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Crafting a queer migrant community. NGOs personnel's positioning in the “Samos LGBTQI+ Support Group”

di Giulia Birindelli

Abstract – ENG

The main aim of this paper is to analyse micropolitical dynamics activated in queer migrant people mutual-support groups run by NGOs. In particular, this article examines how humanitarian personnel picture, organise and experience LGBTQI+ migrant collectives. The selected fieldwork is the Samos LGBTQI+ collective as, in 2021, the first Closed Control Access Centre was inaugurated on the island. The centre is part of the identification and surveillance facilities located in the Aegean Sea. Such institutions are the cornerstone of the European Union’s migrant fluxes management strategy articulated in *The New Pact on Migration and Asylum* (COM - 609/2020). This article then examines humanitarian personnel’s perspective investigating “safe space”’s management, as well as the intersectional dynamics of power which characterise its gatherings, the very definition of queer community and group’s relationship with migration regime’s authorities.

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Introduction

This paper examines how humanitarian[1] personnel picture, organise and experience LGBTQI+ migrant support groups. It highlights and analyses the complexities and the ambiguities NGOs' staff have to navigate through on a daily basis. In particular, the fieldwork took place in 2022 on Samos, one of the Greek Eastern Aegean islands, where a local non-governmental organisation runs a queer safe space named "Samos LGBTQI+ Support Group"[2]. The association[3] provides many psycho-social support activities for migrants but, officially, it does not plan the initiatives of the Group. This is due to two main raisons: the NGO wants to keep the support group as private as possible and, furthermore, it does not want to have full control on the space, as it is pictured as a horizontal environment where all members contribute to its management. As further shown in the next paragraphs, both the organisation and the support group have to employ a strict safety policy which has also been followed by this paper. Security measures are crucial, as queer migrant people are subjected to daily different forms of harassment, violence and doxing by fellow asylum seekers. Besides, authorities enforce harmful narratives and perform detrimental and prejudicial policies and actions (Zisakou 2021; Fenix 2022a). With "authorities" I generally refer to all institutional actors who interact with asylum seekers, namely: the Greek army, coastguard, municipality, police, as well as Frontex. Such discriminatory system is particularly enforced through the management of the Samos Closed Control Acces Centre (CCAC). CCACs are reception hubs which officially

1 For the definition of "humanitarian" I rely on Didier Fassin's interpretation in particular the articulation between moral sentiment and rational political reasoning (2011).

2 NGO volunteers and coordinators named such cluster in different ways such as "the Group" or "the queer group". In order to avoid repetitions, such expressions are also employed in this paper.

3 The name of the NGO is not mentioned in order to guarantee interviewees' anonymity. This organisation was founded in 2016 by a group of volunteers who decided to work on Samos to support migrant people. At the very beginning, its tasks were limited to emergency distribution of essential items, but in a few months the organisation changed its focus and started to organise psychosocial support activities. The NGO indeed inaugurated languages and computer classes, laundry and clothes distribution services, employability and vaccination support and a Women's Safe Space.

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substitute European Union hotspot facilities[4] following the EU *New Pact on Asylum and Migration*'s principles (European Commission 2020). In CCAC migrant people are identified, registered, fingerprinted and provided with accommodation in a shared container until their asylum procedure is concluded (Hellenic Republic 2020). CCACs are the most up-to-date European Union migrants' reception facilities and EU authorities claim that they are going to shape the forthcoming first-countries-of-entry's migration policies (European Council 2018).

On Samos, where the very first CCAC was opened in September 2021 (Hellenic Republic 2021), the Centre is characterised by a prison-like setting, as it is surrounded by a three metres high barrier and a double-fence barbed wire which encircle white prefabricated containers where migrant people are allocated. The entrance is surveilled by a police patrol, while other squads preside the street and the construction sites surrounding the Centre; moreover, a CCTV system is fully active 24/7 [5]. Nonetheless, such facility does not provide basic services and migrants are forced to live in degrading conditions, which are way more harshen for queer people (Zisakou 2021; Doctors Without Borders 2022; Europe Must Act Samos Advocacy Collective 2021 2022; Fenix 2022b; I Have Rights 2022; International Rescue Committee, I Have Rights 2023; Samos Advocacy Collective 2022). Three are the main problematic issues which are systematically reported: the scarcity and lack of quality of the food, the denial of a sufficient healthcare and the deficiency of private and safe spaces. Complaints about the meals were recurrent during my stay on Samos. People asserted that the provisions were not enough and their quality was often not acceptable, as food smelt bad and was expired (see also Samos Advocacy Collective 2022). Still, what migrant people denounce more fiercely was the lack of medical assistance which is per se detrimental, but becomes even more outrageous when healthcare is not guaranteed to people who claim asylum and probably underwent physical and psychological traumatic experiences (Doctors Without Borders 2022). For the vast majority of the time I spent on Samos, the CCAC did not have a doctor and hundreds of migrants excluded from decent medical information and assistance (Doctors Without Borders 2022; Samos Advocacy Collective 2022). Doctors Without Borders (MSF) have tried to compensate these deficiencies building a triage/ambulatory just five minutes walking from the CCAC. Lately though, MSF was granted the authorization to install a mobile clinic inside the camp (Samos Advocacy Collective 2022). Still, the diagnosis produced by MSF are not fully

[4] The EU hotspot approach was officially set up in 2015 through the European Commission's communication n. 240 to the Parliament (European Commission - 2015/240).

[5] The policy of high-level surveillance and the securitization are just some of the factors which determine the sense of imprisonment experienced by migrant people who are forced to live in the CCAC. This feeling has been reported by national and international periodicals, NGOs and parastate agencies, such as the International Law Blog (2022), Amnesty International (2021), the Greek Council for Refugee and Oxfam (2022), I Have Rights (2022), the Samos Advocacy Collective and Europe Must Act (2022).

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considered during the asylum process, therefore the lack of a state official doctor is also detrimental for the vulnerability assessments (Samos Advocacy Collective 2022). Lastly, regarding privacy and safety, people denounced their absence on a daily basis: containers host four/five people who share just one (in some cases two) room and a bathroom. It is not possible to further address such policies, narratives and procedures nonetheless, they have been addressed during the research process[6]. This article is instead focused on humanitarians' reflections and practices related to queer support groups. This choice has two main bases: on the one hand, as asserted by Sara Cesaro: "no research to date has sought to understand the way [NGOs] seek to help LGBT migrants and asylum seekers [e.g.] how should volunteers' actions be understood? How do volunteers discuss their engagement? What fractures exist between their discourses and their practices?" (2021: 15). Indeed, as demonstrated by William F. Fisher (1997), Inderpal Grewal and Victoria Bernal (2014), and Lisa Malkki (2015), in the anthropological literature there is a scarce attention on NGOs' micro-political internal dynamics. Still, investigating a "more intimate set of questions about [queer] 'humanitarians' themselves" (Malkii 2015: 2) appears to be crucial as NGOs are in and for all "knowledge producers" (Sampson et al. 2017: 232), as their personnel decide which services are available and under which conditions. Besides, their activities structure the way asylum seekers can interact with each other, as further shown through "Samos LGBTQI+ Support Group" ethnographic research.

