



# Echoes from the Margins

Amplifying the lived realities of  
racialised Trans and Gender diverse  
Refugees in Sweden



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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

HRT	Hormone Replacement Therapy
TGEU	Transgender Europe and Asia
GNC	Gender Non-Conforming
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
TGD	Trans and Gender Diverse
SFI	Swedish For Immigrants
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.
LGBTQ	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer
TGNC	Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
ILGA	The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association
RFSL	The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights.

# Key Concepts

## Asylum Seeker

An individual who has fled their country and is seeking international protection but has not yet received a final decision on their application for refugee status.

## Cisgender

Refers to a person who does not identify as trans.

## Gender

Refers to a social construct which places cultural and social expectations on individuals based on their assigned sex.

## Gender Identity

Refers to each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms. Some people's gender identity falls outside the gender binary, and related norms

## Gender Marker

A gender marker represents an individual's gender identity, most commonly in the abbreviations F (female), M (male), or X (non-binary, intersex, or gender non-conforming).

## Gender Expression

Refers to people's manifestation of their gender identity to others, by for instance, dress, speech and mannerisms. People's gender expression may or may not match their gender identity/identities, or the gender they were assigned at birth.

### Gender Transition

An individual's own adoption of characteristics that they feel resonate with their gender identity. This may or may not include physical alterations to the body, such as hormonal treatments, surgery, etc.

### Gender Diverse

A term encompassing individuals whose gender identity or expression differs from the societal expectations associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. This includes, but is not limited to, transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer individuals.

### Gender non-binary

An individual who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as both, neither, or a combination of male and female genders.

### Gender Non-Conforming

Refers to gender expressions other than male or female.

### Sexual Orientation

Refers to each person's capacity for profound affection, emotional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender.

### Transman

A person assigned female at birth who identifies as a man.

### Transwoman

A person assigned male at birth who identifies as a woman.

### Race

Although considered a social construct, 'race is a social reality with consequences in practice for people considered different according to their visible differences'.

## Refugee

A person who has fled their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Refugees are unable to return to their country of origin because of this fear.

## LMA Card

An asylum seeker card issued in Sweden under the Act on Reception of Asylum Seekers (LMA). It serves as proof that an individual is an asylum seeker allowed to remain in Sweden while awaiting a decision on their application. The card includes a photograph and is not an identity card but indicates the holder's status as an asylum seeker.

# About Queerstion Media

Queerstion Media is a non-profit organisation led by and for Black and People of Colour (BPoC) Trans and Gender Diverse (TGD) refugees, in collaboration with allies and families in Sweden. We create online and offline platforms to connect, empower, and inspire diverse communities of refugees and activists to be drivers of social change. We also coordinate Queerstion Magazine, a transnational virtual storytelling platform, curating the narratives of BPoC TGD people in Sweden, sub-Saharan Africa, and across the diaspora.

Queerstion Media envisions a world where all diverse TGD people are empowered and free to express their gender identity and have full access to all human rights, including freedom of expression, equitable representation, and the highest standards of wellbeing.

## Acknowledgements

Queerstion Media expresses its deepest gratitude to all the respondents who contributed to this study. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to our partner, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, for their invaluable support and collaboration throughout this project, from its inception to its completion.

This research, conducted by Queerstion Media, reflects our commitment to centre the lived experiences and amplify the lived experiences of our communities as a Transgender refugee led organisation. The findings highlight the significant structural and social challenges experienced by TGD refugees in Sweden. These barriers are further compounded by the complexities of settling in Sweden particularly for refugees with diverse experiences and backgrounds. This study therefore highlights the urgent need for tailored support that addresses the diverse and unique needs of TGD community.

# A note on terminology

This report uses some specific terminology related to gender and sexuality that not everyone may be familiar with. If you are unfamiliar with any specific terms, we have included a list of Acronyms and Abbreviations, as well as Key Concepts (definitions) on page 1 to 4 of this report.

## Disclaimer

The views, opinions, and conclusions expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and Queerston Media, and do not necessarily reflect the official policies, positions, or opinions of any affiliated organization.

# Executive Summary

This report focuses specifically on Black and people of colour trans and gender-diverse refugees and asylum seekers in Sweden. The study was conducted with the primary aim to explore and understand the lived realities to create programmes that address the identified needs for support as well as to better advocate for policies that promote and protect the rights of our TGD refugees communities.

Although Sweden is known for its progressive stances on LGBTQ rights, experiences vary significantly based on factors including region, community size, and social attitudes. (Rainer, Elise Carlson. 2021)

While Sweden's progressive policies provide a framework for inclusivity, the social and intersectional discrimination experienced by the participants underscores the need for enhanced community support, policy reforms and advocacy.

## The research focuses on the following themes:

**Discrimination:** Respondents described facing intersectional discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, refugee status, and gender identity and gender expression. Respondents also reported experiences of prejudice and stigma in schools, municipal contacts, and public spheres.

**Housing:** Our study found that some respondents experienced unsafe housing situations, including some participants who reported being placed in transphobic housing environments leading to physical violence and assault. Some respondents stated that they were comfortable with their housing facility and neighbourhood, which indicates some unequal access to safe housing.

**Access to healthcare:** Respondents, especially transgender women and men reported significant barriers in accessing gender-affirming healthcare. Study participants reported challenges including being misgendered by healthcare professionals, delays in receiving hormone treatment, and absence of gender markers. Some respondents also reported feeling anxiety while accessing health care services.

