

MURRIA

THE WEST AFRICAN LGBTQI MOVEMENT: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE



Myria is a dedicated space created by Initiative Sankofa d'Afrique de l'Ouest (ISDAO) for conversation and reflection, open to LGBTQI persons, LGBTQI activists, and allies, on a range of topics relating to the community and the movement in West Africa. This space is dedicated to a plurality and diversity of voices, experiences, and perspectives.

Issue 3: The West African LGBTQI Movement: Past, Present, Future

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MYRIA

**THE WEST AFRICAN LGBTQI MOVEMENT:
PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE**



WE NEED
a change

WE ARE ALL ON PROBATION! AN OBSERVER'S OPINION ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE LGBTQI+ MOVEMENT IN WEST AFRICA

Ahmed M.



THE LGBTQI MOVEMENT IN WEST AFRICA: A FIGHT FOR DIGNITY AND EQUALITY

Christine



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AN ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION OF THE LGBTQI COMMUNITY IN BURKINA FASO

Dubois



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For generations, efforts have been made to convince us that Black Africa is entirely foreign to homosexual practices. A range of arguments has been put forward to frame homosexuality and related behaviors as unnatural and contrary to African culture. Some go even further, describing it as a mental or psychological illness. However, the World Health Organization, after extensive research on the issue, has officially removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

Some African sociologists and anthropologists have taken an interest in the issue. **In L'homosexualité en Afrique: sens et variations d'hier à nos jours (Homosexuality in Africa: meaning and variations from yesterday to nowadays)**¹, Charles Gueboguo explains that it is an old practice in Black African culture and certain customary rites in black African regions.

From a linguistic point of view, it is clear that many African societies were familiar with same-sex practices long before colonisation. Yet misinformation has become widespread, and even some intellectuals refuse to accept the evidence. Homosexuality does not have a European face or an American face; it simply has a human face. And those who practice it did not choose it, they were born with it.

The argument that homosexuality is "unnatural" is difficult to defend, as these practices are neither new nor imported. Many people live in denial and misinformation about this issue, yet it is well established that same-sex practices are not foreign to traditional African societies. However, it's important to acknowledge that these practices have evolved and transformed over time. Today, some members of the LGBTQI community are open about their identities and no longer hide their sexual orientation. This visibility is felt in many spaces: in neighborhoods, among peers, and especially on social media. Community members now organize various events, such as costume parties and parades. What most characterizes the experience of LGBTQI individuals today is the lack of discretion they are often afforded or expected to maintain in public and private life.

In Burkina Faso, no law has ever criminalized homosexuality since the country's independence in 1960. However, the political and social climate remains deeply hostile toward LGBTQI people. As reported by the French newspaper Libération: **"hostility towards gays, lesbians and trans people fed by many homophobic preachers, unscrupulous media and politicians looking for votes, is still extremely strong - to the point of presenting homosexuals as responsible for the jihadist threat, according to some testimonies. In 2015, in the run-up to the legislative elections, a small political group, the Parti de la Renaissance Nationale (Paren) [National Rebirth Party], tabled a bill**

to criminalize [...] homosexuality". Quoted in the article, a report² published in 2016 by Afrobarometer ranked Burkina Faso among the 3 most intolerant African countries towards homosexuals.

In Burkina Faso, from the creation of the Upper Volta colony through its dissolution, reunification, and eventual independence in 1960, the issue of homosexuality has rarely been openly addressed. This remained true until the military coup by the MPSR² in 2022, which brought a young captain to power. Since then, the LGBTQI community has faced escalating attacks, harassment, discrimination, and violence, often at the hands of individuals who appear to lack access to proper education and awareness. The lives of members of the community are marked by increased stigmatisation. In 2023, the *Conseil Supérieur de la Communication* (Superior Council of Communications) banned all media from broadcasting content that depicts scenes of homosexuality, citing concerns about the "promotion of homosexuality". This is exacerbated by the transitional Government's intention to adopt laws criminalizing homosexuality. These intentions were stated by the Minister of State, Bassolma Bazié, during his address to the United Nations on September 24, 2023.