The support group under scrutiny was founded in 2020, when a group of "external"[7] NGOs volunteers recognised that there was a lack of specific services for queer people on the island; therefore, they decided to create an LGBTQI+ safe space. Since then, the Group changed its configuration many times, but by the time of my stay in 2022, the collective was pictured as a horizontal environment and the number of attendees ranged from 15 to 25, with an average of four/five externals (one group lead who is also the Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support Coordinator of the NGO and three/four external volunteers)[8]. The dimension of the group facilitated one-on-one interactions but also larger group activities. Those ranged from ludic ones, workshops and collective discussions. Usually, for the first half an hour of each meeting, which took place once a week for

[6] For a further examination of the EU-Greek migration regime see e.g.: European Commission (2015), European Commission (2020), Hellenic Republic (2022). For its degrading impact on queer asylum seekers see e.g. Sophia Zisakou inquiry (2021) and Fenix's report (2022).

[7] The organisation defines "externals" all staff members who are not Greek, nor currently enrolled in the migration system.

[8] The number of the participants tended to increase and, by the time of my departure, many people were registered in a waiting list. Still, numbers severely oscillated as, before my arrival, a maximum of just eight people attended, while in previous years up to 70 people joined the meetings.

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three/four consecutive hours, attendees would entertain themselves by joining or organising games and/or handcraft workshops. Subsequently, all participants would join a circle sitting on sofas and benches and, if they wanted, they would briefly share how they felt or what they expected from the meeting. During my stay, many English-speaking participants attended Group' sessions, still there were also some French-speaking people, which is why a bilingual member, either an external or a "service user"[9], always translated from one language to the other. Thereafter, a main activity would be enforced by all members (either proposed by the group lead or an attendee). This could be cooking, discussing, playing a series of games, deliberating on a decision which impacts all group members and planning advocacy actions.

This research first analysed practices and activities proposed during the Group meetings highlighting the reasons why external personnel foster psychosocial and ludic activities. Afterward, it was necessary to address the definition of queerness, namely the identification process (Brubaker – Cooper 2000) which is crucial for the creation of such supportive community. Therefore, interpersonal dynamics which take place within the queer collective are herein analysed and, lastly, this paper examines humanitarians' political positionality. Nevertheless, fieldwork was characterised by many methodological complexities which is why the first paragraph directly addresses the first stages of the research project.

Interviewees proximity during fieldwork and methodological alignments

I conducted fieldwork research on Samos for three months in 2022, but I cannot further specify the dates of my stay, as it would be possible to identify organisation's coordinators. On Samos, I interviewed all NGO members who attended the "Samos LGBTQI+ Support Group", but for privacy reasons personal data has been rendered anonymous and I utilize pseudonyms. Moreover, for safety reasons, it is not possible to mention the time and the location of the Group's meetings and I cannot describe the space where gatherings take place, since it is highly recognisable. It is also worth to mention that I spent the vast majority of my leisure time with external colleagues and I developed a trusting relationship with many of them. This clarification is needed as, during interviews and informal conversations, I did not just ask work-related questions, but interviewees and I shared reflections, ideas and feelings, as we were living and working in the same context and we started to develop a friendship relation. In this setting, three different methodological issues emerged: sharing the same working

[9] The organisation overlooks bureaucratic or political terminology addressing migrant people as "service users"; therefore, it defines people not in relation to their legal status, but through to the linkage they have with the organisation itself. The term "service", as highlighted by Rozakou (2017), is perceived as related to the realm of gift-giving; hence, it theoretically tends to deprive people from the power to actually shape the safe space's aims and activities.

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environment with research participants, developing personal relationships with interviewees and, lastly, recognising the pervasiveness of contrasting feelings and the subsequent collective reflections regarding daily traumatic happenings. All these aspects have been analysed by Sara Ahlstedt (2015) who studied queer partner migration in Sweden. The author argued that all the above-mentioned issues are also exacerbated by a sense of likeness and proximity, which profoundly influenced her reasoning. Ahlstedt (2015) highlighted the importance of recognising feelings as they shape, and at the same time they are reshaped, during the interviews. Indeed, on Samos, the environment we worked in was a highly emotional one: it was characterised by a wide exposure to migrant people's suffering narratives that tended to be shared on a daily basis. During the interviews, this emotional scenery emerged multiple times, so that interviewees and I shared and reasoned on our emotive sphere. One of the most common outcomes of the indirect exposure to suffering is the so-called "compassion fatigue", namely the "reduced capacity for empathy toward clients [service users] resulting from the repeated exposure to their trauma" (Thieleman–Cacciatore 2014: 34). Still, from the information I gathered, the vast majority of volunteers (and I can also include myself) did not suffer from a lack of empathy, on the contrary, they experienced overwhelming emotional flows. Their, or better, our mental health was repeatedly challenged, especially when people spontaneously decided to share part of their life histories and living conditions in the CCAC (for similar insights see Avramopoulou 2020). Ahlstedt (2015) then referred to a general sense of "likeness" and she especially addressed whiteness, therefore a characteristic which, given people's contextual proximity, is perceived as something that creates similarity. On Samos, I was not just a volunteer: I was socialised as a woman, English speaker, Italian and *white* volunteer. Being white was the most evident phenotypical sign that the vast majority of the NGO's personnel shared, a visible "colour line" between mostly North-American, European and Eastern Asian externals and Middle Eastern, African "community volunteers" (namely staff members who are seeking international protection in Greece) and service users. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that almost every external staff member, myself included, benefited from determinate privileges (Bejarano et al. 2019; Borghi 2020). These privileges also derived from our education as each external was enrolled or had concluded their academic education. All external indeed studied humanities or communication related subject; such background also contributed to a shared sense of likeness and similarity. Regarding the personal connections created with interviewees, all externals on Samos tended to bond with each other in a similar way to Elisa Sandri's (2018) informants who worked for grassroots organisations in Calais. Working in an environment characterised by constant exposure to violent and discriminatory practices, narrations of trauma and distress, in this case led people to picture their group of peers

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as a kind of community where they could rely on and support each other (see also Malkki 2015). Retrospectively, it is possible to suggest that the research participants and I were applying Eda Hatice Farsakoglu and Pouran Djampour's "caring is sharing" principle, a reciprocal procedure pivotal for a reflexive practice approach (2021). The relationships we cultivated were indeed characterised by practices of care such as mutual support during and after emotionally draining shifts and intense conversations with fellow colleagues and service users. Crucial parts of the research process (such as interviews and feedback sessions after each Group meeting), as well as more personal conversations during informal chats, eventually resulted in intimate and reflexive exchanges especially focused on the impact of our job on our mental health.

Another crucial methodological issue is linked to the choice of the object of analysis, which was driven not just by personal academic interest, but also by the internal policy of the NGO. Indeed, I initially planned to focus my analysis on both humanitarian and LGBTQI+ group attendees' perspectives in order to holistically analyse the intersectional dynamics between all the participants. Still, when I informed the organisation's supervisors about my research intentions, they prevented me from interviewing service users. Two were the main reasons which drove this choice: coordinators claimed that interviews would be detrimental for a "safe and fair space" (mail correspondence with the Volunteer Coordinator 2022) since they could not verify my academic preparation and, moreover, in their opinion a master student could not offer a sufficient restitution to the people interviewed. Such restriction was then revoked once I arrived on Samos and I started to volunteer for the NGO. Indeed, Lyonel, one of the LGBTQI+ group leads, proposed to me to interview all queer group attendees in order to evaluate the service. Since I was already volunteering for more than a month, therefore people recognised me as part of the organisation and my positionality[10] risked to compromise my relationship with them without having full control of the research process, I decided to refuse and I kept researching on external personnel's practices and policies. A similar approach was utilised by Calogero Giametta, who investigated his positionality as a volunteer in *The Sexual Politics of Asylum* (2017). His task was to support queer asylum seekers writing their life stories that had to be presented to the United Kingdom Home Office. Giametta's research was highly influenced by interactions with migrant people and their narratives, but he could not directly interview them. As Giametta's then, my work highly depends on the engagement with queer asylum seekers, but I do not report the stories they shared with me, I exclusively address anecdotes that cannot be attributed to any specific person and I generally describe the setting where Group's activities took place.

