. This spurred many to consider moving elsewhere, although viable options for onward mobility were understood to be limited.

Kenya as an intended destination

Several respondents planned to travel to Kenya from the start of their journeys because they believed there would be more freedom and less pressure to hide identities there. Social media was at times cited as a channel through which respondents received abuse or were lured into violent situations in their origin countries, as mentioned previously. However, platforms such as TikTok, X, Facebook, and Instagram also allowed respondents to glimpse aspects of life in Kenya by following SGM content creators there. Five respondents said they were attracted by the apparent freedom exhibited online by SGM people in Kenya, which, in their view, sharply contrasted with the debilitating need to constantly hide their SGM identity in their home country. For those who had time to plan their movements, **access to social media and online Kenyan interlocutors was a key factor in learning about SGM-supportive CBOs and NGOs**, and ultimately choosing Kenya as a destination.

> *"I would follow queer creators and organisations on platforms like Facebook and Instagram and that is how I knew where to go once I reached Kenya. I also use Twitter [X] a lot and I would see all these posts about trans assistance. The information wasn't all there but I gathered that there was safe housing and some level of assistance. I figured that I might as well go and see what would happen in Kenya."*
> **Ugandan trans man, 26 years old.**

Travel to Kenya was not just about connecting with organisations, but could also be spurred by desire to experience community and belonging among accepting friends and family. Ostracised by their families and communities at home, eight respondents (from Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi and Ethiopia) attributed their decision to move to Kenya to the presence of close blood relatives, chosen families and/or peers that accepted their identities. **For some respondents, movement to Kenya was based solely on a perception of the country as a key host of refugees**. By and large these respondents had fled SGM-phobic violence.

> *"I started planning when life became difficult at home. I chose Kenya because I knew my sister was here and I would not be alone."*
> **Tanzanian gay man, 21 years old.**

In many cases, respondents' decisions to migrate were shaped not only by factors related to persecution, threats to their safety, and/or incidents of violence, but also their aspirations for living their lives. **Thus, prevailing narratives in asylum hosting countries about SGM migrants focusing on victimhood – often employed by government institutions in RSD processes – need to be nuanced**. At the same time, pre-existing aspirations and/or more proactive movement to Kenya should not be perceived or instrumentalised as casting doubt on any asylum claims, given the systemic persecution existing in origin countries.

> *"I had always wanted to move to Kenya for the freedom, but I wanted to do it when I had put in the proper living arrangements. I wanted to have a job lined up and a place to stay, but after my father found out I had to leave without having put any plans in place."*
> **Somali gay and queer respondent, 20 years old.**

Challenging policy climate in Kenya

All respondents, and particularly those of diverse gender expression, said they struggled to navigate the country's anti-LGBTQI+ policy climate. Transgender respondents in Nairobi reported that their lack of documentation in combination with their identities exposed them to a risk of detention or extortion at the hands of authorities. In areas where CBOs operate safe houses, several respondents recounted living in fear of police raids. A 23-year-old Rwandan trans woman recalled that the safe house she stayed in was raided by police who arrested all the residents. Several transgender respondents noted that after they were arrested, they were extensively questioned about their identities, at times subjected to strip searches to inspect their genitals, and detained in cells with prisoners of the opposite gender.

Respondents exhibited varying levels of knowledge of and engagement with Kenya's evolving legal and policy landscape vis-à-vis SGM people. Most were unaware of relevant Penal Code articles, and some said they had chosen to ignore SGM-related news and debates for the sake of their mental health. Others noted it was simply not a priority in their daily activities, with some adding their situations were already highly precarious, and they did not necessarily see that changing regardless of the adoption of new policies and/or legislation related to SGM people.

> *"I won't lie. I don't follow up on matters of policy or laws and neither do my friends. Those are not things we discuss on the streets."*
> **Somali bisexual man, 23 years old.**

> *"My friends aren't concerned with policies; we mainly talk about SRHR [Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights] care."*
> **Egyptian trans woman, 25 years old.**

By contrast, **the uncertainty generated by ongoing political debates and the potential enactment of the FPB[65] spurred some respondents to take up human rights advocacy and to closely monitor relevant developments**. Some said they kept tabs on the legal, policy, and social climate in Kenya to better gauge when they should move to another country. Once again, social media platforms played a pivotal role as sources of information and forums for dissecting news across SGM circles in the country.

