



# Exploring Social Remittances and Transnational Activism Amongst Transgender Refugees

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This paper explores how transgender refugees living in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States leverage social remittances and transnational ties to advocate for their rights within intolerant receiving countries. Even after migration, their frequent experiences of persecution in so-called “safe” countries often necessitate a continuation of their activism. This study centers on the lived experiences of transgender refugees through a combination of case studies, interviews, and participatory photography. Focusing on three case studies, it analyzes the role of social remittances and transnational ties in the activism of transgender refugees. The results illustrate how transgender individuals build activist networks through interpersonal connections, especially within what research participants described as “chosen families” in receiving countries. Grassroots nonprofit organizations serving transgender refugees prove essential to building this collectivity formation. Such organizations act as loci of activism and allow for safe sharing of lifesaving social remittances to those still living in origin countries. In addition, new technologies, including end-to-end encrypted messaging platforms, allow for the secure one-on-one exchange of ideas and survival practices around gender identity. This sharing creates a ripple effect, leading to the creation of robust transnational networks between transgender activists worldwide. I argue that systemic oppression, racism, and transphobia in receiving countries push transgender refugees, victims of violence worldwide, into roles as activists. By investing in chosen families, participating in nonprofit organizations dedicated to supporting transgender refugees, and sharing their activism worldwide through transnational networks, transgender refugee activists fight to access their fundamental human rights.

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## INTRODUCTION

Alana Eissa fled Malaysia after intolerance of her transgender identity led to multiple attempts on her life, both by strangers and her very own parents. Today, Eissa is a leader in her London community, speaking regularly at activist rallies and an active member of the Board of Directors at MicroRainbow, a nonprofit that serves the needs of queer refugees at 11 locations in the United Kingdom. She didn't set out to be an activist. Instead, the attacks she endured on account of her identity pushed her to find refuge within the activist community in her home country; later, transnational mobility proved essential to her survival. In both Malaysia and the

United Kingdom, Eissa has found her rights to security and healthcare unprotected. She turned to activism, which she saw as her only option. While many academics have argued that refugees and migrants arriving in the United Kingdom and the United States find new protections and therefore opportunities for activism in “safe” countries abroad, this article suggests that this is, at best, only part of the picture. At worst, this assumption glosses over the grim reality in which migrants generally, and transgender refugees in particular, are frequently victims of violence in receiving countries. Thus, transnational activism proves essential. As Eissa explained to me over a Zoom interview from her London flat in June 2020, “Activism for my own freedom is what I’m involved in.”

I argue that systemic oppression, racism, and transphobia in receiving countries often necessitates the maintenance of transnational ties and pushes refugees into roles as activists in receiving countries. This paper highlights how the activism and political engagement of transgender refugees travel with them across borders. Encountering deeply transphobic surroundings in both their origin countries and within receiving countries, transgender refugees turn to activism to survive individually and aid other community members to do the same. To do so, they rely on interpersonal relationships and the transfer of social remittances to maintain long-lasting, impactful transnational ties. Here, I consider social remittances to include norms, practices, identities, social capital, and ideas circulating between migrants and their origin communities. Social remittances inform migrants’ understanding of and interactions within host country societies; additionally, they can have far-reaching effects on the norms and values held within the origin country (Levitt, 2001).

I conclude by exploring how transgender refugees challenge traditional mechanisms used by nation-states to regulate their populations. Firstly, transgender refugees cross geographic borders, leave their origin country, and enter potential host countries to find safety. Secondly, in their nonconformity to gendered expectations, transgender individuals call into question the assumed modes of reproduction of the state and its citizens. As such, this paper calls into question geography and gender, two vectors harnessed by nation-states to control their citizens. Located at the margins of these borders, transgender refugees provide an ideal case study for examining these particular forms of governmental control.

Analysis of the lives and practices of transgender refugees reveals much about the broader system of “border” politics, defined beyond the narrow constraints of geography. In a careful analysis of this population, so often the victims of controversy and violence, I follow Foucault’s observations of biopower as something shaped through discourse, enacted on all levels of society through mechanisms “that, beginning in the 18th century, took charge of men’s existence, men as living bodies” (1978: 89). I site the transnational mobilization of transgender refugees as one of many “points of resistance” present throughout power networks, one which uniquely challenges the power of nation-states to regulate populations through geographic borders and gendered norms (Foucault 1978: 95).

This paper applies literature on social remittances and transnationalism to the particular case of transgender refugees through careful analysis of three case studies. In addition, Alana Eissa’s photographs of her home and activist community in London illustrate the intensely personal and precarious nature of her activism. This study offers scholars of migration, politics, and queer theory a new, intimate and often overlooked perspective on transnational activism in today’s world. In sum, it reveals how the transnational activism of transgender refugees living in receiving countries often stems directly from continued persecution rather than the increased level of freedom or protections found there. These individuals engage in activism through intensely personal networks, beginning with chosen families, often consisting of fellow queer refugees facing similar challenges. The role of grassroots organizations led by and dedicated to providing safe spaces for transgender refugees cannot be understated. Considering the typical lack of national protocols and sensitivity toward transgender refugees in receiving countries, these community organizations provide essential platforms for this diverse group of resilient individuals to fight for access to healthcare and fundamental human rights.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research focuses on the following questions:

- 1 What is the relationship between transgender refugees’ activism, social remittances and transnational ties?
- 2 How do new digital technologies facilitate the transfer of social remittances between transgender refugee activists?
- 3 How does the cultivation of “chosen family” and safe spaces provided by grassroots nonprofit organizations enable the activism of transgender refugees?

This small-scale study sheds light on an under-researched but growing population from a new and personal angle. Focusing on only three case studies narrows in on the individual experience of activism and the importance of interpersonal ties to the activism of transgender refugees in receiving countries. Moreover, it also employs participatory approaches in the form of photos shared by Alana Eissa as part of my primary research. These photos demonstrate how chosen family and engagement with community organizations prove essential to her activism.

## CONTEXT

According to UNHCR, there are roughly 70.8 million displaced people worldwide, 25.9 million of them refugees. Approximately half of these refugees are under 18 years old. (UNHCR, 2019). Human rights violations, whether in detention centers in the United States, border agents shooting and beating refugees in Croatia, or the continuing police abuses in Calais, prove that the scale of legal violations occurring at the borders of so-called “safe countries” looms large and high (Bochenek, 2017; Oztaskin, 2019; Connelly, 2019). Within this larger picture, the specific

positioning of activism amongst transgender refugees provides a unique opportunity to explore the broad reach of social remittances and the transnational networks that they enable.