**Mental health and well-being:** Participants described experiencing psychological stress and depression linked to transphobia, racism, discrimination, unsafe housing environments, unstable employment, isolation, during their settlement processes in Sweden. Many also reported experiencing barriers in accessing affirming mental health services.

**Employment:** Study respondents reported experiencing intersectional discrimination due to their racial background, gender identity, and gender expression, while others struggled to find job opportunities that matched their qualifications. Individuals who held professional roles in their home countries found it difficult to secure similar jobs in Sweden.

**Settling process in Sweden:** Our study found that respondents also experienced challenges during their settlement processes in Sweden. They mentioned language barriers, anxiety, loneliness, and cultural differences as key issues. Some participants found it difficult to make new friends or feel at home. These challenges made it difficult to adapt to their new life.

We discuss each of these themes below in the report with additional details about respondents' lived experiences (see "Study Findings"). Our study reveals that some key practices are essential, including mental health services, inclusive institutional practices, and increased awareness among service providers. Through these interventions, Queerstion Media can more effectively support TGD refugees in their journey toward safety, stability, and belonging. As an advocacy and support organisation, by and for transgender community, Queerstion Media will also be able to connect, and link members with emergency support where needed.

# Introduction

As of 2024, according to The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), 64 countries criminalise same sex relations and most of these countries are located in Africa.

(ILGA world, 2023) Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) persons often face significant threats, harassment, and violence in their home countries due to discriminatory laws like death penalty, 10 years to life imprisonment, public scrutiny, ostracisation and macroaggressions. These individuals face violence, financial hardships, and in the worst cases, assault particularly to transgender women. To escape this type of violence, many are forced to flee in search of safety, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities, such as Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour within the LGBTQ community.

Upon arrival in a new country, Trans and Gender Diverse (TGD) refugees encounter unique and substantial challenges in integrating into unfamiliar environments due to limited knowledge and language barrier and other related challenges (Shaw & Verghese, 2022). For TGD who have fled for safety from countries that criminalise LGBTQ identities, adapting to a new society can be even more difficult.

The asylum system process requires asylum seekers to prove their sexual orientation and gender identity. For those who have lived in secrecy for years, this process can be deeply traumatising. Many asylum seekers experience depression and anxiety from being forced to revisit past traumas during their interviews. (Shidlo & Ahola, 2013)

Sweden is recognised as a global leader in LGBTQ rights, with a history of progressive legislation. Same-sex activity has been legal since 1944, with equalised age of consent since 1972. Sweden was the first country to allow transgender individuals to change their legal gender following surgery in 1972 and further advanced rights with laws enabling legal gender changes without medical interventions in 2013. The Minister for Gender Equality and Deputy Minister for Employment, Paulina Brandberg, was quoted in a debate article in QX magazine stating that Sweden should be the best country in the world for LGBTQI people.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> New measures for LGBTQI people's freedoms and rights in Sweden <https://www.regeringen.se/debattartiklar/2024/02/steg-ramat-for-hbtqi-personers-fri--och-rattigheter/>

While organizations like RFSL and Queerstion Media have produced work on TGD refugees in Sweden, the changing landscape in the country has created a need to have additional data on TGD refugees and their experiences. (Queerstion Media, 2018, SOU, 2017, Korten, 2019, Tanhira, 2022). This research aims to address the gap by documenting the specific needs, challenges, and experiences of TGD refugees and asylum seekers in Sweden.

The report findings highlight challenges such as:

- **Lack of accessible services**, including supportive psycho-social services;
- **Limited information from different municipalities**, making it difficult to understand or navigate the asylum and integration systems, i.e. lack of effective communication from *handläggare* (case support officer)
- **Language barriers**, which hinder social and economic and integration;
- **Lack of safe housing**, which leads to harassment and exposure to transphobia;
- **Mental health challenges** reported by all the groups regardless of their duration in Sweden;
- **Limited safe and inclusive spaces for transgender individuals**, as many existing spaces fail to adequately understand or address their unique needs and identities;
- **Limited access to health care services**, including prolonged waiting periods for non-emergency services and the absence of the third gender marker; and
- **Systemic and intersectional discrimination**, which leads to experiences of various forms of violence, heightened insecurity, harassment and isolation.

The findings will inform Queerstion Media's organising, and programming efforts to address members' needs more effectively, enhance program relevance, and reduce recurring challenges faced by TGD individuals in their pursuit of safety, stability, and belonging in Sweden.

Additionally, Queerstion Media will leverage the findings in this report as a benchmark to evaluate its current programs. Ultimately, the findings of this research will serve as a foundation for advancing gender-focused programming and fostering systemic changes to improve the lives of TGD asylum seekers and refugees in Sweden.

Despite these adversities, the resilience demonstrated by TGD individuals in their efforts to survive and thrive in these conditions is remarkable. With support and presence of Queerstion Media, members of the community will have some of their needs addressed as we continue to advocate for more inclusive and welcoming environments for the TGD asylum seekers and refugees.

While this study is based on a small sample, the findings showcase critical insights into the lived realities of TGD asylum seekers and refugees in Sweden. These experiences reflect similar challenges faced by trans and diverse refugees and asylum seekers globally. (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2024).

Queerstion Media is committed to continuing to collect data and build partnerships to capture diverse stories from different regions, within and beyond Sweden, to better serve our community and understand their needs.