> *"It's a must that I stay updated on such news because it is a matter of life and death for gay people. When you are new in a place you need to know what their laws are, so that you are not on the wrong side of the law. I see all the news about the anti-LGBTQ bills. When I see a video about it, I immediately go to the comments, so that I can see what people are saying about these laws so that I can get more information on how to protect myself. I have a friend who follows up on these laws a lot. We talk on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Imo. I get most of my information from TikTok and we talk about it."*
> **Tanzanian gay man, 23 years old.**

Enduring needs of SGM migrants in Kenya

SGM respondents who had fled persecution in their home countries still lacked adequate protection in Kenya. This was primarily linked to the inaccessibility of refugee status, which could provide a potential pathway to resettlement and greater security outside of Kenya (see next section for further discussion). **While all migrants in Kenya face challenges, SGM migrants face additional hardships related to their identities**. This is not helped by Kenya's worsening policy climate, which can further feed anti-SGM sentiments. Outside of the camps, lack of documentation significantly impeded respondents' access to employment beyond the informal sector, which was characterised by low wages and instability, making it difficult to attain a comfortable standard of living. However, on top of these challenges, respondents had to contend with anti-SGM discrimination, which further hampered their participation in the labour market. In the Kakuma camps, livelihoods were also obstructed, with respondents reporting that other camp residents specifically avoided micro-businesses set up by SGM individuals.

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65   As detailed above, this bill would further criminalise SGM people beyond their sexual activities.

Respondents in the camps relied heavily on NGO support, which should be impartial in keeping with humanitarian principles. Yet, several had experienced or witnessed aid workers demonstrating homophobia or other forms of prejudice. When seeking legal aid or healthcare in the wake of a violent attack, respondents said camp staff and aid workers seemed not to prioritise their needs. Some noted that even after going to trusted aid workers, there was a lack of access to justice due to local authorities' reluctance to take their cases seriously. **Even when perpetrators were identified, they were rarely charged or prosecuted, which speaks to a wider culture of impunity for crimes against SGM people**.

> *"After I got paralysed, I asked people from the reception centre [in the Kakuma camps] if they can help get me a treatment, but the management there had become more homophobic at the time. I wanted them to direct me to some physiotherapy assistance, because I didn't know much about the Kakuma camps. I told them the truth. I requested from them even to get a report from the police, but they asked me what happened. Once I told them, they started to bring up excuses about the situation. They said, 'just wait, let us do it tomorrow'. They didn't do anything; they were not taking it seriously."*
> **Sudanese gay man, 22 years old.**

Respondents in Nairobi and Mombasa also found themselves facing discrimination as a result of both their SGM identity and their migrant status. While some were able to hide their identities to access employment opportunities, others faced discrimination. Seeking to evade public scrutiny, respondents took measures such as limiting their interactions with neighbours, and, in some cases, with other SGM peers. Three respondents (a trans woman, a trans man, and a gay man) said they avoided interacting with their SGM peers in public as it raised their own visibility. Respondents however still interacted with SGM peers in private communal spaces. Public surveillance made respondents very cautious about disclosing their address, fearing violent home attacks. This worry was shared by their peers in the much less anonymous setting of the Kakuma refugee camps. **Some respondents said that security concerns, such as meddlesome neighbours, led them to change homes frequently**.

> *"There is a lot of discrimination in this country. I have never been attacked personally, but it is because I take extra steps to ensure my safety. I never let people know where I live, and I move at least once a year. Sometimes I even move houses twice a year. Whenever I feel like I am being surveilled, I pack up and leave. I also stopped wearing my rainbow bracelet because people could easily spot it and know who I was."*
> **Rwandan trans man, 31 years old.**

Housing insecurity was an enduring issue for SGM migrants in Nairobi and Mombasa, chiefly because it was difficult to afford permanent accommodation. Rental arrears and evictions were reported by those in rental accommodation working informally and sporadically. The lack of safe houses in Mombasa meant many respondents there were threatened by homelessness. While this was somewhat mitigated in Nairobi due to the presence of CBOs which offered safe housing programmes, some SGM migrants noted that the majority of the safe houses were geared toward LGB identities and run by Ugandans. These implicitly catered to other Ugandans due to shared networks and culture. As such, respondents of gender-diverse identities and other nationalities reported a greater struggle to access housing.

