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**MAPPING LGBTQI ORGANIZING IN WEST AFRICA**

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC REPORT FOR **LIBERIA**



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# List of Acronyms

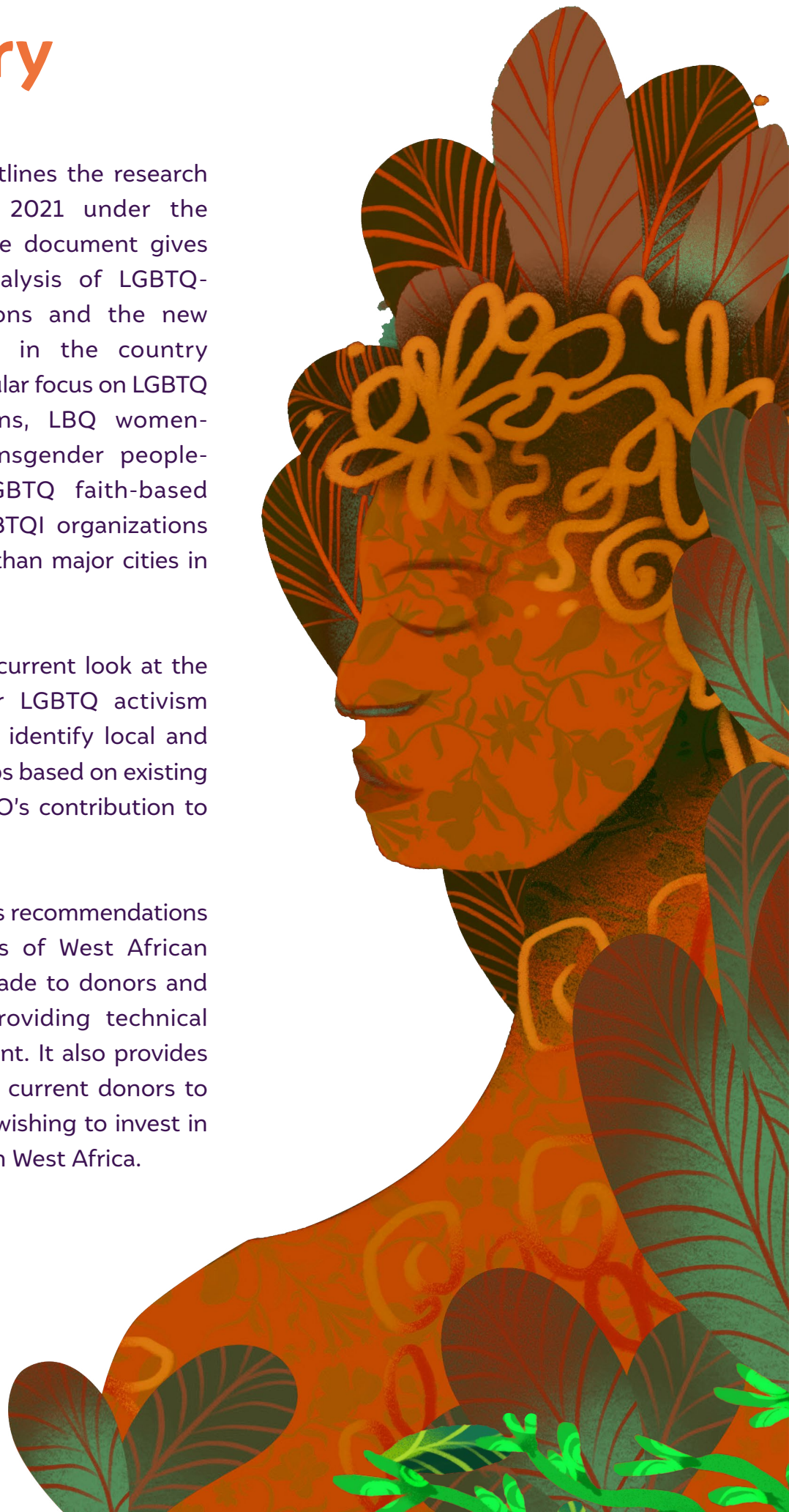
<b>AAL</b>	ActionAid Liberia
<b>AAMIN</b>	Anti-AIDS Media Network
<b>AFL</b>	Armed Forces of Liberia
<b>AJWS</b>	American Jewish World Service
<b>ALL+</b>	Association of Liberian People Living with HIV and AIDS
<b>AY+</b>	Adolescents and Youth Living with HIV and AIDS
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization
<b>DAI</b>	Development Alternative Inc.
<b>FGD</b>	Focus Group Discussion
<b>6060</b>	Family Health International (former name)
<b>GPD</b>	Green Planet Discoveries
<b>HIV/AIDS</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Virus
<b>ICCPR</b>	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
<b>ICESCR</b>	International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
<b>IHRI</b>	Independent Human Rights Investigators
<b>INCHR</b>	The Independent National Human Rights Commission
<b>ISDAO</b>	Initiative Sankofa d'Afrique de l'Ouest (West African Sankofa Initiative)
<b>LCM</b>	Liberia Coordinating Mechanism
<b>LEGAL</b>	Lesbian and Gay Association of Liberia
<b>LEN</b>	Liberia Equality Network
<b>LGBTQI</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex
<b>LIBNEP+</b>	Liberian National Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS
<b>LIMSHer</b>	Liberia Men for Sexual Health and Rights
<b>LIWEN</b>	Liberia Women Empowerment Network
<b>LIPRIDE</b>	Liberian Initiative for the Promotion of Rights, Identity and Equality
<b>MSM</b>	Men who have Sex with Men
<b>NATPAH</b>	National Association on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>PLHIV</b>	People Living with HIV
<b>S4S</b>	Sisters for Sisters
<b>SAIL</b>	Stop AIDS in Liberia
<b>SIDA</b>	Swedish International Development Agency
<b>SOGIR</b>	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Rights
<b>SRHR</b>	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
<b>TNOL</b>	Transgender Network Of Liberia
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Program
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UPR</b>	Universal Periodic Review
<b>WRA</b>	White Roses Alliance
<b>YAL</b>	Youth Alive Liberia

# Summary

This country report outlines the research conducted in March 2021 under the auspices of ISDAO. The document gives a local situational analysis of LGBTQ-led groups/organizations and the new priorities of activists in the country concerned with a particular focus on LGBTQ youth-led organizations, LBQ women-led organizations, transgender people-led organizations, LGBTQ faith-based organizations, and LGBTQI organizations present in areas other than major cities in Liberia.

