ISDAC **Creating the future we want:** LBQ+ Movement-building in West Africa

Reflections, stories and strategies from ISDAO's LBQ+ Convening - April 2024

Written by: Dr. Rita Nketiah, (PhD) Notes compiled by: Sandra Okoed and Bénédicte Joan Edited by: Phidelia Imiegha and B. Caroline Kouassiaman Translated by: Akey Fabrice Looky Graphic recordings by: Nzilani Simu Report illustrations and graphic design by: Vidushi Yadav

Table of Contents



The Movement at a

Glance: What is the sociopolitical context of LBQ+ Organizing in West Africa? 21

- Reclaiming Resourcefulness: Funding Our Movements on Our Terms
- Defining the Movement's Key Objectives
- Impact of Anti-Gender and Homophobia Movements on GBV Issues
- Fostering Collaboration and Solidarity in the Movement
- Clarifying the Meaning of "LBQ+" in the Movement
- Preserving Our Herstories
- Defining "LBQ-centred"
 Policies
- Conclusion

Dreaming of the 42Future: **Possibilities in Our** Dreamspace **Restoration:** Reflections from the Healing Work Recommendations 50 Conclusion 52

Scope of Report

In April 2024, ISDAO convened 28 LBQ+ activists from across West Africa for a four-day gathering titled Creating *The Future We Want: LBQ+ Movementbuilding in West Africa.* This report weaves together the stories, struggles, and strategies that emerged from the convening, offering a deep dive into the lived realities of LBQ+ activists across the region. It captures the energy of the space—where experiences were shared, challenges named, and movement-building strategies envisioned.

Through interactive workshops, thoughtful discussions, and key reflections, participants illustrated the complexity of LBQ+ existence-

navigating employment barriers, family expectations, economic survival, education, safety, and gender-based violence. The report also explores our collective dreamspace as an LBQ+ movement in the region, using a guiding framework for strengthening collective action. In this report, we document the powerful visioning exercise, where participants dared to dream of a movement that is bolder, more connected, and prepared to advance LBQ+ rights over the next five years.

Come, dream with us.

LBQ+ Convening: Why Us? Why Now?

ISDAO: Why We Gather

Convening spaces are vital to our movement-building in the region. It is where we grow, build, strategize, release, and heal. The mere act of sitting in a room, conference space, or even a beach together, sharing space can conjure a bold and defiant resistance to those who say we should not exist.

"Gathering reminds us that we exist, that we can and do see ourselves reflected in each other, and that our lives are possible."

As an activist-led fund, ISDAO has long had a commitment to creating convening spaces for movements to connect, reflect, and learn from each other. Across West Africa, LBQ+ people are an underrepresented and under-resourced community navigating multiple forms of oppression, including gender-based violence, poverty, and invisibilization.

A 2019 study by Astraea Foundation and Mama Cash¹ study found that globally, LBQ+ activist movements are largely under-resourced with 40% of organizations operating on an annual budget of USD 5000.00 or less. The ongoing attacks on lesbian, bisexual, queer women and nonbinary people (LBQ+) demandour collective defiance. By now, we are all familiar with the shrinking space for civil society and democratic movements worldwide.

However, for LBQ+ activist community, this space has always been limited, with a persistent lack of resources to support the political organizing necessary for meaningful transformation. If civil society space has narrowed for broader democratic struggles, the LBQ+ movement has borne the greatest impact. Despite—or perhaps because of—existing at the intersection of women's rights and LGBTI+ movements, queer women's organizing faces dual invisibility, evident in both the lack of funding and the limited understanding of the community's unique challenges. Within West Africa, little is known about the experiences of LBQ+ people, despite a growing and passionate movement to protect our lives.

Within this context, LBQ+ visioning space is a critical tool for our collective liberation. What becomes possible when we create the space for LBQ+ people to commune, share, and think deeply about their lives? What transformative magic do we channel simply by gathering with intention and purpose?

In April 2024, ISDAO sought to explore these questions, when it hosted its first-ever bilingual LBQ+ convening bringing together LBQ+ activists from 9 countries in the region to connect, learn, and reflect on LBQ+ Movement Building.

¹ Saleh, L and Sood, N, (2020). Vibrant Yet Under-Resourced: The State of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Movements. New York and Amsterdam: Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice and Mama Cash.

The convening was the brainchild of ISDAO's Director of Programs Olumide Femi Makanjuola who, in 2019, dreamt of a bilingual space for LBQ+ activists in the region. Together with ISDAO's Executive Director, Caroline Kouassiaman, they developed and fundraised for ISDAO to create a space where LBQ+ activists could connect, learn, and understand the needs of the community.

However, due to the social distancing and stay-athome orders during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, ISDAO postponed the convening. Over the five years since the convening was first envisioned, ISDAO has observed the LBQ+ activist community grow and evolve, often mobilizing with limited resources to address urgent community needs in an increasingly hostile sociolegal and geopolitical climate. This only further fortified our belief that convening space for LBQ+ activists was urgently needed. To develop the approach and structure of the convening, ISDAO drew lessons from years of participating in spaces organized by others, such as QAYN's Feminist Activism school, UHAI EASHRI's Changing Faces Changing Spaces, the 2019 Global Feminist LBQ* Women's Conference, as well as hosting ISDAO partners' forums across its focal countries between 2021 and 2023.

Building on years of deep listening and lessons learned from strategic resourcing, ISDAO collaborated with Lead Consultant Dr. Rita Nketiah to develop a strategic learning space called *Creating the Future We Want: LBQ+ Movement-Building in West Africa.* The four-day convening gathered activists, creatives, shapeshifters, and movement actors to connect, learn, and reflect on the state of LBQ+ communities and activist movements across the region.

The gathering was guided by four main questions:

- What do we already know about the lives of LBQ+ people in the region? What remains to be understood?
- What does a thriving LBQ+ movement in West Africa look like?
- How has the surge of anti-gender attacks impacted LBQ+ communities and movement-building?
- What resources do we need to become a more vibrant activist community? What gaps, opportunities, and challenges in movementbuilding can we identify and address?

Our Process

From its inception, a dedicated advisory team of LBQ+ activists helped shape the vision and structure of the convening, ensuring it was deeply rooted in the lived realities of queer women in the region. Led by Dr. Rita Nketiah, the team—comprising Dr. Larissa Kojoué, Marie-Jo Tra, Nataka Gmakagni, and Sheba Akpokli—brought a wealth of expertise in queer feminist activism, grassroots organizing, and regional movement-building. Their collective insight guided both the planning and facilitation of the convening, ensuring that every discussion, session, and exchange spoke directly to the urgent challenges, opportunities, and gaps within LBQ+ movements.

More than advisors, these activists were cocreators, fostering a sense of collective ownership that empowered participants to shape and sustain the movement beyond the convening itself. In collaboration with ISDAO, the advisory working group undertook the challenging task of curating

a participant list that reflected the diversity of experiences within the movement. Guided by ISDAO's values and principles , the selection committee prioritized bringing together activists from a range of backgrounds, perspectives, and skills. The advisory group prioritized balanced and equitable representation, selecting 2-3 participants per country to ensure diverse regional perspectives. Participants were also invited to share what they hoped to contribute and what they wished to learn. These insights helped shape both the agenda and the overall vision for the convening, fostering a collaborative and intentional space.

²ISDAO principles include: Feminism, Activist-led, Inclusion, Empowerment, Self-determination, Intersectionality, Transparency, Accountability, Power analysis, Equity, Flexibility, Sustainability.

Who was in the room?

Participants:

28 LBQ+ activists from ISDAO's nine focal countries—Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo.

Experience Levels:

A mix of young or new activists and seasoned organizers with deep movement knowledge.

Language Diversity:

Conversations unfolded across both English and French, adding complexity and richness to discussions.

Areas of Expertise:

Community organizing, advocacy, research, media, finance, law, education, and art-based activism.

A dynamic and multifaceted gathering, shaped by diverse skills, backgrounds, and lived experiences.

Convening Support Team

Collectively, the facilitation and technical team worked together to ensure that the convening was an inclusive, affirming, and interactive space. The technical team included:

5 ISDAO staff members

who provided technical, administrative, and logistical support

8 resource people,

including a graphic recorder, a restorative healing facilitator, interpreters, and a bilingual team of rapporteurs.

5 members

of the advisory working group

Key Goals of the Convening:

Greater knowledge of LBQ+ issues, movements, and opportunities within the region.

Strengthening the ecosystem of LBQ+ organizing through connection, learning and reflection.

Identifying opportunities to strengthen movement building in the region.

Providing LBQ+ activists with psychosocial support, well-being resources, and capacity building tools to strengthen their work.



Structure of the Convening

Over four transformative days, participants embraced the invitation to co-create a radical space for learning, connection, and collective care.

Through interactive sessions, panel discussions, and creative self-reflection exercises, the convening wove together the many threads of LBQ+ movementbuilding, ensuring that well-being remained central to even the most complex discussions. Guided by Dr. Rita Nketiah and Dr. Larissa Kojoué, with the support of advisory team members Marie-Jo Tra and Nataka Gmakagni, each day unfolded with intention, centering core aspects of activism, strategy, and healing. The convening strived to foster a space of friendship, care, and solidarity, allowing activists to engage deeply in organized sessions while also leaving room for organic moments of connection. Conversations flowed easily over coffee breaks and shared meals, as participants exchanged stories, laughter, and experiences beyond the confines of structured discussions. Across nationalities, generations, and languages, bonds were formed, creating a sense of belonging that extended far beyond the convening itself.