Transgender respondents were especially vulnerable when seeking medical care as they constantly encountered SGM-phobic medical staff asking invasive and offensive questions about their gender identities. A lack of financial means also prevented some from being able to access gender affirming hormone therapy (GAHT), which is expensive in Kenya. While GAHT was reported to be available in hospitals, a trans woman interviewed in Nairobi explained that seeking the drugs from hospitals meant navigating extensive bureaucracy and discrimination. As a result, she noted that the majority of trans people in Kenya on GAHT use black market suppliers, elevating the risk of buying counterfeit products and experiencing adverse health effects. While GAHT drugs were easier to access on the black market, their availability and pricing was unpredictable, often leaving trans people dealing with stock outages.

> *"I've been off hormones for some months now, it's damn expensive."*
> **Rwandan trans woman, 23 years old.**

Asylum and its obstacles

The worsening policy climate in Kenya for SGM people has given rise to a range of specific challenges for SGM migrants in terms of their legal status, particularly access to asylum. These issues, which were chiefly mentioned by respondents in the Kakuma refugee camps, include facing obstacles in obtaining RSD appointments, having trouble getting documentation accepted, and facing discrimination during their interviews with caseworkers. This adverse treatment appears throughout the asylum procedure, including when registering respondents' claims, obtaining an initial RSD appointment, and receiving the outcome of their claim following an RSD interview.[66]

> *"I didn't get an interview when I arrived. I am still asylum seeker now, since 2019. I only did my interview in 2023. This was the first time. When I arrived, they asked me the reason why I had come. I told them [about my SGM identity]. At that time, the people from the reception centre put us as a group together. [...] I feel that because we were honest and they put us together, I didn't get an interview. Last year, we forced them to give us an interview appointment. We were sending messages to international organisations, and some of them came here and we met them. We complained and they took our complaint. We explained what happened. And after that, we called the authorities, the DRS, to come to do a meeting with us and one of the organisations. Then they finally let us do the interview."*
> **Sudanese gay man, 22 years old.**

Out of 17 respondents who had applied for asylum in Kenya,[67] 16 had not completed an RSD process at the time of interviewing,[68] with several reporting they had been in the process for five to ten years. This "hopeless administrative limbo" was the prevailing situation regardless of nationality.[69] When raising this issue with UNHCR and other actors, particularly in the context of the Kakuma refugee camps, respondents were told that the responsibility to grant refugee status lies entirely with Kenya's Department of Refugee Services. The capacity of outside actors to influence the process was seen as limited as the topic of SGM asylum seekers remains very sensitive.

> *"I am an asylum seeker. I have had the same status for 8-9 years now."*
> **Rwandan trans man, 31 years old.**

Respondents in the Kakuma refugee camps in particular highlighted how their greatest challenge was lack of refugee status, although they also faced continuous mental and physical abuse and violence from other camp residents, who saw them as cursed. Due to the close-knit nature of camps' communities and an intake process that has new arrivals live together at the reception area before being allocated space in the camp, those who identify as SGM are often "outed." Consequently, they run the continuous risk of attack when carrying out simple daily tasks, such as fetching water from communal taps. Perpetrators included other refugees and asylum-seekers as well as members of the host community. Respondents living in Nairobi and Mombasa reported having to devise strategies to live undetected in their neighbourhoods due to ongoing fear of discrimination. However, for respondents who had left the camps, these urban centres provided a sense of relative safety when compared to the targeted SGM-phobic discrimination and abuse they faced in Kakuma.

Access to information on asylum for SGM migrants was not equal across locations in Kenya, with respondents in urban settings appearing less informed. Some respondents in both Nairobi and Mombasa reported having limited information regarding the asylum registration process compared to their peers in the Kakuma refugee camps. Indeed, a number seemed to confuse their proof of registration[70] with having actually obtained asylum. Moreover, some said they were unaware of which government department oversees the intake process for new arrivals. In Nairobi, some

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66 In Kenya, asylum seekers can obtain proof of registration once they begin the asylum application process. However, proof of registration does not automatically lead to a refugee status determination (RSD) appointment. In addition, those who have had their RSD interview are also not assured of receiving an outcome on their case within a predetermined period of time. Also refer to: UNHCR (n.d.). Kenya – Refugee Status Determination and Ministry of Interior. Department of Refugee Services (n.d.). Refugee Status Determination (RSD).
67 Respondents interviewed in the Kakuma refugee camps accounted for most of those who had applied for asylum within the sample, with all saying they had seen little progress over the years since receiving their proof of registration of their asylum claim.
68 The one respondent who did report having a refugee mandate, a 20-year-old South Sudanese lesbian woman in the Kakuma refugee camps, noted that she had arrived with her parents as a minor. Her coming of age and identifying as a lesbian woman while in the camp stood entirely separate from the already received refugee status.
69 These respondents were Burundian, Congolese, Ethiopian, Rwandan, South Sudanese, Sudanese, and Ugandan.
70 This proof of registration is a document only valid inside the camp as a means of identification or to receive assistance.

