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Shamed citizens: Exilic lived experiences of queer Mongolians

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Abstract

Mongolia has seemingly progressive national laws on sexuality, but their enforcement is poor. Criminalizing hate crime and speech against the country's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and other sexual and gender minorities (LGBTIQ+) in the 2017 Criminal Code appears to make Mongolia 'a humane, civil, and democratic society,' as envisioned by its constitution. However, an increasing number of Mongolian queers fleeing the homeland seeking acceptance and freedom shows the magnitude of discrimination, hatred and violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). This paper explores the lived experiences of repressed Mongolian queers and their exilic experiences. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews based on snowball sampling with 16 queers and allies reveal that shame, as a crucial identity construct of Mongolian queers, serves as a trigger for their forced and self-imposed exile. I argue that embraced and resolved shame of queer Mongolians in 'exile,' afforded to them by being exposed to somewhat better environment abroad, ease their exilic experiences, and transform shame into self-acceptance and self-esteem. This paper is original with its nuanced academic debates on the lived experiences of queer Mongolian diasporas in terms of shame, sexuality, and exile.

Keywords: shame, exile, queer, Mongolia, LGBTIQ+

1 Introduction

On the public attitude towards LGBTIQ+ Mongolians and shame attached to it, Anaraa Nyamdorj, a queer trans* man and LGBT Center's co-founder, states that, 'Because when you are yourself, when you don't hide and aren't ashamed, and aren't scared, people's attitude is: "You gotta be scared, you must hide, and you must be ashamed of yourself." And that's really difficult, that's very hard. I can't breathe' (LGBT Center, 2010). On the other hand, a gay man shares, 'Nothing is more heartbreaking than being told by your parents that they regret giving birth to you. It was many times that I have heard them saying that it is better for me to die than live in such shame. There were several times I felt so terrible like committing suicide' (LGBT Center, 2012).

Shame felt by the contemporary Mongolian queers comes from the conflict between their self-identification and public perception of sexual and gender identity. For LGBTIQ+ Mongolians, it is painfully obvious that these shaming acts and behaviors even originate from those who are supposed to love them – their own family. Furthermore, the notion of shame questions one's compliance with fixed norms of masculinity or femininity, decent citizenship, and even existence as a human being. It is evidenced by this testimony of a gay man who was targeted in a night club by heterosexual men, 'He said he wanted them to kick the asses of the gays since gays are a shame to the prestige of manhood…' (Lai et al., 2013). These testimonies represent the deep-seated issues of how queer Mongolians cope with state, media, and institutional pressures and stigmatization based on SOGIESC. Shame is deeply felt, internalized, acknowledged, unnoticed, resisted, rejected, and named and unnamed, both individually and collectively, and discursively and symbolically.

A Mongolian saying goes, 'Suffer with your own rule, rather than frolic under someone else's rule.' As historians explain,[1] this saying originates from the time when Mongolia was a Manchurian colony, which lasted for over 200 years. It implies the pain and sufferings our ancestors experienced during the colonial time, longing for liberty at their own will. The very phrase, 'someone else's rule' in Mongolian language literally means 'human rights,' highlighting how one's right is restricted by some other's rule. Although now 'Mongolia is an independent, sovereign republic' striving to build 'a humane, civil, and democratic society,' as stipulated in the Preamble and Article 1 of the Constitution of Mongolia, a social group of this country, namely the country's sexual and gender minorities, still suffers 'someone else's rule,' forcing them to seek safer and freer lives abroad.

This paper is about queer Mongolians living abroad, who escaped shame for being sexual and gender minorities and thus lead exilic lives as queer refugees, asylum seekers, or educational and economic migrants. The term 'queer' here is an umbrella term describing any SOGIESC that is not heterosexual or cisgender. On the other hand, the term and concept of 'sexual and gender minorities' refer to 'people whose biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and/or gender expression depart from majority norms,' and include 'considerable diversity as well as a multiplicity of identities and behaviors' (O'Malley et al., 2018, p. 10). Lastly, 'trans*' is used in the same meaning as Halberstam intends, as it 'holds open the meaning of the term "trans" and refuses to deliver certainty through the act of naming' (Halberstam, 2017, p. 3). At times 'LGBTIQ+' is used interchangeably with 'sexual and gender minorities,' whereas 'queer' has its subversive role to question and transgress heteronormativity.

A case of physical and sexual assault on three trans* women in 2009 by an ultranationalist group was well-documented by the LGBT Center of Mongolia (UNDP & USAID, 2014, p. 23), which eventually led to the two victims seeking asylum abroad. LGBTIQ+ citizens of Mongolia have been fleeing the country ever since. However, the above case is not the first of its kind. As one of the interviewees revealed, a gay man was granted refugee status in the United States in 1980. This study is to explore how queer citizens of Mongolia negotiate their sexual and gender identity through the lens of shame and exile.