This report presents a current look at the funding landscape for LGBTQ activism at the country level to identify local and thematic trends and gaps based on existing funding data and ISDAO's contribution to the existing landscape.

Finally, this report makes recommendations drawn from the voices of West African LGBTQ communities made to donors and other organizations providing technical support in the movement. It also provides recommendations from current donors to other potential donors wishing to invest in the LGBTQ movement in West Africa.



# Introduction

Liberia is a country with a deeply patriarchal, homophobic, and transphobic society. State actors, opinion leaders, religious leaders, and community leaders utilize anti-LGBTQ rhetoric to exclude or limit the participation of LGBTQ persons in and from socio-economic activities.

State actors have used homophobic rhetoric and the introduction of discriminatory legislation as a political tool to garner political capital and to prevent the LGBTQ community from realizing their rights. *"This tactic is used to distract people from the main issues"*, especially when the government is renegeing on these issues, stated one of the study respondents.

The state of the LGBTQ movement is characterized by an oppressive social, economic, and political environment, all of which have limited its ability to organize effectively. Discriminatory legal systems and frameworks such as the Liberian Penal Code, the inability of LGBTQ organizations to register with the Liberian Business Registry (the body responsible for NGO registration), limited funding sources, and limited capacity amongst LGBTQ persons have led to the existence of a fragmented movement. Though no intersex persons were available to participate in the study, researchers note a nascent, if not increasingly visible intersex movement in Liberia in particular and West Africa more generally. Nonetheless, throughout the

report, the research team uses "LGBTQ" instead of "LGBTQI" because of this gap.

As will be made clear, the information that respondents shared for this report suggests that most organizations providing support to LGBTQ persons in Liberia have limited human resource capacity. Respondents almost unanimously agree that many LGBTQ persons have limited education compared to the general population, in part because of discriminatory practices visited upon people who do not 'pass'. Dropping out of school at the secondary level when some join or create NGOs, they attempt to learn the roles and functioning of their organizations while executing their duties.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused additional safety and security concerns for LGBTQ persons. Lockdown measures created potentially harmful situations where LGBTQ persons had to stay in close quarters with homophobic families or settings and, in some cases, perpetrators of violence. According to a respondent, these conditions caused mental strain, which compromised the mental health of some individuals. There were reported suicides in rural areas.

LGBTQ persons in Liberia would like to project to the nation that they are serious-minded people, who, given the chance, can contribute to national development.

## Methodology

The mapping study commenced with initial desk research, which included consulting the *OHCHR UNDP SOGIR Report* (OHCHR & UNDP, 2020), the *2019 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia* (United States Department of State, 2019) and *We Exist; Mapping LGBTQ Organizations in West Africa* (Armisen, 2016), along with other relevant documents.

With substantial help from national LGBTQ networks and the Liberia Initiative for the Promotion of Rights, Identity, Diversity, and Equality (LIPRIDE) Coalition, the team leads, ISDAO, and the researchers developed a list of 8 organizations and identified LBQ and transgender persons to participate in the focus group discussion (FGD), as well as one activist to interview. The sample included LGBTQ-led organizations that focus exclusively on LGBTQ issues and concerns in their overall program plan and have stand-alone LGBTQ programs. Most of the groups are members of the LIPRIDE Coalition; however, the researchers made efforts to interview individuals who were not members of the Coalition.

The researchers held qualitative interviews from March 1-14, 2021, in Montserrado County, Grand Bassa, and River Cess Counties. Interviewees in Grand Bassa and River Cess counties requested anonymity in their responses due to an increasingly homophobic and transphobic environment<sup>1</sup>

in their communities. As a result of the anti-LGBTQ rhetoric in the county, the researchers do not name or attribute direct quotations to specific people, organizations, or programs but anonymize them.

The lead researchers created interview tools for LGBTQ organizations, activists, FGD, and national partners. During Zoom calls, researchers from English-speaking West African countries reviewed and tested the tools. The researchers utilized cell phone audio recorders and manual note-taking to capture the in-person interviews.

During the in-person interviews, researchers adhered to the COVID-19 standard operating protocols and ensured hand-washing and social distancing during the sessions. Interviews in Grand Bassa and River Cess were conducted outdoors.

Respondents attached to most participating organizations have been working behind the scenes. Organizations that are listed in this study were consulted and consented to being included and named. Cognizant of the security threats members of the LGBTQ movement face, the researchers convened interviews in agreed-upon safe zones and made sure not to include respondents' names in the report.

<sup>1</sup> Members of the LGBTQI community are being attacked and targeted by traditional communities. As a result, 2-3 women have developed PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) symptoms and are no longer able to be in closed quarters for extended periods of time. A member of the LGBTQI community had been sent to the *sande bush* for 5 years as a penalty for alleged LGBTQI behavior. The *sande bush* is part of a traditional society that initiates girls into adulthood and, in the process instills notions of morality and proper sexual comportment.

The researchers recorded the interviews and coded the qualitative data into meaningful categories to facilitate the classification of notes. This process enabled them to identify common themes and patterns within the interviews.

After the interviews, the researchers transcribed both written and recorded materials. They then consolidated smaller, related themes into broader categories, organized recurring themes into subcategories, and removed any codes that differed significantly. This process resulted in thoroughly analyzing a manageable number of categories.

Finally, the research team sent a survey tool to the eight organizations involved in the research. The tool requested respondents to share similar information contained in the in-person interviews, to cross-cut information and data.

## Challenges

The research team faced some challenges while conducting this study, including difficulties in accessing LGBTQI community members in rural areas, safety and security concerns, and the inability to reach intersex individuals. The following strategies were employed to mitigate these challenges:

### 1. Accessing LGBTQI Community Members Outside Montserrado County

Accessing respondents in remote areas, such as River Cess, proved challenging due to both the isolated locations and prevalent homophobic and transphobic attitudes. To reach these communities, researchers initially used vehicles but, where roads were impassable, resorted to alternative transportation methods, including motorcycles and a canoe.

