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**Sexuality and the Asylum Process:
The Perspectives of Lesbians Seeking Asylum
in the UK**

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Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work and Social Care

Re-submission

June 2014

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Title: Sexuality and the Asylum Process: The Perspectives of Lesbians Seeking Asylum in the UK

Summary

The 1951 Refugee Convention aims to provide international legal protection to all asylum seekers. Individuals making asylum claims based on persecution which relates to their sexual orientation however are not explicitly represented in Article 1A (2) of the Convention. As a consequence, cases based on sexual orientation are usually argued under the 'membership of a particular social group' category, a classification which has long remained the most contested of the Refugee Convention grounds for granting asylum.

This thesis focuses on the experiences of lesbian women as they navigate the UK asylum process. The research explores how sexuality is constructed and performed as women seek asylum as well as how this impacts upon their social and sexual identity. A theoretical framework for the study is principally (though not exclusively) drawn from the works of Judith Butler (1990, 2004, 2006) and Michel Foucault (1978, 1979), as well as Ken Plummer's (1995) 'telling sexual stories'.

The research draws upon in-depth, repeat interviews with eleven lesbian asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. These women all reported to have experienced physical and sexual violence in their home countries as a consequence of their homosexuality and all had sought international protection in the UK on the basis of their sexuality.

The analysis presented in this thesis reveals that the experience of going through the UK asylum process was, for the women in this study, an emotionally challenging and confusing experience. As a consequence of women's traumatic experiences in their home countries, they were often over familiar with secrecy which added to the difficulties of self-identifying as a lesbian in the UK. The legal requirement to evidence and 'prove' one's sexual orientation was considered problematic and frequently left women feeling compelled to 'perform' their sexual identity in order to be believed as a

credible lesbian. In addition the analysis presented demonstrates that the requirement to share intimate narratives on demand and in an open and public way had a range of significant implications on women themselves. This included how women felt that their sexuality was persistently judged and the devastating impact of not being believed.

This thesis also shows how navigating complex legal procedures impacts upon women's social and sexual identity. The study demonstrates that living in limbo, without permanency and stability exacerbated women's experiences of social isolation and rejection and left them occupying a distinct social space, excluded from British, asylum seeking and migrant groups. Despite these struggles however, the data presented in the thesis also reveals women's ability to recognise, fight and campaign for their legal citizenship and to enjoy the freedom to express their sexual identity and sexual self-esteem. The desire to create a safe space, to understand their sexuality and to re-construct a sense of belonging was paramount as women fought for their sexual entitlements.

Acknowledgements

There are many people who have helped me to complete my thesis, and to whom I want to extend my heart-felt thanks. First and foremost, I would like to thank the women who participated in this study. Without their commitment and sincerity, this study would not be possible. I am truly indebted to them for sharing their stories, their pain, their hopes and their humour with me. Each woman I worked with welcomed me with great warmth and trust, for which I am eternally grateful. Together, their honesty has both moved and motivated me. I hope this work has done them justice.

I would like to extend my thanks to the Economic and Research Council (ESRC) for funding my PhD and for making this research possible. I would also like to personally thank my supervisors for their support and commitment over the last four years. I am especially thankful to Professor Peter Aggleton, for sharing his determination and for keeping me focused during the first 24 months of this study. Working together helped me structure my conceptual knowledge, which I am especially thankful for as I believe this will serve me well in my future. I would also like to thank Professor Rachel Thomson, who guided me to completion during my final year and supported me post viva. I am genuinely appreciative of her fresh insight and time. I am also extremely grateful for the encouragement and assistance I received from my second supervisor, Dr Felicity Thomas. I am thankful for her continuity, her telephone calls of reassurance and her timely reminders of the importance of this work. In addition, I am grateful for her commitment to me and my work despite her being on maternity leave with two young children.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to Professor Bridget Anderson, Professor Derek McGhee, Professor Rosalind Edwards, Professor Yvette Taylor and Professor Sally Munt for their support and encouragement during the last 12 months. I really appreciate the faith they have all shown in me and my abilities (not to mention the copious amounts of coffee we've consumed together). I look forward to extending our professional collaborations in the future.

Moreover, I am extremely thankful for the comfort and support received from my good friends Denise Turner and Sarah Walker. The patience and understanding given to me will never be forgotten. My final acknowledgement of thanks however has to go to Clare Walton, as this PhD has impacted on her more than anyone else. Doing this study has affected me and us in more ways than we could have ever imagined. My sleepless nights, anxieties and worries were by default, also hers. I only hope that one day we will be able to talk and smile about this together.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

Claire Marie Bennett

University of Sussex

June 2014

Acronyms

The acronyms below are used within this thesis.

CEDAW	Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
HO	Home Office
IRCs	Immigration Removal Centres
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
NAM	New Asylum Model
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
OGN	Operational Guidance Notes
OHCHR	The Office of the UN High Commission for Human Rights
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RC	The 1951 Refugee Convention
RCOs	Refugee Community Organisations
UKBA	UK Border Agency
UKLGIG	UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group
UNHCR	United National High Commission for Refugees
VCRM	Voice-Centred Relational Method

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 The Thesis

This thesis examines how lesbian asylum seekers navigate the UK asylum process and how they believe seeking asylum has impacted upon their sexual and social identity. The research draws upon women's own reflections on their experiences in their home countries, seeking protection in the UK, and being a lesbian asylum seeker. This includes the difficulties they found with negotiating the asylum process and talking about personal experiences of violence and same-sex relationships to strangers. The intricacies of 'coming out' and of having their sexuality open to public scrutiny, together with the pressure of convincing the Home Office and immigration judges of the validity of their claim is also explored. In addition, by using women's direct accounts, the impact of telling and performing these narratives as well as how women were able to reclaim and re-tell their stories for their own purpose is examined.

The following research questions inform my study:

- 1) What are the experiences of navigating the UK asylum process for lesbians?
- 2) How are the sexual stories and accounts of 'truth' for lesbian asylum seekers told and performed during the asylum process?
- 3) How does seeking protection in the UK impact on women's social and sexual identity?

1.2 The rationale for the thesis

This thesis is framed by a specific social, economic, legal and political context. The movement of individuals across international borders is an inherent part of globalisation. Within this, migration, particularly from the South to the resource-rich North, has been an area of notable theoretical, policy oriented and political debate (Gibney 2004; Anderson 2013). In recent decades, the situation of refugees and asylum

seekers and changes in political rhetoric and attitudes towards them has been a key focal point in scholarly discussions. For example, Bohmer and Shuman (2008) chart how the initial sympathy directed towards refugees in the UK¹ became largely replaced by public hostility as refugees arrived from East Africa during the 1970s. In the UK for example, successive political leaders have made immigration and asylum issues a central theme in their campaigns and policies.² This has included questioning the role, benefits and impact of settling refugees and asylum seekers in the UK (Gibney 2004). During the 1990s political hostility escalated as the numbers of asylum seekers increased (Schuster & Solomos 1999; Bohmer & Shuman 2008). At this time, and during an economic recession, members of the then Conservative government referred to asylum seekers as *'cheats....a drain on the public purse'* (Schuster and Solomos, 1999, p.51). This rhetoric was also similarly used during Tony Blair's New Labour government as he promised to halve the number of asylum applications by 2003 (Hatton 2009). Suspicion and security were also added into political debates regarding the role of asylum post September 11th 2001 which led to political promises to tighten and monitor border controls (Sales 2002; Gibney 2004; Anderson 2013). In this context the British public and the media have frequently questioned the motivations and entitlements of refugees and asylum seekers, as they seek reassurance that this group are indeed 'genuine' (Sales 2002; Aspinall & Watters 2010; McKenzie & Hasmath 2013). It is within this fraught social and political setting that this research is situated.

The asylum process is a specific legal requirement which assesses individual claims against international refugee law and UK case law. Individuals seeking international protection apply under the following definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention³:

¹ Sympathy was expressed towards Chilean and Vietnamese people seeking international protection in the UK in the 1960s.

² Including Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair.

³ Asylum applications can be argued under more than one of the Refugee Convention grounds. Applicants who do not qualify under any of the Refugee Convention grounds can apply for Humanitarian Protection (Subsidiary Protection).

Article 1A (2) states that a refugee is a person who:

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion...and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country

(UNHCR 2010a)

Although the Refugee Convention serves to protect all asylum seekers, individuals who have experienced persecution based on their gender or homosexuality⁴ are not explicitly represented within the Convention categories. In addition, sexuality and asylum is a relatively new aspect of refugee law and subject to recent changes and on-going legal debates and disagreements (Hathaway & Popjoy 2012; Millbank 2012). Chapter Two discusses these issues in greater detail including the changing legal context, the additional legal obstacles and the complexity of sexuality claims, as this provides essential background information for this thesis.

As little is known about how seeking asylum impacts upon lesbian women themselves this research is pertinent and timely (Brazier 2008). By focusing on women's individual perspectives, the study illustrates how negotiating legal tiers, interviews, court appearances and receiving decisions are experienced by women themselves. This also includes how being labelled a 'lesbian asylum seeker' affects their social and sexual identity, anxieties, hopes and plans for the future. For this study, I am particularly interested in how lesbian asylum seekers understand this process, the necessity to disclose, the requirement to evidence their sexuality, and the internalisation of decisions which are made about them. Throughout this thesis I draw on narrative approaches to debate how women's sexual stories during the asylum process are told and performed in order to seek international protection. Given that the asylum process is underpinned by a need to provide objective and verifiable evidence, subjective experiences have often been overlooked and at times discounted. In order to make sense of these narratives and the system that demands them I draw on Judith

⁴ As well as other groups including stateless refugees.

Butler's (1990) work on performativity and 'de-realisation,' Michel Foucault's (1967, 1978) analysis of 'truth', 'power', 'knowledge' and the 'docile body' and Ken Plummer's (1995) 'telling sexual stories'. In addition, by using women's direct accounts, analysing whether seeking protection on the basis of your sexuality can result in what Butler (2004) refers to as a 'livable life' is explored.

1.3 Personal Relevance

Completing this study is of great personal and professional interest to me. I outline below some of my experiences which have influenced how I arrived at identifying the premise for the research and its focus.

Prior to commencing my PhD, I worked in the voluntary sector for over eleven years, including six years working in international development. During this time I travelled extensively working directly on child protection, education, gender and health projects in Africa and Asia. My work overseas began in programme management and involved spending many years working with street children who were sex workers and had experienced high levels of abuse, rape and violence. I also worked in refugee and repatriation camps on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border and in Cambodia. I have witnessed first-hand the difficulties refugee and displaced women and girls face accessing health services, advice and economic resources, as well as basic food and shelter. I have spent time working with women shortly after their abuse has taken place, and I have long been interested in women's strategies for recovery. This experience has contributed to a specific interest in refugee issues, especially the situation of women and girls. Whilst this work provided invaluable front-line exposure, I moved into the field of research and completed my MSc Social Research Methods (2004), for which I conducted qualitative research with disabled people and their families in Dodoma, Tanzania. This research provided me with a useful platform to reflect on ethical considerations when working cross-culturally and to learn about adapting flexible research approaches and techniques when working with people with different abilities.

For three years prior to my PhD, I was a researcher working with women asylum seekers who had experienced gender based persecution and were seeking protection in the UK. It was this experience which raised my awareness of the legal asylum process and the challenges that female refugees and asylum seekers face. I have long been interested in rape narratives, including how and why narratives are told, how they shape identity and strategies of recovery. It was during the course of my research on the legal principal of 'internal relocation' (Bennett 2008) however that the difficulties of disclosure during the asylum process were made apparent to me. Alongside this, discussions with lesbian asylum seekers during this research indicated that they felt their sexuality was a problematic area.

My interest in rape narratives is also shaped by my personal experience and with spending many years struggling to come to terms with this. Over the years I have found solace and understanding in many feminist writers who have charted how violent acts can be internalised and the complexity of disclosure. Even now, many years later, the choice regarding whether to tell someone, to publicly declare my experiences is difficult. Some people think it's important to share, some people treat you differently, some people label you as 'victim' or 'survivor' (I identify as neither), some find it depressing, others hopeful. However, what I have learnt is that the ability to speak, to tell and to share is a personal choice. It is for this reason that I have specialised in working in qualitative research, allowing women a safe space and an opportunity to speak and to be heard in their own terms.

The role of research and its relevance to practice, policy and knowledge enhancement has been important throughout my professional career. My experience has taught me of the necessity of using research to help understand the intricacies of lived experiences. The satisfaction I get from conducting research has led me to have a strong identity as a qualitative social researcher. I believe working directly with people and engaging with them helps to disentangle the complexity of subjective experiences and our relationship with the social world.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter Two of this thesis explores the social and political context in which this study is situated. An overview of forced migration and sexuality issues is provided including discussions on global refugees and issues pertinent to refugee women. The criminalisation of same-sex relationships and how this relates to refugee law and the UK asylum process are explored and built upon. Within Chapter Three, I discuss the theoretical frameworks with which I engage, including gender, performativity and the body, sexuality, Queer theory and the queer diaspora. How women's accounts and their experiences of seeking international protection relate to these theoretical positions is developed further in all of the data chapters (Chapters Five-Seven). In Chapter Four I explain the methodology used for this study and discuss the qualitative methods, sample identification and data analysis approach. This chapter also details the ethical issues which emerged and the emotional challenges raised within the research process.

Chapters Five to Seven present the findings from the research. Chapter Five looks in depth at women's reflections on their experiences in their home countries and the interconnection between postcolonial identity and politics, 'home', nationhood and sexuality. In Chapter Six, I explore women's interpretations of the asylum process analysing the performative demands placed on them, difficulties with disclosure and the search for 'truth'. Chapter Seven draws on women's accounts of living in limbo and the complexity of (queer) temporality as women (re)negotiate new spaces and (un)belonging in the UK. Finally, in the last chapter (Chapter Eight), I summarise my findings and my contribution to knowledge as well as potential areas of further research.

Chapter Two: Forced Migration and Sexuality

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores and interrogates debates within the changing field of forced migration and sexuality. This is especially timely as such issues are taking a central role in on-going political arguments across the Global North and South. As few academic studies have focused solely on the perspectives of lesbian refugees, including both their experiences and interpretations of their sexuality in their 'home' country and in the UK, this thesis is able to address some of these gaps in literature.

The chapter begins by outlining the global refugee context and discussing the international response. This includes exploring how these issues relate to refugee women and academic policy-oriented considerations on sexual violence and homophobia. This strand is particularly important as all participants in this study spoke to me about their experiences of sexual and physical violence (as well as threats thereof). The chapter then reviews relevant legal debates, specifically the interconnection with sexuality and refugee law, and considers how sexual violence is disclosed and discussed during the asylum process with reference to relevant feminist literatures. Particular attention is then paid to the UK asylum process and the implications of key sexuality cases and recent policy changes. These debates all provide an essential context to women's experiences of forcibly migrating and seeking asylum in the UK which are elaborated further in Chapters Five to Seven.

2.2 Refugees: The Response

By the end of 2012, 45.2 million people were reported to have been displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, violence and conflict (UNHCR 2013). The need and means however to provide international protection to refugees remains a controversial and fraught topic. For example, throughout the 1980s and 1990s the UNHCR and its Executive Committee emphasised the importance of protecting refugees and of 'burden-sharing' influxes of people fleeing persecution across Europe (Hurwitz 2009). Despite such international pressure, several countries in Europe and

the Global North⁵ have increasingly resisted such calls (or at least tried to restrict the number of applications) and have instead positioned refugee and asylum matters (especially since the 1990s) as a largely negative international burden (Schuster 2003; Moorehead 2006; Tyler 2006). For several years strategies have been developed across the Global North⁶ to deter asylum seekers as well as to restrict their access to housing, employment and welfare. (Gibney 2004; Darling 2009; Aspinall & Watters 2010; McKenzie & Hasmath 2013). For example, in the UK⁷ the role and expansion of detention centres emerged during the late 1990s to help 'manage' migrants and asylum seekers (Grant 2011). A total of 13 Immigration and Removal Centres (IRCs) and Reception Centres currently exist in the UK to detain asylum seekers, foreign prisoners awaiting deportation, visa over-stayers, people who have arrived in the UK illegally and individuals who have refused to return to their home countries voluntarily. This policy is also set to expand in the near future as plans to open further centres are currently being developed.⁸

In the UK it has been suggested that measures such as detention are often supported because popular perceptions have surfaced which suggest that the UK receives and homes an 'unreasonable' number of international refugees (Gibney 2004; Tyler 2006). This view prevails despite statistics continually indicating that the UK homes less than 2% of the refugee population (UNHCR 2011b; Refugee Council 2012a). Four fifths of the world's refugees⁹ live in resource poor countries of the Global South, three quarters of whom reside in their neighbouring countries (UNHCR 2010b). Moreover, whilst the global refugee population has increased in recent years (especially with refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria), the number of asylum applications received in the Global North (including the UK¹⁰) has decreased during this time (UNHCR 2010b; UNHCR 2011a).

Such a politically charged context has influenced sociological debates on the representation of asylum and the impact on refugees (Tyler 2006; Mulvey 2010;

⁵ This includes the USA, Australia, the UK, Italy, France and Greece.

⁶ These countries include the UK, France, Italy, the USA, Greece and Australia.

⁷ Where this study is conducted.

⁸ See <http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/news/hmp-verne-be-immigration-detention-centre>

⁹ This relates to those who have fled national borders.

¹⁰ The number of asylum applications received in the UK for 2011 was 19,808 (see Refugee Council, 2012).

Gerard & Pickering 2013). For McGhee (2005), negative political perceptions and the media have influenced adverse public hysteria directed towards asylum seekers and for Tyler (2013) this has framed asylum seekers as 'revolting subjects'. How these issues relate to the perceptions of lesbian asylum seekers will be explored further in Chapter Seven.

2.2.1 Refugee Women

Globally, approximately 49% of the refugee and displaced population are reported to be women and children (UNHCR 2010b). It has been recognised for many years that refugee women often face particularly precarious circumstances in transit and whilst they are displaced (Fagen 2003; Akram 2013; Gerard & Pickering 2013; UN Women 2013). Changes in their (expected) social roles present many difficulties and challenges. For example, the separation of women from their husbands or sons can leave refugee women vulnerable to violence as they can be monitored and judged with suspicion by other members of the community and have no family protection (Coomaraswamy 1995; Hynes 2000; Gerard & Pickering 2013). Refugee women who maintain some family stability during displacement are also believed to be vulnerable to violence and intimidation, even if they had never previously experienced this (Friedman 1992; Pittaway 2004; Hyder 2007). For example, Pittaway (2004) argues that the loss of cultural, economic and social stability and an exposure to conflict can result in many men turning their aggression and frustration onto their wives, or other women within their family. Moreover, the restrictive cultural codes placed on women can often limit their public exposure and ability to move from unsafe locations, as well as limiting their vital access to networks, support, sanitation, education and information (Hyder et al. 2007; El-Masri et al. 2013). This next section will focus on the growing literature on sexual violence and in particular refugee women's exposure to and experiences of this and the international response. This strand is particularly important to this thesis because all of the women in this study reported that they had experienced physical and sexual violence in their 'home' countries on the basis of their sexuality.

2.2.2 Refugee Women, Sexual Violence and Homosexuality

International agencies, NGOs, governments and academics have over recent years reported that refugee women are more likely to have experienced or be vulnerable to the risks of sexual violence and physical assault than other groups of women (Martin 1991; Shanks & Schull 2000; Hyder et al. 2007; UN Women 2013). These debates proliferated after the Yugoslavian and Rwandan conflicts of the 1990s when evidence emerged of the mass rape of women being used specifically as part of ethnic cleansing (Shanks & Schull 2000; Snyder et al. 2006). Historically, the raping of women has been documented within war (Brownmiller 1975; Milillo 2006), however the prevalence of sexual violence within both conflicts prompted international condemnation and calls for action¹¹ (Farwell 2004).

In light of this, a series of international agreements and instruments including The Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and successive Beijing Platforms were introduced to demand that individual states prioritise the protection of women (including displaced and refugee women). Significantly in 1992, CEDAW universally defined violence against women including sexual violence as a distinct form of discrimination and demanded that national states criminalise such acts (Merry 2009). The specific term 'sexual violence' was deliberately used to categorise and acknowledge the various forms of abuse directed against women (Jewkes et al. 2002; National Sexual Violence Resource Centre 2004). Within these international frameworks, sexual violence is defined as:

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work

¹¹ Especially after the extent to which rape was used as a weapon of war in the Yugoslavian and Rwandan conflicts. Both countries established an International Criminal Tribunal which included the prosecution of rape cases. These trials became amongst the first international trials in which sexualised crimes committed during war were recognised and prosecuted under international law.

(Jewkes et al., 2002, p.149)¹²

A range of sexually violent acts which can occur in a variety of contexts and settings are associated with the term 'sexual violence'. These include:

- a) rape within marriage or dating relationships;
- b) rape by strangers;
- c) systematic rape during armed conflict;
- d) unwanted sexual advances or sexual harassment,
- e) demanding sex in return for favours;
- f) sexual abuse of mentally or physically disabled people;
- g) sexual abuse of children;
- h) forced marriage or cohabitation, including the marriage of children;
- i) denial of the right to use contraception or to adopt other measures to protect against sexually transmitted diseases;
- j) forced abortion;
- k) violent acts against the sexual integrity of women, including female genital mutilation and obligatory inspections for virginity;
- l) forced prostitution and trafficking of people for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

(Jewkes et al., 2002, p.149-50)

Although there is largely international consensus on what is defined as 'sexual violence', the process of establishing universal principles and ambitions for the eradication of sexual violence is more problematic and embodies tensions between international beliefs and local practices (Giles & Hyndman 2004). For instance, criticisms have emerged that western-centric liberal views have been imposed with perceived indifference to local customs, which are also often portrayed as harmful and inferior (Merry 2006; Merry 2009). Within these debates, 'culture' and indeed

¹² This definition reflects the use of the term 'sexual violence' throughout this thesis. I considered this term to be more appropriate as it encapsulates all forms of sexualised crimes which the participants referred to.

'women' are often presented as homogenous rather than a diverse group. Moreover, concepts such as 'sexual violence' frequently fail to recognise subjective interpretations, the complexity of power structures, social patterns and differences between sexually violent acts (Susskind 2008; Rosenblum 2010). Different countries and cultures also perceive incidents of sexual violence and rape differently. Defining and measuring what is considered to be 'sexual advances and harassment' for example, is open to an array of cultural interpretations. Added to this, the often private nature of many forms of physical, sexual and emotional violence women experience can leave violence unrecognised, unacknowledged and unreported (Dobash & Dobash 1998; Boonzaier 2008). These issues are developed further in Chapter Five.

Currently 185 countries have signed and ratified CEDAW, agreeing to its principles, definitions and monitoring requirements (Blanchfield 2011). However, as CEDAW is not legally enforceable and as tensions regarding how to identify and respond to sexual violence continue to surface, the presence of sexual violence against women (including refugee women) dominates human rights concerns and literature (MacKinnon 2006; Bunch 2008; IFHR 2013; UN Women 2013).

The vulnerability and exposure to physical and sexual violence which lesbian refugees experience has recently been recognised (largely by human rights agencies) but receives considerably less academic attention (Stychin 2004; HaleyNelson 2005). For example, academic courses, seminars and conferences which cover issues of refugee women and sexual violence rarely include discussions on lesbian refugees (Martin 2009; Human Rights Watch 2011). The term 'corrective' or 'curative' rape has emerged, with this form of harm deeply embedded within ideological and cultural beliefs which permit that women believed to be lesbians can be raped in order to 'cure' them of their 'unnatural' and 'un-Godly' sexual tendencies (HaleyNelson 2005; Nel & Judge 2008; Martin 2009; Di Silvo 2011). In this context, 'corrective rape' is positioned as a necessary act where men rape women in order to 'reverse their homosexuality', to discourage non-conformity and to remove women's sexual agency (Martin 2009; Van Dyk 2011). Subsequently, perpetrators of corrective rape are not considered to have committed a crime within the local community, but instead, to be

preservers of the heterosexual and patriarchal order (Di Silvo 2011). In many communities (across sub-Saharan Africa) men gain social respect and are congratulated if they openly threaten, or admit to having raped, a lesbian woman (Human Rights Watch 2011). This creates a climate where women who experience 'corrective rape' are frequently deemed as deserving of their punishment and receive little support or sympathy (Martin 2009). In addition, as homosexuality is illegal or culturally unacceptable in over 76 countries, women who experience sexualised crimes frequently receive little or no legal recourse and, if they do report crimes, they can also be subject to arrest and further abuse by police officers (HaleyNelson 2005; Human Rights Watch 2011). Chapter Five explores these topics further and also examines the interconnection between sexualised crimes and academic literature on gender and nation.

The criminalisation of same-sex relationships across many parts of the world is an area of notable concern for international bodies and human rights advocates (Itaborahy & Zhu 2013; Jansen 2013; Tabak & Levitan 2013). In 2011 the UN General Assembly adopted the first ever resolution on LGBTI issues clarifying that:

The application of international human rights law is guided by the principles of universality and non-discrimination enshrined in article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'. All people, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons, are entitled to enjoy the protections provided for by international human rights law, including in respect of rights to life, security of person and privacy, the right to be free from torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, the right to be free from discrimination and the right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action confirms that, 'while the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their

political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms¹³,

(Human Rights Council 2011p.3).

This growing international acknowledgement and concern has also contributed to the Office of the UN High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) launching its first international campaign¹⁴ in July 2013 focusing specifically on countering international homophobia and transphobia. Over 76 countries (approximately 40% of UN Members - including 38 African countries) currently criminalise against same-sex relations and seven countries¹⁵ issue the death penalty (Amnesty International 2013; Itaborahy & Zhu 2013). December 2013 alone witnessed international condemnation against a range of countries that became more defiant and uncompromising towards homosexuality. For example, Russia sought to re-legitimise laws banning LGBT activism, India's Supreme Court ruled that same-sex relations were a criminal offence and in Nigeria, the House of Representatives passed the 'same-sex marriage (prohibition) bill' (Amnesty International 2013; Human Rights Watch 2013; Itaborahy & Zhu 2013; Reid 2013). Similarly, in February 2014 the Ugandan parliament finally passed the much anticipated Anti-Homosexuality Bill and increased the mandatory 10 year prison sentence to life imprisonment for all LGBT people. Significantly, this Bill also acknowledges lesbians for the first time and makes knowing and not reporting LGBT people to the authorities a criminal offence¹⁶ (Human Rights Watch 2014). Living in these circumstances means that lesbians and gay men are frequently subject to a range of attacks, assaults, sexual violence, blackmail, imprisonment and torture (Phillips 2009; Human Rights Watch 2011; Human Rights Watch 2012; Amnesty International 2013). In countries where same-sex relationships are a criminal offence, LGBT people are unable to report crimes or seek protection and thus often live in

¹³ 87 States publicly supported and signed the UN statement expressing their concerns regarding the treatment of LGBTI people.

¹⁴ 'Free and Equal' campaign see: <https://www.unfe.org/>

¹⁵ Including: Iran, northern States in Nigeria, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, southern parts of Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen.

¹⁶ For example, a landlord who knowingly rents property to someone who is LGBT can face a five year prison sentence.

constant fear of punishment and reprisals (Ungar 2000; Nel & Judge 2008; Van Dyk 2011). This study is particularly relevant to these discussions as it illustrates the tensions between sexual violence, sexuality and seeking international protection.

2.3 Refugee Law, Sexuality and Asylum

This section scrutinises on-going debates and disputes within the field of refugee law, sexuality and asylum. International law principles and guidelines are explored in order to provide an overview of international debates and considerations. The thesis then moves to focus on the UK context and discusses recent developments (legal and policy-oriented) which address and prioritise sexuality and asylum issues.

2.3.1 Refugee Law

The intentions, application and interpretation of the Refugee Convention provide important contextual information for this thesis. Refugee claims, including those made by lesbian asylum seekers, are currently processed under the definition outlined in the Refugee Convention. As discussed below, cases based on a form of gender based persecution or harm, or sexuality cases, are often disadvantaged. In addition, how incidents of rape and sexual violence are disclosed and how a person's sexuality is proven, are questions elaborated on throughout this study.

2.3.2 The 1951 Refugee Convention

'The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees'¹⁷ was established in the aftermath and as a response to, the displacement of people during the Second World War. The humanitarian principles which governed the formation of the Refugee Convention represent an attempt to provide a 'better world' and to move away from the horrors of war (Jackson 1991). The establishment of the Refugee Convention enshrined in law that individuals are entitled to live free from persecution¹⁸ (Jackson 1991; UNHCR 2010a). Currently, the Refugee Convention remains the key international

¹⁷ More commonly known as 'The Refugee Convention'.

¹⁸ Since its inception, The Refugee Convention has only been subject to minor changes such as the incorporation of the 1967 Protocols and the removal of the original geographic and time limitations.

instrument¹⁹ relating to the rights of international refugees (UNHCR 2010a). Individuals seeking international protection apply under the definition outlined in Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention. As previously discussed, this states that individuals with a 'well-founded fear' of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion can seek international protection²⁰ (UNHCR 2010a).

The Refugee Convention provides an international framework which is interpreted and applied by each nation state. Individual countries can make specific interpretations of the Convention through their own asylum and immigration case law.²¹ A significant feature of the Convention is the principle of 'non-refoulement'. This states that no persons should be forcibly returned to their home country where any freedom or life is threatened.²² In addition it prohibits the exclusion of refugees for reasons other than national security or public order,²³ and states that refugees should not be penalised for irregular entry,²⁴ or detained whilst applications are processed (Jackson 1991; Chantler 2010).

2.3.3 Gender and the Refugee Convention

Although the Refugee Convention states that all persons have the right to seek asylum, academics and NGOs have for many years argued that the language and content of the Convention means that certain groups are often overlooked or disadvantaged as the differences that exist in how men and women experience persecution is not given full regard (Millbank 2003; Chantler 2010; McPherson 2011). For example, many acts of persecution women experience²⁵ are committed 'by non-state agents'²⁶ and thus,

¹⁹ 147 states have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol.

²⁰ An application does not have to be limited to only one of The Refugee Convention grounds.

²¹ This study is based on The Refugee Convention and asylum and immigration case law within the UK.

²² Article 33 (1).

²³ Article 32.

²⁴ Article 31.

²⁵ Including domestic violence, 'honour' crimes, FGM, trafficking for sexual exploitation.

²⁶ Claims based on persecution committed by non-state agents may also be susceptible for refusal based on the grounds of 'internal relocation.' Paragraph 339O of the Immigration Rules state that 'if there is a part of the country of origin to which the applicant can relocate where they would not have a well-founded fear of persecution or real risk of suffering serious harm, and where it is reasonable to expect them to stay, then the application for asylum should be rejected'.

difficult to situate and evidence within the requirements of the Refugee Convention (Whitton 2010; Querton 2012). As a consequence, many of these cases are usually legally argued under the ‘particular social group’ category. In the UK, two landmark cases have influenced the interpretation of who can be defined as a ‘particular social group’. Shah and Islam²⁷ (domestic violence) (1999) and Fornah²⁸ (FGM) (2006) both tested and challenged legal thinking with regards to how women’s asylum claims are legally presented. In these cases it was recognised that where women are not offered protection by their ‘home’ state they should be considered under the particular social group category of the Convention. Prior to this ruling, the legal definition of ‘particular social group’ was very restrictive, which is why these cases continue to be cited in circumstances where women are not granted social, legal and cultural protection (including LGBT cases) (Dumper 2004; Samuels 2010).

Largely in response to these cases, regulation 6 (i) (d) of the Refugee or Persons in Need of International Protection (Qualification) Regulations, clarified that a group shall be considered to form a particular social group where, in particular:

- I. Members of that group share an innate characteristic, or a common background that cannot be changed, or share a characteristic or belief that is so fundamental to identity or conscience that a person should not be forced to renounce it, and
- II. That group has a distinct identity in the relevant country, because it is perceived as being different by the surrounding society.

(UK Border Agency 2010)

This broad definition outlines the interpretation used by UK courts. Despite legal consensus on this definition however, the ‘particular social group’ category remains the most litigated, controversial and arbitrary category of all the Refugee Convention

²⁷ Islam (A.P.) v. Secretary of State for the Home Department; R v. Immigration Appeal Tribunal and Another, Ex Parte Shah (A.P.) House of Lords 25th March 1999.

²⁸ House of Lords, 18 October 2006, Fornah v. Secretary of State for the Home Department (linked with Secretary of State for the Home Department v. K) [2006] UKHL 46.

grounds and remains open to wide and inconsistent legal interpretation (Pittaway & Bartolomei 2001; Querton 2012).

The legal barriers faced by female refugees (as outlined above) have been widely acknowledged since the 1990s, and several national gender asylum policies have been introduced to help mitigate this. In 1993 for example, the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board were the first to introduce a set of gender guidelines to assist with gender based claims. Although countries such as Australia,²⁹ the USA³⁰ and the United Kingdom³¹ introduced similar directives for use in court, in practice, the utilisation of these guidelines is not a legal requirement and their implementation and effectiveness has been questioned by campaigners (Freedman 2010; McPherson 2011; Querton 2012).

These debates also need to be contextualised within wider discussions on violence against women in refugee producing countries and in particular, questioning who is responsible for protecting women. For example, academics and campaigners have criticised decision-makers in the Global North for fearing that offering protection to women who have experienced violence would '*open the floodgates*' on issues that are perceived to be a national and domestic matter (Siddiqui 2010; Casey 2012). In practice, cases continue to emerge in the UK which test concepts of responsibility, including a case in 2008, known as AA Uganda.³² In this case, the then Asylum and Immigration Tribunal believed it was '*reasonable*' to return a Ugandan woman who had been trafficked to the UK to circumstances of 'enforced prostitution, homelessness and destitution' as 'there are however many young women in that situation' (Bennett, 2008, p.24). Although this case was later overturned in the Court of Appeal, the decision at the time made a statement that the UK would not take responsibility for commonplace acts of violence against women in their home countries.

²⁹ In 1996, the Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs introduced 'Guidelines on Gender Issues for Decision Makers'.

³⁰ In 1995, the US Department of Justice introduced a memorandum which provided guidance on gender based claims.

³¹ In 2000, the Immigration Appellant Authority (now the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal) adopted the 'Gender Guidelines' however, this policy has now been removed. In 2004, the UK Home Office (now UKBA) introduced 'Gender Guidelines' to their 'Asylum Policy Instructions'.

³² AA (Uganda) and the Secretary of State for the Home Department [2008] EWCA Civ 579.

2.4 Disclosure and Rape Narratives within the UK Asylum Process

Further difficulties encountered by refugee women when navigating the UK asylum process revolve around issues of disclosure. For example, in order to ascertain whether a woman is granted refugee status, she will need to attend several legal interviews and court appearances for immigration officials to assess her claim, individual credibility, and to scrutinise the evidence provided (Crawley 2000; Friedman & Klein 2008). For women who have experienced sexual and physical violence, the need to frequently disclose and discuss in great detail traumatic experiences, is an inherent part of the asylum process.³³ The legal interviews and court appearances also serve to identify and examine any inconsistencies in women's accounts. Discrepancies and late disclosure of experiences along with observational actions or behaviours can affect a woman's claim and her perceived credibility (Bogner et al. 2007; McPherson 2011). For example Querton's (2012) study illustrates several examples whereby late disclosure has been interpreted negatively and affected the outcome of the case. She states:

Disclosure may not be facilitated if gender-sensitive interviewing procedures are not followed and rape and/ or sexual violence may make disclosure more difficult thereby negatively impacting on women claimants' credibility. Women may delay their claim for asylum because they fear disclosing their history of sexual violence. Although this fear may be rooted in feelings of guilt and shame it will be up to the decision- maker to consider what weight to place on such factors in an analysis of credibility (p.42)

For decision-makers, questioning a person's credibility is a legitimate line of enquiry as stipulated under Section 8 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004.³⁴ This clearly states that suspicion should be raised if individuals: fail to answer specific questions; hide or provide misleading information; produce false documentation or make an asylum application later than is reasonably expected. The

³³ Women will be frequently interviewed about their experiences of sexual and physical violence relating to their claim by their legal representatives, UKBA, immigration judges and other service providers.

³⁴ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/19/section/8>

interpretation of how ‘credibility’ is assessed has however been subject to criticism. For example in 2007, the UNHCR in their assessment of the then UKBA cited that whilst some good practice had been observed in decisions: *the assessment of credibility and establishing the facts of the claim, a complex element of decision-making, remains a challenging area for a significant proportion of ... decision makers (UNHCR 2007p.2).*³⁵

This also lends itself to Shaw and Kaye’s (2013) report on credibility assessment in asylum claims which argued that in the majority of their sample’s cases,³⁶ how ‘credibility’ was assessed by the Home Office breached their own guidance,³⁷ thus permitting inconsistencies and poor decision-making. They concluded that:

The evidence from the research indicates that a significant number of case owners are making serious and/or multiple errors in the assessment of credibility which are leading to poor quality decisions. The vast majority of these mistakes could be avoided if case owners properly followed UKBA’s own Credibility Guidance

(Shaw & Kaye 2013p.32).

The assessment of ‘credibility’ and the negative impact on women remains a source of apprehension for NGOs and academics and as Jubany (2011) and Souter (2011) argue, this perpetuates a ‘culture of disbelief’ within the Home Office. The use of observational behaviour and how women are judged or perceived by decision-makers also forms part of this critique. For example, in 2001 Crawley stated that observations such as whether a woman maintained eye contact, displayed a lack of expected emotions or hesitated in her responses should not be used to dismiss her credibility. She maintained that how people express themselves may be bound with cultural influences, embarrassment and trauma and warned of misinterpretation by decision-makers. This issue still remains pertinent today as cases continue to be dismissed because the (female) appellant did not ‘act’ or behave in the way expected by

³⁵ Paragraph 2.4.

³⁶ This report assessed the cases of claimants from Syria, Sri Lanka, Iran and Zimbabwe.

³⁷ See the Asylum Process Guidance, ‘Considering the asylum claim and assessing credibility’ (July 2010) at: www.ukba.homesoffice.gov.uk

decision-makers (Sweeney 2009; Bogner et al. 2010; Querton 2012). This issue is particularly pertinent to this study and is explored in more detail in Chapter Six.

Parallels here can be drawn with feminist debates on the disclosure and assessment of rape cases during legal trials. Criminal processes associated with sexual violence and rape has been an area of significant scholarly debate particularly since the 1970s. Feminists have argued that the mechanisms and legal apparatus used to define sexual violence and rape are inappropriate, inaccurate and unhelpful in both determining whether such incidents occurred and in understanding women's perspectives (Brownmiller 1975; Ward 1995; Lees 1996). For example, Brownmiller (1979) challenged the patriarchal construction of rape within courts and accused criminal proceedings of perpetuating men's derogatory attitudes towards women. Although heavily critiqued for positioning all women as vulnerable to rape and all men as potential rapists, Brownmiller's work helped make issues of rape a central theme within feminist deliberations. McKinnon (1989) similarly argued that unequal gender dynamics makes women's power to negotiate consent prior to sex a fallacy, an aspect which the legal system has neglected to comprehend. Feminists have also maintained that the 'man-made' laws and the generation of rape myths have failed to recognise the complexity of women's experiences of rape and have instead undermined, blamed and treated women with suspicion (Kelly & Radford 1996a; Bourke 2007). This has led to accusations that the legal understanding and treatment of rape cases is a "*mockery of justice*" (Lees, 1996, p.111) which has legitimised rape through biasing the legal process to support men (Edwards 1987; MacKinnon 1989).

