

BETWEEN US: The complexities of Lesbians, Bisexual and Queer Women's Organizing in Franco-phone Sub-Saharan Africa

Case Studies
Cameroon & Togo



“The deep entrenchment of male privilege within specific organisations and within society at large suggests that women are likely to be in the forefront of any fundamental changes to the system and its most effective advocates, so that transformatory strategies will generally entail creating the conditions where the potential for such challenge can be articulated, mobilised, and acted upon...”

Naila Kabeer

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Foreword

Since the 1994 ICPD Cairo, there have been significant advancements in recognising and addressing the needs of our diverse communities in Africa in the arena of sexual reproductive health and rights.

Sadly for sexual minorities, an attitude of silence, denial, and even criminalisation has run rampant across our continent, legitimising increased hatred and violence.

Why has this been so?

First, we have not understood why and how some members of our communities are different in how they live and experience their sex and gender. A lack of respect at all levels of our society for people with alternative sexual identities is the result of little quality research enabling a better understanding of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

Second, there has been a steady rise in religious fundamentalist leanings in our countries. The continent's major religions preach peace and love on one hand while continuing to condone hate and violence on the other. Religious fundamentalism has eaten so deeply into our continent that it is now used as the moral standard that dictates African policies, laws and constitutions.

Even though the fight against HIV /AIDS opened an avenue for intervention in the domain of sexuality, it was not until the early 2000s that the discourse of integrated approaches to HIV/AIDS programming provided a platform within the movement for participation of at-risk sexual minorities. Even then, Lesbians, Bisexual women, Queer women and Women who have Sex with Women (LBQWSW) have not been visible despite their vulnerability to curative rapes, hate rapes, and other examples of extreme sexual violence and victimisation.

There are currently very few initiatives researching, mobilising, organising, and advocating for the rights and sexual reproductive health of LBQWSW communities. Even fewer are founded and led by LBQWSW women themselves. To further complicate the matter, they are faced with herculean challenges ranging from limited or no funding and low

leadership capacity to hostile policy and legal environments.

There is a need for an enabling environment that supports the emergence of LBQWSW focused groups and the creation of new LBQWSW focused institutions at a critical mass and a force formidable enough to bring about the change we all so desire to see on our continent. This case studies report, *Between Us: The complexities of Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Women's Organizing in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa* has been produced to give us an insight, and a good measure of understanding, into the nature, capacity and challenges of existing LBQWSW communities, networks and organisations to put us in a position to provide the much needed support required by LBQWSW women to thrive and to advocate for themselves.

Although this report is based on case studies of LBQWSW-led organizing work conducted in two different francophone African regions, Cameroun and Togo, we hope that the findings will give all readers a good idea of what is obtainable in sub-Saharan Africa because of the similarities in our socio-cultural and policy environments, especially as they relate to sexual diversity and human rights.

I strongly recommend this report to all development partners - women's movements, mainstream human rights movements, governments and governmental agencies at the regional and country levels, donor agencies, bilateral agencies and international allies.

Between Us: The complexities of Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Women's Organizing in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa is a compass to all who are struggling to work within the complex landscape of sub-Saharan African LBQWSW organising. This is a groundbreaking initiative that points us towards, and keeps our focus on, the right kind of support to give struggling communities and emerging LBQWSW organizers in sub-Saharan Africa.

With this report we invite you to be part of the movement.

Cesnabmihilo Dorothy Aken'Ova

QAYN's Advisor

Acknowledgements



The Queer African Youth Networking Center (QAYN) would like to express its deep gratitude to the young women activists who fully embraced QAYN's vision of community organizing to implement our collective action plan following the *Gender, Sexuality and Communications: Towards Strengthening Leadership of Queer, Young Women in Francophone West Africa* workshop. The activists' leadership in executing the action plan and their contributions to collective learning through the production of activity reports and project evaluations have been key to the success of the project and the drafting of this report.

QAYN would like to thank the 12 activists from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Senegal and Togo, who, over the course of six months, dedicated their time and energy to organize community mobilizing activities and creating safe spaces for individuals who identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer and women who have sex with women (LBQWSW) in their respective countries. Their experience and insights, which are captured in this report, are invaluable learning material for QAYN and any stakeholders who are looking to develop programs in support of LBQWSW organizing work in Francophone Central and West Africa.

