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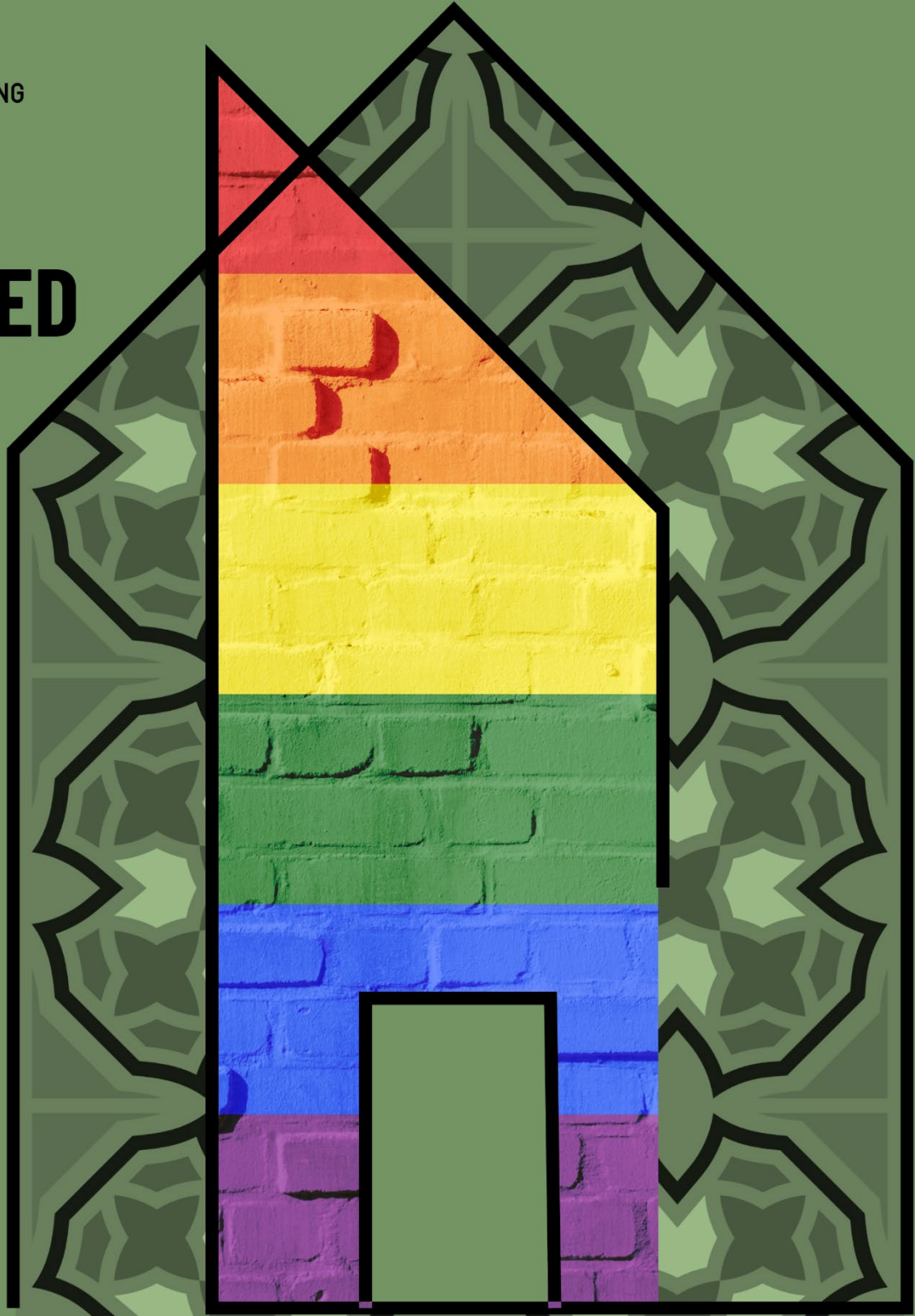
UNSETTLED HOME:

Queer kinship, “traditional family values” and the sense of (un)belonging



An authoethnographic journey across Central Asia by Mirta Kamil

Research Paper

UNSETTLED HOME:

Queer kinship, "traditional family values" and the sense of (un)belonging

Autoethnographic journey across Central Asia

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Introduction

"The beauty of queer families lies in their intentionality; every bond is chosen, nurtured, and celebrated."

— Unknown

The **Central Asian region** comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, is known for its diverse culture, complex history, and difficult socio-political framework. Despite its rich cultural and historical legacies, human rights were never really part of it.

Surrounded by authoritarian neighboring countries (Russia, China, and Iran), the region shares linguistic and cultural ties with the Turkish and Persian communities, but Russian influence remains prevalent, particularly in homophobic and transphobic rhetoric, as well as traditional patriarchal social norms, intertwined with the region's religious conservatism and radicalism. During both, colonial and post-colonial periods, LGBTIQ+ rights in Central Asia have had a slight shift: from criminalization (under the Soviets) to decriminalization in the post-Soviet period; however legal recognition and protection for LGBTIQ+ people remain absent or limited, thus keeping the queer community marginalized and silenced.

Authoritarian regimes in some of the countries in the region have imposed discriminatory laws and policies that directly target the LGBTIQ+ community. Under Russian influence, many Central Asian governments are introducing anti-NGO legislation initiatives that limit the work of NGOs, including LGBTIQ+ organizations.

Except for the few reports from international organizations, and sporadic interviews with some activists, statistical or other data from state structures about the state of LGBTIQ+ human rights in Central Asia is very difficult to obtain. Recent data from the LGBT Equality Index [1]| Equaldex, which assesses LGBTIQ+ rights, laws, and public attitudes in different countries, shows that none of the Central Asian countries are considered LGBTIQ+ safe.

Some Central Asian countries - **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan**, have no criminal codes against homosexuality and have registered LGBTIQ+ organizations. Still, with this new visibility, their situation worsened, and the attacks amplified, as mentioned in the World Report 2020: Kyrgyzstan [2]| Human Rights Watch.

On the other hand, in **Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan**, criminal codes against homosexuality are in place. In Turkmenistan, the most authoritarian state, the Criminal Code Article 135 [3] “Sodomy” is punishable by imprisonment for up to two years, and in the meantime (2022) a new, harsher version of the Criminal Code was published.

Strong patriarchal stereotypes worsen the marginalization of LGBTIQ+ people, especially lesbian and bisexual women, who are often subjected to forced marriages as a form of cultural violence, in an attempt to change sexual orientation. Queer communities in Central Asia suffer numerous violations of human rights, homophobia, transphobia, and discrimination in all areas of life, including employment, education, family life, and relationships. Activists and advocates in the region often operate under the threat of violence, state surveillance, and social ostracism.

