

Second-Class Citizens?

LGBTQI+ Nigerians and the Struggle for
Democratic Belonging



About ReportOUT

Since 2019, ReportOUT has been at the forefront of protecting the human rights of sexual and gender minorities in the United Kingdom and globally.

As a registered charity in England and Wales (registered charity number 1185887) we are fearless, determined and relentless in our belief that human rights are fundamental to advancing the lives of sexual and gender minorities, and their communities.

We recognise that we need to succeed in our aims and objectives by also using principles from international development alongside human rights frameworks, and we believe that both of these approaches should always include sexual and gender minorities as part of them. We align all of our work with Agenda 2030, in that no one should be left behind.

ReportOUT's official aim and objectives are:

To promote human rights (as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent United Nations conventions and declarations) throughout the world for sexual and gender minorities by all or any of the following means:

- Eliminating infringements of human rights;
- Research into human rights issues;
- Raising awareness of human rights issues;
- Educating the public about human rights;
- Monitoring abuses of human rights;
- International advocacy of human rights;
- Providing technical advice to the government and others on human rights matters.

Our guiding principles:

- Principle 1: No one should be left behind in delivering the articles set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- Principle 2: Every person has a part to play in achieving the goals and targets set out in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
- Principle 3: Positive change should be led by communities within a nation state and ReportOUT will support them to do this.

When it comes to formal research projects, ReportOUT is proud to follow the Amsterdam Network Guiding Principles, which were born out of concern that an advocacy community in one country should not speak for groups in another country, without a clear and informed mandate to do so. It sets out clear guidance about how we at ReportOUT, work as an organisation with others in different nation states, and parts of the globe.

ReportOUT is a volunteer-led charity, with volunteers and Trustees originating from over thirty nation-states

About CHEVS

CHEVS is a youth-led feminist collective advancing LGBTQI+ equality across West Africa, by building agency and power with diverse LGBTQI+ youths to shape their own future and boldly confront inequality across sectors. CHEVS' work is achieved through movement building, advocacy and narrative change efforts, while building political power to achieve the liberation of its communities across the region. It builds upon established evidence highlighting the interconnectedness of justice, recognising LGBTQI+ justice, sex workers' rights and disability justice as a critical juncture where some of the most marginalised and vulnerable communities intersect. Research has been pivotal in advancing the work CHEVS does, building evidence for advocacy, policy change and documenting the lived realities of its communities.

As an African, queer and youth-led organisation in West Africa, CHEVS operates within a complex landscape where access and in-access present polar opposites and starkly different realities for its communities, resulting in:

- Systemic and social barriers to meaningful participation in democratic processes.
- Lack of access to inclusive social services which increases vulnerability, leading to poorer life outcomes and othering.
- Isolation of LGBTQI+ issues from other social justice causes.
- Systemic barriers to employment and economic justice, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and marginalisation.
- Punitive laws that perpetuate violence, stigma and restrict access to self-expression, visibility and bodily autonomy.

CHEVS' work is grounded in the needs and aspirations of its communities, with the mandate to listen, learn, and collaborate, ensuring that the organisation's efforts resonate with the lived realities of those it serves. With the vision to enable a West Africa where everyone can live in safety, dignity and freedom. CHEVS works under the following Strategic Pillars:

- Movement Building: Building Cross-movement power and solidarity.
- Advocacy: Maintaining and expanding effective advocacy.
- Learning: Strengthening knowledge production, management and insight generation.
- Institutional resilience: Maintain and improve CHEVS' capacity to be an effective advocate and movement.

Glossary

(H/B/T+) Phobia

Discriminatory attitudes, prejudice, or fear directed toward individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity—specifically targeting those who are homosexual, bisexual, transgender, and others in related communities.

LGBTQI

An acronym representing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and Intersex individuals, reflecting the diverse spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities.

SOGIESC

Stands for Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics. This term encompasses a broad range of human identities and expressions, recognizing diversity beyond traditional gender and sexual binaries.

CSO (Civil Society Organization)

An independent organization that operates outside of government structures, representing the interests of citizens. This includes non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy groups, and other entities engaged in social, political, or environmental issues.

CBO (Community-Based Organization)

A non-profit group that works at the local level to address specific needs or issues within a community through grassroots initiatives.

SSMPA (Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act)

A law enacted in Nigeria that prohibits same-sex marriages and, in many interpretations, other forms of same-sex relationships, impacting the rights and safety of LGBT+ individuals.

GBTI

An acronym referring to Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex individuals, is used to highlight these specific identities within broader discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity. In some contexts as in this report, the discourse surrounding GBTI focuses predominantly on male bodies.

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Executive Summary:

Drew, Marline

CHEVS and ReportOUT are delighted to share the publication of their joint report (“Second-Class Citizens? LGBTQI+ Nigerians and the Struggle for Democratic Belonging”), which represents the culmination of a year of intensive collaboration between our organisations. We are proud of both the output of this report and the shared purpose and mutual respect that has underpinned our successful partnership.

The problem our report addresses is simple to articulate but complex in its root causes and even more complex in the way it impacts the lives of LGBTQI+ individuals: While there are records of citizen participation in democratic processes in Nigeria, there is no record of the participation of LGBTQI+ persons in electoral processes and elections. This legitimises their erasure from contributing to democratic decisions, substantiating the narrative of queer political apathy. For a community that faces not only discrimination through the existing systemic exclusion, but also the constant and continuous threat of physical violence, LGBTQI+ persons have historically contributed to democracy and represent a conscious electorate whose barrier to democratic participation undermines Nigeria’s democracy.

Our research studies the landscape of political participation in electoral processes and elections for LGBTQI+ persons in Nigeria, ultimately supporting evidence-based interventions and advocacies.

Its specific objectives included:

- To provide a database and support data-driven advocacy for the democratic political inclusion of LGBTQI+ persons in Nigeria.
- To support the generation of regional evidence-based arguments for the development of policies advancing LGBTQI+ access to political decision-making spaces.

- To document the political participation of LGBTQI+ persons in the country, ensuring their voices, contributions, and input are not erased from history.
- To guide community-based national advocacy projects that will enable more members of the LGBTQI+ community to assert their civic rights of voting, campaigning and running for office.

The research methodology combined both a desk review of secondary literature sources and primary research, incorporating surveys, interviews and case studies, ensuring ethical considerations for the privacy and protections of research participants throughout the process. The outputs from the study provide a representative account of the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ Nigerians in political participation, underpinned by a thorough analysis of cultural, historical and societal contexts.

The research reviewed, analyzed and provided key findings on existing social behaviors, levels of participation, types of barriers, and proposed solutions for the democratic inclusion of LGBTQI+ persons in Nigeria.

We sincerely hope this report will support the objectives listed above and support the development of policies that allow LGBTQI+ Nigerians to enjoy genuine and sustained involvement within the political process, in line with their fundamental rights under both the Nigerian constitution and the UN Founding Principles

RESEARCH TEAM

Phil Thomas

Lead Trustee, ReportOUT: Human Rights Research

Phil is Trustee of ReportOUT with responsibility for the Research portfolio. He has undertaken research for ReportOUT on a diverse range of countries including Mongolia, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. Phil holds a master's in international relations from the University of Cambridge (UK), MBA from Duke University (USA), and a BA in Modern Languages from the University of Durham (UK). He works in the City of London and resides in Cambridge.

Ross Othen-Reeves

ReportOUT: Human Rights Researcher

Ross (He/Him) has a BA in International Development and an MA in Human Rights. Both degrees focused on global LGBTQ+ rights and included field research in Malawi and Ethiopia respectively. Ross subsequently spent 8 years working on LGBTQI+ issues within international NGOs. He is now a freelance writer focusing largely on queer politics.

Winniw Makaba

ReportOUT: Human Rights Researcher

Winniw Makaba (Kenya) is an advocate of the High Court of Kenya and proprietor of Makaba and Company Advocates, where she actively practices as a litigation counsel and legal consultant in Nairobi, Kenya. She specialises in Human Rights law, Constitutional law and general practice, accumulating valuable experience by practicing in various courts and offering legal consultation services to individuals, companies, and organizations locally and internationally. In addition to her role as a Human Rights Researcher at ReportOUT, she is a certified mediator proficient in dispute resolution techniques

Gustavo Hernandez

ReportOUT: Human Rights Researcher

Gustavo Hernández-Calderón (he/him) is a Colombian-German human rights researcher specializing in sexual and gender minorities in the global south. He is currently completing his MA in Global Studies at the Humboldt University of Berlin (Germany), where he is conducting research on FLINTA migrant sex workers in Bangkok, Thailand.

Arnaldo de Santana Silva

ReportOUT: Human Rights Researcher

Arnaldo has degrees in Law and International Relations, a specialisation in Human Rights Education and is studying an MA in International Relations focusing on Human Rights and the LGBTQIA+ agenda. He is also an activist in international institutions defending the rights of the LGBTQ+

community. Has represented the Brazilian delegation of youth Ambassadors of Internet Governance with the Brazilian Steering Committee of Internet Governance (CGI.BR), bringing the focus on diversity and inclusion of our community on the world wide web, developing researches based on the inclusion and diversity on the web divide, the persecution financed by the State and public policies to LGBTQIA+ in the global south.

Vincent Anadi

ReportOUT: Human Rights Researcher

Chukwuebuka V. Anadi is a Nigerian postgraduate student (and clergyman) interested in the intersections of social inequalities. He provides support to individuals dealing with mental health difficulties. In addition, Chukwuebuka serves as a volunteer human rights researcher with ReportOUT, a global organisation supporting the rights of gender and sexual minorities.

Marline Oluchi

CHEVS: Policy and Advocacy Lead

Marline Oluchi is a queer feminist activist and researcher working on the thematic areas of LGBTQI+ rights, disability and gender justice in Africa from a decolonial lens, an intersection informed by the existing patriarchal and ableist nature of the region, which reinforces binary, heteronormative systems at the risk of LGBTQI+ lives. Her work aims to decriminalize LGBTQI+ identities and livelihoods through inclusive policies and systemic change while fostering dual systems of power through community care and movement building. She currently serves as the Policy and Advocacy Lead at CHEVS.

Olufunso A. Kehinde

CHEVS: Insights and Learning Officer

Olufunso A. Kehinde is a human rights activist with a Master's degree in International Relations from Covenant University and further studies at the Paris School of International Affairs, where he specialized in European Public Policies. He serves as the Insight and Learning Officer at the Centre for Health Education and Vulnerable Support (CHEVS), where he leads research initiatives that shed light on the human rights conditions of marginalized groups to guide advocacy programs and policy development.

Ajinomoh Victoria Eneze

CHEVS: Insights and Learning Associate

Ajinomoh Victoria Eneze (She/Her) works at CHEVS, giving support to achieving the organisation's goal in the Insight and Learning department. She is a dedicated researcher whose focus is majorly on gender and sexual minority issues. Eneze holds a BSc. in Political Science and an MEd. in Educational Measurement and Evaluation. Passionate about social justice and feminism, she has co-authored research publications that shed light on the lived experiences and needs of marginalised and vulnerable individuals in Nigeria.

KEY FINDINGS

Political Consciousness

Widespread Disillusionment and Apathy Regarding Democracy

Many queer Nigerians believe the country's democratic system primarily serves the elite and fails to function as a true democracy. When coupled with exceptionally high levels of Homo/Bi/Trans (H/B/T+) phobia at both the state and societal levels, this disillusionment has led to frustration and apathy within the community, which has little confidence in the system's ability to protect their rights or provide representation.

Political Representation and Support

There is very limited support from politicians or political parties for LGBTQI+ rights in Nigeria. While a small number of politicians privately support the country's queer communities, public defense of LGBTQI+ is extremely scarce, as H/B/T+ phobia is often weaponised for political gain, making it difficult for any political allies to speak out publicly. The most recent example of weaponising LGBTQI+ issues can be seen in Nigeria's signing of the Samoa Agreement. This partnership between the EU and various other nations makes no direct reference to LGBTQI+ rights, yet some political actors have falsely claimed the pact will force Nigeria to adopt LGBTQI+ inclusive legislation (see the Literature Review for more on this).

Political Participation

Legal and Institutional Challenges

Anti-LGBTQI+ laws, such as the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2014 (SSMPA 2014), and a lack of any other legal protections further marginalise the queer community in regard to Nigeria's democratic systems. The criminalisation of sexual and gender minorities discourages many LGBTQI+ individuals from openly participating in elections or running for political office due to fears of being outed, and the likely resulting stigmatisation, and persecution. These concerns also inhibit queer Nigerians from engaging in other political activities, such as attending queer political events whether clandestine or otherwise, or joining advocacy groups.

Intersectionality and Additional Barriers

Intersectionality plays a key role in the exclusion of certain LGBTQI+ persons from participating in Nigeria's democracy. Queer Nigerians with disabilities, and bi women & lesbians all noted the additional challenges they faced when engaging in politics. These included physical access to polling stations and widespread misogyny respectively.

Stigma & Discrimination

Democratic Discrimination Reinforced by State Led Persecution

Stigma and discrimination are the core reasons that LGBTQI+ persons in Nigeria face significant barriers to political participation. Many are subjected to exclusion and hostility in both political and social spaces because of their perceived or actual sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, the data gathered from the survey revealed that masculine-presenting women, feminine-presenting men, and transgender individuals are often singled out at polling stations, denied voting rights, or humiliated due to their gender presentation.

This discrimination is legitimised, and indeed authorised through such legislation as Section 377 and Section 214 of the Criminal Code, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA), as well as the death penalty for homosexuality under Sharia law in the north of Nigeria.

The Weaponisation of LGBTQI+ Rights

Politicians in Nigeria often weaponise LGBTQI+ issues to gain political support. Adopting a simplified narrative that queer identities are a 'Western import' and buoyed by fervent religious teachings which claim same-sex desire is a sin, political H/B/T+ phobia is an all too easy strategy used to distract the public from more pressing socio-economic issues.

Instead of addressing the discrimination faced by these communities, LGBTQI+ rights are used as political tools to rally voters, exacerbating stigmatisation and persecution, and dramatically reducing the appetite for political engagement amongst the country's queer communities.

Safety and Security

State-Induced Vulnerability

The Nigerian LGBTQI+ community faces severe safety and security risks, primarily due to the systemic discrimination and state criminalisation noted above. With the government failing to recognise LGBTQI+ identities, individuals are left without legal protection and are often targeted by state actors, particularly the police. The criminalisation of their identities leads to increased violence and intimidation, discouraging political participation and engagement.

Mixed Perceptions of Safety

While a significant number of respondents to our survey feel unsafe in broader society, a surprising portion also reported feeling safe in their own neighbourhoods and when meeting other LGBTQI+ individuals privately. This discrepancy suggests that Nigeria's LGBTQI+ community is adept at hiding their true identities and creating safe spaces. Yet, given that exercising the right to freedom of assembly and the right of association are critical steps towards realising democratic rights, it is improbable that queer political participation in Nigeria will advance in any meaningful way in the near future.

Activism and Inclusivity

Diverse Forms of Activism

Nearly half of survey respondents identified as LGBTQI+ activists, though their activism varies widely - from professional roles in NGOs to grassroots efforts and online activism. While some engage in formal activism, many contribute through everyday actions that promote inclusivity and peer support within their own networks.

Demand for Support Services

Respondents highlighted a critical need for LGBTQI+ inclusive support services, including mental health resources, legal aid, and healthcare tailored to the needs of Nigeria's queer community. Unlike in other countries accepting of LGBTQI+ rights, existing support systems for the community are primarily provided by LGBTQI+ Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and/or Community Based Organisations (CBOs) rather than via the state.

Given the great challenges that come with operating an LGBTQI+ CSO in Nigeria, the support services provided are often underfunded and geographically inconsistent, failing to meet the community's distinct needs. Without the right to full political representation, the prospect of the state fulfilling its duty of care to its queer citizens remains minimal.

1.0

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

With over 220+ million citizens, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, and seventh most populated in the world. One of the continent's undisputed powerhouses, both economically and culturally, Nigeria's influence in the region and indeed the world should not be underestimated. Yet it is also a nation plagued by conflict, corruption and the long shadow of colonialism. British colonialism can be thanked for institutionalising homo/bi/trans+ (HBT) phobia within Nigeria's current legal system and promoting widespread hostility towards the country's queer community. The former, meanwhile, can both be considered barriers to lesbian, gay, bi, trans, and queer (LGBTQI+) citizens' active involvement in the country's politics. Yet this summary risks simplifying the relationship between Nigeria's LGBTQI+ populations and their interest and ability to engage in the country's democratic processes.