These discussions provide an important intellectual context to this thesis which interrogates disclosure during the asylum process (see Chapter Six). For refugee women disclosure of rape and sexual violence are often further complicated as they are considered culturally taboo and women are unfamiliar with publicly expressing their sexual agency (Bogner et al. 2007). Women's interpretations of sexual violence and rape may also be heavily bound with concepts of 'dishonour' and their perceptions of what constitutes sexual violence may differ to views in the Global North (Niarchos 1995; Dobash & Dobash 1998; McWilliams 1998). The difficulties of disclosure during

the asylum process can also be compounded by problems with translation, interpretation, understanding the legal process, terminology and expectations (Asylum Aid 2009; Baillot et al. 2009). Significantly, a key disjuncture between disclosure during the asylum process and the prosecution of criminal rape cases is that disclosure for asylum seekers is an essential requirement for their case to stay in the UK, and not for the purpose of pursuing a conviction. This is an important distinction as it affects the motivations of why women disclose and the level of resolution and retribution which can be achieved.

Feminist theory is also useful for thinking about the process through which experiences of sexual violence are evidenced for asylum claims. Feminists have long argued that the private, intimate and gendered nature of sexual violence is a crime for which it is difficult to provide material evidence (Brownmiller 1975; MacKinnon 1989; Caringella 2009). For example, the assumption that rape is committed in the context of physical violence or force which can then be tangibly verified ignores the emotional intimidation, mental abuse and fear which may influence men's ability to rape and women's ability to protest (Ward 1995; Tyler et al. 1998; Bourke 2007). This academic literature is particularly relevant to my research as women asylum seekers need to evidence their experiences of rape and sexual violence. The 'burden of proof' is inevitably more difficult for women in the absence of physical scarring and when there has been a lapse of time between the incident(s) of sexual violence and their legal interviews in the UK. Feminist researchers have also argued that legal mechanisms have focused too heavily on women's responses, behaviour and clothing as opposed to the actuality of events and difficulties faced by women (Ward 1995; Murray 2007). As a consequence, the legal proceedings treat women with suspicion by publicly questioning their moral integrity and credibility (Brownmiller 1975; Bourke 2007). Direct parallels can be drawn with the UK asylum process where immigration judges and the Home Office openly debate a woman's perceived 'truthfulness' and the plausibility of the events to confirm or detract from her 'credibility' and character (Herlihy et al. 2010).

The demand to produce narratives of sexual violence as part of the legal asylum process is a relatively unexplored area within the academic literature. One study

(Baillot et al. 2009) has however drawn direct comparisons with rape disclosure in the UK criminal justice proceedings and the UK asylum process. This research has raised several areas of concern regarding women's asylum claims and emphasised how a lack of cultural sensitivity, the presence of male caseworkers, translators and at times children, adds to the intensity of the interview process and may limit a woman's ability to fully disclose. The strict timeframe dictated by the asylum process also means women may not be given the necessary time and support they need to discuss and evidence their accounts, and when they do, they are interpreted and re-prioritised by others through a legal lens. Moreover, clinical psychologists such as Bogner et al. (2007) have argued that the experience of trauma, post-traumatic stress and disassociation associated with rape can also affect a woman's ability to recall specific events in the legally required accurate order. Both of these studies raise interesting issues regarding the barriers to disclosure, which are important given that late disclosure has such a negative impact on women's asylum cases. Of particular interest to this thesis however is how this process is interpreted by women asylum seekers themselves, and how this affects their comprehension of their own experiences of sexual violence. For example, do women identify with terms such as 'rape' and 'sexual violence,' how do they feel about discussing these experiences, and does disclosure during a legal process assist women in their comprehension of their experiences? Alongside this, this thesis also focuses on the disclosure of sexuality and same-sex experiences. Questions such as 'how does this disclosure impact on women,' 'how are these stories told and evidenced' as well as exploring the transition from the private to the public and legal domain are all issues explored in Chapters Six and Seven.

2.5 Sexuality Cases: Law, Evidence and Practice

As discussed in Section 2.3.3, persecution based on the grounds of a person's sexuality is not explicitly included in the 1951 Refugee Convention. As such, these claims face significant problems and legal barriers which can result in a more complicated and lengthy application process. No statistics are currently available to indicate the number of applicants who seek asylum on the grounds of their sexual orientation in the UK but NGOs estimate that in 2008 between 1,200 and 1,800 lesbian, gay and bisexual people

applied for asylum in the UK (Stuart, 2012). In July 2011 however, the Home Office announced that they would start recording this data on their case information database to provide more accurate statistics in the future³⁸ (Stuart 2012a). Sexuality and legal debates have often been overlooked and consequently, trepidations have been raised for a number of years regarding whether lesbian and gay men are accessing the international protection they need (Kendall 2003; Millbank 2005; Hathaway & Pobjoy 2012). For example, Millbank (2005) criticised the British legal response to homosexuality cases in her critique of asylum claims between 1989 and 2003. She argued that during this time, the UK courts imposed too many restrictive measures and appeared hostile to homosexual claims in comparison to other countries.³⁹ Her criticisms included that the UK courts regarded homosexuality as: a 'private' and 'voluntary' matter, they did not recognise the criminalisation of gay sex as persecution and held a belief that homosexuals have a duty to protect themselves. Coupled with this, she claimed that the criteria for recognising persecution against homosexuals through UK asylum law was too arbitrary (Millbank 2005). Similarly, Miles' (2010) research on LGBT cases in the UK illustrated that the Home Office and immigration judges predominantly focused on intimate questions about sexual activity and assumptions regarding physical appearance. This report also illustrated the lack of training and guidance offered to interviewing Home Office staff, the time pressures and targets they were subject to and the how cultural misunderstandings frequently led to cases being refused or to people being returned and expected to live 'discreetly' (Miles 2010). For many countries, proving sexuality in LGBT cases became a problematic area within refugee law. For example, in the Czech Republic between 2008-2010 the phallometry test⁴⁰ was regularly used in asylum cases to measure and determine a man's sexuality (UNHCR 2011c). Currently in many Central and Eastern European countries, medical tests and documents are still required to be submitted alongside personal accounts to establish whether a person is homosexual and warrants international protection (Jansen & Spijkerboer 2011).

³⁸ At the time of writing these statistics had not been released.

³⁹ This also includes Canada and Australia.

⁴⁰ "Phallometry measures changes in genital blood flow in response to sexually explicit visual and audio stimuli using electrodes attached to the genitalia. With men, the most common methods involve the measurement of the circumference of the penis with a mercury ring, or the volume of the penis with an airtight cylinder and inflatable cuff at the base of the penis" (UNHCRc, 2011, p.1).

In light of some of these criticisms⁴¹ and confusion and to help clarify legal interpretations, the UNHCR introduced its own Guidance Note (UNHCR 2008). This Guidance Note sought to identify the specific considerations associated with LGBT refugee claims and their legal examinations (LaViolette 2009b). Whilst this was a largely welcomed document which was the first attempt by UNHCR to specifically recognise the complex legal needs of LGBT applicants, LaVoilette (2009b) stated that the Guidance Note should be viewed as a 'work in progress' as issues such as the use of country information, evidential tests and gender analysis needed further commentary.

Significant legal developments also occurred in the UK in 2010. The UK Supreme Court judgement of HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon)⁴² provided a landmark ruling for LGBT asylum cases and represented a change in asylum law. This important case was based on two gay men, a 40 year old Iranian (HJ) and 36 year old Cameroonian (HT). The case in effect challenged the 'reasonable tolerability' test which was often used to argue that claimants could reasonably be expected to tolerate being discreet about their sexual identity in order to avoid persecution and thus, their application would be deemed as unsuccessful. However, the Supreme Court in this case, unanimously agreed that the men should not be returned to their home countries and expected to conceal their sexuality (Wessels 2012). This judgment introduced a new approach to be followed by tribunals which rejected the principle that LGBT people should participate in their own protection (Aitken & Smallwood 2011; Wessels 2011).

Whilst this decision was largely welcome, legal debates around sexuality and law remain an on-going and contentious issue. For example, in 2012, Hathaway and Popjoy criticised this current legal interpretations as used by the UK and Australian courts as '*inherently problematic*' (Hathaway and Popjoy, 2012, p.326). They argued that the HJ (Iran) & HT (Cameroon) judgement was:

⁴¹ Arbitrary and inconsistent interpretations of refugee claims regarding LGBT individuals in Australia, the United States of America and several European countries influenced the call for greater legal clarity from UNHCR.

⁴² HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon) v. Secretary of State for the Home Department, [2010] UKSC 31, United Kingdom: Supreme Court, 7 July 2010.

Too conservative, in that it is insufficiently attentive to the endogenous harms that follow from having continually to mask one's true identity. It is also too liberal, in that it fails to interrogate the extant scope of 'sexual orientation' as a protected interest to determine when there is a duty to protect on the basis of associated activities, rather than simply as a function of identity per se. (Hathaway and Popjoy, 2012, p.335-6).

Their critique focused on concerns that this new interpretation of sexuality cases was a departure '*in critical ways from the refugee law doctrine*' (Hathaway and Popjoy, 2012, p.331). A viewpoint which Millbank (2012) strongly counters as she argues their position is '*wrong in principle and dangerous in practice*' (p.501). Here Millbank's (2012) scholarly rebuttal warned that it is not reasonable to expect individuals to live closeted lives despite Hathaway and Popjoy (2012) believing this action would not result in their persecution (Goodman 2012).

The significance of HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon) also influenced the then UK Border Agency to produce its own guidelines for its staff to provide further assistance on how to approach and consider claims based on an individual's sexuality (UK Border Agency 2010). This document (the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Guidelines) aimed to provide clear guidance on the following issues:

- a) how to approach consideration of asylum claims made on the basis of sexual orientation;
- b) the additional considerations decision-makers should have in mind when assessing claims for asylum that could include issues to do with sexual orientation;
- c) how to take sexual orientation issues into account when looking at the persecution experienced and whether there has been a failure of state protection;
- d) how to objectively consider future fear within the legal, political and social context of the country of origin.

(UK Border Agency, 2010b, p.2)

Although this is a notable positive step in trying to address and acknowledge some of the difficulties associated with asylum claims based on a person's sexuality in the UK⁴³, NGOs and campaigners remain apprehensive regarding the implementation of these guidelines⁴⁴ (Stuart, 2012). For example, in 2013 the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration group (UKLGIG) reported that whilst they had witnessed improvements in the processing of LGBT cases since 2010, *'old problems are creeping back in, with some case workers focusing on sexual practice during the substantive interviews and considering inappropriate material'* (UKLGIG 2013p.31). Similarly, Cowen, et al (2011) concluded:

What is more important is how far such guidance can go to actually transform practice on the frontline. We are, for example, concerned to hear anecdotally of a growing number of cases, both in Scotland and other parts of the UK where claims are being turned down because the UKBA do not believe that a woman is a lesbian

(Cowen et al. 2011p.100).

In light of such growing criticisms, the UK Home Secretary (in March 2014) ordered a review into how gay asylum cases are dealt with in the UK and stated that *'it was disappointing ...to discover that we may not have followed our guidance in at least one case'* (Press Association 2014).

2.5.1 Eliciting Evidence

The importance of presenting sufficient evidence and how this is assessed remains a dominant strand in research on LGBT asylum claims (Miles 2010; Stuart 2012a; House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2013; UKLGIG 2013). For example, whilst presenting oral evidence at the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2013,⁴⁵ Alison Harvey⁴⁶ stated that in the UK increasing emphasis is being placed on proving a

⁴³ This report also raises concerns over the treatment of transgender cases.

⁴⁴ See The Liberal Democrats response: <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/03/27/lib-dems-lgbt-group-urges-for-better-training-of-home-office-lgbt-asylum-caseworkers/> [accessed 09.06.13].

⁴⁵ Alison Harvey, Oral Evidence taken before the Home Affairs Committee July 2, 2013, Q 286.

⁴⁶ Legal Director for Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (ILPA).

person's sexuality without knowing what evidence satisfies the judgement of the Home Office. Similarly, Barrister S. Chelvan⁴⁷ also presented evidence and detailed how, in these circumstances, LGBT claimants are now going to extreme lengths to 'prove' their sexuality which includes submitting photographic and video evidence of 'private' sexual activities to convince decision-makers of their sexual orientation.⁴⁸

The private nature of sexuality makes it a difficult area to evidence within the parameters of the judicial process (Millbank 2003; Braziel 2008; LaViolette 2009a). As noted earlier, this is especially complicated by the fact that individuals may hide their sexuality from friends, family, the community, the police and medical establishments (Jordan 2011). Limited information regarding hate crimes and discrimination experienced by LGBT groups is frequently absent from country of origin reports and a number of commentators have noted that this missing information is often interpreted by decision-makers to mean a lack of threat (Gray 2010; Bach 2013; UKLGIG 2013). Maklin (1998) also supports these arguments by stating how background reports rarely provide the detail needed and do not cover the complex intersections between homosexuality, persecution, legal, political, religious and familial spaces.

It is in this context that Berg and Milbank (2009) argue that claiming asylum on the grounds of one's sexual orientation means that their personal testimonies become central tenets of their application and are thus heavily scrutinised. This issue is also discussed by McGhee (2000), who examined the requirements, practical difficulties and the 'production of truth' within Ioan Vracui's case (a gay male Romanian asylum seeker).⁴⁹ This case is interesting because it exemplifies the relationship between law and sexual identity, and illustrates the assumptions which often form part of this process. McGhee (2000) argued that Ioan's self-declaration of his own sexual identity was disqualified in favour of professional commentary and medical and psychiatric assessments. For instance in this case, requests were made by immigration officials for medical examinations to authenticate acts of 'sodomy' and for psychiatric confirmation. McGhee (2000) highlighted how these professional assessments were

⁴⁷ No. 5 Chambers.

⁴⁸ See House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2013) p.143.

⁴⁹ The evidence provided in this article is based on a report submitted in Ioan Vracui's second IAT hearing on the 28th April 1995.

presented in court and argued that they were considered more ‘truthful’ than Ioan’s own personal accounts. His analysis indicates the fluctuating relationship between ‘narratives’ and ‘evidence’ and how the legal asylum process regards sexual orientation as something which can be defined and proven, as well as medically and psychologically verified. Similarly, in Wessels’ (2011) critique of LGBT cases in the UK she identifies the difficulty with the production of both narrative and objective evidence is the basing of assessments on the ‘*ignorance or (potentially subconscious) heterosexual biases*’ (p.46) of decision-makers who have preconceived ideas of who and what they assume a homosexual to be and to look like. These debates are explored in more detail in Chapters Five to Seven.

2.6 Summary

In this chapter I have reviewed academic debates regarding refugee women, sexual violence, refugee law and sexuality that provide a context for this thesis. Sexuality and seeking asylum remains a complicated area in refugee law and criticisms that courts interpret law too restrictively continue to surface. This has led to legal professionals, NGOs, academics and campaigners alike raising concerns that lesbians and gay men are frequently not accessing the international protection they need. Of significant concern to this study are the direct views of lesbians navigating this legal process; their perspectives provide an invaluable insight into how they interpret seeking asylum and how this process affects their sexual identity and subjectivity (all these topics are explored further in Chapters Five to Seven). This thesis will interrogate these issues through the theoretical frameworks discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Literature Review: Theorizing Gender and Sexuality

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore academic debates on gender and sexuality, establishing the underpinning theoretical terminology that I will draw on in the thesis. In this research I work with an understanding of gender and sexuality as fluid, fraught, open to (re)interpretation, 'situationally variable' and intersecting (Stanley & Wise 1983; Rahman & Jackson 2010). The first section of this chapter will focus on gender, including an explanation of how gender is defined and interpreted for this research. Specific attention is paid to the work of Judith Butler (1990, 2004, 2006) and her theories around 'performativity', 'derealisation' and an understanding of what constitutes a 'livable life,' – all ideas employed in the data analysis as presented in Chapters Five to Seven. The chapter then engages with the work of Michel Foucault (1978, 1979) and in particular his writings on 'power', 'knowledge and truth', 'sexuality' and the 'docile body'. The second section of this chapter charts the influence of Queer theory in understanding the move away from categorisation and labels and engages with current work on queer temporality which informs my analysis. Throughout the thesis, public expressions of sexual identity and the more private issue of sexual subjectivity are explored in relation to the participants' experiences. I therefore, explain how I am using these terms and how this relates to wider arguments within the academic study of sexuality. Finally, this chapter examines key terms employed in the analysis including sexuality as a migratory issue as well as exploring compulsory heterosexuality and internalised negativity.

3.2 Gender

My starting point for this research is a definition of gender. Here I found the work by Stevi Jackson (2006) particularly helpful as she captures the subtlety and sophistication of contemporary gender and sexuality studies. :

Gender ... encompasses the division or distinction between women and men, female and male, these binary categories themselves and the content of those categories – the characteristics and identities embodied through membership of them. Gender is thus a social division and a cultural distinction, given meaning and substance in the everyday actions, interactions and subjective interpretations through which it is lived (p.106).

This approach learned the lessons of second wave feminism which sought to separate sex and gender analytically, in pursuit of a politics and method for addressing the ways in which natural difference was turned into social oppression (Oakley 1972). The social constructionism of the 'gendering process' dominated scholarly accounts and still remains a key theoretical strand. For example, for Gagnon and Simon (2005) gender and the process of gendering is something that occurs in early childhood. They argue that as soon as a child's sex is announced (based on their anatomy) children's gender becomes structured through cultural patterns which determine appropriate behaviours and actions. For Jackson (2006) gender is one of the first social categories any child learns and identifies with. How one's gender identity changes and fluctuates through adolescence and adulthood however, including the assumptions and meanings associated with gender categories, identity, sexuality and the sexual self is often subject to revisions and reinterpretations (Rahman & Jackson 2010).

3.2.1 Gender, Performativity and the Body

The sex/gender distinction was however disrupted by Judith Butler's notion of identity, first formulated in *Gender Trouble* (1990), and then expounded upon in *Bodies That Matter* (1992). The publication of *Gender Trouble* (1990) was a catalyst in reshaping theoretical understandings of gender, identity and the sexed body. By drawing on and

critiquing other leading scholars in the field of gender and sexuality studies, Butler (1990) provided a theoretical insight into the cultural context and complexity of identity formulation that argued against the idea that sex was natural and gender was cultural, proposing instead the idea of a discursively produced sex/gender binary that is subject to inconsistency, contradiction and instability (Chinn 1997; Salih 2002). Butler offered an influential analysis in which she argued that gender is constructed by society's sex/gender matrix, which only allows certain sex and gender identities to form under particular conditions of permissibility. In this context, a body is 'girded' from childhood and then 'womanised' as an adult by a nexus of ideologies operating through discursive statements to produce a specific identity of a girl or a woman.

Butler draws on the work of de Beauvoir and her claim that '*one is not born but rather becomes a woman*' (1948, p.281). In this sense, gender is not stable but instead is tenuously established and time specific (Butler 1988). This assertion is extended by the suggestion that gender is something we *do* rather than something we *are*, thus we *do* gender through repeated actions which create the illusion that they have always existed (Sullivan 2003). In this context, gender does not essentially exist, it is not a natural attribute or an innate way of being, but rather gender is performative and individual gestures are learned and repeated over time. Therefore as gender is performed in and over a woman's body she experiences her gender identity as involuntary and expressive. As performativity involves both speech and acts it influences the construction of how people represent themselves, how they are seen and heard and how their identity is constructed and (re)interpreted. This remains a key strand of thought, especially within the field of gender and sexuality. For example, Ward and Winstanley (2005) argue, the role of 'coming out' is a performative act which involves both finding the 'right words' and choosing who to tell and how to respond to the reactions of others. As this act is repeatedly performed, it also becomes open to repetition as the individual takes up their subject position. For Esterberg (1996) performativity is closely associated with the role of performance which many LGBT individuals constantly navigate and are subject to. She stresses that many lesbians enjoy the public performance associated with their sexuality as this is often used to form visual and interactive cues to be recognised by other lesbians. It should be noted

however that Esterberg's (1996) performance does differ from Butler's performativity as for Esterberg (1996) the 'performance' is more deliberate and voluntary.

The idea that sex/gender is performed is useful and has relevance for this doctoral study as lesbian asylum seekers are frequently expected to 'perform' and mimic their sexuality in order that their sexuality be 'believed.' Taking the above into account, to be a lesbian depends upon a gender performance which partly challenges the pre-defined dominant discourse of heterosexuality and femininity. For this thesis I am interested in how individual women negotiate these demands, often alone in public and within a legal gaze.

In addition, for this study I am keen to explore whose voice is heard, whose voice is prioritised and whose voice is believed. Here, Butler's *Precious Life* (2006) and *Undoing Gender* (2004) have resonance as these texts focus on the representation and the 'voicelessness' of certain individuals as she asks '*whose lives counts as lives*', '*who is mourned*' and '*what makes for a livable life*'? (2006). Her analysis around violence, bodies that have experienced violence and lives that are '*considered unreal*' as well as the process of '*derealisation*' is of particular interest to me. Butler states that the body is a site of '*morality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to the touch, and to violence*' (2006, p.26). Whilst acknowledging that individuals are vulnerable to violence, she stresses that the process of *derealisation*, through discourse and omission, means that some violence is acknowledged and represented, yet for others their violence or death '*is not worth a note. It is already the unburied, if not the unburiable* (2006, p.34). Although her essays focus upon political Othering⁵⁰, her claims that some individuals are '*ungrievable*' is an issue which can be considered in relation to the violence that lesbian asylum seekers report (explored more in Chapter Five). This study seeks to hear lesbian asylum seekers' stories of violence, reflecting on how the violence inflicted on their bodies is perceived within the legal process within which they are judged. I also use Butler to think through the ways that bodies that have experienced violence or have been ostracised are able to '*remake the human*', to re(construct) a new life, new values and

⁵⁰ In *Precarious Lives* (2006) Butler mainly referred to the 'un-mourned' and 'un-grievable' in relation to 'causalities of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, individuals held in Guantanamo Bay and the rising criminalisation of Muslims and Islamophobia post September 11th 2001'.

a new morality, in order to strive for a livable life. Here Butler elaborates her early theoretical work to deconstruct and reveal the human subject as constituted through discourse and performance by engaging with the capacity of human agency in the recreation and reassertion of the self. How participants do this, the intricacies associated with *remaking the human* and the challenges, contentions and complexities therein are explored in Chapter Seven.

3.3 Power, Knowledge, the Body and Sexuality

Michel Foucault's work developed in *History of Sexuality* (1978) and *Discipline and Punish* (1979) ⁵¹are also useful resources for thinking about the way in which the body of the lesbian is constituted in the asylum seeking process. For Foucault, power underpins sexuality, knowledge and the construction of truth as '*power is everywhere not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere*' (Foucault 1978p.93). The mechanisms and effects of power are embedded within concepts of knowledge and truth which are produced through discourse and are both inextricably linked, as knowledge both reinforces and exercises power (Rouse 2005; Ennis 2008). His work reveals (1979) ⁵² how power infuses the 'legal gaze' which is used by institutions to require individuals to act in a 'normalised' and 'desired' way and to self-regulate behaviour. He refers to this as the 'docile body'; a body which '*may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved... this docile body can only be achieved through a strict regiment of disciplinary acts*' (1978, p.136). The 'docile body' also represents how individuals internalise the unequal 'legal gaze' and how they are subject to and alter their actions as they succumb to disciplinary power and social expectations. Like disciplinary power, bio-power is also considered to be productive, to influence life, to regulate the body and to normalise the psychological and the social (Ojankas, 2005).

In this project I am interested in how institutions (including the political and judicial) and practices (such as observing, judging and validating) establish a normative

⁵¹ Foucault focused his work on prisons although this research focuses on seeking asylum

⁵² Here Foucault (1979) refers to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon as a model for a 'modern' prison.

framework and diffuse knowledge. For Foucault (1978, 1979), knowledge and power simultaneously operate through institutional apparatuses in specific settings to help regulate the conduct of others (Hall 2001). It is here where he also talks of the important role of language (which is culturally and historically specific) in perpetuating and expressing discourse (Hestad 2008). Therefore 'truth' is always invented and discursively produced in a specific moment of time, and knowledge is what is thought to be true (Maeder 2002). I use this insight to explore the construction of 'truth' and 'knowledge' in the accounts of asylum seeking women, including what is the 'truth', whose narratives are considered 'truthful', how language is used to interrogate and determine the 'truth', what is knowledge and how knowledge is represented (and evidenced).

Foucault's work also provides tools for understanding how sexuality is socially constructed and regulated through discourse, the relationship between sexuality, knowledge and truth are significant themes (Dollimore 1991; Visker 1995). Again I draw on these ideas to explore the demands placed on the women in this study who in seeking protection on the basis of their sexual orientation were faced with the requirement to evidence their sexuality, being subject to scrutiny and observation within judicial parameters.

3.4 Queer Theory

The work of Butler and Foucault, which problematises fixed and innate identities, has been heralded as founding the field of Queer theory (Spargo 1999; Wilchins 2004). Queer theory, a collection of scholarly thought and political resistance which emerged during the 1990s. As Queer theory is frequently linked to literature on homophobic discourses, sexualities past and present and heteronormativity, it has substantial intellectual relevance to this thesis (Spargo 1999). Queer theory is largely based on post-structuralist epistemological understandings and subsequently rejects essentialist ideas around sexuality and gender and situates identity as multiple and fragmented (Ward & Winstanley 2005). 'Queer' and Queer theory have numerous meanings and

consequently are often difficult to define (Gamson 1996; Sullivan 2003). Halperin (1995) describes queer as:

Whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers, It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative (p.62)

and for Jagose (1996), *Queer itself can have neither a fundamental logic, nor a consistent set of characteristics'* (p.96).

Stein and Plummer (1996) helpfully chart the significant hallmarks of Queer theory which includes its ability to conceptualise sexuality within paradigms of power; an exploration of the problematical relationship with gender and sexual categories; a rejection of anti-assimilation⁵³ politics and an ability to interrogate issues often omitted from works on sexuality. As an academic strategy, Queer theory scrutinises the relationship between sexual identity, sexual desire and sexual behaviour (Wilton 1995). Queer theory is also notable for its intellectual examination of the label 'deviant'⁵⁴ and its aims to challenge the knowledge regimes of sexuality as well as heterosexual and homosexual binaries (Stein & Plummer 1996; Spargo 1999; Valocchi 2005).

Queer theory prioritises the idea that identity is not fixed but instead fluid and intersectional and thus has notable correlation with intersectionality which theorises the complex construction of identity (Sullivan 2003). Scholars of intersectionality explore and extrapolate the interrelationship between gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity and disability in order to recognise the different ontological positions and oppressions of women (Yuval-Davis 2006). As a theoretical strand it has offered an insight into the intricacy of power relations and has challenged common assumptions

⁵³ Anti-assimilationists are often associated with radical queer thought. Such theories critique the visibility of queer individuals and question the very foundation of privileged heterosexual culture.

⁵⁴ The label 'deviant' was often used to describe other sexual minorities such as bisexuals, sadomasochists, transsexual, transgender and intersex people and their sexual 'deviant' desires.

about the homogenous category of 'woman' (Brah & Phoenix 2013). For McCall (2005), *'intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields has made so far'* (p.1771).

The importance of intersectionality can be seen in the work of Queer scholars. For example Adams (2006) explores the interrelationship of her own sexual and religious identities when she states: *'when I am a Christian I am a queer! And when I am queer, I am a Christian!'* (p.169). Similarly, McDermot (2010) and Taylor (2007) both scrutinise the significance of social class and place on the construction of intimate life and sexual identity.

This study also draws and expands upon the recent body of work around queer temporality and in particular theories around queer time, queer space and the desire for a queer life. For Halberstam (2005) queer time is: *'a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance'* (p.4). In this context, how queer life is constructed and its opposition (at least in part) to heteronormative values means that being queer moves beyond seeing sexuality and sexual desires but instead focuses on queer as a way of life, as a way of owning spaces, belonging, communities, history and a presence (Halberstam 2005; Colebrook 2011; Dean 2011). How lesbian asylum seekers strive for a queer life in the UK, how their time is used (and queered) and the creation of queer spaces and belonging is developed further in Chapter Seven.

The section below will focus on the following themes within Queer theory which form important intellectual strands in this study, namely: Sexual identity and sexual subjectivity. These areas are interrogated throughout this thesis as they permeate the experiences of lesbians seeking international protection in the UK.

3.5 Sexual Identity

There have been significant changes regarding how sexual identity has been recognised and theorised since the late 1960s. For Weeks (1977) in the Global North, sexuality has moved from being understood as an immoral and 'deviant' act practiced only by the sexually perverted and people with mental illnesses, to a model of choice and diversity. His work has chronicled how gay men and lesbians were once regarded as easily identifiable by their physical appearance⁵⁵ as well as being in need of psychiatric help (Weeks 1977; Patton 2010). Mary McIntosh (1968) also notes this historical shift when she writes about when the 'homosexual' was perceived as a person and not just somebody who 'did' homosexual acts. This is also reiterated by Plummer (1981) who explains: *'until the 1970s, to talk of becoming a homosexual was to talk of etiological factors; chromosomes and hereditary, strong mothers and weak fathers, oedipal failure and faulty conditioning'*(p.93). A proliferation of academic literature from the 1970s has helped to infiltrate current mainstream knowledge and political activism, and to change awareness of the social context and individual interpretations of sexuality and sexual identity (Plummer 1992).

Within these debates sexual identity emerged as, and remains, a key and fraught concept. Unlike other fields of personal identity such as race, religion and ethnicity, individuals are not reared in 'homosexual communities' and consequently navigate the process of forming their sexual identity alone (Rosario 2006). Unlike heterosexuals, who rarely have reason to explain or rationalise their sexuality to others, how LGBT individuals construct, brandish and (re)interpret their sexual identity as personal statements of individual belonging has been an area of sociological interest and tension for many years (Weeks 1987; Cox 1996; Rosario 2006).

The binary notions of a fixed heterosexual and homosexual identity which frequented discussions in the 1970s and 1980s have largely been superseded by more nuanced understandings (Weeks 1987; Plummer 1992; Rosario 2006). Questions of how individual sexual identity is deeply embedded within personal meanings, paradoxical interpretations, social realities, perceptions of (un)belonging and structures of power

⁵⁵ This includes observational biological differences in the shape of anatomy between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

have emerged (Weeks 2003; Rosario 2006; McDermott 2010). Sexual identity for gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex and transgender individuals invokes (re)interpretations of self-agency and self-expression which fluctuate over time and are continually (re)negotiated.

In this context, (re)creating and navigating a lesbian identity is a complex and often troubled process. For Wilton (1995) the term 'lesbian' itself is embedded within moral, political, social and judicial paradigms which are fraught with tensions and contradictions and remain without consensus. Therefore to self-identify with this term involves an implicit and explicit consideration of personal meanings, a disassembling of social and personal labels and a negotiation of a desired social visibility (Jenness 1992; Cox 1996; Esterberg 1997). For Jenness (1992), this also involves a complex 'detypification process' which women individually traverse as they locate and embrace the social label of 'lesbian' and their compatibility with this. Being defined as 'lesbian' or 'gay' can also be a socially and personally problematic space of denial, exclusion and rejection (Weeks 2003; Taylor 2007; McDermott 2010). This can be further complicated by differences between personal interpretations, social codes, social assumptions and stereotypes. For instance, perceptions that a lesbian identity is predominantly underpinned by the 'gay scene' and an openly 'out' public identity, ignores private interpretations, the intersections of multiple identities and individual choices of concealment (Valentine 1993).

These debates are pertinent to my study because this thesis explores how sexual identities, along with a private and more subjective sexual subjectivity, are constructed and narrated through the asylum process. For this research I regard women's sexual identity as being located around how they socially and publicly perceive themselves. This includes how sexual identity is used to establish commonality and belonging, especially in times of spatial, cultural, emotional and legal transitions. I also use the term sexual identity to encompass people's public recognition of their sexual orientation within socially and legally defined public spaces. I am interested in how sexual identity is constructed and performed whilst seeking asylum, and pay particular attention to the language women use, the development of their new sexual self-consciousness and their public identity as a 'lesbian asylum seeker'.

This thesis refers to both sexual identity and sexual subjectivity as distinct but coexisting and interrelated concepts. The section below will discuss my interpretations of sexual subjectivity and its relevance to this work.

3.5.1 Sexual Subjectivity and the Sexual Self

Academic debates on sexual subjectivity are more limited than writings on sexual identity. Throughout my thesis I use the term 'sexual subjectivity' to refer to the private relationship individuals have with their own sexual orientation (Plante 2007). This includes the private sense of self, moral beliefs, articulations and individual emotions which constitute how people see themselves as sexually subjective beings. Therefore, individual interpretations of sexual agency, desires, private thoughts, feelings and meanings are all explored in this study to understand women's sexual subjectivity. This concept also incorporates self-reflections on the sexual body, sexual self-esteem and self-entitlement to sexual desires, pleasures and citizenship (Plante 2007; Boislard P & Zimmer-Gembeck 2011). This aspect is particularly important to my research because all the women I interviewed had experienced physical and sexual violence and migrated from communities which they believe persecuted them because of their sexual orientation. Consequently, how these difficult experiences affect women's own personal internalisations and sexual subjectivity is of interest. Focusing on the broader more private and intimate understanding of women's sexual subjectivity is also important in understanding how navigating the UK asylum process affected women's own recognition and acceptance of their sexuality.

My use of the terms sexual identity and subjectivity may appear to stand in tension with my embrace of a Queer theory approach which troubles the stability of such categories whilst also questioning ideas of internal as distinct from external worlds. Whilst I recognise this contradiction, I suggest that these terms have analytic salience, capturing the complex process that lesbian asylum seekers must engage with as they negotiate the demand to produce 'convincing' identities for public scrutiny while sharing with the interviewer private, contradictory and emotional narratives. The creation and analysis of 'sexual stories', both those demanded by the asylum process

and those invited by me, the interviewer, provides a conceptual bridge between a queer theoretical framework and an interactionist methodology and epistemology. How women's private perspectives are communicated through their sexual stories is of great interest to me, including how their sexual experiences are remembered and articulated. By using the framework of the production and consumption of sexual stories (as expanded on in Chapter Four) the intersections between lesbian asylum seekers 'public' sexual identity and their 'private' sexual subjectivity can be a fruitful site for analysis.

3.6 Sexuality as a Migration Issue

The term 'queer diaspora' has been used to theorise the movement of non-heterosexual individuals (Binnie 2004; La Fountain-Stokes 2005). Unlike other migratory groups, the movement of lesbian, gay and transgender people is frequently associated with a desire to find and express a self-identity and affirm a sense of 'cultural belonging'. For example, across the Global North many self-identified homosexual, bisexual and transgender people have moved to certain cities perceived to be open and to celebrate and endorse 'gay rights' and associated life-styles (Binnie 2004; Braziel 2008).⁵⁶ Over the last 40 years, cities have witnessed the politicisation of gay rights, the commercialism of the 'pink pound' and the mainstreaming of gay equality and civil partnerships and marriage within popular culture (Braziel 2008; Peel 2008). This has contributed to the proliferation of 'gay scenes' and bars and celebratory parades such as 'Pride' and the 'Mardi Gras' being part of mainstream public spaces in many urban centres (Markwell 2002; Kates 2011).

Individual journeys of 'self-discovery' and sexual identity are also closely associated with physical migration. The necessity to travel has, for some, formed a crucial part of their autobiographical accounts. Key narratives on sexuality, sexual identity and 'coming out' are frequently associated with moving from repressive families or societies towards locations which celebrate sexual diversity (Davies & Rentzel 1993;

⁵⁶ For example, cities such as San Francisco, New York, Sydney, London, Brighton, Berlin and Amsterdam have attracted global attention for their sexual openness, promotion of gay rights, laws and sexual liberalism.

Cant 1997; Dank 1998). The sense of belonging which many individuals acquired by meeting other LGBT people, going to gay bars and being part of a 'gay scene' has been well documented (Watney 1995; Achilles 1998; Markwell 2002; Braziel 2008). For Watney (1995) for example, queer relief, identification and a 'sense of home', can only be found in a 'local gay bar.' Although, Watney's perception is somewhat oversimplistic and offers a monolithic interpretation of a gay identity, his work adds to a significant amount of literature stressing the importance of a safe space, alongside the personal and physical journey of 'self-discovery' and 'belonging' (Cant 1997; Warren 1998; Valentine 2003; Binnie 2004). These issues are also addressed by Krieger (1998), who writes of the importance of a 'lesbian community' in providing women with a collective identity, solidarity, comfort and security.

Research on the forced migration of individuals on the grounds of their sexual orientation is however more limited. This migration is less of a journey of self-identity, expression and choice and more often about the necessity for survival and safety (Luirink 1998). In many countries, consenting same-sex relationships and the formation of any sexual identity other than the heterosexual norm can be a life-threatening experience for individuals and their families (Ungar 2000; Aken'Ova 2010). To avoid suspicion and to conform to social pressures, sexual minorities may enter, or are forced into, heterosexual relationships and marriages (Sanei 2010). Consequently, as a result of fear, stigma and acute unhappiness, many lesbians and gay men move or flee international borders to places of perceived safety (Jansen & Spijkerboer 2011). This strand is particularly important and politically polarising as many countries across the Global South are taking an increasingly hard-line stance against same-sex relationships (Amnesty International 2013). Both sexuality studies and Queer theory have primarily focused their academic attention in the Global North and consequently, issues faced by lesbians in the South have frequently been side-lined. This thesis addresses some of these gaps by prioritising this experience within the context of seeking international protection in the UK.

3.6.1 Compulsory Heterosexuality and Post-Colonial Context

Adrienne Rich's (1981) work on compulsory heterosexuality is influential in academic debates on sexuality and is still widely cited within Queer theory and sexuality studies. Rich highlighted the oppression of women, the dominance of heterosexuality as well as the exclusion and demonisation of lesbians, stating that compulsory 'heterosexuality', 'hetero-sexist' or 'hetero-normative' ideologies are established from childhood and reinforced through a range of social spaces and political, cultural and class structures (Rich 1981; Pitman 1999). This perspective is also taken up by Boyce (2008) as he explores the role of compulsory heterosexuality in India, and in particular how social codes (especially as part of the kinship and caste system) destroy a 'legitimate space' for an alternative sexuality. He argues, in this social, political and cultural context, that lesbian experience is problematised against masculine hegemony. Other scholars from the Global South have also written about how notions of 'compulsory heterosexuality' are continually reinforced through the media, political discourse, literature and popular culture. For example Salo et al (2010) writes of how homosexuality is framed as a threat to heterosexuality and social and economic progress in townships in Cape Town, South Africa. Similarly, La Font (2009) stresses that 'compulsory heterosexuality' is simultaneously promoted alongside the hatred, inferiority and 'perverse nature' of LGBT people in Jamaica. He adds that living within such strict binary structures warrants the punishment of homosexuals and the promotion of 'buggery laws'⁵⁷ to enable the protection and preservation of the heterosexual norm (Gaskins Jr 2013). Comparably in Muslim countries homosexuality is considered 'un-Islamic' and a source of condemnation and stigma. Any mention of homosexuality is usually regarded as immoral and taboo as it contradicts religious, cultural and ideologically reinforced beliefs (Altman 1996; Rajabali et al. 2008). This leads Altman (1996) to argue that homosexual lovers in such circumstances will always be 'without social context', without social understanding or recognition, and that their relationship will end in tragedy.

⁵⁷ Jamaica's Buggery law infers that bestiality and sodomy are a common law offence and carries up to a 10 year prison sentence for men

As a result of these strict moral codes, the fixed negative perceptions of homosexuality in much of the Global South impacts on the lives of LGBT people, and in particular on their access to information and health programmes (Johnson 2007). Concerns that LGBT people are without essential information (particularly on HIV/AIDS) have contributed to accusations that international development theory and practice has marginalised homosexuality by propelling and only promoting hetero-normative ideals (Khanna 2007; Itaborahy 2012). Jolly (2000) takes this further as she calls for Gender and Development (GAD) theory to be 'queered.' She argues that the resistance to engaging in queer debates in international development leaves lesbian women and gay men in the Global South continually neglected and at risk.

