

Article

The Incorporation of Cultural and Religious Diversity in LGBT Policies: Experiences of Queer Migrants from Muslim Backgrounds in Catalonia, Spain

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Abstract: This article reflects on the biases in sexual and gender diversity policies in relation to the axis of cultural and religious diversity in Catalonia (Spain), where these policies have experienced an enormous boost since 2014. The paper aims to analyse the articulation between the experiences of queer migrants from Muslim backgrounds living in Catalonia and the LGBT and intercultural policies. Based on interviews both with queer migrants and people involved in developing public policies, we analyse how these two axes intersect. The approach of policies is mainly monofocal and assimilationist, failing to acknowledge the hybridity of queer migrant experiences. However, we also find examples of policy programmes that adopt an intersectional perspective and embrace hybridity by advancing more inclusive LGBT equality policies. The conclusions highlight two axes of tensions that have emerged in the analysis of the policies: the construction of the figure of the queer person from a Muslim background and the role of the state regarding sexual and gender diversity.

Keywords: LGBTQ; public policies; sexuality; intersectionality; Muslim minority communities



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1. Introduction

Abdul¹ was 28 years old when we interviewed him; he left Morocco 10 years ago. As a result of the migration process, he discovered a different way of experiencing sex with other men, which changed his way of experiencing desire. He lives in a small town in Catalonia with his brother and uncles. He goes to demonstrations for LGBT rights in Barcelona. He leaves his brother “clues” so he knows he likes men, but he does not want to speak to him directly about it.

Karim was also born in Morocco and arrived in Catalonia when he was 14. He lives in a medium-sized city with his parents, with whom he maintains a delicate balance regarding his homosexuality. It is tolerated as long as it is not verbalised; a couple of years ago, it became evident that he had a relationship with a man, they took him to his country of origin to try to “cure him”. Since then, he has remained silent about his sexuality around his parents while he links up with associations for LGBT rights in his city and Morocco and, when he is with a man, he expresses his affection in public.

Laila is 26 when we interviewed her. When she was nine, she left Algeria to go to a foster family in a small town in Catalonia. Although she likes women, she refuses to use the label ‘lesbian,’ as she believes it gives away very private personal information. In recent years, the pressure from her biological family for her to marry a Muslim man has increased to the point that she does not want to visit her country of origin in case she is retained there. She suffers a lot trying to manage the tension between distancing herself and the need to preserve the bond with her biological family.

In this article, based on these and other experiences, we ask: Are the professionals of LGBTQ support services aware of the specificities that people from minority cultural and religious backgrounds can have in relation, for example, to the public dimension of

sexuality, or the family and community bonds? Are the people who work in the support services for migrants or asylum seekers equipped with the tools to assist people with non-normative sexualities or genders? Do educational programmes to prevent LGBTphobia and promote an inclusive understanding of sex education consider the cultural and religious diversity present in the classroom? Do LGBT policies incorporate the intersection with cultural and religious diversity? Is the ethnocentrism of sexual and religious diversity questioned, as well as the cisheterosexism of intercultural policies?

The general aim is broken down into two specific objectives. The first clear objective is, based on interviews, to understand the experiences of queer migrants from the Maghreb living in Catalonia. The second objective is to analyse how LGBT and intercultural policies consider how these two axes intersect, based on interviews with people working in these fields.

This article focuses on the case of Catalonia (Spain) where, since the implementation of law 11/2014 for the rights of LGBT people in 2014, it is compulsory for municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants to develop an LGBT policy programme and to create a service to assist victims of LGBTphobia. Although this has meant an enormous boost for LGBT equality policies, some limitations are relevant for the issues addressed in this paper: they have not been designed from an intersectional perspective. More specifically, they have been carried out without any connection with policies dealing with policies with cultural diversity. In the specific case of educational programmes to tackle LGBTphobia, we must take into account that sex education does not have a specific place in the Spanish school curriculum, its contents have not been as thorough as would have been desirable (Martínez et al. 2012), and there is also a lack of appropriate teacher training in sex education (Martínez et al. 2013). As a result, Spanish adolescents of both genders tend to be misinformed about sexuality, and myths and misinformation regarding sexuality seem to be common at this stage (Fernández-Rouco et al. 2019). However, these previous studies do not tackle LGBT equality issues or adopt an intersectional perspective to analyse the content and the impact of sex education in Catalonia or Spain.

Regarding public policies on cultural diversity, they do not have much history, partially due to the fairly recent arrival of migrants from the Global South to Catalonia. Maghreb migrants (especially Moroccan) are the largest group in Spain, with Catalonia being the Spanish autonomous region with the highest number of Moroccan residents (INE 2020), comprising 18.8% of the total foreign population (IDESCAT 2020). The Maghreb living in Catalonia are increasingly more visible in the realm of civil society (Østergaard-Nielsen 2009). Actually, the recent boost of both areas of public policies and the fact that they are not fully institutionalised may constitute an opportunity to question their unitary approach and to embrace intersectionality (Cruells and Coll-Planas 2013).