Morning Yoga and Meditation

Each morning began with mindfulness sessions led by Dr. Toyin, affectionately known as 'Moon Goddess'. Her yoga, breathwork, and meditation offerings provided a grounding ritual, while her one-on-one psychosocial support ensured that participants had space to process, restore, and care for themselves throughout the convening.

Convening Structure at a Glance:

DayOne:BuildingConnections,Connecting Our Lives

We committed to developing connection and personal self-reflection of our activist journeys.

- Day Two: Learning and Reflection: Understanding the Organizing Landscape -We spent time unpacking and learning about the various challenges faced by LBQ+ communities and movement-building spaces, diving deeper into key thematic issues.
- Day Three: Our Dreamspace: Conceptualizing the Future We Want -We explored our dreamspace, interrogating and visioning what a thriving regional LBQ+ movement ecosystem could look like.
- Day Four: Rest and Restoration: We devoted ourselves to caring for each other through healing and restorative modalities.



Healing Justice Work:

LBQ+ activists are often at the frontlines of community struggles, confronting trauma and danger while carrying their own unhealed wounds. Healing justice is a political framework and practice that recognizes collective healing as essential to social justice movements, addressing the trauma, oppression, and systemic harm that activists and marginalized communities endure. In a region where survival and resistance go hand in hand, healing justice cannot just be an afterthought—it is an essential pillar of movement-building.

Rooted in a commitment to *healing justice*, the convening aimed to center the well-being of LBQ+ activists, recognizing the emotional toll of their work. Throughout the convening, Dr. Toyin Ajao—affectionately known as 'Moon Goddess'—offered a sanctuary for reflection, restoration, and collective healing. As a Restorative Healing Practitioner, she led morning yoga and meditation sessions, while also providing on-demand care for individuals in need of support. On the final day, Dr. Toyin Ajao also guided us through a series of healing modalities, including expressive writing, dance therapy, and breathing exercises,

intentionally encouraging us to slow our pace, and creating space for participants to reconnect with themselves and each other.

Participants reflect on why they are here:

"Let's move the movement forward, recognizing those left out of these structures."

"[I'm here to] learn from the realities of the other countries."

"To love and to be loved in return by all these activists in the room."

"I want to understand the movement in the region in relation to [my country]."

"I want to understand queer issues beyond Anglophone West Africa and build a network."

River of Life: Defining Our Journeys

LBQ+ communities are like vast, flowing rivers deep, resilient, and ever-changing. Yet, too often, the world only sees the crashing waves of violence and struggle, reducing our existence to headlines of corrective rape, forced marriage, and persecution. Before the currents of activism carried us forward, we were whole—wild, curious, and boundless. The relentless storm of patriarchal and queerphobic violence threatens to erode the fullness of our lives, making it easy to forget that we are more than the fight for justice. But like rivers that carve new landscapes, LBQ+ people need spaces to flow freely, to gather, and to see themselves reflected in the waters of the community.

Our first convening day was an invitation to wade into these shared waters—to step beyond the familiar roles of activist and organizer and reconnect as daughters, lovers, storytellers, and seekers. Recognizing that "the personal is political," we began by tracing our journeys, honoring the bends and tributaries that brought us here. The "River of Life" exercise became a mirror, inviting participants to pause and reflect on the pivotal moments that shaped their politics, identities, and worldviews. As stories ebbed and flowed, deeper connections formed, reminding us that we are not just solitary streams but part of a vast and powerful current, shaping and carrying each other forward.

Participants were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- What's your life story?
- Who are you outside of your activism?
- What is the vision you have for your life?
- What are the pivotal moments in your life that transformed you?

These questions prompted deep reflection and provided participants with an opportunity to gain insight into their own life journeys and aspirations. We used a variety of arts and crafts supplies to create colorful and expressive diagrams on art paper, illustrating the events that have shaped our lives. Stories poured in of strength, resilience, moments of clarity, resistance, and deep transformation. Activists transformed tragic life events into lessons in self-acceptance, selfrecovery, and self-affirmation. The River of Life exercise offered a profound and deeply personal reflection on the journeys of LBQ+ activists, each story flowing with pain, resilience, and transformation. Participants mapped their lives as rivers, tracing the highs and lows that shaped their identities and activism.

Angie's river was marked by rejection from her father, forced marriage, unemployment, and isolation. Yet, through patience and resilience, she emerged proud. **"Today, I am proud to be a lesbian,**" she stated with conviction.

Sarah spoke of how their river was shaped by the trauma of sexual violence and the discovery of their queerness through pain. "It's horrifying, but I'm making it positive; I choose to make it beautiful," they declared, reflecting a determination to reclaim their story. "Friends are the family I never had."

Mawuli's^{*} river was dark and turbulent, reflecting the struggles of being a trans man in a society that refused to accept him. Yet, he held onto hope. "A man wants to dominate and wants to have a family some time," he said, emphasizing his determination to build the life he envisions.

Hawa described how her river began as a calm blue stream but turned black, symbolizing depression and loss. At 19, she realized she was a lesbian—a revelation she marked with a lion's head, representing courage. For years, she struggled to conform to society's expectations, but when she finally embraced herself, she depicted this moment as a butterfly, signifying freedom and self-determination.

For some LBQ activists like Pomaa, a disabled woman, their river of life was shaped by early trauma. Her vulnerability led to sexual abuse at a young age. **"Home was nowhere to be found,"** she said. But in 2021, she embraced her lesbian identity—a moment she described as "rejuvenating." The pride flag, she declared, was her home.

Loss and growth intertwined in Seyram's river. The death of her father in 2012 marked a deep sorrow, but the waves of her journey grew larger, symbolizing her dreams and ambition. By 2022, she had begun "living life," and in 2024, she imagined her waves would be gentler. "I will fly and shine," she said, looking ahead with hope.

Mariam's life before accepting their LBQ identity was defined by their religious upbringing and disappointment. A rapper, they found queer love in 2021 and began to notice the immense suffering of queer women in Burkina Faso due to family rejection. Their vision now is to foster love and respect. "I am **bisexual, and I still pray,**" they affirmed, refusing to see their faith and identity as contradictions. The duality of struggle and triumph flowed throughout Esther's journey. She was called "boy child" for her love of soccer, and when she embraced her lesbian identity, she found unexpected support. Her girlfriend paid her university entrance fees, opening doors to a brighter future. By 2015, she was working with the UN and dreaming of creating a space for female LBQ soccer players. "I am one of the proud lesbians of Liberia," she declared, standing tall in her truth.

Layla's river traced a long and harrowing journey through forced marriage. Born into a traditional Fulani family, she was married off at 14, tied to a bed, and raped by her husband. At 18, she gathered the courage to walk into a police station and demand a divorce. With nowhere to go, she built her own path. **"The only reason I am here is that there is hope,**" Layla said.

Each river told a different story, yet they all flowed with resilience, survival, and the unwavering desire to carve out space in a world that often tries to erase them. As participants hung their drawings along the conference room walls, the convening space was transformed

into a vibrant gallery - a series of rivers fostering conversation, connection, and reflecting collective journeys throughout the convening. SELF-REFLECTION EXERCISE



Our Bodies, Our Stories

Arts-based body mapping has deep roots in African women's communities, originating in South Africa in 2001 as a way for mothers dying from HIV/AIDS to speak to their children through visually documenting their grief and pain. Our bodies carry the stories of our lives-the mole above the left eye, the freckles scattered across cheeks, the wounds that never fully heal. The curve of a nose, the shape of lipseach feature ties us to our lineage and the stories of our lives, a living map of who we are. Sharing the story of our bodies can serve as a powerful form of self-definition and reflection. Across West Africa. LBQ+ communities navigate a complex landscape of visibility, resilience, and resistance. In each country, their presence is deeply intertwined with cultural expressions, activism, and daily survival, yet they remain largely unseen in mainstream narratives. Through the "Body Mapping" exercise, participants painted a collective portrait of their communities, using senses, symbols, and lived experiences to chart the landscapes of LBQ+ life in the region.

Each group selected a volunteer to lie down on brown paper as others traced their outline. Inside these body maps, they filled in symbols, colors, and imagery that represented their communities, based on the five senses: taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing. The session culminated in participants sharing their creations, offering a powerful, collective reflection on belonging, visibility, and the many ways LBQ+ lives take shape across the region.

Participants reflected on the following questions:

- What does community, home, and belonging look like for LBQ+ people in your country?
- Can you identify the LBQ+ community/ culture in your country through the 5 five senses (what does it feel, sound, taste, smell, and look like?)
- What does LBQ+ culture look like in your country (describe using the 5 senses)

⁴Devine, C. (2008). The Moon, the Stars and a Scar: Body mapping stories of women living with HIV/AIDS. Border Crossings. vol 1 <u>https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312022551_The_Moon_the_Stars_and_a_Scar_Bodymapping_stories_of_women_living</u> with_HIVAIDS

Benin: Between Fear and Hope

In Benin, despite a penal code that protects LBQ+ people, community members still fear discrimination and stigma, often preventing them from interacting with each other. Benin's LBQ+ community remains largely underground, as fear of discrimination prevents many from openly claiming their identities. Families often reject those who come out, leaving organizations to provide crucial support. Participants shared that their community historically "tastes" like a mixture of happiness and violence. But while the past was marked by invisibility, today, LBQ+ people are finding spaces in sports and music, dreaming of a future where they can live freely, love openly, and build lasting communities. In Benin, we learn that the community sounds like the chants of ancient female warriors - a call-and-response, "Agojié!" with a resounding reply of "Wuzu!"