## Objective of the Research Report

The objective of the research report is to:

Assess the needs, lived realities and challenges faced by the BPoC TGD refugees in Sweden and identify activities that Queerstion Media can implement to promote collective organising and advocate for the rights and well-being of racialised refugees in Sweden.

## Approach and Methodology

This research report used both quantitative and qualitative methods, including a standardised questionnaire and semi-structured interviews for deeper insight. A total of 29 respondents contributed to this survey; nine completed the questionnaire online, while the rest participated through focus group discussions.

The standardised questionnaire was designed to collect information across respondents covering key areas like demographics, lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and service needs. The questionnaire was distributed online through platforms like emails and WhatsApp messenger, ensuring broad reach within the community. For respondents who faced challenges such as language barriers or other constraints, semi-structured

interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to not only facilitate data collection but also generate valuable recommendations directly from the respondents. Translation support from English to French was provided where needed.

The study used convenience non-probability sampling engaging TGD individuals aged 18–50 residing in different counties in Sweden. While the sample size was small, it included grass-root voices, ensuring that the findings reflect the lived realities of the TDG community.

All respondents were informed about confidentiality and anonymity before participating. Verbal consent was obtained, and interviews were recorded with permission and later transcribed. The trust between respondents and the researcher was important in creating an environment where individuals could speak openly and without fear.

Data was analysed thematically focusing on key areas identified by the respondents, such as discrimination, housing, employment, access to healthcare, mental health, and settling in Sweden. During the cleaning process, follow-ups were conducted to clarify or fill in missing details.

## Study Sample

### Age of the respondents

Respondents were grouped into 4 age groups, including:

- Respondents over age 45 (2 participants)
- Respondents age 35-44 (15 participants)
- Respondents age 24-34 (11 participants)
- and Respondents age 18-24(1 participant)

### Duration in Sweden

Respondents with 1-5 years of Swedish residency ranked the highest in participation with 12 respondents, followed by 9 participants with a duration of 6-12 months and 8 participants with a duration of more than five years. Respondents who have lived in Sweden for more than 5 years demonstrated having more support networks, but they also reported experiencing microaggressions. Respondents with shorter residency expressed

significantly more hardships trying to integrate into the community. All responded in this category described language barrier as a major challenge. Those who had been Sweden for 6-12 months reported experiencing more challenges in securing employment. Even among 8 participants who had stayed in Sweden for over 5 years, intersectional discrimination persisted from institutions and social exclusion. Those with 6-12 months and 1-5 years of residency emphasized the need to learn SFI.

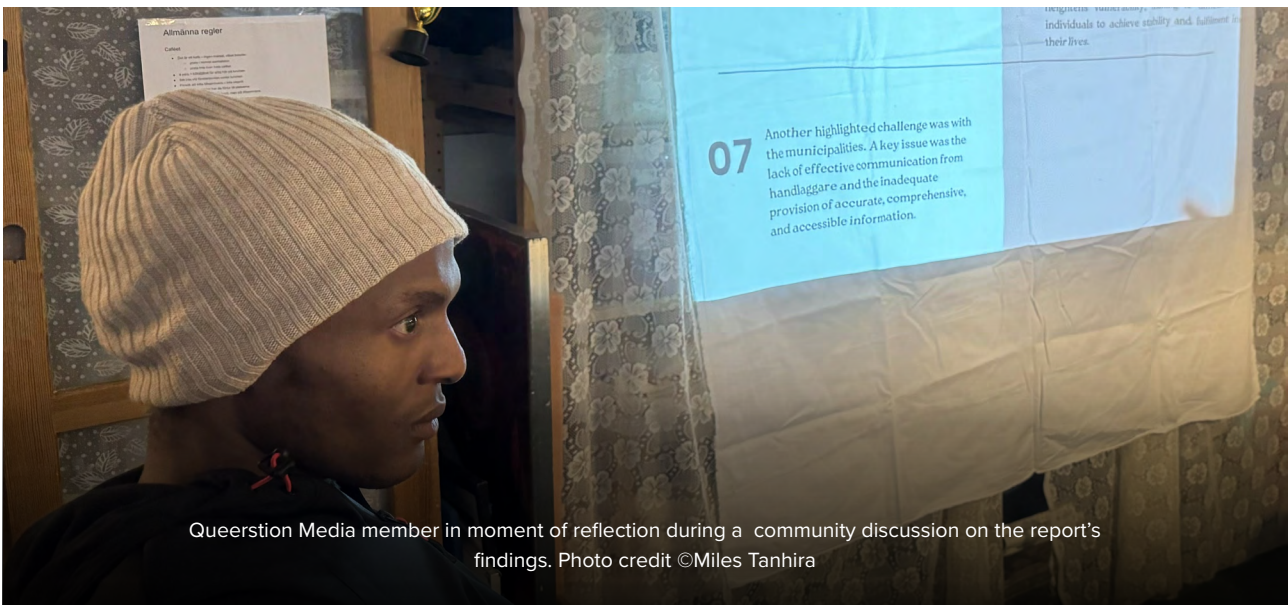
## Gender Identity

The study included 13 non-binary people, 10 transgender women, and 6 transgender men. Transgender women in the study reported the highest severity and frequency of transphobia due to their gender identity and expression. This confirms the heightened precarity experienced by black refugee trans women. For example, according to TGEU's Trans Murder Monitoring report 2023, 94% of victims were trans women or trans feminine people. However, all groups we worked with reported high levels of transphobia and racialized prejudice. Transgender women reported lack of inclusive spaces compelled them to suppress their gender expression, especially through clothing and physical appearance.