[10] For the importance of explicating researcher's positioning and its implications for the production of a situated knowledge see Haraway (1989).

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LGBTQI+ Support Group configuration and activities

> I think one thing that I really, really noticed is the power of messing around and playing games and being childish. It is so powerful in a therapeutic way […] when I started to go to Group, or even before, I thought it would have been more formal than it was and more therapeutic than it was. It was actually very interesting how my perception changed [be]'cause at the very beginning I was like: "Oh okay, this is just about playing games, fine, fun". And then a few weeks later be like: "Games are the most powerful healing thing. Look at these people! Look at the experiences they had… and look how much everyone is laughing! This is incredible, this is so powerful!" (interview with Jo, one of the queer group's facilitators 2022).

Jo's perspective was shared by each external volunteer I interviewed. None of them expected that the Queer Group was going to be massively focused on spontaneous socialization and ludic activities. The above-mentioned interview was conducted right after one of the most playful session, the very last day Jo worked on Samos. That evening, I joined the activities late as the group lead asked me to drive some people from the CCAC to the location of the meeting. The collective offered such service to persons who could not take the bus but also guaranteed it to each attendee every time the public transportation was suspended. Reaching the location of the meetings is in fact problematic as the CCAC is located in a hilly area 7 km distant from the city centre and the street which connects it with the urban centre does not have any pavement. When we arrived, the first part of the session was already concluded, therefore the plenary discussion was about to begin. As often, the atmosphere was cosy and familiar and everyone greeted us when we walked in. Attendees were sitting on chairs and sofas creating a circle. Since someone joined the group for the first time, we all introduced each other saying our name, country of origin and performing our favourite dance move; the most humble and timid people were cheered up by most experienced members. Before the session, the group lead anticipated to externals that she bought paints and tins of dye to organise an art therapy session. Nonetheless, during the circle she did not declare it straight forward, but she rather waited and asked whether someone was willing to propose an activity. That evening the tone of the meeting was particularly cheerful and a participant suggested to celebrate his own birthday organising a day trip on the beach the following week. Another attendee proposed to cook together in two weeks, so we could have spent a religious holiday all together. Since many people joyfully added details to the planning of these peculiar meetings, little time was left for the ongoing sessions. Eventually, a member proposed to play musical chairs and, since externals did not join the conversation

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proposing alternative activities, he solicited us to express our own opinion on the game. All of us enthusiastically agreed to play, and the laughs and the high-volume music kept resonating in the car during the way back to the CCAC, while one of the participants hummed the most popular song we played during the last round of the game.

As shown, the "LGBTQI+ Support Group" is a psycho-social support (PSS) service. The humanitarian personnel I interviewed described PSS method as an operational approach, which promotes the restoration of social cohesion and infrastructure and encourages better connections between people, as it recognises the interrelations between the psychological and the social dimensions. It aims at (re)inscribing people in a social context, acknowledging and fostering their political needs[11]. Moreover, the kind of solidarity which is proposed strives to be horizontal: migrants are actually considered collaborators and not just recipients of external aid[12]. Indeed, the organisation declares and takes efforts in co-constructing the activities and the projects, which it runs. This should be possible not just hiring migrant people in the team but also involving service users in the planning of the activities. This premise was crucial to highlight which kind of operational approach and solidarity paradigm "LGBTQI+ Support Group" external personnel decided to fully adhere to, as each staff member had to sign and respect the organisation's Code of Conduct (CoC), the document which states NGO's goals, ethical and structure. This charter has never been modified since its publication in 2019 and this paper aims at analysing how externals navigate through CoC's "gaps" while crafting queer safe spaces. Indeed, Sally Falk Moore (1978) asserted that NGOs' "cultural, contractual, and technical imperatives always leave gaps" (Moore 1978: 39). Heath Cabot also studied such "gaps", namely "ambiguities, inconsistencies, and contradictions" which characterise the humanitarian sector (Cabot 2013: 453). Such incongruities emerge starting from the planning of the activities of the queer collective that is considered first and foremost as a "safe space". It is then necessary to first analyse how interviewees define a safe space. Anna Carastathis in her article *"Racism" versus "Intersectionality"? Significations of Interwoven Oppressions in Greek LGBTQ+ Discourses* quoted one of her informants who described safe a LGBTQI+ collective as a:

[11] By the time of such a shift, hotspot facilities were already surrounded by an informal camp which was called "the Jungle". Many migrant people still recalled the living conditions in the camp because, even if the Jungle was officially evacuated in September 2021, a lot of people who lived there for years were still waiting for their asylum status. Nine thousand people lived in the hotspot and the Jungle (while the local Samos population barely reached ten thousand), almost each of them in makeshift shelters without electricity or running water.

[12] For an in-depth analysis of the substantial differences between these two approaches see Rozakou (2012) and Theodossopoulos (2016).

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> space where identities and, especially, intersectional identities, can express themselves without fear of prejudice and negative attitudes that they face, one way or another, in society. This works to empower those people with this identity; obviously, if they want to talk openly and publicly about this identity it is clearly their own decision, but as an organisation, the least you can do is to provide this safe space (Carastathis 2019: 14).

Such definition was also embraced by Samos personnel who decided that the collective should be characterised by exclusiveness (queer people only can have access), privacy (it is not possible to share any information with people who are not involved in Group activities) and reliance on mutual support[13]. One of the interviewees, Asia, noticed that the queer space can also be considered "safe" because participants are comfortable enough to actually challenge the leadership of the group. She particularly referred to a specific circumstance: during a plenary discussion, a service user argued that, although the queer group was created in order to cover gender and sexuality issues, until then, those topics had not been exhaustively addressed. External volunteers also privately expressed their astonishment noticing that they were not the main focuses of the sessions. Moreover, such topics had never been discussed on a personal level: albeit participants often shared their sexual orientation, group activities never required declaring intimate information. One of the group lead, Isabelle, justified such approach claiming that her goal was not to force migrant people to have any kind of "catharsis" (interview with Isabelle, 2022) during Group meetings: psycho-social support is not provided through intimate discussions of one's own traumatic experiences or reflections over sexuality, gender and sexual characteristics (SGSC), but through side debates. Furthermore, participants should have been the ones to decide whether personal information or not. Indeed, the organisation did not provide individual psychological therapy sessions, but it aimed to create cooperative spaces where attendees could comfort and protect each other, while enjoying leisure activities. Lyonel described the space as a

> mix between social activities and informative activities… So, a lot of it is games and social time connecting people from different communities who are LGBT together so they can be one community… in a place where people can let their guard down because they do not have to worry about accusations that they are feminine or looking too queer. And then using that space for supporting people with mental health workshops or a

[13] See also Forced Migration Review's study (2021).

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> legal workshop or discussions about LGBT identity. Yeah, basically being sort of a multi-use space: a social space just for relaxing or doing activities just for accomplishing people's needs (interview with Lyonel, 2022).