For individual gay men, lesbians and bisexual people, navigating a personal sexual identity in the Global South is a difficult process which affects their sense of purpose, self-expression and belonging. For example, Sinfield (1997) argues that the experiences of Tamil women in same-sex relationships differentiates vastly with the 'dyke movement' in America as Tamil women fail to be validated as part of a collective identity and struggle due to the gendered expectations placed on them. The realisation of 'difference' in the Global South has frequently been described as troubled times of isolation, fear and alienation (Anastas 1998; Flowers & Buston 2001; Mason 2002). Laurinks (1998) talks of how identifying as a homosexual in southern Africa leaves people perpetually isolated, marginalised and facing violence, abuse and intimidation (this is explored in more detail in Chapters Three and Four). Consequently, fraught relationships develop between people's social and cultural norms and their own sexual identity, sexual agency and self-esteem. Personal experiences of deficiency and shame frequently become reproduced as people struggle with their inferior status, and to live with ridicule, derision and contempt (Kaufman & Raphael 1996). This leaves many scholars to argue that living in such circumstances makes forming a positive sexual identity difficult and often results in the onset of mental health problems, depression and suicidal tendencies (O'Connor 1994; Safren & Heimberg 1999; Dragowski et al. 2011)

Within academic debates, the terms 'internalised homophobia' or 'homo-negativity' have been associated with how individuals internalise the negative social and cultural

messages imposed on their own 'other' identity (Allen & Oleson 1999; Rosser et al. 2008a; Frost 2009). The problematic nature of social negativity has also been associated with people's inability to form and sustain intimate relationships, increased sexual anxieties (including having a negative body image) and heightened personal remoteness (Pitman 1999; Frost 2009). Subsequently, this can impact on an individual's ability to discuss and disclose their same-sex experiences or desires, to confide in family, friends and professionals, and to be comfortable within their own social networks (Sophie 1987). Indicative of the complexity of internal constructions of the self, processes of internalised homophobia/negativity are not linear, and may emerge in varying degrees in different situations, times, relationships and circumstances. These discussions are important to this thesis because there is limited academic debate which explores the relationship between internalised homophobia, sexual identity, private sexual subjectivity, spatial, legal and emotional transitions and the construction of sexual stories during the asylum process.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the theoretical resources that I will draw on in this study (including the work of Butler and Foucault (and Queer theory inspired by them) as well as outlining relevant contemporary academic debates on sexuality and migration. The women in this study have all fled countries or communities in which homosexuality is deemed as immoral, un-Islamic or illegal and had faced the challenge of 'proving' their sexual orientation. Throughout the thesis I will return to questions framed in this chapter asking how is truth defined and performed?' 'what makes a livable life? what is the impact of living under the legal gaze? and does power in-balances create 'docile bodies'?

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Introduction: My Study

My study explores the intricacies of navigating the UK asylum process from the perspectives of eleven women from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East. This includes examining how they negotiated legal barriers and how the asylum process has impacted upon their sexual identities and subjectivities. By drawing on women's direct accounts, I explore the ways in which their experiences of violence are internalised, evaluated and disclosed, as well as how their past experiences and desires for self-expression, shape their current perceptions.

This chapter begins by outlining the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin this thesis. This includes discussing how my epistemological stance has influenced my use of the narrative and 'telling sexual stories' approach. I then discuss the relevance of the 'personal experience' narrative, 'coming out' and the significance of 'enforced narratives' that are demanded by the legal asylum process. Having established the overall methodological orientation of the study, I then outline the research design, including my decision to conduct three interviews with each participant and the use of a range of prompts, including vignettes and timelines, in order to collect the stories. This chapter then moves to review the data analysis process and discusses how I combined a thematic analysis along with the voice centred relational method. At the end of this chapter I reflect upon the ethical and logistical issues which arose from the research process. In this section, I pay particular attention to the challenges of researching such traumatic experiences and the consequences of this, including for the well-being of the researcher.

4.2 Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

This research is situated within an idealist ontological position, which deconstructs how individuals represent and understand their external world (Blaikie 2008). Being influenced by an idealist framework means that this study is informed by the belief that social reality is not an externally fixed entity waiting to be discovered, but instead,

a concept which is constructed and continually interpreted and reinterpreted by individuals. My thesis is guided by the position that every individual has different, fluid interpretations and perceptions of social reality and truth. However, within this context how individual perceptions are shaped by structural constraints such as the asylum process is of central importance. The rigid procedures and formalities of this legal process provide set regulations which individuals have to continually navigate and which become part of their lived experiences. These constraints can shape people's daily routines, influence decisions and limit their interactions. My thesis is therefore framed by the theoretical assumption that individual interpretations of their social worlds are affected by both structural factors such as culture, interactions and language, as well as by personal interpretations and agency (Charon 2001; Burr 2003). In line with this ontological position, my research adopts an anti-essentialist stance and is influenced by social constructionist and interpretivist, most notably interactionist, epistemological positions. I am interested in how the knowledge of an individual's social world is shaped and continually negotiated (Charon 2001; Burr 2003). The view that all knowledge is socially constructed, personal and interpreted by each individual is central to my work (Denzin 1989; Burr 2003). Unlike positivist research, my study represents no established certainties and truths, only the perspectives of the women I interviewed at a particular moment in time (Charon 2001).

4.3 The Narrative and 'Telling Stories' Approach

The ontological and epistemological assumptions which underpin this study have influenced my use of narrative and 'story-telling' approaches as a method (Maynard 1994). My interpretation of 'narratives' is framed within broader sociological perspectives, as opposed to linguistic analysis. As such, within this thesis an individual's narrative is considered to reflect their fluctuating attitudes, memories and their individual understandings of their social world. For the purpose of this study, I regard individual narratives to be neither factual, chronological or a fixed account, but rather a temporary perspective (Elliot 2005). For this research, I have used individual narratives as a complex representation of women's lived experience, behaviours and

outlooks. A narrative approach encourages an exploration of how women construct and deconstruct their accounts, how they narrate past and present experiences and how they speak of, and describe their sexual identity and communicate a more private subjectivity.

There are many sociological studies which illustrate how narrative methodologies have been used to explore the intricacies of individual standpoints and to provide valuable knowledge into a diversity of experiences including: divorce (Riessman 1990); sexuality (Plummer 1995); illness (Charmaz 1991); sexualised crime (Scully 1990) and experiences of trauma (Klempner 2000; Skjelsbaek 2006). How people tell their stories, whether through autobiographical accounts, life history, small stories or partial narratives, and how this process shapes individual identity and social interactions, remains a key area in sociological debates (Lawler 2008; Pheonix 2008). For Lawler (2008), narratives are a *“creative assemblage of disparate elements”* (p.16) in which individuals can actively prioritise, place importance upon, and bring unrelated events together around a plot. The significance of identifying, reinventing and reworking key themes and plots is an integral personal process used to explain and validate experiences and actions (Pheonix 2008). For Squire (2008), it is this complex, interpretative framework and the representation of sequential and meaningful experiences which makes the construction and relaying of narratives an important window into people’s lives.

The narration of personal accounts not only represents what story is being told but also provides a vehicle through which people create a sense of identity, strength, and purpose, and come to exercise their own power. However, narratives can also be used to degrade people or deprioritise their credibility, especially alongside the voices of professional ‘experts’ (Plummer 1995). The shifting nature of narratives allows individuals to relay their story and to represent what they assume the interviewer or audience may want to hear. The ways in which narratives are told, the language people use and how they are performed, can all be misinterpreted or misunderstood by the audience, especially when referring to unfamiliar cultural and social contexts (Pheonix 2008; Squire 2008). In addition, as individual stories are political and

embedded within power structures, they are continuously reprioritised and as such, they can never present one truth, only fluid interpretations of events and experiences (Plummer 1995).

An important intellectual resource for me during this thesis has been Ken Plummer's (1995) work on 'telling sexual stories.' Plummer (1995) takes a symbolic interactionist perspective and writes about the 'personal experience narrative', that is '*the tale told by a person about the self*' (p.24). Plummer explores how sexual stories are told, including why some stories are relatively easy to tell and others are emotionally fraught. His account draws attention both to the ways in which stories are produced and the ways in which they are consumed. He places an analytical emphasis on the social, cultural, political and historical context that enables certain stories to be heard and to become public. For Plummer (2013) '*stories have an inner-life – the stories they tell us; and an outer life – a narrative reality that works its way through the wider society and history*' (p.210). It is this representation of an inner and outer life which interests me. Analysing how stories are crafted by the social and legal constraints of the asylum process, how people wrestle between truth, fiction, reality, personal and subjective meanings, and the constant reworking and unfolding between the private and public, provide the theoretical lens through which I analyse women's accounts (Plummer 2013; Salter 2013).

4.3.1 The Importance of 'Coming Out' Narratives

Plummer (1995) locates the 'coming out' narrative within wider debates on intimate 'sexual stories.' Like Harry (1993), Morris (1997), and Ward and Winstanley (2005), Plummer (1995) argues that these stories constitute a distinct feature in the lives and experiences of lesbians and gay men. For Plummer (1995) 'coming out' stories are told and retold to enable people to transform their own secrecy, guilt, pain and crisis points into positive experiences. Such distinct narratives are important as they significantly shape how individuals represent and understand their own personal journey and meanings. These intimate stories however may change over time as people re-narrate their past in relation to the changing demands of the present, including the demands of new audiences and the impact of new experiences (Harry 1993; Plummer 2003).

'Coming out' narratives are also an important public statement and involve the creation of a public sexual identity, from what might be very private and incoherent thoughts. This story telling process can come with certain risks and is not taken lightly (Ward & Winstanley 2005). For example, as soon as individuals disclose and make their sexuality public, this knowledge may become used and misinterpreted by others (Mason 2002). The audience may project their prejudicial attitudes, hostility and stereotypes which can enhance and complicate the 'coming out' process and leave people facing, and deciding whether to publicly confront homophobia (Herek 1999; Ward & Winstanley 2005; Angelides 2009). For others, their 'coming out' stories are thrust upon them, individuals may be publicly 'outed' or certain situations may force this story to be told. Davies (1992) also warns that selecting safe and comfortable spaces and supportive individuals to disclose personal intimate narratives is important but can often be misjudged.

4.3.2 The Enforced Narrative

The question of whether narratives are always voluntary or whether they are, at times, enforced is of particular interest to Steedman (2000). Her historical work on the enforced narratives of those seeking relief from the Parish within the terms of the Poor Law focused attention on the political, economic and institutional settings which shape how narratives are produced. The idea of the enforced narrative has obvious relevance to an investigation of the stories told within the asylum process. The nature of legal procedures dictates that certain questions are asked within a set time frame and for defined outcomes. Consequently, the asylum stories women produce are told for legal judgement and scrutiny as opposed to self-empowerment. Legal professionals decide how and where accounts are told and to whom, as well as which accounts are to be believed. Within this context, women's stories are susceptible to having their meanings, interpretations and language changed in order to meet judicial requirements. Such constraints can influence the motivations for narrating stories and the sense of ownership or betrayal an individual may have towards their narrative(s) (Steedman 2000; Byrne 2003).

The sociology of narrative approaches provides a useful conceptual framework for my thesis. However as part of these discussions, there is little academic understanding of how intimate sexual stories are told during legal procedures and the impact this has on individuals. It is here where this thesis adds a distinct scholarly contribution to knowledge.

4.4 The Research Process

This section will outline the specific research process and strategies undertaken for this doctoral study. I will reflect on why certain approaches were chosen and how the implementation of the research design was shaped. This includes a discussion of how the research sample was identified, including, the use of 'gatekeepers' and the benefit of having knowledge from within the UK asylum sector. I will then discuss the distinct aspects of the qualitative interview process. This includes a reflection upon how the interviews were piloted and the range of prompts which were used to facilitate the individual in-depth interviews.

4.4.1 Identifying the Research Sample

Asylum seekers and refugees are a notoriously transient population within the UK (Bosworth 2008). For example, although many people attend their initial 'screening interview' in the south east, the UK asylum process subsequently disperses many people out of the London area into other cities. Dispersal locations have often been criticised by NGOs for being in economically deprived areas in the UK, including parts of Manchester, Glasgow, Sheffield and Leeds (Hynes 2006). Many asylum seekers who are dispersed and accept accommodation from the Home Office may also be subject to changes in their accommodation at any stage of their asylum application. People who are not dispersed and opt to stay in the London area often seek housing with friends or relatives. This arrangement can leave people frequently moving and/or 'sofa surfing' (Stewart 2005). Alongside this, as part of the asylum process, asylum seekers can be detained at any stage of their application and for any period of time deemed reasonable by the Home Office (BID UK 2011). In addition, some asylum seekers, especially people who may have had their application refused, often choose to live in hiding for fear of deportation by the authorities (Amnesty International 2006). Once

refugee status has been granted, people are instructed to leave their Home Office accommodation and arrange alternatives. The time lapse between leaving Home Office accommodation and arranging other housing can leave some people homeless, placed in temporary accommodation or continually moving until more permanent housing can be arranged (Stewart 2005).

My previous experience of working as a researcher for a UK NGO specialising in working with women asylum seekers was advantageous for my research, especially in identifying a sample. This previous post and my published work had enabled me to establish professional relationships for a number of years with a range of relevant NGOs (see Bennett, 2008). I approached known professionals who worked for NGOs that provided services and ran support groups for lesbian asylum seekers and refugees to act as gatekeepers for this study. Using gatekeepers can however be problematic and can raise several ethical issues. How gatekeepers communicate the research objectives and the perceived relevance of the study, and how they select suitable participants are areas that are often unknown to the researcher (Miller & Bell 2005). The unequal power dynamics between potential participants and gatekeepers also poses questions regarding whether individuals may feel obliged or coerced to participate. Moreover, some studies have revealed that gatekeepers can actively control the promotion of research as well as determining and limiting who participates in each study (Broadhead & Rist 1976; Wanat 2008). Coupled with this, the relationship between the researcher and the gatekeepers can be ill-defined and unpredictable. For my research, attempts were made to acknowledge and mitigate some of these issues. As I had an existing relationship with the gatekeepers there was an understanding of the research interview process, objectives and potential areas of dissemination from the outset. The gatekeepers were aware that they were under no obligation to identify a sample for this study and that their help was voluntary. I also maintained that any potentially interested participants spoke directly to me about any questions they had. This also helped to ensure that participants did not feel coerced by the gatekeeper and were aware of on-going issues around informed consent and their right to withdraw from the research.

I maintained regular correspondence with my gatekeepers who also provided me with useful insights into the current issues and potential barriers which affected the recruitment of my sample. This included information about participants moving location, updates to their cases and episodes of health problems. They also distributed leaflets (see Appendix One) and helped identify participants based on the sample criteria (see Appendix Two)⁵⁸ and their knowledge of the individuals. I also elicited their advice on the interview schedule (see Appendix Three).

4.4.2 The Sample

This study is based on interviews with eleven asylum seeking and refugee women who lived in England. All of the women had claimed asylum in the UK on the grounds of their sexual orientation under the ‘particular social group’ category of the 1951 Refugee Convention. As part of their claim, all of the women reported having experienced homophobic persecution including corrective rape and other forms of sexual and physical violence in their country of origin. For example, two women had been taken to prison by their fathers and experienced physical and sexual abuse whilst detained. Another woman was raped by a senior police officer who promised her protection and to get her and her children out of the country. Six women reported having experienced various public attacks, assaults and sexual violence from strangers. Two women had experienced domestic violence from their heterosexual partners after news of their secret same-sex relationships surfaced.

The women interviewed were either currently going through the UK asylum process or had been through the UK asylum process in the last five years (see Appendix Four for a table of information and a short biography of the sample). Of the women I interviewed, four were awaiting a decision and were at various stages of the UK asylum process and seven women had received a positive decision and had been granted leave to remain in the UK. It is noted that the majority of women in this sample had leave to remain which may illustrate that the time shortly after being granted refugee status for these women was a time of reflection and a time that they

⁵⁸ The letter in Appendix Two was distributed to all gatekeepers and to women’s support groups along with the leaflet in Appendix One.

wanted to talk about their experiences of seeking protection. Undoubtedly the interviews with women asylum seekers who were unaware of the outcome of their cases were more fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. In addition, women still going through the asylum process were more difficult to identify and to commit to the study. For example, three women initially contacted me to participate in the research and all three women later withdrew (before any interviews) due to the personal stress associated with receiving negative news about their case. Moreover, as seven women had received a positive outcome (after several appeals) this also indicated that for the majority of women in my sample, their stories were believed and their evidence was (eventually) accepted. This perhaps made them more willing to participate as they had received this positive decision and had some (legal) stability. The fact that so many women had been granted leave to remain could also illustrate positive changes that have taken place within the Home Office and with immigration judges (post the HJ Iran and AH Cameroon case). However, from my interviews it emerged that women were unaware of these changes. This could also reflect that the procedures were very new (October 2010) at the time of my interviews (January-April 2011).

All of the women spoke English, although this was not a requirement to participate,⁵⁹ and their ages ranged from their mid-20s to their late-50s. All participants were accessing local support groups where my study was advertised. Two of the women were married in their country of origin and currently had their children living with them (which also presented practical difficulties as discussed below). Two of the women claimed asylum immediately upon arriving in the UK, whilst the other women arrived in the UK with tourist visas or gained illegal entry. These women lived in the UK for periods between several months and several years before they applied for asylum and were not aware that they could seek international protection on the grounds of their sexuality. The women lived and were interviewed in London, Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent, Wigan and Leeds and were from Jamaica, Nigeria, Uganda, The Gambia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Although these countries are not the main refugee producing countries, they are countries which are largely associated with the forced migration of homosexuals (Research Centre for Law Gender and Sexuality 2010).

⁵⁹ I offered to provide interpreters for interviews where the participants did not speak English.

As discussed earlier, my research focus was to prioritise women's personal experience narratives, to understand their individual perspectives regarding seeking asylum and its impact as well as to contextualise their accounts within wider cultural, social and queer debates. It is for these reasons that I decided not to include and engage directly with the Home Office. In addition, and perhaps more importantly as the UKBA Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Guidelines (2010) were only introduced at the end of 2010, I felt it was too early to critically assess its implementation or to triangulate women's experiences alongside those of the Home Office or immigration personnel. This could be regarded as a limitation of the research as there still remains no thorough evaluation of the recent Home Office and legal changes regarding sexuality claims. This is a notable recommendation for further research in this area for the future.

4.5 Interview Development

4.5.1 Pilot Interviews and Rationale

Before I began my interviews with the participants, I arranged three pilot interviews to test the interview questions and style. I identified a refugee from Jamaica and conducted interviews with her between December 2010 and early January 2011. Her personal experience was relevant to the pilots as she had applied for asylum three years ago on the grounds of her sexual orientation. She explained that her application was refused three times and she was detained for several weeks before she was given a positive decision. She also told me during these interviews that whilst in Jamaica, she experienced a series of sexual assaults because of her sexuality.⁶⁰ I specifically chose this participant due to her familiarity with contributing to other research projects on asylum issues and her involvement with other UK RCOs and NGOs.

These pilots enabled me to test out my plan for a three part interview series as well as test the use of a range of interview prompts and tools. The decision to conduct three interviews with each woman was informed by a number of concerns. First I was

⁶⁰ The data produced as part of the pilot interviews is not included in this thesis.

concerned that there would not be adequate time and emotional space to unpick and explore the complex areas of why and how people seek international protection in a sole interview. By suggesting a series of three interviews, I hoped to be able to document how women's sexual stories were constructed and influenced by both their past experiences and current circumstances. The first interview focused upon the participants' experiences in their home countries, including how they became aware of their same-sex attractions and the kinds of oppression they experienced. The second interview concentrated on their experiences of the UK asylum process. With the help of a timeline exercise, women were asked to reconstruct the chronological journey of seeking asylum and to prioritise significant events. The third interview explored how navigating the UK asylum process had impacted upon their lives and well-being. The repeat interview approach also helped me to build bonds of familiarity and trust between myself and the participants, which I felt was essential given the sensitivity of material to be explored. For example, I found that over the course of the three interviews⁶¹ my relationship with the participants grew as they revealed increasingly personal information about themselves, especially in the final interviews (this is discussed in more detail below). The analysis chapters also reflect the repeat interview structure.

The pilot interviews also provided an opportunity for me to assess the appropriateness of the interview schedule, the use of prompts and my interview techniques. This included ensuring that I offered adequate silence and space for women to articulate their thoughts. As well as using silence positively, my pilots allowed me to familiarise myself and feel more confident using probing questions such as 'can you tell me more about that', 'why did you feel like that', 'why do you think that was that significant' (Stanko 1997; Liamputtong 2010). After each pilot interview, the participant gave me feedback and we discussed what she felt worked and what could be improved.

⁶¹ The gaps between the first and third interviews with participants ranged from a period of days, a period of weeks (usually one interview per week), and for one participant, the interviews took place over 10 weeks due to her ill health.

4.5.2 Conducting In-depth Interviews: Creating an Informal Interview Setting

Creating an informal interview setting was essential for my study. Having an interview environment where women felt comfortable and safe was important given the nature of the discussions (Sullivan & Cain 2004). I also felt that the interviews needed to be conducted in a different style to women's previous experience of interviews with the Home Office, legal representatives and immigration judges, as these interviews are often deemed to be traumatic (Bogner et al. 2007). Interviews during the UK asylum process tend to be authoritative and formal. During these interviews, the legal professionals asks set questions, determines the order of the questions, the time allocated, the location, who can be present and how answers should be given. As the UK asylum process is a structured legal procedure, the interviews often present situations where women are forced to provide detailed answers to all questions and where failure to answer questions may go against an individual's asylum claim (as discussed in Chapter Two). Therefore I felt creating a contrasting, informal space was important in order for women to feel more relaxed, to be able to exercise their informed consent and to exert some control. In contrast to the Home Office, my role was more of a facilitator. I arrived at each interview with biscuits or cakes and had 'informal chats' over cups of tea with each person before and after their interviews.

In order to help minimise the power imbalance between myself and the participants, I also asked each woman when and where they preferred to be interviewed. Eight women were interviewed in their homes or temporary accommodation. Interviewing women in their own accommodation helped to provide a familiar environment for the women, whilst also offering me a valuable insight into their current circumstances. Two interviews were disrupted by the presence of young children. In these instances, I devised drawing activities for the children to complete in a separate room. Four women requested to be interviewed on the premises of known NGOs in Manchester and London. One woman requested her first two interviews at the office of an NGO but wanted her third interview in her flat where she '*could provide the cake*'. I considered that giving each woman the option of where to be interviewed was also an important gesture to allow them to exercise their power and choice and to feel at ease and in control of the discussions (Robinson & Kellett 2004).

4.5.3 The Use of Prompts and Aids

The use of prompts and aids has been credited with helping to provide a more relaxed and informal space for interviewees (Moran et al. 2006). Some people find this approach advantageous as it provides an additional space to reflect upon individual thoughts and responses to each question. Moreover, prompts and aids can also be beneficial when interviewing people where English is not their first language. Although I did not use prompts prescriptively with each participant, I did find that when used this approach contributed to a more engaging and interactive process. This method enabled women to drive the discussions and actively shape the conversations. I also found that using aids and prompts facilitated a non-threatening entry and permitted suitable probes into sensitive topics.

The prompts and aids used for this study included: vignettes, a timeline and a discussion line (see Appendices Five to Seven). I outline how each was used in the interviews and the benefits they provided below:

1) Vignettes (see Appendix Five)

Vignettes proved to be useful in providing a non-threatening entry point into a range of sensitive topics. My vignettes allowed women to discuss difficult experiences in an anonymous style (Anderson 2004). The vignettes I devised were based around same-sex experiences in women's home countries and seeking asylum in the UK. My first vignette encouraged women to talk about what they thought might happen to the character in the story. From these discussions, I was able to talk to women about whether their personal experiences were similar or different to the woman in the vignette. I also devised another vignette to look at what advice each woman would give to somebody who was going to apply for asylum in the UK on the grounds of their sexual orientation. This was largely used in the third and final interview.

The vignettes proved to be particularly valuable in generating discussions about experiences of abuse, moral and ethical dilemmas. This tool encouraged debate in the

third person which a few women appeared to find helpful since this allowed them to talk about their experiences indirectly. Some women also found that talking in an anonymous style through the vignette allowed them to discuss sensitive information on a deeper level in a more comfortable way.

Some women naturally talked of the issues outlined in the vignette (and hence the vignette was not used with them), but for other women vignettes provided a prompt to aid the discussions. Using a vignette helped to focus people on specific experiences and presented me with comparable themes. This was especially beneficial during the data analysis process and helped me to explore similarities and differences between women's perspectives. As I will go on to explain in my discussion of the voice-centred relational method below, this prompt enabled me to look at how each woman described their experiences and the different voices they used.⁶²

2) Timeline (see Appendix Six)

I chose to use a timeline⁶³ in the second interview in order to assist women in visualising a chronological order of their experiences of the asylum process. To do this, I drew a line across a large piece of card and wrote at one end 'the day I claimed asylum in the UK' and 'today' at the other end. To accompany this, I handed women several cards which stated: 'I attended the screening interview', 'I attended the in-depth/substantive interview', 'I was detained', 'I was dispersed', 'I attended court', 'my asylum claim was refused' and 'I was granted leave to remain'. I also included cards with more personal events and emotions including: 'I had to talk about private same-sex experiences', 'I had to prove I was gay', 'I felt things were out of my control', 'I was told my story was not credible', 'I understood what was happening with my claim,' 'I felt supported' and 'I felt believed'. Blank cards were also included for women to write and include anything which they felt was relevant and wanted to talk about. Cards which women identified as 'not applicable' were discarded. Each woman selected and chronologically placed their cards along the timeline and then we talked about each card in turn. These discussions were important for women to provide an explanation of

⁶² The voice-centred relational method was used as an analytical framework for the data analysis.

⁶³ A timeline is a tool which I have frequently used in my practical experience to help assist people to chronologically order life events.

how they recalled their asylum process. For example, when women positioned the 'I attended the screening interview' on the timeline, I then asked them to talk about 'what they recalled about this,' 'what happened' and 'how they felt during this time'. I found the timeline useful in prompting women to order their thoughts. Providing women with blank cards for them to complete and place on the timeline offered new insights regarding their individual standpoints and the meanings they placed onto certain events. The blank cards also encouraged women to write their own feelings and experiences and allowed each person to express what they felt was significant about the asylum process. This was important in order to ensure that the 'feelings cards' I provided did not dominate or steer the discussions. This method also proved useful as it demonstrated the different levels of knowledge, understanding and control women felt they had over their asylum claim. For example, some women recalled 'not knowing' about the different tiers of immigration courts, 'not remembering' the chronological order of their asylum interviews and being unaware of how many refusals they had received. This lack of understanding was extremely revealing to me. In addition, the timeline helped illustrate a sense of sequence and how some women prioritised and placed great significance upon certain events such as detention.

3) Discussion Line (see Appendix Seven)

I used a discussion line as a prompt board to assist the third interview. For this, I drew a straight line on a large piece of card with the terms 'agree' and 'disagree' at each opposing end. I had pre-prepared a series of statements which included: 'the asylum process has impacted upon my life', 'the asylum process has changed me', 'I feel safe now', 'the asylum process has helped me' and 'I'm on the road to recovery.' Blank cards were also provided for the participants to write any other issues which they felt were important. Each woman was asked to place the card nearest to either the 'agree' or 'disagree' side of the line depending upon their views. We then talked about the reasons behind their response and the experiences and events which had shaped their answer. This approach was used as a means to ask open-ended questions in an informal and relaxed way.

A criticism of this prompt is that the statement cards may have steered the discussions in particular directions, used a particular language and may have prevented women thinking beyond the pre-written cards. In fact, few women wrote on the blank cards and consequently few additional topics emerged beyond those introduced. On balance however, I found the discussion line useful as it helped to pace and open up discussions for women to reflect and explain their responses and the complexity of their answers. For example, many women deliberated where to place their card and spoke of a range of contradictions and changing perceptions. Some changed where their card was placed as they were speaking, whereas in other statements, women explained why there was no hesitation in their answer.

4.6 Data Analysis

This section will discuss the two main approaches employed in the analysis of the data set: a thematic analysis (Coffey & Atkinson 1996) which identified the cross-cutting issues connecting the stories of the eleven women and the voice-centred relational method (Mauthner & Doucet 1998) which focused on the complexity and depth of individual accounts. I argue that together these complimentary approaches produced a rich and comprehensive analysis that both respects the integrity of personal stories yet sets these firmly within their institutional and social contexts.

4.6.1 Analysing Narrative Accounts

I used a thematic analysis because it allowed for the identification and interpretation of a range of themes and occurrences within the data set (Boyatzis 1998). My approach to analysing individual narratives thematically involved practical and interpretive processes and full immersion in the data. All interviews for this research were voice recorded and verbatim transcripts were produced for the data analysis process.⁶⁴ After reading the transcripts several times, I identified recurring themes. These included areas where there were particular similarities or disagreements such as: 'experiencing violence'; 'developing a sexual identity'; 'concepts of asylum'; 'legal

⁶⁴ I transcribed the majority of the interviews and paid for twelve interviews to be transcribed by a professional. I listened to the voice recorded interviews alongside the externally produced transcripts to ensure their accuracy.

procedures' and 'being a lesbian asylum seeker'.⁶⁵ After this categorising, broader umbrella themes and sub-themes were identified, coded and linked to other related themes. For Coffey and Atkinson (1996), this process consists of pulling apart, reviewing and re-questioning the data.

A thematic analysis was used for all interview transcripts. As part of this process I mapped out common responses by plotting each account on a diagram alongside a brief description of the interviews. I paid particular attention to the chronological order of each woman's story to help understand the sequence of events which led to each person leaving their country of origin. How women described significant relationships, circumstances and actions, as well their thoughts, anxieties and emotions were also noted. Coding key events and emotions was necessary in order to both understand what women were saying and how they described and contextualised their experiences. In addition, locating perspectives of power dynamics and social roles, including how women perceived their own power or interpreted their inequality, was also coded. This was especially relevant in order to place women's narratives within wider social, cultural and legal contexts.

4.6.2 The Voice Centred Relational Method (VCRM)

To complement the thematic analysis, I also used the voice-centred relational method (VCRM) as part of my examination of the data. These two approaches were both consistent with the epistemological orientation of the research. For example, the thematic review identified social factors and cultural constraints which shaped women's perspectives. The VCRM however, assisted in analysing women's subjective accounts through the identification of different, and at times conflicting 'voices'. This latter approach focused not on what was said, but instead on how it was said.

The VCRM is based on the assumption that individuals do not have one constant voice but rather multiple voices that coexist, to represent the complexities of individual experiences and interpretations (Mauthner & Doucet 1998). This approach is frequently associated with the work of Carol Gilligan and Lyn Brown who developed

⁶⁵ These themes emerged from the data. I named and coded the various themes to assist with the analysis process.

the method to explore women's and girl's psychological development (Gilligan 1982; Brown & Gilligan 1992). More recently, the VCRM has been adapted and has demonstrated its usefulness in a number of sociological, health and education studies (Balan 2005; Fairclough 2007; Paliadelis & Cruickshank 2008). Like other forms of data analysis, the VCRM presents a practical guide which can be subject to a range of interpretations and influences (Mauthner & Doucet 1998). This analytical process involves a series of readings aimed at identifying the different 'voices' women use to represent who they are, their relationships and their environments. My approach to using the VCRM was as follows:

Each transcript was read several times and each reading required using a different lens.

- 1) For the first reading, I identified the plot within the narrative, summarising chronological events and actions. Alongside this process I also noted my own reactions to the interview and the data. This part of the reading allowed me to question my own assumptions, and reactions and connections to women's narratives.
- 2) For the second reading, I focused upon identifying the 'voice of the *"I"*'. For this I underlined every part of the transcript where the term '*I*' was used and underlined the proceeding or immediate words which followed. For Mauthner and Doucet (1998) locating the '*I*' in each transcript indicates where each woman has a strong identity (and voice). For the purpose of my study, I also highlighted women's use of the terms '*my*', '*mine*' or '*me*'. These sentences were all pulled together to create *I-Poems* (see Appendix Eight for an example of an '*I-Poem*'). I found the *I-Poem* helpful in illustrating how women spoke about themselves, their pain, their sense of self and their desire for recovery. This reading also helped me to understand women's own concepts of their sexual subjectivity. The 'voices' which I identified from the *I-Poems* included: 'fearful'; 'regretful'; 'isolated' and 'hopeful.' These 'voices' reoccurred throughout many stages of the interviews.

- 3) For the third reading, I charted the range of positive and negative relationships each woman talked about. I interpreted this to include reference to partners, family, children and professionals as well as perceived social and support networks. Focusing on the range of relationships that each individual discussed proved insightful. This reading helped me to identify the complexity of the relationships as well as the direct impact these relationships had on the women. Including professional relationships in this reading was crucial as this group of women had frequent contact with professionals especially whilst navigating the asylum process. This reading helped me to identify how women spoke of the different relationships in their lives, including people in their past and present. For example, how women spoke of the role of support networks, friends and family and how close or distant these people were in their lives was prominent.

- 4) For the fourth reading, I placed each account within its social, cultural and legal context. Specifically, for this reading I noted how women described and perceived their social position. This included references to their social and cultural backgrounds and circumstances. This reading was useful in illustrating the cultural context of women's accounts and their fluctuating social status (upwards and downwards). This also helped illustrate notions of power and often perceptions of social disempowerment both in their home countries and whilst in the UK. I specifically decided to include the legal context in this reading given that this study is firmly situated within the UK asylum process.

I found the VCRM to be useful as it encouraged me to approach the text from different perspectives and gain a deeper insight. The method urged me to listen to the interviews, to note how women spoke and not to just read each transcript. As an interpretive framework, it also helped to ensure that my research was firmly situated in and driven by women's direct accounts (Balan 2005). The approach worked well in combination with the thematic analysis, but as a stand-alone method did not offer insight into wider structural factors. The VCRM was also very intense and time-

consuming. There was not enough time to complete an *I-Poem* for all the interviews⁶⁶ and they were difficult to apply in instances where participants talked in the third person. I also felt the *I-Poems* created a tension with the ‘telling stories’ approach, as the *I-Poem* required women’s stories to be broken up and reframed through the voice of the ‘I’.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

The ethical issues arising from this study were continually reflected upon throughout the research process. This is especially important given the sensitive nature of the interviews and the distinct vulnerability of the participants (Klempner 2000; Blumer 2001). Before commencing my interviews, ethical approval was sought from the University and my Criminal Records Bureau check was granted. Upon meeting each woman specific measures were taken to communicate the ethical procedures and considerations. This included ensuring all participants were aware of the ethical issues before and during the interview process (Blumer 2001). Specific steps were taken to minimise any potential harm and stress caused. For example, a particular interview style was created to make women feel at ease and comfortable (this is expanded upon below). Strategies such as using observation techniques were used to identify any moments in which individuals appeared to be uncomfortable. Women were repeatedly informed that they did not need to discuss or disclose anything which they did not want to talk about. In addition, it was also made apparent that I was not from a legal background and thus, not looking for the ‘facts’ of the case, I was not assessing their ‘credibility’ and I could not assist them in their legal application process. It was also explicitly stressed that no information given to me was shared with any other individuals or organisation, that all data was stored on a password protected computer and that only false names would be used on any written material⁶⁷ (Blumer 1998). Within this thesis, all identifying features have been changed so that individuals cannot be identified.

⁶⁶ I chose one interview per participant to complete an ‘*I-Poem*’.

⁶⁷ All participants’ names provided in this thesis have been anonymised.

Communicating the ethical considerations also involved discussing informed consent issues with each woman before their interview. A conversation about the importance of informed consent commenced before each individual signed the informed consent form and before any information was recorded (see Appendix Nine) (Miller & Bell 2005). The fluid nature of consent was also reinforced with every woman during each interview.⁶⁸ Each woman was repeatedly reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and for any reason, and that they could ask any questions during and after the interviews (Bryman 2001; Miller & Bell 2005). In addition, recordings of the interview only began once permission was granted by each woman. The voice recorder was turned off when some women stated their desire to talk to me 'off the record.'⁶⁹

As part of the interview process, I carefully considered whether to use a 'thank you gesture'. Some form of gesture is largely regarded as key to helping to secure access to the participants and increasing levels of participation in a range of research projects (Thompson 1996; Ripley 2007; Head 2009). The benefits and potential complications of providing this were carefully contemplated and discussed with my supervisors and the gatekeepers prior to the interviews. Particular attention was paid in ensuring that any such gesture was not perceived as an incentive which may appear coercive, or as part of asking women to disclose sensitive information (Ripley 2007). Other considerations which I reflected upon included whether a thank you gesture would affect the power dynamics and relationships within an interview setting. Conversations with the gatekeepers however, resulted in them recommending that a thank you gesture should be provided to the women and would be considered kindly given the 'hard to reach' and precarious circumstances of the sample. Therefore a £10 thank you gesture was given to each woman at the end of each interview as an expression of thanks for giving their time to the study (Head 2009). Individual travel costs were also reimbursed.

⁶⁸ All participants were told they could withdraw their 'consent' from the research at any stage up until the research was published.

⁶⁹ Unrecorded discussions with participants have provided contextual information, but have not been quoted or referred to in the analysis.

4.8 The 'Insider/Outsider' Positions

Undertaking cross-cultural research often involves specific considerations regarding whether the study encompasses an 'insider' or 'outsider' position (Fawcett & Hearn 2004; Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006). For this study, I found positioning myself as either an 'insider' or 'outsider' too simplistic given the range of participant experiences, backgrounds and my own familiarity with working in the field of sexual abuse. There are notable positions of difference which need to be acknowledged between myself and each participant. This includes differences in the fields of race, culture, immigration stability, social and economic positions, the ability to work, as well as educational identity. Commonalities also existed between myself and the participants. For example, some women wanted to engage in discussions about my sexuality or my own experience of sexual violence.⁷⁰ Having worked in Uganda and Pakistan also provided a useful familiarity with local cultures and customs for women from these countries. Added to this, participants also stated that being interviewed by somebody who was not from their home country was appealing. They voiced a distrust of others from their country of origin who they perceived to be 'homophobic' or who could disclose their sexuality within their community. Women also voiced suspicion towards other refugees, based on their experiences of being rejected and shunned from these groups in the UK. This demonstrated to me how both the 'insider and outsider' positions were interchangeable and open to interpretations (Fawcett & Hearn 2004; Hasmita 2008). Being able to occupy both positions to varying degrees, at different stages of the study was, I believe, advantageous to this project.

4.8.1 Providing a Safe Space for Women to Talk

Conducting research with women asylum seekers/refugees raised several practical issues which for me warranted specific attention. During the interviews, several women discussed recurring mental health problems such as depression and their present difficulties such as homelessness. For all participants individual experiences of the UK asylum process had been traumatic and consequently discussing it was emotional. It was apparent that many participants had few avenues to talk about their experiences of the UK asylum process. Many women stated that they had refrained

⁷⁰ This information was only disclosed if participants specifically asked.

from disclosing their feelings to partners and close friends for fear that their worries burdened others. These women in particular spoke of a genuine desire to talk in order to try and comprehend their own experiences and thoughts.

Given this context, I found providing a relaxed space and safe forum for women to disclose personal trauma and associated emotions was important. Many participants revealed that they were talking about their personal journey, experiences and emotions for the first time. For example during a final interview, one woman spoke of her experience of childhood abuse which she had previously been *'too afraid to tell anyone else'*. It became apparent to me that, although the topics of discussion were difficult, talking about their experiences was, for some women, a cathartic experience. The quote below illustrates this:

Each time I talk about how I feel it also makes me look at how I feel, because (...) even if I'm in a dark place, like, where I am now, and I'm in despair [...] I feel like gosh, I don't know what's gonna happen next (...) just talking about it with you, it's been cathartic, it has made me come out of myself a little bit in terms of being in the dark and looking at other possibilities and other perspectives [...] I'm more hopeful, I feel it inside, I've had to look at it, but I think this has been a good thing.⁷¹

Jennifer, Jamaica.