Transgender women and non-binary individuals highlighted significant challenges in accessing safe and suitable accommodation. Transgender men also faced significant barriers, particularly in accessing gender-affirming health care and secure housing. Across all identities, respondents reported experiencing transphobia and prejudice in public spaces and institutional settings.

## Discussion

The discussion explores key themes identified in this research, offering an in-depth analysis of the experiences of diverse TGD refugees and asylum seekers living in Sweden. The respondents shared their real experiences alongside realistic fears based on a culture of discrimination faced by respondents and similar stories they have heard from fellow community members. Together, these responses illustrate the very real impact of culture and policy on TGD refugees and asylum seekers.




## Intersectional discrimination

Our research found that respondents face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination due to their racial gender and migration social positions. This was reported across all gender identities and was particularly noted by participants who had shorter durations of residency in Sweden.

Participants reported experiencing intersectional discrimination in multiple settings, including Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) schools where transgender women specifically reported experiencing transphobia. These incidents were rooted in bias and prejudice and created an unsafe environment for TGD refugee students. They also expressed feeling unsafe to report bullying and incidents of harassment as they were uncertain of the consequences. For example, A.T, a transgender woman, explained:

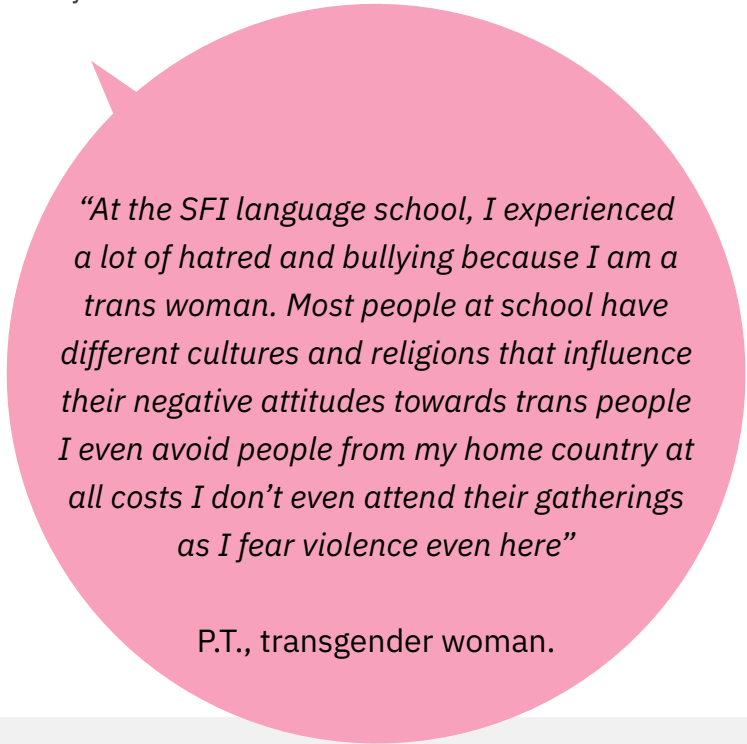
*“I have experienced transphobia at school. I reported it to the teacher, and they asked me to mention the person’s name, but I said no because I was afraid that if the person found out I had reported them, they might try to harm me further.”*

Participants, especially transgender women, reported a lack of inclusive spaces where they could openly express their gender identity. As a result, some participants explained that as a safety measure, they had resorted to conceal their being trans for example by dressing in gender conforming clothing. As highlighted by K.T a transgender woman



*“You see I have been assaulted more than once so I cannot dress up like this while going to seek medical assistance because I fear that I might be attacked again. I can only dress up like this while going to visit my friends and I need to always carry a jacket to be able to cover up.”*

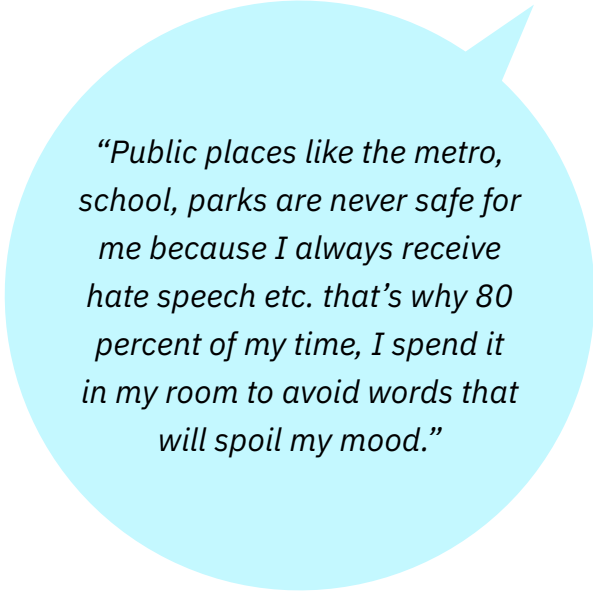
Participants across all residency duration reported experiences of intersectional discrimination in public spaces, as well as exclusion in home country networks and ethnic enclaves. They also experienced isolation within LGBTQ spaces. Such cases of systemic and societal discrimination were also prevalent even among the 8 participants who had been in Sweden for over 5 years.