The queer group mainly endorsed this objective through ludic initiatives. Board games, like Uno or Jungle Speed, and team ones, like charade or relay races, as well as beading, painting and art related workshops used to be enjoyed during each session. Psychosocial support activities together with workshops addressing attendees' needs or passions, as well as plenary discussions (which can range from LGBTQI+ rights in Europe to queerphobia episodes in attendees' countries of origin or living conditions in the Closed Control Access Centre) are considered crucial for people's well-being by scholars, humanitarian workers, institutional actors and people on the move (Logie et al. 2016; Are You Syrious? 2021; Forced Migration Review 2021).
Ludic activities are incredibly useful in terms of building social connections and relieving stress and anxiety (Sutton-Smith 1997), but Groups leads were also particularly attentive to discuss with migrant people about the configuration of the space. In particular, reflections over the regulations on safety and privacy policies, which were mainly carried out by the access procedure, were remarkably fostered by organisers. Regarding this topic, Lyonel asserted that:

> The greatest challenge is being able to make sure that people can easily have access to the group, while making sure that there are just genuine people who have access to the group and not people who want to get access for malicious reasons. This is why we came up with the idea that people go naturally to legal or psychological support, or medical support actually, and then in those meetings or appointments, if it comes up organically that they are LGBT, people can be referred to the group. And this acts like a screening process rather than self-referral and having to have a meeting or an assessment with someone with questions like: "Are you gay? Are you not gay?" (interview with Lyonel 2022).

From Lyonel's words, it is possible to identify two different aspects, which characterise the accesses to the group: people should be able to enter the space without facing a credibility assessment; yet it is crucial that just "genuine" people would attend and this authenticity is somehow validated by other humanitarian actors. Indeed, on the one hand, the fact that just "genuine" people do attend the group is considered pivotal but, on the other hand, the genuineness is not directly evaluated, but it is entrusted to legal and medical NGOs. Following the organisation's reasoning, this approach avoids two potential risks: relying on self-references, which can be deceitful, and interviewing people about their gender and sexuality risking to force people to

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relive traumas opposing to state authorities' intrusive scrutiny[14] (Lewis 2014). Nevertheless, Group's referral pathway has been criticised as people can also lie to doctors and lawyers, or they could not feel comfortable enough to speak about their SGSC with them and, most of all, they could not be fully aware of the possibility of joining a queer support group. Many attendees indeed denounced a delay in getting to know about the very existence of the service. Moreover, Isabelle added that she does not want to link Group's activities to lawyers' work as it would be misleading: on Samos, queer safe space attendance is not a relevant variable for authorities who carry out the credibility assessment of SGCS asylum claims[15]. Such peculiarity seems to prevent the Queer Group to be examined directly utilizing Cabot's "dialogical process of recognition" theoretical framework (2011). During her long-term fieldwork addressing legal NGOs in Greece, Cabot analysed how people who are recognised as "asylum seekers" are inscribed in a very specific social and/or legal category. This recognition has different outcomes depending on which subject, either an NGO or the state authorities, operates it. Such classification process is co-authored by all the subjectivities involved (asylum claimant, NGO's worker and/or state official, interpreter) but it is inheritably a-symmetrical since it is ultimately vertically decreed. The recognition, which is often firstly presupposed by humanitarian lawyers and then (possibly) formalised by state authorities, operates as a "filtering device" which distinguishes between people who seemed to have proven to "merit" the claimant status, from the ones who are thought to be deceitful (Giametta 2020). The Queer Group on Samos though eschew the implementation of a credibility assessment focusing the preliminary interview with queer migrant people on the acceptance of the policies and the willingness to participate to the activities of the group.

Anyhow, during my stay, more and more people came to the meetings because friends shared the time and the location of the sessions with them. Both group leads did not simply let people in, otherwise they would have infringed one of the main safety rules of the Group; on the contrary, they first have had a private meeting with them to understand whether they would have been ready to join all the activities, and then, they presented to the whole group the possibility of letting other people join. In this regard, Lyonel asserted that "it is important for people to feel like they have ownership over their own safety, because it's okay being saying: 'Okay you need to send this person to the referral pathway because we need to keep our member safe'. But if that doesn't

[14] For an in-depth analysis of such violent and discriminatory procedures as well as their "cultural silences" (Shuman, Bohmer 2014), see Sophia Zisakaou's article *Credibility Assessment in Asylum Claims Based on Sexual Orientation by the Greek Asylum Service: A Deep-Rooted Culture of Disbelief* (2021) and Fenix report (2022).

[15] For an opposite perspective see Murray (2016).

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make people feel safe and it does not have any impact then it is pointless doing this, so it is very important to keep on checking in" (interview with Lyonel 2022). Such continual negotiation and discussion about the configuration and the regulations of the group contributes to humanitarians' efforts to co-construct and work *with* migrant people, even if power relations are ever present and undermine such objective, as shown further on. What has never actually been collectively discussed is the very definition of queer and the different meanings of the acronym "LGBTQI+". Instead, Group external personnel often internally debate about their definitions.

Queerness: theoretical and humanitarians' conceptualisations

This section analyses humanitarians' depiction of one of the defining characteristics of the collective: "queerness". It was extremely rare that external volunteers would call the Group with its actual name, rather they tended to address it as "the *queer* Group". It is interesting to notice that both the formal and the informal labels, as well as the iconography (Samos island's shape coloured with rainbow banners) have been chosen by external personnel. Moreover, all its attendees were generally labelled as "queer" and not so much as "gay" or "lesbian". When I interviewed one of Group's founders, he affirmed that within "the [queer humanitarian] sector" the label "LGBT" is commonly recognised but they decided to add the "Q+" in order to be more inclusive as "LGBT" could be considered exclusively "Western". In this sense then, humanitarians' perspective can be interpreted employing queer anthropology of migration theoretical prisms emerged in the last two decades. The term "queer", as depicted by Martin Manalansan (2006; see also Boellstorff 2007), does not just include various identifications related to sexuality and gender, like "lesbian" or "non-binary", but it strives to "trouble"[16] the very concepts of sexual orientations, gender and sex. It implies that these are "disciplined by social institutions and practices that normalize and naturalize heterosexuality and heterosexual practices [...] marginalizing persons, institutions, or practices that deviate from these norms"[17] (2006: 40). A similar definition of "queer" was also proposed by Mark Graham in his *Anthropological Exploration in Queer Theory* (2014)[18],

[16] For the theoretical implications of this term see Butler (1990).

[17] It is crucial to mention that I have never heard migrant people using such terminology. I then recognise that, paradoxically, I am utilising the term "queer" to address all Group's attendees, while the vast majority of them did not actively use it. As this paper does not aim to analyse migrant people's perspective, in order to address this incongruity I rely on Richard Mole (2021)'s interpretation: although deriving from a "western" background, such expression actually aims at addressing all sexualities, gender expressions and identifications, as well as sexual characteristics, which are somehow marginalised and considered non-conforming.

[18] For a critical review of this volume see Boellstorff (2015).