We are thankful to Jules Eloundou, the Director and the entire staff of Humanity First Cameroon for enabling the activists to create a safe space for

LBQWSW women within the organization's community center. We are grateful to Yves Kugbe of *Es-poir Vie Togo* for opening their community center for the group in Lomé. We are indebted to Mme. Kébé of *Sourire de Femme* for lending her living room to the group in Dakar to create a safe space for the young Senegalese women who participated in the program. Finally, a big thank you to Stéphane Simporté for providing ongoing support to the group in Burkina Faso.

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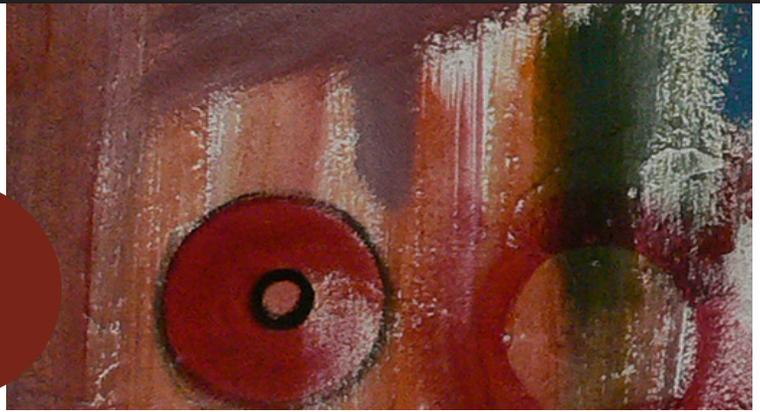


Table of Contents

1	Introduction	6
2	Project Overview	8
	Selection and brief introduction of participants.....	9
	Brief Summary of the Action Plan Through Local Activities Cameroon & Togo.....	10
3	Cameroon Case Study	12
	Country Context	13
	Cameroon Case Study	
4	Togo Case Study	20
	Country Context	20
	Togo Case Study	21
5	Lessons Learned	26
6	Conclusion	30

One

1



Introduction

In Africa, amidst an increasing hostile socio-cultural and political context, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals are engaging in collective organizing as an effective strategy to unmask and address the many experiences of violence and discrimination against LGBT individuals. In few parts of the continent, such as in South Africa, groups can speak of marked achievements in working with national leaders and decision-makers to develop policies that protect and uphold the rights of LGBT citizens.

Gay, bisexual, transgender and men who have sex with men (GBTMSM) have been particularly successful in organizing around their sexual health and rights, and influencing the development of more GBTMSM-inclusive policies, in large part under the cover of donor funding aimed at preventing the spread of HIV and AIDS. The African Men for Sexual Health and Rights (AMSHer), a regional coalition of 18 MSM-led organizations throughout Sub-Saharan Africa is an example. Since 2008, AMSHer's work has evolved from "providing a platform for exchange and learning among grassroots MSM organizations, HIV services and advocacy organizations"¹ to taking greater leadership in advocacy and development of policies that are inclusive of MSM issues.

On the other hand, if African lesbian, bisexual, queer and women who have sex with women

(LBQWSW) share numerous challenges with GBTMSM communities, they also face unique challenges within the larger society and within LGBT civil society. Women organizing around LBQWSW issues are foremost constrained by the conservative roles and expectations placed on women in Africa. Secondly, within LGBT civil society LBQWSW issues are often neglected or given low priority within the LGBT agenda. Due to the mostly conservative agenda of the African women's movement, women rights activists have been reluctant to publically recognize the issues of LBQWSW women as an integral part of their agenda in promoting the rights of all women, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Consequently, LBQWSW activists have few options to lead or even participate in the social justice agenda for the rights of all African women. Moreover, funders and government agencies offer far less equal access to resources and security when it comes to addressing the issues oppressing LBQWSW women.

African LBQWSW organizing work tends to be led by small, grassroots groups, and their leaders tend to be young and relatively inexperienced. The majority of these groups tend to be informal in their structure and operate with volunteer staff and no budget. Despite these realities, LBQWSW women are increasingly engaging in activism, through formal and informal structures, and some with growing visibility such as the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL). Others continue to work in total isolation.

