



STRUGGLING ALONE

THE LIVED REALITIES OF WOMEN WHO HAVE SEX
WITH WOMEN IN BURKINA FASO, GHANA AND NIGERIA



QUEER AFRICAN YOUTH NETWORKING CENTER-QAYN

Struggling Alone: The Lived Realities of Women who have sex with Women in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria

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ABOUT THE ARTWORK

The artworks in this report are courtesy of Corinna Nicole, a visual artist currently residing in Oakland, California. She received her MFA in Studio Art from University of California - Berkeley in May 2011.

Primarily a painter, but interested in other media, Corinna's work often deals with identity and desire, whether it is about the dynamics between herself and others, her desire for women, her bi-racial heritage or her interests in female masculinities.

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Acknowledgments

“Oh, there are lesbians in West Africa?”

“Where are the lesbians?”

“Lesbians are just too hard to find. They do not want to come out.”

These are some of the questions and statements commonly heard in conversations about human rights, women’s rights, and even spaces where the rights and needs of sexual minorities and people with diverse gender identities are most actively discussed. And yet, there are lesbians and transgendered women in West Africa, as in the rest of the continent. This report is a result of a five-month social context analysis conducted by a young, lesbian-led organization, The Queer African Youth Networking Center (QAYN) to call attentions to the lived realities of lesbians, bisexual, transgendered, queer and women who have sex with women (LBTQWSW)¹ in three West African countries. A group of passionate and resourceful volunteers engaged in cross-country interviews and focus group discussions to uncover the challenges faced and strategies used by LBTQWSW in living their lives as same-gender loving women.

Over a period of five months, we met with the most courageous, daring and exceptional women, both young and not so young, who eagerly participated in this research. This report is a tribute to every single lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer, woman who has sex with women in West Africa, who so stoically faces humiliations, harassment, abuse, discrimination, violence at multiple levels, stigma within communities and rejection by family members in order to fully experience her sexuality. These women who are either living in countries such as Nigeria that criminalizes homosexuality or in countries where there are silent or ambiguous laws as in Burkina Faso, are defying everyday patriarchal social systems and the narrowed interpretations of gender and sexuality by conservative religious groups of what forms of identity, expression and relationships are morally acceptable. These women exist; their lives and struggles are real – and deserved to be documented.

QAYN would like to acknowledge the women who shared their experiences and actively participated in this research project. Particularly, we would to thank the members of Sisters and Sisters for Social Justice and Empowerment (SSSJE) and our main contacts in that group, Nii Osu and Victor. We would like to thank

¹ We recognize that there are many terms that are used to describe same-gender loving women, and that women use to describe themselves, many that are particular to various countries and contexts throughout Africa. For the purpose of this report, we are using the acronym LBTQWSW, which includes women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or queer and/or who engage in sexual activities with women (and who may not identify with the aforementioned terms).

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Williams Rashidi, QAYN's Anglophone Program Coordinator for his willingness to engage in this process and for facilitating the first focus group meeting in Accra. Our thanks go to some of the members of Women's Health and Equal Rights (WHER) who made sacrifices towards the success of the research in Nigeria. In Burkina Faso, we would like to thank Mohamed Barry for being invaluable community resource person, and the entire LBTQWSW community of Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso.

Struggling Alone: The Lived Realities of Women who have Sex with Women was made possible with continuous financial and moral support of our friends and families. We would like to particularly give a big thank you to Connie Tyler, Margaret Westerman with a special thank you to Fabrice Armisen.

Caroline Kouassiaman & Mariam Armisen

List of Acronyms

LGBTQQ	Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning
LBTQWSW	Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Women who have sex with Women
MSM	Men who have sex with Men
SSSJE	Sisters to Sisters for Social Justice and Empowerment
QAYN	Queer African Youth Networking Center
WHER	Women's Health and Equal Rights

Introduction

1. JUSTIFICATION

In less than a decade, the West African sub-region has seen an increase in public discourses on the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals. While lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQQ) people in the region face numerous shared challenges in their quest to fully experience their sexual rights, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and women who have sex with women in particular face double obstacles: for being female bodied and same-sex loving people. Morality, as defined by conservative religious and traditional groups in the region, has shaped appropriate gender expression and roles according to patriarchal social system that have denied women full freedom in their experience of sexuality. Additionally, the newly development of organizations working on the human rights of LGBTQQ are dominated by the discourse on HIV/AIDS prevention among men who have sex with men (MSM), where the same sexism and patriarchal values continue to persist.

Although it is generally accepted among women's rights activists, sexual rights and LGBTQQ activists and academics that there is scarcity of information pertinent to the lived realities and well-being of lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, queer and women who have sex with women (LBTQWSW) in West Africa, few of these stakeholders have shown interest in developing research projects to document the lives and human rights situation of LBTQWSW. The most common explanations provided are that "*lesbians are hard to find, or work with*" or that there is no institutional funding for such projects. Consequently, LBTQWSW continue to quietly suffer under social and cultural practices that often suppress many alternative expressions of sexual and gender identities that do not fit into traditional expression of femininity. Out of sight, LBTQWSW face countless human rights violations including but not limited to forced and early marriage, violence, rape, sexual harassment, stigmatization and discrimination within the family, in the community, at school and at work.

The **Queer African Youth Networking Center (QAYN)**, a lesbian-led organization formed in 2010 to establish a wide network of support to promote the safety and well-being of lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning West African youth, conducted a five-month research project in 2011, in both Francophone and Anglophone West African countries to critically document the lived realities of lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, queer and women who have sex with women in Accra, Ghana and Ouagadougou, Burkina

Faso. QAYN's partner in Nigeria, Women's Health and Equal Rights (WHER), undertook the same process in Nigeria. This cross-country project was the first of its kind to be designed and conducted by lesbian-led groups. Plans are underway to undertake a similar process in several other West African countries.

QAYN is committed to promoting the establishment of a solid LBTQWSW leadership in West Africa, in order to create a wide range of network to promote healthy and supportive environment where LBTQWSW West African youth can connect, openly discuss issues directly impacting them, exchange information, find relevant resources and regain some dignity. By developing the leadership of LBTQWSW, QAYN aims to create a supportive LBTQWSW-led network for young leaders to relate to one another, empower them to advance the issues of sexual rights in the sub-region and foster activism so that these young leaders can advocate for a more dignified cultural, socio-economic and political environment.

We recognize that there are many terms that are used to describe same-gender loving women, and that women use to describe themselves, many that are particular to various countries and contexts throughout Africa. For the purpose of this report, we are using the acronym LBTQWSW.

2. OBJECTIVES

From April to August 2011, QAYN conducted a combination of individual interviews and focus group discussions to document the lived realities of lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, queer and women who have sex with women, challenges faced and strategies used to overcome them.

- To document the lived realities of LBTQWSW in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria
- To examine the potential for a LBTQWSW-led movement in the West Africa sub-region
- To collectively strategize on how women can overcome their invisibility in order to promote their basic human rights and form a strong regional network of dedicated leaders
- To critically analyze what leadership styles and advocacy messages LBTQWSW should use to demand their human and sexual rights in West Africa

3. HOW WE COLLABORATE

QAYN's work is grounded in consultative engagement, which we do by directly identifying and working with existing formal and informal LBTQWSW groups in the countries where we have a presence. We spent several weeks identifying and engaging the women who took part in this research. For instance, in the Accra process, we identified our collaborators through networking with a local

organization. We learned about the existence of a newly formed lesbian group in Accra. After several email exchanges, two of our volunteers, including the Regional Coordinator from Lagos (who traveled to Accra) and our Strategic Advisor (who was currently working and living in Accra), met the leader of the umbrella organization that supports this women's group. Following the initial meeting, three months of emails, phones and face-to-face communication ensued to identify the leaders of several small women's groups in Accra and organize the meetings.

Prior to the first focus group meeting in Accra, we invited a representative of another local LGBTQ-serving organization to be a guest; the woman brought another guest. After the focus group meeting, the participants felt trusting enough to suggest organizing meetings with other LBTQWSW groups and individuals that we weren't aware of and a snowball effect was created.