The following literature review attempts to give a birds-eye view of the history and current socio-political contexts within which Nigeria's queer citizens exist, and thereby offer a greater understanding of the decisions LGBTQI+ individuals make regarding their level of political engagement within the country.

1.2 Independence

After gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria retained its colonial-era laws that criminalised same-sex relationships (DFAT, 2020) and integrated them into domestic legislation. These laws laid the foundation for such infamous pieces of legislation as the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, 2014 (SSMPA) (Sogunro, 2022). This law imposes penalties of up to 14 years in prison for individuals involved in or supporting same-sex relationships (Sogunro, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2016). This law, like other State and Federal laws before it, fosters discrimination and shame around same-sex relationships, intensifying criminalisation and stigmatisation.

There is almost an irony to the fact that the adoption of such pernicious laws proved to be one of the smoothest aspects of the transition from colonial rule to independence in 1960. Beyond the legal continuities, the economic, cultural and political imbalances wrought by colonialism caused immediate tensions within the systems and structures underpinning Nigeria's fragile new democracy.

The country's first national election was held in 1964 but led to seething animosity amongst many voters due to the newly formed government being dominated by northern parties (Chatham House, 2023). By 1966 anger had reached fever pitch, ushering in a turbulent era of political assassinations, military coups and counter-coups, ethnic clashes, and ultimately, civil war that led to the deaths of two million people due to the widespread famine that ensued in the breakaway state of Biafra (Bradley, 2023).

The 1970s through to the 1990s were marked by military dictatorships interspersed with attempts to revive Nigerian democracy (Chatham House, 2023). Finally, in 1999, General Abubakar established the Fourth Republic when elections were held in May of that year (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1999). While broadly regarded as fair, international observers noted "some serious irregularities" nonetheless (Ibid).

Yet this was in keeping with the corruption, cronyism, and clientelism which had become hallmarks of Nigerian governance over the decades since independence, no matter who was in charge. Fuelled by capital generated through the country's enormous oil reserves, these issues have continued to blight the country even as democracy showed on this occasion that it would endure. Indeed, in 2022, Nigeria was ranked the 25th most corrupt nation in the world out of 180 countries reviewed (Transparency International, 2022).

1.3 Nigeria's Democracy Today

Decades of political instability combined with pervasive corruption have eroded the institutions and mechanisms needed to guarantee the health of Nigeria's democracy. In southern states, the judicial system is considered compromised and ineffective (UN Special Rapporteur, 2021). Sharia Law operates in many Northern states and actively works against the civil and political rights of many groups, not least LGBTQI+ populations.

Other challenges to Nigeria's democracy include the threat of terrorism from groups such as Boko Haram in the country's north-east, and numerous other clashes between various armed factions across the country.

Nigeria formed the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) to deal with serious crime in 1992. However, SARS soon became corrupt itself, extorting money from regular citizens with impunity - to refuse could lead to violent attacks and even extrajudicial killings at the hands of its officers (Al Jazeera, 2020). This long reign of terror led to the widespread #ENDSARS protests, which began in 2017 and reached fever pitch in 2020. Rather than announce it was disbanding the unit, the government claimed it would reform SARS. Yet observers have noted an increase in police brutality once again, with #ENDSARS protestors being a key target (Amnesty International, 2023).

National elections were held in February 2023, but turnout was low, with around 28% of registered voters making it to the polls. The newly elected President Tinubu won the top job with 36.61% of this share (Stears Elections, 2023). Commentators cited a lack of confidence in the electoral system, a fear of violence, and apathy as some of the key reasons people stayed away from the polls (The Conversation, 2023).

1.4 Demographics

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with an estimated population of 220+ million, and growing by 2.6% yearly (DFAT, 2020). Urbanisation is happening at a rate of 4.23% per year, with half of Nigerians living in urban areas (DFAT, 2020 para). There are more than 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria.

The Hausa people comprise around 30% of the population and are predominantly found in northern Nigeria. In the southwest region, the Yoruba people comprise 15.5% of the population, closely followed by the Igbo group in the southeast at 15.2%. The Fulani people in the northern part make up 6% of the population (DFAT, 2020).

Meanwhile, religious beliefs in Nigeria predominantly revolve around Islam and Christianity. The Muslim population accounts for 51.6%, while Christians comprise 46.9%. Typically, the north comprises a Muslim majority while the south has a Christian majority; Communities practicing both

religions are spread across various other regions of the country (DFAT, 2020). However, there are no published figures for the population of LGBTQI+ communities in Nigeria. The lack of data on LGBTQI+ identities ensures their continued marginalisation by invisibilising their existence, and with it, their ability to claim their democratic rights.

2.0

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 LGBTQI+ Rights Within Nigeria's Legal Framework

The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria delineates the fundamental human rights of all citizens, encompassing civil and political rights in chapter IV, titled "Fundamental Rights." (Olookoba and Mahmud, 2014). This section of the constitution provides the structure for safeguarding individual liberties and ensuring compliance with the rights (Akeuseph, 2024). However, Article 15(2) does not offer protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity (Akeuseph, 2024). Hence, this creates a legal and societal exploitation loophole that amplifies stigmatisation and discrimination (Akeuseph, 2024), accounting for the isolation of the LGBTQI+ community from participating in social and political activities.

Most of the Federal and State laws, such as the Criminal Code Act (1916), Penal Code Act (1960), Armed Forces Act (2004), and the 1990 Criminal Codes Section 214, punish same-sex intercourse expressed as "Carnal knowledge against the order of nature" with a maximum of 14 years in prison. Section 217 penalises "gross indecency" between men with a maximum of three years in prison (Sogunro, 2022).

The Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2014 imposes various categories of sentences on individuals who participate in any form of same-sex activities, either by directing, observing, or assisting in the solemnisation of same-sex unions (Sogunro, 2022). Article 5(2) punishes any public display of affection with up to 10 years imprisonment. In addition, the twelve Northern states, under Sharia law, punish same-sex activities through execution by stoning (DFAT, 2020).

There are no laws that protect sexual and gender minorities from violence or discrimination associated with same-sex activities or the exercise of their civic duties (Olookoba and Mahmud, 2014). LGBTQI+ advocacy groups draw attention to the severe consequences that people who are accused of being gay or trans experience, such as losing their jobs, being shunned by their communities, and experiencing violent, sometimes fatal, attacks. LGBTQI+ Nigerians have stated that they feel uncomfortable seeking healthcare because they are afraid of being discriminated against and potentially being reported to the authorities (Olookoba and Mahmud, 2014). Therefore, sexual minorities feel forced to hide their sexual orientation to prevent prejudice and social rejection. Lesbians and gay men are under pressure to marry heterosexuals; queer Nigerians who disclose their sexual orientation fear exclusion from their families and other forms of discrimination (DFAT, 2020). The Constitution's provision for the equality of all citizens (section 17(2)(a)) is thus fundamentally flawed in not providing for genuine equality for Nigeria's sexual and gender minority communities.

2.2 Nigeria's International Commitments to LGBTQI+ Citizens

The right to participate in democratic processes is a core tenet of civil and political rights. This includes every citizen's right to vote and partake in public affairs more generally. In practice, this gives each individual the right to belong to a political party, and to be politically active through entities such as student unions or civil society organisations (CSOs), for instance. It also guarantees every individual's right to contribute to political life, either directly or via elected representatives. These rights were enshrined over 75 years ago within the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and further ratified by nation-states in the legally binding International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1966 (ICCPR) (United Nations). Nigeria is no exception, having signed the treaty in 1993 (UNTC).

Yet for many sexual and gender minorities across the world, exercising these rights can prove exceptionally challenging, dangerous or even impossible. Widespread discrimination against same-sex practices and gender non-conformity in many countries often makes living everyday life difficult, and the notion of participating in the political sphere only increases this risk. These challenges worsen when such discrimination is codified in law. This is the case in Nigeria, where numerous pieces of homo/bi/trans (HBT+) phobic legislation actively seek to persecute citizens who identify as LGBTQI+, as outlined in the previous section. Such punitive laws are in direct contravention of Article 26 of the ICCPR, which states:

"All persons are equal before the law and [...] shall prohibit any discrimination [...] on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" (ICCPR, 1966)

The phrase 'other status' is critical here. The ICCPR intentionally used this terminology with great prescience, recognising that our understanding of groups in need of protection would evolve over time. From the 1990s onwards, international law and treaties have increasingly interpreted sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) as being protected within this category. The seminal report 'Born Free and Equal' by the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights finally clarified this position once and for all:

"Simply put, human rights are for everyone, without exception: lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTQI+) people are just as entitled to protection, respect and fulfilment of their human rights as everyone else" (OHCHR, 2012)

The ability of Nigeria's sexual and gender minorities to actively partake in the country's democratic processes is significantly reduced due to the state-led persecution that queer populations face, in spite of such international treaties. This fact also demonstrates how Nigeria is falling short of its commitments agreed to under such accords.

2.3 Societal Attitudes Towards Queer Identities

In Nigeria, all socioeconomic classes have a negative attitude towards sexual and gender minorities, shaped by cultural and religious beliefs which perceive such identities as being alien to traditional African culture (Esin, 2023). This prevalent disapproval leads to stigma, discrimination and, at times, even violence against individuals (DFAT, 2020). Negative attitudes are largely driven by religion and culture. Religious leaders often use their platforms to denounce homosexuality and voice opposition to LGBTQI+ rights, portraying them as a threat to family values and structures (Gaudio, 2014). Moreover, cultural norms also play a role in fostering attitudes towards individuals. Many Nigerian cultures prioritise traditional gender roles while considering same-sex relationships and trans identities as deviating from these norms. Within this framework, it becomes difficult for LGBTQI+ individuals to find acceptance within their families and communities (Okanlawon, 2019).

2.3.1 Human Rights Violations Against Nigeria's LGBTQI+ Populations

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) assesses that LGBTQI+ individuals in Nigeria face a high risk of legally sanctioned discrimination and targeting under federal and state law, coupled with a high risk of societal discrimination and violence. These risks are particularly pronounced in northern states where Sharia law is enforced.

In August 2007, Bauchi state police detained eighteen males who were charged with sodomy for cross-dressing, conduct that is prohibited under the Shari'a' penal law in Nigeria (Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria, 2008). The accusations were subsequently reduced to vagrancy, and the men were incarcerated for several years, awaiting trial – which ultimately collapsed in 2011 (Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria, 2011). On September 12, 2008, four publications disclosed the identities and residential locations of twelve House of Rainbow Metropolitan Church members, a Lagos church that supports the LGBTQI+ community. Several of these individuals were subjected to threats, physical assault, and being pelted with stones by members of the public. As a result of these occurrences, the church decided to cancel conferences due to apprehensions over the safety of participants. (Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria, 2010). On April 15, 2017, authorities in Kaduna state apprehended 53 individuals for purportedly plotting to participate in a homosexual marriage ceremony. The defendants were formally accused of engaging in a conspiracy, participating in an unlawful assembly, and being members of an illegal organisation (DFAT, 2020). In August 2017, a total of 42 individuals were apprehended in Lagos State on charges of engaging in homosexual activities (BBC News, 2017).

In June 2018, the Nigerian police apprehended around 100 individuals attending a party at a hotel in Asaba, Delta State, on allegations of engaging in homosexual activities. In July 2018, they were being prosecuted for allegations linked to homosexuality in court. In the same year, in August, Law enforcement officers apprehended 57 individuals during a gathering at a hotel, subsequently accusing them of engaging in public demonstrations of same-sex romantic affection in violation of Section 5(2) of the SSMPA (Rights Africa-Equal Rights, One Voice, 2018). In January 2019, Dolapo Badmos, the

spokesperson for the Lagos State Police Command, issued a stern warning to individuals who identify as homosexual, advising them to leave the nation immediately or else they will be subjected to legal action. In an Instagram post, she explicitly declared that anybody with a homosexual orientation should depart from Nigeria or face legal consequences. Badmos asserts that Nigeria has laws that prohibit homosexual clubs, associations, and organisations, and anybody involved with these might face a maximum penalty of 14 years imprisonment (Punch Newspaper, 2019). In November 2019, law enforcement in Edo apprehended two women who were reported to be involved in a romantic relationship and openly announced their intention to combat homosexuality.

In December 2019, 47 individuals initiated the trial, marking them as the inaugural participants to be prosecuted under the Act (DFAT,2020). In January 2020, the religious authorities in Kano state apprehended 15 individuals who had completed their university education and were allegedly organising a gathering to engage in 'homosexual activities'. In August 2023, law enforcement conducted a raid on a same-sex wedding ceremony in Warri, located in Delta State. As a result, numerous individuals were apprehended and taken into custody. In October 2023, a total of 76 individuals, consisting of 59 males and 17 females, were apprehended at a gathering in Gombe state, located in northern Nigeria. The police 'alleged' that the event was intended to be a same-sex wedding ceremony (CNN, 2023).

2.3.2 The Interplay of Political H/B/T+ Phobia and Social Exclusion in Nigeria's Criminalisation of Sexual and Gender Minorities

In recent years, Nigeria, akin to many other African nation-states, has increasingly upheld its HBT+ phobic stance, suppressing LGBTQI+ rights purportedly to preserve traditional values. This strategy has established a new boundary, referred to as the 'pink line' (Gevisser, 2020: 17), which delineates boundaries and territories to affirm the power of a socio-political system characterised by a distinct hegemony. This system employs criminal laws to control, repress, and socially exclude a minority segment of the population from the dominant governance structures. Within this framework of social exclusion, non-conforming sexual and gender identities have been weaponised to sustain this popular, discriminatory, narrative. Consequently, gender and sexual minorities have arguably become more vulnerable than ever before (Sogunro, 2022).

Yet despite the SSMPA's restrictive framework, several NGOs provide legal advice, advocacy training, media training, and health services to LGBTQI+ individuals, focusing primarily on HIV+ and AIDS. In 2017, a human rights NGO launched 'Quickcare', a mobile application aiding LGBTQI+ individuals in accessing health services and LGBTQI+-friendly facilities. While authorities have primarily allowed these groups to operate, in 2018, the Lesbian Equality and Empowerment Initiatives lost an appeal against the Corporate Affairs Commission's refusal to register them, citing a breach of the SSMPA (DFAT, 2020).

2.4 Queer Participation in Democratic Processes Today

Freedom of assembly, self-expression, and movement are all protected under the Nigerian constitution, as are the rights to privacy and non-discrimination (Home Office, 2022). Yet in reality, members of Nigeria's LGBTQI+ population cannot exercise these rights, given that non-normative sexual and gender identities are criminalised across the country.

With the arrival of the notorious SSMPA in 2014, it has also been illegal for Civil Society Organisations to defend and advocate for the rights of LGBTQI+ people. The resulting climate of fear and threat of arrest therefore dissuades many politically-minded LGBTQI+ activists from engaging in democratic processes or pursuing political careers (Freedom House, 2019).

There are therefore legal restrictions which curtail opportunities for queer Nigerians to partake in democratic processes. However, just as pernicious is the stigma and discrimination which members of the LGBTQI+ community experience within society itself. Effeminate men and trans women can be ostracised from institutions and democratic processes, or indeed even arrested for the supposed (though not statutory) crime of simply being perceived as homosexual (Open Democracy, 2020). The same can be said of trans men and masc-presenting lesbians.

An example of this is the significant support lent by Nigeria's LGBTQI+ community to the #EndSARS campaign. The protests were a powerful symbol of grassroots political activism and many queer Nigerians were active participants in the demonstrations. Not least given how SARS police units had abused the SSMPA to hunt out and blackmail members of the community (UN Special Rapporteur, 2021). Yet when LGBTQI+ activists made themselves and their issues more visible and vocal through the use of slogans such as '#QueerNigerianLivesMatter', they were met with overt hostility from their cis/hetero counterparts (Open Democracy, 2020). Accused of co-opting the protests for a heinous cause, many queer organisations and individuals felt they had no choice but silence themselves for reasons of personal safety. Some commentators have since noted how the queer contribution to these protests has been erased from the historical narrative (Ibid).

