

## **Safe Spaces: The Law and Everyday Experiences of LGBTQ Asylum Seekers**

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Each year a few thousand people arrive in Ireland seeking our protection. The events that lead to asylum applications are likely harrowing. However, for many, the asylum process causes further difficulties, particularly for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) asylum seekers. This paper explores the legal geographies of LGBTQ asylum seekers in Ireland, interrogating the ways in which Irish law and policy seek to control the bodies of this particular cohort of asylum seekers. First, I lay out the global context for LGBTQ asylum seekers before exploring what is understood by legal geographies. The paper then briefly describes the asylum system in Ireland, in particular Direct Provision, before turning to the findings from ongoing research in Ireland. A number of themes are explored including the ways in which Direct Provision and the asylum system serve to keep LGBTQ asylum seekers in the closet. This imprisonment is contested by both asylum seekers and those working on their behalf, which has led to the creation of some precarious sites of resistance.

Across the globe, over seventy states criminalise same-sex sexual acts, with thirteen states still imposing the death penalty for offences (ILGA, 2016). Given this, it is no surprise those with the resources to do so, often flee their countries. The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951 (Refugee Convention), to which Ireland is a party, lays out five persecutory grounds upon which to grant asylum, including *inter alia* membership of a particular social group (Refugee Convention, Article 1). This has been interpreted to include people persecuted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, albeit states have differed on how to apply this provision (see Millbank, 2009; Hathaway and Pobjoy, 2012; Weßels, 2013; and Berlit et al., 2015). Within European Law, Article 10 of 2004/83/EC (Qualification Directive) explicitly names persecution based on sexual orientation as a ground for providing asylum. The Refugee Convention, 1951, and instruments of the Common European Asylum Policy in the past were given effect in Irish Law by the Refugee Act, 1996. The recent International Protection Act, 2015, supersedes this Act as it comes into force in 2017.

Unfortunately, neither the offices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees nor officials in most states collect accurate data regarding all the reasons people seek asylum. In Europe, historically, only Belgium and Norway have gathered statistical data about the numbers seeking asylum based on sexual orientation. Other countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands and Italy have approximate data. It is thought that across Europe upwards of 10,000 people claim asylum each year based on sexual orientation (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011, pp. 15-16). In Ireland, there are no statistics about the number of LGBTQ people seeking asylum. However, approximately 2,443 people have sought asylum here each year since 2006 and anecdotal evidence would suggest a small but significant minority of these people identify in some way as LGBTQ.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The figure 2,443 is an average based on applications during the ten year period from 1 January 2006 – 31 December 2015. The highest number of applications during this period was 4,241 in 2006 which fell to 938 in 2013 before increasing again in the last few years (ORAC, 2016).

## Legal Geographies

It is well understood that law and space are co-constitutive and this paper aims to explore the legal geographies of LGBTQ asylum seekers in Ireland – the places they inhabit and the places they are excluded from. Not only are places where law takes on meaning, as argued by Blomley (1994, p. 111-114), but the relationships among space, place, and law have a significant effect on the production of social space (Delaney, 2010, *passim*). Drawing on Barkan (2011), I argue that rather than being benign or objective, law is a normative tool. It is vital that we unpack what we understand by law and acknowledge the myriad of processes, relations and power discourses that are contained within it? When I speak about the law in this way, I do not just mean Law with a capital ‘L’ – the national legislation, the written criminal code – but also the ways in which written laws are interpreted, shaped, made and remade. Similarly, I am also interested in what might be best described as sub-laws or policies, which are treated as law. For example, how laws are utilised along with local customs and norms that are part of how social space is ordered – what is ‘the done thing’. Rather than law being a moral code promulgated for the public good, Delaney concludes that products of this legal machinery are ‘deeply complicit in structures of domination and subordination’ (2010, p. 11). Thus, in the case of asylum seekers in Ireland, not only are they subject to European directives and regulations and Irish domestic legislation, but also to a host of other semi-laws or sub-laws. The Direct Provision system itself has been criticised for having no legislative basis (Thornton, 2013, p. 67) creating a type of legal-limbo or liminal legal space inhabited by asylum seekers. Despite this lack of legal clarity, it is evident that the daily lives of asylum seekers in Ireland are heavily regulated through a range of government agencies. By looking at how these processes work we can open up new ways of thinking about the processes that shape our world.