### 2. Safety and Security Concerns

Due to safety and security concerns, the team was only able to meet with two LGBTQI members in Grand Bassa. In Montserrado County, researchers prioritized safety by meeting respondents in mutually agreed-upon "safe zones" to protect both participants and the research team.

### 3. Reaching Intersex Respondents

The researchers were unable to identify intersex individuals willing to participate in the study.





# Legal, Political, and Socio-Economic Contexts

## Legal Context

Although Liberia has signed and ratified multiple international human rights conventions and treaties protecting fundamental rights, LGBTQ individuals continue to face harassment, discrimination, and violence rooted in homophobia and transphobia.

Liberia's 1986 Constitution safeguards the rights of all its citizens. Chapter 3, Article 11, Part C, affirms and protects the fundamental human rights of all Liberians, aligning with international human rights frameworks such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and other human rights instruments.

According to the country report of the 2010 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Liberia:

"Chapter III of the Constitution of the Republic of Liberia, among others, provides for the promotion and protection of the following fundamental rights: the right to life; right to personal liberty; right to security of the person; equality before the law; right to be free from slavery and forced labour; right to freedom of movement; right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; right

to freedom of expression and the press; right to privacy and family life; right to peaceful assembly and association; right to equal opportunity to work; right to due process of law, including the right to trial by jury and reasonable bail; right to access to justice, including legal aid services to indigent citizens; right to be free of torture and inhumane treatment; right to own private property within Liberia and right to freedom from discrimination."

(United Nations, 2010, p. 4).

However, despite the ratification of these human rights instruments, and voluntary commitments made during its UPR process, Liberia still has discriminatory laws in effect. The Penal Law of 1978, section 14.74, criminalizes "voluntary sodomy" as a first-degree misdemeanor, punishable by up to 1-year imprisonment (the Republic of Liberia, 1978).

In July 2012, the Liberian Senate unanimously passed an amendment to the Domestic Relations Liberia Bill, also known as the "Anti Same-Sex Marriage Bill," to prohibit same-sex marriage. The penalty for the proposed legislation would carry a sentence of imprisonment of up to 5 years.

During Liberia's 2015 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Human Rights Committee expressed concern about the continued criminalization of same-sex relations. The Committee called on the Government of

Liberia to introduce anti-discriminatory measures, and investigate and prosecute perpetrators of hate-motivated violence (OHCHR & UNDP, 2020, p. 14).

The report continues:

"...during the second cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Government of Liberia condemned discrimination, including discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and committed itself to implementing provisions in the National Human Rights Action Plan in respect of, inter alia, the rights of LGBT persons."

(*ibid* p. 10).

Despite these constitutional protections, Liberia lacks effective national anti-discrimination legislation to protect individuals from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The 2013 National Human Rights Action Plan and the National HIV and AIDS Strategic Plan 2015-2020 are the only national policy documents that specifically address the rights and needs of LGBTQ individuals. Although these plans are not legally binding, many organizations leverage them as entry points to raise awareness and advocate for programs that include LGBTQ individuals in healthcare services.

## Political context

State actors have used homophobic rhetoric and the introduction of discriminatory legislation as a political tool to garner political capital while preventing the LGBTQ community from benefiting from its rights.

According to one respondent, "*This is used to distract people from the main issues*". This, continued the respondent, is especially true when the government is renegeing on these issues.

On March 16, 2020, Liberia reported its first COVID-19 confirmed case. On March 19, 2020, Honourable Vincent Willie, Representative of District 3, Grand Bassa, presented a bill to the House of Representatives seeking an amendment to the penal law. The House of Representatives Committee of the Judiciary was mandated to review the bill seeking to modify Liberia's Penal law to make aggravated involuntary sodomy and involuntary sodomy non-bailable offenses (Mengonfia, 2020). This development fuelled widespread hate speech and religious propaganda against the LGBTQ community.

State-sponsored violence and discrimination against LGBTQ individuals—through laws and LGBTQ-phobic rhetoric—has emboldened non-state actors, including civilians, to perpetuate similar acts of discrimination and violence.

One of the most extreme examples of violence against LGBTQ individuals involves Cheeseman Cole, a former soldier in the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). In October 2020, he was formally charged after allegedly using Facebook to kidnap, brutalize, and torture 27 individuals he suspected of being gay. Cole is also suspected of involvement in the disappearances of Dominic Renner and Winston Kortee, who went missing on September 24 and October 4, respectively (Stewart, 2020). His charges included aggravated assault, attempted murder, possession and sale of objects for lethal use, felonious restraint, and property theft. Despite advocacy efforts by LIPRIDE Coalition members and LGBTQ allies, Cole was released on bail, leaving the LGBTQ community in a state of fear and heightened vulnerability.

On November 12, 2020, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in collaboration with the Independent National Human Rights Commission (INCHR) and LIPRIDE, launched the Liberia Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Rights (SOGIR) Report. The objective of the launch was to officially present the report, including findings and recommendations on key human rights challenges experienced by LGBTQ persons and communities in Liberia.

Unfortunately, “[n]o specific information was obtained on the situation of intersex people in Liberia, which remains a gap in the research” (Ibid, p. 21). The report aimed to contribute to reducing violence,

discrimination, inequality, and exclusion experienced by people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, though it did not address issues related to sex characteristics.

Despite stringent safety and security protocols during the launch, photographs of the event were publicly shared on OHCHR’s website and social media, placing frontline LGBTQ members visible in the images at serious risk of backlash. As a result, multiple security issues arose: some frontliners went into hiding, one had to leave the country, and activists faced heightened threats. OHCHR removed the photo after the fact but took minimal responsibility for the impact. Activists had to seek support from the Urgent Action Fund-Africa to assist one frontliner with relocation, while others, unable to leave, had to go into hiding without direct support, statements, or assistance from the justice system. OHCHR did not respond to affected individuals’ emails, highlighting a potential one-sided dynamic between technical partners and LGBTQ frontliners in Liberia.

Moving forward, it is crucial for activists to work with technical partners to establish secure, reciprocal collaborations that do not endanger local advocates.