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where the author highlighted the importance of deconstructing heteronormative stances. With "heteronormativity" I refer to a "system of norms, discourses, and practices that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality" (Robinson 2016). Heterosexuality, in this sense, is considered not just as a sexual practice but also as a pervasive "identity, institutional arrangements, cultural frameworks, moral order, psychological regimes, legislation that confers rights and responsibilities" (Graham 2014: XI). Oftentimes, such definition overlaps with similar insights over the category of "cisgender" (namely the correspondence between the sexual characteristics and the gender assigned to/recognised by a person) creating an interlocked conventions system named "heterocisnormativity" (Lee 2018). Moreover, Eithne Luibhéid, building on Manalansan's (2003) work, also explored the cultural dimension of the term "queer" observing that it entails that "all identity categories are burdened by legacies that must be interrogated, do not map neatly across time and space, and become transformed through circulation within specific, unequally situated local, regional, national, and transnational circuits. Moreover, these transformations cannot be understood within progressive, unilinear, and Eurocentric models" (2008: 170). Therefore, the term "queer" does not just challenge heterocisnormative paradigms but also ethnocentric ones, which tend to assume the existence of a fixed queer experience. This does not mean that a commonality between queer backgrounds could not exist, but that such assumption should not be not aprioristic. In sum, the term "queer", from interviewees' points of view, can then be defined as an identification process (Brubaker-Cooper 2000) which challenges heterocisnormative assumptions on SGSC. Still, one of the group leads actually recognised that such designation is partial and extremely linked to a specific cultural semantic. Indeed, Isabelle asserted that "there are a lot of people who don't at the beginning, or during, or at the end… actually relate to this way of naming things" (interview with Isabelle, 2022). Moreover, during my stay many attendees asked for the meaning of "LGBTQI+" since they recognised the terms "gay" and "lesbian", but the rest of the acronym was blurred or unknown to them. Nonetheless, analysing migrant people's perspectives on such terminology is beyond this paper's aim; instead, NGOs personnel definition of "LGBTQI+/queer" is herein addressed. Jo, the Vaccination and Well-Being Lead, phrased it in these terms:

> I think everyone in the group is obviously so, so different. With half of them we don't even have a shared language at all… but we have this *connecting thing* and of course their experience of being queer is totally different from mine. But it still feels like a family: we have this thing that *kind of connects* us all. And it makes me love them so much more and it makes me care about… I mean not "care" but you know what I mean. I am more attached to them than everybody else because I can't imagine what it means to be them, but it

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> feels so much more that could be you. It's just so much more real. […] it gives you a *whole other level of relating to people*. And queerness is something you carry with you your entire life. And the "queer thing" doesn't end when you leave the group, obviously, whereas I do the vaccination phone but when I leave Samos, I will not do the vaccination job anymore. But that [queerness] doesn't go anywhere (interview with Jo, 2022).

Queerness is then perceived as a unifying characteristic not just because it is a shared identitarian marker, even though it does not have exact correspondence on an individual level, but because external personnel can more simply relate to discriminations and harassments based on SGSC. The identity marker of being queer, therefore avoiding to adhere to heterocisnormativity canons (Weston 1993; Halperin 1995; Manalansan IV 2006; Boellstorff 2007; Carastathis 2019; Saleh 2020), contributes to the perception of a community, as further shown in the next paragraph. This "connection" created by a somehow shared queer identity is also recognised by non-queer people. In fact, Isabelle, the group lead who is not a queer person, argued that attending a queer support group should not just be a matter of "sensitivity" but all members should also be able to "feel" others' experiences[19]. This capacity to "feel" is not linked to empathetic skills but to people's SGSC. Indeed, this likeness is seen as crucial to create a connection between members. That is why the group lead problematised her positionality as a non-queer person. I do not know whether all attendees were informed about her positionality but, either way, everyone seemed to trust her and many people actually called her "sister". Moreover, Lyonel claimed that this shared "personal element" is also highly beneficial as, in his opinion, people could easily form a trusting working relationship with him; indeed, when he comes out as a gay person, people would tend to assume that he could be trustworthy. Still, being queer is just one of the crucial aspects which characterised LGBTQI+ group membership: such collective is indeed based on the creation of a mutual support community.

Imagined community and consequent impossible situations

One of the group leads noticed that even if migrant people address themselves as gay or lesbian, none of them initially state that they are part of a specific community. Unexpectedly though, the vast majority of people who received a positive decision and left the island, as well as the ones who were involved in advocacy campaigns, defined themselves "LGBTQI+". Advancing speculations over the creation of a somehow "queer" collective identity, as argued by Éric Fassin, is beyond this paper's expectations (É. Fassin 2011; see also Fassin - Salcedo

[19] For further insights on the "competences" that people who directly experience certain forms of oppressions hold see Borghi (2020).

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2015). However, what is investigated here is that, although people do not always feel part of a specific fellowship, the Group strives for the creation of a community, as NGO's aim is to offer a mutual support collective which is based on queer identity. Such an attempt can be interpreted using Fiona Adamson's (2012) conceptualisation of diasporic imagined communities. In *Constructing the Diaspora: Diaspora Identity Politics and Transnational Social Movements* (2012), Adamson employed Benedict Anderson's (2006; orig. ed. 1983) analytical concept of "imagined community". Adamson did so focusing on transnational political engagement in order to analyse transnational political networks, in particular diasporas. Anderson's research is therefore evicted from its original link to a singular national configuration, but such stance is crucial for defining what an imagined community is. First of all, Anderson argued that all communities are constructed and there is no such a thing as a "true" community. Therefore, what can be examined is not whether collective identities have bogus or authentic roots, but how they are fabricated and imagined. The author further explored both the imaginative and the communal dimensions in these terms: "It is *imagined* because the members [...] will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion; […] It is *imagined* as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, [...] is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 2006: 6-7, author's italics). Adamson actually detached this definition from the conceptualization of nation and she employed it in order to examine diasporas, which the author defined as: transnational networks between people who share an imagined community which can be linked to an ethnicity[20], a political perspective or a minority condition. Indeed, Adamson argued that it is possible to define "diaspora" as an imagined community when "a group becomes part of a global community beyond any single state within which they may be a minority. […] A diasporic identity is therefore a means to assert a political identity which can be taken up by groups as a source of empowerment" (2012: 27). Hence, Adamson pictured diasporas as imagined communities founded on an identity marker which have a specific political character. This analytical framework could also be used in order to analyse the categorization process activated by the Samos LGBTQI+ group. As highlighted by Lyonel and Isabelle, the terms "lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, queer, trans" were not necessarily embraced by group members as identity labels. Still, people converged in this group as they are somehow "queer", namely "whatever is at odds with" heterocisnormativity (Halperin 1995: 62). Queerness is therefore the identity marker which founds the inscription within the LGBTQI+ group. Still, this label alone does not constitute the creation of

[20] Adamson does not provide a precise definition of ethnicity. This work conceptualises it relying on Joane Nagel's definition (2000).

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a "diaspora" in Adamson's terms. This safe space, indeed, is not just characterised by a shared common identity but also by reciprocal support. Such reciprocity embodies Adamson's "comradeship" (2006: 7); indeed, members are encouraged to look after each other and share ideas, emotions and knowledge regardless of their backgrounds. They do so in a transnational space where migrant people and externals elaborate common strategies to interact with EU and Greek institutions. What is actually peculiar about the queer safe space and which differs from Anderson (2006) and Adamson (2012)'s imagined communities is the fact that all Group members actually know each other, as they attend safe space's gatherings.

