

MURRIA

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT OF LGBTQI ACTIVISTS IN BROADER SOCIAL JUSTICE STRUGGLES IN WEST AFRICA



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WEST AFRICA**

WITH THE SPECIAL PARTICIPATION OF CAMEROON





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While the involvement of LGBTQI activists in other social justice demands is important, it is not unprecedented or new. However, it is poorly documented and often ignored. Indeed, the October 2014 popular uprising movement in Burkina Faso saw the participation of Burkinabè LGBTQI activists at all stages of the uprising, including helping to provide care for those injured in the uprising. However, when the history and stakeholders of the uprising are told, the LGBTQI activists' participation as full citizens is never named.

Looking at these two case examples, at ISDAO, we have been wondering how we can tell the story of LGBTQI activists' civic engagement in other social justice demands beyond the law review and other electoral agendas as we know there are many others. That is why we have launched this call for essays to document in as many ways as possible, the different perspectives of LGBTQI activists' participation in citizen processes.

In launching this call, we wanted to demonstrate how the LGBTQI movement in West Africa, particularly in ISDAO focus countries, is contributing to building a more egalitarian society by participating in other social justice demands.

We received several contributions from different perspectives and different communities that make up the LGBTQI movement in Burkina Faso, Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, with the exceptional participation of Cameroon. These contributions are proof and a powerful voice that the West African LGBTQI movement does not evolve in a vacuum as the popular imagination of the general civil society conveys, but rather that it is committed and has a will to engage even if its commitment is often ignored and sometimes erased.

In launching this first issue of our journal Myria, at ISDAO, we want to provide a space for conversation and reflection, open to LGBTQI activists and allies, on issues that affect the development of the LGBTQI movement in West Africa, including philanthropy, democracy, the environment, feminism, etc. This space will also be dedicated to a plurality and diversity of voices, experiences and perspectives.

BENIN





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CITIZENSHIP AND VISIBILITY IN BÉNIN: WOMEN ACTIVISTS' ENGAGEMENT IN OTHER SOCIAL JUSTICE STRUGGLES

BY PACIFIQUE DORIANE SOGNONVI — BÉNIN

The struggle for the respect of the rights of all human beings without any distinction is a noble cause to which many human rights defenders have dedicated themselves for several decades. Thus, LGBTQI women activists, as citizens, do not remain on the sidelines of these struggles. In addition to defending LGBTQI rights, they are also involved in various initiatives, programs, and protests to help achieve social justice for all people. In the West African region, how committed are they? In Benin, despite the obstacles and challenges that still remain, let's discover the incredible commitment of Helwise Boya, Alexandrine Guegue, and Doriane Sognonvi, LGBTQI activists engaged in advocacy for social justice about other issues.

In Benin, women are the minority and are associated with many stereotypes: men think they are incapable of taking literacy courses because they have already missed school since childhood, and that they cannot learn any technical area for those who have gone to school a little. This education inequality builds a society where men dominate and where the role of women in society is limited to that of wife or mother.

This obvious injustice led Helwise to want to contribute to a social transformation. Thus, she created a mobilization program to initiate girls and women to IT tools so that they can discover the digital world and can carry their voices as well as denounce the injustices they are victims of. Helwise Boya is a young LGBTQI activist and IT systems and software expert. In addition to her LGBTQI activism, Helwise is involved in a program of initiation of young girls and women to IT tools called "Access to computer for Every girls and women".

During an interview, she quotes,

"I found that being in the IT field where women were scarce, working and shining would allow me to be a role model for those who underestimate themselves. Being in the digital field today, I want to help ensure affordable access to digital tools for women and girls and break the barriers that prevent girls and women from fully participating in the digital economy."


As determined as Helwise, Alexandrine Guegue, has been an LGBTQI activist for many years. Alex, as she is commonly called, is also a great activist who fights for women rights and emancipation, and environment protection. Through the NGO Cercle des Femmes amazones du Bénin (CeFaB), she leads several actions such as: trainings for women on advocacy and gender-based violence in partnership with Association Béninoise pour la Promotion de la Famille (ABPF), trainings on feminism and self-esteem as well as many other trainings that will allow women to flourish and succeed in their lives. In 2018, she participated in the great walk against cancer organized by the association SOS Cancer Benin and in 2019, she took part in the first Eco running 7 press conference in Kenya to fight against plastic waste. In 2020, she led advocacy actions towards the country's authorities for the acceptance of bills in favor of women. Thanks to her leadership, Alex has been awarded several times, namely during the Oscars of Amazons in 2019 organized by Fondation des Jeunes Amazones du Bénin (FJAD) where she was congratulated for her bravery and for all she does for women emancipation in Benin. Also, during the demonstrations that followed the controversial legislative elections in Benin on May 2, 2019 where Prudence Amoussou, died as a result of a received bullet wound, Alexandrine worked with Amnesty International Benin for the signing of a petition and to demand justice for lady Prudence and her family as well as for all people who died and were shot by the police officers from the Government of Benin. This petition, having obtained a great adhesion of the population, shows us

the strength and the capacity of Alex in the mobilization for a social justice cause. As much as she is committed to defending the rights of LGBTQI people, Alex is also deeply committed to other demands for social justice for all in the country. So, she is a true leader and one of those incredible LGBTQI activists who are committed in addition to LGBTQI activism, to demands for social justice about other issues.

With the same commitment as Helwise and Alex against social injustices, Sognonvi Doriane Pacifique, is a Queer, member of the LGBTQI community, Activist, Feminist, Digital Communicator, Community Manager, Blogger and LGBTQI Activist in a non-governmental organization that fights for the rights of LBQ in the Republic of Benin. Apart from her LGBTQI activism, Doriane is also a great activist for women's rights, violence against girls and women, and social justice for all. Doriane has a blog on Facebook where she addresses various issues including leadership issues, how to be a leader, self-esteem issues, slam poetry, and various topics to raise awareness and urge people to take action for the good of all. Since we are in the digital era and almost everything is done on the internet, her blog is doing well and she is now one of the most influential activists in Benin. In 2020, thanks to her leadership, Doriane succeeded in convincing the NGO Racines and their psychologists to provide free care and psychological follow-up for all women and girl victims of rape, a feat that has earned her several congratulations from internet users and leading human rights activists in the country. Doriane is working on Plan International's GOL project, a project

that consists of setting up a safe online space for young girls to protect them from online harassment and to create a space for them to confide in reliable people and discuss issues of interest to them in order to grow and feel safe. This project helps young girls and allows them to grow outside the circle of boys in which they are stigmatized and harassed all the time. In 2019, during a student demonstration for the rejection of online courses, student Théophile Adjaho was killed by a police officer who fired live ammunition at students who refused to submit to the campus of the University of Abomey-Calavi. It was a real tragedy for the students who saw their comrade die from the bullets of this policeman. After this tragic death, neither the rector of the university, nor other authorities, took any measure to punish the policeman for his crime. In light of this social injustice and the anger felt by some students, Doriane worked with the president of the students' association of the University of Abomey-Calavi to file a complaint with the Constitutional Court to demand a trial against the police officer so that justice could be done to Théophile Adjaho and his family.

Moreover, Doriane recently worked to get a girl victim of rape and who became pregnant as a result of the rape taken care of by a gynecological doctor because a few months later, she lost her baby, leaving her in a deep physical and mental trauma. All this work done by Doriane shows us her incredible commitment to other social justice demands apart from LGBTQI activism.



In addition to Helwise, Pacifique and Alexandrine, Andreas Adangnido, and Credo Ahodi, are two leaders of LBQ associations and LGBTQI activists who, apart from their LGBTQI activism, are also involved in other social justice demands. They carry out several actions for the defense of human rights and women development in the Republic of Benin. Their leadership has earned them many distinctions and participation in international meetings. They also lead actions to defend the rights of sex workers. In 2021, as LGBTQI activists, they were associated with the project to set up an observatory to monitor violations against albinos and sex workers by Amnesty International, Benin in partnership with the Ambassador of France to provide their expertise.

However, in this quest for social justice for all, they have had to face obstacles, particularly Doriane who reports the lack of courage and support from girls who have been raped to denounce their rapists. Doriane is subject to harassment and stigmatization by students during awareness sessions because of her appearance. She also faces a lack of resources to support her work.

As for Helwise, she points out that some girls' parents refuse to have their daughters participate in the IT initiation sessions and some are forced to come in secret, and Alexandrine complains about the lack of concentration and the inattention shown by some young people during the sensitization sessions, and the refusal of the population to obey the principles of cleanliness and not to throw away garbage in any way. So, despite their commitments, they face many challenges to carry out their commitments.

In sum, we can say that in Benin, many LGBTQI activists despite the various challenges and obstacles they face in addition to their LGBTQI activism, also carry out actions to defend women and girls, the disadvantaged, the fight against climate change and many other actions to contribute to social justice. These few activists are examples among many others not only in Benin but also in other West African countries.

BURKINA FASO





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RESISTANCE & HOPE: CASE OF ADJA DIVINE'S ASSAULT IN 2017

BY GAYTURE Z. — BURKINA FASO

In May 2017, in one of the popular neighborhoods in Ouaga, one of the most horrific scenes a woman can undergo took place. Going out just to stock up on milk for her newborn, she experienced the worst nightmare of her life that day.

Adja divine artist musician, after refusing to stop for a routine police check and fleeing, was caught by a crowd of men accusing her of "stealing a baby or even five babies" according to some. Even without knowing what was going on, the mob descended on her, publicly stripping her naked and beating her. The two police officers chasing her were quickly overwhelmed and did not intervene to deter the mob.

After being assaulted, physically attacked and publicly humiliated, she was rescued from the crowd by another police patrol. The videos of this aggression made the rounds on social networks, shocking a large part of public opinion.

It should be noted that after the popular uprising that led to the departure of the dictator Blaise Compaoré's regime, the new leaders were not able to restore the trust and order in the republican justice hoped for by the population. So, the country began to sink into a form of mob justice.

However, the barbarity suffered by Adja Divine aroused a wave of indignation within civil society. The reaction of women in general was not long in coming, for in the aftermath of this act of violence, a popular march was organized to demand justice for the victim. The objective was to denounce the trivialization of all form of violence against women and to warn against the danger of mob justice.

As an LGBTQI activist, but above all as a citizen, when I saw the video of Adja Divine's humiliation, I was outraged and shocked! I couldn't believe it! It couldn't be in my country that such a scene was happening. I told myself right away that we had to do something because it was impossible to watch this video and remain indifferent.

So, I contacted a friend who is also an activist to know what he thinks about the situation and what we could do to denounce it. The next day, in the morning on social media, we learned of a march announced and we did not hesitate a second to join it. We were several LGBTQI activists present that day at the demonstration because we felt deeply concerned by this situation and we, ourselves, are constantly harassed and violated in various ways. We marched down the Avenue de l'Insurrection Populaire to

demand justice and reparation for Adja Divine.

As for me, I was relieved and happy to see that many people responded to the call to march. And I saw in this the possibility of a change of the Burkinabe mentality in the fight against violence against women. I felt bad for this woman but at the same time I found the hope that I was beginning to lose in view of the growing level of incivism in the city of Ouagadougou.

Just like during the Popular Insurrection of October 2014 and during the resistance against the failed coup of 2015, we, LGBTQI activists, were still there as citizens to say stop this situation. It was an important experience for me because the justice system responded with open investigations to find the assaulters.