SGM-led CBOs fill this information gap and direct new arrivals on how to initiate the registration process. However, these CBOs are small and limited in resources. It appears overall that **SGM migrants are navigating a trade-off between greater access to asylum processes in the camps, at the expense of targeted abuse regarding their identities, and greater safety and anonymity in urban areas at the expense of not receiving assistance and the potential longer-term remedy that asylum could bring**.

While most who had been in Kenya for several years said they had initially been open to applying for asylum (despite knowing the process is long), Kenya's encampment policy[71] often deterred them from continuing. Two respondents interviewed in Nairobi said they had abandoned their registration process after first obeying official directives to relocate to the Kakuma refugee camps. They ultimately returned to irregularity in urban areas. **Recently arrived respondents who had not yet applied for asylum were discouraged by the current policy climate**, particularly given that applications submitted by their peers were still awaiting resolution after many years. This was especially the case in Nairobi where respondents felt they were stuck in limbo, unable to access any sort of asylum or residency documentation which would improve their living conditions. Some added they would still go through the asylum application process, not so much in the expectation of being granted refugee status in Kenya, but in the hope that a proof of registration would help them resettle out of Kenya.

> *"I applied for the asylum seeker pass because I want to go through the relocation process. I now have the pass. It took 3-4 months for me to get it."*
> **Ugandan trans man, 26 years old.**

Onward movement intentions

Respondents had generally been intentional in coming to Kenya, but based on their experience there, the majority expressed hope that it could be a transit point. They now aspired to move to a country which welcomes SGM migrants. This desire to move onward was primarily due to the continuing discrimination they faced in Kenya. Thus, while Kenya was perceived as a relatively safe option in the region, it still failed to deliver on respondents' hopes and expectations of true security and welcome.

Most respondents who wished to move onward from Kenya preferred to do so through legal pathways. As was the case in the choice of Kenya as an initial destination, social media was again an influential factor in respondents' selection of preferred onward destinations. In some cases, this was due to direct exchanges with peers living outside of Kenya. In others, respondents were able to form opinions about which countries would be safe simply by following social media accounts from SGM content creators living outside East Africa.

> *"When I want to learn about countries abroad, I use apps to talk to my friends who live there. Like Tinder, Grindr, WhatsApp and Instagram."*
> **Burundian gay man, 32 years old.**

Respondents of diverse gender identity and expression all described strong aspirations to move onwards from Kenya. They dreamed of being resettled in Europe, Canada, or the United States, where they believed they would face less discrimination and be able to live without hiding. **For other respondents, onward movement intentions and aspirations varied, largely depending on their living situation in Kenya**.

Due to a lack of progress in their asylum cases, with some having been stalled for years, a number of respondents reported they were considering irregular, risky onward movements from Kenya. The uncertainty surrounding their RSD and lack of a clear status in Kenya was compounded by anti-SGM sentiment from the local community, fellow refugees and asylum-seekers, and Kenyan authorities in the Kakuma camps. These considerations were further influenced by online communication with SGM migrants who had moved from Kenya to South Sudan in recent years, primarily from the Kakuma camps. Some of these migrants had been resettled to North America due to the increased

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71 Following Kenya's encampment policy, those who seek asylum are directed to move to either the Kakuma or Dadaab refugee camps in order to receive support and assistance. Refer to: Kenya National Commission on Human Rights and Refugees International (2024). Transforming Refugee Policy in Kenya: From Encampment to Socio-Economic Integration.

risk of identifying as SGM in South Sudanese camps.[72] Some others noted they were willing to await the outcome of their asylum process so that they could eventually access a resettlement pathway, even if that meant remaining in difficult conditions in Kakuma. This was particularly the case for respondents with children, as well as a few others who hoped that Kenyan and international authorities would still find dignified solutions for them.

