

Lost in Transition: The Unseen Struggles of Sexual and Gender Minorities during Migration

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the victimization of sexual and gender minority (SGM) migrants, focusing on Canadian and Ukrainian perceptions and perspectives. Through in-depth interviews with six students from MacEwan University and Ukrainian Catholic University, perceptions regarding SGM migration processes were explored. Four intersecting themes emerged: “Hierarchy of social problems,” “Institutional influence,” “Othering,” and “Society requiring change.” Analysis reveals the prevalent influence of cis-heteropatriarchy and colonialism on societal perceptions, contributing to SGM migrant victimization further. The study underscores the need to acknowledge and address these power structures to mitigate harm during migration. While providing no direct benefits to participants, the research enhances understanding of societal influences on SGM migrant experiences, facilitating future efforts to address structural oppression. Ethical considerations were paramount, ensuring participant confidentiality and minimising risks.

Keywords: LGBTQ, Migration, Victimization, Intersectionality

Introduction

This study aims to critically understand the victimization of sexual and gender minority (SGM) migrants (i.e., immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers) during migration. Investigating different forms of victimization, such as physical violence and human trafficking, provides a picture of how a community—that is not inherently vulnerable—becomes susceptible to harm. In a study on sexual violence against gender and sexual minorities, Lasowski et al. (2022) found that over half (56%) of transgender asylum seekers experienced sexual violence perpetrated by individuals in positions of power, including family members, peers, teachers, law enforcement officers, and religious leaders. Additionally, these asylum seekers reported high rates of physical assault (92.4%), verbal assault (78.8%), and sexual assault (56.1%) in their countries of origin. They also faced other

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forms of persecution that forced them to conceal their gender and sexual identities. Given these findings, this study explores the different forms of victimization against SGMs and how they manifest through informal and formal means during migration. For the context of this research, victimization is defined as the process in which individuals or groups are subjected to harm, mistreatment, or exploitation within a social context (Dominguez et al., 2023).

Acknowledging colonialism and cis-heteropatriarchy as broadly permeating power structures is essential to understanding the victimization of SGM migrants. Colonialism is defined as the “maintenance of political, social, economic, and cultural domination over people by a foreign power for an extended period.” (Bell, 1991, as cited in Schaefer, 2015). The effects of colonialism are pervasive, persisting through contemporary laws, cultural norms, and societal attitudes that marginalize SGM individuals.

Pre-colonial societies often had more diverse understandings of gender and sexuality. However, colonial powers imposed their own heteronormative and patriarchal values, erasing the Indigenous practices and identities that were more accepting of SGM individuals. Such values are reflected in the organization of institutions that emerged from colonization and societal structures that perpetuate systemic inequalities. For instance, assimilationist policies and anti-immigration legislation that aim to homogenize the population inherently prioritize white cis-heterosexual identities (Schwarz & Ray, 2005). These conditions continue to influence migration patterns, often forcing SGMs to migrate to safer host countries where they inevitably encounter similar oppressive structures, reflecting a global continuity of colonial power dynamics.

Cis-heteropatriarchy elevates cisgender, heterosexual white males as superior and normative, thereby facilitating the marginalization of SGMs (Harris, 2011; Smith, 2006; Schilt, 2009). Working in tandem as mutually constructing systems of power, cis-heteropatriarchy facilitates colonialism in the domination of a people by perpetuating discrimination and violence against those who deviate from heteronormative and patriarchal expectations.

Further, this study uses two frameworks: intersectional feminism and the migration process framework. While an intersectional feminist lens is used in this study to analyze the institutional power structures influencing societal perceptions and, thus, the victimization of SGM migrants, the migration process framework provides checkpoints to analyze such power structures. Through using these lenses, this study argues that power structures, specifically cis-heteropatriarchy and colonialism, influence the societal perceptions that contribute to the victimization of sexual and gender minorities (SGM) during migration.

Framework and Approach

Intersectional Feminism

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Within a contemporary context, intersectionality is a crucial theoretical framework with which to engage. Emerging from anticolonial struggles, global women's and civil rights movements, and the end of the Cold War, intersectionality, as both a theoretical framework and a political project, has become essential to analyzing systems of power, oppression, and social change (Collins, 2019). Intersectionality works to understand the nuances of identity, how they can create compounded experiences of oppression, and the individual, institutional, and societal implications of oppressive power.

The use of intersectionality as a lens to examine the interlink between identity and victimization is indispensable due to the “mutually reinforcing nature of major systems of power and privilege” (Collins, 2019; Jones-Yelvington, 2008, p. 24). The interdependence of power systems, such as colonialism and cis-heteropatriarchy, demonstrates the need to address the root causes of social inequality with a holistic strategy, as it is not possible to have one without reproducing and reinforcing the other (Jones-Yelvington, 2008). Thus, in researching the victimization of SGM migrants who experience the material consequences of colonialism and cis-heteropatriarchy, an intersectional lens is required.

Intersectionality is described as diverse, dynamic, and unique in its ability to fortify several perspectives (Collins, 2019). Giving voice to marginalized and oppressed communities such as SGM migrants allows space to destabilize societal perceptions that are informed by cis-heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and other systems of domination that facilitate victimization.