This article aims to analyse the articulation between the experiences of queer migrants from the Maghreb living in Catalonia and the LGBT and intercultural policies. This aim will allow us to critically reflect on the biases in sexual and gender diversity policies in relation to the axis of cultural and religious diversity. This aspect has not yet been addressed in Catalan and Spanish research, unlike other Global North countries with a longer trajectory in contemporary migration, such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, and France (see Coll-Planas et al. 2020). Analysing this articulation in the Catalan context is relevant because of the shorter contemporary trajectory as a migrant-receiving society and of the spread and institutionalisation of LGBT policies.

The terminological aspects are relevant in a study that precisely seeks to question the Western logic in the construction of (homo)sexuality. However, it is impossible to find terminology that enables us to fully escape from the ethnocentric perspective. After reviewing the different options used in the studies examining this subject (Coll-Planas et al. 2020), we have chosen 'queer' to refer to the sexuality of our informants because this category, despite also originating in the West, allows us to address forms of sexuality that go beyond normativity and that to a great extent cannot be categorised (Sáez 2004). In Rahman's (2010, p. 946) words: a "queer focus on unstable ontologies can be a relevant way to theorize this in-

tersectionality because the lived experiences or standpoint of gay Muslims illuminates their identities as always ontologically deferred from the dominant identity categories of 'gay' and 'Muslim'. Thus, in this article, we use 'queer' as a stance that breaks with the established rules regarding aspects such as gender, sexuality, cultural identity, and faith.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this article, the intersectional analytical framework questions the concept of citizenship and the LGBT policies stemming from it, especially those regarding queer migrants from Muslim backgrounds living in Catalonia. Intersectionality enables us to have a more complex overview of the reality of the LGBT community and to question the possible biases in public policies in sexual and gender diversity, especially the support services and the educational programmes aimed at tackling LGBTphobia.

In this section we will first outline the more general aspects in question in this theoretical discussion and later, we will present the specific theoretical concepts that will be used in the analysis.

In a more abstract dimension, the paper aims not only to discuss the mainstream conception of citizenship but also the critical constructions of sexual and intimate citizenship. As [Lister \(2002, p. 191\)](#) suggests, in its original conception, citizenship appears as disconnected from the body and from sexuality: "The sexual pertains to the 'private' sphere, whereas citizenship is quintessentially of the 'public' sphere". Concepts such as 'Intimate Citizenship' or 'Sexual Citizenship' questioned this division between the public and private domain, de-heterosexualised the concept of citizenship ([Yip 2008](#) and showed the relevance of spheres of the human experience that were previously considered as not political, such as "all those matters linked to our most intimate desires, pleasures and ways of being in the world" ([Plummer 1996, p. 46](#)). In this line, [Plummer \(1996, p. 36\)](#) believes that "To turn this tale from a private, personal tale to one that can be told publicly and loudly is a task of immense political proportions". However, according to [Richardson \(Richardson 2018, p. 1258\)](#), a critical assessment of the notion of sexual citizenship must be carried out to question its normative assumptions and possible biases (among them, ethnocentric): "the centrality of the individual (sexual) citizen who chooses in the literature marginalizes and obscures sites of struggles over sexuality where constructions of selfhood are experienced differently, as constituted within the social relations of kinship, family and community for instance, and cultural contexts where the primary focus is on collective rights".

Next, we will explore how the biases of sexual/intimate citizenship theorization as regards cultural and religious diversity impact public policies. Multiple dimensions can be explored about the articulation of sexual diversity and cultural, religious diversity in public policies. On an exterior level, it affects the neo-colonial and assimilationist policies of the "Gay International" ([Massad 2002](#)) to foster the Western way of managing homosexuality in the Global South (especially in countries with a Muslim majority). In the interstices between exterior and interior policies, [Seitz \(2016\)](#) analysed the construction of queer asylum-seekers to point to "the profoundly ethical and political challenge to the biopolitical conceit that nation-state actors can legitimately choose with whom their citizens inhabit the earth". This article will focus on the internal dimension of public policies (especially support services and educational programmes) considering two tensions: assimilationist vs. hybrid ways of dealing with cultural diversity; and monofocal vs. intersectional ways of addressing the axes of inequality in public policies ([Hancock 2007](#)).

In the first tension, the assimilation model, applied to sexual diversity, reproduces the hegemonic ideas of the West about gay liberation, according to which sexual orientation has an essential nature, it constitutes an identity and must be assumed in public ([Binnie and Simmons 2006; Weeks 1985](#)). The option presented as desirable and liberating, then, is to abandon the home culture to openly assume the gay/lesbian identity. In contrast, the Hybrid response to the conflict is the mix of both cultural contexts. According to [Berghahn \(2012\)](#), hybrid identities "are complex and heterogeneous, characterized by

crossovers and mixes between different cultural traditions that are invoked and drawn upon simultaneously” (p. 133). From this perspective, queer migrants are understood to be in a creative position that is possible precisely because they are in a diasporic space that allows them to look for their own responses (Berghahn 2012; Georgis 2015) in the process of negotiation “in response to both an immediate conversational context and, simultaneously, to broader historical contexts of intercultural contact” (Gaudio 2001). The tension between these models has been analysed in relation to the cinematic representation of queer migrants from Muslim backgrounds (Coll-Planas 2020). In the case of French cinema, Provencher (2008) highlights “the constant tension between citizens who follow a republican model of universalism and integration and those who orient themselves toward an alternative model that does not erase queer French and North-African references to difference”.