[1] Professors of History Dr. Batsaikhan Ookhnoi, Dr. Lonjid Zorigt, and Dr. Baatar Sovd discuss history in a series called 'A History that Should not be Forgotten and Repeated.'

'Homosexuality in Mongolia is a taboo and largely unknown subject' (Bille, 2010, p. 192). Despite being practiced among the clergy in the pre-socialist period and among individuals during the socialist era, homosexuality was taboo and criminalized during socialism, but was decriminalized later following the Soviet Union (Nyamdorj, 2012; Terbish, 2013). Even though the Mongolian Constitution (1992) protects human rights in generic terms and criminalizes hate crime and speech against LGBTIQ+ individuals by its recent Criminal Code (2015; 2017), laws are excellent on paper, but hardly find proper enforcement (United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2017, pp. 18–19). In general, the media still portray homosexuality as a 'Western import,' 'un-Mongolian,' 'shame to family honor,' 'failure as a citizen,' and 'unnatural and perverse.'

To make matters worse, most government officials and the general population do not fully grasp the concept of gender, often confusing it with sex due to lack of knowledge and courses in educational establishments, reports a German development agency (GIZ). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), experts and activists working on and from feminist, LGBTIQ+, queer, and/or intersectional perspectives have been complementing to address the concept of gender and other areas of gender studies, such as queer theory, change theory, intersectionality, etc. In this sense, the state, social norms and even family members do not support queer Mongolians to be the way they are, and some transgender and transsexual individuals have sought asylum; some are now refugees in destination countries. In this context, fleeing one's homeland due to these precarious political situations and restrictive social norms makes one feel almost in exile. 'Shame is a wound of not belonging,' leaving one feeling like in an exile, and comes from feeling different or misunderstood in one's family' (Schwartz, 2018).

The queer community of Mongolia is not a single entity; it is diverse and idiosyncratic in terms of national and ethnic background, socio-economic status, age, sex, gender and sexual identity, race, class, religion, education, upbringing, and other factors. In this sense, intersectional analysis which brings multiple sources of oppression disadvantaging the marginalized groups to light will be crucial to explore the notion of shame among queers. In this context, the main question is: How does the notion of shame characterize the lived experiences of Mongolian queers in terms of their identity, citizenship, and 'exilic' experience? To answer the question, I interviewed 16 participants based on sampling method in this qualitative research.

2 Theoretical framework

Being a powerful political emotion and negative affect, shame is 'the reaction to not being recognized,' having a strong link between shame and identity, and producing social hierarchies (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, p. 116). The word shame originates from the Indo-European verb 'to cover,' implying its association with 'hiding,' in terms of intimate relation of self to itself and to others (Ahmed, 2005). Feeling shame at the individual level leads to reflection, or may produce a new self, whereas the act of shaming occurs when someone or some institution imposes it on people, 'telling you that you ought to be ashamed' (Probyn et al., 2019). When it comes to shame and homosexuality, 'shame is foundational to the creation of modern gay identity'; while unacknowledged shame brings anger and resentment, resolved shame has transformative potential (Munt, 2018).

Whereas shame is addressed in terms of individualized contexts in the fields of psychoanalysis and psychology, sociology brings social dimensions of shame. According to Scheff (2000), shame is decreasing in modern societies, but at the same time awareness of shame is increasing and a sociology of emotions should explore the dynamics of racial, gender, ethnic, and class relationships when it comes to the study of shame. Taking it further, to challenge the binarism of pride and shame toward a queer psychology of shame, Liu (2017) claims that breaking away from the binary can bring shame back to the public as a politically charged and productive affect for queer theorizing.

Drawing on the work of Tomkins, Sedgwick argues that early experiences of shame do not derive from refusal of a parental injunction against what one is doing or wants to do; instead 'shame "floods" one when a desired circuit of communication with another is disrupted by nonrecognition on the part of either person' (Gould, 2009, p. 222). When this happens, one feels 'naked, defeated, alienated, and lacking in dignity or worth' (Tomkins, 1995, p. 133). This sense and/or experience of social nonrecognition is common for marginalized groups, and those who identify as lesbian or gay tend to be subjected to nonrecognition in their relations with heterosexual parents, siblings, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and others with whom they desire interaction (Gould, 2009, p. 223). Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back a confining, demeaning, or contemptible picture of themselves. 'Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being' (Taylor, 1994, p. 25).