In this paper, I rely on the definition of transgender given by the UNHCR High Commissioner on Refugees, namely, as “those whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth” (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011). Within this, it is critical to acknowledge the historically rooted diversity of gender expression around the world, of which the conception of “trans” represents only a small part.

In the United States alone, over a quarter million LGBTQ migrants lack documentation, leaving them vulnerable to deportation and detention (Luibheid and Chavez, 2020). According to Human Dignity Trust, a global leader in LGBTI advocacy, at least 26 states prosecute transgender individuals under public-order legislation (Savage and Greenhalgh, 2019). Over 70 specifically criminalize gay sex, a charge frequently levied against transgender individuals (Savage and Greenhalgh, 2019). An undocumented number of individuals are prosecuted under these and related laws, many of which were first introduced during periods of colonization as part of Commonwealth penal codes (Gitari and Walters 2020: 13). Post-colonial theorists have shown that the common colonial practice of criminalizing nonconforming sexualities, gender identities, cultural traditions, and cultures went hand in hand with the political control over these societies (Gitari and Walters 2020: 13). Today, persecution, institutionalized bias, and societal rejection of transgender individuals remain within and outside legal frameworks worldwide.

Although the Refugee Convention never originally intended to protect individuals on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI), in the late 1980s, asylum seekers began petitioning for protection on these grounds (Danisi et al., 2020: 9). Today, the numbers of individuals who apply for asylum on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity are rising. Their inclusion came amidst increasing politicization and limitation of migration and, simultaneously, growing progressive recognition of LGBTI rights (Danisi et al., 2020: 24). Despite their incorporation into the refugee framework established in 1951, SOGI claimants face incredibly high rates of refusals.

Transgender refugees provide an ideal case study to explore more comprehensive understandings of those who blur multiple borders: borders not only of geography but also of politics and identity. Transgender political theorist Jules Gleeson aptly observes, “Transitions always have to happen in public.” (Gleeson, 2019). Their public transitions suggest certain flexibility in identification; moreover, they illustrate one’s innate ability to break from socially prescribed forms of behavior. Similarly, the geographic dislocation of migrants represents another example of public transition, a literal border crossing. An individual starts as one thing, only to become another: for example, a Syrian refugee becomes a British citizen. Even more complicated, they may refer to themselves as British-Syrian and pursue political activism related to both, and in-between, places. Ostergaard-Nielsen

observes that the increasing influence of transnational politics on domestic policies erodes the distinction between foreign and domestic politics (2003). The apparent ideological dichotomy between nations and genders blurs. This, in turn, changes politics and gender expectations for everyone.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben states, “Exactly because he destroys the old trinity of state-nation-territory, the refugee, an apparently marginal figure, deserves to be considered as the central figure of our political history” (1993:8). Many authors, including Agamben, argue that the transnational activity of migrants not only transforms their politics but seriously undermines the (in)coherent logic of the body-state-nation connection that undergirds modern ideas of the nation-state (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Gleeson, 2019). Holding both unsanctioned mobility and nonconforming gender identities, transgender refugees run against two of the most central alignments by which nation-states control their populations (Gleeson, 2019). They also disrupt common understandings of modes of reproduction, gender norms, and identification. By transferring social remittances between countries, new understandings of gender, bodies, and one’s relationship to the state spread rapidly, particularly aided by new technologies such as social media, private messaging channels such as WhatsApp, and the internet.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Transnational Theory and Social Remittances in Practice

Transnational theory analyses the connections between migrants and those who remain in origin countries (Waldinger 2017: 3). Such cross-border connections allow material things, people, money and social remittances to flow from receiving countries to origin countries. Peggy Levitt, one of the leading thinkers on the topic, defines social remittances as the “ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending-countries communities” (1998: 926). Her definition relates directly to the transgender refugee case, as her inclusion of “identity” stresses how certain societal positions or opportunities arise out of social remittances (Levitt 1998: 936). This includes the very conception of “transgender” as a publicly disseminated discourse, label, and potential basis of an asylum application.

Levitt goes on to investigate how such socially remitted ideas often lead to transnational collectivity formation (Levitt, 1998, p. 926). Evidence of transnational collectivity formation can be found in Alana Eissa’s story, as well as in the case studies introduced later in this paper. Eissa first came to the United Kingdom not as a refugee, but as a student on a scholarship. There, Eissa learned more about Western notions of gender and sexuality and formed a group of queer friends. On her first move to the United Kingdom, Eissa did not undergo a public transition, but she did begin expressing herself in new ways. Moreover, she formed international connections who shared similar beliefs and identities. She also learned about the

possibility of asylum. With these new beliefs and forms of self-expression, Eissa returned to Malaysia to fulfill the conditions of her scholarship.

Facing frequent harassment on account of her gender identity her return to Malaysia, Eissa joined an activist group. There, Eissa met many fellow activists who also had connections of whom also had connections with transgender communities abroad. Migration to democratic countries often creates a diversifying effect on the political attitudes of migrants, as illustrated by Eissa's newfound social and political engagement post-migration (Careja and Emmenegger, 2012). Research has shown that transnational advocacy groups such as those that Eissa supported play a crucial role in the formation of social and cultural norms (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Within Eissa's new highly international activist community, socially remitted ideas and information on gender practices, laws, political movements, and essential information on living safely as a transgender person traveled quickly through activist meetings, gatherings, social media, and personal messages between members. Collectively, these individuals came together to support one another within a hostile local environment—aided by the support and insights of fellow community members worldwide. When Eissa's activism made her a target in her home country, the same connections and accumulated knowledge allowed her to escape by applying for asylum in the United Kingdom. Transnational connections saved her life. Today, she plays an active role in United Kingdom-based nonprofits and abroad through her social media channels, active Twitter page, and advocacy work.

While the flow of social remittances from receiving countries represents only one of many vectors of information flow, they play an intimate and far-reaching role in local conceptions of identity, appropriate dress, etiquette, and understandings of politics and migration. Research has shown that migration to fully democratic countries often has a diversifying effect on the political attitudes of migrants (Careja and Emmenegger, 2012). Eissa's experience in the United Kingdom and subsequent involvement in a transgender activism in Malaysia provides one example of this. Social remittances are powerful largely because they are frequently exchanged between members of the same community or even family; by definition, social remittances have a clear source and destination (Levitt 1998: 937). For example, when Eissa returned to Malaysia, she brought with her new ways of expressing her identity that sparked conflict, both within her family and society at large. Joining an activist group allowed her to share these ideas and other social remittances within a specific, supportive community dedicated to protecting one another. Even when Eissa ultimately fled to the United Kingdom due to the violence she faced in Malaysia, she could continue sharing social remittances to others in her circle through her online presence. In this, she helps to build what political scientist Robert Putnam describes as bonding social capital: tight-knit relationships amongst mostly homogeneous people with similar backgrounds (Putnam, 2000). Through this bonding social capital, transgender individuals living in highly intolerant regions can access the emotional and material support that they need to survive (Williams, 2006).