Due to the lack of insight into the lives and realities of LGBTIQ+ people in Central Asia under oppressive governments, the Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy is

proud to support local researchers in their attempts to document the life and family relationships of queer people.

This research paper sheds light on queer kinships in Central Asia—a subject that remains underexplored in activist and academic discourse. This autoethnographic research aims to amplify these silenced voices and contribute to the understanding of queer existence in the region.

Queer families all over the world challenge heteronormative structures while living deep and meaningful forms of love, care, and resilience.

By bringing their stories to the forefront, we emphasize that the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals are an integral part of the broader struggle for social justice.

Naida Kucukalic
Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy

[1] https://www.equaldex.com/equality-index
[2] https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/kyrgyzstan
[3] https://database.ilga.org/turkmenistan-lgbti

Preface

Living a relatively settled life in Moscow as a migrant from Kazakhstan, I spent years struggling with my identity and the resulting disorientation, unable to critically analyze the heteronormative, oppressive structures shaping my reality. At 19, I left Kazakhstan for Moscow as a student, departing from my beloved, patriarchal Muslim middle-class family, which had ambitious plans for my personal and professional future. As clichéd as it may sound, my story mirrors that of many queer individuals seeking freedom and authenticity in the metropolis.

But why Russia? At first glance, it seems an unlikely choice. However, in the mid-2000s, Moscow was somewhat different. The city still retained an echo of the freedoms of the 1990s, and LGBTIQ+ topics were less stigmatized in public discourse. Kissing in the crowded subway or expressing affection in public felt, if not entirely safe, but at least possible. In hindsight, I recognize this was less a reflection of social acceptance and more a stroke of luck. For many young people from Central Asia, Russia was the most accessible migration destination at the time, offering opportunities to study or work. By the 2020s, however, Russia had become one of the least desirable destinations for queer migrants (Napier, 2022) — a change that hardly surprises me.

The first alarm bells rang in 2013 when the Russian State Duma passed a law banning so-called "gay propaganda" among minors. In 2014, the war in Donbas began, sanctions were imposed, the ruble collapsed, and political rhetoric grew increasingly repressive. Many older and more experienced queer individuals saw *the writing on the wall* and began planning their departures. By 2020, constitutional amendments redefined family as

a union exclusively between a man and a woman. The pre-culmination came in 2022 with the beginning of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, followed by amendments extending the "gay propaganda" ban to adults, and finally, in 2023, a law branding the "LGBT movement" as extremist, introducing harsh penalties.

At the end of 2022, after 17 years in Moscow, I returned to my childhood home of Almaty. Having witnessed the systematic oppression of Russia's LGBTIQ+ community, I decided to refocus my research on Central Asia, recognizing the significant post-colonial influence of Russian political and media rhetoric on the region. The "traditional values" agenda and anti-LGBTIQ+ policies also had been circulating here for a few years, but my research coincided with several key changes.

In February 2023, I began a comprehensive study of the LGBTIQ+ communities of Central Asia. Leading activists, founders of local queer-feminist initiatives, researchers, and human rights defenders became my guides through this intricate and diverse landscape. Thanks to Almaty's activists, I gradually expanded my connections across the region, mapping networks of people, places, organizations, and projects. Beyond this tangible infrastructure, I encountered intimate stories of resilience, struggle, joy, fear, and hope that each interlocutor generously shared with me. Throughout 2023, I visited Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan — sometimes multiple times — conducting research primarily in capitals and major cities, but also traveling to rural areas.

After the Soviet Union's collapse, most republics decriminalized homosexuality in the 1990s, except for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where it still remains criminalized. My first stop was Uzbekistan, where I quickly realized I had underestimated the level of fear and oppression faced by the local queer community. Safety was a constant concern — for my interlocutors and myself. Interviews took place in rented apartments or discreet cafés,

and communication was encrypted, with careful avoidance of sensitive language. Physical data transfers replaced cloud services. Uzbekistan was, without a doubt, the most challenging environment for my research. In Tajikistan, while no direct laws target queer people, activists report pervasive repression. My research there somewhat mirrored the caution I exercised in Uzbekistan.

Kyrgyzstan, once the most advanced republic in Central Asia in terms of LGBTIQ+ advocacy and queer community life, passed a "gay propaganda" law in 2023 during my ongoing study. Therefore, my interviews with Kyrgyz activists frequently ended with uncertainty, as they struggled with questions about sustaining their work under new constraints.

Kazakhstan, where homosexuality was decriminalized in 1998, at the time offered a glimmer of hope compared to other Central Asian countries. Attempts to pass anti-LGBTIQ+ legislation in 2014 failed, and by 2023, the country appeared poised to lead the region in grassroots queer rights advocacy, with a growing number of activists, organizations, media projects, and event spaces promoting visibility and equality. However, by 2024, discussions of a "gay propaganda" ban had resurfaced again. Despite consolidated resistance from activists and civil society, the law was partially adopted and sent for further review, diminishing hopes for a more inclusive future in my home country.

Turkmenistan, from the outset, was seen as too risky for such fieldwork. As one of the most closed countries in the world, its decades-long dictatorship left little room for inquiry. I was warned of potential detainment at the airport, close surveillance, and a pervasive culture of fear, especially among the local LGBTIQ+ community. Human rights activists I met during my research reported relying on online interactions or meeting Turkmen queer people only abroad, for instance in Kyrgyzstan, to gather data. Grounding my research in autoethnography and embodied experience, including the experience of

traveling across countries, encountering my interlocutors, and observing their social environment in person, I concluded that conducting meaningful fieldwork in Turkmenistan was not feasible and therefore decided to exclude it from my study.

In my conversations with participants, we often discussed the enduring influence of the Soviet era and modern Russian propaganda on widespread homophobia and systemic exclusion within the region. In unison, we also agreed that these were not the only forces at play. Central Asia's deeply embedded culture of shame, or uyat (a concept of honor and public decency), and the region's familial and kinship networks also contribute to the challenges faced by queer individuals. Rooted in pre-Soviet traditions of communal honor and reinforced by Soviet-era conformity, uyat prioritizes societal image over individual freedoms. It is a highly gendered practice, placing the burden of family honor on women through controlled behavior, dress, and marital status. Also, any perceived

deviation from the prescribed societal "norms" often leads to ostracization or violence, thus making queer people, as one of the most vulnerable groups, feel socially excluded, forced into secrecy or emigration.