¹ About AMSHer: <http://www.amsher.net/AboutAMSHer/tabid/56/Default.aspx>

In Central and West Africa, LBQWSW-led organizing work at a similar scale and structure as those of MSM-led groups is essentially nonexistent. Newly formed LGBT organizations in the regions are male-dominated in their leadership and are focused on MSM health and rights. The HIV industry's focus on MSM and increasingly sex workers populations in their HIV risk management efforts has sidelined addressing complex issues and challenges faced by a diverse LGBT community in these two sub-regions. For LBQWSW women it provides few options for leadership or even basic participation in the social justice agenda of the LGBT movement.

Frustrated, disillusioned but determined, small, community-based LBQWSW-led groups are being formed in major cities in Central and West Africa and these groups are finding ways to strategize to overcome their invisibility, lack of experience, and lack of resources in order to build their own movements. Their efforts would have benefitted from collaboration and support with established women-led and MSM-led organizations, but this has been largely unsuccessful to date.

It is from this background that the Queer African Youth Networking Center (QAYN) identified the need to strengthen the leadership and the work of emerging LBQWSW leaders in Central and West Africa, particularly in Francophone countries.

In 2011, QAYN approached Isis International, a Manila-based feminist organization to collaborate on a project eventually titled, *Gender, Sexuality and Communications: Towards Strengthening Leadership of Queer, Young Women in Francophone West Africa*. The project had two components: a workshop focused on critical theories of gender, sexuality and communications, and a six month implementation period of pilot activities to be led by workshop participants. The project workshop took place

successfully in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in September 2012 and brought together eight young activists from Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Togo.

The following activities of the action plan focused on creating safe spaces to facilitate the gathering of LBQWSW women and house their political, personal, cultural and social discussions in each of the participant's home country. Over a period of six months, from November 2012 to April 2013, with the groups in Burkina Faso and Togo extending their implementation period until June, the young women organized several activities to bring at least 50 LBQWSW women together through group discussions, film screenings and sport activities.

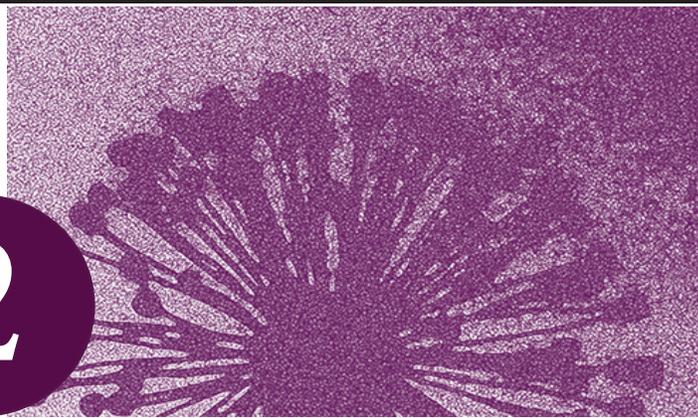
This report presents two case studies of the work that took place in Togo and Cameroon as an attempt to capture the complexities of community organizing involving and led by LBQWSW women in Central and West Africa. Its aim is to provide a basis for learning some of the pertinent issues affecting these communities and, to spark a broader discussion on ways to improve and support the work led by LBQWSW activists.

My analysis of the situation is based on both my own experience of coordinating community organizing and movement building activities in these regions, supported by the monthly reports submitted by each group in the project as part of our monitoring methods.

The report aims to initiate discussions among women's groups, LGBT activists and shareholders on the necessity to work with and support LBQWSW-led initiatives, and to appeal to funders to effectively invest in the critical work being carried out by LBQWSW-led groups.

TWO

2



Project Overview

Since its inception, QAYN has always sought to identify and support young activists, both those working within existing LGBT and youth-led organizations, as well as those who are not affiliated with specific organizations. QAYN has maintained a particular focus on young lesbian, bisexual, queer activists both in Anglophone and Francophone West African countries, valuing collective engagement and working collaboratively across movements and regions in order to achieve the social change that QAYN seeks.