I also found that providing a safe space for women to talk enabled them to gain strength from their own accounts. For example, four women told me how this space had allowed them to reflect on their past experiences and views of the asylum process. For these women, who had *'never really thought about it before'*, acknowledging their emotions and struggles appeared to help them to learn from their experiences. For example, Imogen explains:

⁷¹ Reference to (...) refers to a pause and [...] infers that some words from a verbatim quote have been removed. These symbols will be used throughout this thesis.

Well you just go through the asylum process, you don't really (...) think about it [...] and how it's impacted on you and stuff like that, but now, I can see that (...) I need to think about it [...] and not let it sink me down (...) that's what I've learnt.

Imogen, The Gambia.

Talking through their individual accounts also enabled some women such as Penny, to feel that their stories were helping other women in similar situations. For Penny, being able to participate and talk freely in a safe space allowed her feel confident that she 'was doing something good' and on her terms. She explained:

I feel comfortable talking to you (...) so thank you (...) it needs to be documented (...) it's good for me to give you my time and talk to you, to help, this might help somebody else one day to (...) it's good that you know what happened to me, to do something good with it, I'm pleased I did it.

Penny, Jamaica.

4.8.2 Researcher Subjectivity in Emotionally Demanding Research

Reflecting upon the research process involved assessing my role as a doctoral researcher and my relationship with the participants (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006; Hewitt 2007). During the interviews several issues arose which illustrated the complexity and uniqueness of this role. For example, it was necessary to quickly establish a respectful and trusting connection with each woman from the outset. The relationship between me and the participants was more informal than other professional relationships the women had. Indeed, over the course of study something of a bond of trust developed as participants shared intimate details (Hewitt 2007; Liamputtong 2007). As sensitive information was discussed I was often placed in the role of confidant. For instance, during informal discussions after the interviews participants frequently asked for personal advice on their relationships, returning to abusive partners and how to cope with flashbacks. When reflecting upon this unique

bond I found myself feeling more isolated and under more personal pressure than in previous professional posts. I struggled with not being connected to any service provider and not being able to make any referrals for the women to access immediate support.⁷² I also found myself angry at the lack of information people had been provided about the asylum process from NGOs and immigration officials. Moreover, I found the length of time between the interviews and any published material frustrating as many issues raised presented pressing concerns which I felt required an immediate response.

Throughout the interview process I also felt conscious of the need to negotiate and maintain boundaries, which, whilst important, was also at times difficult (Hewitt 2007). During my fieldwork, numerous challenges emerged which made me carefully reflect on the role and expectations of the researcher. For example, one woman requested to participate in the study but later asked that I assist her and verify her claims in court.⁷³ Another participant insisted on showing me her torture scars despite me telling her this was not necessary. This particular woman expressed how she could not look at the scars herself but stressed *'I want you to see them'* and indicated how important she found our bond.

Alongside boundaries, I also felt I needed to manage the expectations of the participants. For instance, some women indicated that they had participated in the study because they had heard of my reputation within the UK asylum sector. Some participants discussed that they knew that my previous research was widely disseminated across the UK asylum sector, international forums and the UNHCR⁷⁴ and had similar or higher expectations for my doctoral study. Whilst this was clearly beneficial in attracting my sample, I did find that this added a distinct pressure to my work.

⁷² Although I did provide some information on UK based services (where possible).

⁷³ This person was not included in the research sample.

⁷⁴ One participant attended the 'official launch' of my previous research with a UK NGO.

4.8.3 The Impact of the Research and Issues of 'Emotionality'

Whilst reflecting upon the research process and the management of relationships, I have also considered the impact the research has had upon me. The importance of reflexivity in work on sensitive topics with vulnerable groups has been increasingly acknowledged within academic literature on qualitative research (Wilkinson 1988; Moran-Ellis 1996; Edwards & Ribbens 1998; Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006; Liamputtong 2007). Of particular interest to me is the relatively unexplored area of 'emotionality' which encourages a consideration of the direct impact sensitive research can have on the researcher (Stanko 1997; Widdowfield 2000; Campbell 2002). For example, Gilgun (2008) charts how her research with perpetrators of violence resulted in her own increased anxieties, flashbacks, violent nightmares and fantasies of killing. Similarly, Stanko's (1997) talks of her experiences of '*harbouring anger, frustration, fear, and pain*' (p.75) during her research. She argues that emotions should be acknowledged as they form a crucial aspect of the research process and are a key resource. Although debates around 'emotionality' are often critiqued for prioritising the privileged researcher's voice, I felt recognising the interplay and impact of emotions on my research was necessary for my own reflexivity (Stanko 1997; Widdowfield 2000). Conducting this doctoral study impacted on me in several ways. For example, I found listening to accounts of abuse, sexual and physical violence, torture and persecution at times intellectually and emotionally challenging. Although having previously worked with similar groups of women before, hearing individuals give details of abuse, torture and trauma was still a difficult experience (Stanko 1997; Klempner 2000; Campbell 2002). Based on my observations, it was clear that many women displayed emotional pain and anguish in relation to both their current predicament and past persecution. The majority of women described how the UK asylum process had left them 'emotionally damaged,' 'angry' and living with an array of mental health conditions. Observing women struggling for clarity and living with daily anxieties and current feelings of emptiness and loss was often difficult for me. Insight into participants' abuse, current predicaments and daily torments often left me concerned for their circumstances and futures. For example one woman wanted to return to an abusive partner, one woman was struggling with reoccurring nightmares of torture, four

women faced uncertainties in their asylum claim and one woman discussed her battles with suicidal thoughts.

Given this context, the research often left me needing to recognise and manage my own emotions. At times I felt upset at delays in bureaucracy, apparent injustices and institutional 'Othering'. Hearing details of women's unstable situations made me question my own role and ability to provide sufficient solutions. To help address and manage my emotions, I kept a fieldwork diary charting my reactions to women's accounts. In addition, during the course of the interviews I also enquired about accessing additional support from my academic supervisors and the University.⁷⁵ As a doctoral researcher, knowing additional support was available was important.

I do believe that engaging with my own, as well as the participants' emotions proved to be advantageous for the research and for motivating me to complete this work. Gaining an 'emotional connection', or what Gilgun (2008) terms '*connected knowing*', with many of the participants helped shape my knowledge and questioned my own assumptions (Widdowfield 2000; Campbell 2002; Gilgun 2008). Analysing the complexity of both mine and my participants' emotions helped illustrate the intricacies of women's subjectivity and their search for meaning. I believe having an emotional empathy and connection with the women assisted in my ability to recognise and present their inner strength. This included appreciating women's need to take control of their accounts and to be perceived as active contributors to society and not as mere victims. This 'emotional connection' has also made me feel confident that I have heard and understood the women's perspectives and am able to represent their voices in this thesis.

⁷⁵ Although I did not access additional support, I wanted to know what support structures were in place.

Chapter Five: Experiences Back Home

5.1 Introduction

This study examines the context in which lesbian asylum seekers leave their 'home' countries and seek international protection in the UK. It draws on individual accounts to present what it is like to identify or be identified as a 'lesbian' in communities which deem this to be unacceptable. This includes exploring personal reflections of how social, cultural and religious codes, as well as restrictive ideologies, have shaped women's understandings of their own sexualities. This chapter is based on the first round of interviews undertaken with each woman. During this initial interaction each participant was asked about their experiences in their home country. All women interpreted this question to be concerned with 'discovering' their sexual identity, the reactions of other people to this news and the confusion of living within negative social and cultural codes. This suggests to me that women were familiar with linking their experiences of abuse and violence to their recollections of home. This is likely to have been influenced by the legal requirement to repeatedly disclose and explicitly link acts of persecution to individual home countries in order to justify their asylum application. This issue is expanded upon throughout this research. Although some differences existed in women's accounts, their narratives within the first interviews overwhelmingly shared common reports of living within a social climate of fear directed towards gay men and lesbians.

5.2 Cultural, Legal and Social Norms

I have contextualised the insecurity and fear that women reported living with in their 'home' communities within wider theoretical debate informed by the work of Foucault (1967, 1978) and Yuval-Davis (1997). The positioning of women as biological reproducers of nationhood and the role of rigid gender relations and heteronormative discursive norms are central elements of compulsory heterosexuality. The pressure to fall within set collective boundaries influences the way in which sexual identities are performed, agency exercised and norms tolerated (McDermott 1996; Renold 2000;

Flowers & Buston 2001). As same-sex relations are culturally positioned as 'Other', 'deviant', 'criminal', 'perverse' and 'immoral' in nearly 80 countries, social permission is often granted for public intolerance, hatred and discrimination towards homosexuals. This was illustrated in women's accounts, for example both participants from Uganda talked about witnessing local and national campaigns which published the photographs and the locations of known homosexuals.⁷⁶ They talked about being aware of local 'witch-hunts' where people were publicly beaten and even killed because of their sexual orientation. As homosexuality is a criminal offence in Uganda (Amnesty International 2010; Human Rights Watch 2014)⁷⁷ they both spoke of how living within this climate meant they were viewed suspiciously. For example, Penda talked about fearing everybody, because she knew that if anyone became suspicious of her relationship with a woman they would report her to the police. She told me that after her father discovered that she was in a same-sex relationship he walked her and her partner to the police station and demanded their arrest. Knowing that her own family supported her imprisonment was offered as an illustration of how suspicion and fear dominated her life as a lesbian in Uganda. She stressed that the level of open hostility against homosexuals in all public forums meant that to be a lesbian was '*to put your life at risk*'. She explained:

You see you can't be a lesbian in Uganda, no, no, no, no [...] it's against the law [...] if they find you, oh God.

Penda, Uganda.

Like Penda, Jules also talked of how she was imprisoned for being a lesbian in Uganda. She recalled being subjected to verbal abuse, physical torture and sustained sexual violence in prison. Whilst she was being abused she was repeatedly told that she '*should be treated this way*' because she '*was a lesbian*'. Here we can see how Jules' sexed body became the site of morality, vulnerability and violence (Butler 2004, 2006). Using Butler's language we can understand the impossibility of being a lesbian in

⁷⁶ For further information see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12306077>

⁷⁷ For further information see: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/24/uganda-president-signs-anti-gay-laws>

Uganda as a form of *derealisation*, meaning that the violence she experienced was, as far as the state was concerned, *ungrievable* and '*not worth a note*' (Butler, 2006, p.36).

Jules also communicated the sense that her 'life did not count as a life' (Butler, 2006) after she escaped prison. For example, she talked of hiding from the police and the public as her description and calls for her re-arrest were announced on the national Ugandan radio. She explained that fearing everyone placed her in the position of a social outcast an 'unwanted,' 'criminal' and an 'ungrievable' Other. She recalled:

I tried to move round Uganda but [...] my name was on the radio, so they were trying to find me [...] you know how Muslims dress up and cover themselves well, I needed to do that [...] I started to dress up like I was a Muslim so nobody could see me, there was a reward for me [...] sometimes I used to pretend that I was with a limp, I used to walk with a limp so they wouldn't detect me [...] and then I only went out in the night, I never went out during the day, I was too scared

Jules, Uganda.

These examples need to be framed within the wider politicisation of homosexuality across Africa. As discussed in Chapter Two, many African countries criminalise same-sex relations and the treatment of homosexuals has exacerbated political tensions between African states and governments in the Global North⁷⁸ (Human Rights Watch 2008; Amnesty International 2010; Currier 2010)⁷⁹. The cultural perception that being a lesbian or gay man is a 'western import' and thus 'un-African' has been prevalent for many decades in political debates and high profile speeches, and has been reflected in popular beliefs across Africa (Cock 2003; Itaborahy 2012). For example in 1995 Robert Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe stated: '*let the Americans keep their sodomy, bestiality and their stupid and foolish ways to themselves out of Zimbabwe ... let them*

⁷⁸ Governments including the UK and USA have threatened to withhold aid to several African nations including Uganda and Malawi due to the specific treatment of homosexuals in the last two years.

For example see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15511081>

⁷⁹ Also see: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/28/world-bank-uganda-loan-anti-gay-law>

be gay in the US, Europe and elsewhere' (Dunton & Palberg 1996p.14). This speech deliberately positioned sexuality as a binary issue between the Global North and Africa. Five years later, Mrs Mangwe, leader of the ZANU-PF Women's League further racialised sexuality by stating *'our way is to protect or culture. Not destroy it by allowing homosexuality to run rife in it. It's not in our black culture and we don't want it'* (Baird 2004p.81).

Despite anthropological evidence which acknowledges historical same-sex practices all over the world, including in Africa, this view still dominates current political rhetoric (Epprecht 2004; Ilesanmi 2013). This is largely because the idea of an 'African' sexuality is deeply embedded within the (re)production of a national 'African' and postcolonial identity and symbolises historical racial and political tensions. In this context, an African sexuality is positioned as masculine, heterosexual, virile and dominating (especially over women) (Currier 2010). In contrast, homosexuality is presented as the 'Other', a 'problem', a threat to the nation, a remnant of colonialism, and like 'whiteness' it is something which is not naturally African (Currier 2010; Van Zyl 2011; Ilesanmi 2013). Here the nexus of past and the future is clearly underpinned by heteronormative values which are 'unspoilt' by white/European settlers who have historically dehumanised and enslaved the continent, disallowing their own history and agency (Van Zyl 2009; Gunda 2010). For Gunda (2010) and Munro (2012) publicly denouncing pressure from the Global North on an international platform is important given that African leaders are relatively powerless on the Global stage. Asserting their authority therefore on their choice to criminalise LGBT relationships helps to maintain separation and difference from imperial powers and preserves national pride.

Given the interconnection between sexuality and nationhood, drawing on the framework offered by Yuval-Davis (1993) is particularly useful. In her work on gender and nation, Yuval-Davis (1993) shows how heterosexuality binds people as they *'construct themselves as members of national collectivities, not just because they and their forebears have shared a past, but also because they believe their futures are interdependent'* (Yuval - Davis 1993p.623). Thus, as heterosexuality preserves cultural authenticity, women are biological reproducers of nations and so are susceptible to a

greater 'collective gaze' and cultural conformity. For Armstrong (1982) this cultural compliance is policed by symbolic 'border guards', individuals who seek to identify 'members' and 'non-members', to define 'us' and 'them', and to preserve the ideological, heteronormative and national order. In this context, women's sexual agency comes under increasing public scrutiny and judgement, which can be seen throughout women's accounts in this chapter.

For the African participants, being labelled as 'un-African' added to the confusion of understanding their sexuality and same-sex attractions. For example, Penda from Uganda described how feeling that her desires were not only 'wrong' but also meant that she was somehow rejecting her 'African' values and national identity was perplexing. Imogen from The Gambia stressed how she was conscious that homosexuality was being explicitly tied to a collective national identity. She explained:

They say things like it's un-African, you can't be gay and African, or there are no gay people in Africa [...] when you hear it you think, what does it make me [...] but of course its African, there are as many gay people in Africa, as there are in any other parts of the world, they are just being suppressed [...] it has to be suppressed

Imogen, The Gambia.

Similar experiences and vulnerabilities also emerged from the participants interviewed from Jamaica. For these women, anti-homosexual rhetoric was deeply embedded within popular culture which had resulted in normalised aggressive behaviour directed towards homosexuals. As White and Carr (2005) argue, homophobia in Jamaica penetrates not only popular culture but also religious, social welfare and legal institutions; all presenting a singular message that homosexuality is a social stigma. This message goes unchallenged and cuts across all social groups, class and genders (Blake & Dayle 2013). For example, Penny spoke to me about how popular Jamaican songs had promoted, and at times encouraged, violence against all gay men and

lesbians. She believed homosexuality in Jamaica was perceived as ‘culturally wrong,’ an act which should be eradicated.

It's in all the dance halls, they're singing [...] kill the batty boy, kill the batty boy⁸⁰ everyone's singing it, it's not like its seen as wrong, as everyone's singing [...] they sing it and then think let's do it, get the sodomite.

Penny, Jamaica.

These examples illustrate how lesbian bodies can be positioned ‘outside’ of permissible behaviour and how discursive norms can operate to de-legitimise and position these women as non-citizens (Foucault 1978; Hall 2001; Maeder 2002). In the following section I show how such ‘Outsider’ status can render them unintelligible, irrational and as no longer having a right to protection under ‘civil laws’.

5.2.1 Religious Beliefs and Ceremonies

As well as social and cultural norms, the role of religion and the influence of religious leaders in exacerbating the struggles women had with understanding their own sexual identity and desires arose from the interviews. Such accounts reflect how religion is used to perpetuate heteronormative values and behaviour through bio-power and discursive norms. For Yip (1999), religion plays a significant part in influencing values and establishing moral boundaries within communities. He argues that religious leaders have a central role in bringing communities and families together (and apart), and in promoting set beliefs. For example, in 2010 anti-homosexual rallies were organised by religious leaders who called for castration and death penalty for all homosexuals in Uganda.⁸¹ In Jamaica religious sermons have frequently been used to perpetuate anti-homosexual beliefs as morally unacceptable, sinful and intolerable (LaFont 2009). Tigert (1999) asserts that binary languages such as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ have been used within religious teachings to project negative descriptions of people in same-sex relationships and negatively embed homosexuality as a religious issue. The

⁸⁰ ‘Batty boy’ is a term used in Jamaican popular culture to refer to gay men.

⁸¹ For further details see: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8522039.stm>.

use of religious language amplifies the rhetoric of where the 'good' people need to be protected from 'evil' and its influences (Tigert 1999). The women in this study were unanimous as to the part played by religious Christian and Muslim leaders uniting people against homosexuality. Participants from Jamaica, Uganda and Nigeria all talked about the difficulties they felt with being labelled 'evil' by others.

Well in their hearts and faces they see it as an evil thing to do and be, they don't like it, they just want to kill you there and then for it, they just see you as evil.

Penda, Uganda.

According to Jules, the label of 'evil' was also used to warn people away from her. She talked to me about how people in her local community thought that being a lesbian was contagious and could be 'passed on' to other women. She recalled how for this reason, it was believed that being a lesbian was to have the '*devil inside of you*'. For Jules this appeared to contribute to her social isolation and meant that she felt she could not be near anybody else.

They say I'm evil and anyone I touch or speak to, or go near, I make them evil too.

Jules, Uganda.

Similar accounts arose from the women interviewed from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and The Gambia. These three women referred to how homosexuality was considered '*un-Islamic*' and thus culturally unacceptable in their home countries. Currently most Muslim countries criminalise and punish same-sex relationships (Kligerman 2007) and, according to Baird (2004), Muslim countries with a strict and fundamental Islamic code have taken a particularly hard stance. For Kligerman (2007) homosexuality as a negative concept was introduced across the Middle East as part of European colonialism and the increased westernisation across the region since that time. He

argues that Muslim countries had a long history of (private) same-sex relations⁸² but this was not recognised as forming part of individual sexual orientation. With the demise of kinship communities, and the rise of capitalism and colonialism came the label of 'homosexual' and the stigma associated with such 'deviant' people. During this time, the language and views of Europe infiltrated the Middle East and attempts to label, name and shame the 'homosexual' were introduced to act as a distinct binary between the 'expected' and 'perverse' sexualities (Fone 2000).

For the women in this study the role and fear of being labelled a 'homosexual' and 'un-Islamic' filled them with not only a fear of exclusion but a fear of punishment. Over the last 30 years, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism (especially post September 11th 2001) has been associated with increased violence, criminal sentencing and the execution of gay people in many Muslim countries (Siraj al-Haqq Kugle 2010; El Menyawi 2012). This leaves El Menyawi (2012) to argue that social pressure is increasingly placed on women as strict Islamic regimes have reduced their legal rights (including marriage, divorce, child custody, land and economic rights) and have become more conservative about their role as obedient wives. He states that in this context, any alternative to the heterosexual wife or expression of female sexual agency is unacceptable and thus punishable.

For Leila from Saudi Arabia, being perceived as 'un-Islamic' meant that she would be '*without family*', thus without any social and familial support, and she would also lose the custody of her children. Faria from Pakistan also reiterated the difficulties she faced being labelled a 'un-Islamic' woman:

It's a Muslim country so nobody will support you for that [being a lesbian], people are against you [...] It's easy for them to come and kill me and they just say 'she was against Islam'.

Faria, Pakistan.

⁸² Especially between two men.

Strong cultural and religious hostility also extended to the occurrence of certain ceremonies designed to 'cure' women of their 'homosexual sins'. This view was explained to me by Frankie from Nigeria, who talked about her direct experience of such a ceremony. Frankie reported that her family organised a 'deliverance ceremony' as soon as they learnt of her same-sex relationship. For Frankie, this ceremony consisted of a procedure similar to a female circumcision. She talked of how the public display was to perform the roles of 'getting the demon out of her' and to show the community that as a family they were against homosexuality. After the ceremony, it was considered that Frankie would be able to participate in the expected heterosexual roles and would no longer be attracted to women. The entanglement of religion, cultural beliefs and superstition which her family and community subscribed to presented homosexuality as something which could be 'cured', 'reversed' or 'changed'. She explained:

Frankie: *When I was a teenager I was under the gun for deliverance....*

Researcher: *What do you mean when you say that?*

Frankie: *Well they didn't call it circumcision then [...] it was like a circumcision [...] my Granny told me that this will be done in a few days' time, they asked me to get some money to buy a chicken or a goat, so after deliverance, after the circumcision is done, we can celebrate your cleanliness [...] they knew I was gay, it was explained to me, it was to help me, to get the demon in me out, you see I was demonic, I had the demon inside me, it needed to come out, but also to make sure my sexual desires were put right, basically.*

Frankie, Nigeria.

Combined, these accounts illustrate how cultural and religious discourse drives a singular negative message regarding the 'unacceptability' and illegality of homosexuality in women's home countries. As few alternative arguments are promoted, or even discussed, the anti-homosexual stance is not only dominant but also normalised. For all the women interviewed, cultural, religious and ideological

beliefs had labelled them as 'criminal', 'immoral' and 'evil.' Jennifer from Jamaica talked about how living in this environment meant nowhere was safe and she was always a target.

I can't really describe what it's like (...) you're too scared to go anywhere, you know if someone finds you they will want to try and kill you, or rape you, or cut you [...] that's normal, its normal, it's like get the sodomite, and everyone will join in [...] there's no safe place[....] no one will say this is wrong.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

Jennifer's use of the term 'sodomite' is interesting. This label is still frequently used to negatively describe homosexuals (both men and women) in Jamaica. The term 'sodomite'⁸³ has historical connotations with its roots in colonial rule and legislation, being traditionally used across Europe to frame homosexual men as traitors to society, religion and 'truth' (Bray 1990). During the Renaissance the label 'sodomite' was also associated with serious crimes and treason, and as such was punishable by torture and execution (Bray 1990; Fone 2000). In his *History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault suggests that this label represents the historical expulsion of homosexuals from the symbolic order. Here Foucault's framework for understanding how discourse, sovereign and bio-power are used to uphold hegemonic norms remains useful for making sense of women's accounts, highlighting the disciplining of sexual agency and how 'deviant bodies' are repressed to maintain 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1979).

5.2.2 Language, Labels and Finding Others

The role and power of, labels in including and excluding groups and individuals is a notable strand in sociological debate. Interactionists such as Blumer (1998) and Charon (2009) argue that language is used to propel beliefs and values and shape moral

⁸³ The term 'sodomy' was introduced by the Church in the early Middle Ages in reference to non-procreative sexual acts. By the end of the Middle Ages 'sodomy' signified relationships between people of the same sex (Bray, 1990).

understandings. This can certainly be seen in women's descriptions of their experiences in their home countries, where the role of language was described as being very prominent in instilling social reactions and responses. In particular the fear of being labelled 'a lesbian' or 'sodomite' or arousing suspicion among others that their heterosexuality was in question was problematic. The role of language and terminology in the construction and deconstruction of their sexual identity emerged as an important but fraught issue in this study. For example, the label 'lesbian' constituted the grounds of persecution in women's home countries, but was later embraced as an expression of personal identity and comfort (this is expanded further in Chapter Seven). The way in which language was used by others as a tool of intimidation also emerged. For instance, Jules from Uganda talked of how she started to experience verbal assaults, threats and recalled having '*urine thrown*' over her face from community members after she was publicly called a '*lesbian*' by local children. She explained that the label 'lesbian' was '*something to be feared*' and '*used when people do something bad to you*'. The women from Jamaica reported that the term 'lesbian,' was synonymous with 'sodomite,' and both labels were used to threaten people. For example, Nadine revealed that '*you don't want to be called a sodomite or even associated with a sodomite*' for fear of being '*attacked*'. During Penny's first interview she described how being called a 'sodomite' by a stranger in her local town led to a public assault. She told me:

They like, beat me, kicking me on the street, they burst my head, and one Saturday [...] I don't know what hit me [...] someone threw something or hit me with something and it knock me on the ground [...] it was just so much blood, when I come round I could feel my head hurting and the blood was just rushing down and, they were saying "look there's the lesbian girl there, lets attack her, she a lesbian, she a sodomite".

Penny, Jamaica.

Here it is clear how the terms 'lesbian' and 'sodomite' were embedded within social disapproval and marginalisation, evoking fears of abuse and instilling fear. This is

particularly important given that women were immediately expected to self-identify as a 'lesbian' on arrival in the UK (an issue discussed further in Chapter Six).

I don't think I ever just said I'm a lesbian, it's just not, you don't, you don't, even the concept is difficult as the word has such negative connotations.

Jules, Uganda.

For the Jamaican women in particular, language had been used as a tool of intimidation, to socially ostracise, as well as to exacerbate rumours. Sara reported that in Jamaica the 'gossip culture' among her neighbours would instil fears that they were 'getting suspicious' or starting rumours about her being a 'sodomite.' She explained:

People talk in Jamaica, everyone is in your business, everyone wants to know what you're doing, with who, why your curtains are closed, why your door is locked [...] things like that make people suspicious and when people get suspicious that's when it all starts.

Sara, Jamaica.

Despite fears of arousing suspicion or being attacked the women from Jamaica also talked about how they were able to meet other lesbian women, particularly in Kingston. These women spoke of the necessity of secrecy and subtle codes which allowed them to meet other gay men and lesbians in secret. Despite navigating risks, accessing this secret space was reported as important. Penny explains:

Being a lesbian, I had to socialise with other women it's a part of me [...] so, come what may, I had to find some way to live, you know, to meet other women, that's how I had to do it, meet somewhere in secret, that's how I lived my life then, it was just shrouded in secrecy [...] in the night time hiding

somewhere, that's my experience really, living a gay life you know, wanting so socialise with other women, that's how I had to do it.

Penny, Jamaica.

Jennifer also talked about this difficult balance. Accessing some form of 'gay culture' was important to her in terms of providing a space where she felt she could 'be herself'. However, this also came with risks and increased her exposure to other people suspecting or knowing about her sexual orientation.

People get to know people, we had little things, not anything you could name, but places to go (...) it wasn't necessarily safe, but you did have a bit of safety in numbers, if that makes sense (...) you would gather to go to a party and they'd be people cussing and taking your picture and stuff, which is scary because if they put your picture somewhere or, if you park your car they would take picture of your car, people would then know that it's your car, and that sort of thing, they'd put it in newspapers, they'd raid the party and it's just, the police would come and raid and search people, and it's that kind of thing, but it provided a community if that makes sense, because you don't have anything really [...] in your normal day to day life you're just pretending you're someone else, so it gave you a little chance to be complete.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

This kind of description of meeting other gay and lesbian people was specific to the Jamaican women in this sample, and was not reported by others. This might be related to age and experience, as the Jamaican participants were older than the other women I interviewed and had generally left Jamaica in their late 30s or 40s, and early 50s. All of these women talked about being aware of their sexuality for a long time and having long-term same-sex relationships before leaving Jamaica. Furthermore, all the Jamaican women had at some point lived in Kingston, whilst the other participants outside of Jamaica did not live in capital cities. This reinforces the views expressed in

Chapter Two regarding same-sex internal migration to big cities which can frequently be perceived as offering opportunities to meet other homosexuals.

5.2.3 Protection, Punishment and Social Pressures

As homosexuality was illegal and culturally unacceptable in the home countries of my participants, the fear of punishment by the police or their collusion was very real. Yuval-Davis (1993) argues that because women are cultural producers and reproducers of nationhood, their sexual agency must represent hegemonic norms and structures. Deviation from this will leave them susceptible for punishment and the accounts of my participants suggest that the police play a key role in the enforcement of this. Leila explains:

You just can't say I'm a lesbian and men did this to me, they [the police] will just say 'what', you're 'un-Islamic' you know, they wouldn't say 'oh no that's bad [...] You are the problem, you're 'un-Islamic' [...] people can say let's kill her and that's ok, no one can stop that.

Leila, Saudi Arabia.

The lack of protection offered to lesbians can be understood again through Butler (2004, 2006) lens of *derealisation*. Thus to be a lesbian meant women were punished for representing a challenge to the heteronormative values and subsequently were *ungrievable*, voiceless and undeserving of protection. Similar experiences which reiterated women's lack of state protection were expressed by Nadine from Jamaica. She recalled that when her house was burnt down and her partner was beaten the police '*just laughed and joined in...they offered no help*'. For other women the threat of sexual violence and rape was an ever-present fear as they felt they would not be able to access any legal protection. The participants who had experienced sexual violence all spoke of how they knew that it was culturally acceptable and, in some contexts, desirable for men to rape lesbians. Penda from Uganda, Sara from Jamaica and Frankie from Nigeria all explained to me that sexual violence was perceived locally

as the means through which women could be 'cured' of their 'undesirable sexual tendencies.' Frankie described how sexually violent acts such as rape or '*having pepper rubbed in your pussy*' by men, was claimed to be '*good for you*'. Sara talked of how '*corrective rape*' was '*quite common, yeah, it happens all the time*'. Penda also spoke of the time she heard local men speaking about gang raping a lesbian as '*a good way to show*' the woman how to be heterosexual. She explained:

[Corrective rape] it's to teach her a lesson, and there's another thing (...) they think, they have this idea that if we made out with you, it will be an eye opener, it will allow you to know that you are meant to be with a man, it will change your opinion and make you see that you are missing something.

Penda, Uganda.

Women's memories of living outside of heteronormative values were presented as '*difficult*'. Discovering '*feelings*' and attractions towards other women whilst knowing that such relationships were deemed '*wrong*' left some developing strategies in order to be publicly perceived as '*normal*'. For example, Jennifer from Jamaica described how the pressure to socially conform led to her starting a relationship with a man '*to show society a level of normality*'. Similarly, Faria from Pakistan discussed the importance of '*pretending to be normal*' in order to fulfil family pressures to be married. Faria recalled that she reluctantly agreed to marry a man in order to satisfy her family expectations and to avoid bringing '*dishonour*' to her family name. Again Yuval-Davies' (1993) work is helpful in understanding the social pressures placed upon women as wives and mothers and the interconnection between gender and sexuality. Whether women's behaviour is deemed as culturally '*appropriate*' or '*inappropriate*' is judged by a national collective whose cultural values are embedded within the preservation of the family unit. This can be seen in Faria's description of how her own social role was defined by non-negotiable heterosexual values and the pressure she felt to conform to these. She explained:

Your parents, they say things like if you don't marry I will kill myself [....] because my father knew that I love them very much and I can't put them through that, like if I say no, they say they will kill themselves, it's honour [....] they put a lot of pressure on you.

Faria, Pakistan.

5.3 Experiencing Sexual and Physical Violence

Over the course of my interviews each woman reflected on how their experiences of different forms of violence and abuse had dominated their memories of home. Some women talked directly about these traumatic experiences and a couple of women talked in the third person in a dissociated state. Although women narrated their accounts differently and the length of time between their experiences of abuse varied, the significance of how these experiences underpinned their perceptions of their past and their future was similarly conveyed. It was also notable that none of the women spoke to me about positive memories of home or family relationships. The frequent referral to negative experiences should however be situated within the context of my interviews, including the familiarity women had with relaying their negative experiences for their asylum claim. The lack of positive stories could reflect how unaccustomed women were with talking about these memories, as their asylum interviews focused solely on their evidence and accounts of persecution and risks on return.

This section will discuss the different forms of violence which dominated women's accounts with me. These accounts, which were difficult to narrate, are important to document as women wanted them told as part of my doctoral work. During the course of my interviews with the participants I did not ask specifically about their direct experiences of violence and abuse. However, they emerged and dominated women's accounts and their concepts of home.

Some similarities emerged from women's narratives which appeared to be country-specific. For example, all the women from Jamaica talked about public displays of anger, verbal assault and random physical attacks. For these women, the significance of violent confrontations with strangers proved to be both frightening and inhibiting experiences. All the Jamaican women talked to me about how the 'constant threats', 'beatings' and 'intimidation' had resulted in them being fearful of everyone. Nadine for example, spoke of not knowing whether people who approached her 'wanted to ask [her] a question or kill [her]'. Sara similarly commented on how she was specifically targeted and feared this would happen again. She stated:

Then this guy he start hitting me, I say 'what you hitting me for,' he start punching me up and start beating me, so I start to make a run for it, he start to run me down [...] I fall in the gutter, it was slippery and like, when I look up he's starting to come after me with a long knife, that's where I get my scars, he cut me in all these places, this here, this is the other one, yeah, all over[...] I knew it could happen again and it's so scary, it's not nice at all.

Sara, Jamaica.

5.3.1 Experiencing Violence and Threats from Family and Friends

For some women, the violence and threats they experienced came from their family and friends. For instance, Penda, Jules, Frankie and Leila all spoke about the reactions of this close network to their sexual orientation. These women talked of how this experience had altered their relationships and transformed their trust of others. These accounts relayed some of the personal difficulties associated with understanding physical and sexual violence committed or sanctioned by family members. Feelings of acute isolation and rejection dominated these narratives. For example, Leila stressed the emotional and practical consequences of family rejection in Saudi Arabia.

I'm not welcome at my family no more, they've made it clear, last time I was there my brother dragged me out and he beat me, he say they're ashamed of

what I've done, I'm a disgrace to the family [...] in my culture you are nothing without your family.

Leila, Saudi Arabia.

Penda similarly talked of how she struggled to comprehend how the family 'who reared and loved' her, now wanted her 'dead'. She told me that she overheard a family conversation planning her murder and describing her as a 'humiliation to the family'. Penda explained to me that after this incident, she no longer recognised the people who had been in her life for so long. She stated:

People I'd thought were really good, and really nice became monsters [...] people changed in ways that I can't explain to you, the people I knew, I saw sides to them that I never knew existed, people became really horrible, [...] they became monsters (voice breaks) (...) these people who I'd grown up with for more than 20 years and they knew me so well, for them to put it in their mind that they wanted to kill me (...) even saying it, it's so hard to process it in my mind (...) sometimes I just can't process it in my mind (starts to cry).

Penda, Uganda.

Jules similarly spoke to me of how her father took her to the police station because of her 'homosexual behaviour.' She talked of feeling 'betrayed' by his actions and rejected by her whole family who never visited her during her many years in prison. Her account appeared to link the abuse she experienced in prison with a heightened sense of isolation from her family because of her sexuality.

When I got home my father took me to the police station and got me arrested, and it was so horrible, so horrible (sigh), in there the people just horrible [...] I was beaten, I was burnt, I was raped in prison, I got pregnant, I miscarried in

prison, it was just so horrible [...] and nobody came to see me, not one person during all those years.

Jules, Uganda.

5.3.2 Experiencing Violence from the Police

As previously outlined in this chapter, Penda and Jules were both imprisoned in Uganda because of their sexual orientation. Leila from Saudi Arabia also suffered abuse whilst in police custody. All three women spoke to me about their experiences of sexual and physical violence from the police. Their accounts raise issues regarding the relationship between these traumatic experiences and their sexuality. For example, Penda explained:

I was arrested and taken to the police station and jailed [...] for the officers, those police people, you are such a soft touch, you are a target for them, and then the women that you are jailed with, they taunt you, really taunt you, and you can't like look at somebody in the face for longer than a second because they say, don't look at me, you want to turn me [...] the men, oh, you're just seen as fair meat, they want to show you what in inverted commas 'you're missing', and they feel like your sexuality, your being gay is an insult to them, their manhood, and they want to teach you a lesson per se (...) well that's what they were saying (...) that's what they kept saying when the rape was taking place.

Penda, Uganda.

Penda's account offers valuable insights in relation to her interpretation of the rape she experienced. Penda recounted how she was deliberately targeted and raped because of her sexuality. Her memory of this incident was also framed by other women's reactions and in particular their verbal taunts rather than support. This example illustrates her remoteness from all avenues of assistance within her local community. Jules' stories of imprisonment were also filled with personal isolation as

well as intense fear. Having a custodial prison sentence and experiencing torture in prison because of her sexuality left her verbally and physically tormented. The police officers' awareness of her same-sex relationship resulted in her being terrorised and treated with contempt. The knowledge that she had nowhere to go for help and that the institution which was designed to protect her was in fact torturing her because of her sexuality, added to her solitude. She explained:

God I was so scared, I can't tell you how scared I was (...) they took me to this secret place, I don't really know where it is, but it was this dark, horrible, we were walking, I couldn't see as they put this thing on my head so it was covered, and then they took it off and all I could see was there was a hole, they were like saying to me, where do all the gays and lesbians meet, and they said if I don't tell them they will kill me, well they say they will burn me alive, oh I started crying and shouting, I was so frightened so I, I just started naming any places that I could think of [...] after that they walked me to this, I don't know what it was, whether it was a cell or it was a room, there were lots of wires hanging from the ceiling, and they asked me to bend down, they tied my hands and the electric, I was shouting and screaming.

Jules, Uganda.

Leila from Saudi Arabia also talked to me about being sexually assaulted by the police because of her sexuality. She explained how this attack made her feel powerless and how she could not seek help or go unaccompanied to get medical attention after the assault. These accounts illustrate the vulnerability of those without recourse to protection from their family or institutional authorities.

This police man, well he was like in charge of everybody, he say he'd keep me safe from others, they wanted to hurt me bad [...] he took me away from everyone but I was not safe with him [...] he said what I had done was wrong, he said if I told anyone he would kill me and my family, I didn't know what to do, I was so scared.

Leila, Saudi Arabia.

Experiencing abuse by police officers and members of social institutions designed to protect individuals affected women's trust of authorities and perceptions of safety. As women spoke to me of their ill-treatment their heightened social isolation also became apparent. All three of these women talked to me of not knowing '*where to turn*' and '*who to trust*'. Significantly in all three accounts women were told that the crimes committed against them were because of their '*wrong*' sexual orientation. These violent and extremely upsetting experiences reinforced notions that homosexuality should be punished and that they themselves were to blame for the violence that they experienced.

5.3.3 Experiencing Violence from Heterosexual Partners

Other women, including Faria and Jennifer, experienced violence from their male partners. Both told me that they continued their same-sex relationships in secret, whilst in public they upheld heterosexual relationships. When their partners found out about their 'secret' relationship they were both subject to physical and sexual assaults. Jennifer from Jamaica explains below:

I actually had a boyfriend then, and he found out, so that became a big issue [...] he did actually beat me up [...] after that he told me that he knew that I was going out and meeting other girls [...] I ended up having to call the police because he beat me up, and tore my clothes off, and did things to me (...) you know, things I still find hard to talk about, awful things.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

Faria also talked to me about how her husband reacted after he discovered her same-sex relationship. She spoke of how he intimidated her and how she was still fearful that he would find her and her children in the UK. Faria reported that her husband wanted her to be 'punished' for her relationship with a woman. She explained:

He [her husband] saw me and my friend together in the bed and after that he was so angry [...] he pulled my hair and dragged me on the floor but he wouldn't let me get away, even if I went to the toilet he would be staring and watching me on the toilet, he never let me go anywhere [...] he said I would not give you a divorce, I will not leave you, I will keep you with me [...] his words, the way he spoke to me, the way he talked to me it was like he was killing me, it was really bad, and he always used to tell me he wanted to kill me and that he would not let me live for what I've done.