Still, the organisation which unofficially runs the group is based on a strict rule regarding personal relationships: following the Code of Conduct, it is not possible for externals to create any kind of personal relationships with migrants. This involves both friendship and romantic/sexual relationship and it also implies that externals cannot ask personal questions to service users and "community volunteers"[21]. The NGO intends to prevent people from "doing harm" creating relationships, which are likely to end soon after the departure of the externals. As specified by Aoi, an NGO coordinator, people in this sector are constantly coming and going; in fact, this working field is not structured to encourage external personnel to stay, as also noticed by Liinason (2020). Therefore, Aoi claimed that each staff member has to acknowledge the fact that they have to be "replaceable". Indeed, she asserted: "because people come and go from three to six months, then it's why I am so strict and you don't have to make yourself irreplaceable. What I mean with this is making super emotionally dependent relationships with people, both from the community but also in the team. Like… if you put yourself in a situation and then you remove yourself and there will be a massive gap then it's a problem, I think, personally" (interview with Aoi, 2022). However, each person I interacted with found this statement challenging and problematic[22]. Volunteers recognised that emotional dependence is harmful but they did not think the same about personal relationships, which are more similar to friendship. For example, Léa, an English teacher, stated that she does not know

> how to create that distance and I don't want to remind people that distance [...]. You know, we are humans, we wanna find things that we have in common, we wanna talk about those… […] Probably I am not doing it very well. Probably I don't… I don't know, I think… It's hard to know if you are causing harm by letting people

[21] For an opposite approach see Rozakou (2012).

[22] This is also true for some of the community volunteers who I could not interview, but with whom I discussed organisation's policies on a daily basis.

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> share with you and letting people grow attached to you and be dependent on you. But also like… how can you not as a teacher? They will depend on you to be there at the same time. And that grows that dependence a lot and I don't know how to do that (interview with Léa, 2022).

Moreover, she asserted: "everyone leaves here, you know? Everyone you interact with in this liminal living space where no one wants to be here, everyone wants to be somewhere else; so, you are just supposed not to interact with anyone? I don't know" (interview with Léa, 2022). This tension between creating a significative connection with people and maintaining exclusively professional positions can be pictured as an "emotional impasse" (Malkki 2015). Such situations have been studied by Malkki (2015), who defined them as circumstances where the technicalities of humanitarian work are somehow challenged by the inner personal and emotional sphere (see also Sandri 2018). All interviewees claimed that the strictness of internal policies could also be problematic because it can thwart people from sharing possible infringement of the Code of Conduct. Still, the organisation's rules aim to protect migrants from forming emotional attachment with people with whom it would be hard to maintain a sustainable connection after their departure. Volunteers did comprehend this logic but they still found it extremely challenging to enhance.

Nevertheless, externals noted that organisation's rules are somehow suspended or altered during group sessions: people are way more tactile, hugs and kisses on cheeks are recurrent and there is also more one-on-one interaction compared to the daily interplays with other service users. Moreover, as already shown, one of the main aims of the safe space is to create a community where participants can trust and rely on each other. Therefore, there is a strong sense of personal and emotional engagement in order to create a supportive collective. This is also highlighted by the familiar terminology, which is often used to address fellow members; for example, during the last meeting a migrant person attended, we all sat in the communal space and listened to his leaving speech that was characterised with a highly familiar terminology. He initially addressed his "white sisters" thanking them for the support to all the people involved and then he referred to his "African brothers and sisters" saying that joining those gatherings was the most "rewarding and heart-warming" experience on the island and he asserted that participating is crucial for one's own mental health, also because the group "makes you feel part of something, it's a family". Therefore, attendees do remark that the LGBTQI+ group is a safe space where it is possible to create a supportive community based on a shared identity marker. This community is often addressed with a familiar language and "troubles" organisation's rules over personal detachment.

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Regarding the formation of a community, Nina Held (2022) gathered similar findings during the "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Claims of Asylum: A European human rights challenge" (SOGICA)[23] project, as she argued that support groups offer safe spaces where members can find "like-minded people" (Held 2022: 9) who are oftentimes addressed as siblings. Moreover, it is possible to rely on participants for comfort or just to reinforce one's own identities validation (Dustin - Held 2021). In this way, safe spaces for queer migrants can reduce people's isolation thanks to the creation of meaningful relationships (which are usually created with other asylum seekers/refugees), increasing feelings of belonging and reducing the consequences of discrimination and harassment (Logie et al. 2016). In this light then, externals' endeavour to craft a queer diasporic imagined community is founded on the perception of a sort of commonality created by queerness as an identity marker and by the possibility of sharing feelings, emotions and experiences while giving and receiving reciprocal support. Nonetheless, interpersonal dynamics are by no means horizontal but they are characterised by intersectional[24] power relationships, as argued in the following section.

Externals' role and internal power relations

Hierarchical structures were also determined by another queer group's peculiarity: people who frequented it were not just "service users" but some of them were also NGO "community volunteers". If their role in the organization theoretically equated the one of "external" volunteers, in the Samos LGBTQI+ group all migrant people were exclusively considered attendees. Even though it was not possible to interview all members and therefore listen to their point of view on this topic, it is interesting to note that in such space a more formal position was not contemplated for migrants. Indeed, "community" volunteers who, in the NGO, held specific responsibilities and they were engaged in the organization of some activities, in the queer group completely lost their role. Although except for the group lead all participants seemed to have the same position, this is not the case as, under Isabelle's leadership, externals were the only ones who knew the planning of the activities and who contributed to the logistic aspects of the meetings (such as the set-up of the room and the restocking of food/beverage).

Although the sense of being part of a community was widespread, all participants were well

[23] SOGICA was a four-year project funded by the Starting Grant of the European Research Council (ERC) which had the goal of suggesting practices and policies aiming at reducing queerphobic policies and practices in the EU migration system.

[24] For an in-depth analysis of such a theoretical approach see Jordan-Zachery (2006), Dhamoon (2011), Adamson (2012), Tudor (2018), Al-Faham et al. (2019).

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aware of latent and overt dynamics of power especially produced by the migration regime. Structural inequalities ranged from legal status and access to resources, to the freedom of movement and the daily exposure to different forms of racism and queerphobia (de Jong 2017; Tudor 2018; Bejarano et al. 2019; Carastathis 2019; Liinason 2020; Held 2022). Such disparities also generated what Fassin defined as an inextricable paradox in the humanitarian field: if on the one hand humanitarians work in this field as they are moved by compassion and therefore by the recognition of certain inequalities; "on the other hand, the condition of possibility of moral sentiments is generally the recognition of others as fellows[25]: the politics of compassion is a politics of solidarity. This tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance, is constitutive of all humanitarian government" (Fassin 2011: 3).

The configurations and the consequences of intersectional dynamics of power were frequently collectively discussed by externals, they recurrently emerged as a topic of dialogue during the interviews and they were directly linked to humanitarians' role in the collective. With "dynamics of power" I refer to unintended imbalances in the decision-making process and in the access to the organisation's and local resources (for a similar definition see Held 2022). Overall, volunteers' reflections over their role mainly led to the same definition: they pictured themselves as facilitators. With "facilitating" volunteers usually imply their responsibility to support the group lead in organising specific projects, or to propose activities when, during a session, there was a lack of social interaction. Similarly, both group leads I worked with pictured themselves as facilitators even if they provided a different definition of such term. Lyonel indeed pictured his role in these terms: "This is how facilitating works like: white queer people who have the legal status and security and who grew up in countries where it is legal to be queer using that privilege to support people who don't have that privilege because it's not legal or they are at risk" (interview with Lyonel 2022). Reflections over external personnel's role in the safe space also emerged in relation to their intervention during the meeting discussions. Externals found it hard to express their opinions, as they recognised that "It's something you always have to keep in mind that it's at least it's not… it shouldn't be *our* space" (interview with Isabelle 2022). One of the main aims of the group, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, is to create a space for queer migrant people to freely express themselves. Another goal is creating a community which is based on mutual support and collective sharing; however, these objectives often clash, especially on the individual level. Isabelle described