In Burkina Faso, the process involved communication over the course of five months, via phone and emails, with the Director of the only MSM organization in the country, Association Lambda. He then secured a meeting with two lesbians who are well known in their respective communities. Here again, a snowball effect ensued, with each woman introducing the researcher to either other individuals or a small group. Several meetings were organized with the leaders of the groups who participated in this project prior to the actual focus meeting. Each leader required a preliminary meeting, most of the time by phone first, then in person to develop trust and understand the project before bringing her group together. Then, the researcher met the group, discuss the format of the focus group, security issues and identify a place, mostly suggested by the participants and discuss any other logistical issues before the actual meeting.

Also in Ouagadougou, by co-facilitating or being a guest speaker at several workshops about the health right of sexual minority, the researcher was approached by some participants who had lesbian and bisexual members in their organizations to organize individual or small group meetings with these women. However, due to financial constraints, the researchers could not meet with all the groups in Ouagadougou or travel to Bobo Dioulasso to respond to the request of two groups that expressed interest in taking part in the process.

For the Nigeria portion of the work, financial constraints prevented the researchers from traveling to Nigeria to assist the focus group meeting organized by QAYN's local partner, Women's Health and Equal Rights (WHER). As a membership based organization, WHER conducted its project by selecting ten members of the organization for a half-day focus group meeting.

Methodology

1.1 RATIONAL

This research project exclusively used individual interviews and focus group discussions as the main methodology. The rationale behind choosing focus group discussions was to encourage the expression of opinions in the context of exchanges and debates with peers. We believe that by creating a safe and trusting environment where participants could also directly interact and relate to the researchers, this approach would reinforce the sense of equality between researchers and the participants. We also used focus groups because we believe in the power of a group discussion which, when successful in bringing the right mix of participants together with shared experiences, can foster shared analyses of the social and political context that impacts their experiences. The feedback and report of this project has proven that focus group meeting and individual interviews were the right blend of methods to honor the experiences of the women and to act as a vehicle of discovery and empowerment, which we believe are the first steps of feminist consciousness raising.

1.2 METHOD

Each focus group meeting usually began with QAYN offering soft drinks, snacks and informal chatting to give time to the participants to settle in. We then transitioned into more formal introductions and a description of the project and its purpose, addressing confidentiality and safety issues, and the format for group discussion. QAYN facilitators opened each session by introducing themselves and the organization. The facilitators also asked participants to introduce themselves with their name, gender and sexual orientation. Initial conversations were held in each context to determine the terms for sexual orientation that the group used and was most comfortable with. Each focus group also involved some degree of translation into at least one local language.

The QAYN facilitation team developed a set of guiding, purposeful and theme-directed questions to facilitate an open, yet guided, conversation about the identities and lived realities of queer West African women, in the focus group discussions. For each “Core Question”, there is a subset of follow-up questions for facilitators to utilize in order to stimulate further discussion on a particular topic. The “Bridge” serves as introductory sentence to a series of subject-directed questions to increase active interactions between the participants. The discussion then began with the facilitator asking questions from the set of guiding questions, and continued for between two to four hours, closing once the key questions were addressed.

Although there were slight differences in the approaches to facilitation across the three sites (Accra, Ouagadougou and Abuja), the set of guiding questions presented in the annex of this report provides an overview of the topics discussed. A selection of direct participants' quotes is included throughout this report, in order to highlight the voices of the participants in the focus group discussions.

The research design employed the definition of lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer and women who have sex with women to recruit the participants for the various focus groups. Age, education level and class were not considered in selecting the participants. In addition to the focus groups, several one-on-one interviews were conducted to provide some of the participants with the opportunity to share insights that weren't possible in a group setting.

The focus group meetings in Accra, Ghana and Abuja, Nigeria were documented by at least one of researchers. The notes were then combined to create an accurate documentation of the discussions. Only one researcher was able to travel to Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso for the project, she used a combination of notes taking and digital tape recording to document the various group meetings there.

1.3 END PRODUCTS

The present report, the first phase of the research project, only summarizes the findings and processes used. A plan to develop cross-countries advocacy campaigns based on key findings, to create brochures and articles, will follow.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS



Corinna Nicole, *Like to Like #24* Oil on Canvas. Courtesy the artist

- LBTQWSW are often forced or coerced into heterosexual relationships, marriage and/or sometimes to bear children because of societal and family expectations or because of threats of disownment, violence or death from family members.

- LBTQWSW experience blackmail, and extortion, verbal insults regularly and women are

afraid for their safety. Bringing the cases to the police means “being outed”, which in turn shifts the attention from the human abuses to the question of sexual orientation. Attempting to access justice can put a woman in danger of further harm.

- Most often, victims of rape suffer trauma and stigma and do not feel safe to go to hospitals to get proper examination or medication treatment and don’t feel they can count on an

objective police investigation. They further fear prejudice and discrimination from police officials.

- LBTQWSW consistently brought up the fear about being involuntarily “outed”. For instance, a participant in one discussion group shared that “known lesbians on campus were being outed with pictures, names, room numbers, and the owners of these materials will encourage peers that if they found the women beautiful, they can stop the woman’s lesbianism and go date them.” This is a potential call for corrective rape, invasion of privacy, compromising safety and further stigmatization.
- There is immense family pressure for women to conform and a threat of being disowned.
- LBTQWSW most often identified unemployment and poverty as the most salient concerns for them, in addition to the marginalization and invisibility of being LBTQWSW. Almost all participants believe that being LBTQWSW is illegal despite the silent law on same-gender loving women in Ghana and Burkina Faso.
- LBTQWSW face difficulties in accepting and/or openly living with their sexual orientation identity, particularly when they are subject to violence in their families, mockery, stigmatization and discrimination in the streets, extortions, and often state-condoned homophobia.
- Many of the women suffer from very low self-esteem, psychological isolation and often time engaged in heterosexual relationships to “fit in” and take some of the pressure off, but more often these relationships end badly with the women finding themselves as single mothers with limited or no income.
- It was also highlighted that some LBTQWSW are vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, especially those engaging in sexual activity with men (for various reasons).

- Organizing within the LBTQWSW community was found to be challenging because of the fear of being exposed, the lack of leaders to bring the community together and the fact that resources and attention on sexual minorities in the country are directed to men who have sex with men (MSM).
- Some participants argued that the main problem facing WSW organizations was “the L part of LGBT, they are separate and have less support from the entire LGBT community”, which has expressed little interest in supporting a West African WSW’s movement building.
- Some of the participants expressed a lack of comprehension and frustration that the donor community is not interesting in the “L part of LGBT” in West Africa.
- Some of the participants expressed a desire to create a book to tell the lived realities of LBTQWSW and be able to share this amongst themselves and beyond.

Part 1: Living Under the Thumbs of Family, Society and Government: The Realities of LBTQWSW in Accra, Ghana

Brief Overview of Country Context on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The primary reference to same-sex relations in Ghana's official laws is the Criminal Code Amendment Act of the 1992 which, by using the language of "unnatural carnal knowledge", outlaws same-sex activities between two consenting adults. Although this law has been used primarily in targeting same-sex sexual acts amongst men, the strong religious influence and social cultural beliefs in the country are leading to severe discrimination against LGBTQQ people. LGBTQQ people face widespread and severe discrimination in the hands of their families and the larger community. Moreover, acts of discrimination and harassment are often justified and condoned by the state, through the invocation of the Criminal Code Amendment Act.

Although the "anti-homosexuality law" may not specifically outlaw LBTQWSW sexual activities, nor does it directly address sexual orientation identity, there is a dominant perception amongst the community in Accra that being a lesbian, transgender, queer or WSW is illegal. Even if not illegal, the level and layers of discrimination are so pervasive that LBTQWSW are unable to effectively actualize their identity and sexuality in a safe manner and experience their sexual rights freely.