Faria, Pakistan.

These examples raise significant issues over the coexistence of heterosexual and same-sex relationships for the women. As discussed earlier, women believed publicly conforming to heterosexual expectations helped divert attention and provided some social normality. However, for Faria and Jennifer this meant they lived parallel public and private lives which placed them in danger when these two worlds collided.

All these examples illustrate how 'regimes of truth' legitimise acceptable behaviour and punish the unacceptable. It is clear how the police, the family and members of the public all act as monitors and preservers of social order and are thus able to discipline those who threaten this stability. When women's same-sex relationships were publicly known their sexed bodies became permissible sites of violence (Foucault 1967, 1978, 1979, Butler, 2006). The women's accounts portray their clashes and struggles as they experience and *do* their gender and sexuality in a heteronormative society (Butler, 1990, 2004). Together, these narratives reaffirm the relevance of Butler's question 'whose lives count as lives?' as the accounts offered by women in this study reveal their exclusion from citizenship and legitimacy, resulting in forms of suffering that are *ungrievable* within the official culture of the society and as such *not worth a note* given that the punishment received was legitimised (Butler, 2004 and 2006). These accounts demonstrate the process of dehumanisation in a vivid and painful way in a variety of social spaces and places (the home, the street, the state). The discursive influence of

power (legal, customary, institutional) in regulating, reproducing and maintaining norms and expectations over the sexed body can also be seen in women's recollections as they struggle to find meaning (Butler 1990, 2004).

5.3.4 Perceptions of Abuse and Persecution

During these first interviews, each woman discussed their experiences of violence (to varying degrees) in many avenues of their lives, communicating that there was no safety for them in their home country and consequently they lived in a state of constant fear of further attack. For example, Jennifer explained how she believed she had been targeted and persecuted because of her sexuality and thus, could never live in Jamaica again.

I feel like I've been persecuted [...] to me, I have been persistently pushed, I've felt unable to survive because of external harassment, abuse, physical, verbal, psychological, that really messes with my survival, in an extended way, we're not just talking about an odd occasion, it's sustained and, it's over time, it's consistent and persistent.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

The use of language in Jennifer's account is revealing. Her use of the terms 'persecution', 'consistent' and 'persistent' mirrors the legal language of the UK asylum process. All of the women reported how the accounts of violence that they shared with me had also formed the basis of their asylum claims and as such, had been discussed in great detail during their legal asylum interviews. As part of women's asylum interviews they are asked to justify their 'well-founded fear of persecution' (UNHCR 2010a) which included the persecution they had experienced in the past and/or their prospective risk of further persecution if returned to their country of origin (Hathaway 1991). Jennifer's account above indicates how she had familiarised herself with this legal language and how it had now formed part of her personal narrative.

The context in which women were interviewed for this study is also relevant to these discussions. Women were interviewed whilst in the UK, whilst navigating the UK asylum process (or having recently been through the asylum process) and my interviews were based on how they looked back on their experiences in their home countries. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the language used in the UK legal asylum process is based on universal terminology and legal definitions. How this differentiates with women's understanding of sexual violence and their own construction of abuse and 'victimhood' can be seen in Penny's account below. For Penny, living in the UK and navigating the asylum process has clearly changed her use of language and her initial interpretations regarding her experiences of rape.

I start having sex with this girl at her family house one afternoon, I was there and this person burst in, this guy came out, he came in the house and you know, he attack me, and then, he started to rape me, I didn't even know it was rape, at that time I didn't know it was rape, then finally my grandparents found out I was pregnant and they ask me who it was, I couldn't tell them, they beat me, you know [...] I never heard anything like it [rape] until I came to this country [...] and then I look back at the things that happen to me and think, I say, my God, those people [her family and the man who raped her] are abusing me.

Penny, Jamaica.

Penny's account raises important issues regarding how experiences can be reframed through new language and geographical space. This suggests that spatial transitions affect language, perceptions and moral boundaries. For Foucault, the role of language underpins the construction and reproduction of discourse, power and knowledge (Rouse 2005). In this context, how language is used and by whom shapes social meanings and norms. Here the change in women's language can be seen to represent their new space and search for citizenship. For example, Penny's quote suggests that she came to understand her experience as rape whilst in the UK, whilst living in a new cultural context and whilst navigating new legal structures. For many years she did not know, identify or consider herself a 'survivor' of rape and had no specific framework to

describe this experience. Discovering a name and meaning for 'rape' in the UK changed her recollection of events and how she now talks about her family. She often described her family's reaction to me as 'abusive' despite not considering this when she was younger. This issue is also discussed by interactionists such as Plummer (1995) and Charon (2009) who analyse the fluid nature of language and interpretations. This is also demonstrated in Penny's other interviews with me, which revealed that her retrospective story had been reworked and reconceived as she had learnt more about herself, her sexuality and her treatment by others. By my third interview with Penny, she revealed experiences of childhood abuse and molestation. Her account of this difficult time illustrated how she had reorganised her childhood experiences through new language and knowledge gained whilst in the UK.

5.4 The Challenges with Constructing Sexual Identity and Subjectivity

As outlined in Chapter Three women's sexual identity and subjectivity are important themes throughout this thesis. For the purpose of my study, sexual identity represents the public interface of women's sexuality and includes self-expression, belonging, commonality and political activism. Sexual subjectivity however relates to more private thoughts, emotions and internalisations of women's sexual desires and sexual self-esteem. Analysing this particular public/private nexus in this thesis is important given the public role women's sexuality plays in their asylum applications and the historically private aspect of their same-sex relationships and desires. The next two chapters will discuss in more detail the struggle and tensions between these aspects of women's sexuality as they collide during the asylum process. As presented above, the problematic nature of women's sexuality in their home countries compounded their difficulties with constructing, understanding and accepting their sexual orientation. For all the women interviewed, their sexuality was private, shrouded in secrecy and was essential to conceal. For Sara, her private views about her sexuality were an on-going '*internal battle*'. For other women, their sexual subjectivity and identity was associated with negative emotions such as guilt and remorse. This is illustrated by Imogen below, whose reflections on the social messages that were relayed to her impacted upon how she understood her sexual orientation.

Well I thought it [homosexuality] was wrong, because that was what I was brought up to believe, that same-sex affairs are just out of this world, they are bad, it's not normal, so I felt very, very bad about it.

Imogen, The Gambia.

This kind of personal struggle seemed to be exacerbated by other people's reactions when they learned about their same-sex relationships. For example, Frankie talked to me about this moment as a key catalyst in her life which had triggered a range of negative events which she reported that she is still experiencing. She spoke of how she perceived her early attraction to other women as an un-problematic time of innocent sexual exploration and compatibility. However, when Frankie referred to her mother discovering her relationship with a local girl, her reflections of this experience, and the tone⁸⁴ she used in the interview, changed completely.

Well at first I didn't think there was anything wrong with it, it felt fine up until my mum found out, then I realised that there was something wrong with it, oh the drama (...) that was when I knew something must be wrong somewhere (...) something was wrong with me and with what I did.

Frankie, Nigeria.

Frankie's account also helps to illustrate the difficulties in trying to understand her personal emotions within a hostile social framework, negative family attitudes and her own high levels of internal homophobia (Allen & Oleson 1999). When presented with a firm negative reaction, Frankie then believed that what she had done, and who she was, was 'wrong' as she tried to erase and delegitimise her feelings. By applying prohibition to her own idea of self, her sense of shame clearly provoked a separation between herself and the heteronormative desires of her family (Rich 1981). Such social

⁸⁴ The use of the voice-centred relational method helped me to listen for changes in the women's tones as they spoke (see Chapter Four).

'Othering' also represents Frankie's loss of citizenship as she fell beyond the established discursive regimes and grappled with being outside of the heteronormative values (Foucault, 1978, Butler 1990). Living amidst such restrictive social, moral and cultural norms meant that forming a public sexual identity was '*almost impossible*' as it threatened the 'regimes of truth' and women's own civil and physical survival (Foucault, 1978).

My study also suggests that all of the women interviewed inherently linked negative experiences, rejection, guilt and emotional pain to the construction and understanding of their sexual identity and subjectivity. For some, this included directly blaming themselves and their sexuality for the abuse and violence they had experienced, as illustrated by Jules below:

I had done something wrong, yeah, I felt so bad of myself and, like how can I explain it (...) sometimes I wished I was dead, I felt so ashamed, so ashamed, I was so ashamed of myself [...] what they did to me, I was raped every night, by different police officers, I got STDs from them, I felt so bad and ashamed for what I had done.

Jules, Uganda.

Jules' perspective supports scholarly accounts which indicate how incidents of sexual abuse and violence affect women. For example, Wasco (2003) and Bourke (2007) observe that it is common for women to experience feelings of shame, blame and humiliation after sexual violence. However, added to these 'burdens' was the perception that they 'deserved' what happened to them because of their 'wrong' sexuality. Jennifer explained this below:

Even though you're being persecuted deep inside, you feel like it's deserving, it's almost acceptable, it's so entrenched, and so much the norm that you get past the fact that it's wrong, and you accept it, does that make sense? it's like when I

talk about it, I link it in with a criminal activity, it's like you've stolen and you deserve your punishment, it's considered so wrong, and it's so entrenched, that you feel you're so wrong, the punishment is deserving, I, I think I'm worthy of punishment.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

For Leila however the sense of self-stigma she associated with her sexuality made her feel like a '*bad person*.' Her interviews revealed how she internalised her behaviour as being deviant and had clearly associated herself with '*criminals*' and '*bad people*.' She stated:

What they did to me (...) I understand why they did it because it's not allowed, they needed to punish me and in my society that's what they do with criminals and bad people, it's a bad thing I did (...) so that makes me a bad person.

Leila, Saudi Arabia.

These perspectives replicate academic accounts of internalised homophobia. This literature suggests how negative experiences and social hostility in relation to people's sexual orientation can lead to personal feelings of shame and disgust (Allen & Oleson 1999). For Tomkins (1963) '*shame is an experience of the self by the self*' (p.133). This emotion is frequently associated with same-sex desires and is used to self-validate negative experiences as individuals believe that they deserve to feel demeaned (Kaufman & Raphael 1996). This can make negotiating a positive sexual identity more difficult as to be ashamed of one's sexuality can leave one feeling ashamed of themselves (Tigert 1999).

Associating the discovery of a 'different' sexuality with a negative and fraught experience also emerged from the interview. All participants stressed that their same-sex desires was an aspect of themselves which they wished, at some point in their lives, they could change. For example Mae explains this confusion below:

I always thought it was wrong, like a real burden, for me and everyone around me, I really wanted to change it, to be like everyone else.

Mae, Jamaica.

Similarly Jennifer also spoke about her sexual orientation as being a personal 'burden' which had negatively impacted on all aspects of her life. Interestingly, Jennifer also raised the personal issue regarding her conflict with her Christian faith and the struggle she had with the religious messages she received about homosexuality.

If I could of changed it I would have (...) if I could change the way I am [...] it's always been a major, major conflict for me (...) 'cause I always thought for me, from a Christian point of view, about what am I doing being against Gods will, so, in every way, it's difficult for me.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

Frankie's first interview raised similar issues. She talked about how discovering and trying to construct a livable sexual identity was an upsetting experience. Her account demonstrates how she had linked the negative social messages and family rejection with her sexual identity and private self-loathing.

You pick on yourself because you think that you're less than every other person, and to me, I wouldn't want (...) I wouldn't want it for my worst enemy, I'd want them to die than to actually be living a life where you're basically as good as dead (...) you're walking, you're breathing, but you're no good, that's me.

Frankie, Nigeria.

These accounts exemplify women's struggles over their public and private spaces and how their sexuality impacted upon this and their sense of self. Here we can see how

women's own internalisations of social responses, values and 'Othering' often made the thought of a 'livable life' appear almost impossible (Butler, 2004, 2006). However, what should also be noted is that all women left their home countries and sought asylum on the basis of their sexuality and therefore (at some stage in their life) were able to recognise that their same-sex desires were worthy of international protection. This issue is expanded upon below.

5.4.1 Secrecy, Shame and 'Being True'

Having to hide sexual desires and feelings confused women's understanding of their sexual identity and subjectivity. Hiding 'true' feelings was a term that emerged in all of the first interviews. For some women, like Sara, this secrecy exacerbated an internal struggle, social isolation and heightened distrust of people. She spoke of how the constant concealment of her sexual desires, thoughts and relationships had separated her from her friends and family and thus made her feel like an 'outsider.' As can be seen in the account below, Imogen describes how having to maintain secrecy meant she felt she *'could never relax and trust people'*. She explained:

So you have to suppress yourself, you keep everything undercover [...] it's really difficult because even if you show some form of affection to someone, say if you like have crush or something, you have to be busy watching your back all the time, well you have to be very, very careful, who you speak to, who you associate with, even [...] the places you go to, even what you say.

Imogen, The Gambia.

Here Imogen is clearly performing an 'appropriate' sex/gender identity however, it is apparent that the performance has emotional costs. Similar themes also emerged from other interviews where women describe their public denials of their same-sex desire as a form of personal betrayal. This was explained by some of the women from Jamaica as they stressed that 'hiding' their sexuality, lying about their relationships, socialising in secret, or *'pretending to be attracted to men'* was experienced as *'denying'* and *'betraying'* themselves. Jennifer described how *'each lie'* she told in

public felt like a ‘*crushing*’ part of her private life in Jamaica. For Sara, ‘*every time I pretend to be straight, it’s like I’m deceiving everybody else as well as myself*’. Nadine explained that:

Well for me, I can’t speak for others, it was almost as if (...) because I can’t truly acknowledge who I am, and I can’t be who I am, and I have tried, it’s almost as if there is a huge part of you missing [...] in order to acknowledge who you are you have to, hide, and lie, and pretend (...) it goes against everything you believe in (...) it becomes such a complex, underground web of lies and ways to hide, and it’s, it’s difficult.

Nadine, Jamaica.

As well as describing how she felt that a ‘*huge part of her was missing*’, Nadine also reported how her public image left her feeling like ‘*nobody really knew*’ her. Through a Foucaultian lens such assertions are consistent with a regime of truth in which sexuality comes to represent an innate part of the self. Penny explains this below:

It’s hard, how can I explain it (...) you know, you have these feelings but you know they’re wrong, but you can’t stop them, but you try because you think you should stop [...] then you feel bad because you know it’s who you are (...) so you try not to be that person (...) but you are (...) you pretend to others but that hurts yourself.

Penny, Jamaica.

These accounts are important as they illustrate that despite a sense of social marginalisation, negative self-perceptions, and feelings of blame, guilt and secrecy, women still believed that their sexuality could not and should not be changed. For example, Jules explained that ‘*you can’t change who you are, you can’t, it’s who I am, it’s part of me*’. The importance of ‘*being true*’ to themselves, of finding others in

similar situations, of seeking comfort and of wanting to, as Imogen described, *'just be myself'* arose from several interviews (this issue is also discussed further in Chapter Seven). These discussions indicated that the denial of their humanity as lesbians was also associated with a troubled and often a lonely journey, yet that sexual orientation was ultimately regarded as an important and fundamental part of who these women were. For the women in this study their sexuality at times dominated other aspects and intersections across race, gender and nationhood. This is not to say that these intersections were not important or were not present in women's identities, but rather they were aspects of themselves which they did not discuss with me. This may be because their sexuality was concealed and suppressed for so long and being in the UK was the first time they were able to explore this (without repercussions). Alternatively, the centring of sexuality in their presentation of self to me could also represent their lives at the moment in time which I met them, the consequence of a process of oppression and the claiming of citizenship and protection that focused on their sexuality. What can be said with certainty is that women's sexuality was central to both their public and private representations of self, and involved forms of revelation and voice that were a necessary part of achieving what in Butler's terms is a 'livable life'.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored how women's sexual identities have been formed in relation to oppression, violence, subjugation and exile. Theoretical resources offered by Foucault (1978, 1979), Yuval-Davies (1997) and Butler (2004, 2006) have helped me to understand the dynamics of such exclusion. First of all, the women (as biological reproducers of nationhood) were subjected to 'regimes of truth' regarding the dominant compulsory heterosexuality, and their challenge to this left them delegitimised, excluded and needing to be disciplined and punished. Drawing on the women's accounts I show how the state apparatus reinforced these 'regimes of truth' through government legislation, the police, the family, community and religion. As a consequence women were displaced into a realm outside of acceptability and such exclusion symbolically and geographically forced them from their families,

communities and countries of origin. In spite of this, or arguably because of this, we see the emergence of a 'reverse discourse' as the women construct their sexuality as a personal 'truth' to themselves and as underpinning their desire for a livable life. The asylum process requires that the women live this new truth, publicly identify as a lesbian asylum seeker and repeatedly perform their sexual identity in order to seek protection. I will go on to explore this further in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Seeking Protection

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss women's individual reflections of how they navigated the various tiers of the asylum process. Particular attention is paid to the screening interview, the substantive interview and women's experiences of attending court, as these three events dominated their accounts. My analysis draws on Plummer's (1995) work for considering how narratives are produced, how spaces are created to enable a story to be told, who is accessing the story and what strategies are used to tell a story. I also draw on ideas from the wider field of narrative analysis noting the enforced nature of their asylum stories. Attention is paid to how women reflect upon the intricacies of seeking protection and the nexus between the production of narratives and establishing 'truths' about sexual identity. The analysis is enriched by reference to Butler's (1990) ideas about 'performativity' and Foucault's (1978) debates on the role of confession in the (re)construction of truth, knowledge and power.

The chapter is divided into three sections; the stories told through the asylum process, evaluating sexual stories through the legal lens, and finally the transition of women's sexuality from their private lives into the public and legal domain. The personal accounts discussed in this chapter come from the second interviews with the participants.

6.2 The Asylum Process

In order to seek international protection in the UK an individual must apply for asylum. The asylum process is a strict, legal and adversarial procedure. As discussed in Chapter Two, applicants need to submit evidence and have their case reviewed in order to assess its merits against the 1951 Refugee Convention and UK case law. The length of time an asylum application takes depends upon a range of factors including the: complexity of the case; when the application was submitted; evidence provided; the

woman's country of origin;⁸⁵ and an individual's access to good legal representation (Rights of Women 2012). If the applicant is refused, they may be entitled to apply for a review of the decision and attend the Immigration and Asylum Chamber of the First Tier Tribunal.⁸⁶ The Home Office are also entitled to appeal against an outcome where asylum or leave to remain is granted if they believe an error in legal judgement has been made. A diagram of the legal avenues can be found in Appendix Eleven.

The women interviewed for this study were at various stages of the asylum process. Seven had received a positive decision (one was granted asylum immediately) and the other four women had gone through several legal appeals and were still awaiting a decision. One of these four women was initially granted asylum two years ago, however, the Home Office appealed that judgement and at the time of interview she was still waiting for her case to be re-heard. For the women in this study, the length of time that they had remained in the UK asylum process varied enormously from three months (in Mae's case), to over eight years (in Leila's case) and the rest of the women fell somewhere between these two extremes. Consequently, some women's applications were processed under the 'new asylum model' and a couple of applications were submitted 'pre NAM'. All asylum applicants submitted after April 2007 are processed under the NAM which was introduced as a government initiative designed to speed up the application process (Refugee Council 2007). In addition some women interviewed were initially 'fast-tracked' and later withdrawn from this process as the complexity of their case became apparent. Despite the participants having experienced different asylum models, similarities emerged from their accounts.

As stated in Chapter Two, in October 2010 the UK Border Agency introduced guidance for its staff on how to process asylum applications based on a person's sexual orientation and gender identity. Alongside these new instructions, specific training was

⁸⁵ See Appendix Ten for the 'safe country list' (commonly referred to as the 'white list'). These countries (which includes Jamaica) are believed to be 'safe to return' for asylum seekers. 'Safe country lists' are updated by the Home Office. Applications from these countries are more likely to be processed under the 'detained fast track' programme, more likely to have their application refused and more likely to be returned before their appeal. The 'safe country list' does not take into account specific forms of persecution (including the risk of being persecuted because of one's sexual orientation) which may be common within that country.

⁸⁶ An appeal must be made within 10 working days after the initial decision. When applying for an appeal, applicants are usually advised to request an oral hearing so that they can tell their stories directly to the immigration judge(s). If an error in law is made in the judgement at the First Tier Tribunal, the case may then be appealed in limited circumstances to a Judge at the Upper Tribunal.

developed by the UNHCR, the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG) and Stonewall for case owners and presenting officers, senior case workers, team leaders and regional asylum leads. Immigration judges also received specific training although UKLGIG report that this particular training was '*relatively basic*' (Stuart 2012bp.24). Although many of the women involved in this study submitted their asylum claim prior to the introduction of UKBA guidance, this document still provides an important policy-oriented focal point, especially for the women appealing their negative decisions. Correlations and disjuncture's with the current guidance are explored below.

6.2.1 The Screening Interview

In order for a claim to be assessed, those claiming asylum must attend a series of legal interviews. The first episode of formal questioning begins at the point of submitting an asylum application. This stage of the asylum process is referred to as the 'screening interview' (UKBA 2010). This is a basic interview where asylum seekers are asked a series of brief questions in order for the Home Office to enquire about: the individual's country of origin, the nature of their claim, to confirm contact details and the language they speak. Photographs and fingerprints are also taken and individuals are issued with their Asylum Registration Card (if they are not immediately detained). All applicants go through a screening interview which also becomes the means for the Home Office to decide whether it is necessary to immediately detain the individual, whether they should be placed on the 'fast track' process and/or whether and where they should be dispersed (Refugee Council 2012b). Women's accounts suggested to me that the screening interview was considered to be a difficult, embarrassing and an uncomfortable experience. The participants stressed that being immediately faced with the requirement to disclose their sexuality to UK government officials was a problematic process. For example, Jules talked of how she had a deep suspicion of authorities and was uncomfortable talking openly about her sexual orientation. Alongside this, concerns that other asylum applicants could hear their conversations with the Home Office frequently emerged. Imogen explained:

When you go into Croydon you have to wait together with other applicants (...) you know it was just not easy actually talking in front of the others (...) there was about 14 or 15 people behind me, they can hear because there's a PA system, you can hear what they say, like, I could hear others, so the people behind, they knew exactly what was going on [...] there was no privacy there, you know some of these things are definitely not easy to disclose, so having a lot of people behind you it's, well, just not ideal.

Imogen, the Gambia

The significance of the initial screening interview has resonance with Foucault's work on the ritual of disclosure. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978) he argues that the 'truth' of the subject must be confessed in order for the subject to exist. Therefore, confession operates as a special form of narrative contributing to the discourse of sexuality and thus raising questions about who hears the confessions, who is making a confession and for what truth (Tambling 1990). For Foucault (1978) the role of man as a 'confessing animal' has had an unequal and patriarchal presence throughout history and is emblematic of truth and power. Plummer (1995) also focuses our attention on the way that confessional stories are located within power and political structures, drawing our attention to how 'stories' are told, to whom and for what purpose. Together these approaches offer a useful lens for understanding the construction of narratives within social and legal parameters.

In these second interviews, women's accounts provided insights into the kinds of narratives demanded by the screening interview. For example, their descriptions of the physical surrounding of the screening interview and the role (and power) of the interviewer (and interpreter) powerfully evoked the political, legal and symbolic power dynamics involved.

Memories of the difficulties of immediately 'confessing' and self-identifying as a lesbian appeared to be compounded by a lack of privacy provided at the Asylum

Screening Unit⁸⁷. For example, Sara described how the process of *'shouting out (...) and craning your neck 'cause they can't hear'* was humiliating given how *'difficult these things are to tell'*. Similarly, Nadine recalled that the very process of just talking openly about her sexuality to *'complete strangers'* in such a public and un-empathetic forum was problematic. She stated:

Well it's like a bank, you know, someone sitting behind the counter, they just ask you a list of questions, they don't even look at you while they're asking you, they're just reading of a piece of paper (...) it's difficult because in your head you have all this stuff going round [...] like you don't disclose your sexuality to anyone that's your culture so (...) then they say why you claiming asylum [...] so you have to disclose that you want to seek asylum on your sexuality, it's difficult you know, it depends on your culture, it depends on how comfortable you are with it.

Nadine, Jamaica.

Penda from Uganda explained that her screening interview was the first time she had verbally identified as a lesbian and as such was *'physically draining'*. Here the context in which individual narratives are constructed and relayed is important and complicates the voluntaristic model offered in Plummer's (1995) work which emphasises individual choice and anticipations in the telling of sexual stories. For example, Penda described her screening interview as her *'coming out story'* and mentioned that she *'shouldn't have had to come out like that'*. Her expectations and the enforced nature of her *'coming out'* story can be observed below.

⁸⁷ It should be noted however, that since I conducted the fieldwork, the Croydon Screening Unit has introduced changes (2012) in light of similar concerns. At present, private cubicles are available at the Unit to help provide a suitable space for people to talk about sensitive information. As these changes are very recent, it is still too early to know whether this encourages the disclosure of sensitive information at this early stage. Private spaces are still to be introduced across other ports of entry.

They brought this interpreter from Uganda who was interpreting for me and I was saying 'I was a lesbian and I was running away from persecution in my country', and do you know what she was saying to me in my language? she was saying 'you're such a liar, it's people like you who give Uganda a bad name, there's no such things in Uganda,' so she was making this experience even much harder, and she didn't need to do it (...) I said 'yeah I am a lesbian' (...) it was the first time those words had ever, ever left my mouth (...) it was really hard, really hard.

Penda, Uganda.

The accounts above highlight the difficulties and fears associated with talking about sexuality to strangers and how for Penda, saying '*I am a lesbian*' for the '*first time*' was clearly memorable. Bacon (1998) writes of how 'coming out' is an opportunity to speak your own way into existence and for Morris (1997), the 'coming out' narrative is the initial stage to begin to form, accept and embrace your sexual story. Disagreement does exist however within academic literature regarding what this process entails and signifies (Davies & Rentzel 1993). For example, debates regarding whether a person is ever completely 'out', what this means and whether this is ever desirable are on-going (Mason 2002). Being 'out' or being 'in the closet' can often be presented as binary positions, yet for many, this process is continually negotiated as individuals navigate their desired 'visibility' and any potential threats. (Harry 1993; Dank 1998). 'Coming out' also implies a singular event, yet in reality individuals may disclose their sexuality at various stages of life as they may choose to be 'out' to certain people and not others. The 'coming out' literature covers a spectrum of narratives from an unapologetic and empowering process to contrasting views of fears of violence, punishment and rejection (Jenness 1992; Davies & Rentzel 1993; Mason 2002). For Penda however, her 'coming out' story as relayed to me was to facilitate an asylum application. For her, speaking such intimate words was not an empowering process as part of a personal journey of sexual acceptance, she was not speaking her way into existence or negotiating sexual agency. Rather, the legal process had foreclosed the opportunity to narrate her story in her own terms, to an audience of her choice and to

find meanings in her accounts. This enforced 'coming out' meant that she was compelled to perform a new sexual identity in order to satisfy a legal process of subject formation rather than personal empowerment (Butler 1990; Butler 1997).

Talking publicly for the first time about their sexuality also emerged as a key experience for Leila and Faria. Although these women realised the inevitability of needing to talk about their sexuality during the asylum process, the personal difficulties associated with immediately verbalising this was described as '*stressful*' by Leila and '*uncomfortable*' for Faria. This initial 'screening' interaction provides a useful context when analysing the subjective response to narrating the asylum process, including: who the intimate narratives are relayed to; how they are disclosed; how they are heard and how they make women feel. These issues will be expanded upon throughout this chapter.

6.2.2 The Substantive Interview

After the initial screening interview each individual attends a substantive interview⁸⁸ with the Home Office. The substantive interview is conducted in private and is designed to elicit the details behind each claim. During this interview, each individual must disclose a full and detailed account of the persecution experienced and the expected risks if returned to their country of origin (Rights of Women 2012). Evidence to support their claim must also be submitted to the Home Office as part of this procedure. The substantive interview is the first comprehensive interaction between applicants and the Home Office regarding their specific asylum application. A decision by the Home Office should be reached within 30 days from the initial application and will be based on the evidence and answers provided during this interview. The decision reached can include the right to remain in the UK or the refusal of the asylum application. The UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group report that approximately 98% of asylum claims based on a person's sexuality are rejected by the Home Office after their initial substantive interview⁸⁹. This is compared to approximately 73% of all

⁸⁸ This is also commonly referred to as the 'in-depth,' 'asylum' or 'full' interview.

⁸⁹ This statistic was published before the UKBA guidelines on gender and sexual identity. It is largely hoped that with recent changes in UK case law and with the introduction of Home Office (HO) guidelines that this statistic has been now reduced. No official statistics have been published since the introduction of HO guidelines.

other applications in the UK (Gray 2010). The high proportion of initial refusals after the substantive interview continues to be an area in which campaigners are advocating for better decision-making⁹⁰ (Muggeridge & Mamen 2011; Shaw & Kaye 2013).

Women described how distressing they found the length, level of questioning and the intensity of their substantive interview. Nadine, Imogen and Sara all spoke with bitterness about this particular aspect of the asylum process, especially regarding the formal setting and the interrogatory style of the interviewer. For example, Nadine from Jamaica explained that her interviewer did not give her any ‘*eye contact*’ and showed no ‘*empathy*’ to her story throughout the interview. Imogen from The Gambia also referred to her interviewer as using a ‘*clinical approach*’ and of ignoring her own personal attachments and emotions relating to her personal story. Likewise, Sara from Jamaica reported that her interview was conducted with a lack of ‘*understanding*’ and ‘*sensitivity*’ towards her experiences and predicaments. For these women, this context made talking about their personal difficulties and experiences ‘*really traumatic*’ as they felt unable to express themselves in the ways and time they wanted to. Nadine described some of these difficulties as follows:

My caseworker, if she understood, if she care, if she showed empathy, pity or any remorse I wasn't able to detect that (...) you know it was very stringent, very sterile, she wrote and never looked up (...) so how the question was put to me was, there was no format, you weren't able to just talk, you were at the start, the middle, back to the start, at the end, the middle, it was all over (...) and up to that point talking about it was just, I was still overwhelmed by what happened to me and, when I talked about it, I would just cry.

Nadine, Jamaica.

Sensitivities associated with self-disclosure are now acknowledged within the UKBA guidelines on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (2010). This document states

⁹⁰ 25% of initial refusals to grant asylum are overturned on appeal (Shaw and Kaye, 2013). There are no specific statistics available on the number of LGBT cases overturned on appeal.

that *'interviewing officers should ask open questions that allow applicants to describe the development of their identity and how this has affected their experiences both in their own country and the UK'*. Whilst Nadine's statement was taken prior to the introduction of the UKBA guidelines (2010) it provides a useful illustration of the tensions between the demand to produce narratives and the legal mechanisms to determine the merits of each asylum claim. Here Butler's work has particular resonance as it is clear how in this context, the asylum process elicits performative statements as women begin the process of legal subjectification (Butler 1997).

In addition to the performative statements, Penda and Frankie also talked of the stress of not recognising their accounts after they were reinterpreted through a legal lens and written up by others. For example, Frankie commented that how the Home Office represented her story *'did not represent her full account'* and contributed to her view that there was a deliberate strategy to disbelieve her. Similarly, Penda reflected on how she saw her substantive interview as *'a game'* designed to undermine her. She stated:

*But he was so understanding, but then you realise it's just part of a game (...)
these people you can't read them, I thought they were so understanding of my
case, and then you realise after, you've just been really fooled into thinking it's
all an understanding process, sensitive, but boy it's not, it's so not.*

Penda, Uganda.

Again, these examples reveal tensions between the production of narratives in an asylum contexts and a wider sociological literature on narratives which tends to emphasise choice and empowerment. For example Phoenix (2008) describes narratives as a personal discursive space where agentic choice is used to construct and navigate social context and personal meanings. In contrast, the accounts presented to me about the substantive interviews suggest that these created what Steedman has termed as *'enforced narratives'*, as the legal demand for information removes their

ability to decide how and what to disclose. For the participants, the Home Office interviewer held an important role as someone who was not facilitating a personal narrative but a 'coaxer' who controlled the nature, order and time allowed for each discussion point. From the above accounts we can clearly see how the removal of choice from women's (re)construction of their individual narratives impacted upon them. For example, Sarah described thinking '*what the fuck happened?*' after her substantive interview, and Penny recalled feeling '*dead*' after four hours of in-depth questioning. For Frankie from Nigeria however, the substantive interview process was felt to be emotionally destructive, thus removing her sense of control over her story and her ability to maintain her privacy. She explained:

After my interview, I just broke down and I was really crying and shaking (...) if they ask you a question you have to answer, I had a problem with that, if I've been able to bottle up something for so long then someone says you have to tell me, this is something I've safely kept from everybody, somewhere that I don't allow myself to go, something that is hidden, then they're asking me to like bring it out for everyone, but all for their own convenience, you know what I'm saying, I have to start going through that whole emotional bag, just so they have an answer they want, so the fact that I have to remember that, I have to talk about it with them, that angers me (...) I just want to shut it away, that was always my best policy, to just shut it away, but during the asylum you're not allowed to do that, (whispers) and when they ask you, you have to tell (...) I feel angry, it's mine I want to do with it what I want, and what I want is to put it away, to leave it there, stop poking it, stop asking me, leave it, it makes you feel vulnerable, and I hate being vulnerable.

Frankie, Nigeria.

Frankie's account also demonstrates the emotional attachments she had to her own narrative. Similarly, other women raised concerns about both how their stories were told and heard. The knowledge that their asylum claim depended on how much information they revealed clearly affected their motivation to disclose. Having to re-

tell and re-live distressing events was articulated as emotionally ‘*traumatic*’ and ‘*painful*’. Jennifer from Jamaica recollects these difficulties as she talks about her substantive interview:

Each one of those incidents, each time you recall it, each time we represent it, each time we look at it another way, has me going through that incident again, because this is my life, this is what I have lived, it isn't something I've made up, it is something I am recalling and something that is being reinforced in me each time we discuss it, including the pain I felt then and including the pain I feel (...) I remember how it felt then and I am now hurting again (...) it wasn't the easiest thing to deal with on my emotional level.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

The responsibility of providing a narrative and sufficient evidence is placed on each asylum applicant as part of their *burden of proof*. A failure to answer any questions is interpreted negatively by the Home Office and often affects a person's presumed ‘credibility’. For decision-makers questioning a person's credibility is a legitimate line of enquiry as stipulated under Section 8 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004.⁹¹ For Imogen however not being able to refuse any questions, especially ones which she did not understand, added to her difficulties with the interview process. She explained:

You have to answer all of their questions, at most you could say I don't know, but they will hold that against you, then they will say credibility and all that, it's like for them it's the opposite of you, it's like they just pick on those questions that they know you don't want to talk about, and ask you just to frustrate you.

Imogen, the Gambia.

⁹¹ This Act states that suspicion should be raised if individuals: fail to answer specific questions; hide or provide misleading information; produce false documentation or make an asylum application later than is reasonably expected. See: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/19/section/8>

All of the women spoke to me of their hesitancy to talk about their difficult experiences with the Home Office. Many explained that they felt they *'had to talk about stuff'* and Penda described this as *'a matter of life and death'*. The erosion of their choice to withhold information was apparent throughout my study as Jennifer stated: *'you have to talk, it's a must, you need to tell them everything, even if you don't want to'*. This study illustrates how the participants contextualised their initial interactions with the Home Office (both during the screening interview and the substantive interview) and their legal subjectification within unequal power dynamics. Alongside these difficulties, women revealed how not being able to negotiate boundaries, space, silence and consent contributed to feelings of being left *'empty'*, of feeling *'symbolically raped'* and of losing a personal sense of autonomy. Jennifer explains this below:

I genuinely feel like I've been raped, because I feel like so much has been taken from me that I didn't want to give, like I said, it just feels like you've taken all your innards and just spread them out there and somebody's just walked on them, and then you've just got to try to tuck it back in for your mere survival (...) and it's just not an easy process not for me, not for me (whispers and sniffs).

Jennifer, Jamaica.

I have found it useful to understand the screening interview as constituting women in Foucault's (1978, 1979) terms as *'docile bodies'* within the asylum process. Their descriptions portray the unequal judicial power dynamics, their inability to negotiate their permission and approval over what was disclosed to whom and when. Their accounts of being subject to the legal gaze resonates with Foucault's analysis of the panopticon and indicates how women were subject to performative scrutiny as soon as they submitted their asylum application (Foucault 1979). The various mechanisms through which this is done and its impact is expanded upon below.

6.3 Talking About Sexuality

As women's asylum claims were based on persecution arising from their sexual orientation, talking about their same-sex experiences was an essential part of their asylum application. As established in Chapter Five, the conditions and dangers in their home countries meant that the women had little (if any) experience of speaking publicly about this. For Leila, just finding the right words was difficult. She explained:

So I think they [the Home Office] do not understand how difficult it is, to discuss these things, they have no idea, they think that anyone can just say anywhere 'I am lesbian', which is not the case, it's a difficult thing to say and talk about and, they just don't seem to see that.

Leila, Saudi Arabia.

Negative emotions associated with sexuality in women's home countries did not disappear upon arriving in the UK. For example, Jennifer spoke of her struggle with trying to understand her own feelings towards her sexuality whilst going through the UK asylum process. This included trying to 'make sense' of her own sexual identity, cultural beliefs and religious views whilst simultaneously navigating a formal, legal and unfamiliar process. Similarly, Jules spoke of how identifying herself as a lesbian in the UK 'was hard'. She explained:

I was still in that mentality, of (...) I hated myself, I hated myself, and talking about it, I just hated myself, and I quite honestly resented being a lesbian, you know like after the rape and stuff, I resented God for making me this person, and (...) because I just thought to myself, 'everything bad that has happened to you, has happened because of this one thing, it's because you're a lesbian', and er I quite honestly resented the idea (...) coming here, and talking, just saying 'you're gay' or whatever, like for me, that alone was hard.

Jules, Uganda.

Berg and Millbank's (2009) have also written about the significance of internalised homophobia and shame and how this might influence women's ability to openly discuss their sexuality and same-sex relationships with legal representatives. They state: *'feelings of internalised shame may be particularly strong in lesbians and gay men because their experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation have persisted without the coping mechanisms available to other minorities'* (p.198). Added to this, the women also discussed how the style and personal nature of questioning by the Home Office made openly talking about their sexuality both troubling and embarrassing. For example, Penny described feeling *'confused'* as to why she was being asked about sex positions and sex toys. These questions also appeared to illustrate a range of cultural assumptions and western stereotypes used by the interviewer to prove or dismiss her claims to being a lesbian. The nature of the substantive interview illustrated how her asylum narrative was limited to legal necessities and meeting set criteria, as opposed to a space for self-exploration. Penny's revealed that she *'did not want to be rude'* demonstrating that despite feeling uncomfortable and confused by the questions asked of her, she felt compelled to answer. This account highlights the tensions between the formal nature of the legal interview process and the requirement to share personal, intimate and 'secret' details to official representatives.

The difficulties women described to me about the screening and substantive interview also extended to their experiences of attending court. When women appeared in court, they were expected to expand on the information provided in their legal interviews and talk to the immigration judges about their same-sex experiences. As can be seen from the diagram in Appendix Eleven, the court process begins after a person's application has been initially refused by the Home Office. The court procedures require the applicant, their legal representative and the Home Office personnel to each represent their legal arguments and for the judge(s) to navigate the questions and to produce a decision. The UK asylum process consists of two tribunals, the First-Tier Tribunal and the Upper Tribunal. There is an Immigration and Asylum Chamber in each. Although all women, with the exception of Mae, had attended court a number of times, confusion was evident regarding which Tribunal they had attended,

how many times and the differences between these. This lack of comprehension appeared to add to the confusion women had about the legal process and their feeling that navigating this was out of their control. This led to Nadine stating that, *'the asylum process is something which is done to you, not something you do'*.