Dominant groups in any society use 'the rhetorical move of silence' to suppress marginalized groups by rendering their experiences invisible (Glenn, 2004). Dominant discourses judge and frame the lived experiences of queers within heteronormativity and usually state and public discourses are biased to the extent that they silence and erase the actual and lived experiences of the queer community. Particularly, certain sub-groups among the queer community become subject to this invisibility. On the other hand, the silencing of LGBTIQ+ elders in queer and gerontological theories due to age and sexuality excludes them from the creation of a cultural form (Brown, 2009, p. 67). This historical invisibility and silencing 'have left LGBTIQ+ elders without adequate social or material supports and has isolated them from both the LGBTIQ+ and the older-adult communities, as well as the agencies serving those communities' (Brown, 2009, p. 65).

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol allows LGBTIQ+ refugees to be protected based on them belonging to 'a particular social group,' but these wordings invite controversies and contradictions because of its both narrow and expansive interpretations (Buscher, 2011, pp. 93–94). It has implications on how queer refugees would have limited or adequate access in legal terms. Shame, along with homophobia and repressive laws, is a reason why many asylum seekers do not necessarily mention actual causes of fleeing their homeland (Buscher, 2011, pp. 95–96) and being a refugee and a member of LGBTIQ+ groups would subject one to 'double marginality' (Buscher, 2011, pp. 97–98), putting them in extremely precarious and vulnerable circumstances. Unlike most people, who fled their countries due to armed conflicts and for political reasons, queer people are 'banished, exiled, evicted, rejected, and betrayed for being an unworthy citizen' (Dixson, 2017).

3 Methodology

I use the notion of 'lived experiences' in the title deliberately to emphasize the complex intertwining of the discursive (as in talked about) and phenomenal (as in lived) experiences (Earl, 2014) of this marginalized population. By problematizing 'experience' through historicizing it, Joan W. Scott explores various definitions of experience as 'the most authentic kind of truth,' 'the prior existence of individuals,' and 'the process by which subjectivity is constructed' (Scott, 1991, p. 782). What is appealing to me is the notion of experience articulated as 'the lived realities of social life,' (Scott, 1991, p. 784) which reveals the agency, authenticity and reality of lives led by LGBTIQ+ community members through interviews.

Feminist research methods, such as qualitative research, semi-structured online interviews, and intersectionality as an analytical tool guided the methodology of this study. I conducted individual interviews using the snowball sampling method. As a co-founder (2009) and former Advocacy Program Manager (2009–2011) and Executive Director (2011–2014) of the LGBT Center of Mongolia, I am in touch with a network of LGBTIQ+ community leaders and members. Thus, the starting point of the snowball sampling method was me, Enkhmaa Enkhbold, Executive Director of LGBT Center, and Nyampurev Galsanjamts, also known as Nyamka, project manager at the Youth for Health Center. In this sense, interviews were based on snowball sampling as a respondent-driven sampling method (Neuman, 2014, p. 275). Nyamka and Enkhmaa recommended LGBTIQ+ individuals who are in foreign countries and those who contacted the NGOs for support to seek asylum. The selection criteria were queer individuals from Mongolia, who have an experience of living abroad or who escaped the homeland because of being a member of sexual and gender minorities. Therefore, interviewees include queer Mongolians, who are living in different countries as refugees, asylum seekers, educational or economic migrants, and in another capacity; additionally, there is a non-queer, heterosexual ally, who is close with the community and could provide insights on the subject matter.

Contacting potential interviewees and actual interviews occurred between November 2021 and August 2022. Given geographical locations and COVID-19 restrictions, interviews were conducted on online platforms. During each interview, I took notes, transcribed it afterwards, and analyzed it by using the Critical Discourse Analysis. Recurrent themes were topically classified and discursively analyzed which were detailed in the reflections and discussion sections below. Average duration of interview was about 90 minutes.

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews included demographic questions on age, SOGIESC, country of residence, and duration of living abroad. Open-ended questions mainly focused on life histories, addressing the process of asylum seeking, refugee identification, status, relocation and other processes, the notion of shame, how they viewed and experienced it both in Mongolia and abroad, and other relevant questions. Challenges included arranging interviews due to time differences, especially with those living in Northern American and Asian countries. Most interviewees were open and flexible to be interviewed with their cameras turned on, allowing the researcher to observe their facial expressions, gestures, and other body language.

Over 20 queers and allies were contacted for interview. Some rejected to be interviewed after hearing about the topic and questions of the study, claiming that they would not want to discuss their experiences as LGBTIQ+ people in Mongolia, because it might

invoke painful memories. Unfortunately, it was impossible to find out the contact details of two trans* women, who sought asylum and became refugees in 2009–2010. They live in the Netherlands. On the other hand, Anaraa Nyamdorj, a queer trans* man, co-founder, and former Executive Director of LGBT Center of Mongolia, who was an asylum seeker in the Netherlands, who has lived in an Asylum seekers' centers (AZCs) for 3 years and 8 months, agreed to use his name and Facebook posts for the paper and answered interview questions briefly.