It is within this strategic framework that QAYN approached Isis International in April 2011 to develop a leadership development project for Francophone young women activists. Isis International, a feminist media and information communication organization based in the Global South, joined QAYN in shaping this project, particularly in developing the training modules and workshop facilitation. It also brought to the collaboration its experience of Southern feminist advocacy work on various women's issues in the global South, including LGBT rights advocacy in Southeast Asia. Later titled *Gender, Sexuality and Communication: towards strengthening the Leadership of Queer, Young Women in Francophone West Africa*, the project was developed as an eight-month leadership strengthening program with the aim of addressing the knowledge and skills training much-needed by young women for effective organizing of LBQWSW-led groups in Francophone West Africa. The program also sought to ground emerging activists in an understanding of gender and sexuality

that is sensitive to African contexts and to build skills in leadership, organizing and communications. It took over a year and half to plan and fundraise for this project. The first phase of the project, a five-day training and workshop, finally took place in Burkina Faso in September 2012. This training, the first of its kind in the sub-region, brought together eight lesbian, bisexual and queer young activists from Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Senegal.

The overall goal of the five-day intensive training was to deepen participants' individual and organizational agency to shape their social justice activism. An immediate outcome of the workshop was the development of a collective action plan that participants committed to implement over a period of six months. The concrete steps included in their plan were aligned with their overall goal of creating safe spaces in their communities that would facilitate bringing LBQWSW women together to engage in discussions that will surface their needs and address ways forward in developing collective actions to tackle issues pertinent to them. To support the activists in their efforts, Isis and QAYN provided modest seed funding of \$600US per country for the implementation of activities during the six-month period.

Selection and brief introduction of participants

The selection process was guided by two main factors:

1) we wanted to select young women with extensive connections to women's groups in their region; and, 2) to select young women with some organizing experience (either formal or informal) or who demonstrated an interest in engaging in organizing work. More importantly, we looked for an inquisitive and fearless nature and candidates with an ability to express ideas and interest in working for change in their community. For the purposes of communication, virtual networking and reporting, the project required a minimum level of literacy. We concluded that due to the challenging nature of the project two women per country would be selected, in order to promote teamwork and peer support, and, to plan for potential attrition. Where possible, candidates working in the same local organization in each country were selected. This decision was informed by the fact that with limited financial resources to support the groups in their post-training activities, we needed to select women who had some access to non-financial resources, such a space to organize their activities.

TOGO- With the support of Yves Kugbe from Espoir Vie Togo, a mainstream NGO with a MSM program in Lomé, we selected two of their volunteers who were just starting a lesbian and bisexual women's support group. Of the two women, one had a Master degree in Insurance Management and the other, a Bachelor in Human Resources. They were 25 and 22 respectively. One identified as lesbian and the other as bisexual.

SENEGAL- Through past connections with a feminist organization in Dakar working with young lesbians and bisexual women, Sourire de Femme, we selected two of their volunteers.

Of the two activists from Senegal, one was a 24 year-old professional football player; she had a middle-

school-level of education. The second woman, 30 years old, held a Masters degree in Sociology and was formally unemployed, although served as Sourire de Femme's Vice-president. One became a single mother at the age of 17 and identified as lesbian and the other, as same-sex loving woman.

COTE D'IVOIRE- We learned of a group in Côte d'Ivoire through the Global Fund for Women, one of our funders for the training, Lesbian Life Association Côte d'Ivoire (LLACI) and invited the Co-founder and another member to participate in the program. However, only one of the two candidates, the Co-founder was able to attend the workshop. The participant, a 23 year-old, was a Webmaster by training but unemployed. She identified as a "boy".

BURKINA FASO- QAYN's own connection to communities enabled us to identify three women. The candidates were not affiliated with any organization and were new to organizing work, except for one, who is the Founder of an organization providing direct services to orphans in rural areas. Out of the three women, two were based in the capital, Ouagadougou, and the third one came from the third largest city, Ouahigouya. They were 23, 31 and 33, and were respectively a mechanic, a restaurant manager and unemployed. All three women had a high-school level of education. Two of them identified as lesbians and the third as queer. And of the three, two were single mothers, both before the age of 20.