Before that, the president of the *Assemblée Législative de Transition* (Transitional Legislative Assembly) (ALT), Dr Ousmane Bougouma, had expressed the ALT's desire to pass a law prohibiting and penalising homosexuality in Burkina Faso. These have all contributed to the escalating assaults,

threats, and all kinds of violence against the LGBTQI community these days, especially in Bobo-Dioulasso and Ouagadougou. In Ouagadougou, the context is marked by assaults, defamations, threats, as well as deliberate assault and battery on members of the community. There are also frequent violations of privacy and image rights on social media platforms, particularly on TikTok and Facebook.

Since the advent of the transitional Government led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, there have been moves to criminalise and challenge the right to embrace one's sexual orientation. Social media platforms are buzzing with attacks on the rights of sexual minorities and people considered effeminate. Attacks on physical integrity, home invasions, attempted murders, death threats, and deliberate homicide have become daily occurrences for members of the community. In Bobo Dioulasso, this homophobia seems to have a religious background; speeches and appeals in the national language, Dioula, sometimes have religious overtones. Even Quranic verses are sometimes quoted. In some videos published on TikTok, homophobes ask those who are suspected to be Queer to swear on the Quran that they aren't. All this is happening under the silent gaze of the authorities. It begs a few questions:

1 Charles Gueboguo, « L'homosexualité en Afrique : sens et variations d'hier à nos jours », Socio-logos [Online], 1 | 2006, published online on October 9, 2008, consulted on February 12, 2025. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/socio-logos/37> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/socio-logos.37>

2 "Good neighbours? Africans express high levels of tolerance for many, but not for all", Afrobarometer dispatch, March 1st, 2016

THE UNFINISHED JOURNEY: BUILDING A COLLECTIVE FUTURE FOR THE WEST AFRICAN LGBTQIA MOVEMENT

Ehikioya Ataman



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of LGBTQIA rights. This means that LGBTQIA+ organisations can be set up without masking their objectives or the fear of State-sanctioned blowback.

However, that is not to say that these progresses haven't been hampered, almost to the point where it seems as though three steps forward result in two steps backward. There have been rivalries and petty jealousies gaining a chokehold among organisations, resulting in underhanded politicking. There have been situations where leaders of organisations have not been accountable or taken any responsibility for actions held against their organisations, choosing instead to scapegoat others to divert attention. There are witch-hunts and all forms of gatekeeping, where leaders leverage their power to make room for or shut out whoever they please. Most predominantly are the cases of organisations being led as a business enterprise that favours the bank accounts of those in charge, instead of the charitable cause that they are supposed to promote.

All of these failings serve as a deterrent to the objective of advancing the rights and interests of our community. There is an urgent need for us to come together as a collective, holding spaces for each other, especially because we are all fighting for the same cause. Just like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have established measurable, universally agreed objectives for tackling issues of extreme poverty and hunger, preventing deadly diseases, and

expanding primary education to all children, among other development priorities with a specific timeframe, the LGBTQIA movement can come together defined strategic goals, identify indicators to measure progress and propose a future date to evaluate the progress made so far. When organisations work in isolation they can achieve so little, but as a collective, the gain is tangible and significant.

There are still so many strides for the LGBTQIA movement, especially in Nigeria, to make. Some of these objectives are already being implemented by organisations, but it behooves me to touch on them some more. As I previously stated, there have been developments in areas such as the education of members of the queer community, but this objective is not fully accomplished, as evident in the economic imbalance evident in the community. This was never more apparent than during the height of the COVID pandemic and subsequent lockdown in 2020. There are high levels of poverty among members of the LGBTQIA community, and this is especially reinforced by its high illiteracy levels, especially at the grassroots. There is a need to channel funding and resources to these areas, to areas that seek to improve education and make room for the acquisition of skills and knowledge that will go a long way to advancing the economic stability of the community. Most especially, considering the digital age we are in, I cannot overemphasize how vital it is to educate the community on the use of tech to champion change.