This interplay of Russian propaganda, Soviet legacies, and traditional Central Asian norms created a uniquely oppressive environment for the LGBTIQ+ community in the region. Recognizing my dual identity as both an insider familiar with the local complexities and an outsider with firsthand experience of Russia's repressive turn, I opted for an autoethnographic approach in my study. Ultimately, this research became a form of resistance, born of a reality where silence and invisibility are no longer options. For me, the personal has become political, and there is no turning back.

Mirta Kamil

Invitation

I speak with a wound in my mouth
A wound that has bled for a
Long time.
A wound that has gagged me from
Speaking
A wound that has silenced my
Voice.
But this wound is healing.
And the healing pains are
subsiding
But they are not
Forgotten.
They will never be
forgotten
As they will always be
In the periphery of
Consciousness.

(Martinez, 2013)

In today's world, queer people are at the forefront of political oppression, social discrimination, and personal vulnerability. The discourse surrounding the LGBTIQ+ community has become a site of humiliating debates, collective anger, and the subject of hatred. On the other side, it is often exploited for speculation, pinkwashing, political gain, and populist rhetoric. In post-communist countries, queer people and their existence have unexpectedly turned into the supposed "cause" of low birth rates and socio-political troubles, orchestrated by the West, a weapon of family destruction, a force responsible for demoralizing society and depriving it of its moral foundation, leading the nation down a dangerous path. This is, of course, a lot.

In 2022, my same-sex partner and I made a forced but firm decision to leave Russia after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. "So, where are we going now?" my partner asked. I suggested Kazakhstan, my home. "Home..?"

My return became a quiet inner drama. Still not having recovered from the trauma of war and the rapid turn of the country where I had lived for 17 years towards overt political repressions and prosecution of the LGBTIQ+ community, I returned to where I had once left in search of personal freedom. It is both ironic and sad that, in 2022, I returned to Kazakhstan, seeking to save my freedom (and my life), but under completely different circumstances.

I had no idea what the queer community in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries was like. But I wanted to get to know them. It was clear to me that we had something to talk about. I wanted us to reflect together on the condition in which we found ourselves — as enemies in our societies, strangers among our own, outcasts, and criminals. I wanted to learn the life stories of others and share my own. As Fortier (2003) suggests, "wider socio-historical and discursive contexts allow us to consider the deep connection

between the concept of “home” and ideas of family, gender roles, and compulsory heterosexuality". Therefore, I centered my research on the lived experiences of queer women in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, uncovering the challenges they face within their traditional, heteronormative societies. By following their life narratives weaved with my own, I examined how our tangled queer female existence and the struggles we encounter influence our sense of home and belonging. My research and writing, rooted in decolonial queer- feminist anthropology and performative autoethnography, aim to give voice to those often silenced by patriarchal expectations and familial homophobia — namely, queer women of Central Asia.

Thus began my vulnerable journey — an embodied performance, a challenging encounter of the sensitive parts of my life with the resembling stories of my interlocutors. In our lives, we seem to be on a battlefield, so the dialogues we create with each other are meant to give our hearts rest, and our thoughts liberation. I didn’t present myself to those I’ve met as a detached researcher. Instead, I immersed myself in this research “from the perspective of an anthropologist who has come to know others by knowing herself, and who has come to know herself by knowing others” (Behar, 1996). I invited my interlocutors to engage as allies, offering something akin to mutual psychotherapy and uncensored collaborative thinking, where we would share our wounds and pains, anger and indignation, past and present. And now, I invite you, the reader, to join in our co-created embodied knowledge.

How to Approach the Vulnerable?

Vulnerability doesn't mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake.

(Behar, 1996)

As a foundation for my research, I decided to adopt “the self of the researcher and/or narrator within a social context” (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Placing my account and subjectivity as a queer woman returning to childhood home — reflecting on it vulnerably but critically, and finally leaving it again — I used this experience as a source of autoethnographic data and embodied knowledge- making.

While most influential works on queer-feminist theory, migration, and belonging primarily investigate their subjects in Anglo-American contexts, my research focuses on the underrepresented geopolitical locations of the Central Asian region, giving voice to multiple indigenous queer perspectives. As a geography wise element of the research design, I conducted fieldwork across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. I intentionally omitted fieldwork in Turkmenistan due to the extreme lack of safety, which made it nearly impossible to collect ethnographic data on queer lives in this repressive Central Asian state under ubiquitous surveillance. As a result, Turkmenistan remains a blank spot in my research.

Since "autoethnography means sharing politicized, practical, and cultural stories that resonate with others and motivating these others to share theirs" (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011), my research approach is grounded in the method of "layered accounts" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). To this end, I conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews, engaged in collaborative reflection sessions, and facilitated interactive storytelling encounters with women who currently identify, or have identified, as such in the past. Beyond the fieldwork, I actively participated in offline events, examined local queer media, and established connections with LGBTIQ+ activists and related organizations, who provided broader insights into the lives and struggles of queer individuals in their respective countries.

Due to the complicated situation regarding LGBTIQ+ human rights in the region, the interviews were primarily conducted under the condition of total anonymity for my informants. All my ethnographic work was developed with safety-first measures in mind. As a result, in this research paper, I refrain from mentioning real names, specific locations, or any details that might compromise the anonymity and safety of the participants. I also used a pen name for myself as an author and autoethnographer, who exposes her own subjectivity for the sake of the research. The anonymity conditions of the fieldwork and paper writing, therefore, act as a form of social critique, revealing the lack of visibility, stigmatization, and danger under which queer lives are lived in Central Asia.

Chapter 1. **Loving Reflection on the Feminine Self**

There is no possible fight for someone deprived of an identity, no internal motivation for fighting, since, although I can fight only with others, first I fight for myself.

(Wittig, 1992)

We are sitting with Irina in the kitchen of a rented apartment in Tashkent, talking about our lives. We are the same age, and she has a 6-year-old son, whom she raises together with her former girlfriend — the child's non-birth mother. They are preparing for an upcoming emigration from Uzbekistan, currently choosing a destination country. For a while, we discuss various “good” countries for queer emigration and possible paths to legal residency in a somewhat abstract manner. This fleeting conversation occurred in almost all of my encounters with people from local queer communities during my research travels across Central Asia. It is a specific kind of small talk between people united by the same pains: an unsettled sense of home, a traumatized sense of belonging, and the uncertainty of finding your place in a society that doesn’t consider you.

However, our conversation quickly shifted away from an interview format; instead, it became an overflowing dialogue between two individuals who had met by chance but seemed to have known each other for a long time. This sudden closeness between me and Irina — indeed, between me and all the other interlocutors I met — stemmed from a shared desire to express what had long been buried deep inside. I increasingly felt a

natural urge to embed “a diary of my own life within the accounts of the lives of others that I was being required to produce as an anthropologist” (Behar, 1996).