Migration Process Framework

Global legislation regarding migration often needs to appropriately conceptualize the process of migration. Governments adopt fragmented approaches, referred to as policy sector “silos,” to legislation that creates gaps in legal protection, leaving SGM migrants particularly susceptible to victimization (Zimmerman *et al.*, 2011). This fragmentation, a characteristic of a silo approach, means that the content of immigration policies and the way that they are applied are not coordinated to address systemic barriers that impact migrants and other minorities effectively. Instead, global migration governance takes a restrictive approach focusing on security and control (e.g., migrant-screening). Instead of addressing the broader social inequalities that persist in the migration process, existing policies are designed to protect a country's borders and population. As a result, SGM migrants are afforded few protective factors (Zimmerman *et al.*, 2011; Alessi *et al.*, 2021).

This study examines the victimization of SGM migrants through a model developed by Zimmerman *et al.* (2011)—the migration process framework—to address the effects of societal perceptions towards SGMs and their consequent oppressive systems, such as policy silos. Using Zimmerman and colleagues' migration process to analyze societal

perceptions provides greater insight into the broader societal influences that inform institutional approaches: power.

The migration process framework is a nonsequential, multi-staged process that includes pre-departure, travel, interception, destination, and return. Pre-departure is the period before migration begins, while travel encompasses the transit between pre-departure, interception, destination, and return. Interception occurs when migrants are stopped by state officials from entering or remaining in a country or region, often resulting in rejection or detainment (Alessi *et al.*, 2018). Destination, on the other hand, refers to short- or long-term settlement in a new location. Finally, return refers to the circumstances in which migrants are temporarily or permanently returned to their countries of origin (Zimmerman *et al.*, 2011). While this research explores these stages separately, it is ambiguous where each stage starts and ends (Alessi *et al.*, 2018). In the same light, it should be noted that the different forms of victimization and how they manifest are not mutually exclusive to one phase.

The nonsequential nature of the migration process raises concerns regarding the multiple contact points that SGMs must navigate during travel and interception. When the phrase “contact point” is used, it should be considered an interaction between state officials, other migrants, family, or other members of the general population. It is imperative to acknowledge these contact points because each point of contact presents an additional opportunity for SGMs to be victimized (Aneshensel, 1992). The travel phase is of particular interest given the unique circumstances that arise during this stage. Often, SGMs opt for unconventional ways of migration (e.g., smugglers) due to barriers that governmental institutions create for them. Migration through informal means exposes migrants to additional violent interactions that would not occur otherwise (Alessi *et al.*, 2021).

Although the interception phase affects only a tiny portion of the migrating population, specifically asylum-seekers, refugees, displaced populations, and trafficked persons, it is still imperative to understand the systemic practices that victimize SGM migrants. Migrants who are intercepted, rejected, and sent to immigration centres or refugee camps are at an increased risk of victimization, given that they are common sites of human rights abuses (Zimmerman *et al.*, 2011). This risk is further compounded for SGM migrants due to their intersectional identities (Alessi *et al.*, 2021).

Forms of Victimization

Physical and Sexual Violence

Sexual and gender minority migrants are vulnerable to various forms of victimization throughout their migration journey, including sexual misconduct, rape, sexual touching, sexual harassment, stalking, physical assault/battery, dating/relationship/domestic violence, theft, and threat of harm (University of the Pacific, n.d.). These experiences can have profound psychological and physical consequences, making it crucial to understand and address these issues from a scientific and objective perspective.

During the travel phase of migration, sexual and gender minority migrants are at heightened risk of sexual violence and exploitation. Many asylum seekers experienced these forms of sexual victimization during their migration (Lasowski et al., 2023). Sexual victimization during the travel phase was a significant predictor of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression among this population (Alessi et al., 2018; Alessi et al., 2021).

In addition to sexual violence, physical abuse and assault, including physical assault/battery and dating/relationship/domestic violence, are common occurrences for sexual and gender minority migrants during their travel. A significant portion of refugees from the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia reported experiencing physical violence during their migration process, which can lead to physical injuries, long-term health issues, and psychological trauma (Alessi et al., 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

After reaching their destination, sexual and gender minority migrants may continue to face sexual victimization due to their unstable status and financial issues. Marginalized groups, including sexual and gender minorities, are often targeted for sexual violence due to their perceived vulnerability and lack of social support (Thompson, 2021). Lasowski et al. (2023) documented instances of these forms of sexual victimization by authorities, fellow asylum seekers, and others during the *interception phase*. They primarily include prolonged forms of sexual victimization, such as intimate partner rape and sexual exploitation.

During the interception phase, sexual and gender minority migrants may face discrimination, hostility, and targeted attacks from various sources. Particularly, refugees experienced physical violence during their detention and interception processes, further compounding their traumatic experiences (Alessi et al., 2018). Taking into account the specific forms of interception phase discrimination, SGM migrants may experience oppression by institutional structures.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking exploits the vulnerable states of its victims, specifically targeting those who are already marginalized or disadvantaged even before migration (de la Torre, 2011); this can include such groups as migrants, refugees, children, sexual and gender minorities, and people living in poverty. These individuals are often coerced into exploitation or forcefully abducted and abused on the false premises of improved prospects.