But I think it would have been different if there had not been this demonstration, because we have seen many cases of violence without people being charged or convicted.

I am very pleased with this step taken by the Justice system. This is the proof that when we raise our voices against any kind of injustice there can be justice. We must persevere. From this experience I also gained confidence in myself to say NO in certain situations of everyday's life. Change is only achieved when we oppose the oppressors openly! Wherever we are, we must stand up and refuse to be passive witnesses to all forms of injustice.

CAMEROON





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DEFEND, CHALLENGE, DENOUNCE: COMMEMORATIVE DAY AGAINST VIOLENCE AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (HRDS) IN CAMEROON

BY LOLA KAMA¹ — CAMEROON

¹ I would like to thank the activists Sandrine Ateh (AVAF) and Nickel Liwandi (CamfAIDS) who helped me to cross-check the information.

That was three years ago and as far as I can remember, I had a very strong sense of victory and hope. Walking out with a placard to the streets on the occasion of the commemorative Day Against Violence Against Human Rights Defenders is one of the strongest political acts I have done in Cameroon. Indeed, walking in the streets of Yaoundé on 12 July 2018 among the ‘tchélé’, the ‘nkoadengue’, the ‘pédés’, the ‘mvoyes’, the ‘koudje’, those who are publicly mocked without embarrassment, whose existence is denied on a daily basis, and whose lynching is called for without remorse, had a profound taste of victory. A victory over fear, a victory over shame, a victory over contempt, insults and daily violence. A victory over an oppressive and authoritarian system that mercilessly attacks the poor, women, homosexuals, trans people, etc. A victory all the more significant because it is a community initiative, born of a young and ambitious movement that refuses to bow its head in the face of the arbitrariness of the law and the institutions that are supposed to protect us: the state, the police, the family, the church, etc.

This initiative was born following the murder of gay activist Eric Ohena Lembembe in 2013. This cowardly assassination has still not found justice, as have hundreds of other acts of gratuitous violence against human rights defenders, and specifically queer people. And justice is what the organisers of this groundbreaking day are defending. Justice is what the bodies gathered that morning in the car park of the emblematic Yaoundé sports stadium were demanding. We were numerous, coming from the districts of the capital, but also from Douala, Bafoussam, Ebolowa, Kribi, Mbalmayo and so on. Apart from those memorable evenings that only we have the secret of, I have never seen us in such large numbers, and especially in daylight.

In broad daylight, we demonstrated peacefully in memory of Eric, but also to demand justice. Justice for our lives, justice for our existences, justice for our identities, our loves. In broad daylight, we walked with our heads held high, yet used to, forced to shave the walls, to bow our heads, to apologise for being ourselves. Our laughter spoke of our strength despite the fear. Of course there was tension. And it was palpable. Demonstrating in Cameroon is a dangerous act, whatever the cause, especially if it is a political issue. Violence and abuse of rights are legion. There is no counting the number of people brutally beaten and arrested, unjustly imprisoned because they dare to demand their rights such as payment of their salaries, access to health care or justice. Demonstrating in a denied and stigmatised identity is even more so. The regime in power is merciless when you don't praise the one who has presided over the country's (non) destiny since 1982.

It might as well be said that the democratic opening is extremely weak.


Next to me, a Trans woman was laughing as she showed me her scars. She had lost count of the number of times she had been assaulted. On her body were many scars from street violence, some of them very recent. She wanted to make noise. She wanted to shout in the face of the people who were watching us pass by that she was alive and proud. That no one would take away her right to exist. She wasn't the only one who wanted to shout. But in the ranks, they were silenced. It was important not to make waves. Exposing herself like this was a victory in itself. The march had to go well. As demonstrations are rarely authorised, this rally had been held under the guise of a sports march. Maybe next time we'll have enough strength to shout our anger instead of keeping it quiet.

What I remember is certainly the strength of all the people present that day. Knowing that they were gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans or queer and accepting to come together outside the night, outside the party. Knowing that you are a woman, a girl, a victim of violence, infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, a sex worker and accepting to be seen. To use your body as a political weapon, so that justice is done. In front of me, a trans woman had dared to show her thong during the march with a defiant look. You could see faces with light make-up, a swipe of pink blush here, eyelashes traced with a black pencil, a shade of lip gloss there, nails varnished and a scarf expertly tied further on unexpected bodies. I interacted with girls with a proud

head carriage, a soft voice behind a wary look and a very masculine dress. What courage in a country that kills bodies that do not conform! What strength for excluded bodies! What a great step for social justice.

During the march, I also noticed the presence of members of associations working with women and girls, as well as associations fighting against HIV/AIDS. I later learned that several associations working in the defence of human rights had disassociated themselves for fear of being associated with LGBTs, as if LGBTs were not human beings, as if LGBTs did not have rights, as if human rights were not also rights of LGBTs. What a paradox! In a country plagued by the *status quo*, it is nevertheless LGBT people who dare.

At the front of the march was a large banner that read: "Stop the violence against human rights defenders". There were no other messages, but our presence alone was enough to say what was dangerous to say out loud: "We exist", "Our lives matter", "Justice for Eric", "Stop police violence". Though we didn't write it down, we talked about it during the round-table discussion that followed with local personalities: a representative of the President, a journalist, a commissioner, a lawyer and a civil society human rights defender. Paradox, hypocrisy or achievement? If we look at the public discourse of these institutions, which condemn gay people as criminals, we can say that inviting them to a face-to-face discussion is a formidable feat. Although intimidated at first, the demonstrators quickly realised that this was their opportunity to be heard. Loudly they questioned the speakers about



“Stop the violence against human rights defenders”. There were no other messages, but our presence alone was enough to say what was dangerous to say out loud: “We exist”, “Our lives matter”, “Justice for Eric”, “Stop police violence”.

the abuses they suffer on a daily basis in hospitals, in families, in the neighbourhood, by the police, journalists, etc. The people questioned in front of them seemed to insist on their call for “respect for the law”. But there are unjust laws! There are criminal laws! There are absurd laws! There are laws that are outside the law! Article 347 (BIS) of the Cameroonian Penal Code is one of them! It is the law that throws thousands of human lives to the dogs instead of protecting them. It is the law that makes us third class citizens. It exposes us to harassment and abuse of all kinds.

There is no democracy without the right to demonstrate. By occupying the street that day, even though it was only for half an hour, we won a right that is very rarely exercised in the Cameroonian context. We braved fear and anxiety. We showed that we refused to hide. We have made our bodies a tool of justice. Now there is hope. *Fire next time!*

GHANA





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HOW THE MEDIA, AND RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LEADERS MAKE GHANA UNSAFE FOR LGBT+ PERSONS

BY LEILA YAHAYA — GHANA

LGBT+ persons in Ghana are confronted with many legal and societal challenges daily and yet, remain unprotected. They are subjected to abuses and their rights are heavily suppressed.

Physical and violent homophobic attacks against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT+) people are common and often encouraged by the media, faith, religious and political leaders. Despite the constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech, expression and assembly to Ghanaian citizens, these fundamental rights are actively denied to LGBT people. In the following article, I will demonstrate how institutional forces across media, religion and politics contribute to an unsafe environment for LGBT people in Ghana.

“...every human being shall be entitled to respect for their life and the integrity of his/her person. No one may be arbitrarily deprived of this right.”

– The African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights

MEDIA

The media portrays the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) communities in a negative light because of what they claim religion and dogma taught them in the African context. It is very common for mainstream media pundits to make public claims that “homosexuality is not African”.

Public views on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression have continued to divide opinions across West Africa and the globe as a whole. Often, these interpretations of gender and sexual differences are driven by irresponsible media coverage and presentations that are sometimes to blame for the discrimination, stigmatization and unjust treatment of people who identify as LGBT+.

Negative images in the media are widespread. Public reactions to the media and opinions lodged by cis-heterosexual people vary greatly by country or jurisdiction around

every aspect of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, including on issues such as the legality of same-sex marriages, “conversion therapy”, and the criminalization of individuals for same-sex relations. The media is often responsible for inciting homophobia and “gay-bashing” among people who have no real understanding of what being LBGT+ means.

In Africa, anti-gay sentiments are based largely on religious and cultural misinformation, personal, political or/and financial objectives, and are spread daily through religious programming that openly denounces homosexuality as “anti-faith” behaviour. These television and radio ‘talk shows’ (including churches and mosques) play a huge part in the mainstream public opinion about members of the LGBT+ communities.

Recently, for example, popular feminist media personality Gifty Anti's show "The Standpoint" sparked much controversy when she featured an "ex-gay" on her show. These programs do nothing to promote a healthy understanding of gender and sexual diversity, nor do they encourage conversations around crucial issues such as safety and the discrimination faced by the LGBT+ community in Ghana or anywhere else in West Africa. I was surprised by the availability and the acceptance of such a program in the Ghanaian media, especially because Ghana signed on to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, a constitutional commitment of inclusion and equal rights of "every human being" including members of the LGBT+ community in Africa.

“As an activist, I have also realized that when the media is invited to cover an LGBT+ event, they tend to frame the story in a negative light to suit the homophobic public/society. This is because negative stories sell more than human rights in West Africa.”

Some media personnel working with radio and TV stations make up stories and invite LGBT+ persons for interviews with the promise of money and fame. These persons, blinded by these promises, go on air to paint their community black and even give out information about the community just to help the media promote their negative and homophobic agendas.

The mainstream media's negative and homophobic coverage of LGBT+ issues often increase the rate of abuses such as corrective rape, murder, and mob attacks against LGBT+ people in their various communities. These abuses and violations lead to depression, anxiety, self-harm, self-stigma, internalized homophobia, school dropout, loss of employment, estrangement from family and even suicide for LGBT+ people. Every day, the lives of LGBT+ persons are put in danger because of the negativity, hatred, abuses and homophobia that the media is promoting and fueling.

I believe the media is powerful enough and they need to use their platforms positively by addressing LGBT+ issues, cases or events for the public to learn, relearn and unlearn, and for society to start understanding the fact that LGBT+ people are not aliens but human beings. LGBT+ people deserve to be treated with respect and dignity just like any other human being in this world. They have every right to be themselves and live a fulfilling life. LGBT rights are a human right!

In Ghana, because of the media's negligence, misinformation and aggressive homophobia, organizations like the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values, led by Lawyer Moses Foh-Amoaning have begun promoting the homophobic agenda. Foh-Amoaning frequently displays his ignorance and aggressive homophobia, and yet the Government and the media amplifies it, fuelling more hatred about the LGBT+ community.

FAITH/RELIGION

Faith and Religious leaders are often unlawfully politicized, and subsequently, use religion as the basis to justify certain predetermined goals such as religious interpretation and gender discrimination. A critical review of sexual/ gender discrimination shows that, in many ways, religion is repeatedly implicated. Unfortunately, such gender/sexual notions, largely rooted in the misinterpretation and biases of faith and religious leaders, is widespread in many parts of Ghana and around the world. The result is that the notion of male supremacy has become pervasive, despite vigorous struggles made to redress these erroneous biases. Marginalization of LGBT+ persons in the private and public domain is also rife as we are treated like second class citizens in most places. Our appearance and participation, especially in public spaces are not recognized. This development is the outcome of faith and religious leaders' biases, particularly through religious interpretation.