Upon reaching receiving countries, transgender refugees are also frequently exiled from local communities. Research on the

lives of gay Iranian refugees in Canada and Wimark's study of queer refugees in the Swedish countryside both attest to how SOGI refugees are often relegated to the edges of both local queer communities and refugee networks in receiving countries (Karimi 2018; Wimark 2019). Barred from many of the networks that other refugees rely on, transgender refugees turn to highly personal connections, exchanging social remittances between specific individuals who understand their unique struggle to ensure the continuance of lifesaving transnational ties. Research shows that strong bonds often develop between queer refugees as a result of their shared struggles in another example of bonding social capital (Shahidian 1999; Wimark 2019; Micro Rainbow 2013; Roy 2017). Within receiving countries, transgender refugees "bridge" the gap between their diversity in origins and "bond" over shared life histories that include struggles over identity and forced migration. In doing so, they form what Eissa calls chosen families.

### Chosen Families

The concept of chosen families, ubiquitous across queer theory, proves especially pertinent to the activist experience of transgender refugees. Not only have transgender refugees usually left their biological family behind in their origin country, rendering them physically separated, but in many cases were forced to flee out due to the violence enacted upon them at home by loved ones (Danisi et al., 2020). Chosen families can be defined as kinship networks between non-familial individuals, often made up of other LGBTI individuals (Bailey, 2009). Studies of other ostracized groups, including queer African American youth in the United States, show that stigmatization amongst their biological families frequently results in turning towards these alternative forms of kinship in order to foster resiliency and support (Hailey, 2020). My research on transgender refugees shows that they also turn to chosen familial units to combat social isolation, find community support and advocate for their needs.

### Activism, NGOs and Digital Connections

Critic Karma Chavez defines "queer migration politics" as "activism that seeks to challenge normative, inclusionary perspectives at the intersection of queer rights and justice and immigration rights and justice" (Chávez, 2013:6). Her research focuses on coalitional movements, in which NGOs and grassroots organizations play a critical role. On a personal level, these organizations allow for coalitions between individuals with similar life histories, diverse origin countries and pressing material needs; as a result, they drive transnational activism of transgender refugees worldwide. The literature on transgender activism more broadly also affirms the power of engagement in activism for transgender individuals when responding to trauma and gaining access to essential services. "Some days, just getting out of bed is a revolutionary act," said Marla, a 45 year old African American transgender woman interviewed by as part of a phenomenological study on transgender people of color (Singh, 2011). Participants in the study attested that connecting with an activist transgender community of color and cultivating hope critically enhanced



their resilience in the face of trauma (Singh and McKleroy, 2011).

Support organizations specifically catering to the needs of transgender refugees provide critical starting points for the creation of chosen families and the activism that such support engenders. All three of the participants highlighted in the case studies described later in this paper turned to grassroots nonprofit organizations in order to find support in their fight for access to their rights, meet medical needs, and pursue justice for other transgender individuals. These organizations provided essential safe spaces for socialization, inclusive housing options, cultural orientations and career training. Perhaps most importantly, they offered transgender refugees the chance to meet and find community with other individuals who share similar life experiences.

On a material level, grassroots organizations like these offer safe spaces, Wi-Fi and a level of privacy. This enables transgender refugees to rest, make phone calls and engage in origin country communities through online platforms. In today's world, migration strategies, ideas about gender, news, and advice can be shared immediately through social networks such as Whatsapp and Facebook, including to those still residing in the origin country. Moreover, end-to-end encryption on messaging apps such as Signal, Telegram, and WhatsApp guarantees a level of privacy for transgender individuals who risk incrimination if their messages were to fall into the wrong hands.

Saskia Witteborn's research on asylum seekers in Germany revealed that even if the reality of intolerance in one's immediate surroundings goes unchanged, involvement in direct chats and online networks can help migrants gain a sense of autonomy, control, and belonging. Wittenborn uses the framework of *becoming* to emphasize how people relegated to the edges of society can challenge their societal position through multimodal technology (Witteborn, 2015). Her research shows how virtually mediated social practices help migrants to negotiate complex immigration systems, gain visibility (or invisibility) and remain transnationally connected even when physical mobility is impossible (Witteborn, 2015). This is particularly important amongst transgender refugees, who might not be able to return to their origin country safely but can be highly effective at organizing activism, remitting ideas and practices from abroad and remaining connected to their origin country through technology.

Despite threats to life, transgender individuals in origin societies increasingly gain access to socially remitted information through new technologies, including the internet, cell phones, and social media. These channels enable transgender individuals to pursue activism as a route to emancipation, both within origin societies and the frequently intolerant local environments refugees encounter in receiving countries. Importantly, social media offers the chance for users to be both "perceptible and imperceptible" (Witteborn, 2015: 3). By choosing to strategically reveal or highlight certain aspects of their identity while making other aspects (for example, one's legal name) invisible, transgender individuals can preserve their safety and autonomy while simultaneously engaging in transnational communities and activism.

In the following chapters, I outline my methodology and introduce case studies. I illustrate how the activism of transgender refugees in receiving countries often builds from the close-knit familial ties of "chosen families." Relying on various forms of communication technology, all of the research participants shared robust social remittances to those still living in the origin country. Grassroots support organizations and NGOs help facilitate these connections by providing safe spaces for transgender refugees to live, meet one another, share knowledge, and access WiFi and other technologies. As such, grassroots organizations, often led by transgender refugees themselves, act as essential springboards for their transnational activism.

## METHODOLOGY

I take the experiences of Alana Eissa, a Malaysian refugee who now lives in London; Alejandra Barrera, a trans woman and refugee in the United States; and Kamel, a Libyan journalist, activist and transgender man now living in Italy, as jumping-off points to explore how transgender migrants mobilize social remittances and transnational connections to inform their migration decisions and to assist others like them. Due to concerns for his privacy and safety, Kamel's name has been changed in this paper to preserve his anonymity; meanwhile, Eissa and Barrera chose to use their real names. Eissa gave written and verbal permission to me to share her story and photographs. Barrera, also an outspoken activist, agreed to be interviewed and have her name published in the *New Yorker*, Amnesty International, and dozens of other news organizations. This paper applies in-depth qualitative analysis to these three case studies, incorporating academic research and news articles written between 2016 and 2019 to gain an understanding of the lived experience of transgender refugees.