## Socio-economic context

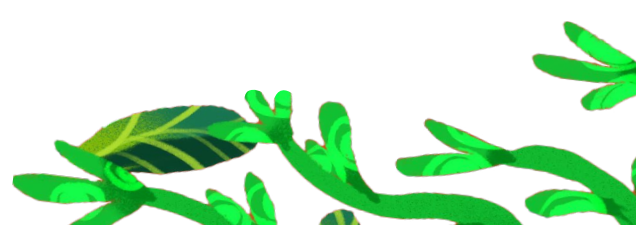
Liberia remains a deeply patriarchal, homophobic, and transphobic society, where opinion leaders, religious figures, and community leaders often use anti-LGBTQ rhetoric to exclude or limit LGBTQ individuals' participation in social and economic activities.

As a result, LGBTQ individuals face significant barriers to accessing social and economic opportunities, leading many to work in the informal sector, relying on what one respondent described as the “daily hustle.”

In remote areas, where traditionalists enforce homophobic cultural norms, LGBTQ community members are policed and often forced into hiding to avoid being ostracized or driven out. These challenges are further compounded by limited access to essential services, such as hospitals and police stations, in these communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional safety and security risks for LGBTQ individuals. Lockdown measures forced many to remain in close quarters with homophobic family members or in unsafe environments, sometimes alongside perpetrators of violence. According to one respondent, these conditions led to severe mental strain, which impacted mental health significantly, with some rural areas even reporting suicides.

During this period, people living with HIV (PLHIV) faced difficulties accessing essential medications and, in some cases, food. Respondents shared instances of breaking movement restrictions to seek food, only to be met with police beatings. These examples highlight the profound impact of homophobic and transphobic actions on the lives of LGBTQ individuals.





# Evolution of the movement

Despite recent attacks that have left the LGBTQ community feeling vulnerable, respondents expressed optimism, noting that the movement is growing and gaining momentum.

As one respondent observed, *"More organizations are forming, and voices are blending,"* meaning that voices within the community are being amplified as more organizations emerge.

However, this growth brings challenges, as newer organizations must navigate the priorities set by more established groups. Another respondent added, *"Advocacy has increased. You are seeing people in positions of power talking about key populations' right to services,"* indicating a gradual shift toward broader recognition and support for LGBTQ rights.

Two prominent actors in the LGBTQ movement in Liberia, mentioned by several respondents, are the LIPRIDE Coalition and Stop AIDS in Liberia (SAIL). Established in 2017, LIPRIDE is a coalition that works to protect and advocate for the rights of discriminated groups in Liberia. Founded in 2012, SAIL promotes education, human rights protection, and advocacy, while also implementing HIV/AIDS programs. Respondents referred to SAIL as the "mother" of the LGBTQ movement, recognizing it as a foundational organization that enabled other sexual and gender minority initiatives to flourish.

Respondents noted that SAIL collaborates closely with LIPRIDE to strengthen the movement by providing institutional support to many LGBTQ organizations. This support includes offering sub-grants to smaller organizations for their daily operations, as well as training and capacity-building. Activities have ranged from assisting with proposal writing to connecting emerging organizations with established funders. This approach enables better-established organizations to leverage their grant-writing expertise to help newer groups grow.

*"In those days, SAIL was the only gay organization. Now there are transgender and lesbian organizations"* shared an FGD participant.

Over time, the space for formal LGBTQ organizing has grown, as evidenced by the increased number of LGBTQ organizations that joined LIPRIDE.

Since its inception in 2017, LIPRIDE has expanded from its 3 founding organizations to a membership of 23, of which 17 are active<sup>2</sup>; and 9 are LGBTQI-led. Through this organized body, the movement has achieved notable successes, including increased engagement from allies and partners who actively collaborate with and support the network's initiatives.

1. Drafting of the Liberia UPR (currently in progress)
2. Organizing Gay Pride events in 2017 and 2020
3. Conducting capacity-building activities with funding from ActionAid Liberia, American Jewish World Service, and Forum Syd
4. Building alliances with other civil society organizations, particularly human rights groups
5. Establishing a safe space for LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ individuals to co-exist
6. Securing grants for the Coalition and its members
7. Actively participating in the HIV/AIDS strategy process
8. Representing LIPRIDE on the Liberia Coordinating Mechanism (LCM) of the Global Fund
9. Representation of LIPRIDE on the Liberia Coordinating Mechanism (LCM) of the Global Fund<sup>3</sup>.

Despite these achievements, the LGBTQ community continues to face stigma, has limited spaces for organizing, and encounters challenges in accessing essential services.

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<sup>2</sup> ActionAid Liberia (AAL), Stop AIDS In Liberia (SAIL), Liberia Women Empowerment Network (LIWEN), DOMAFEIGN (The Future), National Association of Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (NATPAH), Association of Liberian People Living with HIV and AIDS (ALL+), Lesbian and Gay Association Liberia (LEGAL), Liberian National Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS (LIBNEP+), Anti-AIDS Media Network, Adolescents and Youth Living with HIV and AIDS (AY+), Independent Human Rights Investigators (IHRI), Transgender Network Of Liberia (TNOL), Green Planet Discoveries (GPD), White Roses Alliance (WRA), United Sisters (US), Sisters 4 Sisters (S4S), Youth Alive Liberia (YAL)

<sup>3</sup> The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, also known as the Global Fund, is a global partnership aiming at investing funds to eventually eradicate the 3 deadliest infectious diseases.



# State of the movement

The LGBTQ movement in Liberia operates within a restrictive social, economic, and political environment that limits its ability to organize effectively. Legal obstacles, such as the Penal Code, and barriers preventing LGBTQ organizations from registering with the Liberian Business Registry, which oversees NGO registrations, contribute to these challenges. Limited funding sources, education, and organizational capacity contribute to the fragmentation of the movement, which has historically been dominated by MSM and gay leaders. However, LBQ women, transgender, and intersex individuals are increasingly establishing a stronger presence and influence.

One respondent summarized the state of the movement: *"The movement is not homogeneous; it has differing systems and competing priorities. Conflicts affect solidarity and interpersonal dynamics, especially when funding is scarce. The priority often becomes 'what can I get for my organization' rather than a focus on the movement as a whole."*

## Profile of organizations and activists

Despite LBQTI organizations knowing an increase in their number in the past couple of years, they still face significant constraints when carrying out activities. When the movement first started, it addressed the

issues and concerns experienced by gay men and MSM. With capacity development and support/incubation from donors such as the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) AJWS, a space was created for LBQ women and transgender groups.