More recently, hysteria over the presumed threat posed by LGBTQI+ individuals has been whipped up across Nigeria due to a new partnership agreement between the European Union and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS). Known as the Samoa Agreement, the pact outlines six areas of collaboration between the two blocs, including democracy and human rights (European Council of the European Union, 2024). 79 countries across the Global South that signed the agreement, many of which are hostile to LGBTQI+ rights. While there has been some disquiet in other African countries, such as Kenya, Nigeria appears to be the only country in which there has been widespread panic, fuelled by the media and based on false claims that the deal will force Nigeria to adopt pro-LGBTQI+ legislation (BBC, 2024).

The public furore has led to an increase in hate speech against sexual and gender minorities (Ibid). Such continued waves of HBT+ phobia undoubtedly dampen morale and impact the confidence and motivation of many members of the LGBTQI+ community to step into democratic processes. Not least in claiming civil and political rights as openly queer citizens.

2.5 Activism as a Democratic Right - and Act

Despite the intense hostility felt towards LGBTQI+ populations in Nigeria, progress is slowly being made. A review of societal attitudes towards queer identities by the Nigerian LGBTQI+ CSO, TIERs, has shown gradual, if modest acceptance of our community since polling began in 2013. For instance, 90% percent of Nigerians agreed with the SSMPA in 2015, by 2019, this had dropped to 75% (African Liberty, 2019). Conversely, the number of people who believed sexual and gender minorities should be entitled to the same rights as all other citizens jumped from 17% in 2017, to 27% in 2019, a ten-point jump in just two years (African Arguments, 2019)

While there is undoubtedly a long way to go before Nigerian society is fully prepared to accept queer people, these are nonetheless significant shifts in brief spaces of time. These advances also do not happen in a vacuum, and can be, in large part, attributed to LGBTQI+ activism across Nigeria, and which should be understood as a form of democratic participation in and of itself.

Queer activism in Nigeria takes many forms. As we have seen, queer activists have ensured their intersectional issues were visible within such wider protests movements, such as the #EndSARS demonstrations (ISDAO, 2021). At other times, this activism is creative, and adept at harnessing influential mediums such as social media and film. For example, Twitter has been co-opted by members of the queer community as a safe space to increase visibility, advocate for social and political change and offer peer-to-peer support (The Conversation, 2020). Likewise, movies such as 2020's 'Ife' made in partnership with the LGBTQI+ NGO, Equality Hub, pushed the dial on queer social acceptability by presenting a story of a lesbian couple in a positive light (CNN, 2020).

In other instances, activists have forged strategic relationships with other social justice movements in Nigeria such as women's rights and the fight for HIV+ advocacy, through which activists can work towards common goals based on their intersecting issues. For example, the United Nations HIV+ body, UNAIDS, works at the grassroots level with civil society activists most affected by HIV+, such as sex workers and LGBTQI+ populations. UNAIDS subsequently advocates for greater protections for these groups at the state level using the rationale that criminalisation correlates with increased rates of HIV+ transmission (UNAIDS, 2024). Such partnerships have formed a powerful form of democratic participation for some of the most marginalised populations in society.

Many Nigerian LGBTQI+ CSOs have also fostered partnerships across regional LGBTQI+ networks. These collaborations include African-wide groups which can lead to shared advocacy efforts and the cross-pollination of ideas and resources (ISDAO, 2021). These groups include ISDAO, Pan African ILGA, and the Global Interfaith Network.

Partnerships have also emerged across the wider international LGBTQ+ rights movement. This includes memberships within major global rights advocacy networks such as Outright International and ILGA World and its Africa-wide advocacy group, Pan-Africa ILGA. These partnerships enable local Nigerian organisations political participation through international systems, influencing change from the top down. Local CSOs feed into these networks' reporting mechanisms, who in turn report back rights violations to institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council, placing pressure on the Nigerian state to act upon its recommendations (ILGA, 2024).

Other partnerships across the International LGBTQI+ Rights movement may include individual programmatic collaborations, in which two or more organisations join forces to effect change by bringing their individual strengths to the project. A pertinent example of which being that of CHEVS and ReportOUT, who have come together in the hope that this research will offer new insights into the state of queer participation in Nigerian democratic processes today.

3.0

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methodology approach was applied to the research, which comprised of a survey for predominantly quantitative findings, and interviews for qualitative results.

The composition of a mixed methodology to study the vulnerability and exclusion of the LGBTQI+ population from political mechanisms and decision-making spaces is necessary. This approach aims to understand the issue, not only from a quantitative perspective obtained via survey results, but also seeks to delve deeper into the various components of exclusion and discrimination in the country through biographical experiences which were captured in the interviews. In other words, this research examines the intersection of exclusionary factors faced by sexual and gender minorities in Nigeria.

3.1 Direct Interviews (Qualitative Analysis)

The direct interviews attracted ten respondents. Great care was taken to develop a methodology with adequate representation of the various sexual and gender identities across Nigeria, to ensure that the different queer lived experiences were accounted for. The ten interviewees identified as either trans, intersex, nonbinary or queer and elicited their experiences of participating in democratic and political processes in Nigeria.

Five themes were generated from the responses of participants. These themes include political consciousness, political experiences, safety and security, future of inclusivity, and discrimination.

Though there is interest, the reluctance to participate in democratic processes stems from intersecting factors, including those peculiar to being LGBTQ+ in Nigeria, as well as other factors experienced by the wider general public. These factors are discussed under the theme “Experiences” in this report, under the sub-categories social conformity and intersectionality.

The selection of the ten participants for the interviews represents the diversity not only of the SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics) in Nigeria but also showcases the different states of activism and the limitations of political participation in the country. Therefore, some interviews place special emphasis on the participants’ biographies of involvement and the mechanisms for the protection and defence of rights that exist in Nigeria.

3.2 Survey (Quantitative Analysis)

The first part of the research consisted of a survey, composed of 91 questions, addressing various issues, and divided into an introduction, the body of the survey, and a conclusion. The survey was rolled out to different members of Nigeria’s queer community and was responded to by a total of 88 people.

In the introductory part of the survey, general demographic information was collected, this included; country of residence (whether they live in Nigeria or another country), respective city or rural area, age, gender identity and sexual orientation, level of education, ethnic and/or religious identity, and internet accessibility.

Next, in the body of the survey, the questions focused on evaluating the Nigerian democratic system for the LGBTQI+ population, their mechanisms of participation, the degree of physical and psychological vulnerability in response to the repressive actions of the Nigerian authorities, exposure to human rights violations such as the death penalty in some northern states, and defence mechanisms adopted by LGBTQI+ populations to protect themselves against such violations.. Respondents were then also asked about their current state of involvement with democratic processes, political parties or independent politicians, and their respective political visibility as queer citizens in Nigeria. Finally, at the end of the survey, an open-ended question was provided for respondents to reflect on the future of advocacy and activism for LGBTQI+ rights in Nigeria. This section allowed respondents to indicate the direction that should be taken and to define the current biggest challenges for sexual and gender minorities within the country.

3.3 Limitations

Despite the study offering a rich perspective on the condition of LGBTQI+ populations in Nigeria, certain limitations arose when conducting the study. The majority of respondents to both the survey and the interviews were sourced from queer populations based in urban areas, rather than more peripheral zones where the basic rights of this population are highly vulnerable and, in some cases, could be described as a humanitarian crisis. In this regard, it is important to mention the cultural, geographical, and religious differences that exist between northern and southern Nigeria, which also determines the factors of accessibility and representation in this report.

In northern Nigeria, which is the indigenous homeland of the Hausa, Sharia law is implemented in 12 states. LGBTQI+ individuals face severe legal and social discrimination which is distinct from the challenges experienced by queer people in the country's 17 southern states which implement a secular legal system based on constitutional law.

Sharia law, based on Islamic principles, criminalises same-sex relationships and can impose harsh punishments, including imprisonment and the death penalty, on those found guilty of same-sex acts. This legal framework creates an environment of fear and repression, severely limiting the political participation and public expression of LGBTQI+ individuals. This may explain why no Nigerians identifying as Hausa responded to the survey (see demographics section below) In contrast, southern Nigeria, which is more religiously diverse and less influenced by Sharia law, offers a slightly more tolerant environment, though LGBTQI+ rights are still far from being fully recognized and protected.

For this reason, it is evident that the majority of the participants in both the survey and the interviews are located in the southern region of the country, with majority residing in the three largest cities: Lagos, Owerri, and Abuja. This does not imply that the original background of those surveyed and interviewed are originally from the southern provinces, but simply confirms the current landscape of exclusion in Nigeria.

Another significant factor to consider, as evidenced in the survey, is the accessibility to internet connection. In Nigeria, this poses a substantial hindrance to the survey process, as internet infrastructure is unevenly distributed across the country. Many rural areas lack the necessary infrastructure for a stable and reliable internet connection. Even in urban regions, the cost of internet access can be prohibitively high for many individuals, further exacerbating the digital divide.

According to recent data, a considerable portion of the Nigerian population does not have a fixed broadband connection and relies on mobile data, which can be inconsistent and expensive. This lack of access affects not only the ability to participate in the survey but also impacts broader aspects of education, business, and access to information. This was born out in survey findings, with 93% of respondents having reliable access to the internet, versus the national average of 42.65% (Statista, 2022).

This factor thus feeds into another limitation of the study, namely that the majority of respondents are from highly educated professionalised backgrounds. As such, both survey respondents and interviewees may have opinions of political participation which may not be representative of the wider LGBTQ+ community across the country. For instance, individuals who have had the opportunity to access higher education may have increased awareness of the democratic processes and maintain peer groups with similar levels of interest and understanding of political engagement and exclusion. Further research would therefore be required to gauge the lived experiences and opinions of a wider range of queer individuals across such a politically and culturally complex country as Nigeria.

A further significant limitation of this study is the language barrier, as both the survey and interviews were conducted exclusively in English. While English is an official language in Nigeria, the country is linguistically diverse, with over 500 local languages spoken across different regions. For many Nigerians, especially those in rural or underrepresented areas, English is not a primary language, and proficiency levels can vary significantly. This limitation may have affected participants' comprehension of the questions, possibly leading to misinterpretations, simplified responses, or incomplete answers. As a result, the data collected may not fully reflect the nuanced opinions or experiences of those who do not have a strong grasp of English, potentially skewing the study's findings and reducing their generalizability across the entire Nigerian population.

The study's participant age distribution is another notable limitation, with 61% of respondents aged between 25 and 34 and only 1% over the age of 45. This age demographic imbalance may have resulted in data that more accurately represents the perspectives and experiences of younger adults, while underrepresenting those of older individuals. Given that attitudes, values, and experiences can vary widely across age groups, this skewed distribution could limit the applicability of the findings to older generations. Additionally, the low representation of participants over 45 years old may overlook important insights and differing perspectives, which could be particularly relevant in understanding intergenerational attitudes or historical shifts in the subject matter. Future studies could benefit from a more balanced age distribution to achieve a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the population.

3.4 RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

3.4.1 Interviewees' Demographics

Interviewee Overview

Ten participants participated in the interview, all residing in Nigeria, with the majority (80%) living in urban areas and 20% in rural communities.

Regional Distribution

The participants were drawn from various parts of the country, with most residing in the Southwest (40%), North Central (20%), South-South (20%), North (10%), and Southeast (10%).

Gender Identity

The participants represented diverse gender identities, including transgender individuals (50%), non-binary persons (30%), and cisgender women (20%).

3.4.2 Survey Participant Demographics Participant Overview

The survey attracted a total of 88 respondents. The vast majority of these individuals (96%) live in Nigeria. 4% of the respondents lived outside of the country. These participants at the time of the survey resided in Germany, the UK, and the USA.

Do you currently live in Nigeria?

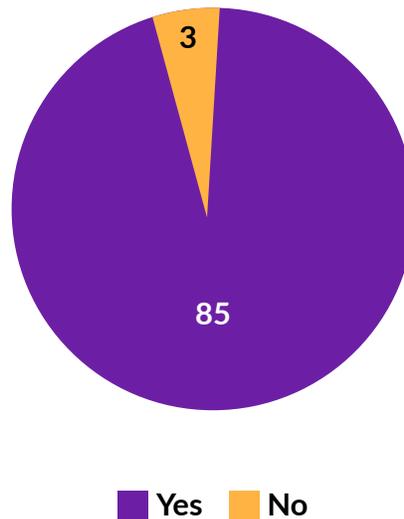


Figure 1 revealed that 85 participants lived in Nigeria at the time of the survey while 3 of the participants lived outside Nigeria.

Location of Participants

The majority of respondents tended to live in urban areas, with most residing in Lagos (26%) and Owerri (23%). Other cities where participants resided, included Abuja (10%), Port Harcourt (6%), Ado Ekiti (3%), Kano (2%), Uyo (2%), Asaba (2%), Awka (2%), Makurdi (2%).

Only one respondent noted themselves as living in a rural or semi-rural area, namely Anambra.

Respondent Ages

The survey respondents were mainly aged between 25-34 years old, with 61% belonging to this age range. A further 20% fell within the 18-24 category, followed by the age ranges of 35-44 at 18% and 45-54 at 1%.

Ethnicity

64% of the respondents of the survey identified as Igbo. 10% identified as Yoruba, 7% as Ibibio, and 1% as Ijaw. 2% preferred not to disclose, while 15% stated they belonged to ethnic groups, unlisted in the survey. This is quite a substantial minority given that most of Nigeria's largest ethnic populations were accounted for in the survey. Aside from those noted, these included: Hausa, Tiv, Kanuri, and Fulani.

It should be noted that 2% of respondents selected 'prefer not to say' when asked about their ethnicity. While we can only speculate as to the reasons some individuals opted for this category, it may be due to the real or perceived increased risk of disclosing such information. For instance, people identifying as Hausa and based in the northern regions are more likely to live under Sharia Law (see section 3.3).

Gender Identity

36% of survey respondents identified as Cisgender Women, 20% as Cisgender Men, 19% as non-binary, and 12% chose not to identify. 2.3% identified as Transgender women, 2.3% as Transgender men, and 2.3% Intersex individuals respectively. 12% preferred not to say, and 6% opted for 'Other'.

Sexual Orientation

21% of respondents identified as bisexual women, 18% as bisexual men. Gay men accounted for 18% participants, 33% identified as lesbian. 2.3% identified as pansexual/queer, and the same proportion (2.3%), preferred not to say. 4.6% of respondents were straight allies. 1% opted for 'Other', and no participants identified as asexual.

Education

52% had completed postgraduate university studies, and a further 9% of the respondents stated they had a master's degree. This brings the total of those with post-graduate qualifications to 61%. 33% of respondents had completed undergraduate university study, 4% had completed secondary education, and 2% completed a post-secondary education not associated with university.

The disproportionate number of highly educated survey respondents is considered under the report's Methodology section.

Religion

38% of survey respondents identified as Protestant, 33% as Roman Catholic, and 19% were affiliated with other Christian denominations. Just 5% identified as Muslim, 4% with other religious affiliations, and 2% of participants regarded themselves as non-religious.

Internet Connectivity

An overwhelming number of respondents to the survey had reliable internet connectivity, at 93%. This is unsurprising given that the survey was rolled out to Nigeria's LGBTQI+ community online. However, this does raise questions regarding how truly reflective the survey cohort is of the country's wider queer population, given that internet user penetration in Nigeria across the general population was forecast to be 42.65% in 2024. Again, this point is explored under the Methodology section (Statista, 2022).

4.0

PRESENTATION OF KEY FINDINGS

4.1 Key Findings I: Political Consciousness of LGBTQI+ Persons in Nigeria

4.1.1 Introduction

The LGBTQI+ community in Nigeria exists within a complex and often hostile political environment. Despite the country's democratic framework, LGBTQI+ individuals face systemic discrimination, legal persecution, and social ostracism. Through its research, ReportOUT and CHEVS delved into the perceptions of Nigerian LGBTQI+ citizens, gauging their engagement with the country's politics, democratic processes, and the broader implications for how these impact the community's ability to realise human rights and social justice in Nigeria.

Political consciousness encompasses the awareness, understanding, and willingness to engage in political and democratic processes. Our findings indicate that LGBTQI+ persons in Nigeria are both politically informed and interested in participating in democratic processes.