The first case study was completed by myself through Zoom interviews with Alana Eissa in July 2020. In addition to the interview, Eissa chose to contribute images of her new home in London as part of a participatory approach to understanding the day-to-day, lived reality of transgender refugee activists. Using this combination of methods, I sought to highlight her personal experience of transnational activism. Her photos attest to the importance of interpersonal relationships and nonprofit organizations devoted to building community amongst transgender refugees (Figures 1-3). These themes correspond to the results driven by the case studies and add a visual dimension to the topics discussed. As a result of the highly specific and potentially triggering nature of the topics, especially in a time when only video interviews were possible, I chose to focus on Eissa's experience. By anonymizing the contributors who did not want to be identified and naming those who were able and empowered by doing so, I designed the research to be as inclusive as possible.

Researchers from the SOGICA Project, with whom I conducted a research placement between 2019 and 2020, completed the second study on Kamel as part of a wider 4 year investigation of SOGI asylum in Europe. The SOGICA

project team generously shared full transcripts of all their interviews with me and gave permission to use Kamel's experience as a case study in this paper.

Finally, I applied the experiences of Alejandra Barrera uncovered by the investigative journalist, Murat Oztaskin, published by *The New Yorker*. Together, the studies reveal a pattern of transnational activism practiced by transgender refugees attempting to secure access to their basic rights in Europe and the United States.

The challenge of using secondary data in this research must be addressed. Because I was not the interviewer, I could not ask follow-up questions during interviews with Kamel and Barrera. Nonetheless, their experiences reveal important trends within the wider, often overlooked experience of transgender refugee activists worldwide working to secure access to their basic rights. Their experiences confirmed that transnational ties and social remittances shared between transgender refugees often formed the foundations of their activist work.

Each of the individuals chosen for this study gained asylum in a country where national law protects transgender individuals. Nonetheless, all of the case study participants encountered situations and localities within the country of asylum in which intolerance of their intersectional identities led to significant social stigmatisation and personal risk. Acknowledging the diverse identifications and situations these individuals faced, despite their identification within a narrow constraint of "transgender refugees," I attempt to avoid generalization and form new connections. This transnational focus extends across national boundaries and accounts for individuals connected with a multitude of environments around the world. Through this methodology, I avoid falling into the trap of methodological nationalism, which often inaccurately relies on the nation-state as the assumed basis of research (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002). Instead, I hone in on individual, local experiences of social remittance transfer and activism, something that all three of my research participants shared. Comparing their experiences allows for a broad understanding of the way in which social remittances influence and inform the transnational activism of transgender refugees around the globe.

Reaching receiving countries does not mean that the transnational activism of transgender refugees can or does end. Rather, fuelled by continuing persecution in their home countries, and necessitated by systemic obstacles to living freely in their new homes, Eissa, Barrera, and Kamel continue their activism in order to help other transgender asylum-seekers both at home and abroad. This work, a form of "active coping" — often necessary for survival—provides a sense of purpose in their new lives and continuity with their pasts (Berry, 1997).

## TRANSGENDER PERSECUTION AND DIGITAL CONNECTIONS

Conditions for transgender individuals living in their countries of origin can be incredibly precarious. Reuters reports that in Honduras, police perform "social cleansing" that targets

transgender individuals; in Indonesia, police stated they wished to get "rid of all transgender people" (Savage and Greenhalgh, 2019). Worldwide, states enforce strict penalties for those who do not abide by gender norms, including the death penalty. Under those circumstances, to put oneself in any public way would endanger their very life: thus, fewer social remittances can be easily transferred, and tend toward autonomous sources where they do exist (Politzer and Hylton, 2019). In such circumstances, the ability to share information and act anonymously through online channels offers one pathway to increased connection and empowerment (Witteborn, 2015).

Social remittances can spark intense conflict, challenging expected norms and unsettling accepted relationships between the body, nation and state (Levitt, 1998). The misconception that transgender individuals represent foreign threats to conservative societies further prevents some transgender individuals living in origin countries from freely sharing social remittances. Many individuals worldwide fail to recognize local, historically-rooted evidence of gender diversity in traditional societies around the world (Karimi, 2018; Duberman, 2018). These tendencies can further transgender refugees' sense of rootlessness and detachment from their origin countries. This disconnect can limit further sharing of social remittances, as many migrants flee as refugees fearing bodily harm and even death at the hands of community members and family (Politzer and Hylton, 2019). Fearing for their lives, some may try to disconnect from their home countries and embrace new modes of living in receiving countries. However, their welcome remains far from secure.

Even in the absence of structural opposition within asylum-granting countries, intolerant, transphobic environments discourage public sharing of social remittances regarding transgender issues. A good example of this is in the United States, where, despite laws protecting the LGBTI community, transgender individuals often experience severe physical abuse and death at the hands of transphobic neighbours. In 2018, at least 26 gender nonconforming individuals died due to fatal violence (HRC, 2019). Black transgender women made up the vast majority of these individuals, killed in what theorist Jules Gleeson describes as a "wave of killings" specifically targeting black, working-class women (Gleeson, 2019). Moreover, studies show that transgender individuals have much higher rates of detention and deportation than other migrants (Lewis and Naples, 2014: 1). Alejandra Barrera, whose story is further explained in the following sections, spent 22 months in United States. detention; meanwhile, she watched other migrants be granted parole within several months, even weeks (Oztaskin, 2019). Examples such as the United States show that, despite official legal protections, the threat of violence remains for transgender individuals, even within receiving countries.

At times, precarious environments and violent persecution flatly prevents transgender individuals around the world from freely sharing valuable information, advice and experience relating to their unique experiences. Transgender refugees living in African refugee camps attest that even stepping outside of their tent means risking their lives (Owunna 2019).

Without access to technology or the outside world, they have very low capacity to receive or share social remittances and engage in any transnational activity. Meanwhile, Alana Eissa, introduced earlier, fled her country as a last resort after receiving recurring death threats as the result of her activism. She had reached the limits of what she could do within her country, the result being death or abrupt departure from the life she had known.