Burkina Faso: A Divided and Fearful Landscape

Despite the climate of fear and marginalization in Burkina Faso, LBQ-led organizations continue to carve out spaces for connection and advocacy. Youthful energy drives much of the movement, with younger members taking the lead in community engagement, particularly in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) initiatives and capacitybuilding efforts. However, the community remains fragmented—some members, including married women, navigate these spaces in secrecy, while older LBQ+ individuals remain less visible. Professionally, LBQ+ people are making strides in diverse fields, from audiovisual work to cycling, while selfexpression through hair, tattoos, and piercings serves as subtle markers of queer identity. Amidst these challenges, the heartbeat of the community lies in the relationships forged in familiar gathering places, where chosen family offers solace, solidarity, and belonging.

Côte d'Ivoire: A Generation in Transition

The lyorian LBQ+ community is often perceived as "lovers of enjoyment", with vibrant nightclubs and bars serving as gathering spaces. Yet beneath this lively exterior lies a reality shaped by pervasive homophobia, limited employment opportunities, and the resulting struggles with depression, anxiety, and social exclusion. Despite these challenges, a younger generation of LBQ activists has emerged, seeking to grow in their activism and determination to shift the landscape. The community was described as visually flamboyant and vibrant, despite the movement itself remaining largely invisible. In the movement, a "sweetness" lingers in the air, symbolizing the promise of a new era and a generation eager to redefine visibility. Participants described the LBQ+ "soundtrack" as one dominated by pop music, echoing both joy and longing within a relatively small but resilient community.



Ghana: A Fragmented Yet Defiant Community

Amidst a legal battle to criminalize LBGTQ+ people, the Ghanaian LBQ+ community was described as a "loose end," lacking cohesion yet yearning for a stronger sense of unity. Many expressed a collective desire for the community to feel like family-a space for free socialization and deeper connection. While there is no single, central gathering place, urban nightlife often serves as the community's heartbeat, with people moving fluidly between spaces to find their belonging. Community members are often recognized by certain style markers-short hair, colored dreadlocks, anklets worn on the left ankle. and tattoos symbolizing social justice and equality. A common myth persists that wearing anklets signals one's queerness. When asked to describe the movement through the senses, participants compared it to the taste of "kelewele"-sweet, spicy, and full of flavor. Metaphorically, it was described as "soft to the touch," embodying both resilience and warmth. Beyond nightlife, the community finds joy in hiking, astrology, and the rhythmic pulse of amapiano and Afrobeat music. Participants also spoke about the abrupt closure of a local skate park where many LBQ people found a social space in the capital city.

Mali: A Hidden but Vibrant Presence

Despite ongoing stigma and a recently passed law to criminalize LGBT people, the LBQ+ community in Mali can be found across many facets of society. Participants shared that LBQ+ people are visible in sports, often recognized by their attire or affiliations with certain sports associations. Their presence extends to music, particularly rap, military service, and cultural traditions like the ethnic Bambara dance. LBQ+ people often express their identity through hairstyles, clothing, and shared spaces of community. As one participant affirmed, "We are rappers. We can also be in the army and wear uniforms."

Liberia: Finding Strength in Visibility

Liberian participants painted a vivid picture of where the LBQ+ community is most visible, spanning diverse sectors such as media, aviation, law enforcement, immigration, nursing, sex work, sports like basketball, and bartending. Nightclubs and parties remain key gathering spaces, where community members forge connections beyond the margins of mainstream society. Liberian participants also shared that community members don distinctive

hairstyles, particularly dreadlocks, which often serve as subtle markers of identity. Meanwhile, digital spaces are becoming powerful platforms for selfexpression—activists shared the story of a Liberian LBQ+ woman who recently came out on TikTok, boldly embracing her identity with pride accessories.

Senegal: A History of Resistance

Once fragmented and isolated, the LBQ+ community in Senegal has now come together, forming a collective force to advocate for their rights. Within their organizations, the community turns inwardcreating spaces of deep listening, understanding, and care. This commitment to one another has fostered a powerful sense of sisterhood, where solidarity is a daily practice. The Senegalese LBQ+ community empathizes deeply with each other's challenges, cultivating relationships based on active listening and confidentiality. At its core, the LBQ+ environment is described as friendly and non-discriminatory, providing a space where all women and LBQ+ members can share freely and feel at home. Intergenerational relationship-building has been at the heart of the LBQ+ community, with older activists continuing the fight for LBQ+ rights alongside newer generations. LBQ+ people commonly participate in professional sports activities, although there are no specific identifiers

⁵At the time of the convening, Mali's anti-LGBTQ+ bill was still under discussion. However, by December 2024, it had been passed by the country's Transitional National Council.

like hair or clothing styles. To illustrate how certain elements of Senegalese culture embrace LGBQTI individuals, the group referenced cultural traditions like the "sabar," a Wolof dance where men dress femininely to dance and perform rituals. Terms like "góor-jigéen" and "muni gang" were used to describe LGBQTI persons during Abdou Diouf's presidency in Senegal. The Lebou community is also known for hosting ceremonies where LBQ+ individuals gather to share in community

Nigeria: Bold, Creative, and Defiant

The LBQ+ community in Nigeria is complex, shaped by both solidarity and exclusion. Within the broader LGBTQI+ movement, LBQ+ people often navigate barriers to full inclusion, particularly those with disabilities, including individuals on the autism spectrum. For participants, this internal complexity raised the question: how can the community become more inclusive? Despite these challenges, Nigerian LBQ+ identities thrive through artistic expression, fashion, music, and activism. Participants noted a shared cultural softness and boldness, mirroring their Ghanaian counterparts, with the younger generation fearlessly pushing boundaries. The Nigerian queer aesthetic is distinct—marked by tattoos, incense, scented candles, and a love for cats and coffee. Their sound is electronic music, pulsating with energy and resistance, particularly in Lagos, where it embodies both anger and defiance. "If yellow had a taste," one participant mused, "it would be us." Another likened their essence to the sweetness of mango. Yet, the struggle for belonging persists, as LBQ+ spaces are often fragmented, and impacted by intimate partner violence and toxic relationships. Still, a spirit of resistance endures.

Participants shared with us a common community chant that ignites the passion in activist space:



Togo: Between Isolation and Solidarity

In Togo, the LBQ+ community is divided between those who embrace the power of organizing and those who quietly endure violence, fearing the consequences of being seen. Yet, participants shared that to see the Togolese LBQ+ person is to see a vibrant display of colors, playful gender expression, and bold fashion choices that challenge rigid norms. Their world feels textured with warmth and solidarity, where wise women extend guidance and support. The movement carries the familiar taste of akume, evoking a sense of shared meals and communal gatherings. Young people are increasingly drawn to these spaces, eager to participate and shape the future. And to hear the LBQ+ community is to hear the echoes of their national anthem-a steady reminder of their presence, resilience, and unwavering hope in a country often described as small and peaceful.

Across the region, LBQ+ activists are shaping movements despite immense challenges. Their presence is both subtle and striking—found in music, fashion, protests, and coded gestures of recognition. Their stories speak to the power of resilience, the necessity of community, and the unwavering pursuit of liberation.

⁶ A thick corn porridge made from ground maize, fermented cassava, and water.

¹ These collective reflections stem from a group exercise during the convening. For more detailed insights into country-specific contexts, refer to <u>ISDAO's 2024 Doundou</u> report series, which examines the landscapes in nine focal countries.

The Movement at a Glance: What is the sociopolitical context of LBQ+ Organizing in West Africa?

On the second day of the convening, Dr. Nketiah delivered a presentation that provided a framework of the LBQ+ community's context and highlighted concerning trends in West Africa. LBQ+ organizers exist in a constantly shifting and hostile socio-legal and political context which shapes their strategies of resistance. Some of the ongoing challenges in the region include:

Regional Context:

- **31 countries** in Africa still criminalize consensual same-sex sexual activity, despite the clear contradiction with established African Union and international human rights standards
- The construction of "African family values" remains a persistent justification for local antigender actors seeking to criminalize LGBT+ persons, reject comprehensive sexual education,
 and oppose reproductive rights—all under the guise of preserving "African" cultural heritage.
- Anti-gender actors are mobilized across state, religious, and traditional cultural leadership in the region, often forming alliances of socio-legal opposition.

- Mainstream women's rights movements in West Africa often uphold social and religious conservatism, framing gender through a binary lens and prioritizing cisgender heterosexual women's experiences. In some instances, these movements are actively hostile towards LBQ women and non-binary people.
- Throughout the region, the focus on gay, bisexual men and men who sleep with men continues to dominate the LGBT+ advocacy landscape,
- There are growing LBQ+ movements across the region, with the rise of new organizations in the past decade.

What are the Consequences?

- Limited access to funding opportunities and organizing spaces
- Persistent invisibilization of LBQ+ leadership, activism, and community priorities
- Weak and unsustainable movement-building in the region

⁸Amnesty International Report, "Africa: We are facing extinction" 2023



What regional infrastructure exists?