Misinterpretation and biases of faith and religious leaders are liable for the many setbacks and backlashes confronting the LGBT+ community in Ghana, especially concerning their chances of emerging and enjoying their fundamental human rights successfully. Yet, a critical review of original religious texts across different religions of the world reveals that religious interpretations, rather than religion, is culpable for the plights of everyone. Religions, across the board, are generally known to preach love, fairness, equity, justice, social harmony, and

togetherness. Unfortunately, injustices and various forms of discrimination are prevalent in many societies. Selfish pursuits and group exclusionary practices are widespread. Religious interpretations underlie these problems. Religious interpretations are universal and have often been employed to achieve certain egoistic aims.

POLITICIAN'S STANCE ON LGBT+ ISSUES IN GHANA

Earlier this year, LGBT+ Rights Ghana publicized the opening of a community safe space on their social media handles on the 31st January 2021 which sparked a media firestorm and threw existing LGBT+ organizations as well as the whole LGBT+ community they serve into the media spotlight. As a result, we are seeing threats of violence directed towards people who are suspected to be part of the LGBT+ community.

Based on this issue, 30 anti-LGBT+ MP's in Ghana Parliament formed "believers against LGBT+". A member of the group, Hon. Emmanuel Kwasi Bedzrah detailed their journey to criminalize LGBT+ practice and advocacy in Ghana by the end of 2021 in a meeting in March 2021.¹

¹ <https://76crimes.com/2021/03/22/leader-of-ghana-parliament-vows-passage-of-strict-anti-lgbtqi-bill/>

LGBT COMMUNITY/MOVEMENT STRUGGLES

In Ghana, even with adequate information about gender and sexual orientation LGBT+ persons are still facing security issues because of their perceived gender or sexual orientation. This places them at a disadvantage and vulnerable to all kinds of violations including sexual harassment, corrective rape, forced marriages, physical and verbal attacks.

LGBT+ organizations and movements are existing in fear for their lives and in fear of opening up their offices to work because of the negative agenda against LGBT+ persons, and how various parties are promoting hatred for the LGBT+ community. The fact that Ghanaians can't embrace diversity and inclusiveness is so disgusting. LGBTQIPA+ activists/advocates are running for their lives because the media and religious bodies are inciting so much hate against the community and people that work for the community.

LGBT+ people can't live freely without being verbally, physically and emotionally abused by the hetero-normative society daily. LGBT+ people are living in fear because of the threats they receive when they go out or on social media.

Through all the struggles, activists and advocates in Ghana are hiding in fear for their lives, because most of them had their faces on the news on TV stations and social media blogs. However, LGBT+ activists continue working tirelessly to find better ways to empower, support and continue the fight for the rights of all LGBT+ persons, even though the fight keeps getting tougher.



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GHANAIAN LBQ WOMEN NAVIGATING COMMUNITY-BUILDING IN THE COVID ERA

RITA NKETIAH, PHD — GHANA

“Are you listening?” My friend Akua texts me, as I am huddled over my late lunch at my sister’s dinner table. My iPhone is on low speaker as I am trying to engage in my third virtual meeting for the day. This time, it is a “room” being organized by queer women in Ghana on the newest social media app called Clubhouse. Today’s room topic is asexual and bisexual women’s identities. To be honest, I’m not even sure if I have the emotional bandwidth for this discussion, as I am still recovering from the casual homophobia of straight Ghanaian feminists in an earlier webinar that day. The week before that, I facilitated a workshop on feminism, in which cisgendered gay men actively centred themselves as the new beneficiaries of the fight against patriarchy. As a queer African feminist, I am politically exhausted.

"Barely... I'm eating." I reply, internally kicking myself for forgetting to charge my Bluetooth headset before the event started. "Sorry... in the kitchen and don't want my family to hear", I text back. While scarfing down my boiled yam and tilting my head towards the phone to hear the conversation at a low volume, I keep a watchful eye out for my precocious nieces running around and my mother some few metres away, faithfully watching the midday news. Despite their seeming distractions, I am ever aware of their presence in our shared space, and do not want to arouse any curiosity that may raise unwanted attention and scrutiny.

"At your big age 🤔🤔." Akua responds swiftly, teasing me in our usual banter.

"Hmm, *chale*¹. The children are here." I try to curve her shade by taking the high road. After all, my twin nieces are only 6 years old, and I am not prepared to field their questions about gender and sexuality come dinner time.

"*Chale, chale*... it's because your mother will beat you ooh." Akua jokingly dismisses me. She will not spare me today, taking the opportunity to remind me that, despite my age and status, I am still a semi-closeted Ghanaian queer woman temporarily quarantining with family on my visit to Toronto.

This is part of the new reality for many lesbian, bisexual and queer women in

Ghana who have recently found themselves quarantining with homophobic family members due to job losses, school closures and strict lockdown protocols brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas they would previously have gone to a friend's house, found safety in their university dorm room or been able to attend in-person community building programs, LBQ women are now, more than ever, relying on the latest technologies to connect them while negotiating their safety, social lives and mental and emotional wellbeing in potentially violent family home dynamics. Young queer women living at home now face increased scrutiny of their gender identity/expression, policing of their phone calls with lovers and friends and increased pressure for marriage by family members. Certainly, prior to the pandemic, queer women faced insurmountable marginalization, as outlined in the COC Netherlands-sponsored LBQ needs assessment entitled *Our Voices: Mapping the Needs of LBQ Women and Trans People in Ghana*². According to this study, LBQ women and trans* people in Ghana experience high rates of depression and anxiety, alcohol and substance use and ongoing stigmatization and gender-based violence in their family homes. Indeed, queer women's communities navigate life at the intersection of sexism, religious fundamentalist violence and queerphobia. LBQ women and trans* people also confront the rigid scripts of gender and sexuality that force them into undesired/forced marriages, conversion therapy, corrective rape, low-

1 Ghanaian pidgin word meaning "friend".

2 Nwosu-Juba, N and the Anglophone West African LBQT Research Collective (2019). 'Our Voices, Mapping the Needs of LBQ Women and Trans People in Ghana: Research report based on a community-led study in four countries'. Amsterdam: COC Netherlands.

paying or even risky jobs to sustain their lives. LBQ women also experience being outed by ill-intentioned acquaintances, old school mates, rivals or even jilted ex-lovers online. During the pandemic, these issues have been exacerbated as many of the common outlets for support and healing have been closed down, and frustration, depression and restlessness creates worsening conditions for community members. The ongoing attacks on LGBTI communities, including the more recent push from the National Coalition of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values (NCPHSRFV) and members of Ghana's parliament to criminalize LGBTQIA+ people across Ghana have created a hostile environment for community members across the country³. Early on in the pandemic, Ghana's chief Imam, Sheikh Dr. Osmanu Sharubutu preached that COVID-19 was the result of sinful behaviour, including the rise of homosexuality in the country, warning local Muslims to stay away from LGBT activity⁴. Currently, while most of the community's attention is on the controversial closure of a new community space opened by *LGBT+ Rights Ghana* (LRG), many underlying issues continue to impact the community. The recent opening (and immediate closure) of the LRG office has also created a controversial fallout, which will have invariable effects for LBQ women's communities. In the following essay, I examine how LBQ women are navigating both the COVID pandemic and the increasingly hostile environment for LGBTQIA+ communities more broadly. I draw on (3) interviews with LBQ women in Accra, including the Executive Directors

of Courageous Sisters Ghana and OLS, respectively and a closeted lesbian university student who is currently quarantining with family. I also recall several anecdotes from LBQ community members in Ghana. Indeed, the pandemic has created both negative and positive impacts for queer women in Ghana, as they continue to build community in a queerphobic environment, with the added challenges of strict COVID protocols and a raging health crisis.

SITUATING LBQ WOMEN'S ORGANIZING

In Ghana, there is currently a small handful of women-centred and/or feminist queer organizations and collectives that mobilize to advocate for, teach and build the capacity and empowerment of LBQ women, trans* and non-binary people. These organizations are worth noting, including Courageous Sisters Ghana, Sisters of the Heart, DramaQueens, OLS, Alliance for Dynamic Initiatives and The Gathering. Each of these organizations or collectives emerged within the previous decade (2010s), collectively contributing to the growing LBQT and queer feminist movement in the country. Their activities range from creative arts/theatre, peer counselling, civic engagement, sexual and reproductive health rights advocacy and consciousness-raising. Many of these organizations work within a larger ecosystem of LGBTQ activism, working with different actors to engage advocacy projects, service provision and safety and security trainings for queer women and trans people.

3 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/foh-amoaning-calls-for-shutdown-of-new-lgbt-office-in-accra/>

4 <https://www.metroweekly.com/2020/04/bigots-blame-transgender-and-other-lgbtq-people-for-spread-of-covid-19/>

Ostensibly, queer women have found very little safety or solidarity in mainstream feminist/gender equality spaces, which are often entangled in (latent?) socio-religious conservatism, casual homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality disguised as "agenda-setting". Many women's rights activists and gender advocates in Ghana have distanced themselves from LBQ women's issues, because it is considered sinful, criminal and/or "unAfrican". The recent vetting of Gender Minister-designate Hon. Adwoa Safo demonstrated the ways in which mainstream gender equality advocates continue to erase, discount or condemn queer communities in Ghana. When asked about her position on LGBT rights, Safo declared that: "The issue of LGBTQI is an issue that when mentioned creates some controversy but ... our laws are clear on such practices. It makes it criminal. On the issue of its criminality, it is non-negotiable."⁵ Popular women's rights activist and media personality Gifty Anti's show *The Standpoint* recently featured an "ex-gay" who claimed to have been delivered through religious intervention⁶. The general tone of the episode suggested that Anti's own personal beliefs condemned homosexuality as sinful and immoral. Similarly, the religious fundamentalist group NCPHSRFV, who has aggressively campaigned to further criminalize LGBTI in Ghana's penal code, has also attracted some prominent feminist activists such as ArkFoundation's Dr. Angela Dwamena Aboagye, who are aligned with their traditional family values and anti-LGBTI stance.

Quiet as it's kept, the face of leadership in the growing LGBTQIA movement in Ghana is also unsurprisingly cisgendered gay men. With the exception of LBQ women and trans* organizations themselves, most organizational leaders across the movement are cisgendered men. We are yet to have a real reckoning with patriarchal notions of power, leadership and authority, or the ways in which, through years of gendered socialization, many LBQ women in Ghana have either been sidelined, lack the confidence to take up leadership positions or are unable to contribute to community organizing with the same regularity as men. Given the burdens of gendered household responsibilities, the masculinist framing of "real activism" or public-facing advocacy, the erasure of female same-sex desire, and the historical donor prioritization on men who sleep with men (MSM), queer women's organizations have experienced wide funding and capacity-building gaps, which have created even greater challenges for organizing during the pandemic.

