

FINDING (UN)SAFETY IN EUROPE: HOW NON-HETERONORMATIVITY INFLUENCES THE EXPERIENCES OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN GREECE

Pablo Pérez Fernández

perezfernandezpablo@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Since 2015, over a million people have entered Greece by either land or sea in order to seek international protection in Europe. However, fleeing war, persecution, and protracted poverty have not always proven to be a reason to be granted asylum by Greek and European authorities, which, as many claim, have established a number of mechanisms to deter further arrivals. In this context, one had to prove to be a deserving refugee, which was often not a matter of fear-induced flight, but rather of falling into one of the pre-existing acceptable categories, customarily linked to country of origin and perceived vulnerability. For those non-conforming to heteronormative ways of being and loving, such deservingness has been considerably more difficult to prove.

This paper reads through my observations on how non-heteronormative sexual practices and desires, being or not the reason for persecution for numerous of the people arriving in Greece, dictate their refugeehood and migration experiences. Such experiences, oftentimes resulting in their self-isolation and social exclusion from peers in liminal spaces and temporalities such as refugee camps, are habitually shaped by the asylum services, where both notions of homonationalism, somehow awarding intelligible manifestations of non-heteronormativity, and LGBTQI+phobia, punishing them, are to be found. By the same token, the assistance provided by well-intentioned humanitarian organisations whose expectations of suffering and approximation to death queer refugees need to fulfill in order to authenticate their sexual orientation or gender identity without disappointing decision makers, and, in turn, meet their vulnerability criteria, plays a central role. The same is true of the support grassroots LGBTQI+ groups lend queer refugees and migrants, which is traditionally linked to a certain degree of visibility and, although indirectly, to a sort of political activism through the politicisation of their struggle. These three points, far from guaranteeing the safety of individuals with non-heteronormative attitudes, further expose them to insecurity, and hinder their sexual, reproductive, and mental health.

Keywords: non-heteronormativity, LGBTQI+, queer, refugee, migrant, Greece, asylum services, humanitarian organisations, grassroots support groups, safety

Authors biography:

Pablo Pérez Fernández (he, him) is a Spanish humanitarian worker with extensive experience in the fields of humanitarian protection and mental health. Holding a master's in international humanitarian action from Uppsala University, in Sweden, he has run a number of projects on the Greek island of Lesbos and in Warsaw, Poland, where he is currently responding to the armed conflict in Ukraine. He has likewise been a member of an LGBTQI+ solidarity group in Greece. Among his interests are forced migration, sexuality, postcolonialism, and humanitarian ethics.