A month prior to the implementation phase, a Cameroonian activist joined the project and is the only project participant not to attend the workshop in Burkina Faso. The activist, a self-identified lesbian from Yaoundé, Cameroon, has a Master degree in psychology, and was a researcher and teacher by profession. She was the Gender Program Coordinator of Humanity First Cameroon, a MSM organization and one of QAYN's member organizations.

She was supported by five peer educators, aged 23- 35, in this project. Three of them were single mothers and the fourth one was expecting her first child; she would subsequently leave the project to give birth. One of the women was a personal trainer/ football coach; two were civil servants; one was a third year university student studying Geography and, the fifth woman, was unemployed.

Brief Summary of the Action Plan Through Local Activities

The main objective of the action plan was to create safe spaces that will facilitate community mobilization of LBQWSW women and house their personal, political, cultural and social debates. The activists aimed to mobilize at least 50 LBQWSW women per country through activities including bi-weekly groups discussions, film screenings, and social activities including sports.

The activists in Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Togo began the project's implementation in late November 2012 and the group in Senegal joined them in December. From November 2012 to May 2013, the following organizing activities took place in each country:

Cameroon– (November –May). Seven activities were organized and 32 LBQWSW women were mobilized. The activities were: 1) group discussions; 2) film projections; 3) outreach in bars and other social gathering places; 4) peer counseling and hotline management; 5) culinary activities; 6) STI and HIV testing; and 7) project evaluation meetings. Humanity First Cameroon, a QAYN member organization, supported the group in creating a safe space by providing a space its community center.

Togo– (November – June). The main activities were group discussions and film screenings. Nine such activities were organized and 102 LBQWSW were

mobilized. Espoir Vie Togo provided the group with a space to organize their activities.

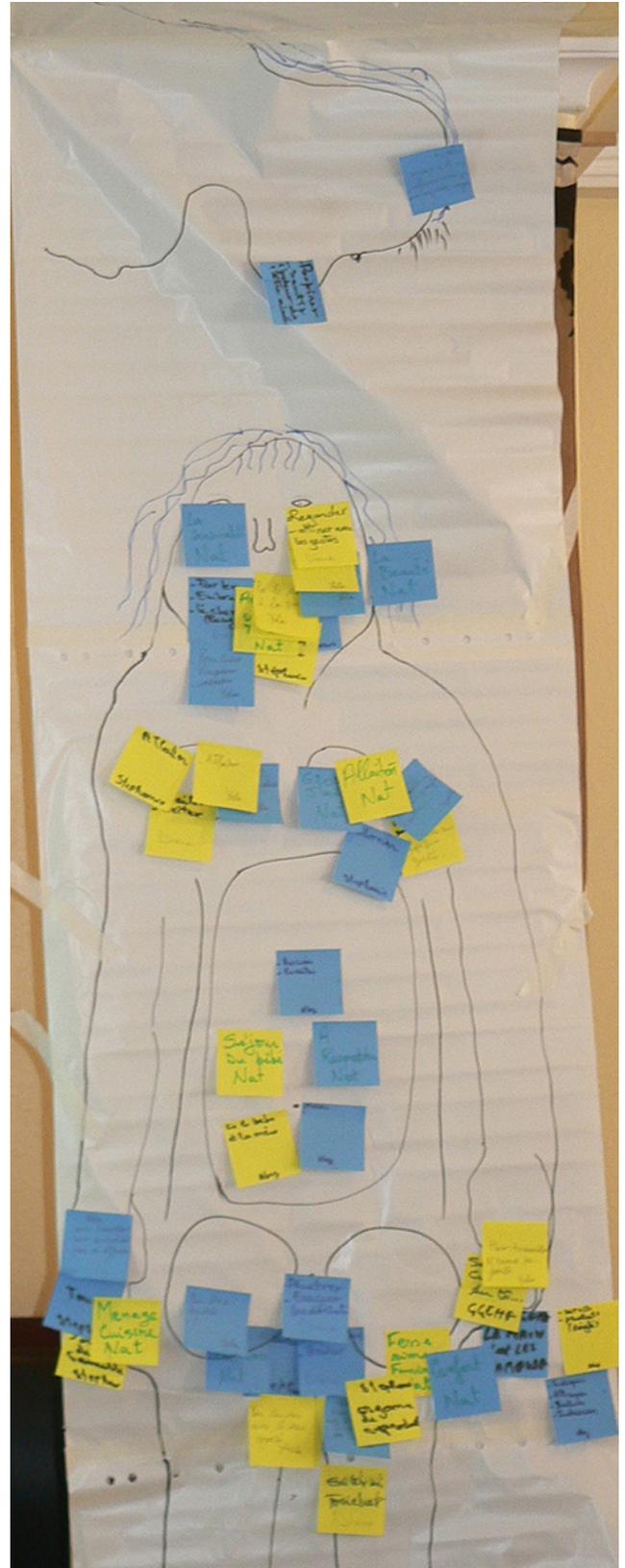
Senegal– (November – March). Despite the fact that the activists were part of an organization, they struggled greatly to conduct their activities following the workshop and eventually dropped out of the project at the end of March 2013. However, during the period they were part of the project they organized four activities, mainly group discussions, and brought 50 LBQWSW women together in Dakar and in Guédiawaye, a community on the outskirts of Dakar.