To this effect, I would like to point out an appreciation of how funding has been made more available to smaller organisations, making it possible for activities driven by my aforementioned purpose to reach varying corners of the community.

Looking back at how we started, it is evident that we have made significant progress. However, there is still a lot of work to be done, and we are just getting started in the movement-building exercise in Nigeria and the broader West Africa region. In conclusion, we must remain committed to this cause and continue to work together toward achieving our goals.

THE CHALLENGES OF LGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES IN BENIN: FIGHTING DISCRIMINATION

Fleur Olive Oussougoe



RETROSPECTIVE AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE IVORIAN LGBTQI MOVEMENT: "SANKOFA"!

Fleury



Why are we still at the stage of collecting 5,000 FCFA or 3,500 FCFA to support an LGBTQI community member in Côte d'Ivoire? Worse still, why are we waiting for funders to step in before we take action to save the lives of our peers?

It is important to look back on the origins of the LGBTQI movement in Côte d'Ivoire. In this country, everything began around thirty years ago. It started with the idea of gathering at the home of a fellow community member, someone who had a place of their own, whether it was a makeshift shelter, a rented apartment, or simply a space where, as we say, "they had the keys to their own door." These gatherings created spaces where attendees could freely express their gender without fear of judgment, wearing a headscarf, wrapping a pagne, putting on makeup, and so on. For the duration of these meetings, people could live more fully: using the pronouns they felt most comfortable with, speaking openly about sexuality, and simply being themselves.

There were parties, agapes¹, conversations, and spaces created to allow community members to come together with others facing similar challenges. At the time, there were several groups: Barbara's group, Félix's group, and Cyriaque's group. However, all the groups knew each other and operated in much the same way.

Meetups usually took place on Sundays, and sometimes on Saturdays. The idea was to gather and chat, catch up on one another's lives, and share updates over a communal

meal called *Daga-bâ* or *Gba-bâ*. People also organized "shows" to celebrate, socialize, and meet others.

After each gathering, a small contribution was collected for the association's communal fund. This contribution wasn't mandatory, but the money raised helped cover emergencies when they arose. That's how the movement functioned during that time.

Then, in the early 2000s, came the period when many associations began formalizing into NGOs. This was seen as an alternative to ensure that part of the LGBTQI community could receive support, particularly in relation to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS. The reality was stark: many of us were dying, mostly due to a lack of information. By the late 2000s, the race for funding had begun. We had to secure funds for the fight against STIs and HIV/AIDS.

To do so, we accepted almost anything, even approaches that didn't necessarily serve the community's best interests, because we needed to make the movement visible and become the "darling" of donors and other technical and financial partners. This funding indeed helped respond to the urgent needs of the time, especially the wave of deaths linked to the lack of STI and HIV/AIDS awareness. However, the earlier *Daga-bâ* and *Gba-bâ* gatherings disappeared, replaced by activities focused on distributing condoms and lubricant.

The "shows" still exist, but have had to be renamed and reimagined. This gave rise to entertainment-based activities centered on education, particularly around STIs and HIV/AIDS, such as awareness-raising and screening campaigns. Today, these activities receive little to no support from financial partners within the Ivorian system.

Community conversations (*causeries*) still happen, but they too have lost their original nature. Discussions now focus almost exclusively on HIV and STI-related topics, such as how to use condoms and other prevention methods. But when do we offer young people real education about living as LGBTQI individuals?

Today, some organizations have managed to negotiate salaries, but only for technical staff or leadership. Field actors such as peer educators and community counselors barely receive the Ivorian minimum wage, 75,000 FCFA. This wage gap is upheld by certain leaders who, instead of promoting equity to achieve equality, reinforce marginalization and discrimination within the movement.