*“At the SFI language school, I experienced a lot of hatred and bullying because I am a trans woman. Most people at school have different cultures and religions that influence their negative attitudes towards trans people I even avoid people from my home country at all costs I don’t even attend their gatherings as I fear violence even here”*


P.T., transgender woman.

Echoing similar sentiments, R.P., who is non-binary, added:



*“Public places like the metro, school, parks are never safe for me because I always receive hate speech etc. that’s why 80 percent of my time, I spend it in my room to avoid words that will spoil my mood.”*

Similarly, L.S, another non-binary participant, explained:



*“Once while I was doing charity work to support fundraising initiative for refugees during Pride last year. When I approached some white guy, he said straight to my face we won’t share money to support blacks/refugees. Another issue is that sitting next to some white people on the train or bus is like a crime; they will move away from that seat immediately.”*

Some respondents, particularly those who had been in Sweden for 1-5 years, reported experiencing communication challenges with their municipal contact persons, who often lacked an understanding on transgender issues. These interactions made them feel misunderstood and excluded. This compounded experiences of vulnerability and being misunderstood when interacting with institutional personnel who lack trans sensitivity and knowledge. These findings highlight that despite national efforts such as 4.6 million SEK funding announced in July 2023 by Minister of Equality Paulina Brandberg to increase LGBTQ awareness there remains a gap especially at the municipal level.<sup>2</sup>

## Housing

Housing is a crucial factor in stability and well-being for TGD refugees and asylum seekers, as highlighted in the TGEU study *Trans & Poverty: Poverty and Economic Insecurity in Trans Communities in the EU* (2021).

While a few participants reported satisfaction with their housing, the majority and in particular transgender women and non-binary participants highlighted significant challenges in accessing safe and suitable accommodation. These reported challenges included racism from landlords and neighbors and financial constraints due to unstable source of income.

Respondents who had lived in Sweden for 6-12 months reported significant discomfort with their accommodations that were allocated by Swedish Migration Agency after acquiring residency. They described being placed in shared accommodations with limited privacy, while some of their friends were given accommodation which was private and non-shared accommodations. Participants questioned the selection criteria in housing allocation, and some shared that they stayed with their friends to feel safe.

Participants with 1-5 years of residency presented more mixed experiences. Some had managed to transition to independent housing, although not always with ideal outcomes. Some within this group struggled with finding secure and inclusive social spaces especially in areas they experienced intersectional discrimination or violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Regeringen vill kartlägga hbtqi-personers utsatthet vid våld i nära relationer <https://www.qx.se/samhalle/250206/regeringen-vill-kartlagga-hbtqi-personers-utsatthet-vid-vald-i-nara-relationer/>

*“As a black trans refugee woman, I need to live in a safer area. However, where I currently live, I am constantly subjected to discrimination and constantly receive threats of physical violence “*

N.S., transgender woman

*“Still staying in a shared apartment, the privacy is not there but at least the people are understanding”*

S.B., non-binary

*“It’s not really suitable because we are many and put all together in the house”*

M.K, non-binary

*“I am in a good housing estate which is spacious and with a good location for everything I need.”*

B.T, non-binary

Overall, these housing difficulties contribute to increased vulnerability, which might lead to homelessness and substandard housing impacting mental health, and physical well-being.

## Access to Healthcare

Access to healthcare is a fundamental right and is particularly crucial for asylum seekers and refugees. Asylum seekers are entitled to a health assessment according to the Swedish Health and Medical Services Act (Hälso- och sjukvårdslagen), and this is coordinated by the regional healthcare authorities. (Swedish Refugee Law Centre, Reception Conditions 2024).

Some participants in our study did not receive invitations to a health care assessment in some regions, and some participants highlighted that while healthcare services at larger hospitals are excellent, primary healthcare facilities often do not meet the same standard. They reported long waiting times in queues to seek for healthcare and high costs for private trans healthcare, including buying hormones.

TGD people are forced to navigate systems that do not recognise or respect their gender identity, including experiences of misgendering by healthcare providers which create feelings of exclusion and discomfort. One transgender woman highlighted that, for instance, if healthcare facilities don't recognize gender markers, transgender women may be admitted to male wards in emergencies, for instance, if their gender identity is not acknowledged. This lack of recognition can cause both psychological distress and practical complications.

Another challenge for non-binary and transgender women refugees is the absence of a legal third gender marker, which could allow them to select the gender that genuinely represents their identity.

In the current system, many TGD individuals are compelled to access healthcare services based on societal gender norms rather than how they identify. R.P a respondent from the survey expressed the need for recognition beyond the gender binary, stating: "I do not fit into any binary of society; I just need that to be respected. I am not female. I am not male. I prefer to be X." This creates a gap between the medical system's practices and the lived experiences and needs of transgender and non-binary individuals, further contributing to stigmatisation. Introducing a legal third gender marker would not only affirm their identities but also ensure they are treated with dignity and respect in healthcare settings.



Queerston Media members take part in a community discussion on the report's findings. Photo credit ©Miles Tanhira

Participants highlighted the challenge of prolonged waiting periods for non-emergency services. These delays extend to long queues for healthcare appointments and extended diagnostic processes, highlighting inefficiencies that obstruct timely and equitable access to care for TGD asylum seekers and refugees. This was also accompanied by delayed diagnosis.