Gender roles in Central Asia

Although the focus of our meetings and my invitation for interviews was on how queer people live their lives in Central Asia, almost all of the women — whether identifying as women in the present or in the past — began our conversations with something else, something that seemed to weigh even more heavily on their minds. They shared with me how, at certain points, they had wanted to become men or had tried on that role — either in reality or in their imagination. "The thing is, women are simply treated poorly, and I myself had a moment when I didn’t want to be a woman. But not because I wanted to be a man, but because I wanted to be treated like a human being," Irina, with whom I’m drinking tea, shares her painful reflection on growing up as a girl in Uzbekistan.

When I first heard this confession — and then many more times from different women in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, across various ages, professions, and social classes — I was overwhelmed. They were speaking about something I knew all too well. It was what I had experienced in my own life but had been unable to articulate for a long time. Around the age of 14, I began to rebel against the image of a girl and woman that my patriarchal family had imposed on me throughout my childhood. Their demands included a specific feminine appearance, graceful manners, obedience, and the ability to remain silent and never argue — especially with men. The women in my family would tell me not to challenge the superiority of men, who were seen as stronger, smarter, and whose lives were inherently more valuable. My primary role, they said, was to

complement my future husband, care for his well-being, raise children, and manage the household. The constant reminders that I was merely a guest in my parents' home, destined one day to leave for my husband's house to serve him, haunted me. Even as a child, I found these familial expectations humiliating. As a teenager, I began wearing men's shirts and long pants, cut my hair short, learned to smoke, drink vodka without a chaser, fight, talk back, slouch, scowl threateningly, and excel at basketball. My parents were shocked and deeply upset.

"A mistake of nature" — this is what the relatives of one of my interviewees from Tajikistan, Amina, used to say when she was growing up in a village near Dushanbe. They didn't know that, for several years, she had been regularly subjected to sexual violence by her older brothers and the local imam. Traumatized by these experiences, she became a *patsanka* (tomboy) in her teenage years — a girl who adopts traditionally masculine behavior or appearance. "I thought strength mostly belonged to men. But if you look at adult life, men may be physically stronger, but morally, women are much stronger. Well, I understand this now, but back then I didn't," Amina recalls about that period of her life.

Irina, Amina, and I, along with many other women, had different childhoods and adolescences. We are all very different — by age, social background, ethnicity, education, and temperament. Yet, we understand each other without needing many words, as if we had lived through the same experience, with each of us contributing our own complexities, challenges, and peculiarities. The experience of growing up as a Central Asian girl is what deeply united us, regardless of our individual backgrounds. We didn't love the girl inside us; she disgusted us. We wanted to be, and feel like, boys, simply because everything around us humiliated this girl. We desired the same "privileges" boys had, but essentially, all we wanted were basic human rights. We internalized this patriarchal image of women's inferiority, watching our mothers and other female

relatives silently work themselves to exhaustion, while our fathers and brothers displayed a laid-back, patronizing attitude. We realized how different our positions were simply by birthright — female versus male. We saw the level of social freedom men had in this patriarchal world and envied them. We wanted to be them because we didn't want to be us. Each day, we were reminded of the oppressed existence of women in our families and surroundings. We tried to escape this constrained womanhood, cutting our hair short, putting on men's clothes, and adopting a facade of masculine bravado. "I accepted it — yes, being a woman is awful. I wanted to be a man," Aida, a young feminist from Kyrgyzstan, recalls about her difficult childhood with an abusive grandmother in a village near Bishkek.

Transidentities in patriarchal society

It is noteworthy that in Central Asia, not only young girls but also adult trans men, who have in some way or at some point transitioned, flee from female socialization and everything associated with it. Sasha, a young trans man from Tashkent, confessed to me that, since childhood, he had associated being a girl with weakness. "I don't say, 'I'm a girl,' I say, 'I'm not a guy.' It's like, I'm kind of strong — not physically a man — but inside, I'm still that hero Mahmut, the guy who will protect and behave with dignity." My other interlocutress, Rufina, a queer activist working at an LGBTIQ+ organization in Bishkek, shared the story of her year-long relationship with a trans man. According to her observations, her partner had trauma related to female socialization and everything connected to the female experience before his transition. He flatly refused to discuss his past as a biological woman or acknowledge things like the fact that he sometimes still had to buy menstrual pads. However, during our conversation, Rufina explained how they

later managed to reflect on these reactions together. According to his own suggestions, his drive toward masculinity and his desire to be a man were primarily socio-psychological — a protective response to the trauma that patriarchy inflicted on the girl he once was.

From my conversations, I made an interesting observation that speaks volumes. After a successful transition, an individual begins his male socialization within his local environment. Rather than joining feminist movements or actively defending women's rights, he often starts to mimic his own oppressor, embodying the patriarchal order — this time from a masculine position. In his new life, the trans man tends to remain silent about his past experience of female socialization, fearing retraumatization.

Moreover, as many of the trans individuals I encountered admit, the patriarchal world is much more forgiving toward trans men than trans women. Cisgender men, aware of the transition, often offer advice on how to behave like a "real man," thereby supporting the individual's initiation, not just biologically, but socially wise. With enthusiasm, they teach him "correct" behaviors and practices — often the same practices that objectify and sexualize women. Thus, speaking in curt binary terms, the transition from female to male, and the desire for masculinity in both its physical and social manifestations, serves as further confirmation of the privileges that this position can offer.

The situation is quite different when it comes to transitioning from male to female. Trans women are far more vulnerable and stigmatized, much more frequently subjected to violence and threats to their lives. Patriarchal, homophobic, and transphobic Central Asian societies, led by men, view this transition as an insult — a betrayal of masculinity and its dominant position — as well as a challenge to the established hierarchy. Any signs of femininity in men are met with harsh reactions, as they are seen as an unacceptable crossing into the realm of those regarded as weaker and lower in the established social order.

What it actually means to be queer In Central Asia?

As Warner (1993) noted, “every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state...” and thus, “being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences.” The people I met during my journey across Central Asia, by the time of our encounters, had already recognized the "vector of oppression" (Rubin, 1984) they had experienced throughout their lives. They had already made enormous efforts and sacrifices to fight the forces surrounding them and find a way to be themselves, no matter the cost. They rethought and reimagined their lives, striving to unblind themselves and uncover the initial ties of their existence, reclaiming dignity regardless of how they were identified or how they transgressed conventional gender and identity norms.