Women also described being acutely aware of the importance of receiving a positive outcome from the courts which heightened the *'pressure of everything'*. This made appearing in front of judges (usually male) and disclosing intimate experiences a particularly *'uncomfortable'* and intense process. Penda explained:

When you're sitting in court, you have to go through it again, everyone's talking about it (...) you see I had a major, major breakdown after the court appearance, I had a major, major breakdown, I just didn't want to go on, I didn't, I was thinking to myself, I don't know how to do this, I don't know how I can keep talking about these things, I was thinking to myself, what do I have to live for, I then tried to commit suicide, I broke down, I couldn't go on, I just couldn't face it anymore, it felt just too much.

Penda, Uganda.

Penda reveals how knowing that she needed to disclose her experiences again, on demand, to immigration judges left her feeling that she could not control her own narrative. She felt that *'everyone wanted to know'* about her, yet at the same time *'nobody cared'* about her. She explained that talking about her same-sex relationship was difficult as it reignited memories and fears about her partner who is still imprisoned and *'I just don't know what is happening to her'*. Added to this, she recalled how she was continually aware that her ability to stay in the UK depended on the construction and interpretation of her accounts. This appeared to add an overwhelming pressure to the situation which she felt contributed to her *'breakdown'*. An additional point is raised by Imogen who found talking about traumatic events extremely difficult in front of men and unknown members of the public.

Yes it was the first time I'd ever been to court (...) it was bad, there were three males, the judge was male, the Home Office was male, my barrister was male [...] but midway into the interview, some people were walking in, you see it's an open court room and people can come in (...) they were just walking in, can you imagine, disclosing these very personal details to three men and then, to add insult to injury, then people just come in and listen to you.

Imogen, The Gambia.

The above examples illustrate how women's subjectivities were framed during the legal process as their performative statements unveiled their own 'truth' for others to scrutinise. During this stage of the asylum process women's 'docile bodies' became a physical space of knowledge and power as both legal decision-makers and members of the public looked on and judged them. Women's sense of themselves through this authorised process of enforced disclosure became fractured by their inability to maintain control, consent, silence, space and choice. This appeared to render women powerless in response to the legal demands and specifications involved in what can be described as a 'victimising' process, which is emphasised below.

6.4 Evaluating Sexual Stories: The Legal Lens

Any asylum claim based on an individual's sexual orientation will need to be supported by evidence to prove their sexual identity (Berg & Millbank 2009). Based on the evidence, interview process and court appearance(s) the immigration judges will decide whether the asylum applicant is indeed a lesbian. The way the legal interviews were conducted, how women were questioned, the evidence needed, and the place and nature of the interrogations, all emerged from my discussions with each woman (with the exception of Mae) as highly incongruous and often resulted in the production of an unfamiliar sexual identity.

In their second interviews most women spoke about how they were conscious of being judged, not just by what they said, but also how they behaved and dressed. The view that the Home Office and immigration judge(s) perceived lesbians in a stereotypical

way unanimously arose, a finding which also supports other recent work from Wessels (2011). For instance, Jennifer talked of how she felt the Home Office personnel and immigration judges dismissed her asylum narrative and instead negatively focused on her physical appearance. This view was also raised by several other women who were angered at specific remarks made by decision-makers about their dress and behaviour. For example, Nadine, Penda, Sara and Imogen all reported that they felt strongly that observations were used in order to police their bodies as legitimate or de-legitimate, in the legal attempts to ascertain the 'truth' of their lesbianism. Sara explains:

I think, I'm using that based on my experience 'cause the judge told me 'I didn't look like a lesbian, I look like an intelligent person', so in their mind maybe a lesbian is someone who is butchy, wears men's clothes and maybe with their hair shaved off and very masculine, that's my personal view based on experience yeah (...) in his mind he had a picture of you know, what a lesbian would look like.

Sara, Jamaica.

For Wessels (2011), '*stereotypes held by decision-makers play a very important, and mostly unfavourable, role for the claimants, as credibility determination is necessarily and inexorably subjective*' (p.36). For the participants, the external lens through which they were being judged and by which their 'truth' was being determined was recognisable. For some women, an awareness of this influenced and altered their behaviour in order to succumb to the expected performative role. For example Imogen told me that she knew some lesbian asylum seekers who deliberately dressed more '*butchy*' or '*like a man*' in order to enhance their 'believability'. This account of self-conscious gender performance illustrates the difficulties of judging sexuality and the contradictions between being 'a lesbian' and being believed to be 'a lesbian' which are played out through the asylum process. Imogen explained:

That's why to be honest, when some of my friends go to claim asylum they all dress like a man, in a tie or stuff like that because they know how the Home

Office behave and the perception yeah [...] they just label in terms of you know, the fem butch sort of thing [...] and that's not the point of it at all you know, it's very sad, it's not about image it's about who you are.

Imogen, The Gambia.

Penda also spoke of the pressure of needing to be believed in order to secure her immigration status, revealing that she felt the need to conform to stereotypes. She explained that she became conscious of how she dressed and even changed her hairstyle to 'act' and look more like the lesbian she thought the decision-makers were expecting to see. Her account demonstrates the delicate balance she experienced between finding her own identity within a new cultural context, yet simultaneously ensuring she was publicly perceived as a lesbian so that her account was believed. Here her sense of sexual identity was reorganised according to stereotypes of 'what lesbians look like' and 'how they behave'. This can particularly be seen in her use of the term 'acting'.

You know you've got to convince them, you know this is something that can be in no doubt, so I have to confess, it did make me think twice about er, like I'd think don't wear that necklace, don't wear that nice blouse, I got my hair cut, but, it just feels like you're acting again, so I didn't stay like that, I wanted to be myself but, with everything else that's going on, your heads all over the place, and you think, you don't know who your true self is, it's like you're being constantly judged.

Penda, Uganda.

To be visible as a lesbian to decision-makers meant that certain practices of the self must be found in order to authenticate evidence. In this context, the 'truth' of women's sexual identity is not discovered within them but imposed upon them. An alternative view was however presented by Mae who appeared to have a different asylum experience to the other participants. Mae reported being asked few questions

about her sexuality and was granted leave to remain after her initial application. Consequently, Mae neither submitted an appeal nor attended court. She described the process to determine her sexuality as *'fine, it was not difficult'* and also recalled that the Home Office immediately believed and read correctly her sexuality. Her accounts could reflect the changes that have been introduced since the UKBA Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity guidelines (2010) which had come into force before her application. These instructions clearly state that: *'although an individual's appearance or demeanour may have a bearing on the persecution suffered in the country of origin, stereotypical ideas of people – such as an "effeminate" demeanour in gay men or a masculine appearance in lesbians (or the absence of such features) should not influence the assessment of credibility'* (UKBA 2010p.10/11). However as Mae explained, the use of observations still appeared to influence her believability as a lesbian:

Well they believed me straightaway, like in the Home Office, in the toilet she said you shouldn't be here, the men's is next door, I get that a lot, people mistake me for a man all the time, so they thought I was a man (...) so, who would not believe I was a lesbian.

Mae, Jamaica.

Whilst the difficulty of narrating personal and traumatic accounts emerged, the necessity of navigating the legal gaze and the judgement of decision-makers appeared to compound women's confusion with their sexual identity. The pressure to 'perform', to be believed and to satisfy the expectations of others can be seen in Penda's account below:

These Home Office people, when you go to court are vicious, absolutely vicious, they were asking the most ridiculous questions on top of everything else, they ask like, why did you decided to be gay in a country when you know it's illegal, things like that [...] have you ever read Oscar Wilde?, you see these stupid questions, they have it in their mind, like this stereotypical lesbian woman with

short hair and no make-up, they just expect you to conform to what they believe a lesbian woman should be like and how they behave and stuff (...) they want all of us to have short hair, and, you know, piercings, it's really, really stereotypical, and they ask you what shows you watch? (...) in my experience everybody who looks butch is believed on the grounds of their sexuality.

Penda, Uganda.

Interestingly Penda's recollection of her questioning in court mirrors some of the early scholarly debates around sexuality. As Weeks (1977) discussed, perceptions that gay men and lesbians are easily identifiable reflects the academic writings of the 1930s-1950s which focused on the physical characteristics of homosexuals (also see Patton, 2010). The proliferation of academic literature on sexuality since the 1970s, and notably Queer theory, has however moved to replace the more binary understanding of a fixed heterosexual and homosexual identity with a conceptualisation of sexuality as a fluid and multifaceted aspect of people's lives. As outlined in Section 3.4, Queer theorists argue that sexual identity for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals invokes interpretations of self-agency and self-expression and a move away from labels. This might help explain why participants such as Faria and Leila (both Muslim women) were frustrated with the fixed expectation of how, as lesbians, they should behave.

Well it's very difficult for me 'cause they [the Home Office] are asking what gay clubs I go to, but I have children, I just can't go out, that I can't just do (...) who will look after my children, and they say if you a lesbian you go to clubs which ones [...] I didn't go to Pride, I will try for next year but I didn't go, they say lesbians go to Pride and you in Manchester.

Faria, Pakistan.

Faria had clearly interpreted these questions to mean that having an observable presence on the 'gay scene' and to be a member of a distinctly gay subculture would benefit her claim. The legal comments regarding her believability as a lesbian also came after the introduction of UK Border Agency Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity guidelines (2010) which also suggests there may be differences or a delay in the implementation of the instructions⁹². What is significant however is the pressure Faria felt to have a publicly recognisable sexual identity and the impact this had on her. Whether Faria ever truly wanted to be part of the local 'gay scene' or whether she felt this was necessary in order to convince the Home Office and immigration judge(s) that she was a lesbian was unclear to me. Leila also raised similar issues. She explained that during one court appearance an immigration judge told her that '*lesbians don't have children*' and she felt that this was used to dismiss her asylum claim⁹³. She stated:

I have children so it [was] harder, he [immigration judge] said 'lesbians don't have children' so you have a man, I told him it was not what I wanted (...) I'm a lesbian but he said 'no, you have children'.

Leila, Saudi Arabia.

The anxiety of being believed also extended to the views held by Imogen and Sara that a public image and public relationships would be beneficial to their case and make their accounts more credible. This presented a distinct dynamic which complicated how women constructed their own personal sexual identity in the context of the UK legal asylum process. Imogen explained:

The only thing I can think of is maybe I need to go out and force myself to have a relationship with someone just to prove I am [a lesbian], this is what is happening, that is what they want, that is not right (...) and I know women that have done that, there's this one woman who's gotten into lots of trouble as

⁹² It should be noted however the UKBA Gender and Sexual Identity guidelines (2010) were only introduced 6 months prior to Faria's experience so it is too early to comment on the wider implementation of the guidelines.

⁹³ This comment came before the UKBA Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity guidelines (2010).

they're with someone who is beating her and now what can she do, she knows she needs to be in a relationship, so I think is this what I need to do, for them to believe me.

Imogen, The Gambia.

Imogen's account raises several issues in terms of the pressure she felt to get her 'truth' evidenced and believed. As Chelvan's evidence, submitted as part of the Home Affairs Select Committee (2013) states, LGBT applicants are going to more extreme lengths to construct evidence which often places them in precarious situations and at risk.

The fear of not being believed dominated many women's accounts, particularly those of Imogen, Sara and Faria, who were still trying to convince the immigration officials of their 'true' sexual orientation. The difficulties of disclosing their intimate and traumatic stories appeared compounded by receiving notification that they were deemed as 'not credible'. This often left the women in a state of desperate confusion as Faria explains:

They don't believe me and I can't tell you what's that like, I don't know what to say, I have these feelings you see for women, and they tell me I don't, but I know I do, but they say I don't, they say I can't be a lesbian, I don't know why (...) what do I do now, I'm asking you what can I do.

Faria, Pakistan.

This reaction can be placed alongside discussions within feminist literature on sexual violence. For example, many academics have commented on the detrimental role of disbelief in accounts of rape (Brownmiller 1975; Kelly & Radford 1996b; Ullman 2010; Ullman et al. 2010). Ullman's (2010) work on rape disclosure and social attitudes highlights that negative responses have a stronger impact on people as '*individuals tend to give negative information more weight*' (p.211), whilst struggling to internalise their own experiences. Perhaps this also explains why the women did not articulate

any positive accounts of when their 'stories' were believed or when their homosexuality was accepted by others (both within and beyond the asylum process).

Being referred to as 'not credible' was deemed to be taken as a personal rejection. For example, Sara described reading her decision papers and feeling '*like somebody was throwing cold water right in [her] face*'. She explained that she struggled to comprehend why her personal account was considered '*not credible*' and why she was perceived as '*a liar*'. Similarly for Jennifer, having her sexual identity and intimate accounts disbelieved was a fundamental issue and a '*personal insult*'. She stressed that not being believed felt as if somebody was denying her '*very existence*'. Her account reveals the personal attachment she had to her narrative and the impact of having this scrutinised and disbelieved. She explained:

It's my life and if I've lived all this shit and then you look at me and you tell me that you don't believe me, it's (...) it doesn't just slide off my back, it's almost as if you denying me my very existence, because this is the life I lived and you're telling me it isn't, so what, in your mind, I don't exist [...] every experience I've had is an intrinsic part of me and you're, denying me the right to all those experiences by telling me that it's not true.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

For both Plummer (1995) and Phoenix (2008) personal narratives are a key methodology through which the self is constructed. It could then be argued that the judicial denial of women's accounts is also a denial of their existence and the validity of their subjectivities. Being subjected to legal scrutiny and having one's intimate accounts dismantled and at times discredited added to what I suggest be understood as a victimising process. This can be illustrated by the ways in which most of the women in this study prioritised and recalled only negative reactions during the asylum process. Here both Foucault's (1978, 1979) and Butler's (1990) work have resonance as we can see how the regime of truth constituted within the asylum process both legitimised and de-legitimised the 'truth' of women's personal narratives, suggesting

that self-identity was out of their control and so too the perceived 'liveability' of their futures (Butler 2004).

6.4.1 Sexuality: The Public and Private Nexus

So far, I have shown how the construction of individual narratives for the purpose of asylum claims required women to re-negotiate their intimate stories for others to judge and interpret, and ultimately determine their 'truth'. This has parallels with arguments put forward by the UNHCR (2008), Berg and Millbank (2009) and Wessels (2011). The women in this study also articulated their difficulties with the requirement to substantiate intimate narratives through the provision of personal letters, emails, photographs and testimonies from friends which firmly placed their sexuality in a public forum. Leila described her transition into the public gaze as '*embarrassing*'. Frankie referred to this as an '*intrusive*' and '*insensitive*' aspect of the asylum process. For Penda, her inability to maintain some private life during her asylum claim illustrated the '*lack of sensitivity*' the legal process had '*towards lesbians*'. Jennifer also described how she felt the public scrutiny of private information, memories and materials was a disturbing part of her asylum experience. She explained:

I wanted my case to be on the merit of what happened to me, not that I had to go and give you pictures of me and my girlfriend in bed to say 'I am lesbian,' which is what it basically came down to, they had pictures of me and my girlfriend and various partners actually, over time, not having sex but in pretty compromising positions to prove that I'm lesbian (...) it really, really, felt too much, they had to see things like emails, letters between me and partners and ex-partners, these are things that your partner has written a letter to you for whatever reason, you don't want that to be evidence in court, that is something that you would probably (...) you know, if you've kept it it's because it means a lot to you, and suddenly you're sharing it in this kind of way that allows somebody else to tear at it and say what they like about it, whether you like it or not (...) I still haven't gotten the documents back from the solicitors, so these pictures that I've had from the 1980s early '90s, I don't have them anymore, and I don't know whether or not I'm going to get them back (...) so these

pictures that mean so much to me, that I've kept so precious and close me, are not even in my possession anymore.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

Jennifer's account is interesting and illustrates how the loss of personal information forms part of a de-legitimisation of her subjective self. The process of having to get friends and family involved to 'evidence her sexuality' marked a clear transition, with her private sexuality being propelled into the public domain. Nadine also told me that this requirement had changed her relationship with her friends and her partner and had left her feeling 'vulnerable' and 'exposed'. She talked about the difficulties she had with 'everybody knowing so much about [her]' which left her craving for a part of her life that was 'left for just me'. She explained:

You kind of feel like (...) that even people who you know, know more about you than they did even though you've known them for ten years, you almost feel like, they're thinking um, you know, they're forming new judgements about you based on what is new information for them, even though you've known them so long [...], even if it's your partner, you want to reserve the right to decide how much of you, you want to share with them, you may choose to share everything, or you may choose to think that what happened when you were six years old is none of their business, you know, you what I mean, then suddenly, nothing about my life is off limits.

Nadine, Jamaica.

For Faria and Leila, who wanted to conceal their sexuality from their children, the limited space in which they could maintain a 'private' life was unsettling and added to their confusion over the asylum process. They expressed that they were acutely aware that on the one hand they needed a publicly identifiable 'lesbian' image to assist their claim yet on the other, they feared this would place them 'at risk' in their community and alienate them from their children. Leila explained:

I don't think the Home Office understand that I don't want my children to know, it's [a] worry for me, they [the children] keep asking me about my case, they don't understand why it take so long, they say 'why?', but I don't want them to know and it's hard because the Home Office think everybody should know (...) if you're a lesbian everybody know, you go to clubs, you go to Pride, you do this, they don't think about children (...) I must protect my children, I don't want them to know.

Leila, Saudi Arabia.

For both Leila and Imogen, living within a Muslim community in the UK meant they were fearful of their neighbour's reactions and arousing any suspicion. For Imogen, this posed several difficulties which appeared to heighten her anxieties in the UK, especially as she feared rejection from other refugee and migrant groups who were her main source of information, care, security and support. She spoke of how she believed that adopting a public lesbian image would make her more susceptible to violence and assault in Manchester. She explained:

So I feel like the Home Office want me to go round and tell everybody but I can't do that, so I just have to live with this deep isolation, they want to put you in a position where everybody know yet they won't guarantee your safety, you're living in accommodation where everyone will snub you once they find out about you, you understand, or you are out and out in a newspaper or something where everyone will know about you, and so, what will happen when you go back? (...) that feels scary as they [Home Office] won't protect you from any problems.

Imogen, the Gambia.

The precarious transition from a private to a public sexual identity as required by the legal mechanisms of the asylum process was clearly troubling for women. The legal

tiers created distinct spaces in which women's sexual identities and subjectivities were played out, and through which the 'truth' was established and their destinies fixed.

6.5 Conclusion

By concentrating on the distinct demands of the screening interview, the substantive interview and court appearances, I have provided insight into the ways in which the asylum process forces women to narrate their 'coming out' stories and testimonies of trauma, propelling their sexuality into the public domain. The initial screening interview emerged as a significant interaction given this was the first time most of the women had publicly identified themselves as lesbians. The lack of control regarding who their account was told to, their inability to narrate their subjective sense of self and the formal legal setting can be understood as constituting these lesbian asylum seekers as 'docile bodies' whose legitimacy could only be established via the legal gaze (Foucault 1978; Butler 2004).

The difficulties women faced with telling their stories and ensuring that they were believed caused deep distress. Women's emotional attachment to their narratives and their own emergent 'truths' meant being publicly discredited was an upsetting experience, representing I would argue a symbolic and legal loss of self. The perception that immigration officials had set beliefs in terms of how lesbians should look, forced women to negotiate the complexities of being a lesbian and performing the role of a lesbian. The highly negative reflections reported by women at this second interview were associated with the challenges of being believed, of being heard and of being supported. In the next chapter I explore material arising from the third interview conducted with my participants, which reveals how women find strength and sexual entitlements, building intimate narratives of self that involve a construction of and search for personal 'truths' amid on-going instability.

Chapter Seven: Life in Limbo: Managing Uncertainty

7.1 Introduction

Navigating the asylum process involves living with profound levels of uncertainty, which are compounded when asylum seekers are subject to monitoring requirements and constraints within the areas of housing, detention, employment, access to health and childcare facilities (Friedman & Klein 2008). Consequently this time-period is often referred to as a 'being in limbo' as people feel engulfed with ambiguity in many avenues of their life (Khanlou & Guruge 2008). As a resource for thinking about this uncertainty I draw on theoretical debates around temporality and 'queer temporality' as it relates to women's (queer) transitions and their search for a 'queer life' and a 'queer space' during the asylum process (Halberstam 2005). I also engage with ideas around how women's experiences are shaped by their ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991) in order to think through the ways in which women understand themselves as 'peripheral beings.' Despite such social, economic and legal complexities however, I focus on how women (re)use their narratives and (re)tell their stories, forming bonds of trust, creating their families of choice and ultimately (re)constructing a sense of belonging. This includes their desire and ability for self-expression, strength and citizenship and how (for some) the asylum process facilitated this. Again, Foucault's (1978, 1979) theories around power, sexuality and the 'docile body' as well as Butler's (2004, 2006) question of 'what makes a livable life' and the process of 'remaking the human' provide an overarching analytical framework.

The chapter draws on material generated through the third and final interview with the participants and is divided into three sections. The first explores women's perceptions of their transitory lives and their uncertainties, with particular attention being paid to their accounts of instability and temporality. The second section explores wider structural issues, for example the participants' experiences of detention, their deteriorating social and economic status and their views of continued social rejection. Finally, I explore the ways in which the women's experiences have shaped their constructions of their public sexual identity and their private sexual subjectivity.

7.2 (Queer) Temporality

Migration scholars such as Anderson (2007) and Griffiths (2013) have critiqued the concept of temporality, and in particular how migrants, asylum seekers and refugees negotiate, understand and 'experience' time. Griffiths' (2013) empirical work with refused asylum seekers and immigration detainees is particularly relevant to this chapter and reflects many of the experiences women talked to me about. For Griffiths (2013) in the case of asylum seekers, the 'long wait' for a decision creates an impression that time has slowed or is somewhat suspended, a contrast to the 'rush' of modern life. In the cases of Sara, Faria, Imogen and Leila, who were still awaiting a decision, descriptions such as *'time goes so slow'*, *'the agony of waiting'*, *'I'm just wasting time'* and *'each day I just sit and wait'* emerged and indicated their suspended temporal state. Navigating this distinct 'experience of time' also appeared to influence their emotional stability and well-being. For example, Imogen stressed that the longer the decision took, the more her life felt in *'turmoil'* as she could not plan for a future or feel safe. For Sara, this temporal state of perpetual instability was *'like torture'*. She explained:

Oh it's just unthinkable, it's horrible, this limbo that I'm in [...] it's not comforting the length of time, the waiting, not knowing, the limbo, time going by and mentally, it's just terrible yeah (...) this cloud is hanging over my head you know, so that's the concern, this limbo position that I'm in, not sure what will happen in the future, that's what caused me the most grief in the heart really.

Sara, Jamaica.

For Faria not knowing the outcome of her asylum claim meant she felt she *'could not do anything'* with her life whilst in the UK, again reflecting her suspended sense of 'time' (Anderson 2007, Griffiths 2013). In addition, she also talked of how her fears of

being returned to Pakistan dominated her present thoughts which added to time passing slowly, but also to fears about the future for both her and her children.

What can I do?, everyday I do nothing but think (...) I can't rest here, all I keep thinking about is how long until they send me back (...) that just goes round and round my head all the time [...] what will happen to me and my children (...) each night, each day, that's in my head.

Faria, Pakistan.

For Leila, the concept of time and in particular time being 'wasted' appeared more acute in comparison to the other women. This is likely to be connected to the time taken to process her asylum application (eight years, and still awaiting a positive decision). Leila consistently spoke of the detrimental effects of living without leave to remain, her 'sleepless nights' and the impact this temporal state had on her two sons. This has resonance with the findings from Griffiths (2013) study as she notes: '*It is this different, pointless time that entrenches alterity, making failed asylum seekers and detainees fundamentally different from the busy people around them*' (p.13).

Queer theorists have also engaged with debates around temporality which encompass aspects of 'queer space' and 'queer choices' which all frame the construction of a 'queer life' (Halberstam 2005; Dean 2011). For Halberstam (2005), 'queer temporality' is a distinct time for LGBT people as they often use and experience time and temporal space differently to heterosexuals and counter to heteronormative social roles. For Colebrook (2011), this includes the forming of personal and impersonal relationships, the (re)creation of new connections with the environment and the use of language, which all form part of the complex process of queer becoming and belonging.

Both critiques of temporality offer a useful analysis when exploring the temporal state, struggles and temporal transitions of lesbian asylum seekers (though theories of queer refugee transitions remain notably absent from this literature). For the women in this study it was clear that their temporality was situated both around their status as an

asylum seeker and was also formed by their construction and desire for a queer life, queer time and queer space. As lesbian refugees their suspended sense of time seemingly impacted upon their queer belonging and becoming (Colebrook 2011). A complex and often contradictory narrative of time being slow and a daily struggle whilst simultaneously representing a space for reflecting on their sexuality emerged. Imogen explains:

When I'm here I know I'm okay (...) that's all I can say for my time here, each day is long, each day is painful, each day I'm in limbo, but as long as I'm here I can be who I want to be.

Imogen, The Gambia.

Similarly for Sara her temporality in the UK was both a time where she felt insecure about her future but also a time she felt able to 'breathe' and to be herself. Her description of 'walking down the street' illustrates the creation of her new 'queer space' that represented both her sexual freedom and the freedom from further attacks. Significantly for Sara, her fears for her future were also tied to her homosexuality and the anxiety of her sexual freedom being removed. She explains:

Being here I don't know how to explain it, I can breathe for the first time, I can walk down the street and not feel that people will kill me (...) I just don't know how long it will last though (...) the longer I'm here the more I feel I can't go back, I can't go back to being in the closet and living in fear [...] I just want to stay, to live and to be me

Sara, Jamaica.

Both quotes raise interesting issues and illustrate women's awareness of feeling in 'limbo' as they are stuck between being 'legal' and 'illegal' in the UK but how during this time, they pursued exploration and hope over their sexuality. This indicates that

the women in this study occupied a distinct temporality because of both their legal status and the desire for a 'queer life'.

7.2.2 Instability

Turner's (1967, 2008) anthropological work suggests that individuals experiencing a liminal existence are socially and physically ambiguous beings with '*no status, insignia, secular clothing, rank [or] kinship position*' (p.98). His work is pertinent when discussing the lives of asylum seekers and refugees whose social dislocation places them as 'neither here nor there' as they negotiate new legal, cultural, social and spatial terrains with 'marginality and inferiority' (Turner, 2008). This temporary state lacks the security which is often associated with permanency, as can be seen from the accounts of the women in my study. This also has resonance with Giddens' (1991) work on ontological (in)security. For Giddens (1991), a certainty in the world, a sense of belonging and being accepted as a member of a defined group helps form individual self-identity and thus ontological security. He argues that knowledge of, a routine and a trust in the social world is maintained through social and material constancy, which, when destabilised, creates a ontological insecurity (Giddens 1991; Croft 2012). A point also raised by Chase (2013) in her work with unaccompanied young asylum seekers. For Chase (2013) the asylum process both re-establishes and undermines young people's ontological (in)security as they try to nurture a sense of security whilst in the UK.

For the women in this study without refugee status, their ontological security was clearly challenged. Their lack of legal, social, economic and material stability meant they had no consistency, no stable routine, no autonomy and an insecure relationship with their social world. For Leila, Imogen, Faria and Sara, ontological security and stability could only ever be achieved through the granting of their refugee status. As Leila explained, '*that's when everything will be ok*'. However, in contrast to this optimism, instability also dominated my interviews with the women who did have leave to remain. For instance, Penda, Jules, Frankie, Jennifer, Penny and Nadine all explained that they still felt insecure in various aspects of their lives and still struggled to contemplate stability in their future as they were fearful they may be returned in

five-year's time. Here women's inability to plan future possibilities represents a main cause of anxiety and has clear resonance with Giddens' (1991) work.

A 'life in limbo' and living within a context where plans for the future cannot be contemplated is symptomatic of liminal lives (La Shure 2005). The dominance of insecurity presented to me mirrors work in other studies with refugees, asylum seekers and migrant groups in the UK, which discuss exposure to poverty, feelings of 'otherness' and the difficulties of accessing services (Gardner 2002; Doyal & Anderson 2005; Warfa et al. 2006). Building from this, my research also reveals the personal impact of continuous ontological insecurity associated with not having expectations met. For Frankie and Jennifer, despite having leave to remain, the transitional time from being an asylum seeker to a refugee resulted in their homelessness as they were both unable to find accommodation with their local authorities. For these two women, this unexpected outcome at a time they envisaged *'things would get better'* compounded their fears that stability remained unachievable. For Jennifer, not having *'the basic necessity of a roof over my head ... and anywhere to put my stuff'* made her feel ill-equipped to *'make any plans.....and move forward'*. For Penda, although not homeless, the *'unexpected difficulties'* and the *'emotional fall-out'* she encountered after gaining her refugee status was recalled as a time of pain and despair.

Such accounts illustrate how *'living in a state of suspension between life and death'*, socially and symbolically dislocated women from their social world (Butler 2004p.25). Women's narratives reveal that for lesbian asylum seekers their ontological insecurity meant they could not preserve a 'livable life.' Their inability to achieve material, social and legal security impacted upon all aspects of their lives and emotional well-being as they waited for leave to remain and stability. Added to this, the prospect of having to reapply for 'indefinite leave to remain' in five years made women feel vulnerable about their sexual identity and the implications of what would happen if they were returned to their country of origin. Jennifer, who was in a long-term relationship, explains:

I think about it, I think about some days more than others, but I think about what will happen in five years [...] if they [the Home Office] decide they don't

want any more lesbians from Jamaica here (...) what will happen to me if they send me back, what happens to [partner's name], we can't be together in Jamaica, not like here (...) so I think about it and you know, what that means for us in the future

Jennifer, Jamaica.

Sara raised similar issues and concerns and implied that her leave to remain was only a temporary relief. Here the granting of refugee status clearly (re)produced ontological insecurity for the women which can be seen as Sara comments that her fears of being returned in the future had '*not disappeared*'. Significantly, many of these fears were based around the implications on her sexual identity and the suspicion that being returned would generate. She explains:

So I fear that if they send me back in five-years everyone will automatically know I'm a lesbian because they know if you're from Jamaica and you got asylum then you're a lesbian [...] I pray I pray it doesn't happen but you never know.

Sara, Jamaica.

Conversely Mae, who was granted leave to remain a few days before I met her, did not convey any apprehensions towards her status, only optimism. As I interviewed Mae over the course of a few days⁹⁴ it is unclear to me whether her perception changed in the following weeks. During my interviews she voiced '*delight*' at her new '*freedom*' which she felt she could now enjoy. She explained:

⁹⁴ Unlike other interviews which were largely conducted once a week. Mae requested that her interviews were held on three consecutive days due to her other commitments.

Yes I've got my papers now, it's such a relief, I can't tell you (...) I feel so happy (...) this means I can stay and just move on [...] I can be me [...] I can't stop smiling.

Mae, Jamaica.

For Mae her new legal status was not just about gaining a sense of legal and social stability, but also symbolically represented a new freedom to express her sexual identity. From her interviews it became clear that being granted asylum and the ability to express her sexual freedom were interconnected and can be seen when she states '*I can be me*'. Here her leave to remain also meant being granted a social and legal permission to live her desired 'queer life'.

7.3 Peripheral Beings

I use the phrase 'peripheral beings' in this study as this term symbolises how women presented themselves and their lives in the UK. Women made reference to not only being socially excluded, marginalised and in-transit, but explained to me how this experience left them feeling '*rejected*', '*unwanted*' and '*de-humanised*'. Peripherality has frequently been associated with geographical space, including reference to specific countries and regions, especially across Europe (Spiekermann & Neubauer 2002; Goetz 2006; Crone 2012). However, these concepts are not only fixed to spatial debates but also represent a symbolic and subjective space which is experienced as people navigate time and place, spatial fixity and mobility, social inclusion and exclusion (Janz 2009; Griffiths 2013).

By listening to women's accounts, it was apparent that three themes acted as catalysts in constructing these perceptions of 'peripherality' notably: detention, deteriorating social and economic status, and negative public perceptions.

7.3.1 Detention

For Jennifer, Nadine, Penny, Frankie, Jules and Sara who were all detained, their experiences inside Yarls Wood Immigration Removal Centre created a perception that they were being imprisoned and treated like ‘*criminals*’ who needed to be ‘*locked away*’ because of their sexuality. For Frankie, being detained reaffirmed her view that as a lesbian, she was ‘*not wanted*’ as part of society, either in Nigeria or in the UK, and Nadine also referred to her social detachment and the deliberate removal of her from society and away from the ‘good people’.

Like when you're there [Yarls Wood IRC] you feel like you're in prison because like (...) from here to there is a door you know (...) and they have this big bundle of keys and they turn the lock, and they lock the door, and it's just banging into your head and you're stood there (...) and then, two three feet there's another door to go through, and it's all the same (...) it's so frustrating (...) I don't think I've ever been in such a degrading position like that ever [....] Oh God, can you imagine what's it's like, you're no good for society, you're so not good that you have to removed, to be taken away, to be taken out of the sight of good people.

Nadine, Jamaica.

These views should be contextualised within women's experiences in their countries of origin and, in particular, their perception of social rejection on the basis of their sexuality, as discussed in Chapter Five. The interconnection between women's experiences of rejection, punishment and their sexuality was seemingly heightened and reignited whilst in detention. For Jules in particular, being inside Yarls Wood IRC spatially represented prison and a place where she was fearful that she would re-experience the abuse she was subject to because of her sexuality in Uganda.

Oh God, it was like a prison again, I saw prison again, my memories came back and it was like too much, and I kept on remembering what happened to me in prison, what it was like and it was all too much (...) I kept on saying it, and they

[security guards] and they kept saying we're not going to rape you (...) it's not like that here, we won't stab you, but inside I did not feel comfortable at all.

Jules, Uganda.

Being deprived of personal freedom and control, not being allowed to see or regularly contact friends and family, having possessions including phones and personal clothes removed and having no comforts, all impacted negatively on women's autonomy. In addition, the strict rules and regulations within Yarls Wood IRC appeared to reinforce an unequal power relationship between the women, the security guards and the Home Office. This is clarified in Frankie's account below as she talks about how she felt unable to challenge how she was treated and her inability to exercise any power.

The way they treat you [in Yarls Wood] was disgusting (...) so, I think as far as I'm concerned I was like (...) I'm in a place of authority (...) I have to do what they ask me to do, so I wake up, sleep and stay in my corner.

Frankie, Nigeria.

In Frankie's account we can also see the stark ways in which the body of the lesbian asylum seeker is rendered 'docile' in Foucault's (1979) terms, as she is subject to the effects of disciplinary power asserted over her in detention, made to 'stay in her corner' and away from the wider social world. For Jennifer and Nadine, being detained forced them into a peripheral space where their personal identity was 'broken'. For example, Jennifer explained that whilst in detention 'you lose yourself' and talked of feeling that she had 'nothing left inside'. For Nadine, detention 'broke her spirit' and heightened her personal isolation. Again this offers correlations with Foucault's work (1979) which emphasises how changes in behaviour reflect the disciplinary power exercised over 'docile bodies'. However, what is notable from Nadine's account below is that, despite this perceived personal annihilation of selfhood, she still maintained her self-determination and 'fight' as she refused to be positioned as a victim or

powerless to the normative, authoritarian order. Here Nadine's sense of personal agency and strength prevails. She explained:

You're completely on your own in there [Yarls Wood], so it's you and your fear and your strength, that's all you have, that's what it's stripped down to [...] you're put in a vacuum, as far as I'm concerned that's a vacuum for them [Home Office] to do what they want with you, at their free will and disposal, to use you, as, they see fit, they know you're not going anywhere so they [security guards] can come for you at whatever time, they can take things from you, they can hold things back from you (...) there's this uncertainty that hangs over you every day whilst you're in there, you know, I think it was part of what broke my spirit, because you have to be fighting, fighting, fighting, fighting for your rights, fighting for your issues, fighting for every scrap of dignity that you can crawl back.

Nadine, Jamaica.

Nadine's account also reflects her persistence as she asserts her right to be conceived as a person (Butler 2004). Despite feeling constrained by the sociality of norms and her peripheral status, her endurance and 'fight' were not diminished. This has resonance with Butler's (2004) work as Nadine's account indicates that whilst her life was perceived as 'unlivable,' she nevertheless exercised the capacity to remake herself as human. For Butler (2004) the ability to critique and challenge normative orders is part of (re)-creating the self as a 'viable being'. This is an integral process where individuals can remake themselves and the world around them, and develop a 'livable' life.

7.3.2 Asylum Seekers: Social and Economic Status

Griffiths (2013) argues that the impact of not being able to work adds to temporal tensions and exacerbates the stress and anxiety associated with temporality. For the women in the study, not being allowed to work whilst claiming asylum was considered incomprehensible and for many, this was the first time they were unable to financially support themselves. Beliefs that they felt as though they were not social contributors

were also reinforced by perceptions that the British public perceived all asylum seekers as a strain on the economy. For Sara, the concept of a welfare state was ‘*strange*’ and as such, she found receiving ‘*hand-outs*’ a source of ‘*frustration and humiliation*’. For Nadine, not being able to work yet wanting to work supported her perception of having a low social status in the UK. She spoke of how she felt she had no daily control over her own everyday circumstances and no ability to help herself.

For Jennifer and Frankie, who had experienced successful careers in their home countries, not working had affected their personal confidence and self-esteem. For these two women the change in social status and loss of professional identity had impacted upon their struggle to find a purpose and rebuild their lives. Jennifer found the contrast from being a respected academic in Jamaica to having no professional identity in the UK extremely difficult. Her sense of frustration also continued after she gained refugee status and was legally entitled to work as she felt her qualifications were ‘*meaningless*’. She explained:

To be in a country where my qualifications don't mean nothing [...] everything I've done means nothing, all my achievements mean nothing [...] to be living somewhere where my legal status is such that I can't work, then I can't support myself (...) it makes me feel like I've lost so much, that's what it is, I lost so much, economically, and right up until this point in my life, any progress I have made I've yet to see (...) my standard of living has dropped significantly by being here, I have nothing, and whilst I'm able to accept that I've bought a lot of it on myself (...) once I started going through this system, I was pushed so much further down and they took everything from me (...) for no other reason than asking for help.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

Throughout all of Jennifer's interviews, she frequently referred to how she felt the asylum process had ‘*taken*’ a lot from her. For her this meant her loss of self-esteem,

confidence, her declining mental health and low social and economic status. These combined experiences appeared to leave her with a continued sense of marginalisation, insecurity and a perceived inability to rebuild her life. In addition, Jennifer used the phrase *'I've bought a lot of it on myself'*, illustrating her continued personal blame concerning her current predicaments and her sexual orientation. Here the presence and fluidity of Jennifer's internal homophobia is visible as she continually relates her difficult predicaments with self-blame to her sexuality. This resonates with literature in Queer theory, especially work by Rosser et al. (2008) on how internalised negativity associated with homosexuality affects how people see themselves and the world around them.

Frankie raised similar points. She also had a successful career in Nigeria and travelled internationally with her job. She associated navigating the asylum process and not being able to work with removing her confidence and pride. Her account below illustrates the difference between how she speaks of the successful person she once was in Nigeria, compared to who she is now in the UK.

You wouldn't think it would you, to look at me you would think it, you wouldn't that woman with holes in her jumper, with nowhere to sleep, you wouldn't think she was successful [....] I'm not lying [....] I had pride, I had a career (...) I had ambitions and plans [....] I got high up in the [deleted word] industry and knew lots of people, I'd get things done and I had a nickname [deleted word], it was because I was a bit fierce you see (...) people would come to me to get things done [....] God, how things have changed, now I can't even look people in the eye, I can't even ask my friends to sleep on their floor [....] I have nothing and I am nothing.

Frankie, Nigeria.