Sweden, was the first country to allow legal gender changes in 1972, and now, Transgender rights are lagging in Sweden (TGEU, 2024). TGD individuals face a lengthy medical examination process to change their legal gender, an administrative task that can take over four years. This delay is largely due to waiting periods of two to three years just to begin the required investigation, caused by limited capacity within the investigation teams.

*“In Sweden, when you are granted asylum access to health is given to you fully but when you access health services with an LMA card, there is some intersectional discrimination that comes with that. Other services are only available to citizens, for example gender affirming care”*

M.S, non-binary.

*“There is still subtle and sometimes outright discrimination. For instance, my endocrinologist referred me to my local neighborhood clinic to avoid long travel to Stockholm. But to his surprise, the clinic wrote back saying they could not take me in. In my endocrinologist’s case, they would have provided reasons, but in this case, they didn’t even say why. I was not surprised because a few years back I didn’t have the best experience with personnel at this clinic when I needed support with my post-surgery dressings.”*

T.R, transgender man.

## Mental health and wellbeing

One significant finding highlights the psychological burden placed on transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) asylum seekers in Sweden. The asylum process requires individuals to prove their sexual orientation and gender identity, which can be profoundly traumatising, particularly for those who have lived in secrecy for years. This requirement often leads to heightened levels of depression and anxiety as individuals are compelled to revisit past traumas. Mental Health issues also stem from living in different parts of Sweden assigned by the Swedish Migration Agency. These relocations can have severe consequences intensifying feelings of isolation, vulnerability, stigmatisation, rejection and mental distress.

Mental health challenges were reported by participants across all residency durations, although their nature and intensity varied. Participants who had been in Sweden for 6-12 months reported the highest immediate impact of mental health as they were still new to the country and adjusting to unfamiliar environments, systems, and social norms. This early age of resettlement brought in feelings of confusion, discomfort and emotional strain. Several participants mentioned that being alone without family members or partners contributed to their mental health struggles. The absence of support systems made it hard to cope with the demands of settling in Sweden and compounding with feelings of sadness and loneliness.

In contrast, participants who had been in Sweden for 1-5 years expressed the accumulated psychological toll of prolonged trauma. For these individuals, mental health challenges were not only about adjusting to the new environments but also the exhaustion that comes from the years of instability and discrimination.

Transgender women across various residency durations reported enduring trauma due to transphobia. A transgender woman reported experiencing physical and verbal abuse, which has heightened her vulnerability and negatively impacted her mental health and well-being.



*"I have been verbally and physically assaulted by some men in my neighbourhood. It was so bad that I became really scared, and sometimes I even feel unsafe, even though I'm supposed to feel welcome here. I reported it to the police, but the help hasn't been very effective, as it's a slow process."*

G.R, transgender woman.

*"It's quite a challenge because I always miss my partner whom I left in my home country and i don't know when and if we will reunite thinking about this makes me so sad most times,"*

N.L, transgender man.

*"My mental health has been okay, as I've been able to stay occupied with reading, and trying to make new friends. The weather is quite challenging, and the food isn't great, but it can be adjusted."*

J.L, non-binary.

*"When I had just been transferred to the north of Sweden it was my first winter and in a small town it felt like a prison. I was all alone with no connections or friends; I almost lost my mind. I even had to request psychosocial support, however after talking to a few friends I disregarded it, and I had to find ways of how to keep my mental health in order. I did not see myself leaving my home country and running mad in a country I want to be safe in."*

Y.H, non-binary.

*"My mental health has never been stable, the asylum system takes a toll on your health"*

P.T, transgender woman.

Other factors such as the cold winters and extended darkness, unfamiliar food, language barriers, Swedish societal norms, financial constraints, and housing issues further compound these difficulties. Such challenges often lead to increased stress and depression.

## Employment

This research examined participants' access to income and the barriers they faced in securing employment. Respondents from both the survey and focus group discussion, described how intersecting factors such as race, gender identity, and migrant status influenced their experiences in the labour market. For racialised TGD refugees or asylum seekers, these identities often intersected to create significant obstacles during their job search.