Warner’s (1993) observation suggests that "queer" challenges not just heteronormativity or heterosexuality but a broader spectrum of normalization. If the “normal” is the practice of patriarchal violence — deeply ingrained and normalized in the countries of Central Asia that I lived and traveled through — then being queer in Central Asia transcends LGBTIQ+ identities and same-sex relationships. It becomes a form of existential resistance to systemic societal oppression and gender-based violence, an opposition to the state-sponsored homophobia, politics of “traditional values” and the power structures that enforce so-called “norms.” To be queer in Central Asia is to resist tirelessly, taking on the courage to face all the consequences that come with it.

Chapter 2. And Then the Queer Comes Out

The institution of marriage in Central Asia

In traditional families of Central Asia, a woman's social status is often determined by several key factors: whether she marries at the "right" time, whether her husband and his family (usually chosen by his or her parents) are satisfied with her, how quickly she becomes pregnant, how many children she has, and how well she manages the household. In many cases, after marriage, a woman finds herself in a form of domestic slavery, accepted by all parties involved. There is often no discussion of love, mutual feelings, or the woman's personal desires. Family and marriage are considered important social duties that every young woman is expected to fulfill.

In Tajikistan, there is a term, "obru", which means decency or respectability. "If you are married, you are decent; if you are unmarried, you are not decent," Sabrina, a journalist and gender researcher from Tajikistan, explained to me. Her father, an orthodox Muslim, imposed a strict condition on her when she was young: she had to get married before she could pursue anything else in life. Sabrina complied, got married, and a year later divorced after giving birth to her child. Afterward, she began building her career, but her father opposed this, insisting that she continue searching for a husband.

My interlocutresses from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan all stated in unison that, as a woman, you have almost no chance of avoiding marriage, especially if you come from a traditional patriarchal mono-ethnic family. They simply won't let you live your life. You will have to marry, perhaps once or even several times, just to finally get

your parents and other relatives off your back. In other words, the mere existence of a husband, rather than the quality of the marital relationship, holds social significance. Rich (1980) states that “when we look hard and clearly at the extent and elaboration of measures designed to keep women within a male sexual purlieu, it becomes an inescapable question whether the issue we have to address as feminists is not simple “gender inequality,” nor the domination of culture by males, nor mere “taboos against homosexuality,” but the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access.” Based on this, marriage in Central Asia, in and of itself, does not signify romantic feelings between partners, nor does it reflect their sexual orientation or gender identity; it serves exclusively as a social marker of respectability, normativity, and an acquired, understandable status of a woman that meets societal expectations. It is a rule imposed on women, particularly those who are less economically independent and less educated.

As a teenager, I began to distance myself from the heteronormative expectations of my family, which became increasingly pronounced with each passing year, as I explored the inner flow of my true desires, feelings, and attractions. Perhaps this was when my double life began, stretching over many years. Moving to another country only intensified this isolation and the gap between two non- overlapping realities. Each time I returned home, I was reminded of my obligation, which I artfully postponed. I justified my unmarried status by focusing on my studies, my work, or by claiming that I hadn’t yet met "the one" — a man whom I, obviously, was not seeking. When I turned 30 and the pressure from my family became unbearable, I came out to my mother. Predictably, my confession was met with rejection, followed by my mother's fear of social condemnation and shame. She imposed on me the demand for silence, insisting that I should continue to live my double life for the sake of our family's well-being. Even more, after my coming

out, my mother repeatedly suggested that I should get married to create the appearance of normalcy, have children, and then do whatever I wanted. Homophobia, described as an “anti-social condition that causes violence and destroys families, as a pathological manifestation of heterosexual culture” (Schulman, 2009), imposed an unbearable condition on my life — “in order to be loved” by my family, I had to remain silent and invisible.

My vulnerable journey, secret meetings, and intimate conversations allowed me to understand that my path of overcoming inner struggles, fears, and doubts was shared by many queer women from all the Central Asian countries I had the opportunity to visit. The advice about the "magic wand" that would undoubtedly heal us, simply by trying and finding a "normal guy," haunted all of us. Under the weight of heteronormative propaganda, we tortured ourselves by pretending to be interested in the opposite sex, often ignoring or failing to recognize the flashes of desire and attraction to our own. We clumsily constructed the image of a weak, defenseless girl, timidly waiting for her savior. In our dreams, we imagined a completely different picture, but intoxicated by imposed heterosexuality, we didn’t admit it to ourselves. We had no idea how to live in this well-structured heteronormative world that disregarded us, a world where all our successes in education, work, sports, and any social sphere were overshadowed by a single unmet condition — the absence of a husband and children by the ages of 25, 30, or 35. As we approached 40, in the absence of these, society labeled us as failures in our female lives, regardless of all other circumstances and achievements. Women in our families spoke cruelly about other “failed” women, forcing us to hide even deeper in our shells. We were afraid, fragile and confused, to challenge the pervasive machine producing new heteronormative units, to resist it, and to forge our own path.

The practice of fictious marriage as a "solution"

As expected, fictitious marriages are a common phenomenon within the queer communities of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Young women meet each other but do not enter into serious relationships. If a relationship starts to progress too far, they end it. "Sorry, but I need to get married; I have to get married," Sabrina shares with me, describing the dramas in the Tajik queer community. Another path occurs when LGBTIQ+ individuals of different biological genders agree to enter into a fictitious marriage and raise a child together to create a facade for their parents and relatives. Alma, a lesbian working in an HIV service organization in Astana, Kazakhstan, shared stories of friends who chose this route. They had known each other for years as friends and then began living together in a marriage "for the parents," pretending to be a couple. However, these arrangements always ended badly — friends would eventually part ways as enemies.

A wedding in Central Asia is a significant event in a family's life. Parents save money for years; it is a matter of honor for them to organize an abundant and impressive wedding for their children, typically inviting 300-600 people. This is where the fictitious marriage of two queer people, who soon divorce, becomes particularly painful. For the family, it is a double disappointment and disgrace, as a significant amount of resources was spent on the event, often through enormous effort and debts. "As a rule, a wedding is a long-awaited event from people of our community. If I were to say tomorrow that I'm getting married, I think my parents would sell everything to make a big wedding," Alma continues. Her mother, suspecting her of being in relationships with women, has been directly telling her for years to get married and have a child like everyone else, and then she can get divorced and live however she wants. What a familiar story. As Schulman

(2009) suggests, “because we love our parents, we make excuses or try to help them expand their thinking, often without fully acknowledging the impact of their prejudices on our emotional lives.” Therefore, when parents pressure their children to "endure" and take on such things as marriage and parenthood in a “normal" way, they are often acting out of their own fears. They fear the potential stigma they may face if the secret comes to light. But in such an arrangement, everything is manifested except for love and faith in the child, the desire to support and help her become more confident in an already challenging situation.