> *"It's not hard to live here… it's just… you know, many people here, they are living without the things. You can live here for five or six or ten years without having a [refugee] mandate. But you're still living."*
> **Congolese trans woman, 27 years old.**

> *"I'm still an asylum seeker but legally I don't think I'm supposed to be an asylum seeker right now because I've spent more than six months here in this camp. Yet, I have not done any interviews for documentation."*
> **Ugandan lesbian GNC, 22 years old.**

> *"When you are thinking about tomorrow, you wish you could live in a country where you are welcome, where you are free to live as who you are without judgment, without prejudice. You are just free. Which is not the case here."*
> **Burundian lesbian woman, 42 years old.**

A few respondents in Mombasa who had managed to acquire Kenyan national identification[73] had no *immediate* onward movement intentions, due to their secure legal status, thought this did not mean they wanted to stay in Kenya long-term. They had navigated what they described as the biggest hurdle, which was to obtain Kenyan documentation, which also improved their access to the labour market. Therefore, most of them were content to remain in the country for the time being, even if this meant their administrative and personal identities did not match. They all noted they would continue to stay in Mombasa, where they felt they would face less prejudice than in Nairobi.

Those in Mombasa who did plan to leave were mainly motivated to do so by the hope of finding better access to livelihoods and assistance from SGM-led CBOs. These respondents all lacked national IDs. Some Somali and Tanzanian respondents who spoke about their Muslim faith aspired to move to Gulf countries, including Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where they hoped to get well-paid jobs. This was in spite of their awareness of hostility towards SGM people in these countries. They hoped that their religious affinity with the host communities would serve as an asset. Still, in general, they noted they would not be able to act on these aspirations to move for the foreseeable future due to a lack of funds.

> *"Some of the friends I have made have travel goals. There is one who wants to go to the UK and others want to go to the Gulf countries. The main reason they want to leave is to look for work opportunities."*
> **Tanzanian trans woman, 24 years old.**

In Nairobi, some respondents who had been able to find jobs and housing were resigned to staying in Kenya, not because they lacked aspirations to leave but because they lacked the funds – and regular pathways – to do so. They mostly aspired to move to European and North American countries where they believed they would be free from SGM-phobic discrimination.

> *"I would never go back to Rwanda. I would honestly prefer to stay here and work, but if I am given the chance I would move to the USA or to Canada. Those countries have a lot of economic opportunities for their citizens. Also, LGBTQI+ people are free over there. You can have a life. Those are just dreams, though, because at the moment I am stuck. I am stuck with my documentation process, stuck financially, stuck mentally. I am just completely stuck here in every aspect."*
> **Rwandan trans man, 31 years old.**

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72 LGBTQ Refugees in Kakuma and Gorom (2024). Op. Cit.
73 These respondents were able to obtain Kenyan ID by asserting family ties to relatives who had married Kenyan nationals. This was facilitated by the fact that Mombasa is primarily a Swahili-speaking city, which made it easier for the respondents (Tanzanians and Somalis) to navigate bureaucratic processes, even without a high level of English.

7. Making a life in Kenya: services, support, and social dimensions

SGM migrants in Kenya face many challenges, but primarily through the SGM community – be it individuals or CBOs – they were able to find at least a measure of support, acceptance and assistance. However large gaps remain due to limited resources, geographic concentration of CBOs in Nairobi, and focus on certain SGM identities and nationalities. Nonetheless, many respondents expressed that life in Kenya allowed them greater freedom to explore their identities than was the case in their countries of origin, and through their use of social media, their representations of life in Kenya could lead others to follow in their footsteps.

Access to assistance and services

Many respondents migrated to Kenya because of established support structures. In particular, the existence of SGM-led CBOs across Kenya significantly helped respondents navigate life upon arrival. In Nairobi, LGBTQI+ CBOs served as a lifeline for respondents providing safe housing, safe spaces for community activities, crucial SRHR care, legal aid, and information on how to navigate life as an SGM individual in Kenya, including both physical and emotional support for continued social marginalisation and abuse faced on a day-to-day basis. In some cases, respondents had even planned their journeys to specific locations in Nairobi in order to link up with organisations so that they could receive housing and assistance upon arrival.

However, some respondents noted that some CBOs, and in particular safe houses, only cater to certain SGM profiles. This left certain identities underserved, in particular ITGNC individuals. Furthermore, some SGM communities in Kenya appeared more developed than others. Ugandan SGM migrants had greater visibility and leadership in Kenya's SGM civil society organisations, leaving respondents from elsewhere feeling underrepresented. Some respondents also felt that Ugandan SGM migrants received priority over other nationalities when accessing CBO services. Given rising SGM arrivals and limited CBO resources, respondents expressed urgency in addressing this perceived discrimination.