Burkina Faso– (November – June). The main activities in Burkina Faso were group discussions, film screenings and a football game. In total, the group organized 9 group discussions, 3 film screening and one football game. Twenty-seven (27) LBQWSW women benefited from the project. In the beginning, this group organized their activities in a restaurant, where one of the project leaders was the manager, on Sundays when the restaurant was closed. It wasn't until late December 2012, when QAYN opened the first LGBT community center in the capital, that the group was able to access a more secure space to organize their activities.

To remain connected and share their experiences, the groups communicated through social media, primarily Facebook, and used a list-serve to share their reports, resources and other pertinent information. They created a secret Facebook group where they met live on the third Saturday of each month in order to share their progress, plans for the coming month, their challenges and learn from each other. They also created a second secret Facebook group to virtually mobilize peers who were not direct beneficiaries of their on-the-ground work. From the list-serve, they shared their monthly reports, including activities and financial reports. One volunteer was responsible for managing the Facebook groups; another for

organizing the monthly meeting and I was the list-serve's administrator.

Throughout the project, the author supported the groups remotely and, in February 2013, went on a three-week evaluation trip to support the team in Lomé, Dakar and Yaoundé.



Three

3



Cameroon Case Study

Country Context

A 2013 report by Human Rights Watch found that Cameroon was one of the few countries in the world to actively pursue its citizens in court for engaging in consensual same-sex relations between two adults². Article 347B of the country's Penal Code condemns "sexual relations with a person of the same sex" with a punishment of a six month to five year prison term and a fine of 20,000 to 200,000 CFA francs³.

In February 2013 during my visits to Douala and Yaoundé, respectively Cameroon's capital and its second largest city, I interviewed four members of the LGBT community whose lives had been greatly affected by the national crackdown on individuals suspected or identified as homosexuals. Of the four, two were young gender non-conformists, recently freed after spending three years in prison. Another person, a gay man, spent one year in jail before being sentenced to three more, but is now a fugitive determined not to return to prison. The fourth person, a young lesbian, was released from prison pending her trial. This provides a sense of the grave impact of these laws on the country's LGBT population.

² Guilty by Association, Human Rights Violations in the Enforcement of Cameroon's Anti-Homosexuality Law. Human Rights Watch: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2013/03/21/guilty-association>

³ 20,000 to 200,000 CFA: \$40 to \$400 US

In addition to the repressive legal environment, I was amazed to discover how much Cameroonian society associates homosexuality with witchcraft. Every single LGBT person I spoke with attested that, in addition to the laws, society rejected them because homosexuals are considered to have made a deal with witches to enrich themselves. Some ethnographic literatures also explore this perception. For example, in his essay on sexuality in Beti culture, the largest ethnic group in central Cameroon, the anthropologist Ombolo found that homosexuality was widely viewed as witchcraft and severely punished. According to the author, women accused of a same-sex relationship were subject to beatings and genital mutilation.⁴ Although the latter practice is no longer used against same-sex loving women in Cameroon, their lives are highly monitored by their families and neighbors and it is commonplace for the women to resort to having children to "prove" that they are not lesbians. This is the main factor explaining the high percentage of single mothers in the LBQWSW communities.

