

Alone and queer?

A study of the living conditions in care- and reception centres for lgbt children who have come to Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers

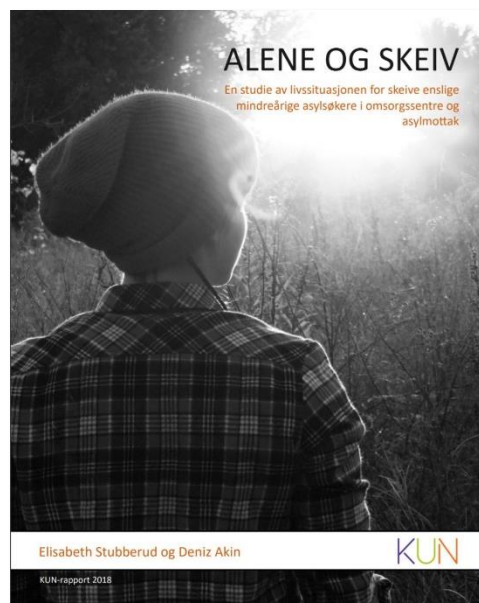
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2018

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This report is written by KUN on behalf of the Norwegian Ministry of Children, Youth and Family Affairs. The report is part of a larger collaboration project between KUN and Queer World [Skeiv Verden]. The report is written for anyone who works directly with, or thematically related to, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, including employees in care centres and reception centres, guardians and representatives, nurses, school nurses, child welfare and social workers and other relevant professions, administrators, policy makers, and non-governmental organizations. The report is also relevant for anyone who works with sexuality education for refugees or more generally.

In this report, we have looked at the situation for queer unaccompanied minor asylum seekers coming to Norway. "Queer" [Norwegian: skeiv] is used here as an umbrella term for everyone who in some way breaks with norms relating to gender and/or sexuality, or identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans (lgbt). We have carried out in-depth interviews with nine unaccompanied minors, ten employees at care centres and reception centres for unaccompanied minor refugees, and three people in other formalised support in relation to unaccompanied minors. Through these interviews we have gained descriptions of the situation in care- and reception centres for queer unaccompanied minors, with emphasis on their experiences of breaking gender and sexuality norms in these places. In addition, the report describes how formal and informal helpers work with queer unaccompanied minors in general, and how they work with themes relating to gender and sexuality more specifically.

The report seeks to address the following questions:

- What is the situation for queer minors coming to Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers?

To answer this question, we have:

- Systematised existing knowledge
- Investigated 1) the experiences of queer unaccompanied minors within care- and reception centres in Norway, and 2) the experiences of employees in care- and reception centres working with lgbt-related topics, and where they report a lack of knowledge.

The report is divided into seven chapters. After the introduction, we explain the methodology used in collecting data. We have carried out qualitative in-depth interviews with all research participants, and have collaborated closely with Queer World throughout the process. Furthermore, we have gone through the limited amount of literature on queer unaccompanied minor refugees. The report has three chapters where we analyse the data material. Here, we 1) discuss the perspectives of the queer minors and their experiences at care- and reception centres; 2) discuss the experiences of staff at the care centres (for children of 15 years and younger); and 3) discuss the experience of employees at reception centres (for children between 15 and 18 years of age). Finally, we provide a summary of the findings, and present recommendations for further work at care- and reception centres, changes in the education for relevant professions working at care- and reception centres, suggestions as to how public administrators can work, as well as for further research.

A key finding in this report is that it is important to talk to all children and young people, including those who come to Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, about gender and sexuality. Employees at care- and reception centres have to talk about variations in gender and sexuality to all unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. For a queer minor, a prerequisite for feeling safe and getting necessary help from adults, is trusting the adult and talking to them about gender and sexuality. At the same time as this is the case, the employees we interviewed had to a very limited extent had LGBT-issues addressed in their education and training, they did not have established routines regarding the issue, and had to a limited extent attended courses at their workplace to increase competencies on gender and sexuality. The employees nevertheless expressed interest in the topic and an understanding that it is important in their work. In order for queer minors to have trust enough to confide in employees at care- and reception centres, it is a prerequisite that the employees have some basic knowledge on LGBT-issues and gender and sexuality more broadly. This competence may also make it easier for employees to address issues of gender and sexuality, independent of the presumed gender identity or sexual orientation of a given unaccompanied minor asylum seeker. We argue that having this competence may make care- and reception centres safer spaces for queer people, whether one is an unaccompanied minor or employee.

Among the employees, a key finding is that most of them stated that there were no LGBT-children living at their institution. We argue that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression should be discussed at the institutions, regardless of whether there are LGBT-person residents or not. Gender and sexuality are issues relevant to all. If issues of gender and sexuality are not addressed unless there are queer minors present, employees are implicitly suggesting that these issues are only relevant to the LGBT-population. In this way, heterosexual minors and queer minors who are not read as queer or who are not visible to employees as queer will not get relevant information on gender and sexual diversity, and LGBT-persons' rights in Norway. We consider this a substantial problem.