Nigeria is a federal republic with a multi-party system, but the political landscape is deeply influenced by religious and cultural conservatism. This conservatism manifests in laws and policies that criminalize same-sex relationships and perpetuate discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals. The 2014 SSMPA is a pivotal example, imposing severe penalties on individuals in same-sex relationships and those who support LGBTQI+ rights.

Despite the hostile environment, many LGBTQI+ persons in Nigeria are acutely aware of their democratic rights and the importance of political participation. ReportOUT and CHEVS found these key findings on how LGBTQI+ individuals perceive their political rights within the context of Nigerian democracy, including the right to vote, freedom of expression, and the right to peaceful assembly.

4.1.2 Summary of Interview Findings

Among those interviewed, four individuals had held elected positions during their university years, and two others had been involved in street organising. Regarding mainstream politics, all but one of the participants had registered and collected their voter cards. Despite this, some of the participants with voter cards had not voted in general elections, citing factors such as the location of polling units and the potential for political violence during elections. Additionally, participants reported engaging in online political conversations and campaigns.

Despite recognizing the importance of representation in political decision-making spaces, only seven of the survey participants belonged to a political party. Most indicated their reluctance to join a political party or run for elected office to be due to other reasons such as political apathy. Meanwhile,

Do you have a voter card?

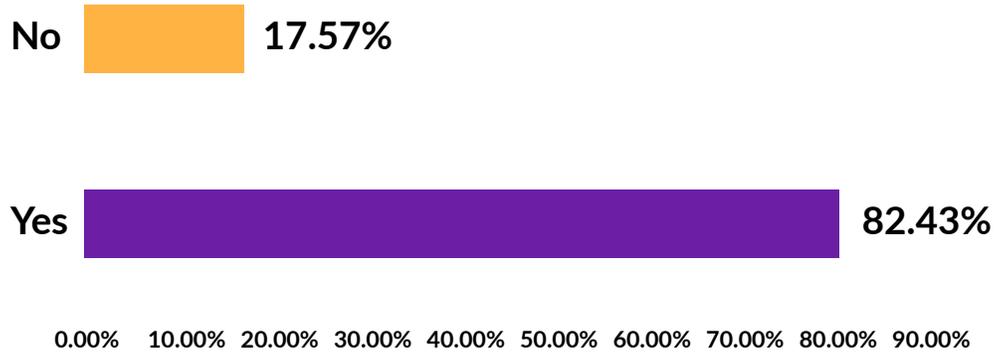


Figure 2 illustrates that the majority (82%) of survey respondents possess voter cards

Have you ever voted in a general election?

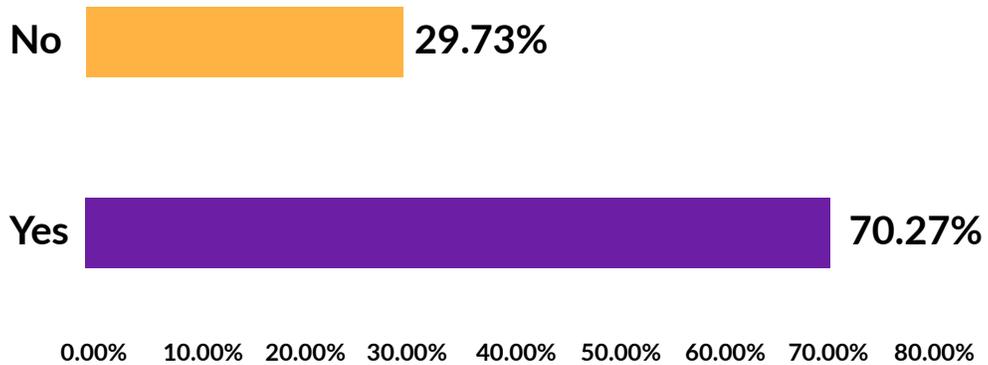


Figure 3 illustrates that 70% of respondents have participated in general elections

Are you registered as member of any political party?

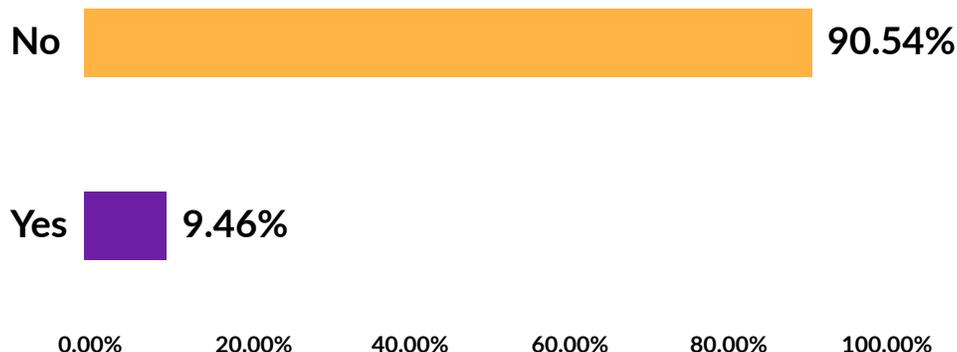


Figure 4 illustrates that the majority (91%) of survey respondents do not belong to a political party.

12% of respondents stated that their sexual and gender identity was a reason they did not engage in political participation. Responses included:



“Yes, the country does not accept political participation of LGBTIQ persons”

“Yes, I cannot freely show up in these spaces with my same sex partner for obvious reasons”

“No, I don’t trust the political system in Nigeria”

This suggests a complex relationship between political awareness and active political engagement among LGBTIQ+ persons in Nigeria. Though there is interest, the reluctance to participate in democratic processes stems from intersecting factors, including those peculiar to LGBTIQ+ persons in Nigeria, and other factors experienced by the general public. These factors are further discussed under the section entitled “Experiences” in this report.

4.1.3 Summary of Survey Findings

As with the interviews, the survey findings evidence high levels of political consciousness amongst respondents. Unsurprisingly, such heightened political awareness also meant participants were clear on their fundamental human rights both as queer individuals but also as citizens of the Nigerian state more generally.

As an LGBTQI+ person, what democratic engagements have you had?

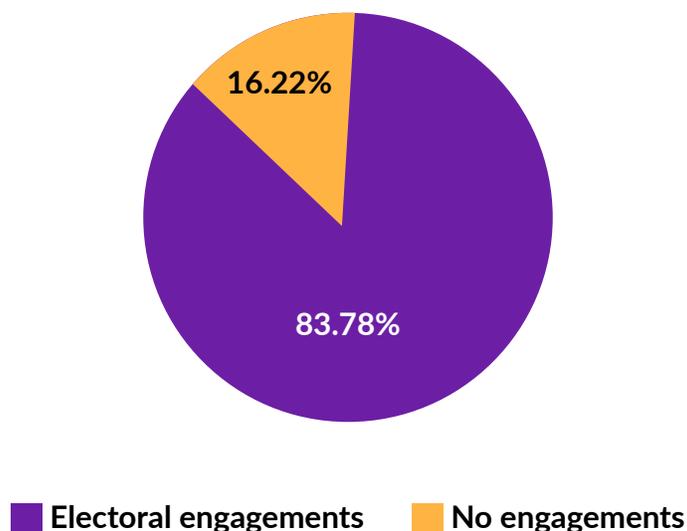


Figure 5 reveals that 83.78% of the 74 participants who answered the question about democratic engagement had engaged in at least one democratic activity, while 16.22% of the participants haven't been involved in any democratic engagement before.

Reasons for non-engagement in political activities included;

There appeared to be widespread contempt for the current state of democracy in Nigeria. When respondents were asked why they have never engaged in political processes, responses included:



"In Nigeria your vote doesn't matter, who will win is up to the political elites"

"Because it [is a] waste of time..."

"Because I don't believe in participating in democratic engagements in a country that is not run by the law, but by politicians."

With confidence severely lacking in Nigeria's democratic processes more generally, the expectations that LGBTQI+ identities and rights might be respected, or even acknowledged, were markedly lacking from participants' answers.

Indeed, it would appear that high levels of political consciousness amongst Nigeria's queer populations resulted in high levels of frustration and apathy amongst the community, who had little faith in Nigeria's democracy in and of itself, and less confidence still that it might serve the interests of queer citizens.

This is despite there being some recognition of a modest number of individual politicians who were quietly supportive of LGBTQI+ issues. This fact may indicate a gradual shift towards greater acceptance of queer identities, but if so, it is at a glacial pace, with these few sympathetic individuals being greatly outnumbered by H/B/T+ phobic parliamentarians and which subsequently prevents most political allies from speaking out publicly in defense of LGBTQI+ rights.

4.1.4 Review of Survey Findings:

What Do Queer Nigerians Believe Democracy Means in the Context of Their Country?

In the survey, participants were asked “What does democracy mean to you in the context of Nigeria?”

The majority of the participants who responded to the question stated that democracy meant a government of the people and for the people. However, a significant number of respondents believed that democracy no longer exists in Nigeria, and that the system is only in place to serve the government itself.

An equally significant number of respondents answered that democracy means a government for the people, but tellingly, that it does not function that way in Nigeria.

From the responses in the survey, participants have a clear concept of what democracy is, but do not believe that it is functional in the context of Nigeria.

Responses included:



“Democracy means being able to vote and be voted for, it means having a government that caters to your rights as a human being. Democracy means having a say in matters that affect your life. It means being represented and respected. Sadly, we don’t have this in Nigeria.”

“Government of the privileged people against the less privilege”

“Well, In the context of Nigeria, i will say democracy refers to a system of government where power is held by the people, either directly or through elected representatives.”

“Nothing concrete. Democracy in Nigeria is more of a smokescreen than an actual system”

Inclusivity of LGBTQI+ Citizens within Nigeria’s Democratic Framework

The issue of inclusivity of LGBTQI+ persons in political discussions and participation in Nigeria still remains a significant issue.

Participants were asked “How do you perceive the level of inclusivity of LGBTQI+ rights within the democratic framework of Nigeria?”

84% of survey respondents stated there was no inclusivity of LGBTQI+ individuals or their rights within the democratic framework of Nigeria.

Responses included:



“Zero”

“It is not inclusive at all, from how laws are made to the state actors who implement the laws, there is deliberate exclusion and vilification of queer people and the fundamental human rights they are entitled to.”

“There is no inclusivity at all. The government could be lenient with thieves, and other criminals but never with the queer community”

“On a scale of 1-10 it’s zero as far as Nigeria political system is concerned”

“The LGBTQI+ right within Nigerian democratic framework is still a work in progress. The progress the LGBTQI+ Community has been marked by discrimination, stigma and even criminalization under law prohibiting same-sex relationship.”

Does Nigerian Democracy Protect its LGBTQI+ Citizens?

In response to the question “Do you believe that democracy in Nigeria adequately protects the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals?”

Majority of the participants in the survey and interview strongly disagreed that democracy in Nigeria adequately protects the rights of LGBTQI+ persons in Nigeria.

Responses included:



“Not at all. Like I mentioned above, LGBTQI+ individuals are criminalized so there is no protection of rights whatsoever.”

“No, democracy does not protect LGBTQI+ rights”



“No. The laws that criminalize same-sex marriage and sexual acts between consenting adults as well as diverse gender expressions put LGBTQ people in danger. The rights of LGBTIQ people are contravened, in direct opposition to guaranteed rights in the Nigerian Constitution.”

“It doesn’t protect LGBTQ+ rights, there’s a sentence for those caught in the act”

“No, police brutality and anti LGBT rights are daily evidenced in the news and social media.”

Are there any Political Parties or Politicians Publicly Defending LGBTQ+ Rights?

Despite this negative sentiment, on the issue of political consciousness, participants were asked “Are there any political parties or individual politicians that you know of publicly defending the rights of LGBTQ+ populations?”

91% of participants answered no to this question, indicating how political parties and political figures in the country do not address and defend the rights of LGBTQ+ persons in Nigeria.

9% of the participants answered yes to this question.

On whether they knew of any individual politicians that privately support and defend the rights of the LGBTQ community, 18% of the participants answered they knew a politician who supported LGBTQ+ persons privately.

When expounding on their answers, some of the responses by the participants included:



“The national human rights commission (Lagos branch) upholds the right of all persons including LGBTQ+ people”

“The Lagos state commissioner for youth privately supports the interest of LGBTQ+ populations. The Labor party governorship candidate privately supported LGBTQ population and his wife publicly supported LGBTQ + rights in her tweets.”

“I have engaged some state actors in my line of work who have their hearts in the right place, but institutionalized homophobia won’t let them be great”

“There are some politicians who are of the opinion that minority specialties and populations should be protected and given freedom to be expressive”

Based on the responses given by the participants, there is a small minority of politicians or members of political parties who quietly advocate for the rights of LGBTQI+ persons but are afraid of doing so publicly due to the backlash they might be subjected to due to the general homophobia and transphobia in the country.

Globally, politicians often weaponize LGBTQI+ issues for political gain and this is especially the case in conservative and/or religious societies like Nigeria. On the issue of how politicians and state actors are likely to weaponize LGBTQI+ issues for political gain on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being highly likely, the average score by participants in the survey was a rating of 3.61.

Are you registered as member of any political party?

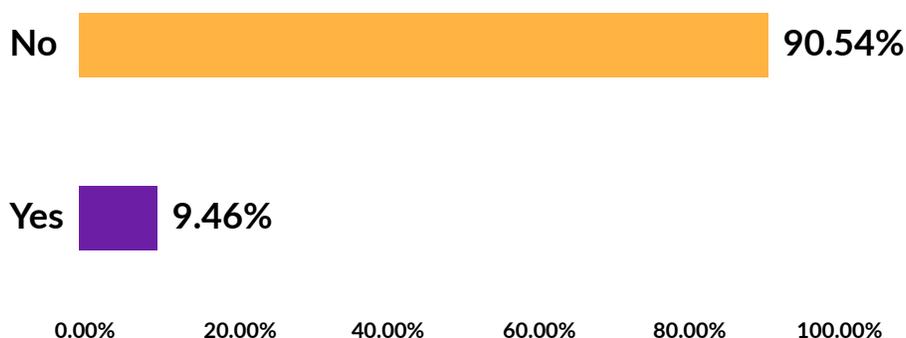


Figure 6a Illustrates participants knowledge and perception of LGBTQI+ support from politicians

Are there any political parties, state departments, or individual politicians you know of who are privately supporting the interests of LGBTQI+ populations?

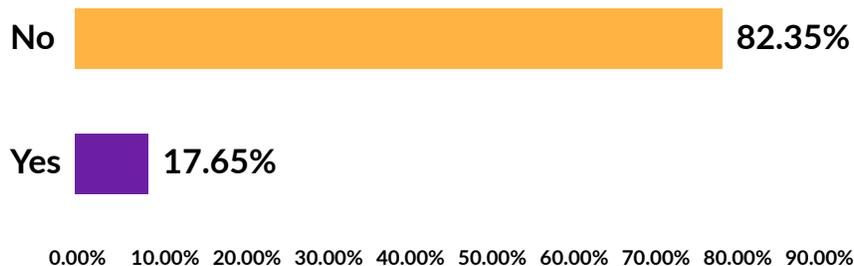


Figure 6b Illustrates participants knowledge and perception of LGBTQI+ support from politicians

56% of participants rated the likeliness of politicians weaponising LGBTQI+ issues at 4 and 5. This indicates that a lot of politicians use homophobia to incite the masses in order to get votes. With Nigeria being a conservative state, politicians know that by weaponizing LGBTQI+ issues they stand to gain a lot politically. This is at the expense of the minority community who consequently face backlash from the general public.

Participants of the survey and interviews conducted were asked "To what extent do you believe living openly as LGBTQI+ would prevent you from securing a job in the state-run public sector?" This question was on a scale of 1 to 3, with 3 being that the participants believed they would be extremely prevented from securing a job in the public sector if they openly lived as LGBTQI+

The average score of this question was a rating of 2.59.

The overwhelming majority of respondents stated it would be almost impossible for them to secure a state-run public sector job living publicly as LGBTQI+ person in Nigeria.

Based on the aforementioned questions, it is clear that there is a high level of political consciousness and a desire to be recognized and included among LGBTQI+ persons in Nigeria. As Nigeria looks into the future, with more inclusivity, there is potential for increased political engagement, international support and prospects for legal and social reforms that ensure sexual and gender minorities in the country are not forgotten or left behind in political conversations and spaces.