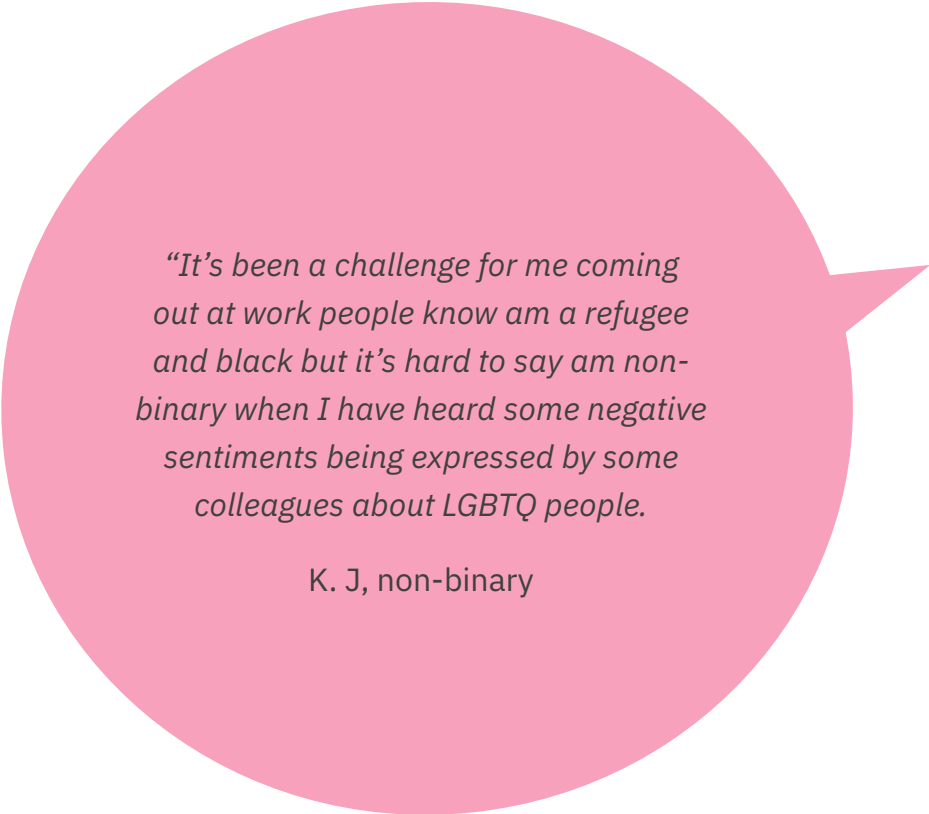
Participants' experience with employment varied by length of stay in Sweden. Those who had been Sweden for 6-12 months reported more challenges. Some of them still had LMA cards [Asylum seeker identity card] while awaiting decisions from Migration Agency which limited their access to employment. Others had already received residency but also still struggled to find employment similar to their previous work experience in their home countries. One participant noted "it's not been easy both during my stay at camp and after as a resident." Employment hardships were faced by where experienced by all respondents who lived in different counties of Sweden.



Queerston Media members engage during a presentation of research findings. Photo credit ©Miles Tanhira

Respondents who had been in Sweden for 6-12 months and 1-5 years identified language barrier especially the need for Swedish proficiency as a hindrance to securing employment. Therefore, one had to complete a course for SFI. Respondents also noted that most employers often asked for account number, Bank ID or residency in Sweden.

Participants in the focus group discussions highlighted significant challenges in accessing stable employment through start-up jobs provided by *Arbetsförmedlingen* (Swedish Employment Agency). Many described these jobs as highly stressful, with some employers having poor communication or stopping work after one or two months. For some, intersectional discrimination based on gender identity and expression added another layer of difficulty. This instability exacerbates mental health struggles, creating further barriers to long-term employment and economic security.



*“It’s been a challenge for me coming out at work people know am a refugee and black but it’s hard to say am non-binary when I have heard some negative sentiments being expressed by some colleagues about LGBTQ people.*

K. J, non-binary

Another participant shared how mismatched identity created a barrier.

*“As an asylum seeker I have an LMA card issued by the migration board which shows a gender marker that does not align with my appearance. This has made it hard for me to secure stable employment in Sweden as a refugee.” -*

W.N, transgender woman

Despite these challenges, some participants expressed gratitude for inclusive workplaces where they felt accepted and valued. One respondent, for instance, highlighted:

*“I once worked at a place where, when they found out about my sexuality, I received a warm welcome from both the company and the group at Jacqueline’s Restaurant, which I appreciated.”*

B.T non-binary

Participants with 1-5 years of residency expressed continues difficulty in finding jobs often in roles that did not match their skills or ambitions. One reported:



In contrast, those who had lived in Sweden for more than 5 years were more likely to have steady employment. A few even worked in sectors they were passionate about showing greater stability and system navigation although intersectional discrimination was still reported.

Overall, the employment sector remains challenging to navigate, even for those with experience or education. Participants shared that even with qualifications, it was difficult to access office- based jobs or professional jobs.

## Settling process in Sweden

Settling in a new country comes with emotional and practical challenges. A significant number of respondents identified language barriers as a major obstacle to settling in Sweden, noting limited proficiency in Swedish as an obstacle to build social networks and employment not limited to settlement in Sweden. However, those with English skills were at a greater advantage compared to those who lacked proficiency in English or Swedish. For example, the two study participants over 45 years old still reported experiencing this challenge.

In addition, many reported feelings of isolation, as they lack family support networks in the country especially the group of respondents who have been in Sweden for nearly a year, many of whom lacked family and support systems. This sense of disconnection contributed to mental health difficulties during the settling process. Some participants stated that it was difficult to build friendships, as people often seemed reserved or reluctant to engage, which made it challenging to feel connected.

*“Integrating into society is difficult because it’s a new country, and everything feels unfamiliar, including the fear and the people around me. I have been in Sweden for almost five years, but I still don’t always feel at home. My experience has been one of being invisible and misunderstood as a trans refugee person.”*

N.R, transgender woman

*“When I was in Stockholm, I got a chance to meet one of the leaders of an LGBTQ refugees support organisation, and she has been so nice and supportive. I recall an encounter with another Swedish ally volunteering in a refugee support group. He was willing to support and tried to speak so we could communicate smoothly, despite not being very fluent.”*

S.B, non-binary

*“It’s very hard; the language barrier and difference in culture make the settlement process very difficult. Most people in Sweden, even in the LGBTQ community, prefer to keep to themselves. This makes it hard to make friends if you are still an asylum seeker or even a refugee. It’s hard to penetrate their circles.”*