Nonetheless, social remittances change the lives of transgender individuals living origin countries. Social remittances bring about new aspirations for self expression, influence local understandings of gender, introduce survival strategies, and more. As such, they prove a precarious and valuable form of social capital. New technologies increasingly enable transgender individuals abroad to connect back with community members in their origin countries safely and securely (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011). Such technological links can structure gendered imaginations, provide visibility, and inform practices of migration (Witteborn, 2018).

No place illustrates this better than Eissa's Twitter page, where she has posted and shared dozens of articles, news, and information on transgender issues in the United Kingdom, Malaysia and around the world. She also directly connects asylum seekers in the United Kingdom and transgender individuals in her home country with UK-based charities that can help to support them. With 672 followers on Twitter alone, her channel represents a small, international community connected and informed through technology. Now more than ever, information about sexual practices, identity, and migratory routes can be safely and efficiently shared through technology straight into the hands of those who need it. As Waldinger stresses, the transnational social connectivity enabled by modern technology plays an increasingly important role in maintaining transnational ties and enabling social remittances even in dire circumstances such as those Eissa encountered (2013: 763).

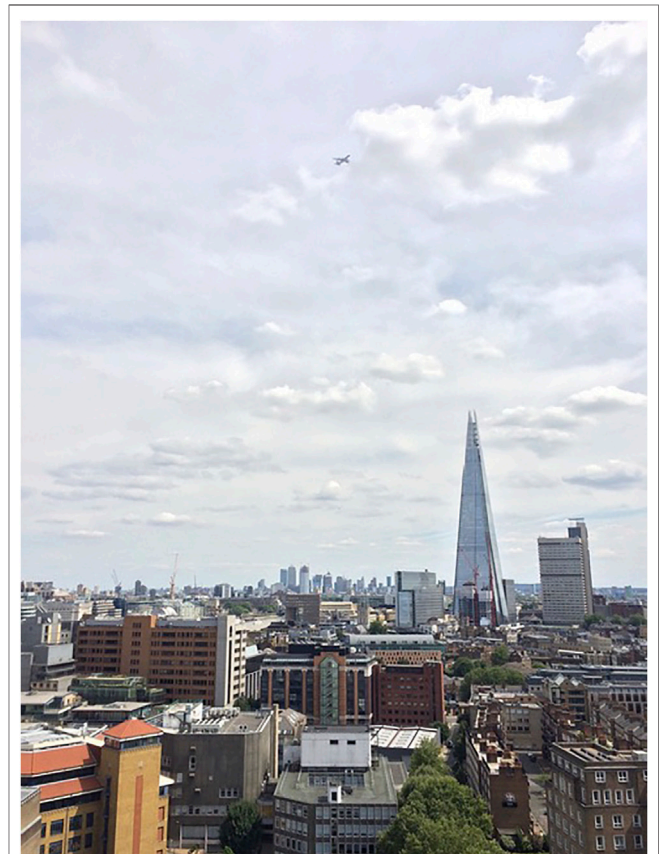
Social remittances facilitate knowledge of safer migration routes, alternative identity constructs, gender performance, and stereotypes. In doing so, they open potentially life saving migration pathways for individuals at risk in their home countries (Levitt, 1998). Nonetheless, attaining asylum abroad does not mean the end to oppression, nor the end of the relevance of social remittances; in contrast, the continued stigmatization and persecution they face in receiving countries often further fuels the social remittance loop connecting transgender individuals transnationally. On July 29, 2020 Eissa posted the following to her GoFundMe page:

“The current transphobic epidemic widespread in the United Kingdom does not help as every pill I take to suppress my testosterone, every estrogen patches I applied and remove on my body, it will remind me of what I have to face on the daily—I thought escaping from the oppressive religious groups in Malaysia for my freedom here in the United Kingdom would make my life easier—but it is actually almost the same. We have our freedom here in the United Kingdom, but I still feel terrified when I step out of the door from my house.”

Eissa's GoFundMe illustrates one transgender refugee's personal attempt to attain the medical support she required, but which the United Kingdom's medical policies towards transgender individuals failed to accommodate for. More than that, it shows how social remittances travel through various media channels and the importance of technology to the survival, not only of transgender individuals residing in their origin countries, but also for refugees who have already attained protections abroad. Through transnational communities online and in person, transgender individuals share their struggles, potential resources and ask for help. Social remittances and transnational connections become the springboards for activism.

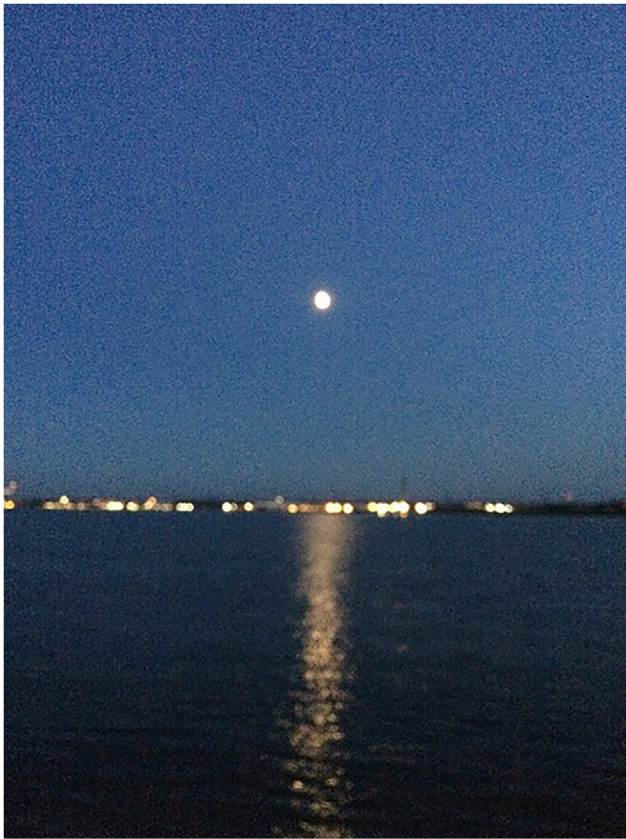
## ALANA EISSA: A DAY IN THE LIFE

Alana Eissa's life story provides an ideal example of the importance of internet technology, activism and transnational ties in the lives of transgender refugees. On any given day, she spends hours on the internet coordinating activist events, studying and sharing on social media. Her presence on Facebook and Twitter is a prime example of social remittance sharing, a forum by which her international community of followers disseminates critical information that can change



**FIGURE 1** | “View of London city overlooking the Shard and Canary Wharf in the distance. My city that I'm falling in love with.”