LBQ WOMEN'S LIVES UNDER COVID

When COVID-19 first hit Ghana in March 2020, the Ghanaian government was swift to action. What felt like almost weekly addresses to the nation were made by President Akufo Addo to keep citizens informed about the ever-expanding protocols and relief measures to address the novel coronavirus. COVID-19 has exposed underlying inequalities, including LBQ women's access to affordable, reliable and non-judgmental healthcare. In a heteronormative (and stigmatizing)

5 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/lgbtqi-is-criminal-non-negotiable-per-our-laws-adwoa-safo/>

6 Anti, G. (2021) *The Standpoint* Episode: "My struggle with homosexuality". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o19_0001VVo.

societal context, seeking basic medical care (particularly sexual and reproductive health care where one may have to reveal their relationship status) is often a gamble for queer women. Further, while this moment is certainly anxiety-producing for many people the world-over, for LBQ women who already struggle with mental and emotional anxiety or depression (and have very little support system), the pandemic poses a greater challenge to their mental stability; long hours spent in the home, without seeing your community members can take a toll on LBQ women. Speaking with one lesbian university student, Frema⁷, who returned home amidst the lockdown, she noted:

“Moving back home unexpectedly from school was difficult for me, because for most of my final year in school, I was trying to psych myself for [returning home] and because it had to happen before I was ready, it was really depressing for me”.

(Frema, Interviewed February 5th, 2021)

While mental health services in Ghana are quite scarce for the general public, the stigma and taboo associated with lesbianism combined with the narrative of “African women’s resilience” can make it difficult for young queer women to access mental health support.

Moreover, physical social space for queer women was already limited before the pandemic. Due to a gendered lack of resources and stigmatization, LBQ women often have limited space to organize and socialize in the country. Popular bars or nightclubs in Ghana are often male-dominated. While there are growing entertainment spaces for gay men across Ghana, LBQ women are often less likely to have their own establishments to hangout or socialize. In the 2019 LBQ Needs Assessment, it was indicated that roughly 57% of respondents (n=295) had no paid job; either formal or informal, representing almost 6 out of every 10 participants. Indeed, unemployment and financial scarcity has always been a challenge for queer women and non-binary people in Ghana. While there are no official statistics on COVID’s impact on LBQ women in the country, there is much anecdotal evidence from community organizers to suggest that the pandemic has had worsening effects on these groups. According to the Executive Director of Courageous Sisters Ghana, Gaga⁸, pre-existing structured inequalities have only been magnified by the pandemic:

⁷ Psuedonym
⁸ Psuedonym

“These marginalized and deprived communities already have needs but this pandemic has rendered most of our target population jobless and has made most of them go back to abusive spaces. Businesses owned by LBQ women hit by the COVID-19 pandemic are facing economic hardships. Economic uncertainty related to COVID-19 has presented unique challenges for self-employed LBQ persons, from closures to revenue losses. During this COVID pandemic those working for themselves didn’t have benefits, such as sick pay, personal care, domestic services, food and pharmaceutical retails. COVID-19 has made self-employers a vulnerable group of people. Self-employers in fashion, entrepreneurship, private business owners have had to close down due to people not patronizing them anymore, and some with medical conditions have to stop working. Most business owners are still not operating because most of their business is travel-related, especially with the fashion and food business since COVID-19 people barely patronize them anymore. People with no skills or no education are also suffering to keep up with a healthy lifestyle under this pandemic.”

(Executive Director, CSG Interviewed Feb 8, 2021).

SHADOW PANDEMIC FOR LBQ WOMEN, TOO?

UN Women has noted that since the outbreak of COVID-19, there have been several reports from frontline workers showing the rise of various forms of violence towards women and girls⁹. Early on, Ghanaian women’s rights activists called for gender-responsive relief measures and sex-aggregated data that could address women and girls’ specific challenges in the pandemic¹⁰. The increased demands of unpaid care workers, the challenges of social distancing in a predominantly feminized informal sector and the effect on women with disabilities were some of the key issues highlighted by Ghanaian women’s rights advocates. Chief among these gendered issues was the growing cases of intimate partner and domestic violence in Ghana. We now know that, what UN Women terms the “shadow pandemic” continues to disproportionately affect women and girls in Ghana and around the world, as COVID rages on. In fact, between March and April 2021, at least four (4) women were reported murdered by their male partners in different parts of the country, sparking outrage and action from women’s rights activists.

And yet, some women are left behind in this discourse of the shadow pandemic. What has the shadow pandemic meant for queer women in Ghana? Are we facing higher forms of violence in our homes? To be sure, COVID may have slowed down the world, but it has not stopped queerphobic and gender-based violence from occurring in LBQ women’s lives.

⁹ UN Women (2020). The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

¹⁰ <https://www.businessghana.com/site/news/General/209223/COVID-19:-Government-must-consider-gender-dynamics->

However, given the lack of government data about LBQ women in Ghana, as well as the heteronormative framing of “gender-based violence”, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent this vulnerable population have also been exposed to the shadow pandemic. Yet, according to the 2018 Human Rights Watch report “No Choice but to Deny Who I Am”¹¹, LBQ women are most likely to face physical, emotional and financial abuse within their household family environments. LBQ women experience high levels of violence and sexual abuse, which often goes unreported to the police for fear of being criminalized or attacked. In a recent survey¹², 54% of the respondents say that they have suffered sexual violence and had not reported it to the police. Due to the financial burdens that many LBQ women face in Ghana, it is not uncommon for them to partner with heterosexual men (while engaged in sexual or romantic side relationships with other women). Within this context, women can be exposed to high levels of violence from their male partners, who typically have more resources than them. Queer women also experience intimate partner violence in their relationships with other women; this violence often can look like financial, emotional or physical abuse or blackmailing. Anecdotes from community members suggest that the lack of job security for some queer women in Ghana (particularly masculine-presenting women) has presented greater stress in some relationships, which may increase incidences of violence within LBQ women’s

partnerships. At a time where many more of us are quarantining at home, one only imagines that these incidences of violence may have also increased. However, it is difficult to fully assess as national statistics do not include gender and sexual minorities’ experiences of domestic violence.

ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION UNDER COVID

For LBQ organizers, this pandemic has created a seismic shift in how we must think about community-building. LBQ women’s needs are ever-expanding as the pandemic has affected our jobs, social lives, access to core services and overall mental and emotional well-being. Community organizers have also been forced to re-strategize their programming given the new COVID restrictions put in place by the Government of Ghana. For example, the OLS Executive Director, Lariba¹³ notes: “The inability to meet our team and community members in person as the result of the COVID-19 protocol, such as social distancing, delayed most of our activities and funding support.” Other organizations have also scaled up their peer support counselling to support the psychosocial and mental well-being of LBQ women. During the height of the lockdown organizations like CSG and OLS provided stimulus packages as emergency funding for individual LBQ women. They also collaborated with other organizations within the movement to provide personal protective equipment and care packages

11 Human Rights Watch (2018) “No Choice But to Deny Who I Am: Violence and Discrimination against LGBT People in Ghana”. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/ghana0118_web.pdf

12 Nwosu-Juba, N and the Anglophone West African LBQT Research Collective (2019). ‘Our Voices, Mapping the Needs of LBQ Women and Trans People in Ghana: Research report based on a community-led study in four countries’. Amsterdam: COC Netherlands.

13 Pseudonym

to LBQ women. The pandemic has also challenged these organizations to think more creatively about how they mobilize community members. For example, CSG Director notes:

“With organization work, COVID-19 has taught us to be innovative in terms of programming. It has also nurtured us to be more assertive on programmes that we host virtually and physically. This pandemic has made organisations work collectively with the best interests of community members as top priority. COVID has also taught activists to practice self-care while teaching it.”


(CSG Director, Interviewed Feb 8, 2021)

This global health crisis has also presented new opportunities for organizers to engage community development online. The role of technology in facilitating new relationships, connections, business opportunities and leisure activities has seen a rise since the pandemic started. For LBQ women, there is now an even greater reliance on internet communication; social media and telecommunication services such as WhatsApp groups, Clubhouse, Twitter, Telegram and Zoom have all become key organizing and socializing spaces for queer women during the pandemic. However, this increased demand for technology-assisted community-building and activism also presents certain challenges in a country like Ghana, where financial access to internet data bundles as well as unreliable network connections and electricity can limit who

and how often community members engage these tools. Indeed, utilization of WhatsApp groups and other social media platforms have always been integral for LGBTQ organizing in Africa. However, with greater online visibility comes greater risk of violence, blackmail and outing. In Ghana, while there is much discussion about gay blackmailers, there is far less attention on how LBQ women are negotiating the risks of online space. More data is needed to understand the specific challenges that these communities face in accessing digital platforms.

CONCLUSION

Moving forward, there is a need for more investigation into the lives of Ghanaian LBQ women under the pandemic. Empirical data is crucial for making a strong case to support and provide more resources to LBQ women's communities. However, the reports from frontline workers such as Courageous Sisters Ghana and OLS does suggest that the conditions for LBQ women are worsening under the pandemic. As Ghana races to manage and contain the virus, currently rolling out the AstraZeneca vaccine, the question remains how the most marginalized communities will be supported. Special attention must be given to historically under-resourced groups, including LBQ women. And yet, I fear that given the current climate of homophobia, queer women's challenges will continue to be invisibilized. To be a queer woman in Ghana is to be told to wait your turn; after all, there are only 24 hours in a day, and we cannot prioritize every issue. To be a queer woman in Ghana is to know that your turn will never actually come, because no one was really invested, anyway.



To be a queer woman in Ghana is to know that even when your favourite queer Ghanaian celebrity couple dies, we will never really get to publicly name all that they meant to us, for fear of how it might embarrass their bereaved families. It is to know that even in death, we are not really free from the homophobic narrative of our lives. It is to be erased, time and again; closeted in plain sight.

NOTE:

This article was first drafted in early March 2021. At the time, the LGBT community was facing a major crisis, after the LGBT+ Rights Ghana office had just been raided, creating a major societal backlash from members of church and state, fueled by media backlash. Since then, another case has emerged, as 21 activists were arrested on May 20th, 2021, while attending a paralegal training on human rights in Ho, Volta region. At the time of writing this article, they had been denied early bail twice and they remain in police custody under the charge of “unlawful assembly”, while the authorities conduct their investigation. It is worth noting that the majority of these activists are part of the LBQT community (15 persons). While the community continues to mobilize around this case, seeking legal support and providing care and welfare to the detainees, the issues of erasure and invisibility of LBQT persons have become magnified in this moment. There is an even greater need now to understand and explain the various intersections of violence that queer women and trans people experience in Ghana, particularly in regard to carceral structures and processes. I stand in solidarity with all of those currently being unlawfully detained and we will continue to fight in their name.

NIGERIA





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BEING QUEER IN THE #ENDSARS MOVEMENT: AFFIRMATION AND CHALLENGES

BY SIKIRU ABIONA YUSUFF — NIGERIA

“A lady brought a rainbow flag and our fellow protesters turned on us at Berger round-a-bout, Abuja. They tore our placards and seized the flag. I got it back but they refused to let us fly it. I wore it on my neck and they refused. Said, we either take it off or leave. I’m leaving.”¹”

The above excerpt captured the distress of one of the queer protesters during the unprecedented #EndSars protests between October 8 and 20, 2020, in Nigeria. Identified as Amara, she, like several other unconventional sexualized minorities, joined the #EndSars protesters in order to amplify their voices against the sustained harassment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), one of the tactical units in the Nigerian Police Force. On the other hand, the protest was also an opportunity for the LTBTQ community to unmask their identities and cohabit freely without any hindrance. Regardless of the prohibition of same-sex relationship in Nigeriasince2014, the queer community, using various hashtags such as #QueerLivesMatter, #QueerNigerianlivesmatter, Na Gay I Gay, I No Kill Person!#LGBTLivesmatter,Rainbow Forever and Na Lesbian I Lesbian, I No Kill

Person; attempted to change the narratives and affirmed their space and agency through the protest. This article explores how attempt by Nigerian queer community struggle to find their voices during the EndSars Movement proved abortive. The paper provides a general overview of queer peoples' struggle in Nigeria. It also reflects on the process of negotiating agency and space appropriation during the protest and its aftermath. The article reveals that, notwithstanding the basis for EndSars protest, attitude towards the queer activists remained unimpressive.