The above accounts are interesting as they also illustrate the contradictory nature of narratives. Here both Frankie and Jennifer discuss more positive aspects of their life in their home countries which they were unable to recall to me during their first

interview. Clearly their ability to pursue and maintain a professional career was an important part of their identity before their same-sex desires were discovered. Both women attributed the de-valuing of their professional status to the asylum process although presumably the very nature of leaving their home countries also contributed to this. The inability to work in the UK and to maintain professional skills, competencies and social standing did however seemingly exacerbate their concerns regarding re-building their professional careers and a 'livable life'.

Chronic unemployment has been associated with temporality as people wait indefinitely and experience 'enforced idleness' (Hoy 2008; Jeffrey 2010). Jennifer's and Frankie's accounts certainly support this as they relay the contrast between their past lives as working professionals and their present lives as 'nothing'. However, alongside this, my study also indicates that this perception was fluid and, for Imogen in particular, it was recognised as a temporary stage. As can be seen from her account below, Imogen's desire to once again make a 'livable life' by achieving social and economic mobility is notable and demonstrates her agentic strength and hope despite her current peripheral status. She explains:

It will happen, one day, when I get my papers, I'll be able to look after myself (...) to not have to line up and receive their [Home Office] payments [...] I pray that day will come, to stand on my own two-feet.

Imogen, The Gambia.

Imogen's account is interesting, as unlike Jennifer and Frankie, she displayed optimism regarding what life in the UK could offer and hopes that her peripheral status would disappear in the future. Imogen was the youngest of the participants and her age and lack of previous professional identity could have also influenced her more hopeful outlook. Significantly however, Imogen was without refugee status (unlike Frankie and Jennifer) which may have enabled her to recognise and see beyond her peripheral state.

7.3.3 Asylum Seekers: Public Perceptions

An awareness of how asylum seekers are negatively perceived in the UK emerged as a troubling issue for the participants which reinforced their perceptions of their temporal state and social peripherality. For example, Sara talked to me about how she felt strongly that asylum seekers were considered to be ‘scroungers’ and ‘people who only come to the UK to claim benefits’. She talked of how this perception affected her and her ability to integrate and develop a sense of belonging in the north of England.

Well they [the British public] think you're only here to claim benefits, they think you've only come all this way because you don't want to work [...] they call us things like 'scroungers' or 'crooks' and think we're living in big houses, they don't know how it really is [...] if you say 'hi, I'm an asylum seeker' oh boy, they'll be like 'go back to your own country.

Sara, Jamaica.

Penda and Nadine also spoke of their exasperation with public perceptions of asylum seekers and how they felt this positioned them on the periphery of British society and citizenship. Penda talked of how she felt she would ‘never be treated the same as a British citizen’ and would always be ‘overlooked’ and ‘pushed aside’. She explained that ‘I will always be a refugee (...) and not from here’. For Nadine, the term ‘refugee’ itself was troubling as ‘it's like refuge, you're like refuge, you're just garbage’. She stated how coming to the UK ‘for help’, yet being treated as if she was ‘taking something’ made her feel unwelcome. For Leila and Faria, being publicly perceived as an ‘asylum seeker’ led to them experiencing verbal abuse in their English neighbourhoods.

I had a problem here, this woman she was shouting at me in street, saying all these things like 'go back to your own country, take your children, you shouldn't be here,' like that, other people threw stones or something at the windows, I

[was] so scared, I asked to be moved but it take time, they say I shouldn't be here, but where, do I go.

Leila, Saudi Arabia.

Although Leila was eventually moved after this incident, she described the experience as making her *'more uncertain'* of people in the UK. Feeling marginalised or being unable to contribute, plan a future or integrate in society correlates with other scholarly studies with migrant and refugee groups (Sales 2002; Mulvey 2010; Chase 2012). This next section however explores how sexuality adds a further layer of analysis to the experiences of seeking asylum.

7.3.4 Continued Rejection

The participants spoke unanimously about how they perceived their sexuality as separating them from other asylum seekers and migrant communities. This was particularly problematic as these minority groups were the main people who women were exposed to and interacted with. Such perceptions of rejection seemingly added to individual fears and peripherality. For example, Sara explained that other asylum seekers had strong, negative cultural and religious views regarding homosexuality. Mae reported *'being ignored'* and Penny had at times felt *'bullied'* by other asylum seekers once her sexuality was discovered. Similarly, Imogen explained her experiences of joining a local support group which helped women asylum seekers in the north of England.

They, put me in touch with an asylum seeking group here, but they turned out to be really homophobic, I felt I couldn't talk to them, if I said I'm gay, oh, they would just turn away and things change, they just stop talking to you and making these horrible comments and stuff (...) it's really uncomfortable actually.

Imogen, The Gambia.

A similar theme also emerged from Nadine, Penny, Jennifer, Sara and Jules, when they talked about their experiences in detention. For these women, the knowledge of high levels of homophobia amongst other women in Yarl's Wood IRC heightened their stress and anxiety. For example Nadine stated that there's '*a lot of Jamaicans in there.....and Jamaicans gossip*'. As a consequence she was adamant that she did not want other detainees to know about her real reasons for leaving Jamaica because '*once one knows, they all know, and they all cussing you*'. Similar views were raised by Sara:

To be honest I didn't want to tell them, I stayed on my own as much as I could, I didn't like speak to people, I said no 'cause I know what would happen (...) it's so intense in there, I couldn't wait to get out [...] you can't be yourself in there, God no.

Sara, Jamaica.

For Sara, the decision to try and conceal her sexuality compounded her isolation and anxiety whilst she was in Yarl's Wood IRC. Conversely Penny chose to inform her roommate as she felt she had '*a right to know*'. However, whilst she indicated that she did not regret sharing this information, this decision did have ramifications. She explained:

I told my roommate, I didn't want her to take her clothes off in front of me and then have to find out I was, because to me, people who are close to me know, and they've said 'why didn't you tell me as I wouldn't have taken my clothes off in front of you,' and I know that we share a room so I say 'listen, I'm a lesbian you should be aware if you don't want to strip in front of me you don't have to', I didn't want her to think I was lusting after her or anything, do you know what I mean [...] but the bad thing was she told some people (...) she had a boyfriend and she told him and he came to see her and he was like, 'has she touched you, does she look at you, has she tried to kiss you', and he was really loud in front of people so, that was not nice [...] and sometimes [other women] they come and

they try and talk to you and ask you what you in here for, what's your room number, things like that [...] but as I said, I didn't talk much when people talk to me I just blank them, I don't answer them because I don't want anybody, I don't like them questioning me, I don't know you so I don't want no question, when they're talking to me I'm just like, I just blank them, I just don't answer.

Penny, Jamaica.

Penny's account illustrates how public knowledge regarding her sexuality added to her personal distress and isolation and demonstrates some of the tensions among asylum seeking communities regarding homosexuality. For Mae, this meant she deliberately avoided mainstream (heterosexual) asylum seeker support groups and she limited her interactions to be with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender asylum groups only.

I only go with LGBT groups, I never go to a women's asylum group, no they'd just take one look at me and throw me out, they don't like us (...) you're just not welcome there [...] that's why we have this group here, many people who come all got homophobic attitude at those group, it's not worth it.

Mae, Jamaica.

Similar views were expressed towards wider migrant communities. For example, Penny claimed that she felt she *'could not be herself'* and *'deliberately avoided'* members of the Jamaican community in London. Frankie also reflected on how she no longer wished to see members of the African community in the south of England. Her account below demonstrates how she felt this particular community continued to judge and disapprove of her sexuality. She explained how her interactions with this group made her feel continually exposed and restricted by their negative cultural codes and attitudes. As a result, she felt her only strategy was to move away. She explained:

I'm thinking right now, maybe if I go away from a community that has a lot of Africans and go somewhere, maybe there I won't feel I'm doing things that are wrong, I don't have to act the way I'm expected (...) like the way the community expects me to act.

Frankie, Nigeria.

Similarly, Faria also disliked being with other Pakistani families and had specifically requested she be dispersed and housed away from this group for fear that they would find out about her sexuality. This has resonance with Siraj's (2011) study with Muslim lesbians in Scotland. She reveals how living in Muslim communities often left women fearing social ostracisation and that their sexuality frequently led to accusations of rejecting Muslim values. Her research highlights the potential problems lesbians face in tight Muslim communities as homosexuality complicates family relationships and negatively impacts on them. For Faria, continually trying to hide her sexual orientation whilst in the UK also meant her daily routines were shrouded with secrecy and denial, which increased her personal isolation and demonstrates the distinct social space she occupied. This pressure negatively affected her emotional well-being as she felt she could not confide or talk to anybody about her case and subsequent fears. She explained to me that:

I told them [the Home Office] I don't want to live in the Pakistani area, you know when they relocate people, I told them not to put me with Pakistani groups, you see you know in Pakistani communities they speak to each other [...] the Pakistani people all have connections to each other, I just don't want anybody to know.

Faria, Pakistan.

This also supports findings in Miles' (2010) study which stressed that many LGBT asylum seekers are often suspicious of people from their own country. He argues that the fear of prejudice from all people from their ethnic background (including legal

representatives) affects claimants' ability to disclose information and to seek help. Within my study I also found that for some, this situation triggered memories of home and family rejection.

Heightened awareness of familial and spatial separation has often been associated with migrating populations and temporal lives (Malakki 1992; Pittaway & Bartolomei 2001; Baey 2007). However, my study reveals that for lesbian asylum seekers, it is not so much family separation but family rejection which dominates their feelings of solitude, isolation and concepts of belonging, as women often perceived that they were (predominantly) alone. For Nadine, such isolation reminded her of times when she did feel protected by her family and others. She explains:

Well you have no one, no one to talk to, no one to comfort you, to say 'it's all going to be ok' [...] you miss that (...) connection, knowing someone's there for you, whatever you've done [...] when I was little I felt everything would be ok because my mother was there, she was like everything you know [...] here you just have your solitude, you're sitting in your room on your own with just your mind going round and round.

Nadine, Jamaica.

For Frankie, the continued social isolation and difficulties lesbian asylum seekers face left her with an impression that '*lesbians are not wanted*' in the UK. Her account illustrates how her peripheral social status and temporality was internalised as a personal rejection because of her sexuality. Frankie was the only person to express this but she explained:

You claiming asylum on your sexuality [...] nah nah, nah, nah, nah, we don't want you here, there's no space for you here, we don't want you (...) all I know is you face a rejection, as far as I was concerned it was a rejection and I couldn't

deal with that, I've spent years of rejection, of not fitting in and being rejected and here I was again, being rejected from the one place I thought I was safe.

Frankie, Nigeria.

Importantly however, despite their peripherality, temporality, and instability, women did at times talk more positively about their transition through the asylum process and their ability to rebuild their lives in the UK, and how this impacted upon their sexual identity and subjectivity. All the women discussed how they thought the UK was a 'safe space' with regard to their sexuality and exploration of a queer life. Drawing on Butler's (2004) concept of 'remaking the human' is particularly useful here. Below I discuss how women *(re)made* their world, *(re)made* their connections, communities and intimacies, and how they *(re)made* their stories of survival to try and *(re)create* a livable life (Butler, 2004, 2006).

7.4 Sexual Freedom

As indicated earlier in this chapter, the participants talked to me about how their (forced) migration to the UK provided a new sense of sexual freedom. Accounts of feeling overwhelmed shortly after their arrival in the UK and relief that homosexuality could be discussed openly without public reprisal emerged. In addition, the perception that same-sex relationships were socially and politically acceptable and recognised alongside heterosexual relationships was considered to be 'a big deal'. Being in this environment allowed women to question their own cultural assumptions and reframe their sexuality through a different lens. For the women interviewed, their sexuality and sexual agency was, for the first time, seen as something which could be individually celebrated and not forcibly repressed. Significantly, homosexuality was also something which could be consumed and which the Home Office expected them to consume. As Jennifer explained to me, having a positive representation of homosexuality through the media was an invigorating experience.

It was almost like I wanted to access all things gay if that makes sense, it's like I wanted to be there, if a singer was gay then I wanted to hear her music, or his

music, even if it wasn't the music that was to my taste, it's like if there was a programme and it wasn't a programme I would normally watch I would watch just to see that single gay kiss, it became, it's almost like I had to consume everything gay to see if it was real, and that actually lasted a while before it all calmed down, it was like a teenager being allowed to party, you'd been locked up all your life and now you're suddenly allowed to party and drink and there are no limits, there was no need to have to stop, you just want it all because you'd been denied it for so long, that's what it felt like.

Jennifer, Jamaica.

This euphoria is also supported by literature on the queer diaspora which suggests that migration to cities where same-sex relationships are endorsed and celebrated is key in forming and expressing one's sexuality, search for a queer life and the self (Davies & Rentzel 1993; Dank 1998; Binnie 2004). Similarly, in Isaac and McKendrick's (1992) research with gay men, accessing this form of sub-culture was considered both powerful and critical in the formation of an individual sexual identity. My study also indicates that being in the UK allowed women to develop an alternative narrative regarding their sexuality and their search for a distinct queer space, place and belonging. For example, Sara talked of how consuming aspects of gay culture was like *'being given permission to be gay'* and to express herself, and for Imogen, this made her *'feel free'*. For Sara, as her account below illustrates, just having the availability of magazines within a mainstream bookstore was important and *'liberating'*. Her use of the term *'being reborn again'* illustrates the importance she associated with being able to acknowledge and identify herself as a lesbian.

For me it was like oh my gosh, freedom you know, oh I can't explain it, to be honest it's like being reborn again, I couldn't believe it, I remember in London they have this huge bookstore and (...) I remember standing at the bookstore and I saw this gay magazine and I couldn't believe it I was (laughing) (...) I remember that experience it was so liberating you know, I can't express it at all,

it was just so liberating, goodness (...) yeah and from then I say 'my God, my God' and comparing that to Jamaica, it's like miles or light years away you know [...] 'cause it's just being yourself freely, well to me now it's just normal now you know, it's not, it's not something I think about twice anymore 'cause it's just me you know, it's good, sexuality wise you know I'm quite comfortable.

Sara, Jamaica.

When placing these accounts next to Butler's question of 'what makes a livable life', it is clear that for the women in my study, the ability to access a gay sub-culture and to have positive representation enabled them to feel safe and to reconstruct a livable life. The provision of a 'safety net' offered by the UK meant for the first time, women could freely express their sexual agency without fear of punishment. Believing that laws and policing in the UK would protect them from any discrimination or violence they may receive because of their sexuality instilled self-confidence and sexual entitlements. For Penny, her sexuality was one of the few areas in her life which she currently felt 'safe' about. She explained:

It's a safe environment you know, thank God I can be who I want [...] even you know God forbid, if I was walking down the street and somebody saw me holding my girlfriend's hand and we were kissing and they started to throw slurs and (...) I have confidence in the [...] police to come and investigate it and I have confidence in this system that you know the person would be prosecuted with [a] fine or locked up (...) in Nigeria if this happened the police wouldn't even turn a blind eye, you know so I do feel safe.

Penny, Jamaica.

Penny's account above also illustrates how 'walking down the street' symbolically represented her new queer space and place. The street and the ability to be able to hold her girlfriend's hand symbolises her new sense of sexual freedom and represents

her search for a queer life and the construction of a sense of belonging and becoming. This resonates with Halberstram's (2005) work on how LGBT people reconstruct and 'queer' places and spaces as they take on new interpretations associated with the desire for a queer life. For all of the participants, the ability to express their sexual identity and freely communicate this to other (predominantly LGBT) people⁹⁵ was important and also offered a psychologically safe and queer space. For example Nadine, who spoke of feeling *'eager to meet other lesbians'*, found these interactions useful in helping her overcome the isolation she had long associated with her sexuality. For Imogen, finding others who understood, empathised and supported her was reassuring and represented the first time in her life that her sexuality felt *'normal'* which was an emotional *'relief'*.

Well, it like takes all the pressure that's been building up for so long away [...] to say 'yeah I really like her' to just say it and talk to friends about stuff like that, you know normal stuff that straight people talk about all the time [...] it was such a relief to just feel like (...) the same as everyone.

Imogen, The Gambia.

The role of friendships in providing *'a sense of belonging'* and community for Sara, and comfort and support for Penda also emerged. For Penda, her new friendships helped her to embrace and reconstruct a queer life in a safe queer space with each other. She described how these friendships had helped her to cope with the difficulties she faced in the UK and also compensated for her familial loss. This issue is expanded upon in the section below.

It's horrible that I don't have any family in my life, like blood family, it's horrible that I don't have people like that in my life, it really saddens me, it's worse on things like Christmas and Mother's Day and things like that (...) it's hard, but I have created a small little family here, people who I know I can call.

⁹⁵ Here reference was made predominantly to LGBT asylum seekers and refugees or LGBT British people who supported LGBT asylum issues.

Penda, Uganda.

7.4.1 Families of Choice

My study reveals that despite their difficult experiences, living in limbo and temporal existence, some of the participants had found new self-confidence and an ability to express their sexual identity to help support others in similar situations. For instance, two of the women who I interviewed had started women's support groups specifically for lesbian asylum seekers to offer a physical '*safe haven*', a queer place and space which provided emotional support. These lesbian support groups were cited by the participants who were still navigating the asylum process as their only access to support and relevant information.⁹⁶ The role of seeking and providing help to each other was also seen as establishing strong and often uncompromising friendships particularly for the women in the north of England. For Sara, her new friendships, the space for belonging which they represented were '*the only thing*' that kept her '*sane*' and for Faria, reminded her that '*people cared*' about her.

But when they moved me here to Manchester, I've managed to make lots of real friends, real good friends, I've made loads of friends, some of them I even call 'family' now, these are people who just accept you for who you are, these are people who just love you unconditionally, that's a huge positive impact it has on my life.

Imogen, The Gambia.

Offering and receiving mutual care and acceptance appeared to help all of the participants to understand and accept their individual sexual identity and subjectivity and to search for their queer life. Here it is clear how women's sexuality brought them together, providing a safe network and familiarity. Unlike their nationality, ethnicity and legal status which were often fraught with tension and exclusion, their sexuality

⁹⁶ The women who were still awaiting a decision and attended the lesbian support group in the north of England reported how this support group was their only avenue of specific advice regarding '*what to expect*' when going through the asylum process based on their sexual orientation.

provided a sense of belonging and becoming with other lesbian asylum seekers. This is demonstrated by both Penda and Imogen who used the terms '*family*' and '*love*' to describe their new relationships with their friends in the UK. For both women, the concept of 'family' was a forum of social and human interaction and unconditional support which was not exclusive to blood relatives and could be reframed through friendships. This also reveals how, for the participants, being in the UK created new, fluid meanings to the term 'family' which encompassed a new safety net, a respect for their sexual identity and a search for their queer life. These findings reflect wider research by sexuality scholars on intimacy, LGBT communities and 'families of choice' (Rubin 1985; Weeks et al. 2001; Dewaele et al. 2011). For example Weeks (2001) argues that for LGBT people, families of choice are diverse, fluid and constantly chosen and re-chosen with a positive and reaffirming potential. For Plummer (1995) the role of friendships and choice is particularly important within non-traditional and non-heterosexual contexts as they help to create social networks and intimate relationships. Women's accounts also demonstrate how friendship helped them to feel respected, safe and understood which added to their reconstruction of their livable life (Butler, 2004). This was particularly important as it offered some stability and trust at a time of legal, cultural, social and economic transition and peripherality.

7.4.2 Sexual Identity and Re-creating New Narratives

As discussed in Chapter Three, Queer theorists frame sexuality as fluid and influenced by a range of interactions, contradictory experiences and perspectives (Sullivan 2003; Valocchi 2005; Adams 2006). This also has correlations with what Butler (2004) refers to as remaking the human, as individuals re-evaluate their norms, meanings, knowledge and truth. For the participants in this study, having time and periods of self-reflection, access to supportive friends, and living in a country where homosexuality is not a punishable offence seemed to allow them to explore alternative and more positive views about their sexual identity and subjectivity. Over the course of my three interviews, complex, fluctuating and often contradictory perspectives regarding their sexuality emerged in women's accounts. For example, Faria and Leila were visibly less confident and more secluded than the other women I interviewed. Both women lived

with their children who they were adamant should not know about their sexuality and both commented on struggling with their sexual identity, especially regarding other people knowing or identifying them as a lesbian. However, they also spoke of striving for self-acceptance since being in the UK and of recently feeling more comfortable and confident with their sexuality.

Being a lesbian, yeah I feel better now, I go to the group [lesbian support group] and I feel better about it and more confident (...) I know this is who I am, I've learnt to feel better now.

Faria, Pakistan.

Since [being] here I've learnt to accept it [my sexuality], you just have to, if not (...) I would have probably denied it or gone into hiding somewhere (...) I know I'm a lesbian, these thing do not change.

Leila, Saudi Arabia.

These accounts illustrate how the women implicitly and explicitly identified with the word 'lesbian' as a category and a 'truth' in relation to which it was safe to describe themselves in the UK. It also demonstrates how, when placed alongside their narratives 'back home,' both Faria and Leila had established a new knowledge base and positive meanings associated with the term 'lesbian'. Importantly, despite personal difficulties, anxieties and continued insecurity, being in the UK permitted the participants to navigate a personal journey of sexual and self-exploration.

After a while you say you know what, this is who I am and whatever you think, I'm really not going to let it bother me.

Nadine, Jamaica.

My study illustrates that the asylum process deeply influenced women's public and private views about their sexuality. For example, Imogen explained how her transition

through the legal tiers had provided the necessary *'push'* to *'come out'* and *'be out.'* The public acknowledgement and collection of evidence for her claim had provided an incentive which enabled her to, for the first time, proudly identify herself as a lesbian. She stated how she was always *'too scared'* to be open about her sexuality in the past, yet having to *'come out'* during the asylum process meant she could not delay this any longer. She explained:

But when I got to the asylum process I knew I had to 'come out', it was my time to 'come out' and I had to let it all out (...) that's helped me because one, you have to be 'out' for different reasons, you can't be in the closet and ask them for protection, they just wouldn't accept it.

Imogen, The Gambia.

Similarly, Sara also talked of how the legal process had made her sexuality something she could *'no longer hide behind'*. She stated that:

When you claim asylum because you're a lesbian you have to learn to be comfortable with it (...) I mean it's something you can no longer hide behind or deny.

Sara, Jamaica.

For Imogen, Penda and Sara, the importance of being able to draw strength from their stories revealed during the asylum process also emerged. For these women, although the asylum process was described as emotionally challenging, being able to acknowledge how it had positively contributed to their lives also helped them to develop resilience and a sense of sexual entitlement. For example these women, who were all part of the same support group in the north of England felt that the asylum process helped them to form important relationships, to learn about themselves and to feel proud. For Imogen, this meant that she refused to *'be a victim'* and for Penda, this taught her how to *'fight to stay in the UK'*. Penda explained how, when initially

refused asylum she used her personal story to launch a public campaign to challenge and repeal the decision. Sara and Imogen also commented that they were prepared to do this if they continued to face difficulties with their application process. These examples illustrate how despite the negative impacts of the asylum process, these women were able to embrace their sexuality as something positive and worthy of citizenship.

Re-framing their sexuality and the stories demanded by the asylum process meant that they were able to use their narratives in different contexts, with different audiences and for different and more positive purposes. Penda reports how using her story for her own objectives was a vital part of forming a political sexual identity. She told me how she had spoken about her asylum claim at several public LGBT marches in front of hundreds of people, written articles and started a public petition. Similar experiences have also been charted in sexuality and Queer studies as people relocate their private traumatic experiences into public concerns and issues of advocacy and survival (Plummer 1995; Weeks 1998). For Plummer (1995) the transition through which private troubles become public problems is a political process enabling new stories to be told, new voices to be heard and new identities to be formed. This can be seen in Penda's account below which reveals how her new narrative represented a symbolic shift in the power and control she now had with her personal story. She explained:

I'm glad I was refused a couple of times because I'm a firm believer things happen for a reason and, I think that was the reason I got refused, that was a time when I got my fighting spirit back, I knew I had to pick myself up, I had to fight and stand up, going through the asylum process, it awakened the feminist and the activist in me, [...] going through the asylum process, I hated myself to start with but, as time went on (...) I became more proud of myself and who I am, and I began to love myself a bit [...] they [Home Office] put me in this corner where I had to defend myself [...] to keep justifying myself for everything, to justify myself for being who I was, as time went by it gave me a sense of, when you cut me, red blood comes out the same as you, I'm a person the same as you.

Penda, Uganda.

Sara also talked about how her transition through the asylum process had made her determined to be heard, to try and take some control and to seek her sexual citizenship. She stated that going through the asylum process had made her feel stronger and allowed her to feel proud of her sexual identity. This clearly contradicts Sara's more negative recollections of the asylum process as recounted in Chapter Six. Here the complexity of women's narratives is revealed as they navigate from moments of feeling disempowered by the asylum process to also recognising how such circumstances enabled them to acknowledge their sense of self and ignite an individual strength. This is further demonstrated when Sara reveals how she wanted to take charge over her narrative and would not allow it to be used by immigration officials to 'undermine' her.

I'm proud of who I am, I no longer care what people think, so in a way, going through the system makes you fight for yourself (...) to be who you are, I won't stop fighting.

Sara, Jamaica.

An important but contrary view was introduced by Mae however who was granted asylum immediately, who never had a refusal letter, never went to court and did not have to repeatedly disclose her accounts of violence. For Mae, her story remained very private and she felt that talking about 'these things' was 'unthinkable' and 'would never be told'. Unlike some of the other participants, Mae's narrative did not take on any additional role or political purpose and was not a source of personal strength. She explained:

I don't talk about it, I never tell people what happened there [Jamaica] I can't even say the J word [Jamaica], some people don't even know that's where I'm

from (...) I won't tell anybody what happened there, if anybody asked about it I would refuse, I won't tell anyone, I can't deal with that.

Mae, Jamaica.

In this thesis I have demonstrated how women's sexual identity was influenced and shaped not only by the asylum process but also outside the legal gaze through popular culture, friendship, a desire for a queer life and a sense of community. Women's arrival in the UK enabled a period of reflection and sexual exploration, including the time and space to 'normalise' their same-sex desires. Through this process of belonging and becoming some women found the asylum process acted as a catalyst, enabling them to familiarise themselves with being publicly identified as a lesbian and an opportunity to culturally embrace being 'out'. Although this was not a straightforward and linear process and did not diminish struggles with internal homophobia, this transitional time and temporal space did allow for the development of a 'queer life' and the process of becoming and belonging to be explored (especially through lesbian support groups). How women renegotiated their new public and private spaces on the basis of their sexual identity and recreated new norms based around their search for sexual citizenship and sexual rights was apparent. The safety and comfort that the women got from each other was a crucial factor in their ability to use their time to help reconstruct a livable life in the UK.

7.5 Conclusion

Women's interpretation of the asylum process encompassed a range of intricate negotiations, instabilities and anxieties. A prominent theme was women's continued insecurity associated with their temporality, which led to social, legal, cultural and economic peripherality. This impacted on how women experienced time and their ability to plan a future, and resulted in deteriorating mental health and well-being. However my final interviews also illustrated that, despite the personal difficulties, anxieties and perpetual insecurity faced by the participants, being in the UK encouraged a personal journey of sexual-exploration. The opportunity to identity with

a community, to create solidarity and a sense of belonging urged women to positively reassess their sexuality and find personal acceptance and sexual self-esteem. This explanation illustrates that although many women felt the asylum process 'pushed them' it also enabled them to meet other lesbians through specific LGBT support groups and to renegotiate their families of choice. The ability to draw strength and to publicly re-tell their intimate narratives in order to '*fight*' for their sexual entitlements and their right to remain in the UK, illustrates both the fluid and complex nature of their narratives and their desire to reconstruct a livable life (Butler 2004; Butler 2006).

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

Throughout this research I have prioritised the views of lesbian women as they seek asylum in the UK on the grounds of their sexual orientation because these perspectives remain under-examined within academic literature. The methodological approach of this study has allowed an interrogation of a range of experiences, opinions and standpoints which together shaped how the participants saw themselves, their sexuality and their asylum journey. By beginning with women's experiences in their home countries I have been able to explore and contextualise how women's past had shaped their current perceptions and apprehensions whilst seeking asylum. By focusing on navigating the legal intricacies as well as the impact of being a lesbian asylum seeker, I was also able to analyse subjective accounts of the transition through legal processes offering sociological insight into sexuality and asylum for an interdisciplinary audience.

The thesis has drawn on a range of theoretical resources including the work of Foucault (1978, 1979) and Butler (1990, 2004, 2006). I have also drawn on the applications of theory within the fields of forced migration and sexual violence, seeking to use the insights of Queer theory, (queer) temporality, ontological (in)security and narrative approaches. Many of these theoretical strands do not specifically focus upon the forced migration of LGBT people and subsequently this study offers a new perspective.

This final chapter will engage with the three research questions posed at the beginning of the thesis and explore the original contribution this study makes to knowledge. The chapter concludes by discussing the limitations of the study and identifies gaps and recommends areas of further research.

8.2 Research Questions

This doctoral study posed three distinct questions:

1) What are the experiences of navigating the UK asylum process for lesbians?

The asylum process as described to me was shaped by inequitable power dynamics that I have explored through the lens of Foucault's work on sovereign power, legal gaze and the 'docile body'(1979). My study reveals that women struggled to comprehend the intricacies of the legal process, the legal arguments and terminology, appeals processes and evidential requirements which formed part of their asylum claims. Subsequently, the asylum process was perceived as something that was done to them as opposed to a system which they could express any form of control over and comprehensively navigate. The inability to exercise power at different stages of the asylum process was illustrated vividly in almost all of the accounts expressed to me. Added to this, the intensity of attending legal interviews and court appearances left women feeling powerless over the length of time, the choice of audience, the questions asked (and ability to refuse questions) and the decisions and judgement that were made about them. Significantly some women commented that they did not recognise the interpretations of their experiences, and a few participants felt this that this was a deliberate strategy by the Home Office to dismiss their claims. This indicates the level of suspicion and distrust voiced by the participants towards decision-makers. This misgiving was notable amongst all participants despite the majority of the sample being (eventually) granted international protection in the UK.

The level of subjection women felt within the asylum process also has correlations with Foucault's work on the 'docile body' as women portrayed constantly being judged, observed and scrutinised and expected to 'act' in a certain way. This was especially prominent when women described their experiences inside Yarl's Wood IRC and their relationship with the Home Office and security guards who controlled their daily routines. For the women who were detained, this process was internalised as a further punishment for their sexuality and reignited personal anxieties that their same-sex desires meant that they needed to be excluded from mainstream society.

It is important however to contextualise women's views of the asylum process alongside their experiences back home. Forcibly migrating away from countries, communities and families which ostracised, marginalised, stigmatised and punished their same-sex desires and relationships clearly influenced women's perspectives. As a consequence women were inherently suspicious of others, fearful of their judgements and importantly distrusting of people in a position of authority. Having kept so much of their life secret and hidden for so long, to then being forced to relay their intimate details into the legal and public domain for the first time was an intimidating and uneasy experience. Simultaneous to women's transition through the legal process was a personal, emotional and cultural transition relating to their sexuality. The asylum process often triggered internal homophobia as women blamed their sexuality for their current predicaments and uncertainties (in a non-linear and fluid way).

Despite these pressures however it was clear that for many women in my study, maintaining the self-determination to '*fight*' for their legal citizenship and for their sexual entitlements was a key motivator. Paradoxically the demands of the asylum system to produce a public sexuality identity became a resource for women in the process of coming to terms with and building a personal sexual identity. This has resonance with what Butler (2004) describes as *remaking the human*; a process whereby individuals are able to rebuild their lives rather than succumb to imposed ideological restrictions. Although this was not a straightforward process and was often emotionally difficult and fraught, it was an important aspect of seeking asylum and of taking some control.

2) How are the sexual stories and accounts of 'truth' for lesbian asylum seekers told and performed during the asylum process?

This study has parallels with Plummer's (1995) work on 'telling sexual stories', adopting his approach to exploring not just what is said but also how stories are told, who they are told to and how they are embedded within power and politics. A key challenge of the asylum process is the demand to place intimate narratives and private memories into the public domain, often for the first time in women's lives. As the asylum process

is a strict, adversarial legal procedure, women had little control over how their stories were told. Drawing on the work of Steedman (2000) I have characterised these legally required stories as 'enforced'. Difficult accounts emerged of verbalising a lesbian identity for the first time as well as the requirement to disclose intimate sexual practices and behaviours in public.

Both the screening interview and the substantive interview were vividly recalled and described as traumatic especially given women's unfamiliarity with narrating such personal details. In addition, reports of being forced to talk in great detail about experiences of physical and sexual violence and abuse emerged as distressing and offer similarities with literature on rape disclosure in legal settings (Kelly & Radford 1996b; Caringella 2009).

The pressure of being judged and the importance of being believed also dominated women's accounts. Consequently, their asylum narratives were not solely based on what they said, but also how these narratives were performed and interpreted by decision-makers. I have drawn on Butler (1990) distinction between the act of *doing* and *being* in order to explore the ways that women talked of the struggle between being a lesbian and being believed to be a lesbian. Here it is clear how the search for 'truth' also elicits a 'performance' as women's accounts and observational behaviour are scrutinised within the 'legal gaze' in order to ascertain their believability. Although a legitimate line of legal enquiry, women internalised this process as a personal interrogation and often a form of personal rejection. In attempting to respond to the legal requests, women reported tensions between constructing their personal sexual selves whilst simultaneously conforming to the stereotypes which they felt they were judged on. This search for a 'true' sexuality also illustrated the distinct scholarly clash between how sexuality is defined and understood across academic disciplines. For example, the legal jurisdictions of the asylum process and the demand for evidence frames sexuality as something which can be objectifiably proven and examined. These perspectives contradict academic debates such as those offered by Queer theory which conversely suggests that sexuality and sexual identity are individually ill-defined, fluid, constantly evolving and open to (re)interpretation. The difficulty of fitting into a

pre-determined and expected stereotype was stressed by the participants who underlined how this was confusing and frustrating.

This research also reveals that having one's sexuality discredited and being perceived as a liar could be personally devastating. Managing the transition between deliberately hiding their sexual identity in their home countries and then being immediately publicly 'out' in the UK was described as a difficult process which seemingly compounded women's feelings of rejection. With the exception of one participant, all of my interviewees had received refusal letters outlining why their accounts were (at some point) disbelieved by the Home Office and immigration judges. Receiving this notification had an extremely detrimental impact upon women and was recalled more vividly than the final (and more recent) notification of their positive outcome. This finding correlates with literature on the disclosure of rape narratives (especially within judicial settings) and how women place a greater weight on negative reactions and prioritise these over more positive and affirming reactions (Ullman 2010).

The methodological approach of repeat individual interviews permitted an in-depth exploration into women's sexual stories. The complexity and often contradictory nature of women's accounts emerged which also supports sociological debates on the construction, the telling and the interpretations of narratives (Phoenix 2008; Plummer 2013). For example, women moved from recalling the asylum process as a very negative, undermining and victimising process to also acknowledging how (for some), it enabled them to (eventually) take control of their narratives and use them as a source of strength and purpose. In addition, the transition through the asylum process also influenced women's use and interpretation of language and allowed a few women to acknowledge and reframe their past experiences of abuse. The variability of women's sexual stories regarding seeking asylum in the UK also illustrates how past and current experiences as well as their future expectations influenced individual meanings, hopes and thus the complexity of their sexual stories.

3) How does seeking protection in the UK impact on women's social and sexual identity and sexual subjectivity?

Women's experiences of being a lesbian asylum seeker in the UK were often framed around managing uncertainty, ontological insecurity and a particular temporality that divided them from others. Waiting for a decision to be made about their case has resonance with migration literature on living in a suspended sense of time and reality (Anderson 2007; Griffiths et al. 2013). Alongside this, the inability to work and to maintain professional skills added to women's negative perceptions of living with a declining social and economic status. Symbolically this created a distinct space in which women felt socially positioned as peripheral beings, being marginalised from society and unable to socially contribute. As lesbians, this group of asylum seekers experienced peripherality in relation to the wider British public because of their insecure immigration status, and in relation to other asylum seeking and migrant communities because of their sexuality.

Although women described the period of waiting for leave to remain as 'being wasted' or 'going slow', the ability to use this time more positively to explore a 'queer life' also emerged. My findings in this area have relevance for work around queer temporality, especially how queer time, queer space and queer belonging is created (Halberstam 2005; Dean 2011). Women's accounts provided insight into the impact of living with positive images of homosexuality within mainstream and popular culture as well as the demand to enact popular stereotypes in the asylum process. In addition, the ability to explore same-sex desires and to walk 'freely down the street' as a lesbian without fear of punishment was an important part of women's experiences in the UK and can be understood as aspects of inhabiting a queer temporality and queer space.

Such reflections are closely interconnected with the asylum process which for some was recognised as providing a useful '*push*' to be 'out' and to start the personal journey of learning to understand and accept their sexuality. For many women, being a lesbian asylum seeker involved developing a strong, and for the first time a positive, lesbian identity which became the basis for friendships, networks and social interactions (which were almost exclusively LGBT). Indeed many of these friendship and bonds of trust was described as 'like family' and provided essential support and belonging which relates to the work of queer scholars such as Weeks' (2001).

Ironically, women's sexual identity whilst in the UK was considered 'safe', in contrast to their insecure immigration status and nationality which remained areas of isolation and rejection. The complexity of sexuality and the asylum process also meant that as women learnt to accept their same-sex desires and interacted with other LGBT asylum seekers (through support groups) their fears of losing these precious achievements, if returned, was often heightened.

Women's accounts regarding their sexuality also appeared to evolve over the course of my three interviews. Sexual subjectivity was, during the first interview often described as entirely troubling and problematic. All participants (to varying degrees) displayed internal homophobia, reporting how they believed, or at least understood, that they deserved the punishment that was inflicted upon them because of their sexuality. Their sexual desires were described as a burdensome internal battle, whereby they were consumed by negative thoughts of guilt and shame, resonating with literature in Queer theory and sexuality studies (Sullivan 2003; Rahman & Jackson 2010; Jennes 2013). However, over the course of the interviews, contextualised by new experiences and perhaps by the experience of sharing their stories, women's sexual subjectivities were seemingly repositioned. Whilst talking about their experiences in the UK, women spoke with more confidence and sexual entitlement. Although this was by no means a linear process and negative thoughts surrounding their sexuality still arose, on the whole, the interview that focused on being in the UK permitted the development of more positive sexual stories in which there was a greater sense of reconciliation between private sexual subjectivity and public sexual identity.

In order to framed this journey over the three interviews I have drawn on Butler's (2004, 2006) question as to 'what makes a livable life?', tracing the movement from a denial of existence in countries of origin, through the enforced narratives of the asylum process to the tentative claiming of belonging that emerged in the third interviews. Many aspects of women's experiences described to me were deemed as 'unlivable', intolerable and detrimental to their lives and well-being. However, within these narratives the role of friendship, belonging and the creation of a community all emerged as essential and important to their social and sexual identity and sexual subjectivity. Despite negative experiences, legal and social constraints and living with

uncertainty, the creation of a safe space (with other LGBT asylum seekers) permitted comfort, purpose and support. Together this allowed women to exercise strength and to try and build forms of solidarity and mutual recognition to enable them to create a livable life whilst in the UK.

8.3 Contribution to Knowledge

The exploration of sexuality and the asylum process is particularly timely given that the criminalisation of same-sex relationships (especially across Africa) is now a central political issue as governments take an increasing hard line. As potentially more people seek international protection on the grounds of their sexuality, the findings presented in this thesis will contribute to knowledge and understanding amongst academics, policy makers, NGOs and practitioners.

Existing debates about sexuality and asylum tend to focus on legal arguments including the interpretation and application of case law and the production of evidence, as well as legal and policy-oriented implications. These discussions have also prioritised professional expert knowledge from barristers, country experts and clinical psychologists who all offer professional opinions on the lives of lesbians, persecution and social backgrounds. My study however, provides an insight into the direct experiences of lesbian asylum seekers as narrated by themselves. This includes various interpretations of how 'truth' is constructed and their views of how they considered their 'truth' was determined and their sexuality was judged by the 'legal gaze'.