**FIGURE 2** | "I always feel calm when I look at the moon. Sometimes the moon over London is pretty, and I find solace over them, no matter where I am."



**FIGURE 3** | "A view outside my window at the Micro Rainbow shelter. Forever grateful after escaping homelessness."

and even save lives. Meanwhile, she also holds a full-time job as a developer at a major investment management firm.

Eissa is a transgender woman from a country that criminalizes those of nonconforming gender identities. Especially in the small, religious town she grew up in, Eissa shared that there is little tolerance for gender nonconforming individuals. When she told her parents about her identity, they attempted to kill her. With nowhere else to go, Eissa turned to activists for protection, soon becoming involved in activism herself. Later targeted as a result of her identity and activism, she ultimately fled to the United Kingdom due to the escalating violence and multiple death threats.

"As an asylum seeker, you leave home hoping for a better life, but here you continue to face the same issues" she said during a Zoom interview with me in July 2020. In addition to feeling disconnected from the local community in her newfound home in London, she has experienced difficulty navigating transphobic environments in the United Kingdom "Transphobia here is terrible. I didn't expect that." Returning to the United Kingdom as a professional woman who had undergone a public transition proved even harder than Alana anticipated. Experiencing the need for representation firsthand, Eissa now actively campaigns for transgender and refugee rights.

The photos she contributed to this project allow for a glimpse into her daily life. The prevalence of images of individuals show the importance of chosen family to making spaces feel like home. Of the total of six images she shared, one third of them included photos of these close friends and adopted families. One caption Eissa wrote simply read, "Chosen family. Nuff said."

The bonds formed between transgender refugees were thus well represented in the photographs, attesting to their central importance. Although I have not included these images here for the sake of privacy, their importance cannot be understated.

Despite her challenges in the United Kingdom, Eissa's photos illustrate her feelings of attachment to and appreciation for her new home. In particular, the landscape photographs of London (**Figure 1**) and the moon over the Thames (**Figure 2**) illustrate her emotional ties to the city. In particular, she captioned one image of the moon, "I always feel calm when I look at the moon... no matter where I am" (**Figure 2**). Aspects of the natural environment that remain constant, such as the moon, provide a sense of solace and stability that can travel with displaced individuals around the world. As Eissa attested in her interview, this sense of solace and belonging in the United Kingdom is part of what enables her activism and resilience in the face of immense challenges.



The final image to be included depicts the view from Eissa's window at Micro Rainbow, an organization specifically devoted to housing and supporting SOGI refugees (Figure 3). Micro Rainbow offered Alana Eissa shelter after an extended experience of homelessness. There, she not only found shelter but also built social and civic support networks necessary to holistically begin building a home for herself in the United Kingdom. Later, the connections with other transgender refugees she made there became the locus of her activist work. After experiencing familial rejection in her home country, the feeling of interconnectedness and belonging enabled by living in accommodation with other queer refugees provided Eissa with the social support she needed to continue her activism. In Micro Rainbow's safe housing program, she found fellow activists, a home and mutual support: "I have found my own chosen family here, with other people who went through the same experience of being a refugee."

Today, she is on the Board of Directors at MicroRainbow, taking a leading role in the organization that kept her off the street during the first years in the United Kingdom. As such, she continues her activism both locally at MicroRainbow and continues to advocate on behalf of transgender individuals worldwide through her online presence.

## DEFINING TRANSGENDER—LAW AND PERFORMANCE IN WESTERN COURTS

Many transgender individuals, like Eissa, aspire to migrate in order to find safety and freedom of gender and sexual expression. Social remittances contribute to this by diffusing knowledge about different gender and sexual identities, as well as potential legal protections abroad. Importantly, socially remitted knowledge of gender and sexual relations also contributes to certain conceptualisations of these identities: labels such as "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," "trans" and "queer," are formally (although not always in practice) upheld in Western courts of law as grounds for asylum. To quote Foucault's *History of Sexuality*: "We must not place sex on the side of reality, and sexuality on that of confused ideas and illusions; sexuality is a very real historical formation" (1978: 157). It is important to keep in mind that I refer to "transgender" within a certain historical and temporal construction of nonbinary gender identity.

Legal categorizations, Vogler and others argue, not only describe but also participate in constructing these very identities (2019). In general, current laws protecting transgender refugees in the United States and Europe tend to follow existing heteronormative, *cis*-gendered models: a trans person can thus be expected to start at one gender, and arrive neatly and completely in the other (Vogler, 2019). Although recent developments in refugee law acknowledge gender identity as grounds for protection, many legal codes adopt a binary perspective on gender, leaving little consideration for those who fall in between. This kind of categorization provides one means to governmental control (Foucault 1978; Scott 1998).

Social remittance of information surrounding identity formation can prove a matter of life and death, as successful asylum cases rest on migrants' abilities to perform a specific, and often extremely narrow, idea of a transgender identity. In certain cases, courts rule that individuals are not "trans enough" due to perceived inconsistencies or complications in their stories of transition (Vogler 2019). Many lawyers coach claimants to choose a narrative of transition that feeds into expected stereotypes of gender binary (Vogler 2019). When claimants' life stories stray from this expectation, as in the cases of Jeune (2016), Moiseev (2016), and Talipov (2014), their cases are often denied (Vogler 2019). Most successful asylum claims implicitly rely on the assertion that the migrant in question wishes to move from one gender to another, and that this desire to transition is a deeply-rooted aspect of their identity (Vogler 2019). Successful asylum-seeking thus partially rests on social remittances about certain identities: successful applicants know what the courts expect from them and adopt stereotypical behaviors and activities in order to make their claims appear legitimate for receiving country audiences (Vogler 2019).

Many courts of law often fail to recognize historically-rooted local and indigenous practices for the incorporation of gender and sexual minorities (Cheney 2012: 81). As Jenni Millbank articulates, when deciding on refugee cases based upon sexuality, "Western decision-makers have to come to terms with the other other" (Millbank, 2002: 1). Similarly, when addressing gender identity-based claims, judges must translate an experience of gender and culture foreign to their own and apply it to the law. This requires imagination, effort and compassion on the part of decision-makers (Millbank, 2002).