Unlike in Nairobi, respondents in Mombasa had limited access to CBOs, with only two organisations working directly with SGM migrants offering legal aid and SRHR care. These respondents had no access to assistance when facing housing insecurity and homelessness, although linguistic and cultural affinities did ease some aspects of living without documentation. **In the Kakuma refugee camps there are LGBTQI+-specific programming and services, delivered by international actors, such as the Danish Refugee Council, however they are limited and overstretched.** Furthermore, some respondents were unaware of the services offered by SGM-led CBOs, likely as a result of the limited reach and resources of these grassroots organisations.

Aside from SGM-led CBOs, respondents relied on assistance from their families (when present in the country), and from peers, migrant communities, and religious institutions. The presence of family and peers factored into the internal movements of respondents, as they ultimately opted to live where they would be able to join relatives and friends. This was especially the case for Tanzanian respondents in Mombasa. Upon arriving in the country, some respondents were able to rely on their families and/or friends for housing and financial assistance. For some respondents, this meant continuing to hide their identities to avoid rejection by loved ones. In Mombasa, several respondents sought support from religious institutions, in particular mosques, although this also entailed keeping their identity secret.

> *"I was in communication with the cousin I currently live with. Our mothers are sisters, but his father is Kenyan. I told him of my plans to leave home, and he asked how I intended to travel. I just told him that I would find a way. My cousin is aware that I am trans, and he has accepted me. He even cautions me about protecting myself while I socialise so that I do not put myself at any type of physical risk."*
> **Tanzanian trans woman, 24 years old.**

Social dimensions of life in Kenya

Although respondents continued to encounter social discrimination in Kenya, many noted they felt less stigmatisation than in their countries of origin and that living in Kenya had allowed them to further explore and understand their diverse SOGIESC. Several said that in Kenya they had been able to explore their identities and express themselves in ways that would have been impossible in their countries of origin. Some expressed awareness that not all spaces were safe, and that they had to limit showing their identities and gender expressions in some circumstances, but at the same time said living in Kenya had for the most part allowed them to expand their social circles and build networks with other SGM people.

> *"While living here, I've been able to express myself more and explore my gender identity. I even pierced my ears. There are limits to how I can dress. I can't go all out, but I am still more free."*
> **Ethiopian trans woman, 20 years old.**

> *"Here in Kenya, I was able to better explore my SOGIESC and understand my sexuality and gender identity. In Somalia, I knew that I was different, but I was not able to fully express who I was. [...] When I got here, I was able to understand my gender identity and all the terminologies, like pronouns and the labels in LGBTQI+."*
> **Somali gay and queer, 20 years old.**

> *"Here, I have more freedom to dress the way that I want. No one cares when I dye my hair or dress in my own way. I get along with the host SGM. I have a lot more friends than when I was in Rwanda. There I just had my family. I could not make gay friends because my wife would be suspicious. Honestly, I don't even miss my wife or family. I like how I get to be free here."*
> **Rwandan gay man, 32 years old.**

Social media provided SGM migrants with safe spaces in which to interact with other SGM people in Kenya and even in their countries of origin and beyond. Respondents noted they were able to stay abreast of conditions in their countries of origin and inform SGM peers back home about the living conditions in Kenya, thus playing a key role in informing the movement decisions of others. The use of social media was cited as a means of offsetting the isolation that some respondents encountered after being cut off from their own social circles back home. Others, especially younger respondents aged between 18 and 24, used social media for more conventional purposes: not so much to explore SOGIESC diversity as to connect with other people of their age group, regardless of their SGM identities.

> *"On Instagram I have followers who live in those [Western] countries and we vibe and talk and I see how life is like on their page. We mainly just vibe and give each other shoutouts to increase our follower count."*
> **Somali gay queer, 20 years old.**

> *"Some of my gay friends in Tanzania are planning to leave. One said that they will go to Uganda, and another will come to Kenya. They are facing the same issues I was facing. They ask me how life is like in Kenya. I tell them that here the people don't discriminate against you outright, but they take time to figure you out unlike in Tanzania where they run off assumptions. I also tell them it's easier to be free and there is work, though you must work hard to get the job."*
> **Tanzanian gay man, 21 years old.**

8. Conclusions and recommendations

SGM migrants in Kenya face heightened vulnerability to abuse, discrimination, and marginalisation, as they had in their countries of origin and during their migration journey. At the same time, there is no single narrative encompassing their departure from countries of origin through arrival in Kenya. Rather, SGM migrants who departed for reasons linked to their identities reported a range of abuses, which were frequently intertwined and compounding: direct violence, both physical and sexual; threats of persecution; and/or experiences of discrimination and marginalisation preventing access to education and livelihoods. **The diversity of experience and challenges faced by SGM migrants was further impacted by their countries of origin and their specific identities**.