In June 2011, a leak of a preliminary report on the MSM community in the Western Region of Ghana generated significant attention and public debate on homosexuality across the country. Since this event, the climate has become increasingly hostile and unsafe for those who self-identify as LGBTQQ and/or those who are perceived to be. Since the leak of the report, several significant political leaders have made statements that contributed to the climate of hostility and insecurity for LGBTQQ people. In July 2011, the Western Region Minister, Paul Evan Aidoo, called for all gay people in the region to be rounded up and arrested. He has particularly called for landlords and tenants to essentially violate peoples right to privacy and security by denouncing real or perceived homosexuals to the local law enforcements officers, in an effort to "rid Ghana of gays". In the same month, President John Evans Atta Mills, stated that "homosexuality and lesbianism" were amongst vices contributing to the erosion of Ghanaian cultural values. He also stated that the government would not decriminalize homosexuality

and that LGBTQQ people should “stop the practice”. Since June 2011, questions around sexual orientation has sparked extensive public discussion, particularly in print (including web) and broadcast media, and many traditional, religious and elected leaders have used public for a to condemn homosexuality as ungodly, un-African and a significant threat to the integrity, cultural and moral values of the country. The current climate has further marginalized LGBTQQ people in Ghana, with significant implications on access to vital health services, as well as heightened vulnerability to threats – and acts – of violence.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PARTICIPANTS

QAYN hosted two focus group discussions in Accra in April 2011 as well as five individual interviews in July and August 2011. The first discussion, facilitated by Rashidi Williams, QAYN’s Regional Coordinator and Mariam Armisen, QAYN’s Founder and Director, took place at a public place, a popular beachside area that was well known by the participants. The second focus group discussion, facilitated by Mariam Armisen, was held in the private residence of Caroline Kouassiaman, QAYN’s Strategic Advisor, who was then working and living in Accra.

The 12 women who participated in the first focus group meeting in Accra were all involved with a local LGBTQSW organization, Sister to Sister for Social Justice and Empowerment (SSSJE), which brought together WSW through a network of neighborhood-based groups. Most of the women attended the meeting as sub-group leaders within the organization. Most of them had more masculine gender presentations, all were between the ages of 19 and 40 and most had never received formal education. Most participants were originally from Accra and resided in the Ga coastal communities of



Corinna Nicole, *Like to Like #24*. Oil on Canvas. Courtesy the artist

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the city. Very few responded to the questions in English, with most preferring to speak Ga (local language commonly spoken in Accra) or sometimes Twi (a local language commonly spoken throughout Ghana), so we needed the assistance of two translators to help facilitate the conversation. All participants came from some of the most impoverished areas of the city. Most were unemployed, except for one, who works as a hairdresser. At the beginning, the women were very reluctant to respond to QAYN's questions, but once we passed the first hour of awkwardness, they became more relaxed, friendlier and more engaged.

The 10 women who attended the other focus group meetings were from similar social background, with the exception that all participants had more feminine gender presentations. About 2/3 were very young (20-27 years old), single mothers and had never attended school. One participant was pregnant during our meeting. Like the first group, they were all unemployed. We used a private apartment to host the rest of the meetings, which created a more relaxed environment for the participants to engage with one another. The groups discussed many important and challenging topics, and individuals shared their opinions largely without reservation.

In addition to the focus groups, a number of conversations were held with women who were unable to attend or wished to share additional observations privately.

HIGHLIGHTS OF KEY DISCUSSION TOPICS

- **Family and Societal Pressures Faced by Ghanaian WSW**
- **Need for increased public education and information about rights and legal framework**
- **Lack of access to education and economic opportunities**
- **Lack of access to safer sex material and adequate health services**
- **Need for WSW support organizations.**

OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

From the two focus group meetings and several individual interviews, the most common themes were the marginalization and invisibility of LBTQWSW, in addition to unemployment and poverty. Almost all participants believed that being LBTQWSW in Ghana is illegal, despite the silent law on same-sex loving women; the participants talked about the difficulties to live their sexuality when they are subject to violence in their families, mockery, stigmatization and discrimination in the streets, extortions, and the constant state-condoned homophobia. The women experienced very low self-esteem, psychological isolation and often times, engaged in heterosexual relationships to

“ It’s better, safer and easier to be with a man than a woman.”

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“fit in” and take some of the pressure off. However, more often, these relationships ended badly with the women finding themselves as single mothers with no - or limited - income. It was also highlighted that the LBTQWSW are vulnerable to un-wanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases when they have sex with men for various reasons. Organizing the LBTQWSW community was found to be challenging because of the fear of being exposed, the lack of leaders to bring the community together and the fact that resources and attention on sexual minority in the country are directed to men who have sex with men (MSM).



Corinna Nicole, *Enter to Life*, Oil on Canvas, Courtesy the artist

KEY FINDINGS

Because it is the dream of every Ghanaian woman to have a family that loves her and is supportive of her choices, according to some of the participants, they felt that “It’s better, safer and easier to be with a man than a woman” in Accra. One woman discussed her struggle to justify why she was not having children, and why she was not married. Thus, to avoid these pressures and scrutinizes, some of the participants decided to “do something and have children” to satisfy their parents’ desire to have grandchildren and/or to end suspicions. Religious practices also add to the challenges of being a queer woman in Accra. For instance, one participant, a young, Muslim woman who identifies as transgender, has to live his/her sexuality in hiding because his/her religion forbids homosexuality, coupled with the fact that he/she is the only daughter in his/her family and he/she is forced to wear female clothes. He/she identifies as a boy to avoid continuously being beaten up by his/her family members.

For women who do not possess the stereotypical features of a feminine African woman, even walking on the streets will provoke mockery, harassment. Moreover, female friends (regardless of sexual orientation) are afraid to walk on the street with their more masculine looking friends. Only one participant, who easily passes for a man, said that people are actually afraid of her. The focus group discussion members discussed that corrective rape is uncommon against LGBTQSW in Ghana, but that they are still subject to physical abuses, including being beaten up by family members. Within such an environment, all participants acknowledged the impossibility of voluntarily coming out to their family members. The participants repeatedly pointed to these conditions as a serious challenge to their emotional and psychological well-being.

“ They will use the Bible...Sodom & Gomorrah. ”

Among the 25 women met, one had a university degree. Many had not attended formal school and of those who went, the majority did not attend past secondary school. All participants expressed their wishes to access adult school to learn English and basic accounting.

Unemployment and poverty were raised as their next biggest challenge, after family and the hostile social environment. Their sexual orientation was often connected with their socio-economic status, as several women indicated that LGBTQSW who have more masculine presentation are forced to live in poverty because nobody wants to employ a visibly lesbian woman. Several of the women indicated that the unavailability of the basic material things, that would make life comfortable for them, makes some women likely to engage in sometimes unsafe sexual relationship with men for economic reasons; thus exposing them to sexual transmitted infections and HIV infection.

The participants indicated that although same-sex relationship between two consensual men is illegal in Ghana, they are still at risk. One participant stated that WSW “are the most wanted people in Ghana.” According to the participants, this silence in the national legislation exposes sexual minority groups to all kinds of human rights abuses. Coupled with the legal framework, the lack of education and access to legal advice has a lot of WSW living in fear of being found out.

All the participants mentioned the challenge of practicing safe sex because of lack of supplies, money and right information. The participants from the first focus group meeting knew about gloves, condoms, lubricant, but talked about not being able to access them, again for financial reasons. They also knew of sex toys such as dildo, vibrators, but again, due to financial reasons, cannot use them.

The participants in second focus group were surprised to hear that two LBTQWSW can transmit STIs to one another. Out of the 10 participants in the second focus group, only 2 were without children. The rest had an average of three children. Most talked about being forced into heterosexual relationships to avoid family pressure and some, for economic reasons. Unsafe abortion was one other health risks mentioned; because LBTQWSW do not use protection in same-sex relationships, they tend to engage in heterosexual relationships with the same

“Even if you dress feminine and people never see you with a guy, they will suspect.”

mind set, thus making them vulnerable to unplanned pregnancies.

Regarding access to adequate health services, most participants expressed the need to have health care providers

who will be sensitive to their health needs. They all mentioned that unlike for MSM, there were no organizations that provide counseling or sexual health services, including free HIV testing for WSW specifically.