L.K, non-binary

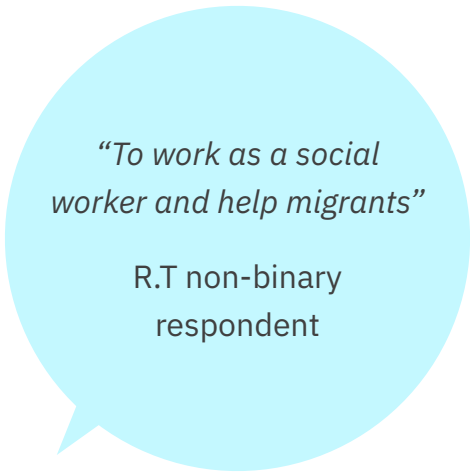
*“It has been difficult for me in many ways; this is further compounded by my being a trans person. It is still very difficult to openly show up as a trans gay man in some spaces due to stigma and prejudice.”*

T.S, transgender man

Despite these encounters, some respondents (especially those who had lived in Sweden for 1-5 years) noted that they tried to find valuable support through LGBTQ+ and transgender organisations in Sweden. They said organisations such as Queerstion Media had provided a sense of belonging and created an environment where they felt welcomed, offering crucial assistance in navigating the challenges of settling in the country.


Participants who had lived in Sweden for more than 5 years demonstrated having support networks which provided emotional and social support however they still faced microaggressions in their everyday life.

When asked about their goals for the future, most of the participants expressed learning the language and learning more about Sweden to enable them to smoothly resettle. Others expressed hopes of wanting to give back to the refugee community and building meaningful careers. Some respondents shared the following hopes;



*“To work as a social worker and help migrants”*

R.T non-binary respondent



*“To stay in Sweden, learn the language and culture, live true to myself, find a partner, start a family, and achieve everything i couldn’t achieve in my home county”*

*B.S non- binary*

# Recommendations

To respond to the challenges identified, respondents recommend the following actions:

## Queerston Media to consider:

- Conduct regular mental health sessions and check-ins with members to respond to their needs and provide support;
- Encourage members to form mental health support groups to help them combat mental distress and these groups would create safe and sharing spaces;
- Collaborate with psychologists and counsellors who have knowledge and are sensitised on TGD issues to fully work with the community;
- Engage with relevant government bodies to increase advocacy and strengthen policies that protect the rights of TGD refugees;
- Share information on legal rights, identify and build relationships with key individuals, organisations, and support networks that can greatly assist individuals during their stay in Sweden;
- Provide access to training, educational resources, and professional development opportunities. By doing so, the organisation can empower its members to become self-sufficient, skilled leaders and advocates within the TGD community;
- Document and share the lived experiences of transgender and gender diverse refugees in Sweden through podcasts, campaigns, storytelling etc.;
- Offer practical guidance on personal safety and organise security focused training to address any threats and risks; and
- Implement advocacy and educational programs that cater to both TGD individuals and the broader community

## Queerstion Media recommends the following actions for Swedish policymakers to consider:

- Enable access to SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) classes to asylum seekers awaiting their decision from the Swedish Migration Agency, due to the absence of SFI classes in some regions where refugee accommodation centres are located.
- Prioritise and support long-term housing for the TGD community so that they can access safe housing;
- Invest in TGD sensitisation programs/trainings for personnel working with refugees in municipalities and other refugee establishment services to foster respectful support systems;
  - Ensure rehabilitation centres are transgender-friendly and culturally sensitive;
  - Invest in continuous sensitisation of migration case officers, as well as promote a humane approach during immigration interviews for migrants facing gender intersectional discrimination and racialized prejudice; and
  - Ensure that the Swedish Communicable Diseases Act, explicitly includes access to hormonal treatment for transgender and gender-diverse individuals who need it for their health and well-being.

## Queerstion Media recommends the following actions for civil society organizations to consider:

- Build partnerships with government agencies and other organizations to ensure coordinated and comprehensive service delivery;
- Engage local municipalities to foster understanding, reduce stigma, and promote integration;
- Implement tailored training programs that specifically address the unique challenges faced by racialised TGD refugees;
- Strengthen partnerships with legal aid organizations to support TGD refugees in navigating asylum claims and appeals; and
- Provide clear, multilingual information about asylum processes, legal rights, and available resources.

## Conclusion

Findings from both the online survey and focus group discussions show that TGD refugees and asylum seekers experience multiple layers of discrimination, shaped by their gender identity, refugee status, and racial background. Access to stable housing remains a significant challenge due to transphobia, racism from landlords, and limited financial resources. In the labour market, precarious employment conditions, workplace intersectional discrimination hinder economic stability. Moreover, barriers in healthcare and social services prevent TGD individuals from accessing the support they need, leading to heightened mental health concerns.

To address these challenges, it is crucial for policymakers, service providers, and advocacy organizations to act. This includes implementing anti-intersectional discrimination measures in health, such as ensuring that healthcare services are trans-inclusive and will have the section of gender marker x. Anti-discriminatory measures should also be taken in housing, employment and municipalities. Additionally, collaborations with other TGD-led and LGBTQ organizations are necessary to develop long-term solutions that prioritize the needs and rights of this community.

Moving forward Queerston Media aims to provide some of the necessary services and support to meet the needs of the participants. We hope that this research report will be valuable for advocacy and policy change.

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A Queerston Media member receives a certificate after completing a movement-building, collective care, and rights advocacy training in Stockholm. Photo credit ©Miles Tanhira