Regarding the second tension, the most usual way of dealing with the axes of inequality is the unitary model, in which each axis of inequality is addressed independently, not acknowledging that people are simultaneously affected by diverse axes of inequality, tending towards essentialism, and not taking into consideration the effects of the intervention in relation to other axes (Cruells and Coll-Planas 2013). In contrast, intersectionality, formulated at the end of the 1990s by Black feminist activists and academics (Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 1991; Combahee River Collective 2014), conceptualises the different axes of inequality as interlinked, resulting in complex and contextual forms of privilege and oppression.

Following Rahman (2010, p. 948), we consider that “understanding gay Muslims as intersectional identities demonstrates that cultures and identities are plural and overlap rather than being monolithic and mutually exclusive”. The intersectional approach allows us to address the reality of this social group, bearing in mind that their reality is the result of the meeting of two axes of oppression (islamophobia and homophobia), which also intersect with other axes such as origin, legal situation, gender, age, social class, which will generate differences within the group.

In short, the hegemonic way of addressing the intersection of sexual diversity and cultural and religious diversity stems from a biased way of understanding sexual/intimate citizenship that reproduces the assimilationist logic. This approach is implemented through monofocal policies that reify Western values and do not respect cultural and religious diversity. Thus, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the development of intersectional LGTB policies that acknowledge the hybrid paths that queer migrants, in this case from Muslim backgrounds, follow to make sense of their sexuality in the context of a clash between cultural frameworks.

3. Material and Methods

In this section, we briefly present the methodology to achieve the specific aims of the article, which have been developed through different research and knowledge transfer projects².

In relation to the first objective, to understand the experiences of queer migrants from the Maghreb living in Catalonia, the corpus of analysis consists of 10 semi-structured interviews with queer migrants living in Catalonia and from countries with a Muslim majority (see Coll-Planas et al. 2020). Regarding the informants, eight were born in the Maghreb and emigrated between the ages of 6 and 23. In the case of the other two, Omar was born in Saudi Arabia and Ibrahim in France, and had parents or grandparents of Moroccan origin. It is essential to acknowledge a gender bias since we recruited eight men and only two women. While in general it was difficult to contact men, it was even more complicated to contact women. This may be related to the greater family and social control to which women are subjected to follow gender norms (Jivraj et al. 2003). It is also important to note the heterogeneity of the interviewees in terms of age (between 21 and 49 years of age), place of residence, and socioeconomic position.

Regarding the aim of analysing how LGBT and intercultural policies consider the intersection of these two axes of inequality, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with two profiles of informants. First, 10 interviews with people who work as LGBT officers (3), childhood and adolescence officers (1 interview with two informants) and intercultural officers (6). These technical staff work in the local governments of three different towns: a large city (with a foreign population of 21.6%, of which 4.3% has Moroccan nationality), a middle-sized city in the metropolitan area (13.5%/42.7%) and an inland town in Catalonia (13.14%/43.6%) (IDESCAT 2020).

Secondly, we conducted six interviews with people who work in associations providing training, counselling and support on LGBT issues. In some cases, the people interviewed work in one town (for example, when the entity has a collaboration agreement with the local government). At the same time, in other cases, they provide training and interventions in different towns. To protect their anonymity, we refer to the informants by their professional role (LGBT, childhood and adolescence and intercultural officers; and Association representative).

On a methodological level, the interviews were analysed using the content analysis methodology based on a systematic, reproducible, and valid reading of the data. The aim was to interpret the data according to their context and to give an account of their manifest and latent meaning (Andréu 2002). For the analysis, an Excel matrix was created in which the transcription of the interviews was codified according to the analytical categories that emerged from the theoretical framework (Meyer and Avery 2009).

4. Analysis

In this section, we present the results of the two specific objectives, focusing on the dimensions they address: experiences and policies.

4.1. Experiences

In this section, we analyse the interviews with queer migrants from Muslim backgrounds living in Catalonia in light of the categories that have emerged from the theoretical framework.

When analysing the informants' interviews, some elements appear to fit the assimilation narrative: the use of the labels lesbian/gay by the majority of the informants; the fact that some of them participate in public actions for the recognition of LGBT rights; or the change that has taken place in the way they understand and experience sexuality after migration. In relation to this latter aspect, Abdul believes that the main change is the union between sex and affection:

'I discovered good sex here [...] when I was in Morocco everything was very cold, very fast, in and out, there was none of that sexual enjoyment that you feel with a man, hugging each other, kissing...'

Karim highlights that the main change is the connection between the experience of sexuality and the collective dimension, which includes activism, the search for cultural role models, or the visibility of affection in the public space.

However, if we analyse the experience of the people interviewed as a whole, we observe that, despite these specific elements, their experience of sexuality cannot be considered one of assimilation. In fact, analysing the informants' narrative, we consider that assimilation is not even possible. In contrast with the feature films analysed in a previous paper (Coll-Planas 2020), our interviewees cannot erase their cultural background and their social bonds to fully embrace gay/lesbian categories in Western terms, even if they would like to.