All participants recognized the need for a unified and organized women’s group led by LBTQWSW. Some participants were sent to few initiatives organized by a prominent human rights defender in Ghana, Nana Oye Lithur, but their level of participations at these meetings was low because of lack of training. The participants were aware of other LBTQWSW groups across Accra, but these groups never coordinated their meetings and members seldom interact. The overwhelming number of participants recognized that a lack of opportunities to interact with other women’s groups, including the mainstream women’s movement, contributed to the absence of services targeting LBTQWSW. They strongly condemned the sexism and discrimination they experience within MSM organizations. There was a feeling of being used by such organizations to access funding but they have yet to see any program developed by these organizations that include WSW.

LESSONS LEARNT/ HIGHLIGHTED OBSERVATIONS

- Although the first focus group meeting was in a public space, it was not a very quiet or a particularly “safe” space, especially given curiosity and intrusions from people who were wandering what was going on. In several instances, we noted people trying to get close and figure out what was going on and what was being discussed. It also was a bit distracting for the attendees because the space seemed to be quite open. We were forced to end the meeting early due to feeling around safety. For the rest of the process in Accra, we therefore hosted all meetings in private homes.
- The focus group began with much hesitation but as we spoke for longer, the participants felt more open to share in their experiences. The interaction level between participants in the group discussion became high and showed how the women were excited to be a part of the process.
- The women spoke on their belief that homosexuality was illegal in Ghana, and concerned that pressure from international community to decriminalize homosexuality was creating a strong backlash from the general public, which in turn was affecting their daily lives in an already challenging context.
- The discussions demonstrated how LBTQSW were a marginalized and vulnerable population, subjected to all kinds of violation of their basic human rights. They are highly vulnerable to physical violence; sexual violence and sexual health risks, especially when they voluntarily or not, engaged in heterosexual relationships or when they engage in risky sexual behavior with men for economic reasons.
- All the LBTQSW in this report have said to be suffering in silence, unable to fully and freely enjoy their sexual rights. Many of the women discussed the internal familial struggle and expectations to be someone else or hide who they are. They mentioned being afraid when going into town because of the way they look or on the defensive as sometimes people want to fight them.



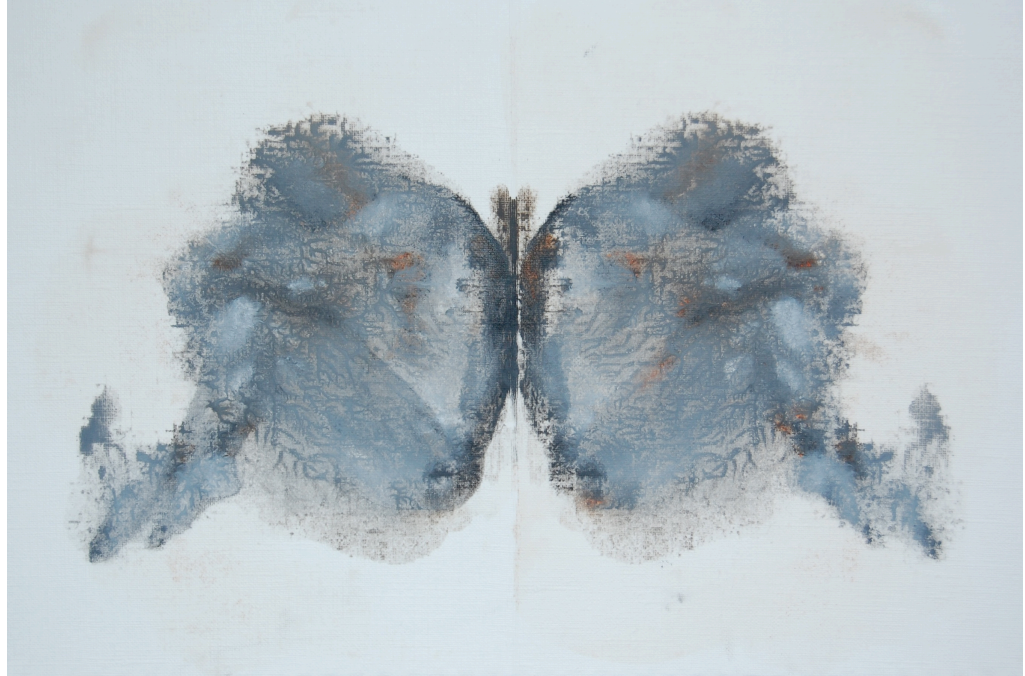
Corinna Nicole, *like to Like # 24*. Oil on canvas. Courtesy the artist

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- Some of the women reported getting into fights (physical and verbal) with people on the street because of their perceived sexual orientation and are often threatened by people in the community.
- Some of the women mentioned that certain churches not allowing LGBT folks to be part of the churches, and others mentioned that churches spoke out against homosexuality and were preaching against it

All participants in this research seemed very interested and excited about a LGBTQSW movement in Ghana, but acknowledged a leadership training and day to day concerns of functioning and becoming productive community members as their main priorities. They understood that human rights issues were of great importance but it didn't seem that the leaders of the small group currently had the capacity to properly advocate their rights without solid trainings and basic understanding of their human rights.

PART 2: How Discriminatory Laws & Patriarchal Social System are Eroding the Psychological & Physical Health of LGBTQSW in Nigeria



Brief Overview of Country Context on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Across most West African countries, particularly in Anglophone countries, same sex activities and relationships among consenting adults are outlawed and criminalized. In Nigeria, the most populous country in the sub-region, LGBTI people are the subjects of violation and abuses of their most basic human rights with impunity, both in the hands of the states and the general public. In late 2011, the introduction of the most repressive and discriminatory legislation yet, the “Same Gender Marriage Prohibition Bill”, which revised a previous anti-homosexuality bill, includes up to 10 years of imprisonment for public display of affection between same-sex couples and further make it criminal for any organization or group that supports LGBT rights.

Furthermore, Northern Nigeria, which is governed by the Sharia Penal Code, LGBTIs living under such code are double penalized. The provisions of the Sharia

Code, which cover 12 Muslim States, apply harsher punishment for people with sexual orientation and gender identity considered deviant and un-Islamic. The Code has specific punishments for male and female homosexuals. Section 130, 131 and 134 of the Sharia Penal Codes says “whoever commits the offence of Sodomy shall be punished:

“With canning of one hundred lashes and if unmarried shall also be liable to imprisonment for a term of one year: or if married with stoning to death”

“Any woman who engages in same sex relationships with caning which may extend to fifty lashes and in addition sentenced to a term of imprisonment which may extend to six months”

Repressive and discriminatory laws coupled with patriarchal social system are the primary contributor to the physical and psychological isolation of women who have sex with other women (WSW). Young women and girls who still depend on parental support live with immense fear of being found out. Deeply closeted, they struggle to cope with unsupportive families, invisibility, and outright fear

RATIONAL

There is a dearth of validated information about lesbian and bisexual women’s health, rights and general well-being in Nigeria. Over the years, development activists have found that issues affecting lesbian and bisexual women have been neglected by the academic community, women NGOs, the public health community and other stakeholders in Nigeria. The result of this lack of attention is that such women are confronted with numerous challenges, including unmet health needs, human rights violations and other offences, on the grounds of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

To better understand some of these issues, the Women’s Health and Equal Rights (WHER), a lesbian and bisexual woman – oriented organization in Abuja, Nigeria organized a focus group discussion to identify the needs and risks facing this community. This is because understanding the needs and risks of this community is critical to devising comprehensive programs to promote their health and rights.

The needs assessment for lesbian and bisexual women was conducted using a Group Discussion as the methodology. The facilitators started the session by reminding the participants about the purpose of the group discussion - which was “To discuss issues affecting Lesbian and Bisexual women in Abuja, Nigeria”. After this, the 10 WSW were asked if they were willing to participate in the discussion and they responded to this by giving their oral consent. The essence of this was to ensure that the WHER team abides by ethical consideration for the needs assessment.