Among 16 individuals interviewed and contacted briefly online, two were community leaders, representing the LGBT Center and Youth for Health non-governmental organizations working on LGBTIQ+ rights, and HIV, AIDS, STIs and sexual and mental health of LGBTQ+ community members, respectively. Out of 16 interviewees, there are 6 gay men, one heterosexual woman, three trans* women, two lesbians, two non-binary queers, and two trans* men. They were interviewed from countries in the Americas, Europe, and Asia, namely, the United States, Switzerland, Germany, Mongolia, and Thailand. The duration of those living in their host countries for 12 queers, who sought asylum, both unsuccessfully and successfully, ranges from 2 to 8 years. (See Table 1 for more details on the list of interviewees and relevant information.)

When contacting potential interviewees and before starting actual interviews, the researcher informed individuals about the research topic, and its ethical concerns, confidentiality, and privacy implications. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of individuals, I gave interviewees pseudonym initials. Due to the time constraint, the number of interviewees is limited, which not only shows the shortcomings of the study, but also of the urgent necessity of a further research on the topics of Mongolian queer diasporas and queer migration.

There are several ethical considerations I need to elaborate at the end of this section. Upon request of anonymity by some interviewees and for the sake of consistency, I anonymized or pseudonymized the interviewees to protect their personally identifiable and sensitive information. Informed consent of the Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 has been the ethical compass of the research (franzke et al., 2020, p. 10), which was obtained on Facebook before or during the interview. As for an anonymized source on YouTube, who is a queer refugee living in Europe, a written informed consent was gained via e-mail from its content creators to quote from the podcast.

4 Shame of sexuality

In Mongolia, it is relatively common that people confuse sexual acts and behaviors with sexual and gender identity, as often reflected in media. The public, especially conservatives and ultra-nationalists, are disgusted by their imagined same-sex sexual acts between men. The majority in society is still incapable of thinking beyond explicit pornographic images of gay men when it comes to differences between sexual acts and sexuality, making them unable to accept sexual and sensual attractions of sexual and gender minorities, inborn gender identities and expressions, and the nature of gender and sexual diversity.

In this context, gay men and lesbians are unable to sustain same-sex relationships without hatred and intimidation, while trans* people often face physical and sexual violence, let alone proper healthcare services. As J.Z., a gay man, who attempted to seek asylum, assures, it is impossible to live with his partner in Mongolia openly; that was the reason why

he wanted to go to Turkey and then to enter Hungary via Serbia, but he was stopped, returned, and detained in Turkey. As an anonymous lesbian observes, 'Mongolian newspapers depict trans* individuals as sex workers, while TVs and ultra-nationalists raid hotels to expose and shame them.'

The case of M.S., a refugee, trans* woman in Thailand waiting for her destination country determination, reveals cruel police brutality and torture. On November 26, 2017, she was arrested and taken to a sobering-up cell by the police due to a false accusation of public nuisance. These cells are usually located in the cellar of police stations. Then she was beaten up and abused by 4 police officers, who held her limbs and took off her pants to determine her sex. When the police officers exposed her genitalia in front of everyone, including those in the cells, M.S. said that she felt shame like she never had in her life. For a trans* person who is ashamed of the only body part she never wanted it to be there in the first place, forcing it to be seen in public is the 'worst nightmare' one can see. This further traumatized and left her with an eternal scar, both mentally and emotionally.

Contemplating many questions of 'Why me as a subject of shaming?', 'Who am I for the queer community?', and 'Who am I for a "certain category" of community?' helps them to identify and reidentify the self in this ever-temporal state of mind and being. Knowing and understanding their own identity truly and profoundly help them to ease the pain of shame, especially for those who stayed abroad for a long time. They understood that some Mongolians do not want to accept differences and diversity, given that Mongolia itself is mainly homogenous.

More than a decade later since the 2010 documentary by the LGBT Center, Anaraa still feels the same about what he reflected on shame, sexuality, and public perception thereof. He reiterates, 'I am still the one who is not hiding, for whom it is no longer possible even to hide, neither am I ashamed of myself or my life. Shaming was imposed from external parties, and that is still the case.'

It is most hurtful and heartbreaking when shaming attacks come from friends, fellow queers, family members, and loved ones. As G.T., a queer, non-binary individual residing in Berlin, shared, his elementary school classmates even composed a 4-line poem to ridicule him, which goes: 'G.T. the Sissy / You are a human shit / Together with other [queer] people / You are a dog poo.' His classmates, who are six or seven-year-olds living in the countryside, recited it every time they see him on the way to and from school. This shows how sophisticated the shaming strategies could be from an early age, regardless of one's experience or location of both shamers and the shamed.