Despite the lack of structural support and persisting discrimination, it is worth noting the legacy of LBQ+ organizing in West Africa. **Key moments in regional organizing include:**

- The establishment of the Queer African Youth Network (2010), a queer feminist organization based in Burkina Faso, works across the francophone region creating spaces for LBQ+ people and trans communities. Perhaps QAYN's most prolific support for LBQ movement building has been their Feminist Activist School, designed to strengthen the feminist consciousness of LBQ activists across several francophone countries.
- PLATEFORME INITIATIVE DES 7 (PI7), a coalition of LBQ+ organizations in the Francophone region has supported the leadership development, capacity building, and inter-regional collaboration of activists, towards a stronger movement ecosystem.
- Inspired by a series of conversations with anglophoneLBQ+activistsin2016,acommunityled research mapping initiative was launched,

bringing together activists from Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana, and Sierra Leone with support from COC Nederland. This initiative played a crucial role in documenting LBQ+ health challenges across the subregion, while also fostering region-wide collaboration and solidarity. A similar mapping series was conducted with francophone activists two years later, and a report was published on the experiences of LBQ+ activists in Bénin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Togo.

Between 2004 and 2021, the **Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL)** created a strong network of 14 LBQ+ organizations across 10 countries in Africa, with the aim of "advocating and lobbying for the equal political, sexual, cultural and economic rights of African lesbian, bisexual and trans diverse people". From 2015-2018, CAL established a West Africa and Central Africa (WACA) programme, which focused on "capacity building/consciousness-raising, media and mobilization and research and lobbying" to support LBQ movements in the region.

- African Queer Youth Initiative (AQYI) organizes the MawuLisa Fellowship program, which provides technical support, capacity building, and funding to young and emerging LBT+ women from Francophone countries.
- Other Africa-wide networks, such as Pan-African ILGA (PAI) and UHAI EASHRI's Changing Faces, Changing Spaces conference, have been instrumental in providing platforms for West African LBQ+ activists to engage in visioning, movement-building, and collective gathering. However, due to the longstanding history of organizing in Southern and Eastern Africa, West African activists remain less visible in these spaces.

¹² https://web.archive.org/web/20160303055013/http://www.cal.org.za/new/?page_id=16

¹³Koujoué , L. Personal Communication, January 24th, 2024.

⁹ https://international.coc.nl/our-international-network/western-africa/

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Kugbe, Y. & Akpokli, S. (2020). 'Breaking labyrinths : An insight into our lived experiences. Report based on a community-led research evaluating the priority needs of lesbian, bisexual and queer communities. In six francophone West/Central African Countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Mali, and Togo.' Amsterdam: COC Netherlands.

Critical Conversations Organizing in West Africa: Highlights from Opening Panel

Moderated by Caroline Kouassiaman, ISDAO's Executive Director, and Phidelia Imiegha, ISDAO's Communications Officer, the opening panel included activists from across the region, engaged in movement-building, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and media and communications, sharing perspectives on the current climate for LBQ+ organizing across key thematic issues. Panelists included:

Nataka

is the Coordinator for QAYN based in Burkina Faso, focused on strengthening queer feminist movements across francophone countries.

Marie-Jo

is an author and the Program Manager of Réseau Ivoirienne des Femmes Bi sexuelles et Queer based in Cote d'Ivoire.

Jemima (Jemm)

is the Program Coordinator for Courageous Sisters Ghana, a feminist LBQ+ organization supporting queer women and trans people across the country.

Benedicta

is originally from Nigeria, is the Community Engagement and Partnership Lead at the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

This panel served as a grounding force for the convening—a space where urgency met strategy,

hard truths were spoken, and moments of collective clarity emerged. Below, we share some of the key concerns and tensions that were discussed:

An Evolving Movement Context

"Do we have an understanding of what a movement is? For me, a movement is a set of actions that we put in place... [The LBQ+] movement is taking a more structured route. These are the skills we are building today. It is part of a rebirth." *-Nataka*

The panel opened with speakers sharing their perspectives on the state of the LBQ+ movement in the region, drawing from their diverse experiences and areas of work. Nataka argued that a movement comprises "a series of actions" aimed at achieving specific goals. They spoke about changes or "shifts" that they had witnessed in the movement, illustrated by the growing number of legally registered organizations. In addition, they noted

a change in movement organizing. Whereas in the past, the movement primarily focused on providing grassroots support, contemporary organizations have evolved to prioritize broader goals, such as movement-building, legal advocacy, and even crossregional collaboration. Panelists observed a marked improvement in advocacy capacity, with more LBQ+ organizations formally registered, indicating a shift towards more professional and organizational development. They also noted increased diversity among movement organizers, which now included young people with diverse gender expressions and those from diverse professional backgrounds. Ultimately, there is a sense of cautious optimism about the expanding LBQ+ movement space, with panelists acknowledging these shifts as a necessary response to the demand for stronger movement infrastructure and development.

Successes: Growing LBQ+ Leadership

LBQ+movement building is growing across the region, despite some of the challenges that have plagued the movement. Panelists were asked to reflect on any key successes and milestone achievements at the local or regional level. Panelists reflected on the importance and presence of LBQ+ leadership across various advocacy spaces. Naturally, LBQ+ activists are engaged in a range of advocacy spaces, likely due to the multiple intersecting oppressions they navigate. For example, we learn of a Nigerian LBQ activist, Benedicta, who was at the forefront of research advocacy that subsequently led to the enactment of a law prohibiting discrimination based on disability and the establishment of the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD).

LBQ+ activists were also instrumental in strategic litigation against the Nigerian Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act 2014, which eventually rendered certain parts of the Act unconstitutional.

We learn that in Nigeria, LBQ+ activists are organizing for themselves, despite major adversity. Benedicta stresses intersectionality in the movement and the need to think about what LBQ+ presence brings into spaces. In Ghana, LBQ+ leadership is growing, partly attributed to funding from feminist donors. Access to regional leadership spaces is also progressing; for instance, an activist from Ghana recently served as the Co-Chair for Pan Africa ILGA, a major network of organizations across the continent. Additionally, LBQ+ women's organizations are spearheading SRHR programs and engaging in data collection efforts to better understand community needs.

Marie-Jo, a panelist from Cote d'Ivoire discussed the progress made in raising awareness for LBQ+ issues in her country. Currently, the country has three (3) national LBQ+ organizations, which is a testament to both the perseverance of organizers, as well as the need for greater momentum. The panelist stressed the importance of building networks and engaging individuals for collective success, citing her organization's collaboration with the Conseil National des Droits de l'Homme (National Council for Human Rights), which has helped to amplify their voices during advocacy efforts. She advocated for moving beyond isolation, promoting reflection, collaboration, and collective action to advance the movement.

Reclaiming Resourcefulness: Funding Our Movements on Our Terms

"In the past, we had meetings in the house or backyard. Today, when we have meetings, we have to pay for the venue." *-Nataka*

Funding remains one of the biggest roadblocks to sustaining LBQ+ organizing in West Africa. Panelists tackled this challenge head-on, sharing hard-won lessons on mobilizing resources, navigating donor priorities, and reclaiming the spirit of mutual aid that has always fueled our movements. Marie-Jo (Côte d'Ivoire) acknowledged the ongoing struggle to access funding but noted a gradual increase in grant availability. Still, she challenged the room to rethink the reliance on donor cycles and consider how LBQ+ organizations could sustain themselves without external dependency. Before philanthropy took notice, she stated, LBQ+ activists were already building, funding, and protecting their spacespooling resources, supporting one another, and creating movements out of necessity. Over time, however, organizations have become increasingly

reliant on external funding, requiring grants for even the smallest activities. She urged participants to reconnect with the movement's roots in mutual aid and collective care, emphasizing that true sustainability must come from within. Decolonizing activism also means reimagining how organizations function, moving beyond the limitations of traditional grant structures. The challenge ahead is not just securing funding but ensuring that LBQ+ movements remain resilient and self-sustaining, shaped by community priorities rather than philanthropic agendas. She compared philanthropy to a food chain-a system of mutual dependence that demands careful navigation to ensure that resources serve the movement, not just the agendas of funders.

Nataka's reflection underscored this point: "In the past, we had meetings in the house or backyard. Today, when we have meetings, we have to pay for the venue," they noted. Panelists warned against the risks of donor-driven priorities that do not always align with community needs. While external funding can be an important tool, it should never dictate the agenda. The panel called for a renewed commitment to grassroots resourcefulness, encouraging LBQ+ organizations to strategize ways to maintain independence while leveraging external support on their terms.



Lack of recognition in broader social justice struggles and responding to anti-gender movements

"Oftentimes, LBQ+ [people] are not considered part of the key populations." *-Benedicta*

As the discussion deepened, panelists reflected on the persistent invisibility of LBQ+ people within feminist, LGBTQI+, and broader human rights spaces. While LBQ+ activists are deeply invested in various struggles for justice, their presence is often erased-sidelined by socio-religious conservatism in women's rights spaces, sexism and male-dominated leadership in LGBTQ+ movements, and institutional norms that devalue LBQ+ ways of knowing and organizing. Some panelists shared concerns about the tokenization of LBQ+ identities, particularly in Nigerian feminist spaces, where a troubling "divideand-conquer" mentality creates a competition for resources across activist movements. This dynamic weakens collective efforts and prevents truly intersectional approaches to addressing the complexities of women's lives. Panelists also highlighted how LBQ+ communities are rarely recognized as "key populations" in advocacy sectors such as HIV/AIDS and disability rights, which can limit access to critical funding and resources.