¹ Adeniyi Ademoroti, #EndSARS excluded queer protesters. What will it take for acceptance? <https://africanarguments.org/2020/10/endsars-excluded-queer-protesters-what-will-it-take-for-acceptance/>. 28 October, 2020. Amara, the lesbian. @theamarion. https://twitter.com/the_amarion/status/1316400819986665476?s+=20. Accessed: 25 March, 2021.

QUEER COMMUNITY IN NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW

There is a growing body of study on the queer community in several developing countries of the world, including Nigeria.² In Nigeria for instance, same-sex relationship became outlawed in 2014 following the signing into law, a bill prohibiting such act by President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan.³ Likewise, during a four-day visit to the United States, shortly after his emergence in 2015, President Muhammadu Buhari also reiterated the position of the country on same-sex marriage.⁴ He opined that, the act of same-sex marriage is abhorred by Nigerian cultures, thus, it remained outlawed.⁵ Nigeria's aversion to same-sex marriage and other related unconventional sexual orientations is as a result of the religious inclination of the people. Under the pretense of religion and other cultural practices, the Nigerian state, regardless of the human rights, as enshrined in the constitution marginalize and silence people of queer orientation. Notwithstanding the prohibition, it would appear that queer community has continued to navigate the virtual space to congregate, discuss and address issues relating to their marginalization.⁶ In a survey by The Initiative for Equal Right (TIERS), a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), seeking to protect the rights of the marginalized, including

the queer community shows that, between 2017 and 2019, there was a downturn in the general perception of the masses towards the queer community. For instance, whereas the report showed that 83% of Nigerians will not identify with a queer person and 90% support the prohibition law, report in 2019 showed that the former had dropped to 63% while the latter was 75%.⁷ Irrespective of the cultural belief, law and criminalization of people with unconventional sexual orientation, the #EndSars protest enabled few queer activists to air their voices and contested the Nigeria space.

#ENDSARS MOVEMENT: A DEFINING MOMENT FOR THE QUEER PEOPLE

The overriding theme of the popular EndSars Movement in Nigeria was the long overdue police brutality by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, tactical unit in the Nigeria Police. The hashtag first surfaced on Twitter⁸ in 2017 as activists in Nigeria sought to abolish a federal police unit for its perceived human rights abuse and extra-judicial killings. Established in 1992, SARS as it is commonly called was set up to address incessant armed robbery incidents afflicting the nation at the time. Overtime, there were growing concerns following reports of human rights abuses such as wrong profiling, extortions and sometimes, killings of innocent souls

2 Azeenarh Mohammed, Chitra Nagarajan and Rafeeat Aliyu ed., *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak*, Cassava Republic, 2018; Jideofor Adibe, "The Politics of Same Sex Marriage in Nigeria", *Journal of African Union Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (2012), pp. 99-108. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26893824>. Accessed: 24 March, 2021.

3 Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, "Why are Nigerians terrified of same-sex marriage in America?", CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/06/opinions/nigeria-america-gay-marriage/index.html>. Accessed: 29 March, 2021.

4 <https://m.guardian.ng/news/there-is-no-room-for-gay-rights-in-nigeria-says-buhari/>. Accessed: 28 March, 2021.

5 Ibid.

6 David Akinfenwa, *How Social Media is Helping Queer Nigerians Come Out, Find Community*, *The Guardian*, 14, January, 2021. <https://m.guardian.ng/life/how-social-media-is-helping-queer-nigerians-come-out-find-community/>. Accessed: 30 March, 2021.

7 Freddie Jacob, "The Challenges of Being Queer in Nigeria", *The Guardian*, 15 February, 2021. <http://gomag.com/article/the-challenges-of-being-queer-in-nigeria/>. Accessed: March 24 2021.

8 Twitter remains one of the most potent identity hidden social platforms where issues are dissected in full blown debate. One significant impact of Twitter is that, it is dominated by social influencers with large followers, hence,

by the members of SARS operatives. In the aftermath of the EndSARS movement of the 2017 which was largely a social media affair, the movement was revitalized in October 2020 after new evidence suggested that this police unit remained notorious in their human right abuses. Unlike the 2017 demand that resulted in change in nomenclature from SARS to FSARS (Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad), there was a sustained outrage, demanding for the total disbandment of the police unit.

When the protesters moved from virtual spaces (social media) to conventional spaces (streets), in several cities, including some rural areas in Nigeria, there were outright demands for the end of SARS, prosecution of culpable police officers and restitutions for victims of abuses. In response to the yearning of the protesters, the Nigerian Police had on 11 October, 2020 announced the disbandment of the unit. While this development received encomium from a group of protesters, another group quickly raised objection that previous disbandment had not produced tangible results, therefore, the demand for government intervention. In any case, there were calls for the President of the nation, Governors of states and other political stakeholders to make public their stance on the EndSars matter. In no time, state governments set up commissions of inquiries into police brutalities and the appropriate persecution of erring officers. It was also decided that victims of abuse would be compensated.

Like the *BlackLivesMatter* in the United States, EndSars Movement received global acknowledgment and support from several world acclaimed influencers, government organisations and countries of the world. Locally, popular leading religious leaders, artistes, celebrities and social media influencers such as David Adeleke (Davido), Douglas Jack Agu (Runtown), Michael Collins Ajereh (Don Jazzy), Eedris Abdulkareem, Olamide Gbenga Adededeji, Damini Ebunoluwa Ogulu (Burna Boy), Ayodeji Ibrahim Balogun (Wizkid), Tiwatope Savage, Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde, and Debo Adebayo (Mr. Macaroni) took to the streets in solidarity to demand for justice against police brutality.⁹ Others were Rihanna, Cardi B., Beyonce, Naomi Campbell, Anthony Joshua, Nicki Minaj, and John Boyega, also added their voices against police brutality in Nigeria.¹⁰

As the protest gathered momentum, it re-echoed one of the sensitive debates in Nigeria, the expression of queerness, the constitutional right of this marginalized community and the demand for justice against police brutality. For queer activists, Mathew Blaise Nwozaku, Freddie Jacob, Amara the Lesbian, and Victor Emmanuel who were physically on the streets during the protest, it was a defining moment to challenge the persecution suffered by LGBTQ in the hand of the SARS operatives. Reports have shown that following the prohibition of same-sex marriage in 2014, the law gave rise to increased homophobic violence in the country, including mob attacks, extortion

⁹ Joe McCarthy, "11 Artists Supporting the EndSARS Protests in Nigeria" *Global Citizen*, 15 October, 2020. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/artists-support-endsars-protests-in-nigeria/>. Accessed: 27 March, 2021.

¹⁰ Ibid.

and sexual assault.¹¹ Queer people are harassed by the police for having anything on them that make the officer think they are queer. Narrating the ordeal of a queer victim, Chisom writes:

They saw the pictures of two girls kissing in my phone and then they asked me if I was a lesbian, said a friend of mine, recalling her ordeal with the police in the capital city of Abuja. I told them that it was for a story I was working on. But they didn't believe me so in order not to escalate the matter; I had to pay them a huge amount of money.¹²

A BBC report in 2014 revealed how police force hunted down alleged gay men in Bauchi after a local newspaper reported that homosexuals were forming an association.¹³

In a similar incident, earlier in 2020, there were reports circulating that police in Benin City, Edo State embarked on a witch-hunt for gay men.¹⁴ It was further alleged, according to the LGBTQ website KitoDiaries, that police were making the rounds in Benin City's gay community and pressuring men to share the contact details of others in an attempt to frame and subsequently arrest them.¹⁵ It is worth underlining that police brutalities against queer victims are mostly unreported due to the hostile environment

that they found themselves.¹⁶ As a result, members of queer community have suffered untoward persecution in the hands of the police force. It was against this backdrop that queer activists took to the streets, notwithstanding people's perception of their sexual orientation to affirm their right and claim their space.

I AM HERE, I AM VALID: ENDSARS, QUEER COMMUNITY AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE NEGOTIATION IN NIGERIA.

On 14 October 2020, Amara, one of the leading queer activists in Abuja shared a video on her Twitter handle, narrating her ordeal and that of other queers in the hand of members of EndSars protesters who suddenly turned against them due to their perceived sexual life.¹⁷ According to her, the queer protesters were attacked, there placards torn and a barricade created to separate them from others. Subsequently, she advised other queer members to stay off the protest in order to protect themselves while she asked them to join her on virtual platforms to chat a new path.¹⁸ Sequel to the attack in another video clip, Amara and another member of the queer community was seen donating snacks meant for queer members who did not show up. This gesture was an uncommon generosity that the queer displayed during the protest to negotiate their rights and existence in

11 law

12 Chisom Peter Job, #EndSARS is a huge moment in Nigeria's queer history. 5 November, 2020 <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/11/05/endsars-is-huge-moment-nigerias-queer-history/%3foutputType=amp>. Accessed: March 24 2021

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 The anti same-sex marriage stipulates 14 years imprisonment for anyone involve in such act.

17 Adeniyi Ademoroti, #EndSARS excluded queer protesters. What will it take for acceptance? <https://africanarguments.org/2020/10/endsars-excluded-queer-protesters-what-will-it-take-for-acceptance/>. 28 October, 2020

18 Ibid.

Nigeria. In a similar video, Mathew Blaise was seen on the street of Ikoyi, Lagos, echoing #QueerLivesMatter.¹⁹ In the video, Blaise, Emmanuel and Freddie expressed trepidation as the protest gathered momentum whether to display their placards and reveal their personality as queers. For Blaise and others, EndSars Movement was an opportunity for queer people to promote intersectionality. It offered a platform to air their voices against mostly unreported victimization in the hands of the Nigerian Police Force. It was believed that protests of this nature should be all inclusive regardless of one's sexual orientation.

Conversely, what Blaise and others saw as an opportunity to promote intersectionality would thereafter be regarded as an attempt at hijacking the EndSars movement. Indeed, there were many meanings to the EndSars Movement. Notwithstanding the position of the law on queerness in Nigeria, the attack on queer persons was received with mixed reactions.