Generational change in the region

The rise of social media platforms and digital connectivity has opened up a whole new world for young Central Asians. Online content, urban centers, educational platforms, local grassroots activists, and influencers offer alternative perspectives on gender equality, queer rights, and personal autonomy, supporting young people on their path to self-discovery and resilience. As a result, the new generation feels more connected to diverse information, values, ideas, and social movements that shape global trends and influence their life strategies and behavior accordingly. Courageously challenging the oppressive aspects of their local culture, they nevertheless invest significant effort in negotiating a balance between respect for tradition, patriotic affiliations, and the desire for personal freedom.

To my great joy, during my journey, I encountered brave, uncompromising young queer women aged 17 to 27 who, alongside their growing feminist self-awareness, also refused to follow the path of fictitious marriages, double lives, and facades, courageously resisting

the traditional patriarchal order of their families and societies. “They say that knowledge and truth make a person free. This principle has worked for me 100 percent,” Amina from Dushanbe recalled, speaking of her journey of self-discovery. When you are trapped in the box of patriarchy and homophobia, surrounded by darkness, you have few options for escape. You can choose to remain there, torturing yourself with internalized homophobia and transphobia, gender dysphoria, psychological disorders, mental illness, suicide attempts, denial of your true gender identity and sexual orientation, viewing things from a "victim's position" (Sasha, Tashkent, October 2023), living in fear of familial homophobia, and making unbearable compromises with the expectations of your relatives and social environment. Or, you can begin your path toward the light — by seeking information, engaging in psychotherapy, connecting with the community, volunteering, participating in activism, accepting and believing in yourself, and enlightening others.

I was particularly struck by the story of a 20-year-old queer activist from Bishkek. In her teenage years, Aigul admitted to being homophobic, strongly influenced by the Islamic religiosity of her large family. Due to the indoctrination from her relatives and society, she felt uncomfortable thinking about homosexuality; it seemed disgusting to her. At the age of 15, she became deeply religious, began performing prayers, and voluntarily put on the hijab. As Aigul explained, she found meaning and support in this way of life; it was easy for her because she believed what she was doing was “right.” I was kind of a liberal Muslim, trying to find some kind of middle ground, trying to sit on two chairs, so to speak. But then I started reading the Quran myself and realized that something wasn’t right for me, and I began asking myself questions. There’s the idea that a woman should be beaten if she doesn’t listen to you, and it seems like the whole Quran is addressed to men, it’s all about them... About a year went by in this inner struggle because doubting is also a sin, and I was like, “Am I in these doubts?”. After a lot of

suffering, I came to the conclusion that I didn't believe, and for a while, I continued wearing the hijab because I was already used to it, it was comfortable, but then I decided to take it off". At 18, Aigul began participating in youth volunteer organizations, meeting new people, and questioning her own sexuality. Finally, she realized that her heterosexuality had been compulsory and imposed, and that she didn't want to "have relationships with men at all" (Aigul, October 2023, Bishkek).

Aigul came out to her family and left home a couple of months before we met. During our conversation, she was in a rather fragile state — at that time, she was undergoing psychotherapy for LGBTIQ+ activists in difficult situations. Her mother didn't accept her and claimed that the youth volunteer organizations she attends had brainwashed her, that the West had imposed homosexuality on her, and that she was being held captive and was in danger. All of her sisters, except for the youngest, who is 13, turned away from her, as did the relatives to whom Aigul's mother had outed her. One sister told her that it would be better to keep this information a secret and not to promote her sexual orientation among children and teenagers (in August 2023, a law was passed in Kyrgyzstan banning "LGBT propaganda among children and teenagers"). Sometimes her mother asks Aigul to return home and says, "I will provide you with everything; you don't have to do any housework, just study and don't be a lesbian." As Schulman (2009) noted, "when a family cuts off a child because she is a lesbian, that refusal, that silence, is morally wrong, even though society and laws endorse it." Despite the difficult period that the young woman is going through, she admits that she feels much better without the burden of the lies she had lived with for many years.

In her work *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, Rich (1980) suggested that "heterosexuality is an institution, and women are forced into heterosexual existence

through the privileges and pleasures they gain (or lose) by making this choice". Wittig (1992) expressed that "gender and sexual orientation are so intertwined that being a woman only has meaning within a heterosexual context". As a result, "lesbians are not women." My young reflexive collaborators are exploring their sexuality, critically reflecting on their surroundings, and staying true to themselves and their path. They do not want to escape their challenging reality or adapt to it by wearing a mask of normalcy. They refuse to remain silent or retreat into internal exile, to conform and blend into the existing heteronormative patriarchal order, or to accept the suggested false marriage and fake existence. Instead, they wish to fight for themselves, for their right to have a voice, and to break down the stereotypes in the minds of their parents and communities. They are determined to express their right to be who they are, fully aware of the risks that await them in this long battle.

Chapter 3. **Let Us Be, Let Us Leave, Let Us Stay.**

Queer Resistance for Existence.

When my partner and I found out that we were expecting a child, we were overwhelmed with happiness. After some time, when we realized that the pregnancy was real and progressing normally, and that we would soon become parents, questions about our future began to weigh heavily on us. Our donor was a close friend of mine. At the clinic where the insemination took place, my partner and the donor had to sign an agreement about their civil union; no other options were offered to us. I was not mentioned in the agreement at all. From the very beginning of the pregnancy, when we started seeing the doctor and I attended all the appointments, we encountered a tense silence caused by my "strange" presence. Even then, just at the start of our parenthood journey, we realized that we couldn't openly say that we were a couple, that this was our child, and that we both would be his future parents. Our position was too vulnerable and dependent to make a public statement and defend our (non-existent) rights. The further we went, the more we understood that we would become even more visible once our child is born.

During my travels across Central Asia, I encountered queer couples who either already had children, were planning to have them, or had once dreamed of starting a family. It was important for me to learn about their experiences, problems, fears, and doubts — not only as a researcher but also as someone at a crossroads, in the process of making a fundamental decision about their own future. It was a complicated choice: to stay in the home I had unexpectedly returned to, in a familiar environment close to my family of origin, but live in silence while facing homophobia and the absence of any social

guarantees or rights for queer families; or to leave home and move to another country where my partner and I could get married and become the legal parents of our child, while being prepared for all the risks and difficulties that come with emigration and parenting without the support of close family.