LBQ+ Activist Role in Countering the Antigender Movement

The rise of anti-gender movements has only intensified these challenges, making LBQ+ inclusion in civil society even more precarious. Many panelists were engaged in resisting these forces in their home countries—whether through lobbying in male-dominated parliamentary spaces, challenging religious leadership, or countering disinformation in the media. However, LBQ+ activists often bear the brunt of patriarchal backlash, facing harsher penalties for protest and political dissent. In many West African countries, anti-gender legal mobilization has focused on harshening sodomy laws, historically targeting male same-sex relations.

This has shaped activist resistance in ways that further obscure the unique harms faced by LBQ+ people. Moving forward, it is critical to interrogate how this patriarchal framing limits LBQ+ participation in the fight against anti-gender movements. Ultimately, panelists underscored the urgent need for targeted advocacy—both to challenge the anti-gender movement's impact on LBQ+ people and to carve out greater space for them within broader human rights struggles. Strengthening movement strategies requires intentional inclusion, ensuring that LBQ+ activists are not only recognized but empowered to lead.

Linguistic Justice and Diversity in Convening Spaces

Apanelist observed that the convening's commitment to bilingualism was an important success for regional movement-building. According to the panelist, the ability to communicate in two languages signifies a victory and reflects broader achievements in collaboration, visibility, intersectionality, and diversity within the LBQ+ movement. The historical dominance of colonial languages-English and French-has created significant barriers to crossborder organizing in West Africa, as most activists are limited to one or the other. Funders have rarely invested in the resources needed to facilitate bilingual movement-building, such as simultaneous interpretation and translation of public reports. The convening's commitment to linguistic justice was recognized as a crucial shift in the movement ecosystem, signaling a more inclusive and accessible future for LBQ+ activism in the region.

Organizational vs. Independent Activism

Digital activism has shifted the landscape of social justice mobilization. Over the past few years, many independent activists have sprung up, using their social media platforms for advocacy. Panelists discussed how movements could collaborate with social media influencers while ensuring community safety and aligning with on-the-ground organizing strategies. This prompted panelists to discuss the pros and cons of collaborating with social media influencers and activists. Some panelists expressed concerns about the safety and security implications of these collaborations, noting that activists and influencers could endanger community members by disclosing personal information or unintentionally thwarting movement strategies. One panelist stressed the importance of recognizing individual agency and sensitizing activists and influencers on the risks of sharing sensitive information on social media platforms. Panelists also emphasized the importance of unity within the LBQ+ community, urging activists to focus on collective resistance against external threats rather than creating divisions between independent and organizational activism. Jemm also highlighted the lack of concrete conflict resolution strategies and suggested establishing ground rules to foster internal cohesion. Speaking about the challenges of managing internal conflicts and the lack of conflict resolution mechanisms. Benedicta stated, "There are no ground rules as we are quick to call ourselves out instead of in."

Creating the Future We Want

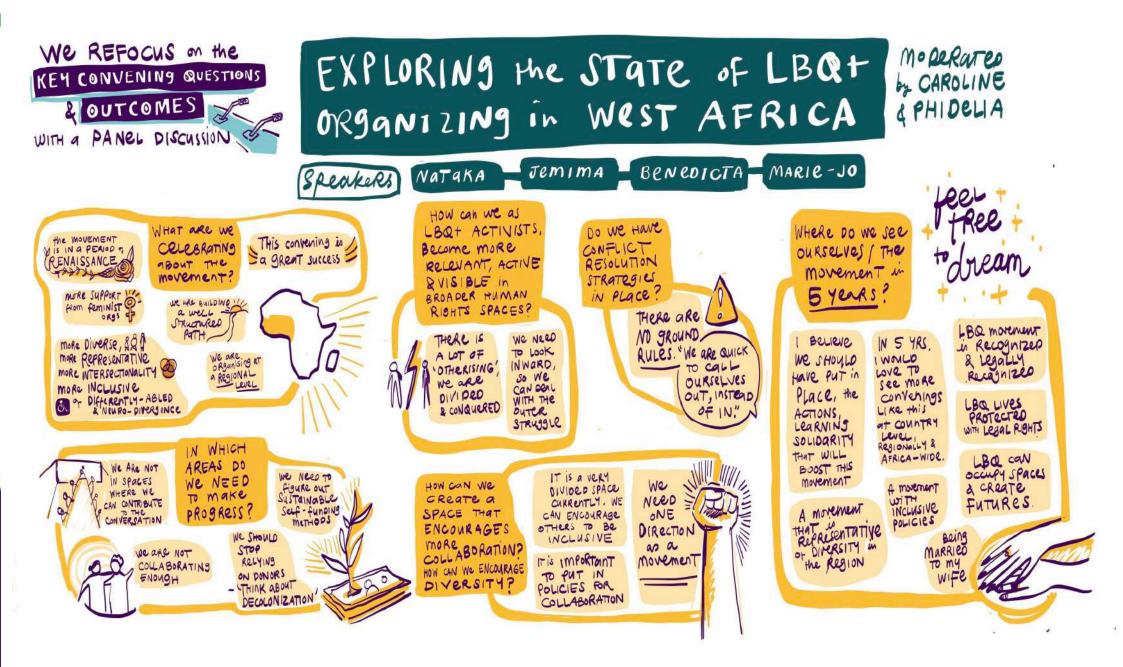
As the panel drew to a close, the moderators invited panelists to envision the future of the LBQ+ movement. What emerged was a tapestry of bold dreams and collective aspirations—each thread weaving together the hopes, struggles, and resilience of activists across the region. Their reflections below paint a vivid picture of the future they dare to imagine:

"First of all, we have to believe in it and put in place the actions, learning solidarity that will boost this belief. This movement mustn't stay where it is today. When we leave, we need to be able to remain in contact. There needs to be continuity when we leave as well, for us to reflect on what we learned." *-Marie-Jo*

"In 5 years' time, I dream of a structured, healthy, and supportive movement." *-Nataka* "In five years, I would like to see more convenings like this at the country level, across the region, and across Africa. The LBQ movement is legally recognized, and LBQ's lives are protected. They have legal rights and can occupy spaces where we can create futures."

-Jemm

"A movement that is representative of the diversity in the region, with more inclusive policies reflecting the needs of the region and sub-region. Lastly, [I see myself] being married to my wife." *-Benedicta*



Voices from the Open Forum: Understanding Our Collective Struggles

Following the opening panel, convening participants were invited to share their reflections in an open forum discussion, highlighting some of the urgent issues affecting LBQ+ organizers.



Spotlight: Activists Responding to Ghana's Family Values Bill

- One of the most pressing discussions focused on Ghana's ongoing legal battle to criminalize LGBTQ+ people—a fight that weighed heavily on Ghanaian activists. Their concerns resonated with others across the region, who feared the ripple effects of such legislation. Participants were eager to understand how Ghanaian activists were confronting this hypercriminalization.
- Ghanaian activists shared that the difficult political terrain posed serious challenges. Despite their best efforts, the Family Values Bill passed by majority vote in Parliament on February 28, 2024. They explained that the bill, introduced as a Private Members' Bill, was strategically pushed by its sponsors primarily members of the then-minority party.
- Ghanaian participants highlighted the community's proactive response. LGBTI organizations, through the National Alliance for Equality and Diversity (AfED) and

other coalitions, engaged allies, lobbied parliamentary stakeholders, and submitted opposition memoranda. They also organized safety and security sensitization sessions to help community members navigate the landscape in the event of the bill's passage. Unfortunately, meaningful dialogue with lawmakers remained difficult due to the country's hostile climate.

- Activists also examined the role of digital and mainstream media. As one participant noted, "The media in Ghana is not on our side, and it's very complicated to associate with them." Mainstream outlets continue to platform hostile pundits who spread harmful disinformation. However, independent activists, particularly in social media spaces, have gained traction. Activists highlighted Ghana's first transgender musician, Angel Maxine, for using her platform creatively to champion LGBT+ rights.
- The discussion concluded with reflections on solidarity with Ghana. Some questioned whether a lack of regional support contributed to the bill's passage, while the moderator urged participants to consider the insidious influence of far-right evangelical actors from the West. Ghana's experience—once a beacon of stable democratic governance in the region—now serves as a cautionary lesson. Participants recognized the importance of learning from Ghanaian advocacy as antigender movements continue to gain traction across the region.
- Ultimately, discussions on LBQ+ solidarity in Ghana underscored the community's resilience and strategic resistance. Ghanaian activists emphasized the need for unity and collective action to navigate these challenges and advance their agenda. Their struggle highlights the urgent need for regional solidarity, collective resistance, and proactive strategies to counter the rising tide of antigender mobilization.