Within human trafficking research, there is a common trend of the exclusion of the queer community, particularly transgender people of colour (Fehrenbacher et al., 2020). This gap in research can be primarily attributed to ways in which victimhood is constructed/understood by law enforcement. It should be noted that not all individuals who have experienced human trafficking identify with victimhood. We use the term 'victim' to clarify the overarching/far-reaching harms facilitated by the systemic oppression that allows human trafficking to flourish. Research surrounding trans women of colour suggests

that there is a hierarchy of victimhood, and they fall outside of the socially constructed “ideal victim” (Christie, 1986).

Transgender individuals, due to their position at the periphery of who is conventionally recognized as victims, often find themselves mischaracterized as offenders rather than receiving the support and recognition they need and deserve. This misclassification leaves them devoid of crucial socio-legal support systems, which makes them more vulnerable to the harmful effects of unjustified criminalization. Such a systemic oversight not only exacerbates their vulnerability but also underscores the urgent need for a more inclusive understanding and approach to victimization that ensures that transgender people are not unfairly punished but rather receive the protection and support they need.

During the travel phase, which is often when human trafficking occurs, criminal activities like illegal border crossings, kidnapping, and sexual violence against women and children typically commence (Zimmerman *et al.*, 2011). This phase of migration in the context of human trafficking presents substantial dangers for its victims.

During the interception phase, efforts are made to prevent or apprehend individuals in the midst of being trafficked, usually at border crossings or transit points where traffickers attempt to evade detection. This phase poses significant risks for the victims, who often lack adequate support for their unique vulnerabilities. At this stage of migration, many efforts are made to protect women and children, while transgender people are often ignored or excluded, reflecting the issue of misplaced criminalization and the failure to provide comprehensive support for all vulnerable groups (Fehrenbacher *et al.*, 2020).

Concealment Stress as a Response to Victimization

Many individuals felt compelled to hide their sexual identity to evade harassment or discrimination. SGM migrants may experience a considerable amount of stress related to concealing their sexual orientation or gender identity during migration. The fear of discrimination and abuse further aggravates their challenges, as highlighted by Alessi and colleagues’ (2018) findings. However, this struggle was notably more strenuous for transgender and gender-nonconforming migrants whose gender expression differs from cisgender norms, making it challenging to blend in without facing discrimination (Alessi *et al.*, 2018). Specifically, for trans and gender-nonconforming individuals who are unable to conform to traditional or binary presentations of gender, concealment strategies become increasingly limited as they deviate further from normative expectations for gender expression.

Alessi *et al.* (2018) noted that before participants arrived in the destination country, many of them sought temporary safety in countries that could provide temporary safety. However, even there, they experience violence and harassment based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, perceived stigma, and the subsequent need to conceal their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2015).

Moreover, it's crucial to take the environments encountered during the interception phase, such as detention centres, which may not be equipped to handle the specific needs of SGM migrants, which increases the risk of violence, discrimination, or harassment. Prolonged concealment stress can contribute to the feeling of isolation from the support systems, which leads to an inability to cope with the stress of the situation.

Methodology

Participants and Study Design

In-depth in-person interviews were conducted in April 2024; all interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded. The purpose of these interviews was to examine and understand the perceptions of Canadian and Ukrainian students regarding the processes affecting the migration of sexual and gender minorities. The use of in-depth interviews provided valuable insight into participants' perceptions of SGM migrants; these two demographics are relevant to this research because they both provide unique insights specific to their respective countries and cultural backgrounds.

The participants were six students: three from MacEwan University and three from Ukrainian Catholic University, who were enrolled in a senior-level university sociology class. The data that was collected was used for the purpose of an intercultural learning project between the Ukrainian Catholic University and MacEwan University students.

Interview Strategy

The interview questions were designed to be open-ended and semi-structured, allowing participants to share their perspectives freely while ensuring that critical topics related to SGM migration were covered. The use of in-person interviews facilitated rapport-building between the interviewer and the participants, enabling a more nuanced exploration of the research topic.

Data Analysis

All six interviews were transcribed verbatim; all participants were signed as respondents, and participants were informed that their participation and data retrieved from their participation would be confidential. No identifying features (e.g., gender) besides race, gender, and nationality are used. Anonymity is not possible given the nature of the interviews; however, the participant's identity is not shared. A detailed analysis of the transcripts involved multiple readings and open coding to identify themes. Codes were compared to discover similarities, differences, and patterns. In a subsequent stage, the transcripts were recoded using refined themes.

The analysis of the interviews revealed five intersecting themes: (a) hierarchy of social problems, (b) institutional influence, (c) othering, (d) society requiring change, and (e)

claims of tolerance. Additionally, 27 sub-themes emerged between the four over-arching themes. Below, each theme is described and illustrated with narrative excerpts while maintaining participant confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted with the approval of MacEwan and Ukrainian Catholic University instructors, who reviewed and authorized the research methodology.

Risks and Benefits. There were minimal risks to participants, such as discomfort or emotional distress, when discussing sensitive topics related to SGM migration. Given the sensitive nature of the research, participants were provided with access to mental health services. This study provides no direct benefits to the individual participants; however, the information gathered from their interview responses created a better understanding of how social context influences perceptions of SGM migrant victimization and different forms of structural oppression.