Hybridity is, actually, the only option for the interviewees. A wider analysis of the informants' experiences shows that they do not completely follow the West's hegemonic gay/lesbian narrative, but deploy hybrid strategies to deal with the impossibility of following the normativity of both the origin and the 'host' communities. As we analyse in depth in Coll-Planas et al. (2020), the experiences of the people interviewed differ from the Western hegemonic logic in relation to two aspects.

First, same-sex sexual practices do not necessarily manifest in identities. Actually, most interviewees feel uncomfortable about identity categories because they feel that they pigeonhole their experience of sexuality and affection, which they understand more fluidly.

(...) ‘you don’t have to be homosexual to have homosexual relations and in Morocco it is very, very natural’. (Karim, 22 years old, born in Morocco and raised in a Muslim family)

In this regard, we see the impossibility of fully following the normativity of the two cultures, since the informants who intended to follow identity categories were not doing so according to the hegemonic way of doing it in the ‘host’ society; but the informants who were critical of identity categories were not completely alien to them:

‘I don’t really like the words homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, transsexual, or whatever. For me, it’s the person and that’s it’. (Ibrahim, 44 years old, family from Morocco and raised in a Muslim family)

‘It’s not that I don’t use it (...) I label myself as gay to demand gay rights’. (Karim, 22 years old, born in Morocco and raised in a Muslim family) (see [Coll-Planas et al. 2020](#))

Secondly, in the informants’ narratives there is a more notable distinction between the public and private domains in contrast to Western societies, where there is an increasing effort to make public, and even exhibit, aspects that were previously considered to be private ([Remondino 2012](#)).

‘I like girls, but I think the label [lesbian] is ... you’re giving away very private personal information’. (Laila, 26 years old, born in Algeria, fostered by a Catalan family)

Due to this clear boundary between public and private, the management of information does not reproduce the logic of coming out of the closet, and the interviewees deploy strategies to facilitate living their non-normative sexuality and keeping the bond with their family and community of origin. This is the case of Mehdi, who has a very close relationship with his mother, but he states that:

‘I don’t want to tell her [his mother] because she won’t understand and she won’t accept it (...) she thinks homosexuality is a ‘bad habit’’. (Mehdi, 21 years old, raised in a Muslim family from Morocco)

Ultimately, due to their location in a diasporic space ([Berghahn 2012](#)), the informants find themselves in a complex position that makes it impossible for them to completely reproduce or subvert the overlapping normativities of both the origin and the ‘host’ society.

In relation to the comprehension of this analytical category, we want to acknowledge the criticisms of hybridity made by authors such as [Ahmad \(1995, p. 17\)](#), who maintains that “the underlying logic of this celebratory mode is that of the limitless freedom of a globalised marketplace”, or [Dirlik \(1997, pp. 65–66\)](#), who believes that the emphasis on hybridity is “at the expense of power, ideology and structure”. In response to these criticisms, we want to highlight that our approach to hybridity does not entail a non-critical celebration of this mix of cultural contexts. Actually, just as the films at times present this more celebratory character (see [Coll-Planas 2020](#)) in the lives of the informants, hybridity generates a tension, which they experience as unsolvable, between the ways of regulating their sexuality, individuality and sense of belonging to the origin and host communities. Such is the case of Laila, quoted in the Introduction, who suffers from the fact that she cannot live according to her family’s expectations, but at the same time, nor can she live her life away from them.

4.2. Policies

In this section, we analyse the information extracted from interviews with people who work, both in the public government and in associations, on LGBT or cultural and religious

diversity policies. We have classified the information obtained according to whether the logic of Assimilation or Hybridity was reproduced.

The intention is not to classify the people interviewed according to these categories, but to identify specific elements from their discourses. As a consequence, contributions from one same informant could fit more than one category.

4.3. Assimilation

Regarding the assimilationist perspective, the people interviewed begin by observing that the policies are designed in a unitary way (focused on one axis of inequality) and no training or resources are provided to work on the intersection between axes of oppression. The result is that the interventions in sexual and gender diversity are based on an ethnocentric framework, and those of cultural and religious diversity, in a cisheterosexual framework.

Two interviewees who work in a support service for minors in vulnerable situations, regarding their experience of intervening in the case of a trans boy from a family of Moroccan origin, point out that “We are not prepared for this specific matter (...) You learn as you go” (Childhood and Adolescence officers). An officer from a municipal support service for LGBT people also says that, in view of the lack of training and resources, she has had to learn through experience when presented with a problem. In this case, the interviewee believes that the theme of religion is a key aspect in the experiences of LGBT users from Moroccan backgrounds, for which she does not feel prepared as she has no knowledge of Islam.

From another perspective, a mediator with a migration background points out that she has considered addressing the theme of sexual diversity with women from her community of origin for two years “but as we have no material and we are not people who are equipped to find the material, or, I don’t know, we have not been able to talk to the people who have answers... we haven’t done much work yet” (Intercultural officer 1).

In addition, the lack of resources can mean that elements such as language can become an obstacle when intervening:

‘Language is an important limitation; we do what we can. At times we’ve asked colleagues for help and they are happy to do us a favour. In this same building there is a Moroccan woman and she always gives us a hand. If not, we make an effort to draw, to try to explain’. (LGTB officer 3)

In this line, an LGBT policy coordinator in a town council, when she wants to work on the topic of sexual and gender diversity with people of Moroccan origin, wonders “how can we approach the topic, if just talking about sex is taboo [for them]? We don’t know which paradigm to work on” (LGTB officer 1). Thus, this interviewee highlights a key matter: the lack of a paradigm from which to work, from which to design training, rethink policies and generate resources.