Being queer can add substantially to vulnerability at care- and reception centres for unaccompanied minors. The children we interviewed had experienced bullying, harassment, sexual and other forms of abuse, ostracism, loneliness and isolation. Establishing a good psychosocial environment in care- and reception centres may involve shielding queer minors from other residents. In order to do this, employees need knowledge of what specific needs for facilitation queer minors may have. In addition, employees need to understand the nuances of openness about LGBT status. This includes knowledge of in which situations openness is beneficial, and what the personal costs openness may be for an LGBT person. Employees should also be capable of informing queer minors about in which situations openness is beneficial, for example in dialogue with migration authorities and when applying for asylum. More staff combined with increased knowledge on gender and sexuality may make care- and reception centres safer for queer minors, and ensure that residents can be open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the contexts where it is safe and beneficial.

In all the interviews with employees, "bacha bazi" came up, the so-called Afghan dancing boys. Bacha bazi exist all over Afghanistan and are often connected to trafficking, sexual abuse, and prostitution (Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission 2002, Lifos 2015, Landinfo 2011). Several of the

informants had previously had Afghan “dancing boys” living in their institutions and they were familiar with the phenomenon. Even though bacha bazi are not directly linked to being queer, it may be the case that former bacha bazi are also queer. It is, however, important that employees have a clear understanding of the distinction between being LGBT and having experience as a bacha bazi, and their own interpretations of the two phenomena. This involves knowing the distinction between having a queer identity, having experience with selling sex, being a feminine boy, and being trans or gay.

Based on the findings of the report, we provide a number of recommendations. These are formulated with the goal of providing the best possible care for queer unaccompanied minor asylum seekers while they stay at care- or reception centres. The recommendations address employees and leaders of care- and reception centres, representatives and guardians, and all levels of policy makers working in relation to unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. Some recommendations are also directed at the representatives or guardians of minor asylum seekers and other formal helpers.

Selected recommendations

ADDRESSING AND NORMALISING VARIATIONS IN GENDER AND SEXUALITY

- Employees need to address and normalise variations in gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation for *all* residents, regardless of their presumed gender identity and sexual orientation.
- Once employees are comfortable talking about issues concerning gender identity and sexual orientation, care- and reception centres can consider using pride-flags and other visual markers, book, films etc. to indicate that it is safe for residents to talk about gender and sexuality.

ESTABLISHING ROUTINES

- Newly arrived asylum seekers should be made aware that information about their gender identity and/or sexual orientation may be relevant to their asylum application.
- Care- and reception centres can consider assigning one person who is responsible for keeping updated on issues concerning gender and sexuality, keeping in touch with relevant collaborative partners such as NGOs working with LGBT-issues, as well as updating other employees on the field.

THE RIGHT TO CARE

- We recommend increasing the number of staff per child at care- and reception centres.

ACTIVE MANAGEMENT OF BULLYING, HARASSMENT, VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

- Employees need to be aware of bullying and harassment that relates to gender and sexuality, and be mindful that LGBT children are at a greater risk. Much of this bullying etc. happens without employees noticing.
- Employees should inform all residents of their statutory right to protection against hate crime and abuse, and ensure residents that these rights also apply to asylum seekers.

- In cases of severe bullying etc., employees can, in dialogue with the resident in question, organise other living arrangements.

CONTROLLING INFORMAL HELPERS

- Employees need to be aware of minors' informal helpers and friends, as unaccompanied minors risk entering into illegal or destructive intimate relations. It is beneficial if employees have knowledge about buying and selling sex and of trafficking, and how this may affect unaccompanied minors after they come to Norway.

USING INTERPRETERS WHO ARE FAMILIAR WITH VOCABULARY ON GENDER AND SEXUALITY

- Interpreters need to be prepared when gender and sexuality is the topic of discussion. If possible, use interpreters who are familiar with modern vocabulary on gender and sexuality, and give the option of anonymous phone interpretation, an interpreter of a particular gender, or (not) from a particular country.

CAPACITY BUILDING ON GENDER AND SEXUALITY

- Care- and reception centres need continuous capacity building on variations in gender and sexuality.
- Knowledge of variations in gender and sexuality and of lgbt issues should be anchored in management and in all relevant policy documents that regulate care- and reception centres. All care- and reception centres need to actively implement capacity building at their workplace.

COLLABORATIONS WITH RELEVANT LGBT ORGANISATION

- We suggest that care- and reception centres organise regular meetings with relevant lgbt organisations.

LIVING IN PROXIMITY TO LGBT NETWORKS

- We recommend that queer unaccompanied asylum seekers who wish to live close to places where there are lgbt networks (in Norway this is currently the case in the big cities) should have the possibility to do so.