4.2 Key Findings II: Political Participation by LGBTQI+ Persons in Nigeria.

4.2.1 Introduction

Despite the hostile environment, LGBTQI+ individuals and organizations continue to advocate for their rights, striving to create spaces for political expression and engagement. Their experiences highlight both the barriers to political participation and the potential for transformative change through advocacy and activism.

Through this research, ReportOUT and CHEVS explored the political participation of LGBTQI+ persons in Nigeria by examining the intersection of legal, societal, and personal factors that influence their engagement. By analyzing the current political climate, societal attitudes, and the perspectives of LGBTQI+ individuals, ReportOUT and CHEVS aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in promoting LGBTQI+ inclusion within Nigeria's political sphere.

LGBTQI+ persons globally still face significant bias and barriers against their attempts to participate in the democratic processes in their counties and communities.

Our findings suggest that queer Nigerians are cynical about the change that they are able to affect through their country's democratic processes. Yet interestingly, much of this disillusionment is not specific to being LGBTQI+.

Instead, it hints of a frustration likely felt by the majority of the population who perceive fundamental flaws in Nigeria's political system.

Equally, however, this fact does not detract from the additional challenges and issues faced by Nigeria's LGBTQI+ community when engaging in democratic processes. This includes being excluded or humiliated while attempting to vote at polling stations due to having perceived or presumed queer identity. Others opt not to exercise their right to vote at all, due to a sense of disenfranchisement, given that LGBTQI+ identities are criminalised in Nigeria. With no elected politicians willing or able to defend the rights of queer people, many within the community question in voting at all.

4.2.2 Summary of Interview Findings

The desire and interests of queer persons to participate in democratic processes in Nigeria have been quite challenging, with certain sub-groups within the LGBTQI+ community experiencing challenges more than others. To better understand the experiences, we further divide this unit into sub-themes "Social Conformity, and Intersectionality".

Social Conformity

The most frequently identified driver of violence and discrimination faced by LGBTQI+ persons in political processes, as revealed by our interviews, is the perceived deviation from societal expectations and norms. The physical presentation of queer individuals, particularly masculine-presenting females and feminine-presenting males, as well as many trans Nigerians, significantly impacts their experiences during democratic and political activities in Nigeria.



"He said they should stop, they should keep a hold on my registration and I was kept aside. They had registered more than two persons that were behind me and I was still there so, I got angry and reacted like, why am I here?...the man [electoral official] now said because I don't even know who I am, that why will I say I'm a woman when I'm looking like a man and dressed like a man that I should stay there, when they are done with people who know who they are, they will answer me..."

One interviewee, a transman who during their voter's registration identified as a cis-woman recounted his ordeal: Similarly, an intersex person shared the challenges faced due to the gender mismatch between his current gender identification and the gender on his official documents, including his National Identification Number and voter's card:

He mentioned that he had to go to numerous government offices where he often had to explain that he is intersex, and that's the reason for the gender mismatch and the female name on his documents. It was often unpleasant when his name (a typical female name) was called in large waiting rooms and he had to stand up and say it's me, and that he often had to explain what it is to be intersex to officials, which wasn't always a pleasant experience.



A second intersex interviewee described being ostracised from a local government community youth group he belonged to when he presented as a woman. After his transition, he was excluded from decision-making processes:

“I asked why are you guys making decisions behind me, I have been part of this group since the beginning, then someone said, we did not want to involve you, then a woman said, you that we do not know whether you are a man or a woman, you just turn to man all of a sudden.”

The experiences shared by participants mirror those of queer individuals who attempted to join the 2020 #EndSARS protests to highlight the unique ways in which LGBTQI+ persons experience police brutality. As noted in our Literature Review section, it has been well documented that queer individuals faced exclusion and hostility during these protests, often being accused of trying to hijack the movement. One interviewee recounted her experience of participating in the protests and how she and her group were denied their democratic rights by other citizens:

“...when they were doing this protest [...] Lekki massacre (#EndSARS). *The Lekki Massacre occurred on the 20th October 2020, when the Nigerian army opened fire on #EndSARS protesters, killing at least 12 in the process. In [name of state withheld], [...] the first day they did it, the second day, I came out, and [...] knowing that I know a lot of queer people in [location withheld], I created a WhatsApp group and said, we should also go out. Now when we were out, somebody said ‘these people wey look like men, no be una, this one, this particular protest no be una own. Make una no come hijack am think say we dey’... we face discrimination.. Like, the whole community but there are people that it’s really really affecting them more.”*

By simply not conforming to society’s gender norms, other protestors felt they were entitled to exclude the respondent and her queer friends from exercising their democratic right to protest and their fundamental right to assembly. This is despite SARS having a disproportionate impact on members of the LGBTQI+ community, as the interviewee mentions in her final comment above.

As noted, these challenges, as revealed from the interviews, are predominantly experienced by individuals who do not conform to societal expectations of traditional gender roles of “man” and “woman.” This can be a particular concern for Nigeria’s trans community. As one respondent noted:

“When it comes to discrimination, I think in the LGBTQ community, there are people that can pass and there are people that can’t pass. For instance, trans people cannot pass, the masculine-presenting people, it is difficult for them to pass. As a lesbian person, you can just pass your way, nobody will look at you.”

Another interviewee corroborated this point, discussing ‘down-low’ (i.e. not out publicly) queer persons who hold elected offices:

“[...] He mentioned that he knows of some politicians who he has direct access to who are queer but down-low and they pass in society. He mentioned that he once challenged one of them when he made a homophobic tweet, which he later took down for fear of being outed.”

These insights highlight the differential impact of societal perceptions on the political engagement of LGBTQI+ individuals, emphasizing how conformity to gender norms can mitigate or exacerbate discrimination and violence in the political arena.

Intersectionality

The interviews revealed that intersectionality significantly impacts the political experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals in Nigeria. Participants noted that their gender and sexual identity intersected with other social factors in shaping their unique experiences. Factors such as being female in a patriarchal society or living with a disability in a world overwhelmingly designed for able bodied citizens. For instance, one participant highlighted the additional safety precautions he must take due to his disability, emphasizing the need for extra measures to protect himself in political and social environments. He also pointed out the inadequacy of infrastructure used for electoral processes, noting that many facilities are not inclusive for people with disabilities:

4.2.3 Review of Survey Findings:

What Barriers Do Queer People Face When Participating in the Democratic Process?”

Participants of the survey were asked “What barriers, if any, do you face as a queer person in participating in the democratic process?”



“I went to vote, [but] where they kept the machine was upstairs and now, I’m a person that uses crutches... Nigeria system, we know it’s not inclusive, even the public facilities are not, majority of them are not inclusive... Being a person with a disability, already, you are being discriminated against, then, you now say you are a queer person with a disability...”

While cis-heterosexual persons with disabilities may also experience this challenge, it is crucial to consider how being disabled and queer further exacerbates these difficulties in participating in political processes in Nigeria.

Additionally, female participants noted the compounded difficulties they face in accessing political spaces due to societal gender biases:

“...it is very difficult for community members to have this access because we are also women and women are not considered equal in the society too...”

Comparing general challenges through the lenses of queer individuals, interviews revealed that some people with voter cards could not vote because they had relocated from their place of registration, which serves as their polling unit. The frequent movement and migration of LGBTQI+ individuals to escape discrimination complicate

their participation in elections, as changing polling units can expose them to further discrimination

Stigma and Discrimination:

This was an open-ended question for the participants, yet respondents consistently referred to overlapping concerns. Not least among them being stigma and discrimination, which many participants noted as the most significant barriers to political participation for LGBTQ+ individuals:



“Segregation and discrimination.”

“There are quite a lot [of barriers] but I will streamline them to three. 1. Discrimination and prejudice 2. Legal barriers: Laws criminalizing same-sex relationships 3. Social exclusion”

“Stigma and discrimination as well as verbal and physical abuse”

“Fear of Discrimination and violence”

Legal and Institutional Barriers:

Other respondents highlighted legal and institutional challenges, such as anti-LGBTQI+ laws or lack of legal protections, as key obstacles:



“Once people know you are Queer they won’t vote for you, the opposition will make that the only thing in their manifesto and still win. Even Queer people will not want to be associated with you openly for fear of outing themselves. Another major barrier is funding. Money makes the world go round and here queer folks face a lot of poverty.”

“I don’t think your ambition will see the light of day”

Safety Concerns:

Safety, including fears of violence or harassment, was also likely mentioned as a significant barrier to political participation, and how their identity as a queer person could be weaponised against them at a later date:



“Can’t be queer and participate. Everyone will fixate on the queerness and the day someone doesn’t like a decision or position I’ve taken they will call my queerness to everyone’s attention and instigate hate”

No Barriers to Participating in Democratic Processes?

Interestingly, 15% of participants in the survey stated that they did not face any barriers in participating in the democratic process as LGBTQI+ citizens. These respondents also indicated that the reason they could participate in the democratic process freely was because their sexuality and gender identity was hidden.

It is clear that gender identity and sexual orientation is still a pervasive issue for many in Nigeria, yet those who had the opportunity to hide their queer identities did so at least in part, so as to secure their right to partake in democratic processes:

“None at the moment because I am straight passing and not necessarily out.”

“I’ve never faced any, I don’t publicly identify as a queer person.”

“You just have to keep your identity closed”

“Usually I suppress my personality and disguise. So I haven’t faced those restrictions”.

Obtaining a voter’s card is among the first steps one takes in Nigeria to be able to participate politically.

82% of the survey respondents stated that they held a voter’s card

70% had voted in an election, meanwhile

18% of the respondents stated they did not have a voter’s card. The respondents who did not have voter’s card shared various reasons for this ranging between everyday practical issues, through to frustration and apathy as outlined in our section on Political Consciousness:

“Couldn’t make it to my local government to acquire it the last election year”

“Because democracy doesn’t work in Nigeria, [the] voter’s card is just another identification card.”

“It was too difficult for me to get a voter’s card during the registration period.”

“I hate politics”

*“I don’t have interest because everything is f*** up in this country”*

In What Ways Do Queer Nigerians Engage in Democratic Processes?

Participants were also asked what democratic engagements they have been involved in.

The majority of participants selected 'registering to vote' (59%) and 'going out to vote' (55%) as the main forms of democratic engagement they have ever performed.

A significant number of participants (26%) stated that they had participated in political campaigns for a leader of their choice.

A significant minority of participants (15%) stated they have never had any democratic engagements. Some of the reasons given by these participants again included apathy, lack of interest, corruption in the democratic process and lack of political inclusion.

On whether their decision to vote in an election was influenced by their belonging to the LGBTQI+ community, the responses were quite evenly split between yes (45%) and no (55%).

Notably, participants appeared to show a wariness for Nigeria's democratic process, whether it was due to being queer or not. For instance, of those who said their LGBTQI+ identity did not influence their voting pattern, many still cited a lack of interest in voting owing to a belief that their vote simply wouldn't affect change:



"It's pointless, the government already knows who they want to control the country'.

"I felt is a waste of time and my vote"

Further research would note if this position also holds true for cisgender / hetero Nigerian's citizens also.

One participant noted a risk of violence around election time, while another captured the notion of apathy which many participants appeared to share relating to Nigeria's democratic processes:

"No need to vote for people who don't protect my own rights"

"The fear of violence"

"Because my vote won't count..."

Due to suppression of the political rights of LGBTQI+ persons in Nigeria and lack of inclusivity across society, it seems queer Nigerians have been limited in their political participation.

Are LGBTQI+ Nigerians Excluded from Political Activities due to H/B/T+ Phobia?

Participants were asked “Do you think there are political activities you cannot engage in as a result of discrimination due to your sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics?”

This was an open question, and participants were free to respond as they wish, based on their own lived experiences.

The activity that the majority of the participants stated they could not engage in as a queer person was running for public office:



“I could not safely run for office at any level if people knew my sexual orientation.”

“There is no political activity one can run as an LGBTQ person”

Another common answer among participants was participating in advocacy groups. A participant stated;

“Yes, there are. Activities such as advocacy groups: Discrimination may limit my ability to join or participate in advocacy groups focused on LGBTQI+ rights.”

The responses by the participants indicate that most LGBTQI+ persons believe there would be significant challenges for openly LGBTQI+ individuals to pursue political activities publicly, including both running for office and advocating publicly for improved rights for LGBTQI+ Nigerians.

Due to the conservative political and societal environment in Nigeria, it is difficult or even impossible for LGBTQI+ individuals to hold political office openly. A majority of the participants (72%) stated they did not know any queer person who held a political position. 22% of participants reported knowing an LGBTQI+ person in a political office. However, many of these individuals noted that the officeholder kept their sexuality private, as being open about it could pose challenges to their career. It is essential to recognize that perceptions about their sexual orientation may often be based on rumors circulated by political opponents aiming to discredit them rather than on confirmed knowledge of these individuals' identities.

This lack of representation within politics is likely to dissuade other queer Nigerians from attempting to run for office themselves. This is lamentable as the battle to win rights for LGBTQI+ Nigerians would undoubtedly be smoother with supportive, queer members of parliament in positions of power and visible role models for younger LGBTQI+ Nigerians. However, the current climate of hostility towards LGBTQI+ people suggests that it would not be safe for queer citizens to attempt running for such roles at this time.

How Many Queer Nigerians are Registered with a Political Party?

91% of participants indicated they were not registered to a political party in Nigeria, and only 8% were registered members of a political party. The responses by the participants indicate a strong alignment between personal identity and political support.

What Political Processes, if Any, Has Nigeria's LGBTQI+ Community Engaged In?

Over half of respondents (56%) stated that they have never engaged in any political processes. A little less than half of participants (43%) stated they have participated in political activities and events. The most common political activity the participants participated in was voting. Other activities included attending campaigns and rallies.

Participants who participated in a political event all had different experiences in these events, ranging from the highly enthusiastic to the disconcerted.



"It was exhilarating, I really came out because I had faith in the fact that we could effect change and have a better government. But sadly, nothing we did worked."

"It was tense and filled with anxiety"

"Fun. Felt like a citizen"

"Just normal, but then I was totally careful not to be identified as a gay person"

"It was a risky venture as people are scared for their lives"

"It was not very fair"

Other forms of political or democratic processes that respondents have been a part of include school leadership and social media advocacy. The majority of the participants had not participated in any other democratic processes other than voting in general elections.

Contesting for a political seat/position is a form of political participation in a democracy. 95% of the participants have never contested for a political position in Nigeria. Almost a quarter of participants (24%) stated that being part of the LGBTQI+ community influenced their decision not to contest a political position. The responses by the participants in the survey highlight a general skepticism about political support for LGBTQ+ rights.



“Yes, the country does not accept political participation of LGBTQI persons”

“Yes, I cannot freely show up in these spaces with my same sex partner for obvious reasons”

Interestingly, over 75% of participants in the survey stated that their membership in the LGBTQI+ community was not the reason they never contested a political position. Instead, their reasons again included a distrust of the Nigerian political process more generally.

To What Extent Has H/B/T+ Phobia and Discrimination Impacted Queer Nigerians' Engagement in Political Processes?

The systemic challenges faced by LGBTQI+ individuals in engaging with political processes in conservative and religious societies is the risk of being discriminated against or harassed when they are exercising their democratic rights.

Participants in the survey were asked; “Have you experienced discrimination or harassment based on your sexual orientation or gender identity when engaging in political activities?”

A large majority (78%) stated they had never faced any discrimination or harassment when engaging in political rallies, suggesting that discrimination or exclusion is not a universal experience, though it remains a significant issue in the LGBTQI+ community. It should of course be remembered that this 78% of individuals who safely attended rallies, are in fact a subset of the 43% of LGBTQI+ Nigerians who stated they had engaged in some form of democratic process. Within this group, the most common form of political participation was voting, followed by those attending rallies. In short, this 78% of rally attendees is a deceptively large figure, given that the overall number of individuals it represents is likely to be quite marginal. Moreover, those that feel confident that they have the ability to ‘pass’ as cis/straight are arguably more likely to attend rallies, knowing that the risk of harassment and discrimination is significantly reduced.

The participants further explained that a key factor for this lack of discrimination or harassment was not tolerance but rather because they were not open about their sexual or gender identity while engaging in political activities:

A smaller, yet not insignificant number of participants (22%) affirmed that they had been discriminated against and harassed due to their sexual orientation or gender identity when engaging in political participation.