HIGHLIGHTS OF KEY DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Stigma, discrimination and human rights issues facing lesbian and bisexual women
- Access and use of health care based on sexual orientation
- Challenge of lack of acceptance and internalized homophobia
- Extortion and blackmail
- Sexual health and rights issues, including sexual violence and sexual health risks

OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

- LBTQSW experience blackmail, and extortion, verbal insults regularly and women are afraid for their safety, bringing the cases to the police means being “out”, which in turn will shift the attention from the human abuses to the question of sexual orientation. Further harm will be done to the victims.
- LBTQSW constantly fear being involuntarily “outed”.
- Most often, victims of rape suffer trauma and stigma and do not feel safe to go to hospitals to get proper examination or medication treatment and don’t feel they can count on an objective police investigation. They further fear prejudice and discrimination from police officials.
- There is immense family pressure and threat of being disowned, and in many cases this is occurring.
- Lesbians are forced into heterosexual relationships/marriage and to bear children because of societal and family expectations or because of threats of disownment or death from family members.

KEY FINDINGS

The session started with a discussion about a lack of acceptance in the society as it affects lesbians and bisexual women on the grounds of their sexual orientation and gender identity. All of the participants identified a lack of acceptance as a major challenge facing them as sexual minorities. Some participants explained how difficult it is for many lesbian and bisexual women to come out about their sexual orientation, especially in a typical cultural family setting in Nigeria when parents and families usually expect their daughters to get married and have children with men.

During this discussion, one participant shared her own story of what she went through when her parents found out that she was lesbian. She said that her parents immediately interpreted lesbianism as being a spiritual problem and therefore took her to a church where pastors carried out so called “deliverance” for her. The purpose of this, she said, was to stop her from engaging in same-sex sexual practices, which they perceived as being “*demonic*” or an indication of being “*possessed*” by the devil. According to her, “*Despite all the efforts to deliver me from lesbianism by the pastors, I still remain who I am.*”

Participants shared their experiences of receiving insults and other forms of stigma in different settings such as in schools, places of work, neighborhoods, etc. where



Corinna Nicole, *Like to Like #34*. Oil on Canvas. Courtesy the artist

people have made statements such as, “*You fucking lesbian*”, “*You bloody lesbian*”, and “*Shameless lesbian.*” They also shared different experiences of violence and homophobia at large from different people and in various situations on the grounds of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Some participants shared the story of a friend of theirs, a lesbian who was almost set ablaze in Los, a city in Northern Nigeria because people found out about her sexual orientation.

The participants discussed the issue of sexual violence as a serious issue of concern facing their community as women engaged in same-sex sexual practices. A number of cases were cited where lesbian women were raped on the grounds of their sexual orientation by heterosexual men who were angry as they felt these women were, “*wasting their beautiful, attractive and sexy bodies with other women*” rather than having sex. Men see and used rape as a mean to convert the women into heterosexual women. Another participant cited the example of a lesbian girl who was raped by a man she knew very well but against whom she could not seek redress, report, or seek health care because of the fear of stigma, outing of her sexual orientation and the possible delay in accessing justice in Nigeria.

“It is really challenging for us. It is worse for tom boys, that is, women who are masculine or who dress, appear and act like men.”

The participants also discussed the issue of health behaviors, health status and access to and use of health care for lesbian and bisexual women. During this part of the session, participants mentioned discrimination from health workers as a major obstacle for them in accessing health care based on their sexual orientation. The participants also described some cases where some lesbians and bisexual women were humiliated and discriminated against by health workers when they found out about their sexual orientation. Another participant said,

“I don’t really know why people act this way against their fellow human beings just because they are different. That is why many of us keep our sexual orientations secret. It is sad enough that many families and parents do not know that their daughter or sister is lesbian and bisexual. If there is no discrimination, people will open up and share with others. Like me, I can never tell my father I’m lesbian because he will kill me”.

The women further explained the implication of the discrimination by health workers to their health and how it has contributed to many women suffering in silence, contracting infections and having unmet health needs. Also, in the course of this discussion, some participants mentioned that religious leaders are a contributing factor to the widespread discrimination. Religious leaders were said to be using their influence in their churches and mosques through their preaching, which often condemns persons engaged in same- sex practices.

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Participants were asked if they had ever received any sexual health education and information on the health of LBTQWSW but only a few of them mentioned ever receiving such and this was primarily through the Internet. Furthermore, most participants were not informed about protective sex for same-sex practicing women. This may be due to the widespread incorrect beliefs by many that STIs, including HIV is a problem of gay men and that it has nothing to do with women who have sex with women.



Corinna Nicole, *Like to Like #34*. Oil on Canvas. Courtesy the artist.

Participants highlighted another factor that threatens the health of lesbians and bisexual women – that they are forced into heterosexual relationships, which may put their health at risk. A significant number of participants agreed that lesbian and bisexual women sometimes engage in sexual relationships with men for economic reasons, which could

increase their vulnerability to STIs, including HIV. A participant shared a story of some of her lesbian friends who are now married to men against their wishes because they were forced by their parents into doing so. She further explained that these women, despite their marriages, are miserable and unhappy because they are no longer true to themselves in terms of their sexuality. Another participant shared the story of some lesbian and bisexual women who engage in sex work

with men for survival. The issue of multiple partnering was also highlighted as another sexual health challenge in the LBTQWSW community in Abuja.

It was argued by all the participants that there is no organization that provides counseling services, health services, including sexual health, STI, HIV prevention services for LBTQWSW in Abuja. Participants also agreed that many LBTQWSW were at risk of anxiety, depression and even suicide due to the numerous challenges they are often confronted with in the Nigerian society. Extortion and blackmail was discussed as another issue of concern facing the community but none of the participants had personally experienced it. A few participants reported knowing friends who had been extorted and blackmailed on the grounds of their sexual orientation. While most participants seemed to have an acceptance of their sexual orientation, we found that internalized homophobia is an important concern. They mentioned several points such as: not feeling comfortable coming out about their sexual orientation at work or to family members.

“ This is the situation we are facing. I can’t even go to a doctor with my partner to say, look, this is what I’m facing with my health as a lesbian. The reason is because these doctors are homophobic. It is bad enough that you can’t confide in your family doctor. They can out you.”

LESSONS LEARNT/HIGHLIGHTED OBSERVATIONS

- The women were extremely passionate about issues affecting them and how to address them. The interaction level of the participants in the group discussion was high. It was obvious that all the participants were excited to be a part of the process.
- There are no services specifically targeted at LBTQWSW in Nigeria – there is a huge gap and unmet need in this area.
- Most participants were naïve about health issues, including sexual health and rights issues facing lesbian and bisexual women. Some of them have great potentials for becoming advocates and social workers on lesbian and bisexual women’s health. There is, however, a great need for capacity building to strengthen this.
- Ignorance remains a great challenge on these issues as many Nigerians interpret lesbianism as being demonic and devilish. This ignorance contributes to discrimination and a lack of acceptance. The fact that people believe that

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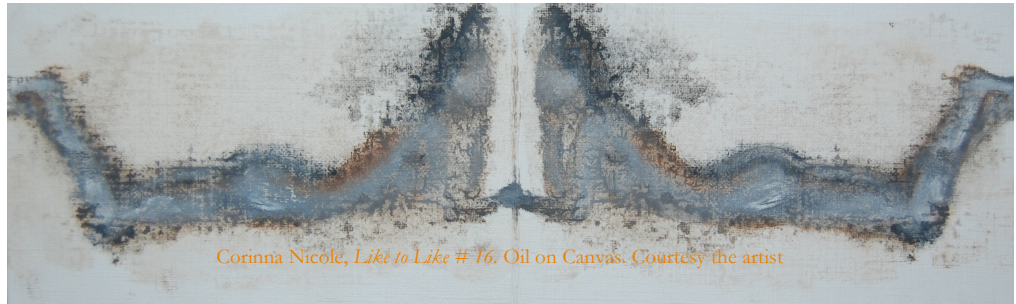
being lesbian can be converted through prayers or sexual violence is also another challenge as it can inspire violence and hate crimes.