Membership contributions have continued and are now mandatory, as organizations have adopted formal statutes and internal regulations that clearly state this obligation. Additionally, members of organizations who participate in an activity where they receive financial compensation are required to give 10% of that amount back to the organization's coffers. This practice has been ongoing for over ten years now. So the question remains: what is being done with all these funds?

In the years to come, it is time to rethink the movement by returning to its core values or by intentionally integrating African values such as solidarity and mutual aid. Upholding and honoring these values will only be effective if we have the resources to support them. So, where can these funds come from? They already exist: the 10% contributions we collect must be put to good use. We must create genuine, well-managed solidarity or emergency funds, with clear transparency and accountability.

We must also put people at the center of everything we do. We are a community-based movement, working in the field of human rights. That means we must bring conversations about the well-being of our teams and communities to the table with donors and other partners, and we IM-PE-RA-TI-VE-LY need to make health insurance a non-negotiable part of our funding proposals.

¹ Agape : love feast, unselfish love of one person for another without sexual implications; brotherly love. (dictionary.com)

THE ADVOCACY JOURNEY OF THE LGBTIQ+ MOVEMENT IN WEST AFRICA

Gloria Quaye



MYRIA WEST AFRICA

The history of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) movement in Africa offers valuable lessons and insights to shape the future of movement activism and advocacy in the region.

West Africa has a rich history of resilience, challenges, and progress, continuously shaped by activist groups, anti-rights groups, and sappers¹, who have actively worked to sabotage our efforts over the years. With 16 countries in the region, the specific experiences of LGBTIQ+-led organizations, movements, and coalitions have varied widely.

Numerous past experiences and moments have shaped and governed how LGBTIQ+ movements operate to ensure a positive future for the community at large within the region.

Community existence and visibility in the past were only known to a few persons within a particular territory or location due to fear of being exposed to the public. People are known to be extremely homophobic when issues of LGBTIQ+ people are raised or discussed. Yet, currently, we notice a more inclusive society where LGBTIQ+ issues are discussed openly, even with the media. This clearly shows how the community has advocated positively for our opinions to be heard in society, even though most often, positive results are not immediately visible.

This brings to mind the issue of public gatherings, where members of the community meet up at locations tagged as "safe spaces" to hold meetings, events, and other activities but receive negative backlash from the public. Even though safe spaces were initially not entirely accommodating due to communities' financial constraints, several engagements with allies resulted in them using their positions to facilitate access for the community to some of these locations.

Community mobilization towards empowerment, education, and social interventions has increased in the past and become easier over time. In the past, community members and allies found it difficult to openly mobilize leaders and individuals in forums, meetings, or even training due to the myths and misconceptions society generally shared on LGBTIQ+ issues. In our current societies, it is becoming easier due to access to advanced technology such as the internet, mobile phones, laptops, etc., as it allows community leaders to mobilize without moving from one place to another to share information.

Another factor to examine critically is the emergence of LGBTIQ+-led organizations, movements, and networks that were not in place in the past. For over 15 years now within the West African movement, the emergence and management of organizations working and advocating for the rights of LGBTIQ+ communities have considerably grown. These groups have provided different levels of support - raising awareness, challenging discrimination, and changing narratives. They have identified the needs of LGBTIQ+ persons and are working towards ensuring their documentation, as it will help them provide better services for the community in the future, ensuring that the human rights and dignity of all marginalized groups and persons are upheld. It will also be kept as archives we can look back on in the future.

These movements and organizations continue to face increased human rights violations due to the false narratives spread by anti-gender and anti-LGBTIQ+ movements and groups, including religious and traditional leaders, the media, influential persons, and other actors. Regardless, the movements grow stronger, thanks to the passion and unity of the wider community, activists, advocates, and allies leading the fight for justice, equality, protection, etc.