Consent. Before participating in the study, all participants were provided with detailed information about the research purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. They were allowed to ask questions and provided their informed consent to participate voluntarily. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. To maintain confidentiality, gender non-specific pronouns (i.e., they/them) are used to describe participants.

Results

Theme 1: Hierarchy of social problems

Elevating the Importance of War Above Addressing the Discrimination of SGMs.

Through the thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews, it was found that participants often held either explicit or implicit beliefs of what social problems were most urgent. The data overwhelmingly expresses that Ukrainian participants believe that the inequality that SGM migrants face is not a social issue that should be prioritized due to the ongoing Russian invasion. One Ukrainian student shared:

...all of the people have a lot of problems that were caused by the war in Ukraine. And, like, these questions about sexual minorities and all this stuff, they are not even discussed because there are other things to be discussed. (Respondent F)

They later added that:

Ukraine needs time to get used to it. I feel like it's just not the first problem in the country... We just have to get used to it. We have to talk about it. But maybe not now. (Respondent F, Ukrainian)

Respondent F views resolving the Russo-Ukrainian war as more important than addressing other social problems. While they agreed that SGMs are oppressed, they did not recognize how the hierarchy they created perpetuates this oppression.

Elevating the Importance of Economic Issues. A common subtopic within the social problems hierarchy was the elevated importance of the economy within a Canadian context. The data demonstrates that Canadian students believe that the state emphasizes the importance of economic issues, such as taxes, over other social problems (i.e., the victimization of SGM migrants):

We're very economics there. There are a lot of taxes, right? Like what's being taxed and what's not versus money. [It] really comes down to [financials] when it comes to environmental [issues], when it comes to [owning a] house, when it comes to civil rights, it all comes back to who's paying for [it] (...) so I would say, yeah, very much like taxes. (Respondent E, Canadian)

Minimizing the Challenges Faced by SGM Migrants. Amongst the elevation of other social problems, participants placed the victimization and challenges of SGM migrants lower on the hierarchy of social issues by undermining queer experiences as less severe.

"It's just that sometimes the majority feel that they're, you know, better or they deserve more in the country than those minorities do." (Respondent B, Canadian).

This quote demonstrates ideas that the 'majority,' or those who benefit from cis-heteropatriarchy, only *sometimes* hold oppressive beliefs that they deserve more than SGM migrants. Coming from a self-identified privileged member of a colonized society (i.e., white and heterosexual), this language works to minimize the realities of power systems that place minorities beneath others.

Acknowledging Problems of SGMs. Several participants acknowledged the colonial and cis-heteropatriarchal power structures that influence the migration patterns of SGMs. While they acknowledge these oppressive patterns, they separate themselves from the institutions they benefit from directly:

If I was one of those sexual and gender minorities, I wouldn't want to go to the South. I'd want to go to a more open area where there are different types of people. I'd want to go to a more liberal, accepting area in the States. (Respondent D, Canadian)

That said, Canadian respondents were more explicit when they acknowledged the victimization of SGMs:

...then, for, like, I don't know, sexual identities and stuff or gender identities, migrating can be challenging because they can't still, unfortunately, go to any country because not every country is safe. (Respondent B, Canadian)

Migration Process Framework. Participants tended to focus on predestination and travel as the most challenging in terms of accessibility but focused on interception and destination as the primary mediators of victimization.

Predestination. Participants focused on the tangible work that is needed to prepare for migration as opposed to the potential dangers one might encounter. Participants also discussed the benefits of social capital and how it makes the process of migration easier. Others discussed the emotional stress that forced migration offers. Several participants focused on the tangible preparations needed for migration rather than the potential dangers migrants might encounter. They also highlighted the benefits of social capital in easing the migration process.

I [would] sell everything. And, well, if I know that I'll go there for a while, I probably will save money. And, of course, I [would] probably choose the country where my relatives are, because I don't want to be just alone with no one, so I'll [go to] a country where I know that [there's] either a big Ukrainian community or I know some relative there... (Respondent A, Ukrainian)

Additionally, some participants discussed the emotional stress associated with forced migration.

Yeah. I think moving anywhere away from what you're used to is very challenging. You know, you have to get used to a whole new culture and group of people and away from your family. I think I've definitely thought about it, but never from a perspective of having to leave, but, like, more wanting to leave for, you know, experiencing new things. And I think wanting to leave is challenging as well, but then having to leave also is, you know, that extra added that maybe you never wanted to leave, but because of circumstances, you're being forced to. (Respondent B, Canadian)

Travel. Participants spoke broadly and superficially about the challenges that migrants experience: “The first challenge is actually getting there...” (Respondent D, Canadian).

Interception. When asked about the challenges that sexual and gender minorities might experience during migration, they focused on the issues of women and children. This reflects the influence of their cultural milieu as a self-identified woman on their priorities.