Many interviewees referred to metaphors of 'dog' when describing how they were treated at the sub- or non-human level. Although dog is a domesticated pet widely known universally, referring to as 'living like a dog' in Mongolian language means being treated as an animal or non-human. The police would threaten M.S. that she would die 'a dog's death,' implying no one would know how or why she died, or that her death would be miserable. As for G.T., the poem those who bully them composed also included 'dog poo,' which is an insult equating human being with an object. B.Z. explains that his condition in a refugee camp was awful as if he 'lived like a dog.' This kind of sub-human, inhumane, and degrading treatment of queers made them think, 'I do not want to be a citizen of Mongolia if they treat me like this,' in the words of M.S.

Intersectionality plays a major role in how shame manifests for Mongolian queers living abroad. If you are single, queer, living with HIV or AIDS, coming from socio-economically

lower status and class, and a refugee, you are double and triple marginalized and vulnerable. In the case of E.G., a trans* woman and refugee, her HIV status and being trans* alienated her from both biological and chosen families, constantly shaming, and putting her at risk of physical and sexual violence. A gay man living with HIV, who is an economic migrant in Europe, feels lonely and 'broken,' as he also hides his sexuality because he works with many heterosexual Mongolians.

Race, class, gender, and sexuality complicate one's marginalization and vulnerability. T.N., a single mother living with AIDS with an African-Asian daughter, is seeking asylum in Germany after some failed attempts in Canada and Germany. Despite being a heterosexual woman, T.N. claims that she feels queer kinship with queer Mongolians due to shared experiences of shame, discrimination, and marginalization with LGBTIQ+ peers. Personal is political, and one's SOGIESC, intersected with varying degrees of socio-economic background, physical appearance, HIV status, sexual positions in same-sex sexual relations, and other signifiers intensity the queer lived experiences of shame, with its complexity and trauma shifting from the individual level to the inter-personal and community levels.

5 Shame of family and sexual citizenship

As community leader Nyamka, who is a manager at the Youth for Health Center, working on HIV, AIDS, sexual and mental health of GBTQ+ community members, confirmed, the current understanding and acceptance of the public and family members of queer Mongolians are extremely superficial. They acknowledge and claim to accept the members of sexual minorities, but they show tendencies and attitudes of stigma and discrimination. In a closed session involving high-ranking politicians and government officials, he heard that LGBTIQ+ issues should remain a taboo topic. It is eerily resonant with how the topic was silenced and suppressed during socialism.

When coming out to family members, the most common reactions are: 'go abroad and never come back!' Interviewees often cite 'family honor,' 'shame of family,' and reasons of family members being ashamed of their relatives who have LGBTIQ+ sons or daughters. Mothers and sisters usually cry and plead them to leave the country, while fathers and brothers are often mute about the whole coming out process. Apart from the exilic experiences following the asylum-seeking process, it is common for Mongolian queers to pursue self-imposed exile; whether it is for educational or employment reasons; they affirm that they would not want to return to Mongolia due to hatred, discrimination, and violence based on SOGIESC.

It is also difficult to report and take your family member to the police or to court for hate crimes and domestic violence. Because of family honor and shame felt from neighbors, M.S.'s brother beat her up, and threatened to kill her. When her case went to a trial, a state prosecutor shamed her for putting her family in that situation during the closed trial session. In these narratives, the interviewees preferred their chosen or constructed family, i.e., LGBTIQ+ family, rather than their biological one. It is usually their brothers, uncles, and other men threaten to kill them for ruining family reputation in the eyes of the public, showing the social and collective dimensions of shame felt by the loved ones. This kind of shame turns loved ones into enemies or villains against queer individuals.

The sacrifice T.B., a 35-year-old gay man, made at home is separation from his partner of 10 years and leaving behind their adopted son whom they raised together. As an only son

of his family, he lived an almost unbearable life of pressure to produce offspring for his family so that there would be a continuation of his family line. At work, he suffered playing stereotypical gender roles by pretending to be a macho man and wearing a mask to hide his true sexuality. The fate is similar for another gay man and the only child, T.K., aged 30, who is ashamed of coming out to his relatives in Mongolia. Nevertheless, he married a man in the United States in 2016.

As a gay male refugee, who has lived in Europe for the past 20 years, puts it, he still hides from his family members and does not dare to contact them even on Facebook. Wishing to be reunited with his family, he is still fearful that they would not accept his sexuality. He used to blame himself for being born as a gay man, but now has come to terms with his sexuality, and longs for family reunion. However, his family members did not let him know when his parents died, and it was most hurtful that he was not given a chance to say goodbye to his beloved ones.