LGBTIQ+ movements have engaged at national, regional, and international levels to advocate and speak up against the colonial-era and new laws criminalizing LGBTIQ+ persons and activities. The movement's power, knowledge, and connections increase daily, bringing more legal recognition, respect, and inclusion for sexual and gender minorities, with some progress recorded in

the acknowledgment of their rights. Some of these regional engagements have been successful in a few African countries like South Africa and Kenya but are extremely challenging for West African countries. Countries like Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Nigeria are critically considered when planning regional LGBT-led dialogues and organizing meetings. The community has so far managed to withstand backlash, legal obstacles, and political challenges while continuously working to develop better strategies for challenging the draconian laws targeting LGBTIQ+ people in the sub-region.

In the past, attitudes outside and within Africa towards the LGBTIQ+ community have varied significantly from country to country and even within regions. This is because some of these countries have more tolerant attitudes, while others exhibit varying degrees of hostility and discrimination. Presently, homophobic actions have worsened due to the existence of colonial-era laws and/or new anti-LGBT laws being introduced or passed depending on the West African country's context to criminalize LGBTIQ+ persons.

The struggles and progress of LGBTIQ+ activism in West Africa continue to grow due to political tensions arising from divergent views, goals, visions, and interventions by various groups across the region. Despite these challenges, activists and organizations remain steadfast in their commitment to pushing for change that will shape a brighter future for sexual and gender minorities.

¹ "Sappers" refers to individuals or groups that deliberately attempt to weaken, undermine, or obstruct activism and advocacy efforts by human rights activists.

Fundraising to support the work of these organizations and activists within the sub-region has seen progress compared to the past, however, the movement is still largely underfunded. In the past, it was almost impossible to raise funds to support the work done by LGBTIQ+ movements and activists, but now, substantial funding support comes from international spaces, embassies, allies, and digital crowdfunding.

This funding has sped up the work and has influenced the direction of goals and interventions done within society to change wrong narratives and push for a positive agenda. While some West African countries, particularly francophone ones, remain underfunded due to language barriers, geographic locations, limited capacities, and sometimes donor restrictions, the future looks promising as donors are increasingly willing to support them. This has, in turn, increased the need to strengthen the organisational and financial capacities of LGBTIQ+ organisations.

The experiences of activists and organizations in West Africa are entirely diverse, and the progress varies from one country to another. While there have been significant challenges, the resilience and determination of activists have contributed to raising awareness and identifying the right strategies for proactively advocating for LGBTIQ+ people in the sub-region. For the future, we must take into consideration all our collective weaknesses, especially language injustice, organizational hazards, and other pressing needs, to ensure there are ways to mitigate these barriers hindering our overall progress.

The journey of the LGBTIQ+ communities in West Africa is a huge testament to struggles, resilience, strength, and passion despite the legal and societal barriers. Activists and community members have created spaces rooted in courage, solidarity, creativity, adaptability, and flexibility. Spaces that support ongoing efforts and sacrifices. As the West African community continues to navigate through uncertainty, their collective strength lights a path of hope, inclusion, and justice, serving as a reminder that even in the most challenging spaces, advocacy as a tool can inspire and bring a transformative change.