Today, transgender refugees' asylum claims, largely based on Western-defined gender identities, rarely engage with indigenous conceptions of non-binary or minority gender practices. Further efforts to explore, define and re-adopt such identities might help foster a sense of belonging for *trans*-identified individuals from countries which currently criminalize gender transition and a range of queer practices. Investigation and dissemination of these practices, including historical and legal research, educational programs, and community-led discussions could pave the way to robust, two-way sharing of social remittances between members of origin and receiving countries. It might also facilitate a greater understanding of and tolerance for the diversity of possible gender identities, something which continues to lack in both origin and allegedly "safe" countries alike.

In some places, recent court decisions show a movement towards greater awareness of diversity within transgender identities: in September 2020, Arther Britney Joestar became the first person to be granted permission to stay in the United Kingdom on the basis of a nonbinary identity, thereby setting a new precedent for asylum cases (Joestar, 2021). "It's hard to fit in when the system is so binary," Eissa told me in our interview. New legal precedents such as Joestar's case make a space for transgender individuals within the fabric of society. In the face of rampant persecution and systematic oppression, the collective power of transnational, transgender communities remain as powerful forces in support of tolerance and freedom

of gender expression. (Gleeson 2019; Vogler 2019; #IamwhoIsayIam 2019).

## **BARRERA—BUILDING COMMUNITY ACROSS BORDERS AND GENDERS**

Transnational activity amongst transgender refugees differs from other migrants in that many of these individuals never return to their countries of origin due to the risks involved in their potential return, especially following a public transition. Nonetheless, in their political and social activity, transgender refugees cross and recross borders, purposefully reaching across divides to reach those still in origin countries. Thus, while rarely transnationally mobile, they provide a virtual lifeline, and lead deeply transnational lives, through the dissemination of information about transgender politics and opportunities abroad.

Here, I consider the transnational activities of transgender migrants as the social connections between sending and receiving countries: those connections which unite people from differing national origins, but which share a commitment to principled ideas (Waldinger, 2013: 759). In this, I model the “universalist” or “anti-nationalist” ideology of transnationalism. Waldinger contrasts this ideology to strictly origin-receiving country connections described by other forms of transnationalism. He claims that through transnational practice, migrants blur the boundaries between foreign and domestic policy (Waldinger 2013: 778)

Alejandra Barrera’s fight against unfair treatment in U.S. detention exemplifies Waldinger’s claims. After fleeing death threats in El Salvador, Barrera was detained in the U.S. where she faced harassment and physical violence at the hands of guards and fellow asylum-seekers alike. She remained in detention for over a year and a half, subject to abuse, lack of medical care and systematic oppression (Oztaskin, 2019; Alejandra Is Free, 2019). In the United States, transgender asylum-seekers spend approximately twice the amount of time in ICE detention than other migrants in detention due to long wait times for asylum hearings and systematic backlog under the Trump administration (Oztaskin 2019). Moreover, Barrera’s is not an isolated case, nor is she one of many victims of an anti-immigration administration. Since the late 1980s, when gender-based immigration cases first began emerging in U.S. Case law, women like Barrera have faced intense scrutiny and frequent rejection by the immigration system (McKinnon, 2016).

For Barrera, suffering in detention provided the impetus for her to continue her activism. Her internet campaign for freedom included international organizations and figures ranging from Amnesty International, the TransLatin@Coalition, actress Laverne Cox to YouTube star, Chella Man (Assuncao, 2019). Her supporters from around the world all rallied around one common ideal: #FreeAlejandra (Assuncao, 2019).

Transgender theorist Jules Gleeson observes that both migrants and transgender individuals upset the coherent imaginary of a singular state and nation (Gleeson, 2019). Migrants disturb the solidity of state borders; meanwhile,

transgender individuals threaten the heteronormative “nuclear family” model as the basic unit of state-society. It is for this reason that transgender migrants, failing to fit neatly into “norms” of either the body or the state, prove contentious, politically charged subjects. The international community of over 36,000 individuals who stepped forward to sign the petition for Barrera’s freedom transformed what could have been one of thousands of unreported domestic detention cases into an international scandal for the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Rojas, 2019). Barrera’s supporters allowed neither gender nor citizenship to stop their activism; rather, the ideal of fair treatment united them in a common goal.

Barrera’s experience combating persecution in her origin country gave her the tools to effectively mobilise when faced with dire circumstances in the United States. Barrera came to the United States with experience in activism: in El Salvador, she regularly visited ill HIV/AIDS patients in hospitals and helped to educate members of the transgender community about disease prevention. When detained in the United States, she mobilised this experience to write many open letters to advocacy groups, pushing them to document the abuses and lack of proper medical treatment in Cibola County Correctional Facility. “This is the continuation of my activism,” she said (Oztaskin, 2019). Furthermore, she said that her traumatic experiences in U.S. detention have given her “motivation to go on fighting and fighting... I have the opportunity to speak about what happened to me inside, and what’s still happening to my compañeras inside” (Oztaskin 2019).

By speaking out about her experience, Barrera strengthens the transnational ties and social remittances that allow other transgender migrants to understand the risks and potentials of migrating, the harsh realities of detention in the United States, and methods of coping and surviving despite overwhelming obstacles. Through Facebook and solidarity organizations, these connections travel transnationally with ever-increasing ease. Finally, as transgender individuals and activist groups pool knowledge, resources, and advocacy, they apply pressure governments to acknowledge their existence and their unique placement in society, as shown by new adaptations of legal codes (Vogler, 2019).

## **KAMEL—LEADING ACTIVISM IN LIBYA, ITALY AND BEYOND**

Tracing Kamel’s flight from Libya to Italy and his continuing activism also sheds light on how socially remitted information and transnational ties can become means of survival. Kamel, an intersex and transgender man from Libya, is an international journalist and transgender activist. His life, both before and after migrating, exemplifies the concept of “core transnationalism,” one in which everyday activities and experiences connect individuals to nations and causes beyond their own (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p. 760). However, Kamel never wanted to leave his country: “I left many things. Nobody wakes up in the morning and decides, “Okay, now I will take my bag and go to Europe’... I didn’t have another choice”

(#IamwhoIsayIam 2019). Due to his activism and identity, he received death threats from ISIS forces in 2015. Increasingly, his friends and fellow activists were targeted and killed. Due to his well-founded fear of ISIS' threats to his family—even more than for his own life—Kamel ultimately decided to flee his country and seek refuge abroad. In 2017, he received international protection in Italy.