To qualify as a decent, proper citizen, one must fulfill one's reproductive duties for the nation, interviewees claim. A lesbian interviewee reveals that people act as if she was going to end the next generation of the country by being lesbian and not giving birth in a heteronormative manner. Regular questions, such as 'When will you get married?' and 'Will you have a baby?' target lesbian, bisexual, and queer women to challenge, provoke, and annoy them. Gay men are disqualified because they cannot marry women and have children; lesbians are blamed and shamed that they make their reproductive capacities go to waste; trans* men and women mutilate their bodies making it impossible to procreate. The female-identified interviewees state that their families and even taxi drivers demand that they give birth to support population growth of the nation. As a foreign queer refugee in Australia put it, a queer life and body is valued for the nation only when she or he fulfills duties of 'submission, reproduction, subjugation, and conformism' (Dixson, 2017).

6 'Exilic' lived experiences

Exilic experiences of queer Mongolians start from the point they depart Mongolia, continuing into their journey of seeking asylum and a refugee status, to resettling in the destination country. Some interviewees acknowledge that they feel like in an exile even after they become refugees, or educational and economic migrants, feeling loneliness and struggling with survival as aliens in a foreign land.

When in exile, most queer Mongolians think hard about the notions of home, citizenship, and belonging. While home is supposed to signify safety and belonging, they could not enjoy it like other heterosexual, reproductive citizens. In May 2020, Anaraa's asylum appeal was rejected by the Zwolle court, in which the regional court decided that the Government of Mongolia is 'sufficiently equipped to deal with SOGIESC-based violence cases, not taking into account of the weak rule of law.' He was there for almost four years with ongoing harassment and death threats by fellow asylum seekers. B.Z., a trans* man and a refugee in Switzerland, spent about 5 years to obtain his refugee status. Since February 2016, after his identification determination, he stayed in a bunker-like facility with 77 men in conditions closest to those of a prison. He was beaten up with constant threats to cut him with a knife and rape him, with a fellow cellmate threatening to kill him. It was 5 years of pain, tears, and suffering. B.Z. claims that 'once you cried for all those years, you would not be able to

feel joy in the end.' It was a matter of life and death. Compared to that, he reflects, 'the pain of transitioning and relevant surgeries was minimal.' Trauma and emotional turbulence caused him insomnia; he sleeps about a couple of hours a night. He hallucinates sometimes imagining that someone is coming to kill him. He feels lonely most of the time. He expresses his exilic experience as if he is 'imprisoned inside his heart.' Although he is free in the most developed country in the world, he feels trapped and imprisoned.

Once in a country where they apply for asylum, LGBTIQ+ people face further harassment and gender-based violence (GBV). For example, in April–June 2020, M.S. experienced multiple sexual harassment, sexual, and GBV, perpetrated by male neighbors of her accommodation, and fellow refugees. J.Z. was detained in an immigration detention center in Turkey for 12 days in prison-like conditions, in a cramped room with 6–7 people without any window. With his mobile phone confiscated, he could tell time by meals he received. 'Hungry people would grab each other's food and sexual harassment and rape attempts would occur inside the toilet, which is the only place in the cell without a surveillance camera,' he recalls. Whether it is a Western country or a highly developed nation, interviewees unanimously agree that the conditions of these facilities were all similar and like those in a prison.

Ashamed of this experience, J.Z. hardly talks about it to other people, but only to his queer friends when he is brave enough to talk about it. While he had never been in a sobering-up cell in Mongolia, his experience of being in the detention center was 'beyond shame.' He was handcuffed to get tested for drugs while in the detention center, and it was a 'highlight' of his shameful experience. Others describe this kind of exilic experience of living as a refugee as 'a prison with better conditions.' M.S. also says that 'even if you are free, your freedom is limited.'

Queer bodies, especially those in queer shelters, camps, and in-between facilities, are often subject to sexual abuse and harassment, sexual and gender-based violence, and all kinds of exploitation. Men feel free to abuse them at will, scarring and damaging queer bodies and souls irretrievably. Physical harms include rape, sexual assault, beating, and other forms of violence, whereas milder symptoms would be rashes and pimples appearing on the skin due to the stress of routine shaming. Asylum seekers and refugees still seek psychological and mental counseling to take back their bodily and mental control and to solve the issues related to anger, despair, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty.

As refugees, some claim that, 'it is neither your homeland nor a foreign land,' begging the question of 'where is home?' When it comes to citizenship, failing to be 'model citizens' by not fitting into heteronormative narratives comes as a great ordeal for the sexual and gender minorities. Most interviewees profess their love for the homeland, but the authorities make them less of a citizen and non-human due to their sexuality. They view their exilic experience as a journey to the future away from the past filled with shame. As T.N., said, 'I will never go back to Mongolia;' it is a motto of most queers and in the modern time of technological advance and social media, they could easily contact their loved ones. One of the negative aspects of life as a refugee, or life of those in exile, is often loneliness. There is no social life and there are no friends to talk to in real life. It appears that they unlearn and undo the way they used to identify themselves in terms sexuality and shame by leaving the past behind in the best way they can. As queer refugee and human rights activist Tina put it, 'I am learning how to be at home, in exile' (Dixson, 2017).