The government's discriminatory legislation has impacted LGBTQ organizations' ability to organize formally. Official NGO registration is required for groups to operate NGOs and gain legitimacy or access funding. When known that groups support LGBTQ rights, the Liberian Business Registry denies them the NGO status. The LIPRIDE Coalition was officially registered in 2020 after previous failed attempts.

Limited human resources capacity remains a challenge in the movement. Most LGBTQ persons have limited education, dropping out of school at the secondary level and learning their roles in NGOs while executing their duties. Funding has been minimal with funds coming primarily from the ActionAid Liberia, AJWS, and the Fund for Global Human Rights. The LBQ Focus Group respondents pointed out that LBQ organizations experience more resource scarcity than their counterparts.

SAIL supported the growth and development of organizations and individuals. Although their primary focus was HIV/ AIDS programming targeting gay men and MSM, they engaged other members of the LGBTQ community in their activities. The executive directors of organizations such as United Sisters, Sisters for Sisters, LIMSheR, and LEN can trace their professional development to the SAIL. With mentoring and coaching support, individuals who served as peer educators at SAIL gradually set up organizations that addressed issues affecting specifically their sexual orientation and gender.

Due to homophobic and transphobic traditional structures in Grand Bassa and River Cess, and difficulty registering and formally organizing, these counties do not have LGBTQ organizations. However, organizations such as the Lesbian and Gay Association of Liberia (LEGAL), SAIL, and TNOL have focal points that implement LGBTQI, sex work, and HIV/AIDS-related activities in these areas.

One of the research limitations of the study was that the team was only able to include 1 independent activist in the survey. The activist interviewed stated that he established *Journal Rage*, an online LGBTQ publication, to give LGBTQ persons a channel to document their specific stories. This publication greatly benefits the movement since mainstream media do not adequately report on LGBTQI issues, as many journalists consider it taboo.

## Challenges faced by LGBTQ people, activists, and organizations

The challenges faced by LGBTQ persons are numerous. They include limited access to healthcare, mental health services, legal recourse, safety and security, access to safe and secure accommodation, education, and livelihoods. Noted below are the results of the interviews.

### 1. Limited access to healthcare

An overwhelming number of respondents stated that discrimination at healthcare centers and hospitals/clinics was a significant challenge in accessing their services. Respondents indicated that healthcare providers are homophobic and transphobic and do not know how to engage and treat LGBTQ persons. Most LGBTQ persons who visited medical facilities opted not to divulge their sexual orientation due to the fear of having their treatment compromised.

Strides are being made by organizations such as ActionAid Liberia, LIPRIDE, SAIL, and LEGAL to train health workers in Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). This training and awareness-raising would ultimately increase the number of LGBTQ-friendly healthcare personnel and facilities that LGBTQ persons can access.

### 2. Limited access to mental health services

During the FGD, many respondents stated that mental health is generally a problem in the LGBTQ community. People who identify as LGBTQ in Liberia face significant mental strain due to high levels of rejection and

violence due to homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia.

The COVID-19 pandemic compounded with environmental factors like unemployment, health concerns, and discriminatory treatment has increased the levels of mental strain. Organizations such as LIMSheR set up a psychosocial counseling project for community members to receive counseling sessions.

### **3. Limited access to legal representation/ recourse**

LGBTQ persons face harassment and are subject to hate speech when dealing with the Liberia National Police. According to an LBQ respondent, she doesn't feel safe engaging with the police: *"You don't feel safe when you have to take disputes to the police because they turn any issue into a sexuality issue"*.

Solidarity Sisters Network of Liberia was created to provide protection services to the members of the LGBTQ community.

### **4. Safety and security concerns**

As a result of the limited protections offered by the state, LGBTQ persons are forced to prioritize their safety and security. During FGD discussions with the LBQ and the transgender community, respondents shared personal experiences of managing their safety and security.

One respondent, who identified as lesbian, spoke about how she attended a live-streamed party on Facebook, which eventually ended with homophobic

members of the gathering seizing the cellphones of suspected gay partygoers.

Another respondent raised the issue of cyberbullying on Facebook.

While there are security-conscious LGBTQ persons, a majority of them lack the tools to protect themselves on social media platforms. As a response to this lack of awareness, some tools are outlined in a detailed document and training manual written by the Safety and Security Committee. It provides tips such as how to encrypt data and have a strong password but lacks visibility among the community.

Participants in the FGD held with the transgender community, agreed that discrimination against transwomen is high. A respondent who identified as a transwoman stated that binary norms put transwomen at risk: *"Because my dress, body movement, and voice do not conform to those of society, I face many challenges that people don't understand"*.

A participant expressed concern over the recent state closure of the LGBTQ Center in Accra, Ghana (Princewill, 2021), stating that she hoped that the action would not have a domino effect and affect the LGBTQ community in Liberia. The consensus in all discussions was that there is a need to train LGBTQ members on safety and security measures to minimize their risk of being targeted.

## 5. Limited access to employment/ livelihoods

The limited education levels among members of the LGBTQ community may correlate to limited access to secure and stable employment. One respondent estimated that over 70% of LGBTQ members depend on day-to-day hustling. However, because LGBTQ populations are heavily stigmatized it has yet to be possible to get systematic demographic data on this issue.

One respondent elaborated: "*Community members are not empowered and vulnerable — many don't have jobs*". She further explained that many lesbians sleep with men for their livelihoods or get involved in sex work.

During the COVID-19 lockdown measures, poverty amongst LGBTQ persons intensified. The limited formal social support structures resulted in many LGBTQ persons relying on members of the LGBTQ community for support.

*"It wasn't easy; some members had suicidal thoughts"*, shared a respondent.

## 6. Access to safe and secure housing/ accommodation

During the interviews, participants stated that they experience difficulty accessing safe and secure housing. Property owners denied them housing due to their sexual orientation by preventing them to apply. FGD members said that their homes are monitored — people keep track of who enters and leaves their homes.