“...there were a lot of people, and I know that that's why there was a lot of people waiting for [women and children] near the border for the to kidnap them for some sexual goals...” (Respondent A, Ukrainian)

Destination. Participants focused their attention at this stage on the importance of social capital and cultural milieu. The sociopolitical context of one's destination country dramatically influences one's experience, especially in reference to the risk of victimization. Additionally, having a community is integral to one's experience as a newcomer:

"I think it's about the country of your destination. If [the] country is open and people and society is open to every person, it will be easier for you. I think it's about people and society." (Respondent C, Ukrainian)

This perspective appeared more frequently with Ukrainian participants who placed more value on family:

"...the first weeks, the first months, when you are in the country, the hardest, you don't know anyone, you don't know what to do." (Respondent A, Ukrainian)

Theme 2: Institutional Influence

In analysing and interpreting the results of the interviews, a recurrent theme was present throughout all of the interviews: social institutions are essential in the context of the perception of sexual and gender minorities. The analysis will focus on the role of different institutions such as religion, education, family, social capital, cultural environment and government.

Religion. Religious doctrines promote heteronormative and patriarchal values, marginalizing sexual and gender minorities by labelling their identities and behavior as sinful or deviant. Stigmatization based on religious doctrines often leads to social ostracisation and justification of discrimination and violence against SGM.

I think when people hold strong religious beliefs, it is what they base their entire lives on. And unfortunately, I think that a lot of people believe that in most religious institutions, they believe that SGM is a sin." (Respondent B, Canadian)

Moreover, being religious frequently shapes an individual's worldview, with many adherents holding intolerant perspectives and views; it is also commonly conflated with conservatism.

Education. Education as an institution can both contribute to the inclusion and to the exclusion of sexual and gender minorities from society. As an institution, it frequently reinforces gender binaries and heteronormativity by failing to provide a comprehensive education that includes a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities. This exclusion perpetuates ignorance and prejudice against SGM people further in society.

I think that education can either help it or stop it. And I think it depends on what educational institution you're in and how you're learning. And obviously, on the

curriculum. But I think that education has played a significant role in helping.
(Respondent B, Canadian)

The absence of a supportive educational environment may force SGM individuals to conceal their identities, which can contribute to concealment stress, leading to long-term psychological consequences and trauma (Pachankis, 2007)., especially during the stress and instability of the migration process.

Family. Most models of family relations are fundamentally based on two principles: heteronormativity and cis-heteropatriarchy, so family rejection can significantly contribute to the vulnerability of SGM individuals, who often migrate to escape abuse and seek acceptance, but then encounter even more discrimination and increased isolation relying on potentially unsafe external social networks (Alessi et al., 2018).

It was noted that Ukrainian respondents generally maintain closer relationships with their family, including those within their immediate social circle. This indicates that family plays a significant role in influencing various aspects of their lives. Culturally, family ties in Ukraine tend to be strong, and this closeness may impact their social behaviour and the system of values that guides them in life, as family plays a pivotal role in shaping values and cultural norms. When describing their social circle, Respondent A said:

“I think it’s my family; the first thing that comes to mind is my sister, my father, and my mother” (Ukrainian).

Consequently, SGM migrants from Ukraine may experience heightened vulnerability when migrating as they also navigate the loss of this essential support system and seek to build new, accepting social networks in their host societies if travelling apart from their families.

Cultural Milieu. The social context in which individuals allocate themselves significantly influences their views on sexual and gender minority migrants. It was noted that being surrounded by positive attitudes towards SGMs in a social environment fosters more informed and tolerant attitudes in participants.

“I was exposed to [positive attitudes about SGMs] from a very young age, which made it very, you know, made it very accepting and made it easier to understand” (Respondent B, Canadian).

Similarly, the lack of exposure can lead to unawareness or lack of empathy towards issues of SGM migrants. The cultural milieu may be less inclusive or diverse, potentially perpetuating ignorance or indifference toward SGM-related issues. Thus, it leads to increased prejudice, discrimination, and misunderstanding. This aspect will be elaborated on during the discussion in greater detail.

“The thing is that I never have these [SGM] people in my whole social circle” (Respondent A, Ukrainian).

Government. The data from the interviews indicate that participants see a reciprocal influence of how public attitudes shape government actions that reinforce or challenge social norms, resulting in policies that may appear fair-minded in theory but are not effectively implemented in practice.

I think governments always write policies where it looks good on paper. But then, in practice, there's always that, like, nefarious where it's not actually equal in practice. And I think that's how many laws and policies are written. Where it's like, oh, well, when you read it, it doesn't look bad. But then, when we're actually practising it, it's definitely not equal. (Respondent B, Canadian)

In addition, concerns arise about the recent political regression and growing hostility towards SGMs. While policies and legislation can facilitate positive change, they are also vulnerable to societal prejudice that can aggravate the marginalization of SGM migrants.

I feel there's an unfortunate shift backwards in a lot of these areas when it comes to policies and stuff. I think there's this large pushback against SGM for some reason. (Respondent B, Canadian)

Theme 3: 'Othering'

The data illustrates the construction of SGM identities as 'others.' Exclusionary language regarding the LGBTQ+ community contributes to the social exclusion of sexual and gender minorities. The way that identities are constructed in exclusionary manners contributes to the victimization of SGM migrants throughout the migration process. Additionally, othering language can be attributed to broader heteronormative beliefs that are harmful to sexual and gender minorities, constructing them as deviant to normative ideals.