Emerging Themes: Open Forum

i. Defining the Movement's Key Objectives

"The movement needs to be defined by us." *-Participant*

Extensive discussions centered on the state of the LBQ+ "movement" in the region. While the term is broadly applied, it does not always reflect the lived realities of LBQ+ activists and communities. In some countries, the movement appears nascent due to a historical lack of funding, lesbophobia, sexism, and limited access to traditional advocacy spaces and strategies. This has led to uncertainty about whether the movement truly exists in a structured form. Instead, the LBQ+ movement in West Africa is an ongoing project of world-making, where activists and allies continue to articulate their needs, desires, and priorities. The conversation underscored the urgency of developing movement infrastructure and a clearer definition of its objectives. It also highlighted the unconventional nature of LBO+ activism in the region, shaped by limited resources. During the open forum, activists engaged in a critical discussion about defining the movement's key objectives. This urgency was best captured by one participant's reflection: "The movement needs to be defined by us. We want to promote a renaissance for the movement. The real question is who does what, at what time? We're the ones who determine that. When we talk about rebirth, what do we actually want?"



ii. Impact of Anti-Gender and HomophobiaMovements on GBV Issues

Some activists raised concerns about how the growing anti-gender movement is exacerbating gender-based violence. As opposition to LGBT communities intensifies. LBQ+ individuals face increasing barriers to accessing support from mainstream institutions for intimate partner and gender-based violence. Participants also highlighted a common misconception that violence only comes from external sources, while intimate partner violence (IPV) remains a persistent issue within the community itself. The discussion also acknowledged the growing trend of policies criminalizing LGBQTI communities, in Africa and globally. Participants highlighted the need for allies to support datadriven research and for movement actors to better understand the workings of anti-gender movements. The publication "Who is Afraid of Gender?" (ISDAO and QAYN, 2022) was referenced as a key resource for understanding the rising tide of anti-gender actors in the region and how we can safeguard our communities and movements.

iii. Fostering Collaborationand Solidarity in theMovement

"Languages and borders must not divide us. If I don't agree with someone in the community, that doesn't mean I can't collaborate [with them]." *-Participant, Ghana*

An important conversation ensued about the difference between "collaboration", "coordination" and "solidarity". The core question was: Are there ways to work with each other without holding the same perspective?



The responses were varied and thoughtful:

- Solidarity, a key ingredient for collaboration, was framed as mutual care, taking individual responsibility, and maintaining a shared vision while effectively resolving conflicts.
- Speaking to the importance of solidarity within the movement, participants emphasized the need to foster continuous solidarity• and proposed strategies to overcome distractions like the anti-gender movement and competition for donor funding.
- Burkinabe activists offered an example of innovative collaboration in their country, where the creation of a GBV podcast was sustained without donor funding, instead relying on their available human resources • and organizational equipment. This unconventional strategy was questioned by some activist leaders, who had become

used to the typical donor-supplied per diems. Not only did this experience highlight the movement's normalization of, and overreliance on donor funding, it also demonstrated that activists are capable of finding new strategies for self-sustainability.

Participants also emphasized the importance of cross-border support, with one activist stating that solidarity means supporting each other, regardless of national boundaries or personal differences. They reflected: "Languages and borders must not divide us. If I don't agree with someone in the community, that doesn't mean I can't collaborate."

Another participant noted: "Solidarity is about accepting diverse opinions [within the movement]."

iv. Clarifying the Meaningof "LBQ+" in theMovement

"[The advisory group] had a lot of discussions to define the movement, but we had to use standards [for this convening space]. There are people here who identify differently. The reality of how we define ourselves is much more complicated." *-Moderator*

Within West Africa, terminology for same-sex desire between women varies across countries and cultures. During the open forum, questions emerged about who is considered an "LBQ+ person," reflecting ongoing tensions within the movement. While the convening explicitly centered Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer (LBQ) individuals, participants challenged the complexities of this identity. For example, some nonbinary and trans women align with LBQ+ identities, highlighting overlaps in lived experiences. However, the movement continues to struggle with creating trans-inclusive LBQ+ spaces, given the biological essentialism that often underpins the category of "woman" and the varied realities of LBQ+ people. Some participants expressed concerns that including trans people in the convening did not reflect the realities of organizing in their country contexts, where LBQ individuals do not always align with or share community with trans women. It was important to clarify that the advisory working group—composed entirely of LBQ+ activists from the region—used intentional and politically progressive criteria to ensure that attendees reflected the diversity of the LBQ+ movement. Indeed, trans men and non-binary persons who identify as part of the LBQ+ movement and organizations were invited and took part during the convening.

The moderator emphasized this point, stating:

"We had many discussions to define the movement, but we had to use standards [for this convening space]. There are people here who identify differently. The reality of how we define ourselves is much more complicated."

This discussion demonstrated that the movement is still actively navigating how to inclusively represent diverse identities within its framework.

v. Preserving Our Herstories

Participants expressed a profound desire to understand the historical trajectory of LBQ+ movements in West Africa. While some research has been conducted over the years, it often remains scattered and is seldom retained within emerging movement spaces. During the open forum, discussions underscored the necessity of preserving the histories of LBQ+ organizing in the region. There is a pressing need for comprehensive historical research and documentation on LBQ+ movements and pivotal moments. Concerns were raised about how to chronicle the history of the LBQ+ movement before the establishment of formal organizations, ensuring that early pioneering activists receive due recognition.

Dr. Larissa Kojoué highlighted the foundational work of key activists in Senegal, as well as Caroline Kouassiaman and Mariam Armisen, who have been active in the movement for many years. Caroline emphasized the importance of capturing the essence of the LBQ movement before the advent of formal organizations. Senegal participants noted that organizations began forming in 1980; prior to that, individuals who would now be identified as LBQ were referred to by terms such as góor-jigéen,



a Wolof phrase meaning "man-woman," primarily used to describe gay men. She noted that terms like "LGBQTI" and "sex worker" were not commonly used at the time, yet communities were actively organizing and forming networks. It is also important to emphasize that shifts in language were, in part, shaped by donor trends, as funding priorities began to focus on "key populations," including LGBQTI individuals and sex workers. A key recommendation from the discussion was for writers and researchers. to begin documenting these histories to preserve and bolster institutional and movement memory. This endeavor is crucial for acknowledging the contributions of early activists and ensuring that the rich tapestry of LBQ+ organizing in West Africa is not lost to time.

vi. Defining "LBQcentred" Policies

"We're not looking for specific policies, but inclusive ones." *-Participant*

Participants emphasized the necessity for LBQcentered (and informed) policies to be integrated within broader frameworks, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and general health and well-being policies. They highlighted the International Planned Parenthood Federation's (IPPF) national policy on disability in Nigeria as an example of inclusive policymaking from which the LBQ movement could draw lessons. The LBQ+ movement seeks policies that ensure legal protections, including marriage rights and safeguards against discrimination based on sexual orientation.

One participant from Senegal noted the societal challenges faced by queer women, stating: "Sexist norms in Senegal make it difficult to accept that a woman can love another woman. Nothing is fixed on the word LBQ; these are things that have existed. We're not looking for specific policies, but inclusive ones."

Conclusion

Participants recognized the need for continued research, historical documentation, and strategic advocacy to advance the LBQ movement. They stressed the importance of fostering solidarity across national and identitybased differences, resisting donordriven competition, and developing inclusive policies that reflect the lived realities of LBQ individuals in West Africa. The conversation underscored the movement's resilience and commitment to shaping its own trajectory.

Learning and Reflection

Digging Deeper: Thematic Analysis of LGBQTI+ Issues

On Day 3, the convening space provided an opportunity to dig deeper into some of the core issues and "pain points" impacting LBQ people's lives in the region. Based on issues identified by activists the previous day, participants were divided into discussion groups focusing on the following core thematic areas: gender-based/intimate partner violence (GBV/IPV); economic justice and livelihood; mental and emotional health; and family.

Once in their thematic pods, the participants addressed the following questions:

- Considering your contexts (country, regional, or organizational), what is the state of this thematic area in 2024?
- What resources currently exist to address this thematic issue?
- Where are the gaps?

The participants' presentations are summarized below:

GBV/Intimate Partner Violence

Participants challenged the common perception that gender-based violence (GBV) is solely an external threat, highlighting its prevalence within the LBQ+ community itself. GBV takes many forms beyond physical violence, including cyber harassment, verbal abuse, discrimination, and the enforcement of restrictive gender norms. Alarmingly, law enforcement officers—who should offer protection are often among the worst perpetrators, targeting LBQ+ individuals with violence and extortion.

Efforts to address GBV are underway across the region. In **Burkina Faso**, funding by ISDAO has supported organizations working to combat GBV and intimate partner violence. Some countries have established shelters with social integration programs, while others have developed focal points dedicated to supporting survivors.

Despite these efforts, critical gaps remain. In Nigeria, the lack of proper documentation of GBV cases limits visibility and accountability. Law enforcement officers, instead of providing support, often exploit and extort LBQ+ individuals. In **Côte d'Ivoire**, participants noted a scarcity of feminist allies willing to integrate LBQ+ concerns into broader gender justice work. Fear of visibility and potential arrest discourages survivors from reporting abuse, while societal stigma continues to block meaningful legal protections. Without sustained advocacy and targeted interventions, LBQ+ individuals remain disproportionately vulnerable to violence—both from within and outside their communities.

Recommendations:

- These gaps underscore the urgent need for increased awareness, sensitization, and legal protection for LBQ+ individuals experiencing GBV and intimate partner violence.
- Participants also called for better integration of LBQ+ issues within broader feminist movements and stronger support from allies.

Economic Justice and Livelihoods

Group members emphasized the significant livelihood challenges that LBQ+ individuals face in countries like **Ghana** and **Liberia** due to limited educational and job opportunities. While vocational training offers a potential pathway to economic stability, true mastery of a skill requires sustained, comprehensive training. Moreover, entrepreneurship demands not just technical expertise but also financial literacy and recruitment strategies—areas where LBQ+ individuals often lack institutional support.