## 7. Barriers to education

The Liberian Constitution states that everyone is entitled to an education free from violence and discrimination. However, during the FGD with the transgender community, participants spoke about the harassment and bullying they experienced in school. This discrimination coupled with minimal family/societal support was cited as 1 of the reasons many members of the transgender community dropped out of school. As a result of limited education, many members of the LGBTQ community engage in the informal sector or low-remunerated jobs such as tailoring, hairdressing, and hospitality.

## 8. Limited funding

Respondents agreed that the lack of funding to meet, organize, and strategize represented a challenge to LGBTQ persons and organizations. The limited funding is attributed to weak internal proposal writing capacity, limited funding opportunities, and high competition among LGBTQ organizations.

## 9. Lack of cohesiveness

Respondents stated that while the movement has grown, tensions and conflicts exist among LGBTQ persons. The lack of cohesiveness between member LGBTQ organizations and LGBTQ persons may be due to a lack of sharing information and limited collaboration.

## Approaches and strategies used

Although the challenges cited were numerous, the respondents were proactive in identifying multi-pronged strategies to address the obstacles. Organizations and individuals have tapped into local resources, leveraged their project implementation successes, and engaged allies, and social collateral to address the challenges.

### Access to healthcare

With support from stakeholders such as FHI 360 and AJWS, organizations such as LIPRIDE, LEGAL, and SAIL have raised awareness and sensitized nurses and other healthcare workers on SRHR. On another front, ALL+, an organization working with key populations, works with allies and health facilities to see how best to increase access to medication for HIV/AIDS infected/affected communities.

### Access to mental health services

In the same vein, LIMSheR, under its mental health program, conducted a mapping of LGBTQ-friendly organizations in the capital, Monrovia, subsequently recruiting trained professionals to provide psychosocial counselling services to LGBTQ persons.

### Access to legal representation

LEGAL raised funds to partner with a legal clinic and engaged the services of a lawyer on retainer to support members of the LGBTQ community in need of legal services.

### Safety and Security

The establishment of Solidarity Sisters Network of Liberia, an organization comprised of female law enforcement officers to provide protection services to members of the LGBTQ community, has assisted LGBTQ persons to interact with law enforcement in times of need.

### Lack of education opportunities to build capacity

International partners like AJWS and Forum Syd have employed multi-faceted and strategic approaches to support the LGBTQ movement. For instance, Forum Syd provided funding to ActionAid Sweden, which was then channeled through ActionAid Liberia to support LIPRIDE programming.

Through the collaboration between Forum Syd, ActionAid Liberia, and LIPRIDE, LGBTQ organizations received critical capacity-building support over five years (2017–2022), including training in fundraising, proposal writing, financial management, and safety and security.

Similarly, AJWS adopted a strategic approach by assisting the LGBTQ community in developing a safety and security plan, supporting SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights) programming, and sponsoring LGBTQ individuals and organizations to participate in key national and international training and conferences. Additionally, AJWS facilitated collaborations with various health facilities to enhance access to SRHR services for key populations and LGBTQ communities.

At an organizational level, well-capacitated entities like SAIL prioritize building individual capacity by recruiting and consistently training motivated staff who are deeply passionate about their work. This approach fosters long-term commitment, empowering team members to take ownership of the work with a mindset of “For ourselves, and not others.”

## Collaboration and Networking

Building the competency, trust, and organizational skills amongst the LGBTQ community to collaborate and network is essential in movement building. During the research, respondents had mixed reactions about the level of collaboration and networking amongst LGBTQ organizations.

At the LGBTQ FGD, members agreed that collaboration only happens when funding or similar activities are implemented. Reference was made to the Development Alternative Inc. (DAI) capacity-building project, which focused on capacity-building on the LIPRIDE Coalition members' advocacy. Under this project, organizations worked together with allies to strengthen LIPRIDE's advocacy skills.

However, the formation of cliques around specific SOGIR areas and personal relationships within the movement made it difficult for effective collaboration. Respondents cited the following reasons for the limited collaboration between LGBTQ organizations: limited information sharing, personal conflicts between organizations, and competition.

LGBTQ organizations also inadvertently network and collaborate with the non-LGBTQ members of the LIPRIDE Coalition to address human rights-related issues and programs. These allies include the Anti-AIDS Media Network (AAMIN), DOMAFEIGN, Independent Human Rights Investigators (IHRI), National Association of Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (NATPAH), Domafeign, Liberia Women's Empowerment Network, White Rose Alliance, and Youth Alive Liberia (YAL).

However, mainstream partners also collaborate with LGBTQ organizations during proposal development sessions but do not engage LGBTQ organizations in project implementation. According to an interviewee, the National AIDS Commission consults LGBTQ organizations at the proposal development stage and engages non-LGBTQ organizations to implement the activities.