Ignorance. Ignorance regarding the distinct experiences and challenges faced by sexual and gender minority (SGM) migrants emerges as a significant theme in the data. This lack of knowledge and awareness perpetuates the invisibility and marginalization of this vulnerable population. The scarcity of information and understanding about the unique intersectional challenges encountered by SGM individuals in the context of migration contributes to their further ostracisation and neglect. The dearth of knowledge and recognition of the specific issues faced by SGM migrants exacerbates their precarious position, rendering their struggles and needs obscure and unaddressed within the broader discourse on migration and minority communities.

"I honestly don't have a lot of knowledge about [the differences in how SGM migrants are treated compared to just migrants]" (Respondent B, Canadian).

The lack of knowledge is due to the direct exclusion of SGM migrants from the general discourse. The perception of issues as "the problem of the other" reduces empathy and

understanding of the need for a solution, so the general population does not need to delve further into migration policy regarding SGM migrants.

Mentioning Discrimination. Despite a common trend of the challenges that SGM migrants face being minimized, several of the study's participants had either passively or assertively discussed the reality that sexual and gender minorities are discriminated against. The lack of safety for SGM migrants appears to be one of the most visible challenges for participants in the study.

And then I think there's always this pushback against them [SGMs] a group... So I think it's just that underlying thing. I don't know what's safe or what's going to happen. It's probably the inequality that I see the most. (Respondent B, Canadian)

Additionally, participants mentioned discriminatory beliefs stemming from religious doctrines, as mentioned in the institutional influence analysis. The idea that sexual and gender minorities are living in sin suggests that they are deviant and are thus considered 'others' in the eyes of the church. With Christianity being a prominent faith on a global level, such beliefs contribute to the social exclusion and, consequently, the victimization of SGM migrants. The following quote reflects a Canadian perspective on religious doctrines.

And I think it's unfortunate because [Christian people] always do it in a way that's like, oh, we love them, but they're not going to go to heaven. Or we love them, but they're living in sin. And I think that I mean, there's no hate like Christian love. (Respondent B, Canadian)

Uncertainty/Hesitance. When faced with questions regarding sexual and gender minorities, participants commonly felt unclear in their answers or opinions regarding the topic, allowing space to be corrected. The recorded responses often implied uncertainty regarding whether or not the sources that they retrieved their information from were accurate. One Canadian participant states:

"I don't know if like um like kids are being pushed more into like a like oh like you can choose who you are kind of way I don't know if that's really happening" (Respondent B, Canadian).

The uncertainty that is present may be attributed to the ongoing anti-queer Canadian political discourses.

Right now, I think it's more accepting. Yeah, I don't know, uh, I don't know like the research on it, I don't know if like maybe now more people are becoming gay or like now people are becoming like S like like SGMs, right I don't know if that's more. people are choosing to do it or that like people were always like that, but now it's becoming more like their people were always like gay (Respondent B, Canadian)

Moreover, uncertainty was often tied to a lack of representation within the media regarding the issues or challenges that sexual and gender minorities face.

I'm sure I have. I can't think of anything [about media coverage on policies related to sexual and gender minorities in migration] off the top of my head. I know. Yeah. I don't know if I have anything in particular that is exactly right. Yeah. I'm not sure. (Respondent B, Canadian)

Prejudice. Participants in the study recurrently discussed values that are reflective of biased preconceptions concerning sexual and gender minorities and migrants. Such preconceptions included feelings of SGM migrants being foreign, dangerous, and abnormal: “And it is dangerous because, for example, you think that some migrants are dangerous...” (Respondent C, Ukrainian).

Another respondent offered:

...we learned in class last semester certain people are like raising their children like and not having a gender that's kind of weird to me, like, I don't agree with like stuff like that like they were like raising them to like if they were born a girl they were just gonna like say oh like you're whatever you wanna be like I think at a certain age you can decide that but not when you're a kid.” (Respondent D, Canadian)

Social Marginalization. When participants were approached with questions regarding sexual and gender minorities, responses commonly included women and children. The lack of response surrounding SGM migrants who were queer or gender nonconforming demonstrates the invisibility or marginalization of this group of people.

So, women, I think, and kids are the main target of, like, human trafficking or something like that. And sexual orientation is also, sexual orientation, it's interesting, because I'm not, like, aware of that. But I think that you need to ask a person to know about that. So, it's not really visible. You can't tell, like, right immediately. So, you can hide it at first for, like, if you think that you can be in, might be in danger in this country, you can don't tell about this” (Respondent, Ukrainian)

Multiple participants from both Ukraine and Canada expressed a lack of representation of SGM migrants in popular discourse.

I don't think so. I haven't seen anything like that [discourse involving SGM migrants], so. (Respondent D, Canadian)
[How often do you hear about sexual and gender minority migrants in the conversation?] Yeah. I would say not. Not much, ever. (Respondent E, Canadian)

Cultural Homogeneity. Participants express monolithic ideas as reasons behind a lack of receptiveness towards SGM migrants within both a Ukrainian and Canadian context. Both

Canadian and Ukrainian respondents describe a factor of undesirability when it comes to immigration.