While most respondents were effectively impeded from living and participating fully in their societies – whether they had experienced direct violence or not – many also were influenced in their migration decision by a proactive desire to live more freely. **Rather than focusing narrowly on SGM "victimhood", refugee status determination and/or resettlement procedures should take into account the varied forms of persecution experienced by SGM migrants, ranging from physical violence to restricted rights and freedoms**.

Kenya has long been perceived as the only country in the region where displaced SGM can – at least until recently – access some form of protection based on persecution linked to their diverse SOGIESC. In practice, however, and in the context of an increasing anti-LGBTQI+ policy climate in Kenya, **respondents reported that their access to asylum and eventual resettlement pathways were very limited**. Some asylum applicants were still waiting for their status-determination interview, while others had not had news of their applications for years. Additionally respondents reported a range of anti-SGM discrimination and abuses in Kenya.

Despite these challenges, Kenya remains a regional destination for SGM migrants seeking relative safety. SGM people continue to "promote" the country through social networks and social media, describing it to peers as a place where supportive communities and associations exist, despite their limitations. With few viable alternatives, SGM migration to Kenya will likely continue.

Many who reach Kenya aspire to resettle in other parts of the world, but the reality is that only a minority will qualify for formal resettlement programmes. Even fewer will secure the limited available places, and fewer still have the resources to pursue such journeys independently.

The following are implications and recommendations for key actors, including those engaging in humanitarian programming, policy actors, officials of governments in the region, and representatives of donor countries, based on this study's findings, and co-created with the Steering Committee:

- To ensure the human rights (including those related to asylum and protection) of SGM migrants are fully respected, **continued advocacy for a more humane consideration of their presence in Kenya (and across the East Africa region) is essential**. The Kenyan government should adhere to its international obligations, including the international conventions to which it is party, by processing the asylum applications of everyone who has faced persecution or violence in their country of origin, regardless of their SOGIESC.

- **If the Kenyan government continues to disregard SOGIESC-based persecution as a valid ground for asylum, there continues to be a need for regular pathways out of the country (and region) for SGM migrants**. With the limited availability of third-country resettlement options, educational and labour opportunities tailored for SGM migrants in East Africa should be discussed by governments of safe third countries.

- **More resources should be allocated to CBOs and RLOs that provide essential assistance** to SGM migrants in Kenya. Their capacities should be strengthened in order to scale up the existing responses. Localisation efforts in humanitarian programming should ensure that some of the supported CBOs and RLOs are engaged in filling critical service gaps for SGM migrants in Kenya. **Such gaps include supporting access to documentation, safe housing and medical care, including SRHR care and GAHT**. From the respondents' accounts, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) emerges as a key need following traumas suffered as a result of becoming displaced and facing violence linked to their diverse SGM identities.

- **Direct and continued engagement with SGM migrants in all their diversity is key to the design of appropriate programming that addresses enduring needs**. SGM-led steering committees should be established which feed into programme design, implementation, and evaluation. More participatory and innovative programming should strive to move beyond the current one-size-fits-all approach to SGM programming, in which SGM individuals are seen as members of a "community" with identical experiences and needs.

Annex 1: Role and involvement of the SGM Steering Committee during the research process

Research phase	Activities	Description
Inception phase	• Creation of the Steering Committee • Outlining the research objectives	The Steering Committee (SC) was comprised of members of SGM civil society organisations and RLOs based in Nairobi and met in-person on a bi-monthly basis throughout the project. MMC and SC members used the sessions to share updates on emerging issues and trends that affected SGM people in Kenya, and as well as to co-design and provide feedback on all facets of the project. In addition, monthly virtual check-in calls were convened to update the SC on the project's progress and for any ad hoc feedback. During initial meetings, the SC was instrumental in framing the research by highlighting the day-to-day context navigated by SGM people and SGM-focused organisations in East Africa. This information was based on members' personal anecdotes and experiences working with SGM clients. Additionally, in the inception phase of the research, the SC provided insights into and direction on the terminology applied in the research, and worked with the team in reflecting on their own biases and positionality.
Research design	• Drafting of the research design and the research tools • Site selection	The SC provided feedback on the research design and data collection tools. Based on their knowledge of settlement patterns in Nairobi, the SC recommended expanding data collection within the greater Nairobi metropolitan area to sample more diverse SGM profiles. Moreover, they identified certain gender minority profiles as underserved in research and advocacy and assisted the MMC team in identifying a more varied sampling frame.
Data collection	• 35 in-depth interviews • Discussion of preliminary findings	The SC aided MMC in contacting participants in Mombasa and Nairobi and one member identified a set of safe houses as a venue for the interviews. Through this continued engagement MMC was able to ensure that the sample size was reflected diverse SOGIESC profiles. Discussing the preliminary findings from the Kakuma refugee camps and Mombasa with the Steering Committee allowed MMC to adapt the Nairobi data collection to fill gaps in the study.
Data analysis and validation	• Thematic analysis of qualitative data • Discussion of research findings	The SC examined and gave feedback on the research findings, validating the portrayal of the varying experiences of SGM people on the move and the continuous obstacles that they navigate even after leaving their countries of origin.
Dissemination	• Report drafting and dissemination	During a closed-door dissemination event, MMC presented key findings of the study, alongside several members of the SC who then examined the implications for programming and policy.