Alma, who told me about some of her friends entering fictitious marriages, also shared stories from the other side. She gave me a glimpse into the lives of her friends living as queer families in Kazakhstan. According to her, if a couple consists of women from the same nationality, for example, both Kazakh or both Russian, they introduce themselves as “sisters”. This is believable, as sisters often live together and share the costs of renting an apartment. Doubts arise when the couple consists of women from different nationalities, as in Alma’s case. She is Kazakh, and her girlfriend is Russian. She admits that their neighbors have probably figured everything out long ago, but fortunately, they don’t pry with questions. When a couple of women has a child, for example, from one of the partner’s previous marriages, the second woman takes on the role of the “aunt”. "Mom and aunt," or "mom and her friend" — that’s how couples present themselves to the outside world. Even if women live together for years and raise a child that one of the partners had from a previous relationship, the second partner never becomes the child’s stepmother, neither socially nor legally. The closeness and kinship develop only within the family, forming a kind of internal agreement that doesn’t extend beyond their home.

Things become more complicated when a couple of "sisters" has a newborn baby. Alma spoke about some of her friends of different nationalities who got pregnant and gave birth just a month apart. One of them had been trying to conceive for a long time, undergoing tests and multiple insemination attempts. Her partner then decided, somewhat randomly, to undergo insemination during the same period, using the same donor. Their children, now 4 years old, are biological siblings, but they are not socialized in their living

environment as a family with two mothers. To their neighbors and relatives, the women remain simply "friends." Their future as a family and as parents to their children, as well as their social inclusion, remain highly uncertain, raising many questions and concerns. "Why don't I want to have or give birth to children? Because I'm afraid that tomorrow my child will be bullied just for having two moms. I think that if I lived in another country, I would already have children, a home, and a family," Alma confesses to me.

Sabrina, my interlocutress from Tajikistan, whose father spoke to her about "obru" and forced her to get married, shared how many lesbian couples are forced to leave the country. When parents or ex-husbands discover that women prefer same-sex relationships, they often begin to actively pursue them. She recounted one of the many stories from her human rights practice about two young women who started living together as a couple and rented an apartment, but their ex- husbands united to find them. When they finally found them, they subjected them to brutal violence: one had her long hair cut off, and the other was tortured with electricity. The women called the police and later approached the German consulate, where they requested asylum. Soon, they were able to leave the country and escape the persecution of their ex-husbands.

In her personal life, Sabrina also experiences uncertainty. She has been in a relationship with her girlfriend for several years, but they do not live together. Her partner, who is a masculine-presenting lesbian, faces immense pressure from her extremely traditional patriarchal family. At 30, she is constantly pressured by relatives to get married and have children. Although she openly states that she does not want either, this answer is simply not taken seriously. Meanwhile, her relationship with Sabrina remains a secret. To their colleagues, they maintain a story about boyfriends, and only their closest friends know the truth about them. "I always tell her that I don't want to leave, but if we want to do something, we have to leave. We can't be who we are here — we are constantly deceiving

everyone, deceiving ourselves, and it's very hard to live like this," Sabrina explains her situation.

Human rights activists from Tajikistan told me that they are receiving more and more requests from lesbian couples seeking help to relocate, apply for political asylum, and document the difficult situation of LBTQ+ women in the country, as they are being forced into marriages and subjected to violence. According to their observations, those who decide to move are mostly educated women over 30 years old who have managed to escape forced marriages, formed a partnership with their same-sex partner, and are mentally prepared for the challenges of migration. They have completely lost hope for a decent future in Tajikistan and are leaving with nothing to hold onto.

As Mizielińska (2022) stated in her book about families of choice in Poland, “in a heterosexual family’s life course, such markers of life experience as engagement, marriage, anniversaries, the birth of a child, baptism, etc., form familiar scenarios, which the social surrounding is fully equipped to read as displaying family". However, it turns out to be different, when same-sex couples form unity, because “the family of origin often feels lost, not finding known reference points that mark key life transitions”. The story of Irina, biological mother, and Nadya, non-birth mother, of 6-year-old Ivan from Tashkent was revealing for me. Nadya’s parents don't accept her non-birth motherhood and Irina’s father still doesn’t know about her family life and her sexual orientation. Despite the lack of acceptance from the family of origin, both parents treat Ivan in a manner of openness and self- confidence, so that little boy proudly tells others that he has two moms. However, this concerns his mothers, as they are unsure what lies ahead for their child when children cease to be innocent and can hurt each other. They coincide in what social environment they are living in. Although Nadya and Irina are now in other relationships, they plan to emigrate together to another country. Among the reasons for their decision,

besides the lack of safety and security for their queer family and the danger of bullying towards their child, they mentioned poor school system inherited from the Soviet times, which in most cases is based on oppression of individuality, instead of the opposite.

Young, active queer people without families or children, whom I met during my travels, most often proclaimed that they don't want to leave their country. They want to live and develop at home, to create something useful and necessary for their society. Their thoughts about emigration are only associated with situations of severe persecution or direct danger to their lives. They mentioned feeling a strong sense of patriotism, expressing a desire to study abroad, obtain a good education, and then definitely return home. I listened to them with mixed feelings — admiration for their youth, inspiration, and faith in a better future on one hand, and a bit of sadness on the other, as I realized they are likely to face disappointment and, sooner or later, will question whether to stay in their homeland or leave. In contrast, queer couples, mostly adults between 30 and 40 years old, who had already gone through a certain path in their attempts at socialization, assimilation, and acceptance, but failed, were already on the verge of emigration. Like me, they felt that when you create a family, you become even more vulnerable due to your increased visibility. If children are involved, the stakes become even higher.

Traditional family values in Central Asia have clear outlines, with their own canon, significance, and rituals, where the family is regarded with a sort of holiness. It also serves as one of the main political and economic pillars of society. In the heteronormative context of Central Asia, a queer family doesn't carry any of the cultural significance that heterosexual families do. At best, a queer family will be ignored; at worst, it may be seen as an assault on something sacred, with all the unpleasant consequences that follow. Even when queer families try to associate themselves with the recognized social and cultural meanings of family life by insisting on "normality and similarity to others" (Mizielińska,

2022), they remain an invisible social layer — totally excluded or forced to hide from public familial life. This stigmatized existence inevitably leads many to think about leaving.

Could I Belong Here? The Question Instead of Conclusion

My vulnerable journey through the lives of queer women in Central Asia revealed how deeply rooted patriarchal norms and familial homophobia shape and constrain female identities, desires, and freedoms. Through the multivocality and layered accounts, reflexive analysis, and autoethnographic exploration, I suggest that the queer experience in the region is not only about gender and sexual orientation but also about resisting the oppressive cultural expectations that undermine women's autonomy. Our female queer lives serve as a mirror of the terrain of patriarchy, homophobia, and imposed heteronormativity, where our bodies and identities are subject to intense scrutiny, control, and marginalization.