The consequences of the lack of intersection between the two axes are very evident in the case of sexual and gender diversity workshops held in educational centres. Two interviewees who provide training in secondary schools qualify the attitude of the boys of Moroccan origin in the workshops as disruptive (“we have to stop them”, “they are disrespectful with the topic”, “they distort the group a lot”), while the girls are represented as passive (“unless they have to, they won’t volunteer to put on a condom [in a demonstration]”, “they don’t participate in the chat, because they are not allowed”, “they don’t want to look at photos of genitals”) (Association representative 5).

A trainer from another Catalan city differentiates between groups according to their origin: she identifies that teenagers of Indian and Pakistani origin do not participate, but they are respectful, while she identifies those of Moroccan origin as disruptive (LGTB officer 2).

These approaches can be considered assimilationist because, first, they reproduce generalisations based on origin, and, secondly, they present a complaint about the attitude of students from a migration background, especially those of Moroccan origin, without a critical view of whether the workshops and interventions have been designed and

implemented taking into consideration the cultural and religious diversity in the classrooms. We can illustrate this attitude in a case shared by one of the interviewees who works as a trainer. She explains that in a workshop on sexual and gender diversity, there was “a Muslim boy” who, in response to a general questioning of the traditions transmitted by families, reacted with “significant implicit aggressivity”:

‘He stood up, clenched his hands in fists aggressively and turned around saying, ‘What do you mean, that what I’ve been taught, what I’ve learned, my religion, my culture...’ And then I clarified it for him again because that wasn’t the point, but that everything we’ve all learned in all this time, in general, you know? Everything we’ve been told about sex, love, man and woman, I don’t know... that this can be enriched, it can evolve... He left and the rest were relieved [she laughs], because it was a total fundamentalist aggressivity’. (LGTB officer 2)

Thus, in this fragment, we see how the boy is blamed instead of critically reflecting on the situation that took place, and the fact that the boy left the activity is seen as a satisfactory solution.

This same situation is described by the person from the LGBT service who organised the workshop. The interviewee, who was not present at the workshop, based on what she was told by the trainers, interprets the boy’s attitude differently (“the boy was very tense and nervous and seemed to be having a hard time”). Likewise, she believes that the examples given in the workshop did not reflect the cultural and religious diversity of the classroom, and that the message being transmitted did not take into account how it was being received (“it seemed like the boy was being told that what he believed was wrong”). Furthermore, instead of being happy about him leaving the room, she concludes that “we don’t know how to deal with it [sexual and gender diversity] without hurting people” (LGBT officer 1).

Another consequence of the absence of intersection and the ethnocentric bias of LGBT policies is that it fuels the idea that cultural and gender diversity does not exist in their cultures of origin:

‘We see that (...) there was complete disconnection: ‘this has nothing to do with me’. And that also used to happen with the gypsy population: ‘that’s a non-gypsy thing’. You don’t know to what extent it’s really that, ‘I don’t feel included or I don’t feel that they’re talking about me because I don’t relate to the cultural references they’re mentioning’. (Association representative 2)

To contrast the ethnocentric perspective of the workshop and promote the inclusion of students from minoritised cultural and religious contexts, the interviewee explains that she incorporated references from other cultures. In these cases, the reaction from the people she wanted to include was negative:

‘Sometimes a girl would get annoyed with us saying ‘no, no, no, that doesn’t exist in my country!’ (...) And one time my colleague showed them a public exhibition or public demand from Muslim countries or the Muslim culture, showing that it does exist, and then they got really annoyed’. (Association representative 2)

Upon understanding that sexual and gender diversity are part of the hegemonic culture, to which they feel like they do not fully belong, a short-circuit occurs when they are shown examples from their culture of origin. These examples or having to attend workshops against LGBTphobia, can be experienced by these students as a “Westoxication” process, that is to say, an intoxication of Western immorality and permissiveness (Yip 2004, p. 340). This is key to gain a more in-depth understanding of the disruptive or non-participatory reactions we have seen above: they can be understood as the result of the shock between cultural contexts and the feeling that people from minority cultures and religions have that addressing these topics goes against their values.

The assimilationist discourse is also structured around three elements. The first is the culturisation of the other and the negation of the cultural (ethnocentric) nature of the intervention. This is shown in the discourse of one interviewee who attributes a “more cultural

view” to youths of Moroccan origin, as if the trainer himself did not also have a cultural view (in this case hegemonic) of sexual and gender diversity (Association representative 5).

The second element of the assimilationist discourse is the evolutionist perspective, which draws “A path of development from folk, indigenous or ‘traditional’ configurations of same-sex practices to a modern, politicised gay marked by visibility and greater publicity” (Binnie and Simmons 2006, p. 3). This evolutionist interpretation is especially clear in the case of the social construction of queer Muslims, who “are perceived as being too oppressed and alienated from their own needs to speak up as long as they still identify with Islam” (El-Tayeb 2012, p. 80). Thus, their only way out would be to break ties with their culture and religion and construct themselves based on the Western logic. In this line, we find statements such as that claiming that the change in mentality of the population of Moroccan origin “will be in third or fourth generations” (Association representative 5) or that to understand this group “we need to go back to how we lived fifty years ago” (LGBT officer 2).