The whole experience takes a toll on their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, isolating them from their homeland and loved ones, deepening their soul-searching on sexual

and national identification, belonging, citizenship, and ideas of home and community. While in detention, J.Z. had many things on his mind, thinking about his homeland, a better life imagined, and how one would live only once. He still wants to live abroad and is ready to take action when the time is right. Refugee rights are restricted as well. 'If someone from my family dies and I need to visit Mongolia, I will need to get a permission from the government of my host country,' says the anonymous lesbian who has lived for 7 years in North America. As Nyamka informs us, there are some families who meet their LGBTIQ+ children at the Mongolia–China border city by staying in a hotel and meeting each other as a family.

As Anaraa aptly describes his mission on Facebook, he is 'on a life-long journey to my true Self/Other.'[2] 'Refugee' in the Mongolian language refers to something related to war, explains T.N. In a sense, it is a war-like situation for refugees who struggle to survive on a journey to the future despite many challenges one after another. As Anaraa reminds us, 'Everyone is born into this world to fulfill their karma. But for most people, the biggest lesson in karma is love. All our lives we learn to love people.'

7 Conclusion

As a queer educational migrant, who has been living abroad since 2015, I feel emphatic with the exilic experiences of fellow Mongolian queers. Whether Mongolian queers are educational or economic migrants, or refugees or asylum seekers due to SOGIESC, we go through varying degrees of shame and exilic experiences. Having studied with scholarships and living in somewhat better socio-economic circumstances, I feel the sense of privilege and entitlement, but I am aware of it so that I would not be biased in my analyses and judgment.

Reasons why Mongolian queers and allies migrate abroad as refugees, or educational and economic migrants are multifold: sexual, gender, and racial discrimination, SOGIESC-based violence and hate crimes, poverty, as well as family rejection and death threats. These are deeply engrained in the patriarchal and stereotypical social norms and practices regarding sexual and gender minorities, unwillingness and inability of the police and authorities to take actions, hostile social environment against the minorities to be and to live as they are, which eventually make them feel as if they are disqualified, secondary, and failed citizens. Nationalism is not only a gendered and sexist practice, but also strongly heteronormative (Bille, 2010).

Shame and shaming are major factors, triggers, and causes of Mongolian queers to seek asylum. Restrictive social and cultural norms, both conventional and social media, cruelty by the police and authorities, and even close circles of families, friends, and classmates deploy shame as a strategy to discriminate, alienate, and violate queer Mongolians. These dominant discourses attempt to silence queer Mongolians and erase their lived experiences (Glenn, 2004). More seriously, police brutality is rampant in Mongolia. Police departments and stations, prosecutor's offices, and courts are reluctant to investigate, prosecute, and resolve hate crimes perpetrated by the police and authorities, whereas police officers on the ground brutally commit hate crimes and offenses.

[2] Anaraa Nyamdorj's Facebook account: https://www.facebook.com/anaraanyamdorj.

While Mongolia professes to be a tolerant nation accepting LGBTIQ+ individuals with its recent amendments to the Criminal Code, Offense Code, and other laws with SOGIESC-related provisions, its implementation is often weak or non-existent; thus, the number of queer Mongolians who flee Mongolia has been increasing. Sexual and gendered shame, derived from patriarchal and heteronormative social norms in Mongolia, are the underlying reasons of why queers are rejected, alienated, and stigmatized both in family settings and country contexts. Queer identities partially shaped by their un-, or misrecognition in social hierarchies (Gould, 2009) and inevitable oppression intensified by the notion of shame reduce and exclude Mongolian queers as human beings (Taylor, 1994).

It is evident that most LGBTIQ+ people tend not to report hate and bias crimes and offenses to the police for fear of further shaming, insult, and ridicule. In fact, cases get stranded, even after exhausting all domestic procedures with Mongolian queers failing to see justice at home. Cases would also take a long time with the police and authorities, who tend to slow down the process, and attorneys asking victims for high fees, often harming community members, financially and mentally. As Enkhmaa Enkhbold, the LGBT Center's Executive Director, informed us, only one case went through the judicial procedure during the past four years since the amended Criminal Code took effect on July 1, 2017.[3] This is a very low number of cases for a country with over 3 million people.

Mongolian queers and allies, who participated in this study, appear to be going through experiences on the spectrum of embraced, rejected or unresolved shame, and that the feeling of shame does not seem to go away completely. An increasing level of education, knowledge and exposure to foreign cultures and ways of living may ease the intensity and frequency of feeling shame, but it is often triggered by discriminatory, cruel attitudes and behaviors they experience abroad. When you are in exile, or in self-imposed exile, you feel shame for leaving your country behind, and you feel shame for surviving multiple challenges. Ultimately, learning how to live with your true self has been a main factor in genuinely overcoming and embracing shame. It is indeed the process of producing a new self for Mongolian queers as a reaction to, and through the experience of shame (Probyn et al., 2019).