The legal practices of naming, cataloguing and ruling are imbricated in the production of space. To ascribe legal signifiers to an act or an object situates them within networks of power. These positions further condition actions and reactions to these acts or objects, further reinforcing their position (Delaney, 2014). Thus, laws which deem homosexuality and homosexual acts as illegal serve to coercively control particular bodies within space. Not only are particular actions criminalised but such laws seek to eradicate LGBTQ people by making their very ‘being in space’ unlawful. Furthermore they give licence to the general public, encouraging discrimination and harassment. For LGBTQ asylum seekers in Ireland, they may have fled such attempts to control their bodies because of their sexual orientation, only to then find themselves in a system that uses different names and categories to similarly situate them. Refugees are conceptualised in the public imaginary as ‘poor women and children’ fleeing war, clearly in need of our protection. The term ‘asylum seeker’ has become a term loaded with mistrust and suspicion. Much is made of the difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee and increasingly both are being used interchangeably with the term migrant.<sup>2</sup> In international law, however, the term refugee is declaratory, meaning it simply recognises an existing legal status rather than conferring any new rights or duties upon the asylum seeker/refugee. Phrases such as ‘failed asylum seeker’ have entered the lexicon of politicians, journalists, and citizens alike, although it has little meaning in a legal sense.

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<sup>2</sup> The title of an article in the Irish Mirror is illustrative of this conflation of terms ‘Up to 600 refugees will be told ‘you can’t stay in Ireland’: Migrants coming here could end up in Direct Provision centres after being classed as asylum seekers’ (Murphy, 2015).

## Methodology

This paper draws together data from a number of existing publications concerned with aspects of the asylum system in Ireland. In addition, a selection of decisions from the Refugee Appeals Tribunal (RAT) were catalogued and analysed. Following years of criticism regarding the lack of transparency in the Irish asylum system, a database of anonymised decisions of the RAT was created and, since March 2014, has been available upon registration to members of the public. Asylum seekers to Ireland come from across the globe and there are entries in the database for more than seventy countries. As this body of work came from a wider project exploring the post-colonial legal geographies of LGBTQ people in southern African states, it was decided to narrow the search to decisions related to people from that region (see Table 1 for a full breakdown of decisions reviewed). All decisions in which the sexual orientation of the claimant formed all or part of the basis for seeking asylum were then further analysed. From an initial 733 decisions reviewed, only 12 were found to relate to people claiming asylum based on persecution relating to sexual orientation. Unfortunately, first instance decisions are not published, so it is impossible to say if the small number of appeals are based on LGBTQ asylum seekers generally getting a positive decision at first instance, or if people simply decided not to appeal decisions to the RAT. Given Ireland's historically low rate of refugee recognition over the period in question, it is unlikely LGBTQ asylum seekers were routinely granted refugee status at first instance.<sup>3</sup>

County	Dublin II Regulation	Asylum	Subsidiary Protection	Total	LGBT Cases
Botswana	0	5	0	<b>5</b>	0
Lesotho	0	6	0	<b>6</b>	0
Mozambique	0	4	0	<b>4</b>	0
Namibia	0	2	0	<b>2</b>	0
South Africa	1	222	3	<b>226</b>	1
Swaziland	0	8	0	<b>8</b>	1
Tanzania	2	7	0	<b>9</b>	2
Zambia	0	6	0	<b>6</b>	1
Zimbabwe	5	445	17	<b>467</b>	7
<b>Totals</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>705</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>733</b>	<b>12</b>

Table 1: Country and number of appeal types reviewed

Additionally, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with people working with asylum seekers in Ireland; see Table 2 for more details. All those interviewed were based in Dublin but have clients from across the country at varying stages of the asylum process. Participants were selected based on their role and where organisations offer a series of distinct services, interviews were conducted with representatives from different sections of the organisation.

<sup>3</sup> From 2002 to 2015 Ireland's average rate of recognition was just 6 per cent.

Participant Code	Role
Resp. 1	Legal Officer
Resp. 2	Legal Officer
Resp. 3	Case Worker (non legal)
Resp. 4	Social Support
Resp. 5	Case Worker (non legal)
Resp. 6	Case Worker (non legal)
Resp. 7	Case Worker (non legal)

Table 2: Description of interview participant's positions

## Asylum in Ireland and Direct Provision

As outlined above, the asylum system in Ireland is currently in a period of transition. The new regime will allow asylum seekers to make a claim for all forms of international protection in a single application, unlike the current system which requires that asylum seekers first apply for recognition as a refugee and only upon refusal of refugee status may apply for other forms of protection. However, it is too early to assess the change this will make to the lives of asylum seekers.