The discussion highlighted the systemic barriers to education, including the lack of financial support for LBQ+ individuals pursuing tertiary studies. A common misconception persists that LBQ+ people are only suited for "unskilled" labor, erasing their presence in academic, administrative, and professional sectors. Workplace discrimination further compounds these challenges, with rigid, heteronormative dress codes policing LBQ+ identities and limiting employment opportunities. To address these disparities, the group proposed strategies to strengthen education and skill development within the LBQ+ community. They suggested that individuals who receive educational support from the movement should, in turn, contribute their skills back to the community, potentially through a formalized Memorandum of Understanding. Additionally, skilled LBQ+ professionals were encouraged to share economic resilience strategies—such as financial management and banking knowledge—to foster greater financial independence within the community.

Recommendations:

Participants recommended implementing inclusive policies, increasing funding for education, and launching initiatives to challenge stereotypes about the employability of LBQ+ individuals. They emphasized that promoting vocational skills training and financial literacy within the LBQ+ community could enhance economic resilience and empower individuals to explore diverse career paths.





Mental and Emotional Health

Participants highlighted the urgent need for dedicated mental health structures to support the well-being of LBQ+ individuals across the region. They observed that mental health struggles within the community are often compounded by systemic oppression and stigmatization, leading to severe consequences such as suicide and violence. Currently, most mental and emotional health initiatives rely on donor funding. In Benin and Burkina Faso, organizations use donor support to provide therapeutic dance and yoga sessions, while in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, therapists offer counseling and follow-up care. Despite these efforts, participants emphasized a critical gap: many mental health professionals lack an understanding of LBQ+ experiences, leading to inadequate and sometimes harmful support. Without affirming and culturally competent mental health care, the community remains vulnerable to the long-term impacts of trauma and exclusion.

Recommendations:

 Participants recommended that mental health providers recognize and affirm LBQ+ rights. They emphasized the need for tailored support systems that address the unique challenges faced by LBQ+ individuals. Developing inclusive and affirming mental health resources was highlighted as a priority to ensure the well-being of the LBQ+ community.

Family

While family in West African societies often extends beyond the nuclear unit, it remains rigidly defined by traditional gender norms, reinforcing heterosexual unions and biological parenthood as the standard. Given this context, LBQ+ individuals frequently encounter legal obstacles in forming recognized family units, including challenges related to adoption, protecting family members, and custody issues in cases of abandonment or the death of a partner. Resources to support LBO+ families are limited across the region. The absence of rapid response services and safe housing often leaves LBQ+ individuals vulnerable in crisis situations. While there is some support for LBQ+ individuals experiencing physical distress, there is a notable lack of internal support for conflict resolution and overall family well-being.

Participants underscored the urgent need for legal protections for LBQ+ families, particularly in areas such as custody disputes where current laws may not adequately address their rights and responsibilities.

Recommendations:

- Participants recommended establishing a committee or mechanism to provide mediation support for LBQ+ couples facing issues like gender-based violence and intimate partner violence. This would offer alternative support mechanisms given the barriers LBQ+ individuals face in accessing traditional legal avenues.
- Developing inclusive legal frameworks that protect LBQ+ families was also identified as a crucial step in addressing these issues.



Safety and Security

Dr. Larissa Kojoué and Nataka Gmakagni led a critical session on safety and security, a topic added to the convening at the participants' request. While initially absent from the "Digging Deeper" discussions on key LBQ+ issues, participants insisted on its urgency, underscoring how deeply safety concerns shape their daily lives. Discussions revealed the constant threats LBQ+ people face, with participants highlighting the link between dress codes and vulnerability to attacks—especially for trans and non-binary individuals who do not conform to gender norms. Some shared that they carry sharp objects, such as knives, as personal security measures. Many noted that safety fears impact their education and careers, restricting their movement and opportunities. Dr. Koujoué firmly reiterated that no one's attire or gender expression should ever justify violence.

Digital security was also a key concern. Participants exchanged strategies like encrypting electronic devices to protect themselves online and emphasized the need for responsible digital behavior. They called on donors to recognize safety and security as essential, not optional, aspects of LBQ+ movement-

building.

In **Liberia**, the LGBQTI community has formed a safety and security committee, while in both Liberia and Ghana, color-coded safety zones are used to mark safe spaces. Participants discussed public visibility and awareness of rights, particularly the extreme targeting of transgender individuals. One participant captured the harsh reality: "There is a need for security in the community because there is no one to support you, except yourself."



Dreaming of the Future: Possibilities in Our Dreamspace

"We dream of a space where everyone is listened to, safe, and respected." *-Participant*

Dreams are more than just wishful thinking-they are blueprints for the future we dare to build. Dreaming of a freer, more just world is not only an act of resistance but also a blueprint for change. Despite the towering challenges facing LBQ+ communities and movements in the region, the convening was intentional about carving out space for radical imagination. What does a liberated future look like? How do we move beyond survival into thriving? Larissa and Nataka led a visioning exercise where participants shared hopes, aspirations, and strategies to advance LBQ+ rights in the next five years. To cultivate this dreamspace, participants were guided in developing Theory of Change frameworks-mapping out their visions, assumptions, strategies, and objectives to bring their aspirations to life.

Participants were broken up into groups named after fruits (peach, mango, pineapple) and asked to develop a Theory of Change following the five steps:

What is a Theory of Change?

• Step 1

Define the problem. Including the identified root cause and stakeholders

Step 2

Define the desired end goal/impact/vision

• Step 3

Key assumptions (what needs to change to achieve the impact)

• Step 4

Map intervention strategies and activities that could lead to short- and long-term outputs.

• Step 5

Summarize the visualization in graphic narratives.

Below, we share the bold and transformative visions that activists are dreaming into reality:

Group: Mango

Problem

Lack of recognition of LBQ women's rights in West Africa. As a result, LBQ women experience violence and have no rights.

Vision

To create a conducive environment for women and girls.

Strategy

Building connections

Group: Peach

Problem
 Religious beliefs and traditional/cultural societies oppress LBQ women

Assumption

When we target certain religious leaders e.g. Pastor Chris (Ghana) who has followers, we can get the recognition and tolerance that we need.

Strategies

One-on-one engagements with religious leaders to cultivate strategic allyship.

Group: Pineapple

Problem

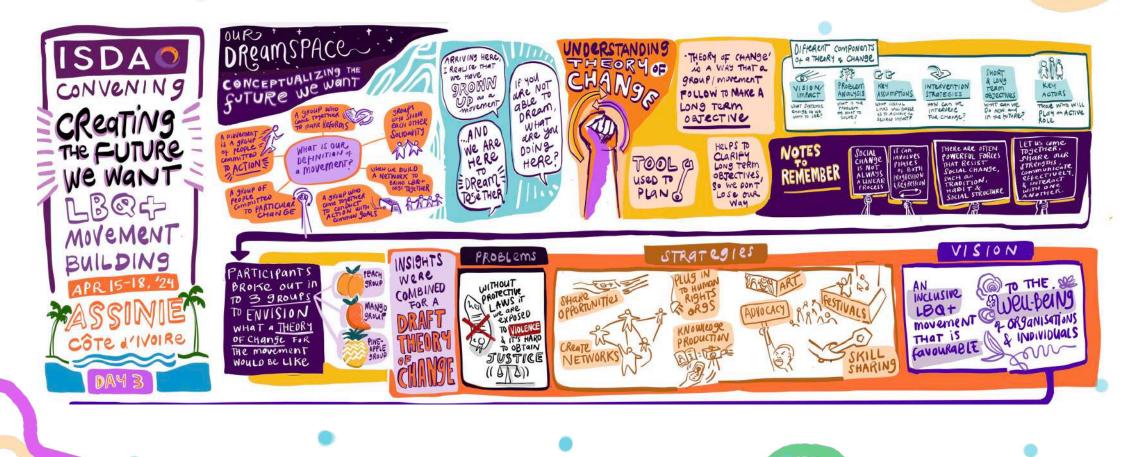
Lack of support and allyship for LBQ+ movements.

Strategy

To establish alliances, we need a supportive team - a network of mentors to support younger activists in the long-term fight.

Strategies

Annual meetings, which can be online or physical for LBQ women to speak out about progress/strides made.



Participants reflected on the exercise, with some engaging the Theory of Change framework for the first time, while others saw it as a valuable tool to integrate into their own organizational strategy processes. During the exercise, one participant acknowledged the power of dreams but emphasized that realizing them requires time, strategy, and collective action. As conversations unfolded, participants explored ways to strengthen the movement, identifying legislative advocacy, government engagement, community empowerment, and radical inclusivity as essential pillars. They underscored the urgency of securing protections for LBQ+ people and creating spaces where they could exist freely and unapologetically.

For some, the path forward was through policy change. One participant highlighted the need to lobby governments for laws that recognize LBQ+ rights, including marriage equality and legal adoption for same-sex couples. They stressed that such protections would offer fundamental security and dignity. Others emphasized the importance of documentation, training, and direct engagement with policymakers to ensure LBQ+ voices shape legislative frameworks. A participant from Ghana envisioned a West Africa where justice and freedom were non-negotiable, where no one—especially minorities—was left behind. "West Africa is free, just, and jealously guarding minorities," she declared, affirming that inclusive governance was key to achieving this shared vision. Similarly, a participant from Burkina Faso dreamed of a future where LBQ-friendly laws ensured access to healthcare and education, urging for a strategy that combined stakeholder sensitization with religious texts promoting love and acceptance. "We come together to support each other," they reminded the group, reinforcing the power of collective care.