The third element is related to how the intervention in the area of sexual and gender diversity is justified from a perspective of assimilation of the migrant population into the hegemonic cultural framework, which is never questioned. Thus, one interviewee who gives workshops in secondary schools states that the aim of her intervention is “to change mentalities” and that the educational system needs to “prioritise the Western culture over the traditional culture they have at home” (LGBT officer 2). This interviewee, when asked if she believes the training needs to be adapted to incorporate cultural and religious diversity, responds:

‘I don’t see a tailormade strategy because everything is fine as it is. What I would like is to not be controlled by people from over there. The way things are, the way we do things, is fine. We have attained a society that is starting to show maturity in some ways. (...) One thing is that they show you their food, but another is the lack of freedom and the machismo; we don’t have to share that. It’s they who have to share the opposite with us’. (LGBT officer 2)

In this fragment, we can see how although assimilationism today is a highly controversial and politically charged approach that has been discredited as a model of inclusion (Zhou 2015), it continues permeating the discourse and conception of the actions of many professionals and political leaders. Assimilationism, as revealed in the quote, is based on considering people of migrant origin as “others”, regardless of their birthplace, who have to adopt the culture and identity of the country in which they live while they gradually abandon their culture and identity of origin (Norris and Inglehart 2012). Within this stance, this process is considered as natural and desired, as it will be the foundation that allows migrants to access citizens’ rights and equal opportunities. In other words, assimilationism deems that the desire to maintain their culture of origin (understood as inferior) is a hindrance to their inclusion (Zhou 2015).

Thus, this interviewee’s approach supports an understanding of citizenship that excludes differentiating between social groups: “each child, regardless of where he or she lives, with whom, the family... society has a fundamental role for this child to be able to reflect and somehow progress and become included in the society in which he or she lives” (LGBT officer 2). However, she identifies “society” as the autochthonous population, in such a way that the imaginary of the migrant population is constructed as one that needs to be culturally assimilated in order to be truly considered a part of society. Contrary to this universalist and ethnocentric logic, another trainer considers the question of whether workshops on sexual diversity should be held during Ramadan (Association representative 5), which triggers the debate about whether in a secular state such as Spain, interventions in LGBT matters should be subordinate to the religious calendars of the different religious traditions.

The tension between the universalising perspective of citizenship and the tendency to adapt the interventions to the cultural and religious diversity is eloquently addressed by a staff member in a LGBT support service as a balance between, on the one hand,

“cultural relativism and the ‘everything goes’ logic” and, on the other hand, “exercising that paternalism of shitty accompaniment of these people from a punitive or colonising approach” (LGTB officer 3), a reflection that we will return to in the conclusions.

4.4. Hybridity

In this section, we group together the contributions that contrast with the logic of Assimilation. We will start by examining the contributions that consider the need to transform LGBT policies to question their ethnocentricity and include cultural diversity in them. In this line, one interviewee considers:

‘Non-racialised people who accompany racialised people are in a hurry to solve the situation. There is a relationship of, I don’t know how to say it, of assistance that is a bit ethnocentric, where, in the end, the school asks them to come out of the closet quickly, protect them from the family. And our role is sometimes to provide some calm, understand that before the punitive strategy or the more radical strategy of removing that child from their family, there might be pedagogic strategies that can be explored, such as talking to the family, coming up with other answers’. (LGTB officer 3)

Regarding the case of the population of Maghreb origin, one interviewee who works in an STI-prevention centre insists on the need to acknowledge their cultural and religious realities. He stated that it is crucial “to understand where you come from, how you’ve got here, what sexuality means for you, what sexuality does not mean and what difficulties you might have when telling me something or when you come to the Centre” (Association representative 6). Among these specificities, the informants point to three that we have mentioned in the Experiences section and that are analysed in more depth in [Coll-Planas et al. \(2020\)](#).

The first is the need to understand that queer migrants from the Maghreb do not have to follow the logic of ‘coming out of the closet’ (Association representative 5, Association representative 6). Thus, Fatima El-Tayeb questions whether this ‘coming out’ is the only and best way to manage sexuality in their environment, from a post-colonial view: “The coming out becomes a decontextualized fetish around which the familiar superiority of western individuality is built, while queers of colour are expected to catch up, to overcome their inherent cultural disadvantage” (El-Tayeb 2012, p. 89).

Secondly, the importance of differentiating between sexual practices and identities appears. The interviewee working in the field of STI prevention, considers that in the case of Maghreb men, sexual relationships with other men:

‘... are not related with identity, with how you identify yourself in terms of your sexual orientation; they are related with a relationship that is established with the other. So, of course, the concept of gay is removed from this; it is totally unrelated. (...) So, when the person who arrives here follows this concept, it doesn’t change because they change country, right? (...) if they have recently arrived, they continue with this same construction, they will never identify themselves as gay, even if they have relationships with other men’. (Association representative 6)

Considering the categories of ‘gay/lesbian’ as a Western construction, some informants opt to work based on sexual practices instead of identities. In the case of STI prevention, this recommendation translates into working: “in a way in which the person understands the risks involved but without having to identify themselves” (Association representative 1).