Kamel's experience shows how social remittances lead to the formation of activist links around the world, links which, in times of great trial and persecution, can become lifelines. Kamel's transnational ties as a journalist and activist in Libya allowed him to escape conflict in the country when ISIS took over large portions of his country. As conditions in Libya escalated, he received threatening text messages, emails, and pictures from ISIS fighters and began to fear not only for his own life but also for his family. An invitation to an activist conference in Egypt gave him an excuse to leave the country just as ISIS forces advanced through the country. Passing their checkpoints as a man with a woman's travel documents proved incredibly dangerous, but by concealing his identity under a burqa for the crossing, he was able to make it safely to Egypt. From there, he traveled to Italy, where he applied for asylum. Although he still experiences routine social ostracization and transphobic attitudes on account of his gender identity, he now lives in relative safety. Moreover, he is part of a wider community of openly transgender individuals living in the city, many of whom share international connections and participate in activism.

In June 2020 Kamel presented as a guest lecturer at the EU-funded 'Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Claims of Asylum' (SOGICA) Project's final academic conference via Zoom, giving voice and advice to transgender refugees in an online format that remains available as a permanent resource. If Kamel were to return to Libya, it could cost him his life. However, through Zoom, online advocacy, writing, and social media, he still remains active in his origin country politics (#IamwhoIsayIam, 2019).

Kamel also struggled to find suitable housing in Italy. Usually, agencies place refugees together in temporary housing; however, in the case of transgender refugees, their fellow nationals were often the same people persecuting them inside the country of origin. Cut off from their fellow refugees due to their gender identity, and isolated from mainstream society due to their status as migrants (in addition to their gender), transgender refugees suffer from severe social, structural, and political ostracization. Arriving in a safe country alone does not guarantee safety or secure housing, as Kamel experienced.

Kamel finally found a place to live through a friend, who knew of an organization in Italy called Movimento Identità Trans (MIT). Through the network of fellow transgender individuals active within MIT, Kamel finally found himself a suitable place to live. Now, he works for them, and played a pivotal role in creating the first-ever *trans*-specific housing accommodation service in Italy. MIT, headed by and run for transgender migrants, remits knowledge and cultural information while creating a place for transgender migrants settling into their new homes in Italy to come together in solidarity and community. MIT's services include both practical and personal considerations, addressing structural-level issues by offering legal advice, housing, and healthcare options, while also creating safe spaces to meet, socialize and form

community. Through this organization, Kamel remains active in assisting fellow transgender refugees overseas who seek to migrate to safety. In this, he maintains robust transnational activism, despite the fact he will likely never return to Libya.

Kamel, like Barrera, Eissa and many other transgender refugees, remains deeply connected to his origin country through networks of transnational activists, social media and personal contacts. His experiences of social intolerance and lack of access to housing spurred his further activism on behalf of transgender individuals in both the receiving country and the origin country. Through transnational activism, transgender refugees act as bridges, warning, informing and advising the next generation of potential refugees. Both at home, abroad and transnationally, shared survival strategies utilized by transgender asylum-seekers bring people together separated by space (Waldinger, 2013).

The activism of transgender refugees in receiving countries represents a continuance of their lifelong fight to access basic rights. While it is true that increased openness in receiving societies may open up new opportunities for activism as scholars Ahmadov, Sasse, and Eggert have traditionally argued, to assume that this activism happens because of the lack of opposition in receiving societies would be deeply misleading (Ayoub and Bauman, 2019). Instead, transgender refugees engage in activism within receiving countries largely out of necessity; their histories of persecution and activism in their origin countries give them the tools and experience to do it well.

Eissa, Barrera, and Kamel all formed transnational connections with other queer individuals and activists as a means of survival long before applying for asylum. In the continuance of their activism following asylum, transgender refugees deploy what the psychologist John Berry terms "problem-focused coping" (1997). Facing extremely difficult circumstances—whether locked inside U.S. detention facilities, on the streets of London or fighting homelessness in Italy—these resilient individuals focus on changing the circumstances so that life can become better, both for them personally and others like them. Remaining involved in transgender activism before, during, and after migrating gives transgender refugees the acceptance of a particular community and broader purpose of promoting tolerance in society. It also may provide a sense of continuity between their old and new lives (Berry, 1997).

## CONCLUSION

In short, social remittances bring new ideas about gender identity, politics, migration, and other potentially lifesaving knowledge to individuals living in countries that do not tolerate gender diversity. Social remittances enable migration by facilitating knowledge of the potential for asylum. They also provide the necessary familiarity with Western conceptions of LGBTI culture to publicly, and before European courts in asylum cases, "perform" a transgender identity. Especially in the case of transgender individuals living in countries with illiberal policies towards transgender individuals, social remittances from abroad can open up aspirations to living openly and even gaining political rights. In Eissa's case, as in others,



attempts to live more openly or campaign for equal treatment can, sadly, lead to situations in which seeking asylum abroad becomes the only route to survival. In other cases, such social remittances act as a warning to transgender individuals hoping for a better life elsewhere. The examples of Barrera's extended detention in the U.S. and Kamel's struggles to find safe housing in Italy might act to better inform transgender individuals on what to expect in receiving countries. As the experiences of Eissa, Barrera and Kamel all illustrate, the fight for access to basic rights continues even after arrival in receiving countries.

Transnational communities created by transgender migrants around the world, despite vehement opposition and the dangers community members face to create such groups, increasingly unite and inform the next generation. New technologies prove crucial to this transition, allowing for the creation of transnational social capital and opening up new ways of participating in activism. Finally, nonprofit organizations offering support and housing specifically for transgender refugees provide essential platforms for activism and leadership in the fight for fair treatment, access to healthcare, and other basic rights.

Transgender refugees cross boundaries of both gender and geography, calling into question common assumptions that undergird the nation-state and any individual's place in society. The scale of the violence enacted against the transgender community supports the idea that their identity and activism provide an important and potentially radical disruption to the methods and assumptions by which nation-states currently order our world. Not only do transgender migrants cross borders, but they also cross genders, blurring boundaries and complicating expectations for them on multiple levels.

In the face of structural opposition and intense state scrutiny, the release of Alejandra Barrera from detention in September 2019 illustrates how the mobilization of transnational ties between transgender refugees, human rights organizations and even average citizens—over 36,000 of whom contributed signatures—facilitates the survival of transgender refugees in

the worst of circumstances (Alejandra Is Free, 2019; Rojas 2019). Upon her release, Alejandra attested to the importance of transnational ties and activist efforts to her survival: "Through letters of support, people from around the world gave me the strength to continue in this struggle that was so hard for me. I'm here to keep fighting" (Rojas 2019).

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Sussex Ethics Committee. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The research for this manuscript was designed and completed by IS. IS wrote the manuscript and later revised and approved the submitted version.

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