- LBTQSW are a vulnerable population in Nigeria. They are highly vulnerable to physical violence; sexual violence; and sexual health risks for instance when they are forced into heterosexual relationships or when they engage in risky sexual behavior with men for economic reasons.
- Many LBTQSW women are suffering in silence and are far from enjoying their sexual rights in Nigeria – some get raped by men and may still be silent without reporting due to the fear of homophobia and being exposed. These women are vulnerable to STIs, including HIV, if they do not seek health care when they are raped.

Part 3: Invisible but Present: How LBTQWSW in Burkina Faso are Living their Lives in the Margins

Brief Overview of Country Context on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Burkina Faso is the only Francophone country where this research was conducted. Compared to its Anglophone neighbors, Burkina Faso does not have any anti-homosexuality law in its Constitution, thus the law is silent on the rights of sexual minorities. Additionally, unlike the other two countries in this report, the government does not publically promote or condone homophobia or homophobic actions. But similar to its Anglophone neighbors, the social, cultural and religious influences are so strong that the LGBT community lives in total clandestinely and is terrorized of being found out.



INTRODUCTION OF PARTICIPANTS and PREPARATORY WORK

The women who participated in both the focus group discussions and individual interviews in Ouagadougou came from various socio-economic backgrounds. The first focus group discussion was with self-identified lesbians and bisexual women, commercial sex workers who provide services to both male and female clients. This group has 30 members, ranging in age from 15 to 40 years old, but we met with 10 members. All participants in this first focus meeting were had feminine gender presentations, and were economically independent women who were either living alone or living with their parents and providing for them. Almost all 10 participants in this focus group were in relationship with someone from the group. Most of the women admitted discovering their sexual orientation through their work.

Regarding education level, all members in this group had completed primary school at a minimum with the highest level of education completed being the second year of secondary school (5ème). The discussion with this group was

conducted in French, Dioula and Moré, with translation by two of the participants.

For this first meeting, we agreed after about three meetings with the leader of the group, to use a *maquis* (a small outdoor restaurant) in her neighborhood. For privacy and security precautions, we rented the entire restaurant for from 9 AM to 1 PM and had a MSM guard the entrance. The group was a bit tense, hard to engage during the first hour, but soon relaxed after the awkwardness passed and participants started to engage in the process.

The second focus group discussion was with LBTQWSW living with disabilities. This group has 10 members in total. The members ranged in age between 25 to 40 years old. Most of these women were small business owners, and rely on wheelchairs to move around. The leader of the group is a prolific entrepreneur and owns two hair salons. Almost all of the group members are single mothers, but all are now in relationship with other women, mostly from within the group itself. We were introduced to this group after co-facilitating a workshop on HIV/AIDS prevention in the MSM and sex workers communities, where we were approached by one of the participants who wanted to introduce us to the leader of this group. The process in identifying and securing a safe space for the meeting was the similar to the first group. The difference here was that we were able to use rented facilities and most individual interviews took place in the home of the researcher.

The third focus group discussion was with a small group of LBTQWSW business owners. This group had 10 members as well, most in their early 30s, and only one person in this group, a midwife, had received formal education. Members of this group had feminine gender presentation, were living alone or with their children, except for the youngest member, 27 year-old who was living with her family. The process around organizing the meeting with this group was similar to the other two. The two focus group discussions took place in the restaurant owned by one the members. We meet with 8 members, during the two sessions.

We also undertook individual interviews with 10 individuals. Their occupations and socio-economic status were varied. The interviewees included a young police officer, an office manager, two university students, a commercial sex worker, a hairdresser, a footballer, an artist, a restaurant owner and an activist.

OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

- The LBTQWSW community in Burkina, especially in the two biggest cities, Bobo Dioulasso and Ouagadougou is deeply closeted yet also quite extensive.

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- LBTQWSW women socialize based on class, age and similar ethnic background.
- Women are vulnerable to blackmailing, especially from neighbors, and are sometimes coerced to have sexual intercourse to “buy the silence” of extortionists.
- LBTQWSW believe that being financially independent will ease family and social pressure to conform to heterosexual lives. They argued that if they could become one of the main breadwinners in their family, their parents and siblings would have less power over their sexual rights.
- Most WSW feel required to have “beer boyfriends”, meaning that to avoid suspicion in their community, they usually will date men, even if they have no intention to have sexual relationships with these men. For the ones who have MSM friends, they will sometimes have fake heterosexual relationships with their MSM friends.
- The vast majority of WSW actively have relationships with men and women; some to avoid scrutiny and other because they need the financial support of their male partners.
- The social and cultural context makes it easy for two women to live together as a couple, but their lives as couple can only unfold behind closed doors. Even in such arrangement, the constant fear of being found out always puts considerable stress on the relationship.
- There is a great need to sensitize police and other law-enforcement officers about sex workers’ rights in order to lower violence and extortions by the authorities.

HIGHLIGHTS OF KEY DISCUSSION TOPICS

- **Experiences in urban Ouagadougou and Family Pressure faced by Burkinabe LBTQWSW**
- **Education of LBTQWSW on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation**
- **WSW Invisibility in LGBTI and HIV/AIDS Initiatives**
- **Lack of access to education and economic opportunities**
- **Need for support organizations for LBTQWSW**

KEY FINDINGS

About 2/3 of the LGBTQSW in the focus group meetings had to leave their hometown in order to escape environments that made it impossible for them to explore their sexuality. Life in a big city like Ouagadougou, according to most of the participants, enabled them to blend more easily and live their lives in a relatively anonymous ways; thus escaping some of the pressure to marry and have children. In addition, the participants we met fit best in the stereotypical notion of feminine women, which enables them to often “pass” and which shields them from the stigmatization and discrimination that the more masculine-presenting LGBTQSW experience. However, all participants recognized that the biggest challenge they face as same-gender loving women comes from the reactions from their family. A woman, who makes her sexual preference known, will either be forced to marry or banned from her family; consequently, the vast majority of LGBTQSW live their sexuality in an extreme secrecy, which makes them vulnerable to psychological distress. All participants said they live “freely” only behind closed door, between peers and sometime after midnight.

Over half of the women we met in Ouagadougou came from a Muslim background. They typically came from large polygamous families, where not much importance is giving to girls’ formal education, since the practice is for them to be married at an early age and to have children. All participants in the focus group discussions expressed the need to educate the public, especially their family members on gender and sexuality issues. They believe that if there was some comprehension around sexual minority groups and their rights, their conditions will improve.

The first focus group discussion, with the group of sex workers, revealed that most of them were practicing this profession due to lack of other economic opportunities for them, and for survival. The youngest participant, a 19-year old, said that she was a

“My family accepts me as a sex worker, but they will ban me if they discover I am a lesbian.”

commercial sex worker to pay for her school fees since her parents would or could not pay for her schooling. She said she lives with the constant fear of her family finding out about both her sexual orientation and her work. Two other participants, two sisters, had to drop out of school to engage in sex work after their father’s sudden death. They were the oldest children and needed to take other father’s duties. They affirmed that their family was accepting of them being sex workers, but they were certain that if they were to discover they are lesbians, they would be cast out or forced into marriage. All the participants in this focus

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group affirmed being publicly open about being sex workers, but are living their lives as lesbians in complete secrecy. They explained that since their income from their sex work was often the only income sustaining their family, this was accepted, but if the word were to be out about their sexual orientation, they would likely experience great discrimination, starting from within their family.

The participants further stated that although they hid their sexual orientation to their loved ones, they still feel more liberated than the LGBTQSW they serve. They affirmed that almost all their clientele is made of married, middle to upper middle class women who are afraid to have long-term relationships with other women, thus preferring the discretion of paying for few hours of another female's company. The focus group participants discussed that the LGBTQSW community in Ouagadougou was very big and completely hidden as women are forced in to marriage, no matter their social status, but still manage to somehow have experiences with other women. However, they highlighted that leading these double lives has a severe psychological impact on LGBTQSW.