What measures do you think could enhance the participation of LGBTQI+ individuals in the democratic process?

Finally, with regard to political participation, the respondents were asked what measures they thought could enhance the participation of LGBTQI+ individuals in the democratic process in Nigeria. The respondents gave vibrant, different, and compelling suggestions. The majority of the participants

stated that inclusive laws would make a significant difference. This was followed by decriminalisation of LGBTQI+ relations and enactment of laws to protect LGBTQI+ persons from discrimination and harassment.



“I believe when there is a leader who is perceived to have our interest at heart, LGBTQI+ individuals will go to any length to participate in the process of seeing them on site”

“Laws that protect LGBTQI+ persons”

“Community engagement: Engage with LGBTQI+ communities through town halls, forums, and other events. Political leadership support: Encourage political leaders to publicly support LGBTQI+ rights and issues. Education and awareness: Educate political leaders, officials, and the public about LGBTQI+ issues and concerns”.

“Decriminalization of laws that restrict LGBTQI+ persons from expressing our fundamental human rights freely without fear of stigma and prosecution”.

“The government should lift the ban on LGBTQ first before anything:”

“I sincerely don’t have answers”

These findings provide a comprehensive look into the challenges and perceptions of LGBTQ+ individuals regarding political participation in Nigeria. They highlight the need for increased advocacy, legal reforms, and social acceptance to enable queer Nigerians to have greater participation in political life.

4.3 KEY FINDINGS III: STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

4.3.1 Introduction

When analysing the stigmatisation and discrimination faced by sexual and gender minorities in Nigeria, it is important to identify from the outset the religious, ethnic, social, and cultural diversity that shapes the complexity of society and the distinctions between the north and south of the country. The complexity of the situation has led to various forms of violence, hatred, and stigma directed at queer Nigerians, which can be seen at different levels of vulnerability and exposure to

danger throughout the country. Additionally, the cultural and social differences between the northern and southern regions have resulted in the federal republic's distinct judicial and political systems. It is important to note that most of our respondents were from the southern region. These factors, compounded by the unique experiences of stigma and discrimination are likely to impact queer Nigerians' capacity to engage in democratic processes.

In the 12 states that make up the immense northern region of the country, where Sunni Islam is practised as the main religion, the Sharia Penal Code has been established as civil and criminal law since 1999. This code criminalises homosexuality and imposes the death penalty for such acts. Although not all Sunni practitioners in Nigeria belong to the Hausa ethnic group, they constitute the vast majority of the country's Islamic population. 22% of the respondents of the survey stated that they have lived in a state where the death penalty is in effect.

The Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups are located in the southern part of the country, in the coastal region. Their dynamics of stigmatisation and discrimination are shaped by a different process, which is linked to the formalization of the British colony in Nigeria. This included the imposition of the penal code which Britain had already foisted upon India. Specifically, Section 377 directly criminalised homosexuality.

Section 377 remains part of the current penal code of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This results in judicial institutions, the police, and the military acting by these laws as instruments of the state which directly seek to repress the rights of LGBTQI+ citizens.

Southern states are also overwhelmingly Christian, with a wide variety of denominations but most notably, Catholicism and Anglicanism. Like Islam in the north, Christian teachings across southern Nigeria are largely hostile to LGBTQI+ identities and rights. This therefore feeds into wider society, generating a culture of exclusion, stigmatisation, discrimination, and persecution towards sexual and gender minorities.

The violence and vulnerability faced by Nigeria's LGBTQI+ population in both the southern and northern parts of the country can therefore be considered distinct. Though extreme hostility towards queer people persists in both areas. Discrimination occurs both online and offline, with more severe impacts on visibly queer individuals. Misinterpretation of laws further exacerbates these issues, leading to widespread hostility and exclusion in political contexts.

This section explores what this overt discrimination and danger means in practice for Nigeria's queer communities. Many of our findings do not directly relate to democratic participation. This may at first seem counterintuitive, yet there is logic to this. Without laying bare the extreme stigma and persecution faced by queer Nigerians, it is not possible to fully grasp the strong trend of political apathy and disillusionment which runs through the other sections of this report, and which informs the extent to which LGBTQI+ people do – or rather, do not – engage in democratic processes within the country.

More importantly, with the death penalty for queer people active across much of the north, and Section 377 outlawing homosexuality across the entire nation, there is no safe way, nor even the possibility, for LGBTQI+ citizens to engage in Nigerian democracy without compromising such fundamental rights as freedom of expression and the right to association. This political exclusion helps maintain the status quo, as queer people are largely shut out of the democratic processes which may ultimately enable them to affect change in all other aspects of life.

In short, there is no more salient example of discrimination than the disenfranchisement of queer citizens from the democratic process.

4.3.2 Summary of Interview Findings

Interviewees identified the SSMPA law, religion, cultural beliefs, and individual perceptions of queer persons, as factors that impact the discrimination of LGBTQI+ individuals, which makes it difficult for openly queer persons to be able to participate in key political and democratic processes like running for office and publicly associating closely with someone who is running for office. Importantly, the interviews highlighted that these laws are also misinterpreted in society. It was also highlighted that discrimination was both online and offline and some community members are more discriminated against than others. The following are excerpts from participants' comments:

...before this SSMPA law, I think people were scared of hurting or discriminating, openly discriminating against the queer community... but currently, with the law, someone can just tell you "after all, our law dey



against you". Do you understand? They believe they have a stand, they believe that there's something that they can use against you. Now, with that SSMPA law, the penal code law and the rest of it, if you come out [for elections], and they know you are queer, they will just read it out for you and tell you, you cannot rule us, we are against what you do so, that is a huge rule of discrimination, openly discriminating the queer community...

...yes, so, online, yes. Because, myself and some group of friend, we were actually trying to include advocacy for queer rights and all of those things in the last election... then, the people felt our concerns were not valid and that this is not even what we should be pushing for that we were looking to corrupt the society... and they were like, maybe God punish any government that was even going to attend to that or even listen to that kind of advocacy, that there's no space for queer persons here in Nigeria and if they want to include their own rights and all of those things in any administration, they should rather get off the country... so sad that even after the online experience, some persons on the street were still perpetrating violence against my friend, because he is very vocal on Twitter so, he wrote so many pieces about advocacy for queer rights and inclusion so, it was really crazy that on the street, they will point at him and be like that's the gay boy, they throw pure water at him... Both online, it was horrible because people kept tweeting like no, this will not happen in Nigeria...

...unfortunately, people have misinterpreted the provisions of the law for so long... the SSMPA for example, what my 80+ grandmother knows about it is that ah! Government said they should be killing gay people, right? Some persons will say "Oh! Once you identify as gay, we just need to arrest you..." so [...] purely the misinterpretation of these laws are ruining the advocacy effort...

...it's just individual perceptions of a queer persons. So, when they see a man on the street who is feminine presenting, who have not even spoken to them that he is gay or nothing, the typical



idea they have of him is that this one wants to burst your nyash [bottom]... they feel that a feminine presenting or an average gay man on the streets of Nigeria just wants to sleep with anybody that they see around so, that's what they think about queer people, and this makes them aggressive towards these group of people...

I think the gay men, especially the effeminate ones, they will surely like, definitely experience the hate... then, the lesbians, the masculine ones like us... and also the transgender men, the transmen. Those are the three categories I know will experience it more... say I'm an effeminate gay man and I want to contest in my village for counsellorship, nobody will even listen to me, nobody will want me, they will be like, what is this? The whole disgust and everything will be with them, but a gay man who is masculine presenting can always cover up everything and nobody will know...

According to activists who participated in the interview phase, stigma and discrimination occur in various institutional settings. It is common for individuals to be invalidated during a democratic process because their appearance does not match the gender listed on their identification documents, as well as when they seek services from a public institution. This contrasts with the survey results, where 11% of respondents reported experiencing an act of discrimination by a public official. Yet as noted earlier, this disparity in interview and research findings could be based on a number of factors, including the fact that many LGBTQI+ people who feel they are at risk of being discriminated against by public officials would simply choose not to go to polling stations (or engage in other democratic institutions) in the first instance. This would therefore reduce the number of respondents who experienced such discrimination firsthand.

4.3.3 Review of Survey Findings

What is the Most Pressing Challenge Faced by Sexual and Gender Minorities in Nigeria?

When asked What is the most pressing challenges faced by sexual and gender minorities in Nigeria? This was an open question to participants. The largest factor given by some margin, was discrimination, with over half of respondent (57%) stating this was the greatest challenge queer people faced in the country. This discrimination was articulated in a variety of ways:

Harassment, discrimination and physical violence.

Honestly the harassment and abuse from everyone in their life and around them

General discrimination and casual violence

Prejudice in finding jobs Physical harassment Discrimination that leads to homelessness Blackmail from government officers (police) and non-government officials Restricted access to healthcare Social attitudes causing homelessness and giving room for crime, victimization and violence against queer people. Coupled with laws that seem to justify members of the public taking up the law in their

own hands through mob attacks, forced evictions, extortion and so on

The most pressing challenge is the prevailing social bias against LGBTIQ people fueled by religious fundamentalism and political homophobia. This lays the foundation for laws like the SSMPA and Sharia laws criminalizing homosexuality with the death penalty.

Getting lynched on by strangers for just looking like a Queer person

Harassment

While Harassment was also reported, though interestingly, less frequently by government workers, lawyers, civil defence, and social services. This fact may hint at the notion that there is also class discrimination at play here, where queer people in higher status jobs are less vulnerable to H/B/T+ phobia at the hands of the state than their queer counterparts in lower income and/or less privileged lines of work.

How Confident Do Queer Nigerians Feel About Being 'Out' Publicly?

Discrimination and stigmatization can also be measured by individuals' perceptions of the acceptance of their identity in their environment. When respondents were asked who knows about your LGBTIQ+ identity, 79.5% noted their close friends, and 52% reported that their partners knew their full identities, 35% said their family members are aware, 31% indicated that their doctor or healthcare worker knows. To a lesser extent, respondents mentioned that their employers (21%), work university or colleagues (20%), and customers/clients (14%), neighbours (14%), and religious communities (6%) were aware of their sexual and gender identities.

It is understandable that a significant majority of respondents were out to their friends, given that queer people are likely to socialise and befriend other people in the LGBTIQ+ community. This therefore speaks less of people's confidence in being publicly out in Nigeria. The figure of 52% of people who are out to their partners is also slightly misconceiving. It could infer that some trans, non-binary, or bi people who are in relationships with cis or hetero partners respectively, have chosen to disclose their full identities to their partners, but equally it could also indicate that a little over half of participants were in intimate relationships at the time of being surveyed and who were therefore out with their partners. Deeper research would be required to give full explanation to this statistic therefore.

Arguably the most pertinent figures here are the low percentages queer Nigerians have stated for being out within wider society, such as employers, neighbours and religious communities. The need to hide sexual and gender identities speaks to the underlying threat of stigma and discrimination that queer Nigerians accept as ever-present in their daily lives.

How Secure are Queer Nigerians in Expressing their Sexual and Gender Identities?

When asked about their sense of security in expressing their sexual or gender identity in daily life, more than half of respondents reported feeling relatively insecure in expressing their identities, with an average score of 4.20 out of 10 (1 being completely insecure and 10 being completely secure). Again, these figures allude to the fear of negative reprisals for anyone identifying as LGBTQI+ who might dare to challenge Nigeria's strong cis-heteronormative social structures. Unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents (56%) said they felt they had to hide their sexual or gender identity from their local community.

Discrimination in the Form of Enforced Cis-heteronormativity

When asked 'Have you ever been forced to have a relationship with someone of the opposite sex, or to have a gender-conforming relationship?', a substantial minority (21%) explained that they had. This coercive behaviour was most commonly instigated by the respondent's families. This pressure to conform to sexual and gender norms can often be attributed to families seeking to avoid the stigma and shame that queerness brings upon a household in Nigerian society. However, as the answers allude to, there are others in society, whether ex-partners or even strangers which demand and impose sexual and gender conformity motivated by a deep resentment of LGBTQI+ identities, as some of the respondents' later comments allude to.



**Trigger Warning: The final commentator in this section shares a highly traumatic experience.*

"My parents are always pestering me to have a girlfriend that will lead to marriage or they will go out there and get me a wife whether I want it or not!"

"I was supposed to get married to this guy to prove to my family that I'm not into women, it was horrible but I'm glad I pulled through"

"I was forced to sleep with a girl"

"An ex boyfriend, he believed I was confused and decided I must make up my mind on what gender was best for me. Obviously he wanted me to stick with just men"

"I have been gang raped because of my sexuality, raped by five different men"

Theft, Blackmail and Extortion

In the survey, a space was provided for individuals to share their experiences in a paragraph. Many of the accounts below are highly sensitive. A large number of respondents shared their experiences of theft, blackmail and extortion:



“My childhood friend found out I was gay through my ex and subsequently blackmailed me”

“It was through word of mouth! They were saying I don’t have a girlfriend and they wish to see my girlfriend else they will [start] the rumor”

“I was blackmailed by someone who I actually thought was queer because I refused paying him a visit”

“My ex-husband who is a ‘renewed’ gay man outed me to my family members and that led to our separation.”

“I have experience bullying online and offline because of my sexual orientation”

“A guy shared our chat to my community and his dad who brought police to arrest me”

“Met the dude online and we started vibing. Invited me over to his house for sex and stuff, next thing a bunch of people are coming out of corners to beat me. I narrowly escaped but he reported me to my parents and neighbors, threatened to report me to the police too if I didn’t give him money”

“When I got admission newly some group of boys force themselves into my phone and see gay porn videos and they beat the hell out of me and collected [stole] my phone”

“There was this boy at my street when I was growing up so that was the day he took my phone and When I asked for my phone back, he refuses giving it to me threatening that if I did tell anybody that he took my phone that was going to expose me that I was gay and I have been hitting on him for a while ”

“Well, long time ago, went to meet a someone I met online after we agreed to meet, only for me to get there and be surprised by boys who beat me up mercilessly, took my phones and money.”

“A guy that got close to my family with intentions of marrying me got to know that I’m queer, he didn’t openly threaten me but I got the message he was passing across”

“Some homophobic outed me to my parents, it’s been hell, they withdrew every form of support...been struggling for long”

The ever-present threat of being publicly outed makes LGBTQI+ Nigerians an easy target for theft, blackmail and extortion. Despite the huge financial, emotional and at times physical harm done by such acts, the hardships caused by the loss of items such as phones, or cash, are often considered the lesser of two evils when the alternative is to risk even greater harm once outed

The Weaponisation of LGBTQI+ Issues in Nigerian Politics

The stigmatisation and discrimination of LGBTQI+ populations have a significant impact on the creation of political capital in Nigeria. Despite the presence of activism in the southern part of the country, in the north, association, visibility, and the possibility of a political assembly remains highly risky, especially in regions where Sharia law is enforced. The institutionalisation of these exclusionary practices is reflected in the survey, where 82% of respondents reported being unaware of any policies from political parties, state departments, or individual politicians that support or promote LGBTQI+ rights.

In contrast, respondents generally agreed that politicians often weaponise LGBTQI+ rights to gain political support and voters. This demonstrates that the stigmatization of the LGBTQI+ population is not only ignored by political authorities but is also used as part of their political and electoral messaging strategies.

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All these factors make Nigeria a hostile environment for sexual and gender minorities and legitimise violence against the community. These findings express serious concern over the escalating persecution, discrimination, and violence against LGBTQI+ individuals across Nigeria.

4.4 KEY FINDING IV: SAFETY AND SECURITY

4.4.1 Introduction

Given that most of the safety and security concerns faced by the Nigerian LGBTQI+ community can be considered the result of discrimination, the distinction between this section and the preceding chapter, specifically focused on 'Stigma and Discrimination', is in some respects arbitrary.

Yet there are some important differences which warrant this report having two separate sections. For one thing, discrimination comes in a variety of forms. This includes direct forms of discrimination, such as verbal abuse, harassment, or refusing to serve a customer due to their sexual or gender orientation. Examples of indirect discrimination might include the ways in which sexual health provision excludes the needs of queer people (intentionally or otherwise).