In Ukraine, it's not like that. Ukraine is one nation, and we will take care to save this nation. and I think we also want to follow the example of Poland because Poland also has just Polish people, and if any migrants get there in Poland, they're trying to force them to learn their language and to like to have the same document, they're trying to assimilate that to the Polish, and I think it's the same as in Ukraine, we won't really want to have different nations to have this multiculturalism, we want to be focused that we're one nation, and if you want to live there, then you need to learn Ukrainian or something like that. (Respondent A, Ukrainian)

I think, unfortunately, Canada still, or my country still, upholds a very similar situation; there are certain migrants that people are okay with, and others they're not. (Respondent B, Canadian)

Exclusive Language. Throughout the interview process, it was found that there was often exclusive language that contributed to SGM migrants being perceived as *other*. Such language includes terms such as “foreigners” and “people with different types of living.”

...they're even foreigners, and non-binary foreigners, like, especially in countries with, like, only one nation. So, they're, like, different from you, they're just different from you, and they're foreigners, so it's kind of too much. And there's a society that just pushes them; they don't want to have them in their society. (Respondent A, Ukrainian)

Additionally, when discussing challenges that SGM migrants may face, a respondent stated: “But maybe in some countries, it will be difficult if you are not usual people.” (Respondent C, Ukrainian). The exclusive language that was represented by Canadian respondents was explicitly in regard to gender non-conforming and queer youth.

...we learned in class last semester certain people are like raising their children like and not having a gender that's kind of weird to me, like, I don't agree with like stuff like that like they were like raising them to like if they were born a girl they were just gonna like say oh like you're whatever you wanna be like I think at a certain age you can decide that but not when you're a kid. (Respondent D)

Theme 4: Society Requires Adaptation/Change

The data provided highlights the need for societal change and adaptation to address the challenges faced by sexual and gender minorities (SGMs), particularly in the context of migration. In most interviews, respondents expressed the need for changes in attitudes toward migrants who are sexual or gender minorities. Some were focused on the present, while others put it off for a longer period of time in the future. This difference in time

distribution mostly depends on the priority of the problems of SGM migrants in the respondent's value system.

Need for Societal Change Now. The subtopic emphasizes the urgency for a societal transformation to create a more inclusive and accepting environment for SGMs. Several quotes underscore the necessity of working towards change at an individual and societal level. For instance, emphasizing the need for change in the present tense is often associated with prioritizing personal development.

So, we already need to work on the next generation, like, on us and on our kids. Of course, I will raise my kids in the right way, like how it's supposed to be, because the world is changing, and you need to follow this world. (Respondent A, Ukrainian)

However, the desire for immediate change is also linked to the fear of reducing the progress of acceptance of sexual and gender minorities.

I am optimistic that we can fight against it, but I'm unfortunately also scared that there is this immense pushback against what it was like before. And I think, yeah, I see a lot of, like, going in the opposite direction that I would want it to go in. (Respondent B, Canadian)

A minor part of the respondents expressed their understanding of the barriers and challenges to improving the attitude toward SGM migrants, and they assessed the obstacles as quite significant and difficult to overcome. Solving the problem may be driven by a personal desire to reduce social tension. In the context of SGM migration, societal change is crucial to create a welcoming and supportive environment for SGM migrants, who often face compounded challenges due to their intersectional identities. Fostering an inclusive society can mitigate the risks of marginalization, discrimination, and isolation faced by SGM migrants, thereby facilitating their successful integration and well-being, then leading to empowered social solidarity and functionality of various communities.

Need for Societal Change Later. This subtopic represents a more cautious or delayed approach to societal change, particularly in specific cultural or sociopolitical circumstances. Some respondents suggest that societal change may be considered a lower priority or a longer-term goal in specific contexts.

Our law does not allow people of one gender to get married, so that's the problem. Why can't they? Why can they make it in Germany and not in Ukraine? Why not? So, our law is kind of not prepared for such changes. But once again, it's not the priority right now. (Respondent F, Ukrainian)

In the case of SGM migrants, however, the recognition of the need for societal change, even if delayed, is still existing for some respondents. It acknowledges the existing challenges and the potential for future progress, which could eventually lead to more inclusive and supportive environments for SGM migrants in their host societies.

Theme 5: Claim of Tolerance

When approached with questions regarding personal perceptions of SGM migrants, participants overwhelmingly responded with claims that they and their social circle are tolerant. Claims of tolerance were often stated as an explanation for unawareness of or blindness to the challenges that SGMs face. In discussing how often a participant had noticed discriminatory practices towards SGMs, they informed us of only one example that came to mind.

“Maybe that’s because my social circle is just tolerant and doesn’t make, like, we just don’t care. I would say like this” (Respondent F, Ukrainian).

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to critically understand the victimization of sexual and gender minority migrants during migration and examine the impact of power structures such as cis-heteropatriarchy and colonialism on social perceptions. The data indicates that societal structures substantially influenced participant’s perceptions of sexual and gender minorities.

Notably, the findings indicated that the challenges faced by SGMs were frequently minimized, viewing queer experiences as less important in comparison to other social issues. Such prioritization reflects a tendency to diminish the struggles of SGMs in favour of economic concerns and the Russian invasion.