Thirdly, the people interviewed highlight that we need to understand the centrality of the link with the family and the community of origin, in contrast with an autochthonous population in which individualism takes priority. As a mediator of Moroccan origin says:

‘Family is very important to us, on a cultural and family level, I suppose like in many cases. When you live with your family constantly and have a very solid relationship with your family, you will find it harder to assert your identity or decide things about your sexual life, gender, etc’. (Intercultural officer 6)

In addition to this cultural dimension, there is also the migratory aspect, which accentuates this dependence on the family and community of origin. In the first generation of migrant individuals, which is the case of most of the interviewees, Yip (2004) points out that the community acts as a support network and as a space to reinforce the sociocultural practices of their countries of origin, contributing towards weaving a network of commitments and obligations. According to one interviewee who works in a support service for LGBT people, it is essential to take this close relationship with the family into account when accompanying minors of Moroccan origin who have a family conflict due to their sexual orientation or gender identity:

‘... to be able to say, “well, that’s the scenario you have, that’s your reality, we’ll accompany and inform you about which decisions you take”. But the person, depending on their age, but if they are 16 they need to know the consequences of breaking away from their family for not being called as they wish. There is a part of realism too, of putting their expectations on the table, of seeing the available alternatives, how far they can go with their family and seeing the scenario and working gradually. Because breaking away from the family might be a disaster and the person might end up in danger’. (LGTB officer 3)

From the desire to work from a hybrid perspective, the interviewees who work in the field of cultural and religious diversity agree on highlighting that the aim is that the migrant people themselves define their priorities and values: “the view is that we shouldn’t have to tell them about their struggle or what they have to do, it should be them” (Intercultural officer 2). An informant who is an intercultural mediator, for example, explains that if the town council asks her to work on controversial topics in her community, such as sexual and gender diversity:

‘We would try to see how to work, because first, I as a reference would have to look for information about my references or people in the district, and see what they think. And based on that decide what we do. If it is a help or a hindrance’. (Intercultural officer 1)

Thus, she points out that we need to adapt the interventions to the realities of the destination population, modifying where necessary the objectives to not generate the opposite effect. The mediator of Moroccan origin interviewed, for example, does not believe that the topic of homosexuality can be openly addressed with Islam religious communities (“For them, working with these topics in the association will be a no-go”); in relation to interventions against LGBTphobia, she believes that the expectations need to be re-examined, so the intervention is effective: “the Muslim community or the Moroccan community are light-years away. Sometimes I settle for the fact that they don’t insult, we’re at a very basic level” (Intercultural officer 6).

In this adaptation process, the informants suggest two strategies: to adopt an intersectional approach and peer accompaniment. Regarding the former, the same informants who complain about the disruptive nature of boys of Moroccan origin recognise that the boys do not have the (supposed) power position that they have in the classroom in any other area of their life: “they become the protagonists at that time, but then you see the signs of [social] class and you say ‘you’re a tough guy in certain contexts and in others you’re not the tough guy you’d like to be because you don’t dominate’” (Association representative 5). This consideration opens the door to an intersectional understanding of the inequalities similar to that presented by the Black feminist activist and theorist Patricia Hill Collins (Hill Collins 1991), who conceptualises the different axes of oppression as being interwoven into a matrix in which individuals are constituted in different and changing power positions.

In relation to the second strategy, three of the organisations interviewed work by providing mentors or guides who share as many characteristics as possible with the person they are accompanying/training/informing (Association representative 6, Association representative 3, Association representative 1).

In the case of a support service for LGBT people, one interviewee explains that at certain times, they ask a colleague from the town council who is of Moroccan origin to intervene:

‘In the end, you wonder if you are a valid assistant depending on the context. For example, with this young Moroccan girl, there is little I can say about her inconsistency or unease with the religion. Especially because I am not religious, not only because I am not Muslim, but because I am atheist, so although I can empathise with her, it is a more ascetic accompaniment. That is when I ask other colleagues who might understand it from a more personal stance. (...) If only we were a team of twenty people. Because it’s not only about origin, I’m a woman but I’m straight, I’m white, middle-class and I work in the LGBT service helping a lesbian Moroccan girl... we’re worlds apart’. (LGBT officer 3)

Regarding the importance of mentors with whom they share origin and sexuality/gender, there are also critical contributions. First, some interviewees express an idealised perspective of the way identification works in intervention processes. For example, an interviewed mediator says that the women of the same origin in her neighbourhood:

‘can transmit the message exactly as they want to me, they don’t have to find a strategy to say to me, ‘we want that for such and such a reason’. They can tell me neutrally what they want to do. We share the same religion, it’s much easier to ask things and work towards the objectives and then, based on that, they see how I am too. Wearing the veil has helped me a lot too’. (Intercultural officer 1)

From our point of view, we need to recognise the importance of the local governments and associations having staff who reflect the diversity of their environment. However, this idea of “neutral” and unproblematic communication based on sharing origin and gender is questionable for several reasons: because forming part of the community can also act as a hindrance when sharing certain information; a hindrance which can be due to the difficulty of sharing doubts or criticism with a person from the same community, or the fact that the person represents a certain position within the community, hindering their identification. For example, will a girl who does not want to wear a veil or who questions aspects of her religion feel as comfortable with the interviewed mediator? In the specific case of this mediator, her position in one of the two doctrinal currents of Islam from the same geographical origin which coexist in the district raises the suspicions of others, questioning the possibility of neutrality mentioned by the interviewee.