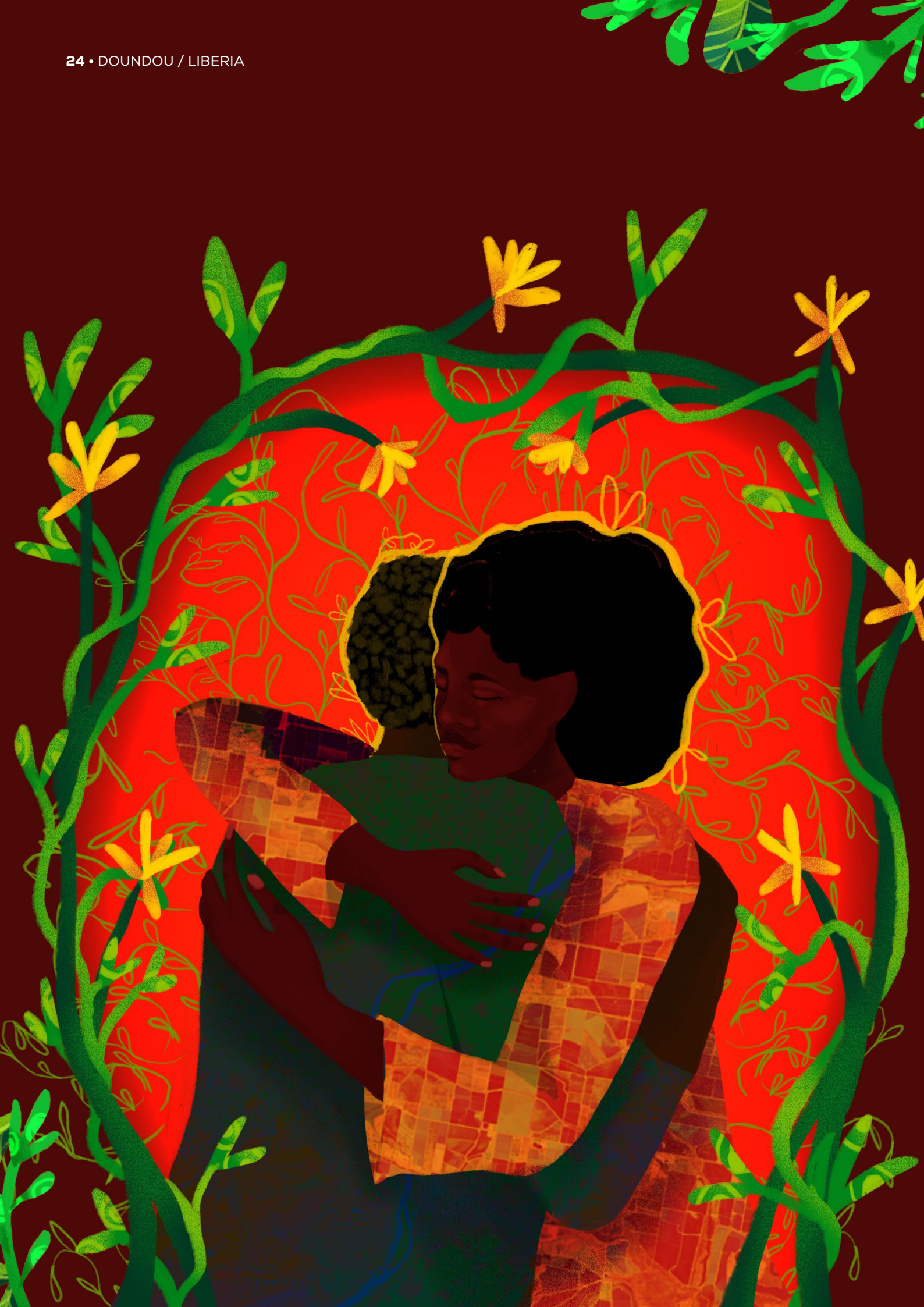
The Ministry of Justice and the INCHR were identified as key allies. While the Ministry of Justice operates as a state institution, the INCHR, though established by law and with commissioners appointed by the state, does not receive operational funding from the government. Instead, it relies on international donors for funding, which helps maintain its independence. This allows the INCHR to function as a para-state institution. Regardless, its impact is significant.

According to one respondent, *“When they started, they didn’t know the issues but they slowly integrated LGBTQ-related elements into their work.”*

At the same time, ActionAid Liberia and AJWS have been favored due to their track record working with LGBTQ organizations. These partners have provided space for mentoring and supporting program development.

The movement collaborates with several national partners in its advocacy efforts, including the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the U.S. Embassy. These partners not only offer spaces for organizations to host and participate in events related to LGBTQ organizing but also occasionally provide funding to support their initiatives.







# Technical support needs

## Technical and organizational capacities of organizations and activists

Of the eight organizations interviewed, all work directly on sexual orientation and gender identity issues, with nearly all addressing HIV/AIDS programming through mobilization, peer education, and awareness-raising. Within the LIPRIDE Coalition, there are nine LGBTQ organizations with distinct focus areas:

- **ALL+, LEN, SAIL, and LIMSHeR** focus primarily on the MSM population.
- **LEGAL, United Sisters, and Solidarity Sisters Network of Liberia** address the needs of the LBQT population.
- **TNOL** focuses on the transgender community.

Among these, **SAIL, LEGAL, and TNOL** are considered more seasoned organizations, while **LEN, LIMSHeR, United Sisters, and Solidarity Sisters Network of Liberia** are newer organizations, registered between 2017 and 2019.

Regarding governance, seven of the eight LGBTQ organizations interviewed reported having a board of directors in place. The one without a board was recently registered and is in the process of formalizing its structures. Most LGBTQ organizations operate with a small team of salaried staff and volunteers.

During the interviews, seven of the eight organizations identified technical gaps in advocacy and campaigning. Six also highlighted a need for improved proposal writing and fundraising skills. Additional technical gaps included safety and security training, financial management, report writing, negotiation and stakeholder engagement skills, leadership development, and career growth opportunities.

## Technical support providers

Funding for LGBTQ organizations is minimal; partners such as FHI 360, AJWS, the Fund for Global Human Rights, and ActionAid Liberia (AAL) provide technical support opportunities to organizations.

During the organizational interviews, it was noted that SAIL and LEGAL receive technical support from ActionAid Liberia, AJWS, and FHI 360 in fundraising and project management. The more nascent organizations—LIMSHeR, LEN, Sisters for Sisters, Solidarity Sisters, and United Sisters received technical support from the LIPRIDE-Forym Syd capacity building program in strategic management, proposal development, financial management, and safety and security.

AJWS, through its capacity development grants, provided funds to SAIL and LEGAL to support United Sisters, Sisters for Sisters, and Solidarity Sisters respectively, to act as fiscal hosts and set up and manage their financial management systems.

During the interviews, seven organizations identified support in strategic advocacy campaigns, while one organization identified leadership and career development as significant technical gaps.



# Funding landscape

## Availability and accessibility of funding

Of the eight organizations interviewed, SAIL, LEGAL, and Solidarity Sisters reported implementing activities funded annually by partners such as AJWS, ActionAid Liberia, ISDAO, FHI 360, Forum Syd, SIDA, and UNFPA. The funding they received ranged from USD 15,000 to USD 235,000, enabling them to implement national programs focusing on PLHIV/AIDS, advocacy, human rights documentation, and safety and security training.

Respondents could not speak to the topics of upcoming funding opportunities. Stakeholders such as FHI 360 regularly communicate funding opportunities to their partners, while AJWS identifies strategic partners to engage in their programming.

With limited access to donor funding, relatively new organizations such as Sisters for Sisters, LIMSheR, LEN, and United Sisters use their social collateral to raise funds for awareness-raising and food distribution activities. At the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic, Sisters for Sisters raised funds from the private sector to procure food and non-food items for LGBTQ members, while United Sisters uses membership dues to support activities for LBQ athletes.