Currently, an application for international protection is initially determined by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner (ORAC). If a person is refused refugee status, as most are, they may appeal the decision to the RAT. Between 2009 and 2014, the RAT upheld the ORAC decision in 92.4 per cent of appeals (Working Group on the Protection Process, 2015). The only other means of appeal is to bring an application to the High Court for judicial review. It is important to note that a judicial review does not re-examine the case on merits but rather seeks to review if the law was correctly applied in the decision-making process. From 2009-2014, less than 4 per cent of negative decisions by ORAC and 15.4 per cent of negative decisions of the RAT were the subject of judicial review. The number of legal proceedings being issued with regard to ORAC and RAT decisions has fallen in recent years (Working Group on the Protection Process, 2015, p. 80). Nonetheless, the number of asylum related cases of judicial review represented almost a quarter of all judicial review applications in both 2014 and 2015 (Courts Service, 2016, p. 41).

At any point in the process an asylum seeker may decide not to appeal a refusal but instead to apply for subsidiary protection as outlined in the Qualification Directive or leave to remain in the State at the discretion of the Minister for Justice and Equality. All of these decisions involve lengthy waiting times. In February 2016, 55 per cent of people in the system were in the system over five years (Working Group on the Protection Process, 2015, p. 350). The single procedure should shorten the length of time people must wait for a final decision. Nevertheless, what is not set to change with the enactment of the International Protection Act, 2015 is Direct Provision, which houses 46 per cent of asylum seekers in Ireland (ibid.). Regrettably, very little data is available with regard to people living outside Direct Provision and their experiences are largely absent from this paper, and much of the relevant literature. It is thought some may have left the State while others are living under the radar working in the informal sector or relying on friends or family to support them.

Direct Provision was established in 2000 to meet the demand for housing created by a sharp rise in the number of people seeking asylum in Ireland at the time. Initially designed as an emergency measure, Direct Provision is now firmly embedded in the state apparatus for the management of asylum seekers. Typically, when a person registers with ORAC, they are referred to the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA), who place them first in a reception centre before being transferred to a Direct Provision centre, generally outside Dublin. All centres are operated by private contractors and conditions and facilities vary dramatically. All provide bed and board based on three meals a day. Residents are not allowed to cook for themselves (Reception and Integration Centre, 2015, p. 15) and in many centres find the food to be unhealthy and culturally inappropriate. Residents also receive a medical card and a weekly allowance of €19.10 per adult and €15.60 per child from the Department of Social Protection.<sup>4</sup> Often families must share one room and single people live in dormitory-style accommodation, sharing with strangers and with little consideration for potential conflict. In the case of LGBTQ asylum seekers, they are often housed with people from the same country or similar culture, seeking asylum for reasons other than sexual orientation and some may be deeply homophobic. More than 80 per cent of Direct Provision centres are located in former convents or disused hotels, and are, in many cases, physically isolated, cut off from the local community.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The asylum application process and Direct Provision system have both come in for significant criticism in recent years, from both a legal and moral perspective (Ní Raghallaigh et al., 2016; Conlan, 2014; Thornton, 2014; Breen, 2008). In focusing on the legal geographies of LGBTQ asylum seekers in Ireland, this research seeks to develop a full understanding of the ways in which the law opens up and forecloses spaces for people to seek protection, express themselves and live a full and rich life. Unlike some of our European partners, Ireland does not routinely detain asylum seekers; nonetheless, the notion of detention or a lack of freedom comes through in the research. Direct Provision is likened by many to open prisons (Working Group on the Protection Process, 2015, p. 59). Residents are free to leave the centres during the day. However, residents are not provided with any choice regarding what centre they are placed in (Reception and Integration Centre, 2015, p. 7). Transfers can be requested but are at the discretion of RIA and only ‘when [they] decide to allow it based on its merits and in rare and exceptional circumstances’ (Ibid.). A number of participants did report they have successfully made representations to RIA on behalf of clients requesting a transfer; nevertheless, there is little choice regarding the new accommodation centre. Asylum seekers can also be required to move centres without having requested a transfer (Reception and Integration Agency, 2015, p. 13). Many within the asylum system feel transfers are used as a form of punishment for speaking out or complaining (O’Shea, 2014). The ‘House Rules’ also alert residents that accommodation centres may be monitored by security cameras and centre managers will periodically conducted room inspections. In many centres, visitors are only allowed in ‘visiting rooms’ which must be booked in advance. Visitors must sign in and may be refused entry by centre management.