Their accounts highlight the complexity, intensity and levels of performativity required to have their homosexuality recognised and believed. For some this included feeling obliged to change their physical appearance and adopt a certain 'publicly out' lifestyle in order to provide suitable evidence. However, my study highlights how women held more fluid interpretations of their sexuality and often felt frustrated and angered at the questions asked, observations used and judgements made. Such tensions also mirror academic disciplinary differences particularly between Queer theory within the social sciences and legal jurisdictions, which offer different insights into what sexual identity is and whether it can be measured. The struggles relayed by women

themselves also illustrate the devastating impact of not having their sexuality believed and, for some, this was internalised as discrediting their very existence. These issues discussed from the standpoint of lesbians have rarely been covered in academic debates. The contradictions and intricacies of women's accounts offer a contribution to knowledge and provide invaluable insight into how women's sexuality frames their experiences of seeking asylum in the UK.

Moreover, whilst the nature of talking about individual sexuality has been an area of scholarly interest for many years (Harry 1993; Plummer 1995; Weeks et al. 2001), discussing the sexual stories told as part of the asylum process offers a new scholarly contribution. This thesis reveals how legal, spatial, cultural and emotional transitions affect how stories are (re)told and (re)framed and the complexities and contradictions which emerge as part of this.

My study also has relevance to wider debates in Queer theory and sexuality studies especially regarding forced migration of lesbians from the Global South to the North, on which there is limited academic debate. For instance, this research reveals the long-term difficulties of growing up and living in environments hostile towards homosexuality and how this can result in internalised negativity towards one's own sexuality. As a consequence, after forcibly migrating, lesbian refugees are often over-familiar with secrecy, betrayal and a fear of being negatively judged by others which affects their experiences of seeking asylum. By drawing upon women's direct accounts, I was able to look at the social situations faced by lesbian asylum seekers in the UK and their tendency to be isolated from other asylum seeking, migrant and host communities. These findings offer some generalisability, as similar circumstances and situations may also be faced by other lesbian asylum seekers in the Global North. Together with this, my study also raises issues which are relevant to wider asylum seeking and refugees communities. For example, the loss of social and economic status, living with constant instability, the impact of detention and being separated from families, whilst simultaneously navigating the asylum process, can result in an anxiety-proving experience.

8.4 Limitations of My Research

The perspectives presented in this thesis capture a moment in time which was shared between myself and the participants. I acknowledge that the views raised by the women are likely to differ with other audiences, in different situations and alter throughout different stages of their lives.

In this thesis I have set out to examine three questions and to make a contribution to knowledge. The approach I have taken has however meant certain areas are left unexplored or unanswered. As discussed throughout this study, I have focused on how women construct and tell their sexual stories, including their past experiences in their home countries and, in particular, whilst navigating the asylum process. My research approach was based on how women looked back and described their experiences. Some of the incidents women talked to me about had occurred many years ago and it is unclear whether their views on certain events had changed over time. Some women were in very precarious situations when I met them, which may have influenced some of their more negative reflections of the asylum process. In addition, it is also unclear how the women I interviewed perceived me and whether they wanted to present a certain image of the asylum process. As some of the participants knew me from my previous research with an NGO there did seem to be an expectation that my findings would be widely disseminated and potentially used for lobbying.

For the purposes of this study I have focused on women's individual perspectives as I wanted to understand their own personal reflections of the asylum process. I have deliberately not triangulated this with the legal arguments and the views of legal representatives. If I had taken this approach it may have provided me with more insight into current legal debates surrounding sexuality claims. This approach would have also provided a more factual account regarding the progression of women's cases and explanations regarding why certain asylum claims may take longer to be processed than other cases. In addition, a triangulated study would have also allowed further investigation into the implementation of the UKBA Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (2010) guidelines as well as the current progress being made and the Home Office's commitment to address sexuality cases.

The sample for the study consisted of eleven women, which is a small proportion of LGBT asylum seekers. The majority of the participants were in contact with two lesbian support groups in London and Manchester. This means the sampling techniques I used was unable to identify and engage with some of the more marginalised lesbian asylum seekers who may not be accessing any form of support.

Including women from a range of countries allowed an exploration as to whether there were differences in experiences across cultures and countries. However, it would have been interesting to have either focused on one country, a particular age group, or women who had applied for asylum during a smaller time-frame in order to look more specifically at a concentrated group. For example, taking a more precise sample would have helped identify any culturally specific issues, including the use of language and terms or concepts which may be culturally misunderstood. Focusing on a sample from a specific country would have also provided a useful benchmark to understand the intricacies of women's experiences in their home country and to outline areas of further research. Similarly a sample of older women would have been interesting in order to explore age, sexuality and the asylum process. From my study, the more mature participants seemed to express a greater sense of personal, social and professional loss. However, as the age range within the sample was so broad, it was impossible to make any conclusions regarding this. On reflection I also believe that choosing a sample of women who claimed asylum within a shorter time-frame (for example within a year and post the introduction of the UKBA Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (2010) guidelines) would have offered a more precise account of how asylum applications are currently being processed. Although my sample applied for asylum within five years, it is unclear whether the style of questions or decision-making process may have changed more recently.

Despite these limitations having a broad sample did however, offer a distinct view into commonalities of experiences of the asylum process despite different countries of origin, different age groups, and historical differences in when asylum had been applied for. The similarities conveyed by the participants have allowed for certain generalisations to be made regarding the difficulties and complexities of navigating the UK asylum process on the basis of your homosexuality.

8.5 Areas of Further Research

The methodological approach used for this study has allowed me to understand something of the complex relationships between public and private sexual stories. This has illustrated to me how important it is for people to 'seek ownership' of their stories, both in terms of how they are told but also, who they are told to and how they are heard. This was evident in how women spoke of their reflections on the asylum process but also, their interviews with me. For example, three women stated at the end of my final interview with them that they found my interviews useful in helping them to verbalise, trust and understand their own stories. I was told that creating a safe space where women '*could just talk*' and not '*feel judged*' helped them to learn to accept their own experiences and circumstances. In addition, another participant phoned me over a year after we met to thank me for including her in this study and for listening to her. She reported that she found talking about her experiences useful in helping her to accept her past and to try to rebuild a life. During this telephone conversation, we spoke of how her situation had changed since the interviews which also illustrated to me how the circumstances and perspectives of many of the participants in this study may have altered since my interviews. More importantly, this approach also taught me of the importance of engaging directly with marginalised groups in emotionally challenging contexts, as often this group of people are looking for avenues to be included and to express themselves. Therefore I recommend further qualitative research with LGBT refugees to explore the intricacies of their lives and how they create queer spaces, queer places and queer belonging in the UK.

Other issues which emerged from my study which I believe warrant further investigation include how women's perspectives of the asylum process and their sexual identity change over time. More longitudinal work exploring whether women's views alter as they move beyond the asylum process and as they establish their lives in the UK would complement this work. Given the fluid nature of women's sexuality, it would be interesting to look at how this is re-framed away from the pressure of the asylum process. It would also be useful to know how women's circumstances and their concepts of home change over time and whether their feelings of social isolation and fear of return continue the longer they stay in the UK. Moreover, I believe doing

research with women as they re-negotiate their indefinite leave to remain after their five years in the UK would be beneficial. This type of research would enable others to learn about changes in expectations, any challenges regarding the resubmission of evidence, whether re-engaging with legal processes re-ignited previous anxieties or, whether women felt more confident with legal systems and had found stability and trust in such institutions.

My interviews also suggested that many lesbians faced certain difficulties, insecurities, health and practical problems when they first gained asylum. I believe further research in this area would be useful to both policy makers and practitioners. The women in this research all seemed to believe their life would improve upon gaining their leave to remain. This expectation was frequently described to me as being short-lived for women with refugee status, as they faced new obstacles in the UK and negotiated new professional relationships and social services. My interviews also suggested that the participants felt there was little information and advice for them during this period of their life. This confusion could have been exacerbated by women's lack of access to information given their separation from other asylum seekers and support groups. Additional research would illustrate a number of key issues including: how lesbian refugees access support and information, the difficulties they may face integrating, and whether they continued to feel that they were being negatively judged on the basis of their sexuality the longer they stayed in the UK.

This research does not include statistical information on the numbers of LGBT asylum applicants in the UK because this information at the time of writing has still not been published by the Home Office. More accurate information, a greater understanding and monitoring is needed regarding sexuality and the asylum process. In particular it would be useful to know: how many LGBT people claim asylum in the UK; how many applications are refused from the first decision; how many of these decisions are later overturned; how many applicants are placed under the fast-track programme; what the main grounds for refusal are and which countries people arrived from.

Finally, more policy-focused research and debate is needed on the specific changes that have been made since the introduction of the UKBA Sexual Orientation and

Gender Identity Guidelines (2010) and how these are currently being implemented by Home Office staff. This will add an essential updated perspective on the intricacies of how sexuality cases are currently being processed in the UK. Alongside this, further discussions on the legal changes and challenges that have arisen since the case of AJ (Cameroon) and HT (Iran) would be beneficial. This also includes comparative work on how homosexuality claims are processed as well as interpretations of law across different countries. Together such further pieces of research would offer an invaluable, important and in-depth insight into sexuality and the asylum process.

"I just want people to know that as a lesbian I'm still a human being (...), I feel the same emotions as you (...) I feel pain and get embarrassed [....] that's why I came today, because I want you and others to hear what I have to say, it's important people know we exist and to see we have a sense of pride."

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Appendix One

This leaflet was printed and circulated to known gatekeepers who worked with lesbian asylum seekers, as well as a number of other groups who supported women asylum seekers

Would you like to be involved in a new research project?

If you:

- **Are a lesbian**
- **Have claimed asylum because of your sexuality**
- **are aged over 18 years old**
- **are living in the UK**
- **If you have experienced physical or sexual violence because of your sexual orientation**

then I would like to talk to you.

My name is Claire Bennett and I am doing research working with women asylum seekers in the UK.
I am a doctoral student at the, University of Sussex.

I am very interested to learn about your experiences of the asylum process. I have worked with and published research with women asylum seekers before and would like this opportunity to talk to you about your views of going through the UK asylum process.

As part of a research study I am completing for a higher degree, I would like to hear about your experiences especially:

- Being a lesbian in your country of origin
- Your experiences of the UK asylum process
- What it is like to be a lesbian asylum seeker in the UK

I would like to interview you 3 times at a time and location that is suitable for you. I will cover all travel costs and where needed, childcare expenses.

You can bring a friend or support worker with you to the interviews if you would like.

Please note:

All information that you provide will be treated in the strictest confidence.

- I will not share any of your details or personal information with anybody else
- I will respect you and do not want you to talk about anything you do not wish to discuss
- I will change your name and personal details, so when the research is published nobody will identify you or recognise what you have said
- If you decide that you no longer wish to participate in the research at any stage then you can withdraw.

I will talk to you about this in more detail if you would like to participate.

If you would like to be part of this research please contact me.

You can email me: bennett_claire@hotmail.com

Or you can phone me: 07762 814 004

What happens next?

Once you express an interest in participating in the research - we can talk about any further questions you may have and then arrange to meet up at a suitable location.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Appendix Two

This letter outlining the sample criteria was devised in consultation with my supervisors and the gatekeepers.

It was circulated along with the leaflet (Appendix One) to known gatekeepers and agencies providing support to lesbian asylum seekers.

This research project explores the lesbian experiences of lesbian women who are seeking or who have sought asylum in the UK on the grounds of their sexual orientation. I am recruiting women who meet the following criteria.

Can you please circulate this, along with the research leaflet.

If you know anybody who may be interested, would like to talk about their experiences and meets the criteria below, can you please make them aware of the research.

Do contact me if you would like me to come and talk to the women's group or to discuss the research in more detail with certain individuals.

Please feel free to share my contact details.

Many thanks, Claire

Sample Criteria

This research is currently recruiting lesbians who are:

- **Are currently seeking, or have claimed asylum in the UK because of their sexuality in the last five years**
- **Have sought refugee status on the grounds of the 'particular social group' category**
- **Are aged over 18 years old**
- **Are living in the UK**
- **Have experienced physical or sexual violence in their country of origin because of their sexual orientation**

Please note, I will provide translators and child care arrangements if required

Appendix Three

The schedule below was devised, in consultation with my supervisors to assist the interviews. The Schedule was to act as a guideline only and was not to serve as prescriptive questions.

Draft interview schedule for the participants

- The role of the interviewer is to facilitate, and guide discussions towards the following themes.
- Adequate time and space should be provided for women to answer in their own words and at their own pace.
- The questions below are not prescriptive

1st interview – Background /Context

This interview is to discuss women's experiences in their country of origin

- Can you tell me a bit about your life in (country of origin) – *(general – look at key experiences and memories)?*
- Can you talk to me about your family - did you live with your family – who were you closest too - were you married – did you have children? *(draw out key relationships and support)?*
- Were you in employment and if so, can you tell me a bit more about what you did?
- How would you describe your friendships and relationships in (country of origin)?
- Can you describe what it was like to live in (specific place in country of origin)?

Discuss homosexuality (use vignette one if appropriate)

- What was it like to be a lesbian in your country of origin?
- What did other people say about homosexuals/lesbians?
- What is the law/cultural restrictions regarding homosexuality?
- How did the media, politicians, educational establishments, religious organisations/congregation and community members talk about people in same sex relationships?
- Did you know other homosexuals?
- How did the views of other make you feel?

Discuss Relationships

- Can you tell me what having a same sex relationship is like in (country of origin)?
- Did you tell anybody about this relationship?
- Who did you tell - how did they react?
- If kept secret, why and how did you keep this secret – what did you need to do?
- Did your family know about this relationship?
- How did you feel about being in a same sex relationship at the time?
- what type of support was there available for you including friends/family/ community/ groups/ organisations etc - and how did they support you?

2nd interview – the asylum process

This second interview is to discuss women's transgression through the asylum process. Ask each individual to talk about what they remember and recall as significant.

Use the timeline if suitable and ask participants to add things to the time line.

- How and when did you arrive in the UK?
- Can you recall the asylum process?

Talk about specific aspects of the asylum process including:

The Screening Interview

- Where did this take place (port of arrival or Croydon)?
- What happened at this stage?
- Who was there (eg, male/female, UKBA staff/ interpreters)?
- Describe the process?
- How were you feeling?
- What happened at the end of this interview?

1st interview with UKBA

- Can you tell me more about this interview
- Where was it held and who was there
- What type of questions were asked?
- How long did this interview last for?
- How did this make you feel ?
- Did you talk about any experiences of rape/sexual violence at this stage/ same sex relationship?
- How did talking about this experience make you feel?
- Did you know why these questions were being asked?

- Did you feel supported during this interview?
- How long after this interview did you get a decision?
- What did your letter say and how did this letter and decision make you feel?

Further interviews/Court Appearances

- How many further interviews did you have?
- Did you attend court?
- How many times? What was it like in court?
- What types of questions were asked?
- How did this feel?
- What did you do after your court appearance?
- When did you hear about your decision?
- How were you informed?
- What did you do when you got this decision?
- What happened next?

Accommodation/Detention/Monitoring

- Were you dispersed – if so when/where/what was this like?
- How often did you need to attend the UKBA for monitoring requirements?
- Were you detained? – when ? what was this like?
- Where are you in the asylum process now?
- Are there any other key experiences as part of the asylum process you want to talk about
- What would you tell other people about the asylum process?
-

Could also use vignette Two – to look at how much people understand about the asylum process and what they would advise other about the asylum process.

3rd interview – Impact of the asylum process

Could use the discussion line to assist participants in talking about how the asylum process has impacted upon their lives.

- How do you feel the asylum process has impacted upon your life?
- Do you feel this process has impacted upon your health?
- Whilst going through this process what access to support did you have?
- Was there any support you did not have and felt that you needed?
- Did you understand the asylum process?
- What does having refugee status mean to you?

Appendix Four

A table providing brief information on the participants is provided below. After this, a short summary of the interviews with each of the women is discussed.

Name	Country of Origin	Age	Leave to Remain	Applied for Asylum
Faria	Pakistan	40s	N	2010
Frankie	Nigeria	20s	Y	2009
Imogen	The Gambia	20s	N	2010
Jennifer	Jamaica	50s	Y	2008
Jules	Uganda	20s	Y	2009
Leila	Saudi Arabia	40s	N	2005
Mae	Jamaica	40s	Y	2011
Nadine	Jamaica	50s	Y	2009
Penda	Uganda	20s	Y	2008
Penny	Jamaica	50s	Y	2009
Sara	Jamaica	40s	N	2006

Short summary of the interviews with women participants

This section provides a brief synopsis of the interviews with each of the women interviewed for this study. The accounts below illustrate the women's backgrounds and outline any specific areas which dominated their interviews with me. As stated earlier in this thesis, I conducted three interviews with each of the participants. During the course of our discussions different women prioritised different aspects of their asylum journey as significant to them. For example, some women focused more on their experiences back home and their early struggles with their sexuality. For other women, it was their experiences of the asylum process and their life in the UK which they frequently referred to. I have used broad age ranges and details of when their asylum application was submitted in order to maintain the anonymity of the women interviewed.

Name: **Faria** Home Country: **Pakistan** Age **40s**

Faria had two young children lived in the north of England. She was dispersed after she applied for asylum in 2010 and has been refused asylum twice. Faria was notably confused about the legalities of her case and recalled being told by the UK Border Agency and immigration judges that they did not believe she is a lesbian. She stated how the legal arguments and legal procedures confused her. She also talked about the practical difficulties she had when she was first dispersed. For example, she felt that she had received no help 'settling' into her local community. She recalled not being given information regarding how to register at a GP's, where to buy local food and how to find a school for her children.

By talking to Faria, it was very clear that she was pessimistic about her and her children's futures. She was visibly anxious about her asylum application being refused and was concerned that she would be 'internally relocated' in Pakistan. She believed it would not be possible to live as a lesbian with children, and without any family support or a husband in an unknown region of Pakistan. Faria also talked to me about how she felt her life in the UK was isolated. She spoke of her distrust of other people within the local Pakistani community and her fears of them learning about her sexuality or, of telling her husband her whereabouts. She also described how she often felt unable to leave the house and did not even like opening her curtains at home.

Faria also spoke about her experiences back home. She told me how her husband had found her with a long term secret same sex partner. She described the physical and emotional abuse she suffered from her husband after this incident and how he wanted to "*punish*" her and was still trying to find her. She spoke of how her husband had also threatened to tell people in Pakistan of her lesbian relationship and of her fears of being branded "*un-Islamic*".

Name: **Frankie**Home Country: **Nigeria**Age: **20s**

Frankie's asylum application was submitted in 2009 and she had been granted her refugee status a few months prior to we met. She told me that she had been homeless for a while and was 'sofa surfing.' She described that now she had refugee status she felt unable to ask friends for support and for somewhere to stay because she felt there was an expectation that she no longer needed their help. She frequently told me how she struggled to trust people especially Nigerian and African communities and people in authority. Since being in UK, Frankie had also changed her name by de-pol so nobody from Nigeria would be able to trace her.

Frankie's accounts of the asylum process were based around her perception that it was "cruel" and left her feeling "undermined". She voiced a lot of bitterness towards seeking asylum on the grounds of her sexuality and often described it as a "game". She mentioned that even after she was granted leave to remain she phoned the UK Border Agency for confirmation, as she initially thought they were "having a joke on me". Frankie told me that whilst seeking asylum she struggled the most with detention and the monitoring requirements. For her, these aspects epitomised how the asylum process treated her as a "criminal" and ostracised her from British society.

When Frankie spoke to me she often talked in the third person, especially when referring to her experiences back home. She was still deeply troubled by her family's reaction to finding out about her same sex relationship. Their response and attempts to conduct a 'curing ceremony' and to marginalise her from all aspects of family life had made her feel extremely isolated and rejected. When Frankie talked about her sexuality contradictory accounts frequently emerged. When she spoke of her current reflections she often oscillated between feelings of shame and defiance. She talked of how hearing the word 'lesbian' in the UK was heartening, as she felt she had a word and community to identify with. Simultaneously however, she also spoke of how her sexuality still caused her internal battles and often made her feel that she could not get "the demon inside" her out.

Name: **Imogen**Home Country: **The Gambia**Age: **20s**

Imogen submitted her asylum application in 2010 and was appealing her second refusal when we met. She told me that the UK Border Agency and immigration judges have ruled that her accounts are deemed as "not credible". Her current worries and the uncertainty over her asylum claim dominated our interactions. She frequently referred to not "being believed" by the UK Border Agency and immigration judges and the difficulties she had with being labelled a "liar".

Imogen's views of the UK asylum process were varied. She talked to me about how she did not understand the legalities and decisions surrounding her case. She spoke of feeling confused regarding how to prove she *"was a lesbian"* and how to get decision-makers to believe her accounts. She felt strongly that the UK Border Agency were not interested in her full explanations and only concentrated on certain aspects of her case. She also described feeling anxious and powerless about waiting for, and not feeling able to influence the judgements made about her. Alongside this, she recognised how going through the asylum process had brought about some positive changes in her life. The role and importance of Imogen's LGBT friends was apparent. She talked of how this group of people had provided her great courage and strength and had helped to rebuild her confidence. She also talked about how she felt *"free"* and *"comfortable"* with her sexuality whilst living in the UK.

Name: **Jennifer**

Home Country: **Jamaica**

Age: **50s**

Jennifer applied for asylum in 2008 and was granted refugee status a few months before we met. She talked of feeling very confused as to what this meant to her. She talked at great lengths about how she felt she should be pleased with her status, but instead, she felt the asylum process had *"taken too much"* from her. Subsequently, Jennifer spent much of our discussions talking about how *"angry"* she felt towards the asylum process and how she was treated.

She described the asylum process as *"intense"* and blamed it for negatively impacting on her confidence. A key issue which Jennifer struggled with was having her sexuality in the public domain and open to public scrutiny. She frequently described herself as a *"private person"* and spoke of the personal difficulties she faced with giving up private photographs, documents and emails to be judged and commented on by *"strangers"*. In addition, she explained that the sentiments and attachments she to her accounts were often ignored or seen as *"not relevant"* by decision-makers. She found the lack of empathy she experienced by immigration officials as *"deeply upsetting"*.

Added to these difficulties, Jennifer also stated that she was now homeless. She talked of the uncertainty with living in temporary accommodation and not knowing whether *"it's worth unpacking my bags"*. She told me that given her previous professional status, she found it even more difficult to *"be left with nothing."*

Jennifer also spent much of our interviews talking about the negative emotions she still had towards her sexuality. She discussed that she still frequently blamed her sexual orientation for the adverse impact it had had on her life. This included being physically and emotionally separated from her family, of having no sense of belonging or home and of feeling unwanted by society. She was however comforted by being able to be with other LGBT people and to express her sexuality freely.

Name: **Jules**Home Country: **Uganda**Age: **20s**

Jules applied for asylum in 2009 and had her refugee status for approximately six months before we met. She appeared very quiet and shy. During our interviews she talked the most about her experiences in Uganda and how she was treated as a lesbian. In particular, she focused upon how her father discovered and informed the police of her relationship with a woman and how, as a result, she spent several years in prison. She discussed how she was repeatedly gang raped, of having a miscarriage in prison, of having experienced torture and of being placed in solitary confinement for months on end. She found talking about her family difficult and was hurt with her father's reaction to her sexuality and disappointed that none of her family had visited her, or has tried to contact her, since she was in prison. Jules also talked to me about the difficulties she found with looking at her scars each day and that they felt like "*a constant reminder*" of her experiences of violence. Within our discussions, it also emerged that Jules still had regular nightmares about her experiences in prison and found it difficult to not think about these memories.

Jules' accounts of her asylum application indicated a limited understanding of the process, procedures and legalities. Jules talked of how she left her asylum case to her solicitors and how she "*did not get involved in it*". She could not recall how many times she got refused or on what grounds. She often recollected not "*really knowing*" who she was talking to and remembered questioning why decisions took so long. However, Jules described how she was "*very grateful*" that she could stay in the UK and felt that she could now "*do things*". She showed me a prospectus for a local college and talked about the course she was going to start in the coming months.

Name: **Leila**Home Country: **Saudi Arabia** Age: **40s**

Leila's asylum application had taken the most amount of time in comparison to the other participants for this study. She applied for asylum in 2005 and told me that she was initially granted leave to remain in the UK in 2009. This decision however, was appealed by the UK Border Agency and she has been awaiting the outcome of the appeal ever since. Leila talked of how she did not understand "*what was happening*" with her asylum application and "*why it was taking so long*". Leila could not remember the last time she spoke to a legal professional about her case and was clearly perplexed regarding why her application was accepted and then refused. She had no expectations of how long her case would take to be resolved or what, if anything, she needed to do.

Leila had two children, her youngest son was still at school and her eldest son wanted to go to University but could not apply until they had leave to remain in the UK. Leila told me how she considered this a source of great frustration and felt responsible for

her son not being able to achieve his potential. She was also worried for his future and opportunities.

Leila spent a lot of time talking about her current struggles living in the north of England. She spoke of previous problems with neighbours and referred to one incident where a woman continually verbally abused her and physically threatened her. Leila and her children were re-housed into her current accommodation after her neighbour threw stones at her window. She spoke of feeling *“better here”* in her current street however, she talked of still not feeling *“comfortable”* with her British and Muslim neighbours.

Leila’s sexuality was a very complicated aspect of her life. She discussed how she felt *“supported”* from the LGBT asylum group she attended. She told me that people in that group were the only people who she felt she could be herself with. Outside of this groups however, Leila appeared very isolated and fearful of others knowing of her sexual orientation.

Name: **Mae** Home Country: **Jamaica** Age: **40s**

Mae’s interview was notably dissimilar to the other women I interviewed for this study. Although Mae had been in the UK for a number of years, she only applied for asylum three months before we met and was immediately granted refugee status. For Mae, her interaction with the UK Border Agency was limited and *“not particularly stressful”*. Mae spoke of how anxious she was before she claimed asylum, but believed the process itself was more straightforward than she feared. As Mae was granted refugee status shortly after applying, she did not attend court and did not receive any refusal letters. She was however, aware of the difficulties her friends had experienced and was *“relieved”* that her asylum claim was different. She told me that she would recommend claiming asylum to other lesbians.

During our discussions, Mae talked of how she felt *“looking like a man”* assisted her claim. She mentioned that her credibility was never questioned and laughed about how she was mistaken for a man at the UK Border Agency offices.

Mae’s conversations about her experiences in Jamaica were relatively brief. She told me she felt uncomfortable talking about this and did not want to discuss anything about her family. She described being a *“private person”* and that nobody knew what happened to her in Jamaica. Mae discussed that she felt *“happy”* living in the north of England and believed that having access to good friends and the ‘gay scene’ was really important and made her feel *“hopeful”* about her future.

Name: **Nadine**Home Country: **Jamaica**Age: **50s**

Nadine had lived in the UK for many years before seeking asylum. When we met she was living with her long-term partner who had insecure immigration status. Nadine spoke to me about how she was granted refugee status in 2010, after several refusals. Nadine appeared deeply suspicious of the asylum process and notably the UK Border Agency. She frequently referred to the *“unfair”* way she was treated and told me how she felt the asylum process was specifically designed to *“break people”* so they would return to their home countries.

Nadine’s interviews were often dominated by her experiences in detention. She spoke of being detained in Yarl’s Wood Immigration and Removal Centre for over three months. She felt that her *“incarceration”* had affected her mental health and self-confidence and made many references to detention being the same as imprisonment and was a punishment for her sexuality. Her isolation in detention was also exacerbated as her partner was unable to visit because of her own insecure immigration status. She explained how these difficulties and her fears of being returned to Jamaica culminated in several suicide attempts.

Nadine also described the problems she encountered immediately after gaining asylum. She spoke of the challenges with finding work, finding accommodation, getting a driving licence and opening a bank account. As Nadine spoke, it was apparent that she was still quite fearful of immigration officials especially as her partner did not have secure immigration status. She feared they would be separated and told me how the UK Border Agency was still *“having a hold”* on her life.

Name: **Penda**Home Country: **Uganda**Age: **20s**

Penda is a very outwardly confident young person. She’s gained refugee status in 2010 and was working as a carer. Penda claimed asylum in 2008 and received several refusals after her accounts were originally deemed as ‘not credible’. Penda also told me how the police officers who raped her were described as *“a few bad apples”* by the immigration judge in her refusal letter. She described this as a *“heart-breaking”* time in her life.

During the first interview, Penda talked about how, in Uganda, her father walked her and her girlfriend to the police station after finding them in bed together. She told me that whilst in the police station, she was gang raped and burnt with hot iron rods by the police officers. As she reflected on these memories, she revealed that her scars served as a *“daily reminder”* of what happened to her and what *“could be happening”* to her girlfriend who is still imprisoned. Talking about her girlfriend was clearly upsetting as she portrayed feeling *“useless”* and unable to help her.

Penda was very vocal about her experiences during the asylum process. She spoke with a degree of anger at being dis-believed and of feeling misunderstood by decision-makers. She also discussed the emotional difficulties of disclosing her experiences to strangers as part of the legal process. She told me how recounting her gang rape in great detail and having her scars discussed in public was *“humiliating.”* She also found the screening process extremely challenging as this was the first time she had ever verbalised that she *“was a lesbian”*. She described the process of evidencing her sexuality as *“ridiculous”* and was infuriated at the types of questions she was asked by immigration judges. For Penda, navigating these difficulties had had a detrimental impact on her mental health and well-being.

Significantly, Penda also thought that having her claim dismissed several times had helped her to *“learn to fight back”* and had motivated her to start a public campaign to get her decision overturned.

Name: **Penny**

Home Country: **Jamaica**

Age: **50s**

Penny gained her refugee status in 2010 and when we met she was living on her own. Her asylum application took approximately six months until a positive decision was reached. She referred to feeling very *“confused”* by the asylum process and often felt unsure who she was speaking to and for what purpose. She also told me that during this time she suffered with severe depression and therefore did not concentrate on the legal side of her case. She outlined that she felt the asylum process was *“a bit of blur”* and that she wanted her solicitor to *“sort it out”*.

Penny frequently referred to her experiences back home. She explained in great detail how she felt ‘different’ to other girls from an early age, and talked openly about her sexual relationships with women in Jamaica. She also talked about the violence she encountered when people suspected or discovered her relationships. After she was raped by a man who found her in bed with another woman, she became pregnant and spoke of the difficulties she found being a mother. When Penny referred to this experience, she told me how her perceptions of what happened had changed since being in the UK. She now feels she was treated unfairly by her family and recognises that what happened to her was rape. Penny also told me about other abusive relationships from her childhood and how her relationship with members of her family is now very strained.

Penny was still unsure about her future and mentioned how she continued to suffer with depression. She mentioned feeling overjoyed at being allowed to stay in the UK and reassured that she did not have to return to Jamaica. She also talked of how her relationship with her son has improved and how happy she was that he has accepted her as a lesbian.

Name: **Sara**Home Country: **Jamaica**Age: **40s**

Sara applied for asylum in 2006 and is still awaiting a decision. She has received several refusal letters which stated the immigration judges deemed her accounts to be 'not credible'. She reported feeling "*unsure*" regarding the progression of her case and what additional evidence she needs to produce. She felt that because she had not claimed asylum immediately after arriving in the UK, her accounts were dismissed by immigration authorities. She told me that she felt not being believed and not feeling listened to was extremely distressing.

Sara did talk about her experiences back home, including her marginalisation from her family and community. She described the humiliation and rejection she felt after her cousin who she trusted, told her family about her sexuality in Jamaica. She had very limited contact with her family who all knew she was a lesbian.

Her current anxieties were heavily influenced by the insecurities she faced with her asylum application. She talked of the on-going problems she was experiencing in her neighbourhood and her requests to the UK Border Agency to move. She also spoke of the difficulties regarding waiting for confirmation that she could stay in the UK. Sara described not knowing about her future as "*painful*" and of causing her great "*sorrow*." She told me that feeling like her life was "*on hold*" and not being able to make plans for her future was very difficult. She also talked of the shame she associated with taking "*money from the government*" and believed that the British public were judging her negatively for this.

Sara's talked with confidence about her sexuality. She spoke about "*learning to feel proud*" of this part of her life and recognising it was something which can "*not be changed*". She discussed learning to "*accept herself*" and of no longer worrying about other people's negative reactions.

Appendix Five

These vignettes were used to assist the interviews, although they were not used prescriptively with each participant.

Vignette One:

Suzie was in a relationship with Glenda. They had secretly been seeing each other for over 12 months. They both lived in (country of origin). They were scared about people finding out about their relationship with each other. One day, Suzie and Glenda were kissing on the sofa in Suzie's house. They didn't hear the door open. Suddenly, they looked up and could see Suzie's parents standing over them.

- What do you think would happen next/ how do you feel her family would react?
- What do you think the community would do when they find out about Suzie and Glenda's relationship?
- What do you think would happen to Suzie and Glenda?
- Did this or anything similar happen to you?
- What happened/Why do you think this happened to you?

Vignette Two:

Jill has just arrived in the UK from (country of origin). Jill left because people found out that she was gay. She experienced violence and sexual abuse in (her country of origin) and is scared to go back. She is frightened and does not know anyone in the UK. She has heard she can claim asylum in the UK.

- What do you think Jill should do?
- If you were standing next to Jill what would you say to her/what advice would you give her?

Appendix Six

This timeline was used to assist the second interview with the participants. A large piece of card was provided with a line across it (as demonstrated below). The following statements were given to each participant to place, chronologically along the line. Each card was discussed in turn. Blank cards were also provided.

The day I claimed asylum

Today

The following statement cards were given to the participants to arrange chronologically along the timeline. Blank cards were also provided

I attended the
screening
interview

I attended the
substantive
interview

I was dispersed

My asylum claim
was refused

I attended court

I was detained

I needed to talk
about traumatic
experiences

I needed to talk
about my same
sex experiences

I was granted
leave to remain
/refugee status

I understood what
was happening
with my claim

I felt supported

I had to prove I
was gay

I felt listened to

I felt things were
out of my control

I felt believed

Appendix Seven

This discussion-line was used to assist the third interview with the participants. Like the timeline, a large piece of card was provided with a line across the centre (as demonstrated below). The following statements were given to each participant to place along the line nearest to whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement. Each card was discussed in turn. Blank cards were also provided.

Agree

Disagree

The following statement cards were given to the participants to place along the discussion line, nearest to their answer.

The asylum
process has
changed me

The asylum
process has
impacted upon
my life

I feel safe now

The asylum
process has
helped me

I'm on the road to
recovery

The asylum
process has
impacted upon
my health

Whilst seeking
asylum I had
access to support

I am glad I claimed
asylum

The asylum
process was fair

I am looking
forward to my
future

Appendix Eight

I provide an example of an '*I-poem*' below. An '*I-poem*' was one of the four readings of the 'voice-centred relational method' analysis and prioritised identifying the 'voice of the *I*'. In order to do this, I underlined every part of the transcript where the term '*I*', '*my*', '*mine*', or '*me*' was used along with the proceeding or immediate words which followed. I then placed these underlined sentences together and, by listening to the transcript again, I identified a range of 'voices' women used.

The following chart represents a short excerpt from Jules first interview. The '*I-poem*' allowed me to identify her use of what I refer to as the: *inquisitive*, *fearful*, *isolated*, *self –critical*, *regretful* and *hopeful* voices. I also noted Jules's use of repetition, changes to her tone, the speed she was talking and words which she placed emphasis on. I interpreted her repetition to illustrate the significance of the points she was making.

I didn't know then that it wasn't allowed I didn't know it was an abomination they're so many things that happened to me because of it	Voice used: Inquisitive/searching
they did so many bad things to me for it (long pause) they used to call me evil (long pause) I felt really bad the way I was treated I didn't like it my dad took me to the police station he asked them to put me in prison until I die that's what he said I heard him and then he looked at me and said if I come across your face again I will cut off your head (long pause) they abused me , they abused me so much in prison	Voice used: Regretful
it was because of my sexuality (long pause) it was because of my sexuality (long pause)	note: use of repetition Voice used: Fearful

that's what they used to say to me when they were doing things that's what they said when they were beating me they used to beat me a lot they used to starve me	
I was put in one cell I was on my own I remember the corridors were long I was put in one cell there	Voice used: Isolated
I felt horrible I felt so <u>ashamed</u> of myself	Voice used: Self –critical (emphasis)
I thought if I talked to someone about it, I would get the same I couldn't talk about it	Voice used: Isolated
I remember four months past, I got very sick and weak I was pregnant different police officers used to rape me , they used to come and rape me , they'd beat me , and when I got weak and sick I miscarried <i>(talking rapidly)</i> I remember one day my stomach was hurting and I was crying, I used to hear foot- steps where they put me , I couldn't see but I could hear	Voice used: Regretful
I was <u>shouting</u> for help my stomach was hurting so bad but <u>nobody came</u> I felt the water coming out and the baby was coming out	Voice used: Isolated (emphasis) (emphasis)
I don't want to think about it <i>(long pause)</i> I don't want to think about it	note: use of repetition
I wish I could change what happens to me <i>(change in tone)</i> wherever I go I can't get away from it I <u>wish</u> I could change it all	Voice used: Reflective (emphasis)
I so <u>wish</u> I could change my past my life was horrible	note: use of repetition (emphasis)
I can't talk to people Claire I can't I can't	voice used: Isolated

<p>I went to a Pride here (<i>change in tone</i>) I saw my old friend he told me I could claim asylum for what had happed he told me I would be safe I could be safe I wanted to be <u>safe</u> here I didn't want to go back</p>	<p>Voice used: hopeful</p> <p>(emphasis)</p>
<p>I wanted to be safe, that's all I wanted (<i>long pause</i>) So that's when I applied That's when I thought I could be <u>safe</u></p>	<p>note: use of repetition</p> <p>(emphasis)</p>

Appendix Nine

This informed consent form was given to each of the women at the start of each interview. I read the form to every participant and discussed a range of ethical issues before any interview commenced.

This research is for a Doctoral Study at the University of Sussex.

My name is Claire Bennett and I have worked on issues affecting women asylum seekers and refugees for a number of years.

The research study I am working on is looking at the perspectives of women asylum seekers who have claimed asylum in the UK based on their sexuality. The research will look at specific experiences of being a lesbian, going through the UK asylum process and the impact this has had on your life. I would like to talk to you about your opinions and learn from your experiences.

The research will consist of 3 interviews. All interviews will be recorded and nobody apart from me (the researcher) will have access to any recordings or transcripts. In the final report, all names and any identifying features will be changed so nobody will be able to identify anything you have said. All interviews will be treated in the strictest confidence. **Throughout the interview, you do not have to talk about anything you do not want to discuss.**

If you decide you no longer wish to participate in the study at any stage before, during or after interviews, then that is fine. Please just tell me, you do not have to provide any explanation.

I agree to participate and be interviewed by Claire

Name:

Signed:

Date:

Appendix Ten

The safe country list (commonly referred to as the 'white list') is a list of country's which the UKBA deem to be safe for individuals to be returned. Ten countries were on the original 'safe country list' however, these countries subsequently joined the EU and were removed. Since 2003, other counties have been added to the list and the UKBA continue to make amendments (UK Border Agency 2012).

As of May 2011, the safe country list included:

The following countries are considered 'safe' for men only:

Albania

Ghana (men only)

Bolivia

Gambia (men only)

Bosnia Herzegovina

Kenya (men only)

Brazil

Liberia (men only)

Ecuador

Malawi (men only)

India

Mali (men only)

Jamaica

Nigeria (men only)

Macedonia

Sierra Leone (men only)

Mauritius

South Korea (men only)

Moldova

Mongolia

Montenegro

Peru

Serbia

South Africa

Ukraine

Appendix Eleven

The chart below briefly illustrates the UK asylum process, from the initial application to refugee status or refusal (Asylum Support Partnership 2010).