EndSars protest was a significant milestone in the lives of queer people in Nigeria. The movement became an opportunity to contest the social space and display their agency against all odds. Seeking intersectionality, the protest afforded the queer activists to raise awareness and concerns of other marginalized voices while reawakening the global sentiment on the obnoxious same-sex marriage that has continued to hinder their right to liberty and freedom of expression

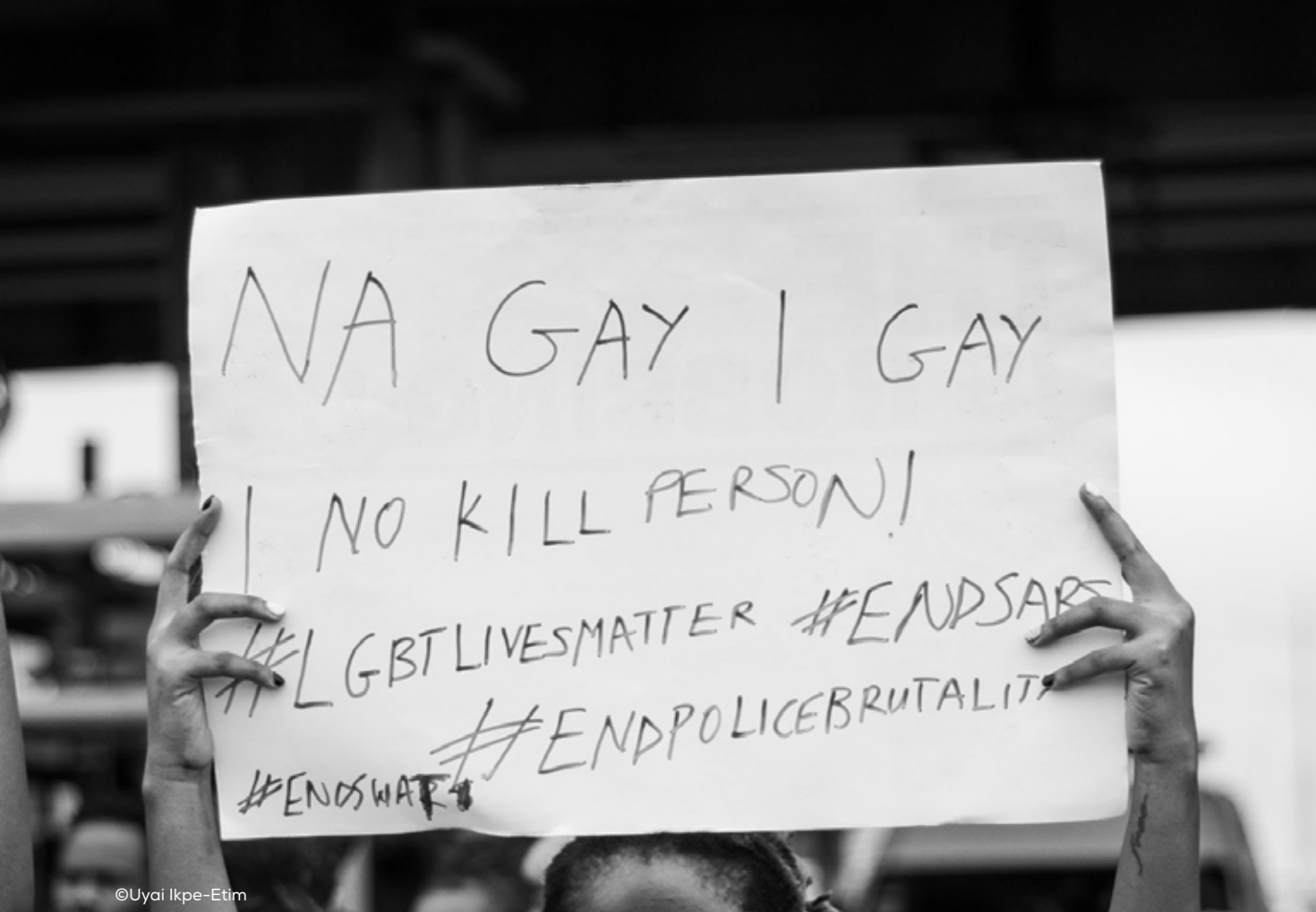
and association. According to Emmanuel, the protest served as a clarion call to the international community and human rights organisations to advocate for equal rights of the queer people in Nigeria.²⁰

CONCLUSION

In this article, attempt has been made to reflect on the impact of EndSars Movement on the queer community in Nigeria. While the overriding thrust of the protest was to end the impunity of the SARS unit of the Nigerian Police Force, it also offered the queer groups who had suffered untoward injustices in silence to air their voices and negotiate their space. Notwithstanding the challenges they were confronted with, the protest would remain a defining moment in the queer group struggle for legitimacy in Nigeria.

¹⁹ Vincent Desmond, *Why #ENDSARS is also a Defining Moment for Nigeria's Queer Community*. 22 October, 2020. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/endsars-nigeria-protests%3famp>. Accessed: 24 March, 2021.

²⁰ Vincent Desmond, *Why #ENDSARS is also a Defining Moment for Nigeria's Queer Community*. 22 October, 2020. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/endsars-nigeria-protests%3famp>. Accessed: 24 March, 2021.



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UNTIL WE ARE ALL FREE

BY AUMARH — NIGERIA

The past few months have been a rollercoaster ride around the globe. While we are still trying to stay safe, survive the COVID-19 pandemic and get used to the new normal, the world experienced different uprisings from the US elections to the various movements protesting bad governance, police brutality and gender-based violence around the world. In Nigeria, Nigerians united to speak against police brutality meted on its citizens by members of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS was a Nigeria Police Force unit created in late 1992 to deal with crimes associated with robbery, motor vehicle theft, kidnapping, cattle rustling, and firearms. However, the members of the SARS unit profiled citizens and unleashed inhumane treatments on individuals suspected to be gay, cultists, internet fraudsters, among others. The LGBTQI+ community in Nigeria remains one of the groups most persecuted by SARS.

In 2020, a video of a young man who was shot dead by members of SARS went viral. This sparked a nationwide outrage that led to the #ENDSARS movement. The #ENDSARS movement calls for an end to police brutality and bad governance in Nigeria. Peaceful protests were held around the country and everyone came out together to organise. Activists from different walks of life came together to lend their voice to the movement. The Feminist coalition, a group of young Nigerian feminists raised funds around providing legal aid for arrested protesters, mental health support and medical treatment for wounded protesters, and relief for families of deceased protesters. LGBTQI+ activists were not missing in action either; they were at the frontlines of the #ENDSARS movement. Members of the LGBTQI+ community took to the streets to peacefully protest against the inhumane treatments they have experienced from these SARS officials over the years. Young LGBTQI+ activists became the centre of organising for the community. Adaeze Feyisayo established Safe Hquse NG which was set up to respond to the needs of the LGBTQI+ folks during the #ENDSARS protests. SafeHquse NG raised funds which were used to provide temporary safe housing for at-risk individuals, medical treatment for the wounded and call cards and internet data for online protesters who continued to create online awareness about the movement. Other LGBTQI+ activists also worked behind the scenes to ensure queer protesters who encountered any difficulties resulting from the protest were taken care of. At the protest grounds, people donated food, drinks, nose masks, inhalers and gas masks, all in the bid to ensure everyone at

the protest ground was fully prepared and protected. More folks became visible and lent their voice to the #ENDSARS movement. In Abuja, LGBTQI+ protesters including a popular youtuber 'Amara the lesbian' were harassed at a protest for carrying the rainbow flag. They were advised to put away the flag claiming it would confuse the demands of the people. In Lagos, similar push back was experienced by queer folks who dared to carry anything deemed to be pro LGBTQI+ to the protests. But despite the push back from fellow Nigerians, the LGBTQI+ community continued to attend the protests and lend their voices to #ENDSARS.

On 20.10.20 in Lagos, the Nigerian army and police officers opened fire on peaceful protesters resulting in a number of casualties. The Lagos state Government also imposed a curfew which further instigated violence in the state, which spread quickly to other parts of the country. There were clashes between the state actors and communities, people were killed and injured, and properties were destroyed. However, activists continued to organise to provide socio-economic and psychosocial resources for individuals who were most affected by the aftermath of the #ENDSARS protests.

Queer womxn activists also continue to champion the fight for women's rights and equality in Nigeria. The COVID-19 lockdown saw a rise in reported cases of Gender Based Violence (GBV) around the country. Some of the women who sought help and needed temporary shelter were sent to safe homes that are run by LBQ organisations. The Nigerian Feminist Forum (NFF), a Pro

LGBTQI+ and SHRH group made up of different independent activists including queer womxn, is also at the fore front of the fight against GBV in Nigeria. NFF continues to provide financial and technical support to respond to reported cases of violence against women irrespective of their sexuality or religion.

In August, Musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu was sentenced to death by hanging in Kano state for blasphemy against Mohammed. LGBTQI+ activists among other independent activists took to twitter and started a campaign with the hashtag #JusticeForYahaya to free the singer. A retrial was later obtained for Yahaya Sharif-Aminu on the basis that he was not represented by a legal representative throughout his trial.

2021 has also seen some challenging times as we still battle with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the battle for vaccination as many countries start to administer vaccines so far into the year. In February, The Lagos state government announced that they will be reopening the toll gate and Lagosians responded by coming out to #OccupyLekkiTollGate (the toll gate is also the site of the Lekki massacre). #OccupyLekkiTollGate is a movement against the reopening of the Lekki toll gate until the government is held accountable and justice is obtained for the families who lost their loved ones on 20:10:20. The protest however was not a success; the Lagos state Government had assigned armed state actors to stand guard at the protest location and its environs. At least ten protesters were beaten and arrested, other folks had to

return to their homes. Cybersecurity Corner, an LGBTQI+ cybersecurity community on Twitter and Instagram designed carousels to create awareness around protest security and where to access help and support when needed. These were shared on different platforms and networks in the days leading to #OccupyLekkiTollGate. Cybersecurity Corner continues to provide digital and cybersecurity resources to minority communities around the country.

LGBTQI+ activists in Nigeria continue to lend their voice to fight against discrimination of any kind. LGBTQI+ organisations continue to roll out programs that seek to educate the general public on their human rights while building bridges with allies and stakeholders. This type of engagement brings about positive change in the movement and foster spaces where we learn, unlearn and relearn; and understand that our issues are interconnected because...

“Until we are all free, we are none of us free”

- Emma Lazarus.



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IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POLICE BRUTALITY, MY QUEERNESS TOOK A BACKSEAT

BY VICTOR EMMANUEL (VICWONDER) — NIGERIA

When Kayode Ani (another LGBTQ+ rights activist) and I decided to march alongside several Nigerian youths in the End SARS protests in Nigeria in 2020, specifically in Enugu state, nothing could have prepared us for the resistance and remarks that we got from the rest of the agitating flock.

The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria was a decentralized movement against unfathomable police brutality from the SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad) unit of the Nigerian police force. The unit had been notoriously profiling young people, especially men, as criminals and fraudsters based on their choices of fashion, body tattoos, hairstyles and the type of electronic gadgets we used. First created in late 1992, their mandate was to deal with crimes such as armed robbery, vehicle theft, kidnapping, etc., but for almost two decades instead, their activities involved mounting illegal roadblocks, carrying out unwarranted searches based on the appearance of their "suspects", making illegal arrests, extortion, rape and many more hideous crimes. So, on the 8th of October 2020, having reached our peak of frustration, the Nigerian youth decided to engage the government through peaceful protests across the country.

The LGBTQ+ community had not been spared from all the atrocities of the SARS unit so members of the community and activists also joined the marches to protest police brutality, especially because it was two times worse for us. This unit would often harass, assault, extort and in some extreme cases, kill queer people not just because they decided, without proof, we were internet fraudsters but also because they found out about our sexual orientation. It was necessary that as a community, we joined the country to rid it of this menace.

I was in Enugu state for the duration of the protests and together with other queer youths, we took up placards and joined the seemingly endless throng of young people on the streets and major roads of the state. On our placards were written the hashtags "#EndSARS" and "#QueerLivesMatter." Unfortunately, due to the homophobic climate of Nigeria, our hand, stretched out in solidarity was rejected.