While residents may leave the centres during the day, absences overnight must be explained. Unexplained or inadequately explained absences of more than three nights can result in a

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<sup>4</sup> The weekly allowance for adults has remained the same since the establishment of the Direct Provision system in April 2000. The rate for children has seen one increase from €9.60 to €15.60 in January 2016.

person's room being reallocated (Reception and Integration Agency, 2015, p. 18). If a child is due to stay overnight somewhere other than the Direct Provision Centre, at a school friend's house perhaps, the manager of the centre must be given the name and address of the person with whom the child is staying. Otherwise, the child will be reported missing (Reception and Integration Agency, 2015, p. 23). This serves to further undermine the role of the asylum seeker in parenting their own child.

These attempts to control and monitor the movement of asylum seekers are further compounded by the isolation experienced by asylum seekers. This is to some extent based on the geography of where Direct Provision centres are physically located. They are often in rural areas or on the outskirts of towns. Participants spoke of some clients having to walk miles to the nearest town (Resp. 6). This physical isolation is experienced by all Direct Provision residents but for LGBTQ asylum seekers, the isolation can be further exacerbated by the lack of any nearby LGBTQ friendly spaces. In cases where social groups or support groups do exist, many LGBTQ asylum seekers are fearful of attending if it is too close to the Direct Provision centre, in case they are seen by a member of staff or another resident and are effectively 'outed' in a homophobic system. Direct Provision centres are very much experienced as spaces where the protective Irish laws and norms regarding homosexuality do not reach. Instead, centres are better described as liminal spaces where residents must negotiate between circumstances they have fled and the hope that being in Ireland promises. This isolation and the atmosphere of many Direct Provision centres has often been likened to the Irish policy of confinement. In the past, this gave us lunatic asylums, mother and baby homes, Magdalene laundries, and industrial schools. Today, it has given us Direct Provision – spaces where the rights of asylum seekers are violated on a daily basis. As in the past, these violences, are made legitimate and normalised through the legal and policy framework employed by the state.

Efforts to tackle social isolation are hindered by the limited resources available to asylum seekers. The bar on employment coupled with the meagre allowance provided to residents of Direct Provision creates a number of barriers to interacting with the local community or indeed with any special interest groups such as LGBTQ social groups. Limited funds can make it difficult to travel to a larger urban centre for events or to meet other LGBTQ people in a safe environment.

These physical and material barriers to engaging fully with the local community are felt by all asylum seekers in Direct Provision. However, for many LGBTQ asylum seekers, homophobia serves to further imprison people. This homophobia can be both internal and external. For many people, they have grown up in a society where being LGBTQ was not only criminalised but also deemed to be morally unacceptable. This type of hatred towards LGBTQ people can only serve to create an internal conflict within a person as they struggle to come to terms with who they are, and the morals and values they have been raised with. A number of participants noted that people may still be dealing with their coming out process, being in Ireland may be 'the first time that they have actually been able to openly identify as LGBT' (Resp. 1). Another participant told me of a client who has asked if there was something that could be done 'to make him not gay again' (Resp. 6). Even here in Ireland, the coming out process is something people sometimes grapple with. LGBTQ asylum seekers might be coming from a country where being gay is punishable by the death penalty, consequentially, even with Ireland's progressive laws, they can be understandably slow to disclose their identity, a sentiment echoed by several participants.

The sense of shame experienced by some LGBTQ asylum seekers can have a direct impact on their case. The Working Group on the Protection Process report included consultations with members of the LGBT community and found ‘some of those present ... completed the application without any support and were afraid to disclose information about their arrest or persecution due to their sexual orientation; they felt this may have a negative impact on their case’ (Working Group on the Protection Process, 2015, p. 126). This failure to disclose the relevance of their sexual orientation from the beginning of the asylum claim is often viewed with suspicion by decision makers with little understanding of LGBTQ issues. There is some concern amongst practitioners that the new Act places an even bigger onus on people to present everything at the earliest opportunity but it is too early to see if this will have any impact on the decision making process. This theme of disbelief will be picked up further below. Although, it should be noted that increasingly in European Law, it is recognised that requiring protection applicants to disclose their sexual orientation at the first opportunity or face being labelled ‘not credible’ is an unfair burden to impose (Berlit, et al., 2015, p. 650).