[25] Still, Fassin recognised that this fellowship could never been horizontal as "when compassion is exercised in the public space, it is thus always directed from above to below, from the more powerful to the weaker, the more fragile, the more vulnerable" (Fassin 2011: p. 4)

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such tension in these terms when, during a collective discussion about colonialism, she wanted to leave space for migrant people to discuss, but she also wanted to share her experience as she comes from a country which faced colonialism too: "And I remember that there was a moment when I wanted to talk about my experience and then I was like: 'Okay this is not my place to discuss about colonialism'. Of course, we can say things, it is not that we can be in the shadows… but again, I mean… I also talked about colonialism [...] in front of a beer with other people" (interview with Isabelle 2022). Léa, an external volunteer, also problematised the fact that even though all the participants are queer therefore they can, in a way, relate to queerphobic harassments, attendees actually come from very different backgrounds and the harshness of the violence they experienced does not "measure up" (interview with Léa 2022, for similar insights see Carastathis 2019). Still, this standpoint is not universal, indeed Asia was actually keen to start actively participating in discussions, as also requested by some migrant attendees. She asserted that a more personal engagement in plenary discussions would make the space more horizontal, as it would erase the difference between migrant participants who join the debates and external spectators. Asia also linked the effort to turn the meetings in more horizontal discussions to a political standpoint: she acknowledged that trying to eradicate externals' privileges is impossible, but she claimed that creating a horizontal space where relational power dynamics are challenged could actually be beneficial for migrants and for the NGO itself, as it would break fixed hierarchical structures which tend to separate people.

Power dynamics also involved people's identity and attitudes: during my stay, the space was frequented by a multitude of persons whose gender and/or sexuality was not always shared, but the vast majority of them used to be socialised as men. In this regard, Asia noticed that "the conversation is always led by guys, actually, the most extroverted lead it; therefore, while building a safe space, [the group lead] should consider gender inequality" (interview with Asia 2022). Isabelle also noticed an unbalance between women's and men's engagement during discussions; still, during my stay, no initiative was implemented in order to face this specific issue. This lack of provisions resulted in a partial exclusion of some attendees (namely people socialised as women and less talkative persons) from collective discussions which may have also impacted their daily lives. The lack of engagement in plenary debates could also be traced back to ones' own personal attitude and contextual dynamics, but it is still significant that externals acknowledged the possibility of structural and unbalanced gender dynamics. This is one of the reasons why it is crucial to adopt intersectional lenses in order to analyse micropolitical dynamics in diasporic communities. Gender, as well as gender stereotypes, are two determinant variables which cannot be excluded (Hondagneu - Sotelo 1994; Mahler - Pessar 2006). Adopting

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an intersectional approach which acknowledges participants' country of origin, legal status and gender reveals that external staff members are "ambiguously positioned" (Liinason 2020: 7) as, on the one hand, they strive for creating horizontal relational dynamics while, on the other, they activate, both intentionally and inadvertently, peculiar imbalances of power. Indeed, it is interesting to notice how externals behave as "complicit siblings", as similarly argued by Sara de Jong (2017). The author studied the positionality of "women in the global North who want to 'do good'[26] by supporting women in or from the global South" through international activism or humanitarian support (de Jong 2017: 1). De Jong defined these women "complicit sisters: women who share certain gendered experiences with the women they seek to support and as women whose subjectivities and positionalities are intertwined with the material inequalities and power structures that have marginalized others" (de Jong 2017: 191). This terminology both highlights the willingness to support, which is also funded by a recognised commonality through the application of a familiar terminology, "sisters" (in this paper "siblings"), but also shows how these practices are embedded "in the inequalities and power relations they seek to address" (de Jong 2017: 1). Indeed, a focus on the general category of "woman", or in this case "queer person", can overshadow other intertwining dynamics of power. Therefore, de Jong called for an intersectional approach which has to be focused on different axes of differentiation. Those are not completely concealed by NGOs personnel, indeed, de Jong argued that usually the staff do "not only want to 'do good' they also want to 'do it right'" (de Jong 2017: 195). This "rightfulness" is associated with the accountability of their skills, the reflexivity of their work and of their moral goals which should be in line with organisations' ones. Yet, the author also claimed that the relationship between humanitarians and service users "cannot be situated at the level of the individual 'complicit sister' or at the meso level of organisational structures and development discourses. Instead, it is rooted in and tightly intertwined with those macro level structures of global inequality that the women's personal reflections have helped to shed light on, solidifying the [...] critiques of neoliberalism, racism, neocolonialism, and heterosexism" (de Jong 2017:198).

Overall then, externals strive to foster inclusive activities and create a horizontal community where they do not work *for* people or work *to* people but they aim at co-constructing the safe space and work *with* migrants, even if power relationship cannot be completely horizontal because, as argued by Nina Held: "on one hand, […] there was support, solidarity and voluntary engagement; on the other hand, predominantly white queer structures would often not cater for queer migrants' or queer refugees' needs" (2022: 10).

[26] See also Zivetz and Brogan (1991).

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Humanitarians political positionality and Group's relationship with CCAC

Beyond psycho-social support, there is another activity which was endorsed by both Samos LGBTQI+ Group and the local NGO: advocacy. All the campaigns were mainly defined by their political positionality but also by migrant people's requests.

Speaking about the first aspect, the primary explicit feature which highlights the Group's standpoint is its location. Since it is not possible to specify where it was actually located and I cannot describe the locale where the meetings take place, it is crucial to mention that it was outside of CCAC's units. This is not a causality but the result of a specific political choice. Indeed, NGOs working on Samos, as well as many associations working in the humanitarian sector, have to decide whether they want to work inside states' facilities or outside them. I defined this choice "political" as it implies to directly collaborate, or to refuse to cooperate, with state and supra-state agencies that are responsible for the migration regime which generates the causes of sufferings inflicted to the very same people organizations strive to support. This political choice has been studied by Katerina Rozakou (2012) who argued that most of the time NGOs located on EU Mediterranean shores which work inside hotspots picture asylum seekers as "in need of care and protection and a potential danger" (Rozakou 2012: 573); migrants are depoliticized and disempowered, "passive recipients of a biopolitical[27] humanitarian project […], wherein the beneficiary is an object" (Rozakou 2012: 573). On the contrary, NGOs which work outside camps actively and deliberately try to dismantle refugee camps' biopolitical power: "[r]efugees [...] are thus not perceived as needy people but as actors. They are reconstituted as political subjects, not in abstract terms but as hosts, active of control, education, and care" (Rozakou 2012: 573). In addition to the perception of migrant people's role and capacities, the physical location of the Group concerns a further aspect linked to the positioning of the association itself. Group's personnel refused to fully collaborate with the hotspot/CCAC authorities and decided to operate outside their fences, as it rejects the treatment which migrants are subjected to in these facilities. Indeed, Advocacy and Social Media coordinator stated that "I think it [working outside the camp] makes quite clear that we are external to the authorities and that we are independent organisation, which I think is super important for advocacy – people come and speak to us: what life is like into the camp, their complains, their issues, also just general day-to-day thoughts" (interview with the Advocacy and Social Media coordinator 2022). Still, this choice is not free from consequences as the CCAC

[27] See Foucault (1978), Agamben (1998).