Annex 2: Overview of research participants

Table 1. Interview locations and countries of origin

Greater Mombasa		Kakuma refugee camps		Greater Nairobi	
Country of origin	# of interviews	Country of origin	# of interviews	Country of origin	# of interviews
Tanzania	4	Uganda	5	Uganda	3
Rwanda	2	Burundi	2	DR Congo	2
Somalia	3	Rwanda	1	Rwanda	2
Ethiopia	2	DR Congo	1	Burundi	1
Burundi	1	South Sudan	1	South Sudan	1
Uganda	1	Sudan	1		
Egypt	1	Ethiopia	1		
	14		12		9
Total		**35**			

Table 2. Respondents' SGM identities by country of origin

Nationality	# of participants	SOGIESC representation
Uganda	9	1 lesbian, 2 GNC lesbians, 3 gay men, 2 trans men, 1 intersex & non-binary bisexual
Rwanda	5	3 gay men, 1 trans man, 1 trans woman
Tanzania	4	1 gay man, 1 bisexual man, 2 trans women
Burundi	4	1 lesbian, 1 gay man, 1 bisexual man, 1 intersex & asexual
Ethiopia	3	1 gay man, 1 trans woman, 1 queer & non-binary
Somalia	3	1 gay & GNC, 2 bisexual men
DR Congo	3	2 bisexual women, 1 trans woman
South Sudan	2	1 lesbian, 1 trans woman
Sudan	1	1 gay man
Egypt	1	1 trans woman

Table 3. Respondents' arrival timelines by country of origin

Country of origin	Earliest arrival year	Most recent arrival year	Total arrivals
South Sudan	2010	2013	2
DR Congo	2011	2018	3
Ethiopia	2012	2024	3
Rwanda	2016	2024	5
Egypt	2016	2016	1
Somalia	2017	2021	3
Sudan	2019	2019	1
Uganda	2019	2024	9
Burundi	2021	2023	4
Tanzania	n.d.[74]	2022	4

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74 One respondent did not recall their exact arrival year between 2008-2013.

Annex 3: Overview of types of SGM-phobic violence

The below list was created by the researchers of this study based on the respondents' accounts, and may not be exhaustive or directly translating to other contexts and environments.

1. **Physical Violence:** This includes any physical harm or assault, such as hitting, shoving, or other forms of physical aggression.

2. **Verbal Violence:** This involves using language to demean, threaten, or intimidate SGM individuals. It can include hate speech, slurs, and derogatory remarks.

3. **Sexual Violence:** This encompasses any unwanted sexual acts or contact, including rape, sexual assault, and other forms of sexual coercion.

4. **Psychological/Emotional Abuse:** This involves actions or words intended to control, manipulate, or cause emotional distress to an individual. Examples include gaslighting, threats, isolation, and restricting someone's freedom of movement.

5. **Economic Abuse:** This type of violence involves controlling or restricting access to financial resources, employment, or other economic opportunities.

6. **Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity:** This involves attempts to force or pressure an individual to change their sexual orientation or gender identity, often through harmful or ineffective therapies.

7. **Hate Crimes:** These are criminal acts motivated by bias against SGM individuals and can involve physical violence, property damage, or other forms of intimidation.

8. **Community Violence:** This encompasses violence perpetrated by individuals or groups within the community, often targeting SGM individuals based on their identity.

9. **Institutional Violence:** This refers to violence and discrimination perpetrated by institutions, such as the government, healthcare systems, or educational institutions.

10. **Cyber/Social Media Abuse:** This includes online harassment, threats, and stalking targeting SGM individuals through digital platforms.

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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