This internal struggle is further compounded by the often homophobic environment of Direct Provision centres. LGBTQ asylum seekers have fled states where they have been subjected to persecution and in many instances torture because of their sexual orientation and now are living in a country where it should be okay for them to express themselves. A country which has not only legalised same-sex marriage, but did so by means of popular vote. This is indicative of a progressive society at large as well as a progressive legislature. Instead, people are trapped in Direct Provision centres, surrounded by people from the same homophobic culture they have fled. All of those interviewed identified Direct Provision as a problematic space for LGBTQ asylum seekers. Some spoke of clients being bullied and threatened by other residents and sometimes even staff because they are gay. The ‘close living quarters’ were identified by numerous participants as having a detrimental effect on LGBTQ asylum seekers as well as heightening the sense of always being subject to surveillance: ‘Everything you do is more under scrutiny than if you are in your own space’ (Resp. 2).

Direct Provision was referred to as a ‘microcosm of what they experienced at home’ (Resp. 1). As one participant put it: ‘you have people there, stuck in the closet, stuck in a room with maybe six other men from [their] country of origin who will probably have a very negative view of homosexuals’ (Resp. 3). In Direct Provision, LGBTQ asylum seekers often feel they need to be careful, closed off from those around them. The shared experience of being an asylum seeker is not always enough to bridge the many and diverse differences between people. Thus, for LGBTQ asylum seekers, the closet remains a prominent part of social life. Sedgwick describes this closeted nature of LGBTQ life as each new encounter prompting a new closet ‘whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure’ (1990, p. 68). Consequently, even in the space asylum seekers are told to consider home (Reception and Integration Agency, 2015, p. 4) they do not and cannot feel the sense of security that has traditionally been associated with home (Tuan, 1977, *passim*). The family and home are fundamental to the Irish psyche and even enshrined in our constitution but are rights not extended to asylum seekers.

For LGBTQ asylum seekers who find themselves in such a situation, it is very difficult to move on with their lives. Having fled persecution, they now find themselves stuck in a type of legal

limbo, waiting for a decision on their status, stuck in the closet. This is especially difficult if the basis of their protection claim is their sexual orientation. How do you prove your sexuality? How do you convince a decision maker you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender when you are forced to continue to hide this, even in what should be a place of sanctuary? This can cause profound problems for LGBTQ asylum seekers as the decision makers' subjective assessment of their credibility is frequently key to most decisions.

A case can often hinge on the perceived credibility of the asylum seeker but many of the people interviewed felt additional sensitivity training is needed around LGBTQ issues. There are a number of documented examples of asylum seekers being expected to know about the 'gay scene' either in their country of origin or in the country of asylum (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011, p. 57). A 'gay scene' that is frequently understood as based on a commodified 'white, gay, male culture' (Keenan, 2015, p. 4). Ireland is no exception to this and while there are some well-known gay bars in Dublin, such establishments are less obvious outside the capital and, where they do exist, may not necessarily be viewed as a welcoming space by asylum seekers. Furthermore, as previously discussed, the small allowance given to asylum seekers does not lend itself to frequent socialising and indeed can be viewed as another deliberate policy aimed at the social and economic exclusion of asylum seekers from Irish society. Not to mention assumptions about the 'gay scene' and appropriate behaviour of queer men and women are frequently based on decision makers' perceptions and stereotypes, which are often not a reflection of the diversity within the LGBTQ community.

Those who were consulted by the Working Group on the Protection Process reported they had been asked inappropriate questions at various stages during the process. Questions such as 'Do you want to be normal? You don't look gay. You were married/have children, how can you be gay?' (Working Group on the Protection Process, 2015, p. 126). These type of questions also emerged in the interviews conducted for this research. One participant spoke of a client being told it was not believable that he hadn't realised he was gay until he was nineteen. This can hardly be considered a late age when the formation and identity of one's sexual identity is a complex, dynamic process that in many regards is ongoing throughout life. It is also recognised that this process will be particularly fraught in countries where homosexuality is outlawed (Berlit, et al., 2015, p. 662). Another client was told she did not look like a lesbian (Resp. 1). This type of discourse is also evident in the RAT decisions. In one analysed for this study, almost an entire page was devoted to exploring why the applicant might prefer hanging out with boys and men if she is a lesbian, given that lesbians like women (Refugee Appeals Tribunal, 2013, n.p.). In another decision, the fact a man had fathered a child was used as evidence to cast doubt on his claim to be gay (Refugee Appeals Tribunal, 2009, n.p.). Similar cases are reported in the pan-European 'Fleeing Homophobia Report', with Irish practitioners reporting 'homosexual applicants were questioned about the number of sexual partners and frequency of sexual relationships' (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011, p. 55). While context is hugely important with such questions, in many cases, the practitioners felt the questions implied expectations of promiscuous behaviour among gay men.