For trans* refugees and asylum seekers, the journey in exile has mostly to do with finding the true authentic self in their own body, skin, and soul by fulfilling their life-long dreams of transitioning. Both trans* men and women have undergone various operations and surgeries, affecting their physical, mental, psychological, and emotional health. On the other hand, for gay men, lesbians, and other queer individuals, finding a same-sex, like-minded partner, husband, or wife and living in a safe, queer-friendly environment with job security and social welfare is the priority.

In terms of identity negotiations, self-expression, and rediscovering one's sexuality, queer Mongolians abroad question the gender and sexual normativity and stereotypes they lived through back home, further inventing their names, identities, and expressions in foreign languages and terminologies. When reclaiming, re-identifying and redefining their sexual and gender identities in foreign lands, one of the most powerful memories that queers do not want to invoke or revoke is denial and rejection of their loved ones, especially fathers and mothers. They are the ones who told them, 'There was no one like you in this family line

[3] Enkhmaa shared this information both via video calls and during The Late Night with Miko. Please see the references for detailed information.

ever!' when they needed their help most, either when they came out to them, or if it was an 'accident.' It seems that this kind of strong message is always stuck in the minds and souls of queers, who are triggered to feel shame throughout their lives.

Often contemplating concepts of citizenship, patriotism, motherland, family, and belonging, queer Mongolians mostly prioritize the notion of survival, while feeling shame that they have left their homeland behind and will never return. It is all about surviving hardships as a queer member in any society they are assigned to, trying to forget about bitter, past experiences at home. On the other hand, exile equals never returning and in the words of the most interviewees, 'I will never go back to Mongolia!' is the parting farewell to their homeland. Yet, it will never be a genuine home like the motherland, and this temporality in time and space would keep visiting and revisiting the ever-multiplying marginalized queer Mongolians in 'exile,' as a queer, as a refugee, and as Other in many ways.

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TABLES

Table 1 List of Interviewees/Participants

№	Name / Birth year	SOGIESC	Status abroad	Years (abroad)	Country of residence	Reason of emigration
1	Anaraa Nyamdorj, 1976	Trans* man	Asylum seeker, later deported	2018–2022	Netherlands and Mongolia	Police, violence
2	T.N., 1976	Heterosexual cis woman	Asylum seeker (past attempts (-))	4 years (15 yrs.)	Germany (Canada)	Racial and AIDS disc.
3	J.Z., 1980	Gay man / drag queen	Failed to live abroad / asylum	In 2018 (6 months)	Mongolia (Turkey)	Economic / SOGIESC
4	M.S., 1988	Trans* woman transitioned	Refugee status gained already	2+ years	Thailand (+destination)	Police torture and brutality
5	T.B., 1987	Gay man, divorced	Green card winner (?)	4 months	USA	Economic after divorce
6	T.K., 1992	Gay man, married	Work and travel visa	6 years	USA	Work and marriage
7	B.Z., 1984	Trans* man transitioned	Refugee status gained already	8 years	Switzerland	Violence against trans*
8	E.G., 1990	Trans* woman	Refugee status gained already	2+ years	Thailand (+destination)	HIV status, family viol.
9	Anonymous, 1980s	Gay man, HIV+	Contracted worker	3 years	N.A.	Economic migration
10	A.Z., 1991	Lesbian, queer	Contracted worker	6 years	USA	Studies and then work

Table 1 *(Continued)*

№	Name / Birth year	SOGIESC	Status abroad	Years (abroad)	Country of residence	Reason of emigration
11	Anonymous, 1980s	Lesbian, queer	Refugee status gained already	7 years	N.A.	Family violence
12	N.G., 1988	Gay man, Com. leader	Youth for Health NGO	N/A	Mongolia	N/A
13	E.E.	Queer, Com. leader	LGBT Center NGO	N/A	Mongolia	N/A
14	Anonymous, 1980s	Gay man, married	Migrant worker	5 years	N.A.	Studies and Work
15	G.T., 1990	Queer, gay, non-binary	Educational migrant	3 years	Germany	Studies
16	M.D., 1978	Trans* woman	Community leader	N/A	Mongolia	N/A
Participants whose stories were analyzed from media, Facebook posts, and YouTube content:						
1	Trans* woman	Trans* woman	Refugee	Since 2009	Netherlands	Ultra-nationalists
2	Trans* woman	Trans* woman	Refugee	Since 2009	Netherlands	Ultra-nationalists
3	Anonymous	Gay man	Refugee	Since 1999	France	Family violence