URIOKE: A NEW DAWN FOR LGBTQI LIBERATION IN WEST AFRICA

Oghenefejiro Faeyfaeyy Adjerhore



THE HIDDEN REALITIES BEHIND SENEGAL'S RECENT DECLINE IN HIV RATES

saliff13



**FOR THE FUTURE OF MYRIA,
WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!**

Dear Reader,

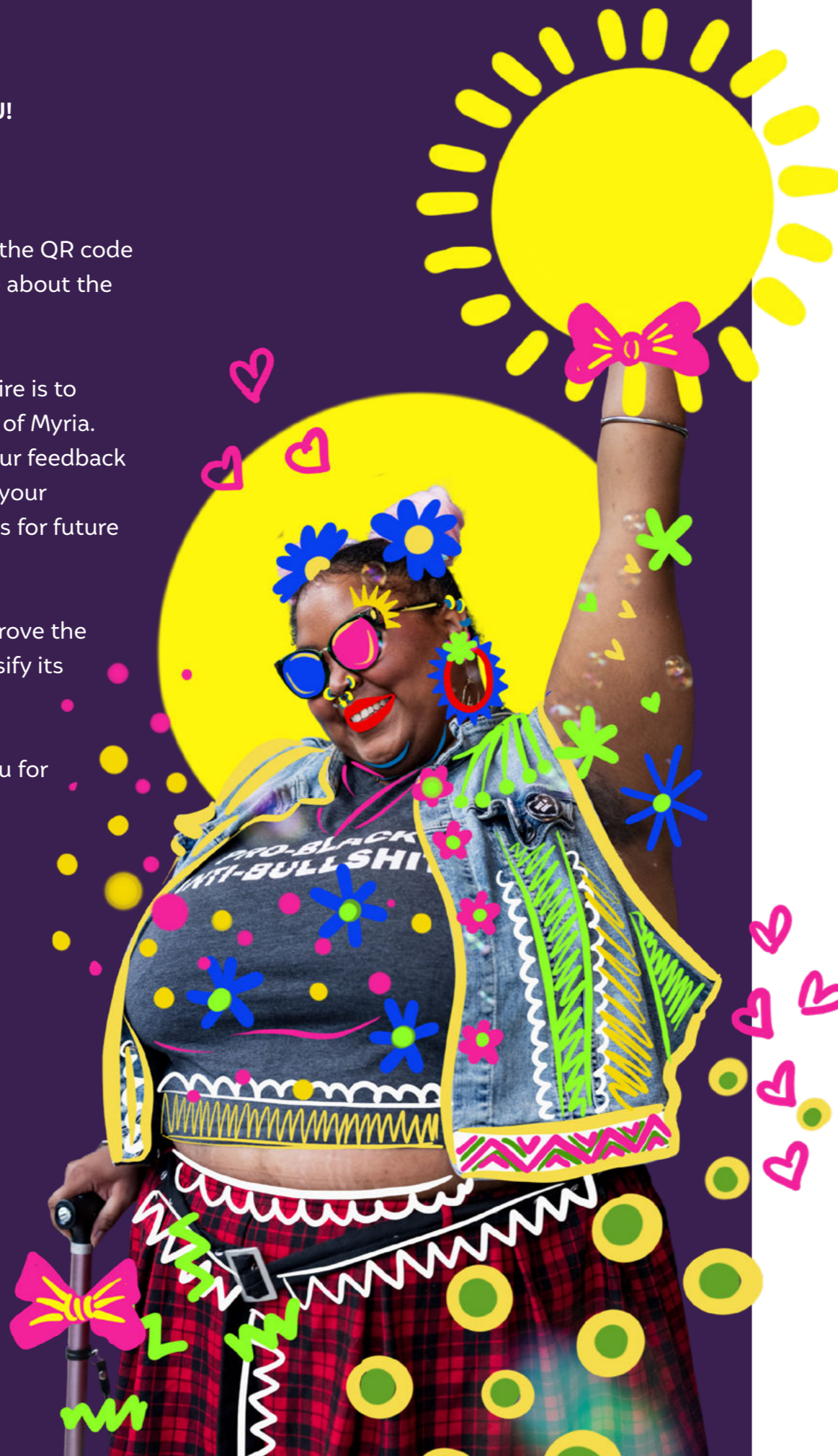
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The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather your opinion as a reader of Myria. We would like to understand your feedback on previous editions, as well as your needs, desires, and expectations for future publications.

Your responses will help us improve the content and, if necessary, diversify its formats.

Your opinion matters. Thank you for contributing!

The ISDAO Team



ISDAO

INITIATIVE SANKOFA D'AFRIQUE DE L'OUEST

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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