In addition to the urgent need for sensitivity training for decision makers, the role of interpreters also emerges as problematic, both with regard to making a legal case for international protection and to accessing what few supports and services are available. Asylum seekers come from across the globe and collectively speak hundreds of languages. This impacts not only the availability of suitable interpreters but also the ability of the service provider to facilitate the

creation of a safe space for an LGBTQ asylum seeker to disclose their sexual orientation. One participant said it can be ‘tricky’ because ‘it’s usually an interpreter from their culture because it’s the language and when that’s the case they don’t necessarily want to disclose in front of the interpreter’ (Resp. 6). This person also recalled instances of interpreters laughing when they heard terms such as gay, lesbian or homosexual. Another participant noted that for both clients and interpreters, it can sometimes be difficult to find the right words in any language to convey what is meant around sensitive topics such as sex and sexual orientation. The working group consultations also found interpreters to be problematic at times. Respondents suggested that ‘LGBT friendly interpreters should be available’ (Working Group on the Protection Process, 2015, p. 123) while others reported that interpreters have been known to ‘chastise the person for being gay... [or use] derogatory terms to describe their sexual orientation or gender identity’ (Ibid.).

Despite the general lack of safe spaces for LGBTQ asylum seekers to be themselves, a number of precarious spaces and networks have emerged. Non-Governmental Organisations and other service providers in the sector can be safe spaces for LGBTQ asylum seekers albeit work remains to be done in some areas. Funding for these services however came up as an area of concern. Almost every participant in this research mentioned a former project run by an LGBT youth organisation that specifically targeted asylum seekers and refugees that has ended because of a lack of funding. This was described by one as ‘a real lifeline for people’ (Resp. 1) and by another as ‘an excellent experience and a safe place’ (Resp. 4). Limited resources and lack of funding also impact on the remaining service providers. Most described operating at capacity with one participant commenting ‘we are so understaffed [...] we are so overrun [...] we depend a lot on volunteers’ (Resp. 6).

Notwithstanding these difficulties, opportunities do exist and some spaces are being carved out that are safe and welcoming. A small group of people have formed a support group for LGBTQ asylum seekers and in June 2016 crowd-funded money to participate in Dublin Pride. This group is very small, and is largely made up of Dublin-based people that have exited Direct Provision. Unfortunately, not everyone is in a position to join such a support group. One respondent commented that the trauma of living in Direct Provision and negotiating the asylum system in Ireland makes it impossible for most people to deal with torture or traumatic events they may have experienced prior to arrival in Ireland. The violence of Direct Provision also leaves them unable to move forward with their lives, to join groups such as this one, creating a type of limbo in which they are forced to exist (Resp. 6).

The LGBT asylum seeker group is a step in the right direction but with limited funds and geographically dispersed stakeholders, they may not be able to reach everyone who would benefit from the group. One participant talked about the difficulties for the group in raising awareness about their existence in the Direct Provision system with much of it done through word of mouth and personal connections (Resp. 4). Making this group more visible would require buy-in from both RIA and individual centre managers, as well as some initiatives to tackle homophobia in the Direct Provision system. This is not viewed as an easy task and one participant remarked ‘you have to change the culture but the culture is rotten to begin with. Sexuality and gender is only one part of their human rights that are being ignored’ (Resp. 4).

The lives of asylum seekers in Ireland are subjected to high levels of surveillance and control. Even the sanctity of the home, a notion much celebrated in Irish culture, is not respected with

rules and regulations removing freedom of choice from people at every turn. Within this system, LGBTQ asylum seekers are on the one hand subjected to these many laws and policies of the Irish State but are simultaneously not protected by the laws and norms that have made Ireland increasingly a more LGBTQ friendly nation. Instead they are forced into new closets in Direct Provision, taking care in every moment to not give their secret away. For those who do venture out of the closet, there are very few places that are welcoming and they must face the types of homophobic abuse and questioning that are not in sync with the image Ireland portrays to the world. A pink-washed image of a hundred thousand welcomes? Well, not if you are an asylum seeker.

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