Additionally, the process of ‘othering’, marked by exclusionary language and heteronormative beliefs, only further aggravates the victimization of SGMs. However, there is a recognized need for societal change to create a more nurturing and inclusive environment, although participants’ reflections on the urgency of this matter vary.

The results of this study imply that cultural and societal perceptions of sexual and gender minority migrants have consequences at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. Understanding the influence of larger oppressive structures on societal perception is necessary for assessing social inequality and allows room for social change. The individual, institutional, and societal implications must be analyzed collectively and intersectionally to do so effectively.

At an individual level, the results demonstrate how the personal victimization of SGM migrants can occur. The common trends that were found, such as othering and creating a hierarchy of social issues, reinforce cis-heteropatriarchal views of sexual and gender minorities as deviant, less critical, and abnormal. Thus reinforcing oppressive power that largely contributes to the harm that SGM migrants experience, such as sexual and physical violence and human trafficking. Those who hold similar perceptions and understandings

are likely to expose SGM migrants to discrimination. Notably, the typical pattern of ignorance and minimization demonstrates a significant risk for SGM migrants to experience microaggressions.

For instance, Alessi (2018) describes a situation in which societal perception impacted an SGM migrant's experience at border control or at the interception phase of the migration framework. In this particular situation, a translator made false claims about a queer individual being dangerous, ensuring that they could not enter the country. This example reflects the harm that can result from negative societal perceptions influenced by oppressive power systems.

Despite claims of tolerance, there was a common lack of acceptance among Ukrainian participants. This lack of acceptance worked alongside a general lack of acknowledgment of how they may benefit from the structures of power that this research critiques. Individual unwillingness to assess positionality within the context of colonialism and cis-heteropatriarchy allows for complacency in oppressive power. This complacency further acts to victimize SGM migrants, who are uniquely impacted by the power given their intersecting identities. The relationship between power and privilege is central to the discussion of victimization, and without assessing this relationship on a personal level, critiques and discourses become superficial and used as a tool to uphold cis-heteropatriarchy (Schwarz & Ray, 2005).

The societal perceptions that are both influenced by and uphold oppression can be closely connected to the introduction of anti-queer and anti-immigration legislation. Beliefs that SGM migrants are fundamentally different from hegemonic groups of people allow for space to demonize and ostracise marginalized groups of people. Consequently, their victimization goes undiscussed. These beliefs were demonstrated by monolithic and homogenous language throughout the interview process. Monolithic beliefs tied to anti-immigration ideologies may contribute to the victimization of SGM migrants during the migration process, particularly during the travel phase. A lack of willingness to accept SGM migrants can lead to this community entering hostile or unwelcoming countries.

The results demonstrating hyper-homogenous ideals are of particular concern due to the influence such perceptions can have on state decision-making, such as policy. The impact that such beliefs have over institutions drives colonial and cis-heteropatriarchal practices of marginalizing groups of people that are deemed undesirable due to their lack of conformity.

Lastly, the results of the study are a reflection of broader structural oppression that pillar society. Colonialism and cis-heteropatriarchy exist in close relation to each other as structures of power that mutually reinforce one another. The societal perceptions that were reflected in the research demonstrate how systems of power permeate societal perceptions, thus fortifying the goals of colonialism and cis-heteropatriarchy and making the ultimate goal of social change less attainable.

Conclusion

The findings of the study align with the existing research and literature. The literature reviewed underscores how cis-heteropatriarchal and colonial power structures contribute to the marginalization and victimization of SGMs. The thematic analysis of the interviews aligns with this by highlighting participants' acknowledgment of colonial and cis-heteropatriarchal influences. Nevertheless, participants did not attempt to acknowledge how they, as self-identified privileged individuals, benefit from those oppressive systems of power, which indicates an issue without taking agency and personalized accountability. This, by itself, reflects a broader societal problem.

One unexpected finding of the research was the level of uncertainty and, in some cases, ignorance that was expressed by participants when discussing the victimization of SGM migrants. This gap in awareness and general knowledge contributes further to the social exclusion of sexual and gender minorities. During the interviews, Ukrainian participants often diverted the conversation to issues affecting only women and children during the migration process, reflecting the societal tendency to prioritize those groups. This reflects the invisibility and lack of discussion concerning SGM issues in Ukrainian society's discourse.

Participants acknowledged community as an integral component of one's experience as a newcomer. However, it is crucial to recognize that the semblance of community is inaccessible for most queer migrants. This poses significant challenges to their integration and support within society (Alessi *et al.*, 2021).

This study has several limitations. Firstly, it only explored the societal perceptions of youth and had a small sample size. Additionally, the sample is limited to students from MacEwan University and the Ukrainian Catholic University, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Secondly, there is a potential for social desirability bias, as the interviewers knew their respondents personally. However, this bias does not appear to be a significant concern, as the data still demonstrated instances of othering from all six respondents.

Finally, this study does not capture the voices of SGMs—the most critical stakeholders in terms of understanding the victimization of SGMs during migration. For this reason, future research should explore how the perceptions of SGMs either maintain or mitigate the victimization of SGM migrants. This research would also benefit from a larger-scale study with a representative sample from both Canada and Ukraine.

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