On the first day of the protests, only Lagos state youths had marched and convened at the State House of Assembly. On the second day, protests had sprung up across major cities like Abuja and Port Harcourt in addition to Lagos that was still going hard. It was on the third day of the protests that Enugu joined in the action. By then, I and Kayode Ani, who are very visible within the Nigerian queer community had tweeted our intentions of joining the protests not just as angry Nigerian youths, but also as angry queer Nigerian youths. We both reside in Enugu city. In Lagos, Matthew Blaise, another visible member of the queer community and an activist himself, had also made plans to join the protests alongside LGBTQ+ people in the state. All the way in Abuja, the nation's capital, Amara (popularly known as Amara the Lesbian) and her girlfriend Yinka, had also decided to represent the community in the Abuja protests.



“Although we felt slighted that in the fight against oppression, we were being gaslit, we still showed up the next day and the days afterwards until the protests ended because the bigger picture was to end SARS!”

On the third day of the protests, that is the 10th of October specifically, we were all chanting “EndSARS!” and “QueerLivesMatter!” In Enugu, after about an hour of chanting, other protesters picked up on what we were saying and immediately took offense. According to them, we were bringing another agenda to the table. First, a random person started mimicking the walking pattern of a queer man in mockery, then they snatched our placards and tore them into pieces. In a bid to prevent an escalation of the situation, we had to walk in silence.

The segregation we felt that day in the midst of other oppressed Nigerians on the streets of Enugu, and the violence and attacks that loomed on the horizon if we continued to have a unique voice designed by our unique experiences, prompted us to

take precautionary measures and so before the following days of marches, we put out information on social media stating that we were going to walk together as a group to mitigate danger. We also set up channels to receive funding and donations so that we could feed, quench our thirsts, give first aid, etc., as it was crystal-clear that the cis-heterosexuals did not really give a damn.

Although we felt slighted that in the fight against oppression, we were being gaslit, we still showed up the next day and the days afterwards until the protests ended because the bigger picture was to end SARS!

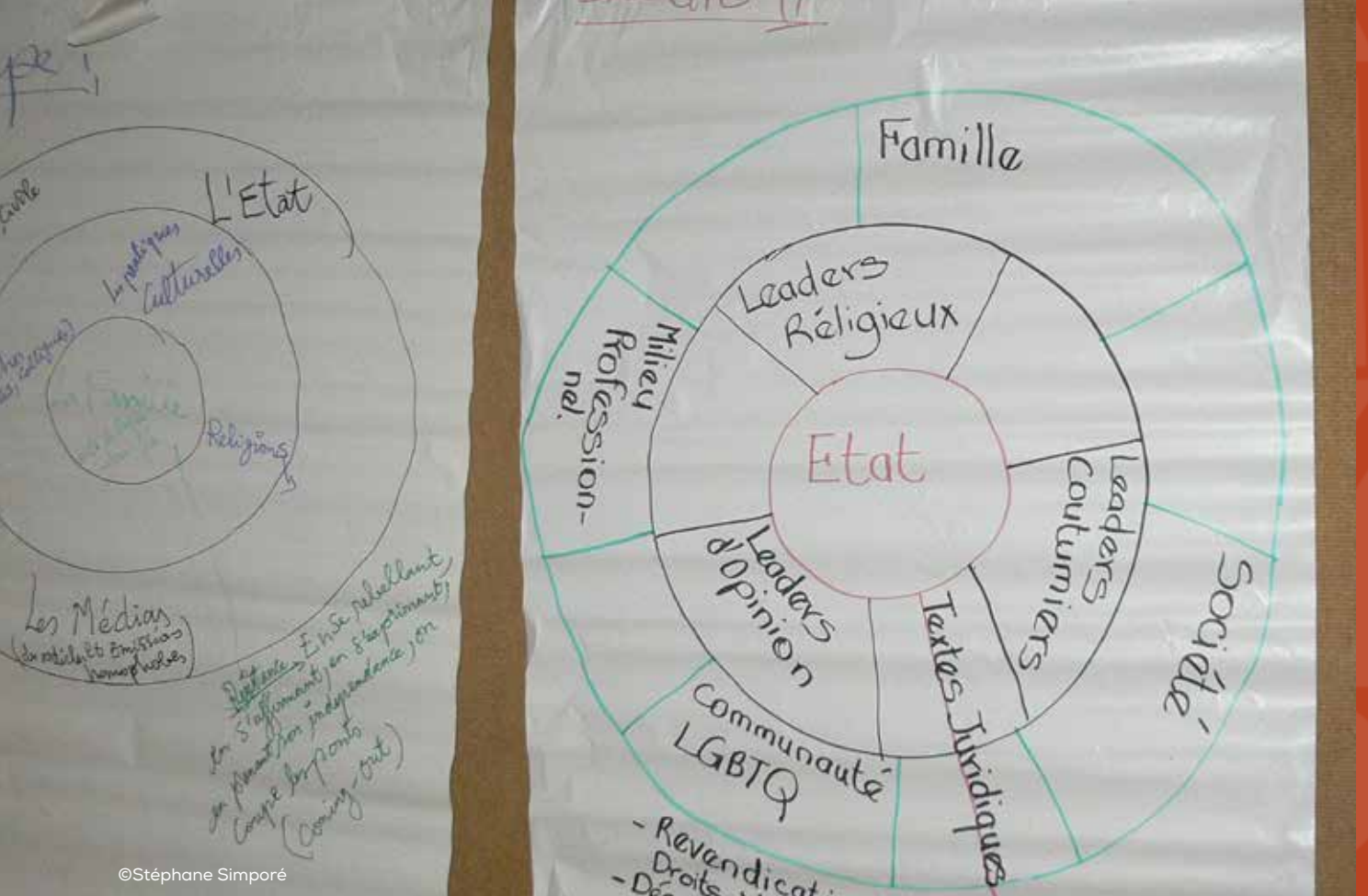
#EndSARS as a movement had started long before 2020. In 2016, the hashtag had first trended on the internet. After much agitation online, the government had then promised reforms of the unit. But like most promises from the Nigerian government, this too wasn't kept. In 2017, 2018 and 2019 more promises of reforms were made. Similar to most Revolutions in history, the spark needed to drive permanent changes happened on October 3rd 2020 when a video of a SARS police officer shooting a young man in front Westland Hotel, Ughelli, Delta state surfaced on the internet. Watching an innocent young man lose his life unjustly lodged an uncomfortable lump in the throats of young Nigerians and we took to the streets. The protests ended on the 22nd of October, having lasted almost a month, a period that sadly featured a lot of deaths and human right violations. At the end, Nigerian youths presented a list of five demands to the government. First, we demanded the immediate release of all those arrested during the protests, then we asked that justice and compensation be served to those who died from police brutality in Nigeria and their families. We also demanded that an independent body should be set up in ten days to investigate and prosecute all reports of police misconduct especially during the protests. The fourth demand was for a psychological evaluation and retraining of SARS operatives going forward and lastly, the salaries of police officers be paid completely and more frequently as there were complaints from the force that they hardly got paid.

After days of protesting and making these demands, the Inspector-General of the Nigerian Police force banned the FSARS unit from all illegal activities and indiscriminate searches.

I learned something in the whole process: although Nigerians cherry-picked the type of oppression they wanted to fight against – and it goes without saying that the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community wasn't included – it is imperative that we all come together and demand our rights and privileges as citizens, one cause at a time.

SENEGAL





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LESBIAN, BISEXUAL AND QUEER CITIZENS IN SENEGAL: CHALLENGES AND FUTURE

BY KIRAAY — SENEGAL

Most of the time, when Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer (LBQ) women get involved in programs, it is only as part of associations or networks of associations. Many of them work with civil society organizations under the umbrella of programs and themes of HIV-AIDS and related opportunistic infections. The societal and religious reality of the country has been transformed with the appearance of religious radicalism, a recent fact with direct effects on the rejection of LGBTIQ people. A few years ago, as already noted, there was greater openness to the lived experience of homosexuality in Senegalese society than today. Religious extremism has entrenched LGBTIphobic prejudice. Islamic fundamentalists spread anti-Western and homophobic messages based on radical interpretations of religious texts that designate homosexual people as “cursed. This contributes to a societal climate of violence and discrimination against queer and non-binary people. Very few Muslim and Christian leaders are sensitive to the plight of LGBTIQ groups and communities.

In the report of a survey published in September 2020 and carried out by ALDARTE-Spain BILBAO with MEDICOS DEL MUNDO, community associations, civil society and and religious sector on questions of sexual and gender diversity, it is mentioned that the hostile attitude towards sexual and gender diversity is due to the interpretation of the Koran as one of the imams testified: "the Koran is clear, it says that LGBTI people are outlawed and we cannot go against the Koran". But later he acknowledged that if LGBTI people are not accompanied and continue to be excluded from health programs, diseases and infections will continue to spread in the general population. And it is on the basis of this sense of self-protection that some religious leaders have finally agreed to "work" with LGBTI collectives in Senegal.

Nevertheless, as an LBTIQ collective, we take advantage of this breach of acceptance to consider them as pseudo-allies and to make them carry awareness-raising on cohabitation and acceptance in the aim of reducing violence based on orientation and gender. This work is supported by Médicos and includes advocacy arguments that these clerics will use in the mosques to raise awareness against stigma and discrimination for better access to care for LGBTI people. This collaboration allows us to advocate with state officials - religious and allies with the "face" of HIV-AIDS.

However, we can see a lack of willingness from the Senegalese government to protect LBTIQ people rights, and whose national legislation criminalizes LBTQI people

in the so-called Article 319 law. Recently questioned publicly, the Senegalese Head of State affirmed that:

“We are very comfortable with our laws and Human Rights are respected but there could not be any change about the laws on homosexuality because the Senegalese society is not yet ready” and he added “we cannot ask Senegal to legalize homosexuality and organize a GAY PRIDE tomorrow, it is our way of living and being and it has nothing to do with homophobia.”

It is important to remember that these words were said during the visit to Senegal of the Canadian Prime Minister who in his speech questioned his counterpart Head of State on the human rights situation of LGBTI people in Senegal.

It must also be recognized that in Senegal, there has been a development of a strong sense of claiming a national and African identity in a global context of struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism. However, this resistance comes at the expense of the rights and needs of LBTQI people who are unfortunately presented as a Western priority. This has direct and very negative consequences for the LBTIQ collective.

In such a context, the sexism of the Senegalese society finds itself in a collective imagination that is incapable of seeing the existence of women who desire other women. The LGBTI reality is fundamentally male and lesbianism is rendered totally invisible. And the fact of

living in such a hostile environment where multiple factors favor violence and rejection makes it very complicated to accept oneself, and, even more, to live openly one's desires to come out publicly or to talk about it in the close environment (family, university-school-neighborhood, work etc) and to organize collectively.


This is why one of the challenges of the struggle for sexual and gender diversity in Senegal is to work to strengthen the collective identity of lesbian, bisexual and queer women* who are subjected to severe controls by families and society, leading to corrective or curative rape or violence. The paradox is that LBQ, who are labeled as the weaker sex, face oppression and are devalued, in terms of access to funding, employment and education, in favor of gay men. The internal violence within the collaboration in mixed-gender networks, where men take advantage of the precariousness of identity-based associations led by women who have difficulties in obtaining resources to develop their structures, is exacerbated.