In this research paper, I have focused on the tangled journey of queer womanhood in Central Asia. The female voices intertwined with reflections on their desires to escape oppressive gender expectations are not merely stories of identity but of survival, resilience, and inner struggle. Each interview, each personal confession, reveals the unjust ways in which women in Central Asia are limited in their free will and forced to confront a culture that sees them not as full human beings but as extensions of patriarchal structures — wives, mothers, and caretakers, whose roles are defined by their relationships to men. Their rebellion, expressed through attempts to break these rules by seeking refuge in masculinity as a means of escaping an oppressed female identity, or even undergoing gender transitions, speaks volumes about the trauma of sexism, which is embedded in Central Asian societies.

Another site of oppression is the institution of heterosexual marriage, which acts as a form of entrapment for queer people, forcing them to resort to fictitious marriages as a survival tactic. Confronting familial homophobia, compulsory heteronormativity, internalized misogyny, and the societal stigma of being unmarried, queer women often find themselves forced into double lives, silence, and conformity.

For many, emigration emerges as the only path to living an open yet safe life, despite the risks and complexities that accompany the journey of exile. For others, staying at home close to their families of origin and friends is more desirable. However, this choice requires constructing facades by presenting their queer relationships as those of "sisters" or "friends" and protecting themselves through invisibility.

When my journey came to an end, I felt both empowered and saddened. My interlocutors taught me how to be strong and resilient no matter the circumstances, how to cope with trauma and hardship through self-education, passion, and curiosity, and how to believe in yourself and your right to be who you are, even when the surrounding reality insists otherwise. They showed me the greatest strength by resisting the imposed gender binary, reclaiming their dignity and human rights in the face of patriarchy and homophobia. They shared with me intimate moments of self-discovery as lesbians — how they came out to their families and stood firm in their principles and choices. Their fight and resistance aren't bloody or loud; rather, it is the quiet, persistent work they do every day to save themselves.

As Fortier (2003) suggested, "when "leaving home" is the condition of possibility for finding a "real" home, moving home establishes a clear distinction between the initial site of estrangement — home as not-home — and home as a new site of possibility. The emphasis here is on the future, on creating home as a space of safety and comfort, which

is determined by the refusal of the childhood home." But what if we had the possibility to create our real home "as a space of safety and comfort" in our homeland, without having to refuse it or unsettle it? What if we had no need to flee, to leave, to be exiled? What if we could feel accepted, equal, and loved in the place where we were born? What if we could belong to our childhood home and family of origin just by being who we are? I'm sure, if it was so, the reflection in the mirror would be much brighter.

Where do I belong if I do not belong
Here.
Where am I to call
Home?

(Martinez, 2013)

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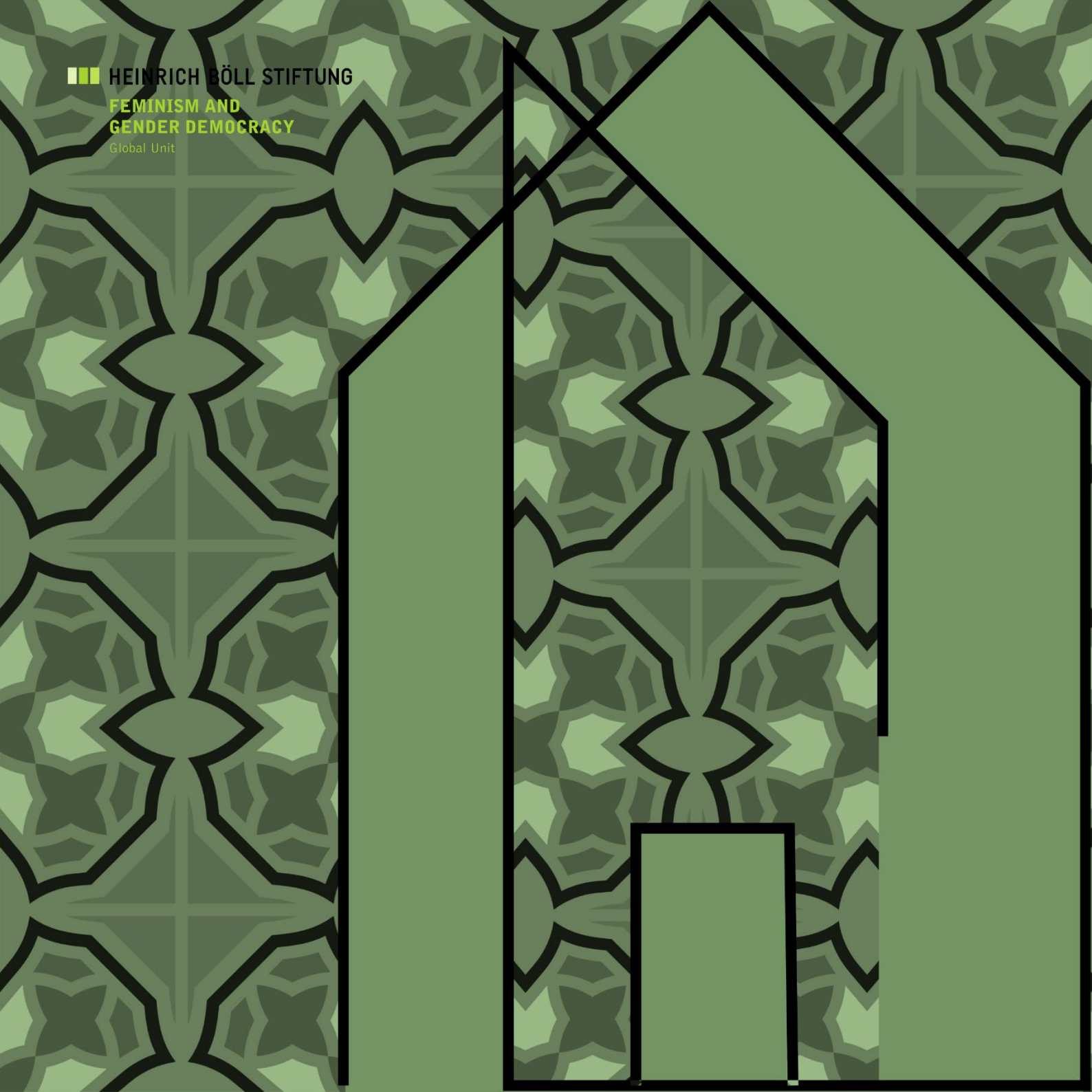
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