## Unmet or Under-Prioritized Needs

Funding to LGBTQ organizations is mainly restricted to PLHIV/AIDS programming and capacity development support for one year. These short grant periods do not allow for continuity in programming, particularly for advocacy work, which takes time to get results. Most of them have some areas that have to do with health, that focus on HIV and AIDS awareness-raising, even if they are not key population organizations.

Funds for institutional development are difficult to access, while other under or unmet needs identified during the interviews include: leadership development, capacity development support, scholarships, talent development, vocational training (soap making, carpentry)

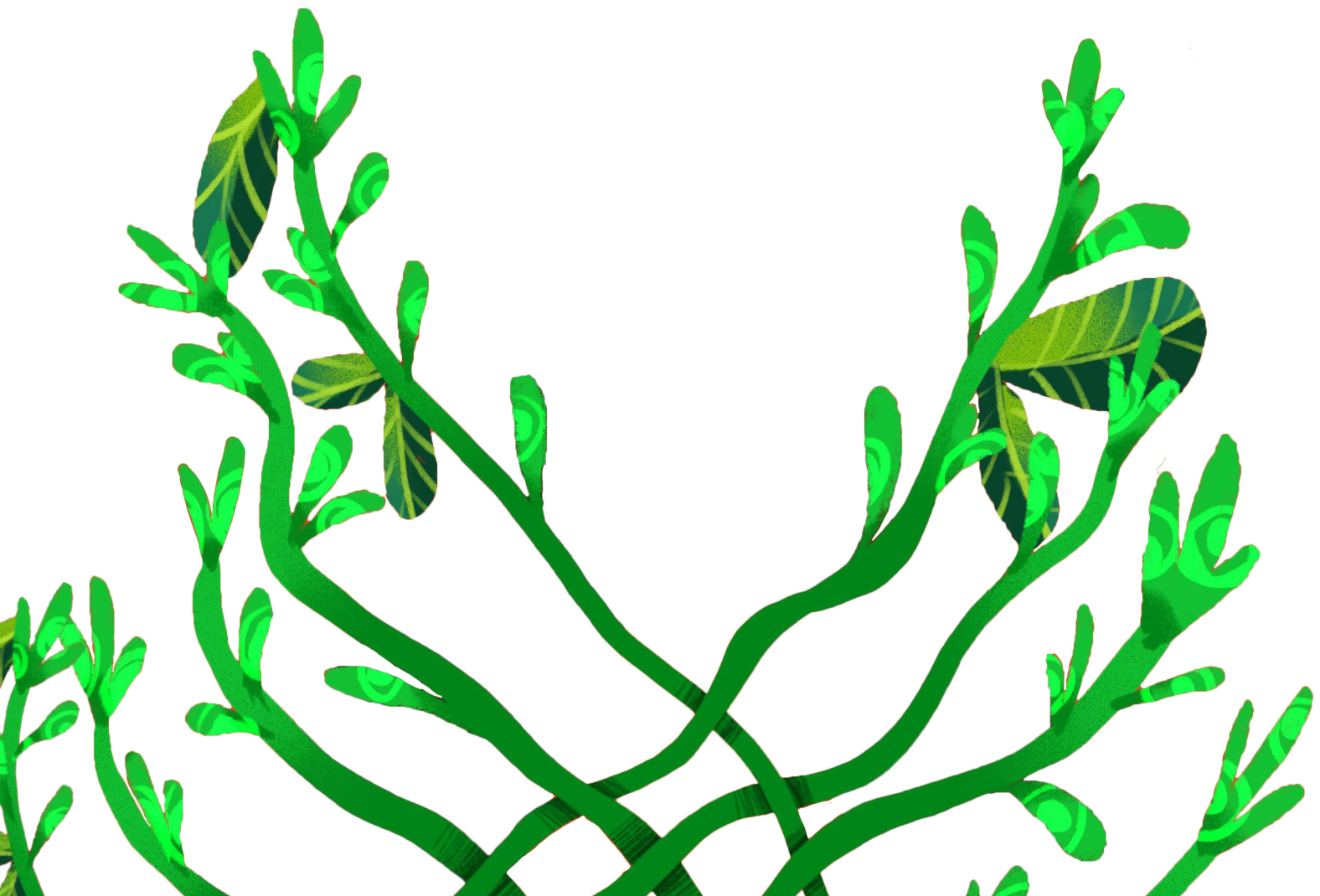
Organizations noted fundraising assistance as a significant unmet need and suggested that donors leverage funds to support organizations during the proposal development and submission processes.

## Funding challenges

LGBTQ organizations interviewed cited various funding challenges that ranged from limited organizational fundraising capacity, restrictive grant eligibility requirements, and limited access to funding opportunities at the local and regional levels.

Organizations stated that most donors directly funding LGBTQ work are located outside Liberia and the West Africa region, making it difficult for LGBTQ organizations to access funding opportunities. ActionAid Liberia, AJWS, FHI 360, ISDAO, and SIDA were mentioned as a few donors based in Liberia and directly supporting LGBTQ work in West Africa.

However, access to information on available funding opportunities is a challenge, as most organizations lack the skills and access to a stable internet connection to research funding opportunities. In the event they find opportunities, they lack proposal writing skills and are unable to manage the stringent funding requirements.



# Recommendations

During the interviews, respondents shared several recommendations for how donors could better support them in accessing funding and addressing their specific capacity gaps.

These recommendations for donors included:

1. Simplifying funding requirements/criteria for LGBTQ organizations;
2. Providing funding for vocational training activities, e.g., soap making, catering, tailoring, hairdressing, and entertainment;
3. Supporting scholarships and other educational opportunities for LGBTQ persons;
4. Channeling funds for LGBTQ community activities through LGBTQ organizations and not through non-LGBTQ institutions, in the spirit of the principle of "Nothing for us, without us";
5. Increasing funding to the LGBTQ community including funding for core organizational costs;
6. Consulting members of the LGBTQ community when there are funding/programs that involve/impact them.

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ISDAO is an activist-led fund dedicated to building a West African movement that advocates for sexual diversity and sexual rights through a flexible approach to grantmaking and strengthening a culture of philanthropy that promotes human rights and social justice.

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