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de facto detains many people and reaching the headquarters of the organisation is not as easy because of the location of the Centre. As highlighted by the European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), some people are subjected to a confinement in the Centre, specifically:

> a) new arrivals after the registration of their asylum application and pending the issuance of a [asylum seeker] card, b) persons whose applications have been rejected at second instance who did not lodge or are unable to lodge a subsequent asylum application, c) those who have filed a subsequent application until a decision on admissibility is issued, d) those whose applications have been rejected at first instance, until they can lodge an appeal (ECRE - 2022).

NGOs working in the humanitarian sector then have to face a constant tension between being physically closer to the people they want to support, while being somehow complicit with state authorities, or choosing a different physical and political standpoint while jeopardising the opportunity to organise fully accessible activities.

However, even though Group's external personnel made a specific choice, it does not imply that group leads totally sever any kind of interaction with CCAC authorities, as further shown through the following anecdote. On a cold and gloomy evening, the community space which hosted queer group's meetings was filled with voices, as all participants were either chatting or playing Uno or Jungle Speed, two of the most popular board games available. As usual, the first half an hour was dedicated to non-structured ludic activities and casual social interactions. Still, that day Lyonel interrupted all the activities claiming that he had an announcement from CCAC authorities. He indeed discussed with both Centre's officials and European Union's representatives in order to enhance CCAC's policies which should aim to protect queer migrants. Centre manager asked him to refer a proposal to queer group members: it was either possible to allocate all queer people in containers close to the Security Office, or renovating the composition of each container, giving the chance to queer migrants to stay in queer only accommodations. During the plenary discussion, all participants sat on chairs and sofas disposed in circle and started to debate while, right in the middle of the room, Lyonel prepared a long paper sheet where attendees could also write down which services were lacking inside the camp, what did they want to request to the CCAC management, and, lastly, what they would have liked to do during following queer space sessions. Although the discussion was mainly led by more talkative members, in that case each member actually managed to express their opinion. The main vehicular language was English, while French speakers relied on Léa's translation and Somali speakers used automatic translation apps. What emerged from the plenary session

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was that the Closed Control Access Centre is an extremely unsafe space for queer people as there is no privacy in the containers, it is not possible to have private conversations with partners, friends or family members, security guards are not sensitive towards migrants' requests, people who have diverse habits or who come from different backgrounds and beliefs towards religion, gender, sexuality are forced to live in an environment where such differences are not acknowledged and the access to primary resources is scarce. Attendees also asserted that such conditions usually lead to conflicts both with other asylum seekers and with the police. In this setting, creating a specific block for queer migrants could only deteriorate the already precarious living conditions, as such space would be an easily detectable area where people would feel segregated and stigmatised. On the other hand, living in containers with other queer persons could be beneficial, as people would be more discreet and they might respect others' privacy and space. Moreover, it could be a chance to have daily support and create a LGBTQI+ community *inside* the CCAC. Indeed, so far, the Centre management divide blocks according to "ethnicity" while specific sections are dedicated to unaccompanied minors and single mothers with under-18 children, but no service is available for queer migrants. The discussion resulted in a dense and emotional debate over the living conditions in the Centre, the difficulties experienced trying to take care of one's own physical and mental health and the recurrent forms of harassment and violence queer migrants face, while authorities do not provide any type of support. When I left the island, two months after this discussion, queer group's decision had not been implemented yet and, from the information I have, thus far Centre management did not apply any resolution.

The conflicting and ambiguous relationship with the CCAC is also shown by another episode: for three weeks there was a water shortage in the CCAC. People were provided with just 1.5 litres of drinkable water per day and the tap water run for just 20 minutes per day (Samos Advocacy Collective 2022; I Have Rights 2022). Consequently, people used to employ the NGO bathroom (which is not equipped with a shower) in order to perform daily care/hygiene procedures. The NGO did denounce such situation; nevertheless, some external volunteers criticised the lack of political assertiveness. During the interviews, the research participants indeed explored a moral/political dilemma which addresses the very nature of the humanitarian aid, namely the provision of services which the state cannot guarantee. Dimitrios Theodossopoulos analysed a similar internal critique of humanitarian actions: the de facto assistance of state and supra-state authorities although NGOs actually theoretically reject their procedures (2016). Humanitarian organisations find themselves in a catch-22, a solidarity paradox: on one hand the personnel feel responsible for the living conditions of the people they want to support; on the other, their actions contribute to the state's lack of accountability. Indeed, it seems

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that since other actors can provide for some services, the state can be deficient of basic welfare guarantees. In these cases, the relationship between NGOs and the authorities is way more blurred and controversial, as noticed by Grewal and Bernal in their post-structuralist analysis of feminist organizations in neoliberalist economic and political environments (2014). Resolving this dilemma is beyond this paper's aims but it is interesting to analyse how NGOs keep running their activities while navigating it.

First of all, NGOs' actions are not limited to the provision of services which migrant people passively benefit from, but, the proposed activities aim to be co-constructed (de Jong 2017) and there is a strong focus on advocacy actions. Still, on the other hand, advocacy risks to be a solipsistic effort which is not generated by, and sometimes does not involve, migrant people. Liinason indeed reflected over the concept of agency and the practices of small-scale resistance while studying the way transnationalist queer NGOs are intertwined with the neoliberal economic system. Liinason, relying on Hodžić's arguments, demonstrated that queer NGOs are "ambiguously positioned in contexts of resistance cut across by multiple political projects" (Liinason 2020: 2). Haraway's reflection over the concept of cyborg deeply influenced Hodžić research. Hodžić used the metaphor of the cyborg which "does not draw normative […]; rather, it confounds them. [Indeed, NGOs] are tied to neoliberalism, but they are also constitutive of political organizing that challenges neoliberal discourses and practices" (Hodžić 2014: 245). The relationship with the Centre can then be interpreted using post-structuralist theories. Indeed, the organisation and other NGOs keep maintaining an open dialogue with the authorities, while opposing their border regime strategies. The relationship with the CCAC is central for queer group's advocacy strategy but the organisation does not want to be somehow complicit with the migration system enforced by the Centre itself. Still, in order to support migrant people's claims and necessities, it is not possible to sever contacts with it, as its manager has the power to actually improve queer migrants' quality of life.

Conclusions

This article aimed at analysing the complexities and the impasses external personnel have to navigate through working in queer hubs for migrant people. What emerged is that NGO staff crafts a space which aims at being safe for people who use it. In such context, asylum seekers are not perceived as passive recipients of external aid, but collaborators with whom it is necessary to try to build a horizontal collective (see also Cesaro 2021). This is possible thanks to the willingness to share both an identitarian marker, namely queerness, and a political agenda which is recurrently discussed. The first aspect though leads to an emotional proximity which harshen the struggle of maintaining a professional relationship with service users, therefore creating an inner impasse

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(see also Malkki 2015). The queer group is then pictured as a diasporic community where people from extremely different backgrounds actively decide to share a space where identities, life histories and interests are validated and supported. Nonetheless, the relationship between external staff and service users cannot be horizontal, as it is characterised by disproportionate dynamics of powers which massively derive from micropolitical dynamics (de Jong 2017). Group staff often acknowledge such imbalance, still, even if it is addressed and discussed on both micropolitical and organisational levels, it is not possible to overcome it unless facing structural inequalities. For this reason, the Samos LGBTQI+ Support Group strives to foster and develop advocacy campaigns but, as highlighted by the relationship with the CCAC, NGOs are most of the times ambiguously positioned towards state authorities (Liinason 2020).

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