Nevertheless, LBQ women, aware of this situation of inherited male oppression, pictured this as an egg in its cocoon, decided to hatch the egg to see the light of day. We LGBTIQ women, full citizens, aware of our value and competences, decided to see the day intelligently. We decided to work by creating links of peer-to-peer solidarity, and to strengthen each other through cohesion in equity and intersectionality, in order to

raise our voice. Thus, we participate in the individual and collective development by sensitizing our peers for improved self-esteem, by providing information on laws, fundamental rights, safety to avoid or reduce aggressions especially in periods of societal crisis as recently noted in Senegal.

Aware that strengthening must be done at several levels for a good advocacy approach and that networking is a strong point of mass mobilization, even though we know that for most LBQ women, visibility may not be the fundamental priority, strengthening, training and acceptance remain a form of passive revolution and being aware of this revolution is the beginning of a commitment towards visibility. Other strategies of mobilization and community development that we have include: the creation of soccer teams to, among other things, meet and "feel" each other. There is also the organization of symbolic weddings. Faced with questions, we have opted to work towards women's self-determination and to put in place strategies for peaceful mass organizing, hence the linkage, word of mouth, snowball effect and langaboury¹. This is the type of sensitization called 'going to the bottom of the pyramid' for our peers who are not members of an association, who have no information (creation of safe space for discussions, dialogue of the youth, support of psychosocial support, prevention advice and warning to avoid isolation and stigmatization, violence). We strategically collaborate with some state representatives

¹ Lagan Boury is a Senegalese game (example: you are blindfolded and asked to go and look for a hidden object in a non-determined space). We take this example to go down to the field, particularly in the sites of drag without knowing what is waiting for us, to look for our peers who don't want or don't know the associative life; alone or rejected to accompany them and try to convince them to join the associations for better care and to reduce the stigma and the discrimination



in cognitive advocacy on human rights and by reminding them of the conventions signed and ratified by the country during some workshops. We also engage in advocacy with certain media identified as underground allies for a better articulation of information and for a more positive view of LGBTIQ.

The effect has begun to sink in and the hope of reaching the process of changing mentalities is possible in some outlooks - LBQ women have long suffered from not being taken into account in national programs, the lack of economic financial resources knowing that this is part of the crux of the matter. For example, a milestone in Senegal's social justice landscape in engagement with the Global Fund to fight HIV, Tuberculosis and Malaria - the NFM3² validated the inclusion of trans people in the Senegalese concept note, which was followed by an extraordinary internal uproar in some state departments, which led to some critical questions - How to work with trans* people? Who are the trans* people? What to do to have expanded visibility and accessibility for Trans* people?

Our dream as LBQ women is to see an inclusive and balanced Senegal in the respect and equality of rights where all diversity can open up and live harmoniously. We believe in this, provided there is necessary support in strategic resources and the creation of agile movements capable of working collectively for social and political change in flexibility, commitment, solidarity and harmonization of efforts to achieve our goal: the right to be able to choose freely and assert our rights.

² NFM 3: stands for New World Fund Session 3. It is in relation to the activities that are carried out and where lesbians are not taken into consideration. Only sex workers

TOGO



Les LGBTQ
s'engagent dans
les luttes
citoyennes de
façon visible

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THE DIFFICULT, IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF TOGO'S LGBTQI+ MOVEMENTS IN SOCIAL JUSTICE STRUGGLES OTHER THAN THEIR OWN

BY GATSBY — TOGO

To my surprise, the atmosphere at this September 2017 event was quite friendly and good-natured. It was not one of those angry, vindictive gatherings of people demanding change now. There was plenty of room for that, but no. On the contrary, there were many smiles on their faces. There was a lot of joy and happiness and tides of flags. Green, yellow, red and white in abundance and more. In the air floated a collective satisfaction of being together without social distinctions or political affiliation. People from all walks of life united by a common vision of a democratic, more just Togo. My doubts and apprehensions were shattered.

My feelings were still confused though. There was euphoria, a little fear, but above all a lot of pride. For me, being a Togolese citizen has long been about being born somewhere. Being born somewhere, having your identity documents and jumping off the couch when Adebayor scores at the Africa Cup of Nations. In the heat of that September afternoon in Togo, this word also took on another meaning that I had not previously imagined. Clinging to Peter's back, on his motorbike, still as noisy as ever despite the cacophony of the vuvuzelas and the chants of the demonstrators, I was holding my flag with my fingertips, with a hand stretched to the limits of the impossible, towards the sky. The flag of my country, Togo. I wanted it to be the highest, the most visible of all. Yet I had never felt any particular attachment to this kind of patriotic symbol.

“How could it be otherwise for the young gay person in his process of self-construction, evolving in such a hostile environment?”

Citizenship under other skies means belonging, being recognized as such, and thus enjoying specific rights without forgetting one's duties. Today I am here to fulfil one of these civic duties: to campaign for a more democratic future for my country. To demand constitutional reforms that guarantee alternation by limiting the number of presidential terms. Like 85% of my compatriots according to the Afro barometer survey, I wanted to put an end to this quasi-monarchical system where for almost 50 years, the same people have concentrated all the powers without any sharing. Today

I am fully aware of my citizenship and I am committed to a better Togo.

We have to be honest, though. My newly discovered patriotism and enriched citizenship were not entirely selfless.

Yes, it's true that Peter had finally convinced me with his long arguments for days on end about the imperative need for activists to invest in even more inclusive struggles and concerns. It's no longer about distant support with reposting and hashtagging, he said. But an active engagement on the ground, close to the organizations and the demonstrators. A way to prove our value and our commitment as LGBTQI+ people to the construction of a new Togolese society. A Frederick Douglass strategy in short. Frederick Douglass actively campaigned during the American Civil War for the enlistment of blacks in the abolitionist troops so that they would eventually be recognized as full citizens and slavery would be definitively ended throughout the USA. Why not? I finally conceded to him with some apprehension and a little bit of reservation. But the prospect of being able to address a new page in our infamous 'agenda' did not displease me. Who knows, with a bit of luck the changeover might bring out new leaders with new visions and a much more progressive mentality on issues related to feminism, gender and sexual orientation.

So, there I was, finally, in this crowded square for a nation that willingly grants me civil rights but denies me the essentials. I was not forbidden to vote. Under certain conditions, I participate fully in social and community life. Only that when it comes to who I am...

“... I was denied the most basic right from which the inescapable needs of my sexuality, my protection as an individual, and my freedom to love and associate, among others, flow.”

my nation prefers not to know. Better, it was sometimes in my interest that my nation does not know. I was denied the most basic right from which the inescapable needs of my sexuality, my protection as an individual, and my freedom to love and associate, among others, flow. This nation has never been there for me and yet I am there for it, braving bans on assembly, threats and the risk of violence.

Suddenly, bitterness was added to fear, pride and euphoria. The last sentence of the national anthem, *“Togolese come let's build the city!”*, taken up in chorus as one by the whole of the crowded Boulevard du 13 Janvier, brought me out of my emotional confusion. It sounded like an echo of my questions about my patriotism, which I discovered as quickly as I questioned myself. Questions about my presence here, a gay activist committed to a homophobic homeland? *Togolese, heterosexual cis gender, come*

let's build the city” or *“Togolese, whatever your sexual orientation, come let's build the city”*? Jubilation seems to be gaining more and more of the crowd. The doubts, more and more of my thoughts.

In Togo, as in many former autocratic regimes, the terms ‘civil society’ and ‘activist’ have a light scent of sulfur in their wake. This is the result of democratic advancements, particularly the multiparty system, which was achieved at the cost of the relentless mobilization of activists in many countries of French-speaking Africa in the 1980s. Since then, a lack of trust has developed between the movements that claim to be part of civil society, whatever their field of intervention, and politicians. In this game of mutual undermining, all tricks are allowed.

Thus, in 2015, LGBTQI organizations were stunned to discover a press release on social networks proclaiming the support of so-

called sexual minority organizations, until now unknown, to a march organized by a coalition of opposition parties to demand constitutional reforms. The controversy was immediate. Dozens of hours of airtime and dozens of pages of articles and opinions were devoted to the news. The ruling party and the opposition exchanged pleasantries for several weeks, never failing to scold us in the process. Strangling is a euphemism. One side denounced a fabricated operation to discredit the organizers of the march and divert attention from the demands, while the other put on a moral trial on the values of the movements claiming to be opposition and their real "agenda". Religious leaders and traditional chiefs were quick to add their opinions and further fuel the controversy. Our local partners expressed concern about our 'political shift'. In a desperate attempt to clear our name and remove any ambiguity, a press release was sent to some media outlets. This did not have the desired effect and only added to the controversy.

Drowned in this crowd, all the anxiety of that time came back to me. I don't belong here. I support this cause, I will probably fight for it 1000 times more than anyone else here. But they will have to do without my presence. I mistakenly thought that a personal commitment would have been enough. I was careful not to commit the organization I lead to this struggle, which falls within the spectrum of the social justice values we defend. Yes, but no. The backlash could be extremely damaging to the slim successes achieved through years of hard work. Our struggle is not political. I won't be.

I mean I won't display it. We won't display it. Because between us, let's be honest now that we're between us, what could be more political than standing up for inclusion and equality regardless of gender or sexual orientation in a hetero-centric patriarchy inherited from years of imperialist exploitation and domination? Of course, our words, our interventions, our wish to build more just and inclusive societies are political. But shush! shush! That remains between us. It could scare our partners and our infamous "agenda" could be revealed. We will find ways to exercise our civic duty and commitment without having to show who we are.

On a more serious note. The interconnectedness of social justice struggles is no longer in question, at least not in Togo. However, the socio-political environment is such that organizations find it difficult, if not reluctant, to clearly show their support for demands for democracy, good governance or the promotion of women, even in the most conservative and classical sense of the term. The exploitation of LGBTQI+ movements for political and electoral propaganda purposes by the ruling and opposition parties, for example, has definitely hindered organizations from showing their support and participation in civic debates related to democracy. A form of civic engagement is taking place, but it remains individual and very discreet.

On other more societal and less political fronts of social justice struggles, one would be tempted to believe that there is space for LGBTQI+ organizations. But there isn't. In 2018, two social events shook social networks



in Togo. The disclosure of nude photos of an influencer by her spurned ex-lover and the rape of a young girl filmed by her attacker, then posted on various platforms. When asked to justify their actions, the perpetrators gave mind-boggling arguments based on their sexist and misogynistic views. These scandals caused a stir even within LGBTQI+ organizations. They had a particular resonance there because of the issues of privacy, gender-based violence and toxic masculinity that were being addressed by the advocacy initiatives of identity-based organizations at the time.

As a result of this unfortunate development, the women's movement was revitalized and formed a coalition of women's rights organizations. I sent in an expression of interest for the organization I was leading at the time to be included in the platform, and it was not received favorably. An NGO leader, a member of the coalition, told me some time later that our presence within the coalition risked 'muddying' the message. This speaks for itself.

Ultimately, the path for LGBTQI+ organizations in Togo to invest in other social justice struggles remains long and winding. Not impassable. New alliances will need to be forged. Advocacy and change of mentality will have to be stepped up. It is our imperative duty as citizens to participate in actions to promote equal rights and collective solidarity.

GATSBY, TOGOLESE LGBTQI+ ACTIVIST



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USE YOUR
VOICE!