In turn, this chapter explores what happens when discrimination tips across to cause safety concerns to queer Nigerians, by harming such individuals, either physically or emotionally. These risks to personal and psychological safety are exacerbated – if not the direct result of – the lack of security afforded to LGBTQI+ populations in Nigeria. The safeguarding rights of Nigeria's queer community are non-existent because, under Nigerian law, LGBTQI+ individuals are not recognised and therefore cannot be protected by the state. Yet, if the invisibilisation of LGBTQI+ identities leaves them vulnerable to safety and security risks, then the criminalisation of queer people makes them not only vulnerable, but an active target of the state itself.

Much of this section therefore looks at the ways in which the safety and security violations of queer Nigerians have been at the hands of state institutions, most notably, its police force. These risks drastically reduce the appetite of queer Nigerians who might be considering entering into politics. Not least given that violence is an everyday lived reality within Nigerian democracy. Attacks on democratic candidates and party supporters are a common occurrence, and security risks reach fever pitch around national and state elections. According to the organisation, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED):

Half of the violence involving party supporters in the 12 months before the 2023 election involves direct, organized attacks against civilians, followed by mob violence and abductions [...] Unarmed civilians were the target of violence in around 80% of the events recorded [...] Attacks against prospective candidates, party supporters, and local apparatchiks were a common occurrence during this period, including in areas where Nigeria's overlapping security crises exacerbate threats to the physical security of politicians. (ACLED, 2023).

This disconcerting summary of recent electoral violence happened in spite of the fact that 18 of Nigeria's political parties signed an accord agreeing to fight a peaceful political campaign (Ibid). It appears that even LGBTQI+ issues were largely spared weaponisation for political gain in this most recent election, unlike in 2014 when the proposal of the SSMPA was used to build political capital (Open Democracy, 2022). Regardless, the intersection of political H/B/T+ phobia, and democratic violence more broadly, creates an environment which is far too volatile for the vast majority of queer citizens to contemplate a life of active service within the world of Nigerian politics.

4.4.2 Summary of Interview Findings

The limited assurances of safety and security for queer individuals was identified as a significant barrier to their participation in political and democratic activities across the interviewee cohort. While political and democratic activities in Nigeria are generally unsafe and insecure for the broader population, these concerns are often amplified for queer individuals. Many must navigate the dual challenges of blending into society to avoid being identified as queer and ensuring their overall safety, as politics and violence in Nigeria are frequently intertwined, as noted above.

Interviewees shared various strategies they employ to keep themselves safe when engaging in democratic processes, such as elections. These included wearing clothing that conforms to societal norms, being vigilant about their surroundings, and avoiding events where their safety cannot be guaranteed. As participants explained:



[...] you know our security belong to us [...] knowing that I'm queer, I must protect myself first. So, when I go out, even aside political spaces, first thing, I check my environment. So [...] after that first time that I registered and voted, I've not participated again but when I went out there, I checked the environment... I always check to know if anything happens, where can I run to, where can I hid[e] myself till when the place is calm.



You just have to learn how to navigate, you know, learning your environment, and all of those things, right? So, you know that you have sensed a bit of homophobia in this kind of neighbourhood right, so, you just want to conform to what they think their ideal man should be... to avoid verbal assault and all of those things...

...I rarely attend events unless it's a queer event that I'm sure of [and] that my security is guaranteed. I don't even attend house parties...

Have you faced police brutality because of your LGBTQI+ identity?

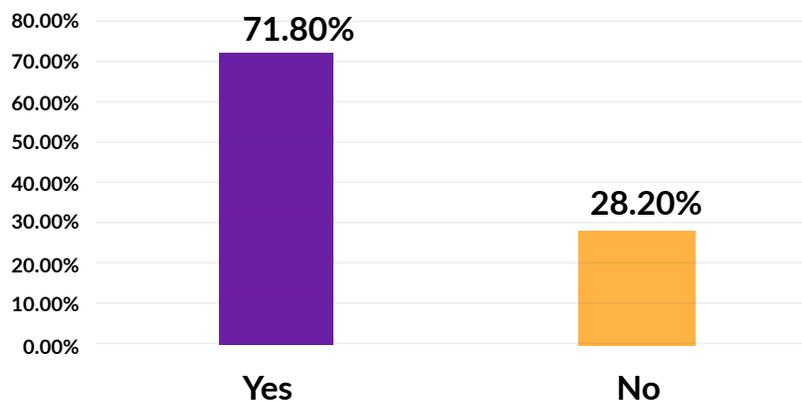


Figure 7 71.80% of participants have experienced police brutality as a result of their LGBTQI+ identity, while 28.20% participants said they haven't experienced police brutality.

What form did the police brutality take?

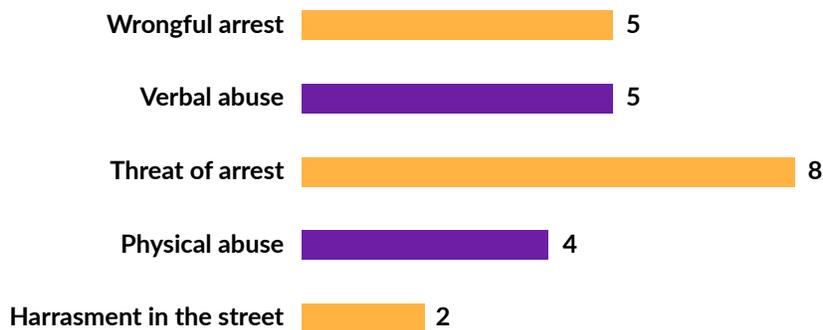


Figure 8 24 participants shared the form of police brutality they have encountered, threat of arrest was the most frequent form of brutality experience (8 participants), wrongful arrest and verbal abuse followed closely with 5 participants each identifying them as the form of police brutality they have been faced with. Also on the list are physical abuse and harassment in the street, which was experienced by 4 and 2 participants respectively.

4.4.3 Review of Survey Findings

State Brutality Against Queer Nigerians

Participants were asked to share their experiences of state brutality, if they felt comfortable doing so. Almost a third of respondents (28%) reported cases of police brutality and abuse against them, with common practices including threats of arrest, physical and verbal abuse, unjustified detention, and harassment in the streets. 13% of the individuals reported having experienced harassment from a government institution at some point, specifically by the armed forces and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) of Nigeria. Harassment by other state actors was also reported, though interestingly, less frequently by government workers, lawyers, civil defence, and social services. This fact may hint at the notion that there is also class discrimination at play here, where queer people in higher status jobs are less vulnerable to H/B/T+ phobia at the hands of the state than their queer counterparts in lower income and/or less privileged lines of work.

Formally Reporting Incidents of Attacks

21% of individuals who had reported being the victim of an attack went on to report the incident to authorities. However, only 7% of this cohort felt they received justice for the incident. We asked participants to share their experiences, if they were comfortable to do so:



"I faced intimate partner violence. Fight was so bad, and my properties were destroyed."

"I went to the Nigerian police. I told them a girl I lived with had a fight with me and destroyed my property. They asked me who she was to me, I said a friend, they asked me some questions and then said they will need some money to mobilize. I told them I was going to get the money, and I left. I didn't go back because I was afraid of what the outcome would be, if they found out we were intimate partners."

"I was sexually harassed at the police station when I went to negotiate bail for the arrest of some members of the MSM community."

"Unlawful searching of phones."

"I was harassed and threatened by my house owner and upon reporting to the authorities I was queried for dressing and looking masculine because that could possibly be the reason I was harassed."

"It was an attack by family, so it didn't escalate as it should, if it were to be from an external body."

"It happened on a day I was coming back from work so there was a police checkpoint and then they stopped my boss and asked everybody to come down, checking our box and then [saw]

some perfumes and body sprays, and lip balm. I had a lot of it in my bag, so they were asking if I was a girl or a boy, [and] that it seems I belong to the gay group. Then he threatened to arrest me if he is not taking to beat out the demon of gay in me. So, I was quiet because I couldn't do anything or see anything that could trigger them to hurt. I was scared, but [...] they let me go after verbally abusing me and calling me a girl. "

It is clear from the experiences shared by participants that reporting incidents of violence, harassment, or abuse of any kind to the authorities can exacerbate the problem at hand. Rather than receiving support or justice, queer individuals instead commonly find they become the target of police suspicion, at risk of arrest or police abuse themselves. This fact also played out in the next question asked to participants.

How Confident Are Queer Nigerians That They Would be Kept Physically and Psychologically Safe from Harm if Arrested for a Crime Relating to Their Sexual or Gender Identity?

Participants were asked: 'If arrested or convicted of a crime relating to your LGBTQI+ identity, how confident would you be of being kept physically and psychologically safe from harm (either by others in detention or by law enforcers?)'. 18% stated that they were 'extremely unconfident' that they would receive such protections, followed by a further 64% who stated that they were 'very unconfident'. Asked to explain their answers, respondents said:



"I know a lot of people who were detained and were physically and psychologically abused. In fact, the abuse starts from when you are arrested. You are stopped on the street like a thief. You are abused and violated."

"I know people who have been harmed and abused in prison."

"Nigeria is prominently high on self-imposed morals and the moral compass for judging LGBTQI persons are alarming, so I don't trust the system even with my network ."

"The SSMPA has further made state actors, especially [the] police force to continuously lay false accusations against LGBTQI persons and use such to prosecute them."

"The country frowns at the LGBTQI+ people, therefore any form of discrimination and torture would be unleashed on such individuals. So that's why I said I am not confident at all!"

"The hate is too much, and one can lose his life for just identifying as LGBTQ."

How Widespread are Physical Assaults Towards Sexual and Gender Minorities in Nigeria?

Participants were asked, in their personal opinions, how widespread physical assaults towards sexual and gender minorities by the general population were across the country. 64% of those asked stated physical assaults were 'very widespread', and a further 27% regarded such abuse as 'quite widespread'. In total therefore, 91% of respondents considered physical assaults a prevalent part of everyday life for Nigeria's queer citizens.

How Widespread are General Expressions of Hatred and Aversion Toward LGBTQI+ People in Nigeria?

Similarly to the above, we asked participants to share how widespread they felt general expressions of hatred toward queer people were from the wider Nigerian public. 45% of respondents regarded aversion to queer people as 'very widespread', while an additional 36% 'quite widespread'. 81% of people surveyed therefore regarded hatred towards Nigeria's LGBTQI+ population as pervasive across society.

How Safe Do Queer Nigerians Feel Walking Alone in Their Neighbourhoods?

Given the above findings, it is interesting to note that when asked how safe participants felt walking alone in their neighbourhoods, the largest percentage of respondents (36%) were neutral. Further complicating this picture were the three tying responses in joint second place, with those who felt that they were 'always unsafe', 'mostly safe', and 'always safe' receiving 18% of answers each.

Further research would be needed to ascertain why such a significant proportion of respondents (72%) felt either safe or neutral while walking alone in their areas. However, we can surmise from comments made by participants in virtually all sections of this report, including this one, that there is a strong need to conform to sexual and gender stereotypes.

Indeed, this question was put directly to participants, with 66% of respondents stating that they needed to hide their sexual and/or gender identity within wider society. This strategy may provide many queer citizens with a sense of safety while walking in their home districts. Other precautions may also be adopted by Nigeria's LGBTQI+ community, and which provide a sense of personal security. Again, however, additional research would be required to better understand the disparity between this survey finding and the preceding two.

To What Extent Do LGBTQI+ People in Nigeria Socialise Online Versus Real Life?

Respondents were asked to what extent they socialise with other LGBTQI+ individuals online, through social media or virtual platforms, compared to their level of socialising in real life. A substantial majority (71%) said that they have a mixed balance of socialising both on and offline. The second largest proportion of respondents (12%) noted that they mostly socialise online.

Regarding the same topic, 18% of participants said they felt 'much safer' on social media than in real life, 24% reported feeling 'safer', while most individuals answer unsure (39%). A substantial minority

(20%) said they felt 'less safe' or 'extremely unsafe' online versus real life.

These mixed results allude to several points for consideration. For many, social media and other platforms provide anonymity and a safe and liberating space for expressing one's sexual and/or gender identity without explicitly 'coming out' personally. However, social media can also be a breeding ground for hate speech and may thus cause significant psychological or emotional harm to those engaging with such platforms.

How Safe Do Queer Nigerians Feel While Attending LGBTQI+ Events?

The largest proportion of respondents (19%) stated that they did not feel safe at all when attending an LGBTQI+ event. 18% stated that they did not feel particularly safe or unsafe, while the third largest proportion of respondents (12%) felt very unsafe. Overall, 44% of participants felt unsafe attending queer events to some degree (excluding the 18% who were neutral). These findings are particularly of concern for those within the LGBTQI+ community seeking to organise themselves for democratic participation, whether through protest marches, or simply in holding political meetings.

How Safe Do Queer Nigerians Feel Meeting with Other LGBTQI+ Individuals?

Interestingly, and conversely to the findings above, the largest proportion of respondents (18%) felt extremely safe meeting with other LGBTQI+ individuals, followed by 15% of people who felt quite safe meeting others. Overall, 55% felt in some way safe meeting with queer counterparts. 14% felt neither safe nor unsafe, and 31% felt unsafe to some degree while meeting other LGBTQI+ people. The reasons for this could be varied. For instance, some may feel that meeting other LGBTQI+ people increases the likelihood of being presumed queer and therefore lead to the threat of attacks or arrest. For others, it may be the fear of blackmail or extortion from within the queer community itself (see relevant sections above).

These findings are particularly interesting as they suggest that strategies around personal safety, such as hiding one's sexual and/or gender identity, and exercising extreme caution, enable queer Nigerians to meet and socialise with peers without feeling at disproportionate risk of harm. However, further research would be required to explore other potential reasons for this. For instance, whether the demographics of the participant cohort may have skewed findings vis-a-vis the country's wider LGBTQI+ population. Individuals that are more highly educated, and/or working within professional industries, are also likely to be living in more affluent areas, which also afford greater security and privacy to residents.

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Regardless, it is telling that the majority of queer Nigerians feel safe to meet up privately, while almost half feel unsafe meeting at formal LGBTQI+ events. Exercising the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and the right to freedom of association are critical steps towards realising full democratic participation of any group. This is as true for LGBTQI+ populations as with any other group, and an area which queer Nigerian activists should reflect upon, in their pursuit of greater LGBTQI+ participation in the country's democratic processes.

4.5 KEY FINDING V: ACTIVISM AND INCLUSIVITY

4.5.1 Introduction

This section explores the role that activism plays in pressing for greater political engagement of queer people in Nigeria. It also considers how LGBTQI+ CSOs foster a sense of inclusivity, by providing queer people support systems and services which are most often provided by the state in countries accepting of LGBTQI+ populations.

Some of the findings frame the act of political participation as a form of activism in its own right. In this context, we see from a number of interview findings that opportunities for such activism are curtailed by the fear of being outed - for instance, during the standard eligibility assessment process undertaken by the state to run for some form of public office.

As explored in other sections of this report, the exceptional risks posed by being outed (ranging from social and familial ostracisation, incarceration, physical attacks, or even death) dramatically limit the number of queer people willing to pursue a vocation in politics. This maintains a vicious cycle; without queer representation in political spheres, there remains little opportunity to press for positive change. False myths, hysteria and unfounded disdain for queer identities thus continue to forment across society unchallenged. This in turn ensures that the risks posed to LGBTQI+ individuals wanting to enter into politics remains dangerously high, preventing the vast majority of queer Nigerians from even contemplating this prospect. This is despite most interviewees recognising the need and value of being represented within democratic processes.

An individual's sexual or gender identity may therefore play a pivotal role in dictating whether that person seeks a career in politics or not. However, as previously noted, other intersecting factors, such as ethnicity, sex, age and dis/ability, are likely to also converge and inform such decisions.

Given the challenges posed by using activism as a direct tool for democratic participation, we also explore LGBTQI+ activism at the grassroots level through our survey findings. It is important to note that almost 50% of all respondents regard themselves as LGBTQI+ activists. This activism is interrogated below, as it includes those working in professionalised LGBTQI+ CSO and NGO, through to individuals whose small gestures and actions help progress acceptance within families and/or communities.

Regardless of the form of activism implemented, it must be recognised that a significant number of respondents can be considered politicised, with a strong sense of civic duty. The cohort of participants may therefore not necessarily be reflective of most queer Nigerians, who may well be less engaged in democratic processes or civil society organising. Further research would be required to ascertain this distinction.