Corinna Nicole, *Like to Like # 16*. Oil on Canvas. Courtesy the artist

The commercial sex workers are subject to police harassment and brutality. Some have spent time in jail. They are vulnerable to drug use and often subjected to acts of violence at the hands of their clients, in

addition to the refusal of getting paid for their services. Some of these participants indicated not using condoms or gloves with some clients, especially when they did not get enough clients that night. In this case, they feel required to agree to some clients' request to have unprotected sex. As one participant succinctly said, "otherwise I will starve the next day."

The discussions with the second group, all self-identified bisexual and lesbian women with physical disabilities had some similarities with the first group. However, the added challenges the participants in face are directly linked to their disabilities. The participants affirmed facing more discrimination, stigmatization and social isolation because of their disabilities. They believed that they are invisible at multiple levels, in all layers of society: for being a woman, a person with a disability and a WSW. The participants indicated they were primarily vulnerable as women with disabilities, but also vulnerable because of their sexual orientation. The participants discussed the issues of sexual violence as a serious

issue of concern facing disabled women living alone, with their lovers and/or with their children. They talked about men raping the most physically challenged women and getting away with these acts because most of the time, the women will not report rapes to the police. They justified not reporting rapes to the police based on past experiences of some known women reporting rapes, just to be treated as liars by law enforcement officers who laughed, saying what “man would like to have sex with a disabled woman.” The leader of the group shared the story of a lesbian friend who was forced to regularly respond to the sexual desires of a man in her neighborhood, because he discovered her sexual orientation and threatened to expose her to the all neighborhood. The leader said that this woman had no choice than to comply because she is from a well-respected family and already had to live with the weight of being a disabled person in her family, thus she could not bear to bring more shame to her family.

The multiple discussions, which ran across the groups, revealed a lack of understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation, even in the LBTQWSW community. Although the participants engage in same-sex relationship, they acknowledged not grasping a lot of notion around these practices. This ignorance is due to the fact that sexuality remains taboo and access to the right information is difficult due to the fact there are no organizations explicitly providing services to LBTQWSW. This is compounded with the fact that most participants had low to no education background to be able to access reading materials, even if they wanted to.

“ No one should be a woman, a woman with disability and a lesbian in Burkina Faso.”

The participants argued that even if no existing formal laws criminalize same-sex relationships, they still had to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity. Physical violence, including rape by family members and neighbors, are a reality in the lives of LBTQWSW in Ouagadougou. According to the participants, LBTQWSW who live alone are exposed to extortions and blackmails by neighbors and sometimes forced to provide sexual favors in order to buy silence from male neighbors. The few gender non-conforming women we met are not able to find decent employment because of their gender identity, gender presentation and sexual orientation. The gender non-conforming participants (who do not identify as transgender) further argued that because they are visibly gay, most often when they are in relationships with other women, these women would be pressured to end the relationship by family members and/or friends as not to attract too much attention. The gender non-conforming participants also reported experiencing intimidations from men and sometime police officers, threatening to “show them how to be a real man” or arresting them for being lesbians in the case of the police

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officers. They stated that people's stares and looks of contempt are daily occurrences that are very heavy to bear.

Like most women in Burkina Faso, LBTQSW have little to no formal education. Most participants stated they primarily make ends meet by operating small, informal



Corinna Nicole, *Like to Like #16*. Oil on Canvas. Courtesy the artist

businesses. The group of bisexual and lesbian commercial sex workers argued that poverty is the primarily reason why they are in the sex industry. Due to the fact that their financial contributions are expected in their families, including helping with mortgage, food, paying for siblings and/or children's education, most WSW are forced into sex work to fulfill their obligations as family members.

The vast majority of participants wish to see organizations providing services such as counseling, health services and/or a center where they can go and find information and a support system. All participants actively advocate for some kind of interventions in families to sensitize parents about sexual rights. They strongly believe that if the families get basic sexual education, there was "a chance that they might tolerate homosexuality."

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The research process, and specifically the series of focus group discussions and individual interviews, highlighted that there are specific needs for LBTQWSW that cut across national boundaries and contexts. The earlier sections highlighted specific themes and observations for each country context. The purpose of the following section is to present QAYN's recommendations to policy makers, international and local NGOs interested in the promotion and protection of women's human rights, as well as activists, and any other actors who care about the wellbeing, safety and livelihoods for LBTQWSW in West Africa.

- Conduct sensitization of LBTQWSW on sexual orientation and gender identity to ensure clarity for the community and increase women's understanding of sexuality.
- Develop sub-regional research on the sexual health of LBTQWSW in West Africa. Ideally, this should be designed and implemented by coalition of grassroots groups, with the technical support of academic researchers.
- Explicitly include and engage WSW as stakeholders in any and all HIV/AIDS discourse and initiatives.
- Provide medical support that incorporates assistance with substance abuse and depression. This should be done in conjunction with research on mental health, suicide prevalence and risk within LBTQWSW communities in West Africa.
- Provide women with basic self defense training – to help women to physically defend themselves.
- Promote support groups and counseling services to women who have sex with women, with particular outreach and well-developed resources for those who are coming to a realization about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Due to the social isolation, stigma, secrecy, discrimination and the notion that “being a lesbian you are doomed to be poor, alone and unhappy”, there is a great need to provide psycho-social support mechanisms to LBTQWSW, to minimize depression and substance abuse. There is also a need to provide positive and safe spaces that provide community and access to information.
- Train the LBTQWSW communities about the complexity of sexual violence, basic documentation of human rights violence and create referral networks of allied police, doctors and lawyers to contact in case of sexual violence and other abuses.

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- Sensitization of religious and traditional leaders, family members and the entire society on sexual orientation and gender identity, by specifically identifying and training key allies in these communities to conduct the sensitization work.
- Provide access to skills-building programs in order to increase economic independence.
- Provide media advocacy and training on sexual orientation and gender diversity, to encourage more balanced, informed media coverage that also does not incite hatred or violence towards LGBTQQ people.
- Train LBTQWSW in leadership skills development and provide technical support to strengthen capacities of LBTQWSW movement in the sub-region.
- Offer security training to WSW activists.
- Provide training on advocacy and languages to support activists and the entire LBTQWSW community to develop confidence and understanding of the power of advocacy and knowledge of advocacy tools.
- Provide training on feminist theories, sexual rights and links to human rights.
- Award institutional support grants for grassroots LBTQWSW groups, which are in great need of financial and technical support to attain their fullest potential and meet the needs of their community (and who have very limited access to funding). These supports will enable groups to provide more services and to gain more legitimacy for their work.
- Create opportunities for linking WSW leaders with mainstream women's groups. Such opportunities could include internship placements for young WSW in various women's organizations. There is a need for young WSW to get involved, be included and invited to conferences, meetings, in order to bolster a more inclusive women's rights movement.
- Strengthen spaces and opportunities for WSW groups to support and work together, nationally and cross-nationally.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the research process was an informative and engaging one in and of itself. As a newly established organization, QAYN benefitted from the process of collecting information, analyzing the issues across the contexts, and learning. These activities also enabled us to clarify areas for collaboration with local and international LGBTQ organizations as well as our unique interventions. We intentionally decided to use focus groups and to undertake a purely qualitative process to enable the engagement to be more interactive and participatory. Although this research highlights some of the key observations and crosscutting issues in the needs, challenges and realities faced by LBTQWSW across three West African contexts, we want to caution readers to avoid overgeneralization on the basis of this report. We recognize that our review has its own limitations, several of which we will describe;

- First, there is some considerable self-selection bias amongst the focus group discussion participants. Most of the women who attended were already engaged in LBTQWSW groups or social gatherings, and many of them were leaders within these groups. Thus, they were more likely to be more comfortable with their sexual orientation identity, engaged within the community and relatively more “out” than other LBTQWSW.
- Second, our sample was predominately urban, although many of the participants may have migrated from other areas of their respective countries. We know much less about the context for women in more rural areas, where there are even less opportunities to connect with the community, with other LBTQWSW women, and to access information.
- Third, individual groups were made up of women from relatively similar socio-economic backgrounds and/or occupations. There are likely LBTQWSW individuals and communities, even within the same cities, who were not represented in the groups that we met with.
- Fourth, although there was variation in how they experienced and expressed their gender, almost all of the participants identified as “women”. We did not explicitly ask about their assigned sex at birth, but based on the conversations, we can infer that most were assigned the female sex at birth. Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to interact extensively with individuals who identify as transgendered or gender variant, and we believe that there is certainly much to learn and understand about their unique experiences and lived realities within West African contexts.