In this line, an interviewee who works in an STI prevention centre explains the limits he observes in the strategy of working among peers. In the case of his association, the hiring of a sex worker of Brazilian origin as a mediator helped to connect especially with the Brazilian population and, to a certain extent, with the Latin American population, but it did not help to connect with users of other origins (Association representative 6). As a small association, the interviewee did not consider it viable to be able to hire mediators from each of the origins with which they want to work. And if this were the case, it cannot be guaranteed (as we have seen in the case above) that this person will connect and relate to people of the same origin.

One interviewee who holds workshops in secondary schools recognises that “the topic of mentors is key in prevention” but she also highlights some limitations of this strategy. First, she says that all possible intersections cannot be taken into account. Secondly, she points out that it can result in a logic “of multicultural representations that are like circuses”. And thirdly, she questions that by definition, a person can feel more connected or more trusting with a person with whom they share social position (Association representative 2).

5. Conclusions

In this last section, first, we reflect on the results based on the analytical categories (Assimilation and Hybridity). Secondly, focusing on the main aspect of this article, Policies, we address two axes of debate that have emerged from the informants’ contributions.

The assimilationist approach considers that the way sexual and gender diversity is managed in the West is superior to elsewhere, arguing this from a universalist and evolutionist logic according to which LGBT people from non-hegemonic cultures and religions (and especially of the Arab culture and Muslim religion) have to abandon their origins and embrace the “liberating” Western logic. In this line, it is considered that the state has to play the role of helping this social group to eliminate the conservative influences of their origins and incorporate the modern, egalitarian and democratic elements associated with the West. However, when we analyse the experiences of queer people from migrant backgrounds whom we interviewed, we see that assimilation is a mirage: in real life, it is not possible to erase the cultural baggage or the links that connect us to the family and community of origin.

Thus, we find that the logic of hybridity is key in the narratives of the queer people from a Muslim background whom we interviewed. The informants do not have any option other than to build their own path combining elements from both cultures. Therefore, from our point of view, hybridity would not be an option but the only alternative to the impossibility of completely continuing the parameters of the culture of origin and the host culture. Hybridity that does not become idealisation, as has been criticised by [Ahmad \(1995\)](#) and [Dirlik \(1997\)](#), becomes an ambivalent path: open to creativity and the quest for one’s answers, but also plagued with tensions. Applied to policies, hybridity takes the form of questioning the ethnocentrism of LGBT policies; considering the intersection with the axis of cultural and religious diversity to better accompany LGBT people from minority cultures and religions; and ensuring that the respect of sexual and gender diversity does not contribute to the construction of the immigrant person, especially Muslims, as the Other.

Focusing on the dimension of Policies, the focal point of this article, we want to underscore two axes of tension that have emerged and which we would like to further explore in future articles. The first axis is related to the construction of the figure of the migrant queer person from a Muslim background. In the interviews with people working in LGBT and cultural and diversity policies, we have found a tension in this regard. On the one hand, there are informants who, often from an assimilationist perspective, generalise when constructing the figure of the Muslim immigrant to such an extent that they deny them the capacity of agency and the different ways of embodying and experiencing this position. On the one hand, they are approaching what Sara Ahmed ([Ahmed 2000](#), p. 5) calls the ‘stranger fetishism’, which “invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts ‘the stranger’ off from the histories of its determination”, that is, denying their nature as subjects and using this category “to establish and define the boundaries of who ‘we’ are” ([Ahmed 2000](#), p. 3). At the other end of this axis, we find the people who avoid generalisation by presenting Muslim migrants as unique people among whom no common traits can be identified. This trend is more present in the hybridity discourse. Regarding this tension, the challenge would be to recognise potential cultural and socioeconomic differences stemming from the migratory process, without denying the subjects’ agency or the individual variability.

Secondly, we identify a second tension related to how the role of the State is constructed in this matter. On the one hand, assimilationist stances suggest that the state must treat everyone as equal, that all citizens should receive the same information and training (about sexual and gender diversity, in this case) without differentiating between religious origins or beliefs. On the other hand, more present in hybridity discourses, there is an effort to adapt the interventions to take cultural and religious diversity into account. Thus, as the first extreme runs the risk of falling into universalism and ethnocentrism, the second runs the risk of falling into culturalism and cultural relativism.

In this regard, Jacqueline Bhabha ([Bhabha 1999](#), p. 189) warns of the risk that in order to move away from “the Western universalist conception of human rights”, we must not fall into relativist conceptions that “easily become vehicles for a discriminatory hierarchisation of human rights protection and an uncritical reinforcement of exclusionary state practices”.

Thus, the challenge in relation to this tension would be how to question the ethnocentrism of the interventions in the area of LGBT and how to adapt them to a culturally and religiously diverse context without eliciting culturalist and hierarchical explanations.

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¹ To protect the anonymity of the people interviewed, the names used are pseudonyms.

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