This caveat notwithstanding, our findings shine an important light on the challenges and perceptions held by those in Nigeria's queer community striving for greater LGBTQI+ inclusion through democratic processes and grassroots activism. Most notably, the intense need for increased inclusive support services, which, in other more LGBTQI+ tolerant nations, is often regarded as the responsibility of the state.

4.5.2 Summary of Interview Findings

Some participants expressed faint hope for the future inclusivity of LGBTQI+ individuals, citing the pervasive hostility of Nigerian society, particularly in light of prohibitive laws and society's religious-centered nature. When asked if they or other queer persons they know had any interest in running for political office, the majority responded negatively.



Ah! No, I don't, my dear. Not myself or anyone I know. Personally, I will say I have lost faith in Nigerian politics. On a personal level, I don't know about any other person. I actually don't have interest anymore on anything politics in Nigeria... especially because of the discriminatory laws, and so many other unfavourable things to queer people...

... not actively. What I usually do is to lend my voice from afar but not actively. That was the thing of my younger self or my unaware self, because for some reasons, I've always been self-sabotaging, thinking that there's no space for queer persons here so, I would rather not bother [...] because the kind of people you will be gathering with for meetings or even local government mobilisation, you will just feel 'I don't belong here, no matter how I have tried'. I think that my opinions will not be valid to these people... because people are always talking about how they want the government to better improve, which is a general concern but personally, I have individual concerns that I feel that they might not push the agenda for me when it's time for voting and all of those things...

Another reason why I didn't consider it is that I noticed that if you are running for any election [Like] counsellor... there will be a point of collating [...] my data, and then they will need my WAEC [West African Examinations Council certificate]. On my WAEC, it is Esther that is on it, and the gender is female, and I know that all of this might stand as a, you know, a form of disqualification later on. Because I have heard stories of governors that said that okay, they went to go and dig deep into their WAEC or NYSC [National Youth Service Corps] and the funny part is that even my NYSC is still carrying Esther... All of these is why I don't consider myself being in a political setting or all of that because of all of these issues. Even if I want to correct it, it will take a lot of time and a lot stress, and I'm not mentally in the state of doing all of that now...

Some participants, despite being acutely aware of the challenges and barriers they face, expressed a keen interest in future engagement in politics. They showed a willingness to navigate the difficult landscape, driven by the hope for a more inclusive political environment for LGBTQI+ individuals in Nigeria.

... I love politics, and I want to fully participate, looking at how it is currently for the queer community. I think we need ourselves there. If we are there, then we'll be able to push forward everything on our agenda. So like myself, yes, I would love to,

Yes! I think a friend of mine who is also a queer, an intersex person like me, is always so much interested in all of this. I don't know now if he's still much interested in it because he has always said the Nigerian system of government is very poor and if he was in the position, he will change a lot of things... I said, my friend, I'm at your back but you know, because of the gender thing and all of that ... I don't know if he is still making moves.

While the majority of participants do not foresee themselves running for political office, they believe in the importance of their voices and the need for involvement in various political activities such as

voting, protests, campaigns, and discussions. They emphasized that fostering political consciousness and reducing apathy through civic education by LGBTQI+ organizations could significantly enhance political participation in the community. This increased engagement could lead to more community members being elected into political positions, where they could effect positive change.

Some participants mentioned being aware of community-led organisations with programmes aimed at encouraging political participation within the LGBTQI+ community.



I remember back in 2022, 2023, the then Executive Director of *[organisation's name withheld]* actually had like a personal project, I don't know if it was tied to the organisation at the time but then, I remember that I participated in one of the outreaches that she was conducting. So, the essence of this was to mobilise youths, young persons generally, to be involved in politics... saying that regardless of your sexual orientation, gender identity and all of those things, you can still actively participate, and by so doing, you know, you get to, maybe challenge, or even initiate policies that will now favour the community...

4.5.3 Review of Survey Findings

How Many Survey Respondents Considered Themselves LGBTQI+ Activists?

52% of respondents said they did not consider themselves to be LGBTQI+ activists, while almost half (48%) regarded themselves as being involved in some form of queer activism. Yet the nature of this activism varied widely, as the summary of responses to our follow up question highlights.

What Kind of Activism Were Respondents Involved In?

As noted earlier, numerous respondents noted their direct involvement or employment with LGBTQI+ CSOs or NGOs, or in other professional spaces. This aligns with the discussion outlined in the report's Methodology section, which suggests that the cohort of respondents is far more politically engaged than the national average:



"I work for an NGO that protects the right of lgbtqi."
"I work with an organization that advocates for the equal rights of all especially sexual and gender minority groups through human rights and advocacy, sexual health and wellness and capacity building initiatives as a human rights program officer."
"Advocacy for the rights for LGBT persons in my locality, providing health services in my locality through the help of international funders."
"My work as a journalist allows me to document the realities of queer Nigerians. Not just the bad, but also humanizing queer people."

Yet beyond professional activism, other respondents gave a wide variety of interesting responses, highlighting the broad and multifaceted forms of activism quietly pushing for change at the grassroots level. This includes semi-formal peer support groups, and creative initiatives:



"I have a support group for young LGBTQI+ people in Lagos State. Where we come together to develop life competency skills training, and extend such skills to others in diverse communities, without regard to their SOGIESC."

"I tell Queer stories, I live my authentic life as a queer person and here in Nigeria that's activism. I engage stakeholders in conversations about LGBTQI rights, I educate community members on their rights, sexuality and relationships. I create and provide safe spaces for community members to hangout or even live in. I connect people to each other. I'm heavily involved in grassroot organising in Lagos state and rivers and delta states. "

Given the great personal risk to queer activists in Nigeria, a number of respondents explained how online activism was their preferred medium for driving forward change:

"Creating films, digital works that further drive for awareness and advocacy for LGBTQI+ persons while living freely in my authentic self."

"Digital activism."

"Online advocacy through social media content creation and promotion of lgbtqi visibility online."

"I lend my voice in speaking up against injustice perpetrated on LGBTQI+ persons, mostly on social media. Too scared to identify in physical public spaces."

Other participants explained how any form of support for their queer peers should be understood as a form of activism and defiance against the current hostile status quo in Nigeria:

"Basic activism. Everyday, anywhere I find myself, I try to project inclusiveness and safety for the queer community."

"Helping the young and confused LGBTQ+ people build confidence, love and accept themselves..."

"I carry out personal advocacy."

"I have taught a large group of people about the need to understand people and stop homophobic and discriminatory practices."

The above findings highlight the broad and vibrant array of options open to queer Nigerians in pushing for greater acceptance. The final set of responses here is particularly revealing. In line with the feminist maxim, "the personal is political", participants highlight how, when living under a political system which refuses to acknowledge their existence, any form of positive representation of queer identities, or support for the wider LGBTQI+ community, is a deeply political act in and of itself.

5.0

RECOMMENDATIONS

What, if Any, Organisations or Support Networks Do Queer Nigerians Rely on for Political Engagement or LGBTQI+ Advocacy?

46% of participants said they did not rely on any form of support from LGBTQI+ organisations regarding political engagement. This broadly corresponds to the number of respondents who also said they were not involved in some form of activism. From this we may be able to infer that many of those individuals who are not heavily embedded in some form of activism already, may not be involved or interested in having their voices heard in the political processes more generally. This is merely a hypothesis, and further research would be required to ascertain whether this theory holds, as well as the reasons which may underpin this lack of engagement.

However, of the 54% which had sought support from CSOs, the organisation TIERS was most frequently cited, followed by Libera Initiative, ISDAO, and CHEVS. Interestingly, one participant noted 'Twitter' as a support network they rely on for LGBTQI+ advocacy, again underscoring the importance many place on social media and digital activism more generally, as ways in which to engage in Nigerian politics. This is despite the hate that many individuals receive for voicing positive attitudes towards LGBTQI+ identities online.

What Do Queer Nigerians Consider to be the Most Pressing Challenges Faced by Sexual and Gender Minorities in Nigeria?



One of the reasons that might explain why such a large minority of queer Nigerians don't rely on organisations to advocate for their needs, could simply come down to the fact that many people do not know that such support exists, as one respondent explained;

"Most LGBTQIA persons don't even know that there are organisations supporting the system and it's crazy... Many of us have been chased out of homes."

It is interesting to note that this respondent considered this one of the most pressing challenges facing sexual and gender minorities in Nigeria today. The participant's statement suggests that so much more could be done to support individuals at the community level if LGBTQI+ CSOs were better known. Maintaining a record of such support also builds a strong case for further advocacy at the national and/or international level, and which could ultimately lead to initiatives aimed at protecting those most in need.

However, here again we come up against yet another vicious cycle. It is obviously not safe for most queer organisations to promote themselves or their causes too explicitly within wider society. But this therefore maintains the status quo, where only digitally-connected, highly-educated, and/or politicised LGBTQI+ individuals are likely to find and engage with such organisations. This is despite those left behind often being some of the most at high-risk and marginalised members of the LGBTQI+ community, precisely because they have not been afforded higher educations, or consistent access to digital platforms, etc.



Other challenges that respondents noted varied, though often homing in on the need for greater support services:

- » Treatment of sexual minorities, including legislation, state protection, and support services; the safety of sexual minorities living in Nigeria
- » Family issues and brutality, security issues and support systems
- » Lack of Support Services: There is a limited availability of support services tailored to the needs of sexual and gender minorities in Nigeria. This includes mental health support, legal aid, and community resources.
- » Healthcare Access: Sexual and gender minorities may face challenges in accessing healthcare services due to discrimination from healthcare providers or lack of knowledge about LGBTQ+ health issues.

Here, participants highlight numerous aspects of support that would traditionally be seen as the responsibility of the state, from healthcare to legal aid, mental health support, and, of course, protective legislation.

While the latter is a long way from being realised in Nigeria, despite the careful and concerted efforts of some LGBTQI+ advocates operating in the political sphere, many of these other elements of support are overseen by CSOs and NGOs working on behalf of queer communities in Nigeria.

Yet our participants' responses suggest that the resources available do not meet demand. In other countries more accepting of LGBTQI+ rights, civil society would leverage democratic processes to evidence the need as well as campaign for such services to be rolled out for the domestic queer population. This is, of course not possible within Nigeria's hostile political environment, meaning that the support services available to queer communities across the country are likely to be underfunded, geographically patchy, and inconsistent in delivery. This is no fault of the CSOs and NGOs rolling out such services, but simply the reality of implementing such services while operating in an often under-resourced, high-risk, and clandestine environment

What Changes Do Sexual and Gender Minorities Want to See in Nigeria?

It's unsurprising that the changes many respondents said they wanted to see mirrored the challenges many outlined in the preceding question, with many focused on inclusive support service delivery across CSO and societal networks:



- » *Safety, security, inclusivity, respect, love, acceptance, support*
- » *Financial support, mental support, queer gatherings - mostly outreaches here in Uyo [as] the number is very poor*

- » *A safe space for all*
- » *Enhancing access to support services such as mental health resources, legal aid, and community centers that cater to the specific needs of sexual and gender minorities.*
- » *Ensuring that healthcare providers are trained to provide inclusive and non-judgmental care to sexual and gender minorities, addressing their unique health concerns.*
- » *Promoting family acceptance and support for sexual and gender minorities to reduce instances of family rejection and its negative consequences. These changes aim to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for sexual and gender minorities in Nigeria, where they can live without fear of discrimination or violence and have equal access to rights and opportunities.*

Other Items that Members of the Queer Community Opted to Share Regarding Their Experiences of Political Engagement and LGBTQI+ Rights Advocacy in Nigeria

Despite significant numbers of respondents focusing on the need for increased and improved support services for LGBTQI+ individuals, most participants turned their attention to Nigeria's punitive, anti-LGBTQI+ laws, when asked to elaborate on their experiences of political and rights advocacy:



"I think there's a need to do more to have the SSMPA repealed. There's a need for more political engagement and education."

"LGBTQI+ persons are humans too, we deserve to enjoy our rights without fear of being prosecuted, stigmatised or even killed. A lot of persons within this space actually have more than our sexual identities to contribute to the world, but if you're not ready to look past this aspect of our lives and focus on more important contributions [that] we could make, then the problem is far from being solved. Decriminalise LGBTQI+ and watch how it starts to get more and more accepted, and less stigmatised."

"It would be a huge improvement if the LGBTQI community can be fully represented in political offices."

"Law makers should be enlightened. More work is to be done on awareness as the level of homophobia in Nigeria is high."

"It is time to amplify the promotion of LGBT inclusion in civic spaces. I commend CHEVS and recommend that they prioritise collaboration with other CSOs that are open-minded."

These responses show a clear recognition that the criminalisation of queer identities is the principal obstacle to attaining all other rights in Nigeria. Not least amongst these being acceptance into, and change through, the democratic processes which are available to the vast majority of Nigerian citizens, albeit within a less than perfect political system overall.

Without decriminalisation, there can be no significant gains made through the standard political processes, meaning there can be no overarching strategy to LGBTQI+ inclusive service provision, nor protections against LGBTQI+ hate crimes, stigma and discrimination within wider society. The decriminalisation of LGBTQI+ identities may therefore act as the catalyst for change which so many queer Nigerians long for. As one participant succinctly put it:

"I just want to be free to love who I love, I am tired of hiding."

1. Building Alliances with Sympathetic Politicians

LGBTQI+ CSOs and NGOs across Nigeria should aim to identify and build alliances with the small minority of politicians who privately support LGBTQI+ rights. Having allies within Nigeria's parliament will be critical in any attempts to provide queer Nigerians greater protections when engaging in democratic processes.

2. Foster International Support for Legal Reforms

In partnerships with Nigerian CSOs, international LGBTQI+ organisations, human rights groups, and governments should continue to pressure Nigeria to reform discriminatory laws, such as the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act (SSMPA).

These efforts should focus on the rights of sexual and gender minorities in Nigeria, as well as the country's international commitments to universal human rights. Without progress towards the dismantling of Nigeria's anti-LGBTQI+ laws, the full enfranchisement of the country's queer populations is likely to remain unfulfilled.

3. Encourage Political Engagement Across Nigeria's LGBTQI+ Populations

Encourage the participation of LGBTQI+ individuals in democratic processes through political workshops and discussion groups aimed at reducing political disillusionment and apathy.

These could include the establishment of localised LGBTQI+ advocacy groups, supporting the training of queer-friendly political candidates, and outreach programmes designed to build political consciousness across the queer community.

4. Public Awareness and Education Programmes Aimed at Acceptance of Queer Identities

Using creative and safe avenues (such as online platforms and the use of the arts), LGBTQI+ activists should promote public campaigns and education programs that challenge societal norms and religious biases against sexual and gender minorities.

These programs should aim to make clear the impact that discrimination has on queer Nigerians' fundamental right to partake in democratic processes, as well as highlight how the country as a whole suffers when minorities are excluded from such processes.

There should be a concerted effort among community-based organisations to also engage political parties and rural communities alike, where safe to do so. These conversations should emphasise the harmful impact of discrimination against queer individuals and how it undermines the democratic process.

5. Community Safety & Security Initiatives

Developing community-led initiatives focused on personal safety and security can help foster the confidence and reassurance which LGBTQI+ individuals need so as to engage in democratic processes.

These initiatives may include LGBTQI+ support networks, safe spaces, and strategies for managing the risk of discrimination while at polling stations or at meetings for local government. Workshops on personal safety, emergency response strategies, and mental health support could also be developed, aimed at encouraging Nigeria's queer community to partake in politics.

Effective funding strategies are essential to ensure the safety and security of community members, particularly in supporting their participation in the democratic process. Establishing a domestic basket fund dedicated to the security of community members, whether running for political office or engaging as voters, should be a priority. This fund would provide the resources needed to protect and empower LGBTQI+ individuals actively involved in Nigeria's political landscape.

6. Enhance Awareness and Accessibility of LGBTQI+ Support Services

Increase efforts to raise awareness about LGBTQI+ support services which are available across Nigeria through queer community outreach programmes and digital platforms.

These can help members of the community who are unaware of existing support and resources to access the necessary LGBTQI+ services, particularly those which are harder to reach, and more likely to be left behind. For instance, non-English speaking queer people, those without frequent access to online support, and those based in rural areas.

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