We recognize that QAYN does not have the capacity to address all of the needs discussed throughout this report. Moreover, there is an exciting growing

movement of organizations that are working to promote human rights for all, and specifically to provide support and services to LGBTQ/MSM/WSW individuals. The research process helped us to learn more about these other actors in the region, identify opportunities for collaboration, and also to identify areas where QAYN is best suited to lead.

A key issue that arose in every conversation was the need for a space that is safe, secure and comfortable, for LBTQWSW to connect, have access to resources and information, and to find support. QAYN has prioritized the development of “space” since its establishment in 2010. Since November 2011, the QAYN-produced Q-Zine, a quarterly magazine, by, for and about sexual minority groups in Africa and the diaspora, provides a virtual, creative and storytelling space for LGBTQQ Africans to share their talents and to speak about their lives. QAYN’s website also hosts a forum for discussion, and a health advice column where readers can obtain health information and answers to questions. We have also developed the H.O.T. program, a peer education curriculum for young LBTQ Africans. Our priority is to bolster our physical presence in the region, while enhancing our virtual space, in order to create space and engage a wide network of individuals. We realize that the Internet can be a powerful tool for increasing access to information about sexuality and for building community, and are committed to using technology to provide access to quality information and resources, and to strengthen the network. QAYN is establishing a physical office in Burkina Faso, and we plan to launch a young women’s support group, based in this office. We also plan to organized national forums for LBTQWSW in three Francophone countries, to bring women together for reflection, exchange and collective-action. We have developed a project in collaboration with Isis International (a well-established feminist organization based in the Philippines), which will involve an eight-month long leadership program to build the leadership skills of 15 LBTQWSW young women from Francophone West African countries. We believe that strengthened leadership will strengthen the movement, and will enable young women to play a crucial role in facilitating and sustaining inclusive spaces for LGBTQ people across the region.

Documentation is an essential component of QAYN’s work, and we believe that this report contributes to the growing body of knowledge in this field. There are many more questions to be answered, and much more work to be done. We are excited about sharing our ongoing learning. Most importantly, we look forward working collaboratively with the community of concerned individuals and organizations, to facilitate a more inclusive and empowering environment for LGBTQQ individuals across the African continent.

Annex A: Sample of Questionnaire

Core question 1: What are the issues that matter most to you, as lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or women who have sex with women?

1. What are the things that concern you the most as human beings and African women? (goals, values, plans, expectation from family and society)
2. What are the most challenging aspect of being lesbian, bisexual or transgendered women in your country? How do you overcome them?

→ *What do see as the challenges for the queer women community in city and country? (e.g. health, leadership, empowerment, etc.)*

BRIDGE: We are interested in the experience of LBTQWSW in their communities and what spaces exist for them in city/country.

Core question 2: How visible are LBTQWSW and what spaces exist for them in country?

1. Do you find that LGBTQI are people visible in their communities here?
2. How do LBTQSWs meet each other? How do people find out about the groups or other information relevant for queer women in city/country?

→ *What social activities do LBTQWSW in city/country engage in?*

BRIDGE: From what we have heard SSSJE is one example of a space for queer women in Accra, so we are interested in how the SSSJE groups work.

Core question 3: How do the SSSJE groups work?

1. What are the reasons that your group get together/meets? And, what are some of the topics that you discuss?

→ *What are some of the concerns that the group members have had?*

→ *Are the different groups divided based on specific issues, such as lesbians groups, bisexual groups, transgendered women groups, or footballers groups, etc?*

2. What are some of the challenges facing the group leaders of queer women?

→ *What are the possible ways of addressing these challenges?*

BRIDGE: One of the goals of QAYN is to promote the development of a movement of queer young people across West Africa, to come together to share information, learn from each for a strong movement building.

Core question 4: How interested and willing are you in being involved in a LGBTI movement?

1. Do you see any necessity in building a regional women's movement?
 - *How do you understand community building?*
 - *What approaches have worked and/or not worked in the past?*

2. What do they think LGBTI/Queer movement should look like and what role/responsibility they want to take in that movement?

Support Us

QAYN currently operates as an all-volunteer organization, and has established an accessible web site that provides critical resources and information; published the first pan-African, bilingual and electronic magazine; organized several focus meetings in different West African countries; published a peer-counseling curriculum and engaged in events to raise awareness about the situation of African LGBT populations in the U.S and participated in the 49th Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

We need financial support to sustain and formalize our operations, and launch key pilot projects for promoting and understanding human rights of LGBT youth; promoting queer women's support groups; training peer counselors for the region; and organize leadership and advocacy training for young LGBTQSW in the region.

HOW TO SUPPORT OUR WORK

- **Spread the word about us and our publications**
- **Refer us to donors**
- **Link us to other link-minded groups worldwide**
- **Make an online donation: <http://www.qayn-center.org/support-us/>**

FOLLOW QAYN

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/QAYN/>

Twitter: [@qayncenter](https://twitter.com/qayncenter)

READ OUR E-MAGAZINE

<http://issuu.com/q-zine>

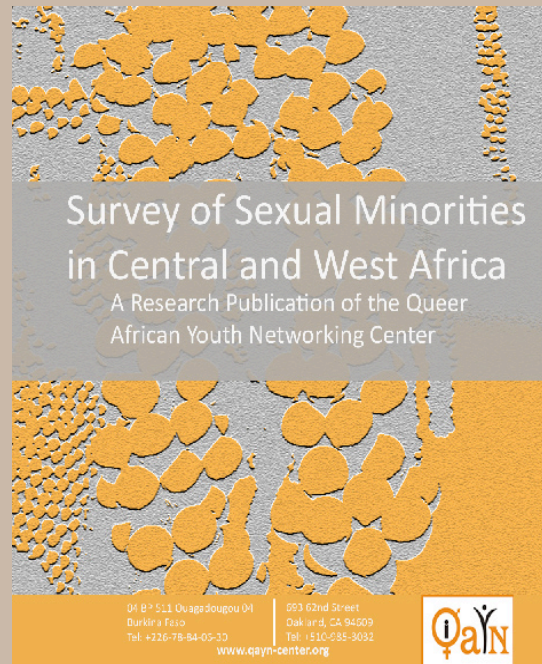
CONTACT US

contact@qayn-center.org

The Queer African Youth Networking Centre (QAYN) was formed in 2010 intended to establish a wide network of support to promote the safety and well-being of lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender and questioning West African youth. A fiscal project in California, USA and pending registration in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, QAYN currently works with lesbians, transgendered and bisexual women in Ghana, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and MSM in Cameroon. QAYN is committed to establishing a wide range of network to promote a healthy and supportive community both online and offline, where LGBTQ African youth, especially lesbians and transgender, connect, openly discuss issues directly impacting them, exchange information, find relevant resources with the aim of empowering youth to regain dignity. By providing a safe platform, QAYN aims to create a trusting and supportive environment for out and questioning youth to relate to one another, empower them to advance the issues of LGBTI in West Africa and foster activism so that youth can advocate for a more dignified cultural, socio-economic and political environment.

Documentation is an essential component of QAYN's work, and we believe that this report contributes to the growing body of knowledge in this field. There are many more questions to be answered, and much more work to be done. We look forward to sharing our ongoing learning with the broader community of individuals and organizations interested in promoting and protecting the human rights of LGBTQ Africans.

Our documentation and publications include a recent publication of a report of "Census of Sexual Minorities in Central and West Africa" and QAYN's quarterly, bilingual, pan-african electronic magazine, Q-zine.



www.qayn-center.org

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