One Ivorian participant saw a future where an organization dedicated to LBQ+ women would tackle gender-based violence and forced marriage. A Liberian participant, deeply moved by the space created at the convening, expressed gratitude: "This is a dream come true." She had long imagined a space where LBQ+ women could gather, connect, and build together. For many participants, the dream was no longer distant—it was already unfolding.

Participants also observed the lack of West African LBQ+ representation in high-level international conferences. One participant, for example, reflected on the stark absence of LBQ women from francophone Africa in UN spaces, attributing it, in part, to a gap in knowledge about human rights frameworks, UN treaties, and international advocacy. At the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), she found herself as the sole francophone LBQ representative from the region—a reality that underscored the urgent need for greater visibility and engagement.

She emphasized that civil society organizations (CSOs) already have networks within the CSW and suggested that stronger coordination efforts could bridge the existing gaps. Raising awareness, strengthening local advocacy through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and ensuring more LBQ voices are heard in international spaces were among her proposed solutions. "How can we collaborate?" she asked, urging the movement to think strategically. "There's so much we can do to make our community stronger, bigger, and more impactful."

"Are we ready?"

"Readiness is not a fixed destination—it is a journey shaped by courage, fear, experience, and the weight of responsibility."

Across the room, participants wrestled with what it truly means to step forward in a movement where visibility comes with both power and danger. Some activists were eager to take risks, ready to stand before governments, religious leaders, and even their own families to claim space. "Is it not time to stop hiding ourselves and be ready to be at the forefront?" one participant challenged. Others, however, acknowledged the real fears of abandonment and burnout. "I am afraid of being left on the battlefield alone," admitted another, underscoring the necessity of collective care and support in movement-building.

The discussion revealed that while some activists found strength in their years of experience, others were only beginning to grasp the depth of what activism required—strategic knowledge, advocacy skills, and the resilience to withstand setbacks. Calls were made for more learning spaces, like QAYN's Feminist School, to equip activists with the tools they need to sustain the fight. At the heart of the discussion was a critical tension: the balance between risk-taking and selfpreservation. For those in countries with punitive laws, the stakes of activism are high. Activists in Togo described how many LBQ+ organizers flee the country when faced with danger, leaving behind a fragile movement struggling to find its footing. In Senegal, while gay men have historically found small pockets of tolerance, LBQ+ women continue to face intense hostility, requiring a different kind of advocacy.

Others turned to digital activism, using TikTok and social media to spread messages of acceptance while avoiding direct public scrutiny. Still, participants agreed that silence could not be the answer. "A living hero is better than a dead hero," one person reminded the room, emphasizing the need for strategic, sustainable resistance. As the conversation came to a close, Dr. Koujoué left participants with an essential question: "What are we ready to do in our own countries?" Readiness, after all, is not just about personal conviction—it is about finding ways to act, however big or small, to keep the movement alive.



"We hugged each other, held each other, and spent time by the water, which I found very healing."

-Participant Response, Post-survey

The final day of the convening unfolded as a deeply transformative moment. With the rhythmic pull of the ocean as their backdrop, participants stepped onto the beachfront, entering a space of restoration and release. The air was thick with anticipation the kind that comes when a body knows it is about to exhale. Here, beneath the open sky, movement, stillness, and breath intertwined in a ritual of care, renewal, and collective grounding. Grief, joy, exhaustion, and hope coexisted, as 'healing work as justice work' moved beyond theory into embodied practice. Dr. Toyin Ajao led participants through holistic body scanning, movement flow yoga, and deep breathing exercises, guiding them into a day of liberatory healing. Sitting in an Ubuntu healing circle, the waves of the Atlantic behind them, participants engaged in meditative practices, reflective writing, and storytelling—sharing experiences of love, loss, and marginalization. Dr. Toyin encouraged them to honor their needs, even if that meant simply resting, reminding them that care is both an individual and collective responsibility. In a safe and supportive space, they reflected on their past year and set intentions for the future through self-affirmations and letter writing.

Gursha Expressive Writing

Participants wrote letters to their future selves, sealing their words inside envelopes—a time capsule of self-affirmation to be opened on December 31st, 2024. Dr. Toyin emphasized that healing is both personal and communal, urging them to embrace care for themselves, for each other, and the movement.

As the convening came to a close, participants expressed deep appreciation for the balance of strategic dialogue and intentional self-care. Many described the space as transformative, offering psychological healing alongside movement-building. One participant called it "human and intellectual wealth," while another reflected on the emotional impact: **"We hugged each other, held each other, and spent time by the water, which we found very healing.**"



Recommendations

During the convening, participants shared recommendations on how to strengthen the LBQ+ movements. The recommendations listed below emerged over the course of the convening.

• Create more opportunities for knowledge • sharing, capacity -

Building, and technical support: LBQ activists in the region need more opportunities to build their skills. Many activists are working with very little financial support within grassroots communities, and welcome the opportunity to learn more about advocacy strategies, report-writing, fundraising, and organizational development. Independent activists who are not tied to institutional structures of funding often miss opportunities to be engaged in capacitybuilding activities that are housed within an organizational container or programme. Donors should consider creative ways to support these activists to understand funding structures, and learning and skills-building opportunities. Create more spaces for physical (and virtual) gatherings Provide training on personal, digital, and organizational safety and security-

At several moments in the convening, participants expressed the importance of having a regional space to gather. These opportunities are important for building momentum, camaraderie, and sharing ideas and emotional support for activists. Given an increasingly hostile climate for LBQ activists in the region, there is far less physical space to gather in their home countries. COVID also shifted the spaces that were previously available for in-person meetings. In some instances, spaces were closed down and not reopened once the pandemic was quelled. This has impacted LBQ communities' opportunities to meet and engage in communitybuilding. Donors should continue to prioritize offering secure locations for activists to gather. While in-person gatherings can be costly, oneoff meetings can make it difficult to sustain momentum in regional movement-building. Therefore, donors should consider sustainable strategies for gathering activists within and across the region.

Provide training on personal, digital, and organizational safety and security-Increasing criminalization across the region demands that activists and community members build their capacity and resources to withstand violent (physical and online) attacks. Convening participants expressed the need for more support to secure their organizational and activist work, and to support community members with their personal safety and security. Donors can support by providing technical providers to support training on digital and physical security.

Support human capital development for LBQ People -

The convening identified that LBQ activists and community members also need support to develop themselves, professionally and personally. As many LBQ people may face isolation and financial abuse from their family members, this has implications for their livelihood and human capital development. Donors should invest resources in supporting LBQ person(s) to gain life skills, training, and resources.



 Provide wellness and psychosocial support -

Lesbophobia, biphobia, and transphobia have harmful effects on the mental and emotional health of LBQ people. Therapy and counseling can be quite costly for a demographic that is already under-resourced and facing underemployment. Most LBQ people do not feel like they can access mainstream services for mental health or domestic violence, for example. Some participants expressed the need for more resources to support their communities to engage in healing, restorative, and well-being work.

• Support emergency funding -

Philanthropic organizations seeking to support LBQ people in West Africa should consider providing more emergency funding in cases such as abuse, arrest, kidnapping, and homelessness. LBQ organizers are regularly inundated with these types of cases, while also under threat as human rights defenders themselves. However, project-based funding often does not allow them to redistribute resources to create emergency hotlines, provide emergency funding to pay for rent, court cases, or rebuild lives after abuses, for example.

• Support LBQ activists to attend regional and global spaces, with emphasis on more francophone participation -

Donors should seek to support LBQ activists to attend global spaces or support those global spaces with multiple language interpretations to ensure better access for non-English speakers. Francophone activists are often left out of key convening spaces because of the Anglophone dominance of global and (African) regional spaces. This creates an imbalance in knowledge and opportunities between anglophone and francophone activists. Participants at the convening mentioned that they are sometimes the only francophone activists in a global space, which can feel alienating and counterproductive. Promote collaboration between LBQ+ organizations:

Donors should prioritize supporting collaborative work between LBQ+ organizations instead of forcing them to compete for funding. This could include establishing a dedicated collaboration fund, offered at least once a year, to support joint initiatives, co-creation efforts, and strategic planning among LBQ+ organizations.



¹⁴ Connected to Recommendation V

Conclusion

During the convening, participants underwent a journey toward personal healing and reflection on their involvement in the LBQ+ movement. Through dialogue and reflection, they explored avenues for collective action, emphasizing solidarity, education, and community support for LBQ+ rights and empowerment. Recommendations emerged for advancingLBQ+rights, including conducting research on the movement's origins, establishing a couple of mediation support committees, encouraging skilled LBQ+ individuals to share economic resilience skills, and implementing inclusive policies. Committed to inclusivity, participants vowed to contribute to a more equitable and supportive environment for LBQ+ individuals.

Participant Testimonials:

"Networking and building connections are fundamental for our movement, which is why this convening proved to be exceptionally beneficial to me. Sharing best practices and insights not only contributes to our individual growth but also strengthens our collective impact on the movement. Engaging in the panel discussions and group activities significantly enhanced my understanding of the current state of our movement, providing valuable perspectives and opportunities for collaboration."

-Participant, Anonymous Post-Convening Survey "The convening was invaluable, providing a space for me to connect and build relationships with activists outside my country – a process that could have taken years through other means."

-Participant, Anonymous Post-Convening Survey

"During these three days...I was able to learn a lot of things and methodologies about the LBQ movement and the fact of being in contact with other countries made me understand that the struggle we are waging is the same and we just say "stick together." *-Participant, Anonymous Post-Convening Survey*