According to LGBT activists, homophobia is on the rise, fueled by the increasing visibility of both activists and LGBT individuals in the public arena. Individuals perceived to challenge the patriarchal socio-cultural norms of their assigned gender face a host of repercussions.

⁴ Sexe et société en Afrique noire. L'anthropologie sexuelle beti: essai analytique, critique et comparatif. Ombolo, J.P. (1990). Paris: l'Harmattan.

The arrests, physical abuse and extortion of feminine-presenting men are examples of such repercussions. In the case of women, masculine-presenting women labeled “footballeuses” are the most visible and the most likely to experience the same violations and discrimination as the aforementioned men.

In a deeply religious country such as Cameroon, churches are promoters of what are considered appropriate gender expression and roles. Recent months have seen a growing number of church leaders preaching homophobia. For instance, according to activists, in his 2012 Christmas’s Eve sermon, the Archbishop of Yaoundé called upon his congregation to actively discriminate against LGBT people. In June 2013, during a press conference following a workshop under the theme, “Terrorists in society and dogma: their origins and how to eradicate them”, the National Council of the Communauté islamique Ahl-UI-Bayat du Cameroun (Cisac) [the Islamic Community of Ahl-UI-Byat of Cameroon] a local Muslim association representing religious family values, Cheick Hassan Nsangou compared homosexuality to “sexual terrorism”⁵ and called on Muslims to condemn homosexuality.

Still, amidst this climate, LGBT Cameroonians are becoming more visible, particularly through their organizing work. The country counts 7 LGBT/MSM organizations, all of which are MSM-led. There is only one lesbian-led organization, Lady’s Corporation, which uses sport, mainly football, to bring LBQWSW communities together.

5 Cameroun: L’Islam dit non à l’homosexualité! Camer.be. <http://www.camer.be/index1.php?art=27242&rub=10%3A1>

Cameroon Case Study

A difficult beginning

At the time we approached Humanity First Cameroon (HFC) to be part of this project, they had just welcomed their first lesbian volunteer, Mariane,⁶ to lead HFC’s newly created Gender program. Therefore, the project came at the right time for the organization; HFC viewed the leadership and movement-building project as a concrete step to working with the Yaoundé LBQWSW communities. They offered their facilities to house the project and provide the communities with a safe space to organize. With a background in research and teaching, Mariane was new to LGBT activism but saw the FSF Project (the title she gave to the project) as a right opportunity to widely engage with LBQWSW communities in Yaoundé.

As a part of the project team, Mariane rapidly developed her own action plan with the primary goal of engaging local LBQWSW communities to become interested in community organizing by providing a safe space where potential leaders could meet to discuss their issues and identify ways to turn their social gatherings into an organizing space. The concrete steps of the action plan were centered on organizing group discussions, film screenings, and sports activities to mobilize at least 50 LBQWSW women in six months through two activities per month.

The mobilization plan involved conducting outreach in selected sites including bars, outdoor restaurants and other public venues favored by LBQWSW communities to disseminate information about the project, identify key resource people and engage with one-on-one conversations with community members to build trust before inviting the women to the new space provided by HFC.

6 Not her real name

Prior to joining HFC, Mariane had not been well connected to Yaoundé's LGBT community and was coming from a mostly academic background which was her first challenge in taking a role as a direct community organizer. To facilitate her introduction to the women's communities, HFC's Director introduced her to Syl⁷, a young woman with extensive networks, to be her liaison. They spent the first weeks of planning on conducting outreach in public places and engaging with women on several Facebook groups to raise awareness around the project and identify leaders of small groups which would later be invited to the first activity. After over two weeks of intensive networking, the initial contacts were made and through a combination of instant messages, phone calls, and in-person meetings, a certain level of trust was established between the project leaders and the identified group leaders. By the third week of November 2012 the team felt that they could organize their first activity at the end of November. This activity was a group discussion, and the organizers provided refreshments as well as reimbursement of transportation expenses in order to encourage future participation.

The organizers were expecting 15 participants at this first activity, but 6 women came. After the first tense hour, the group had a fruitful discussion around the question of "*Who is lesbian?*" A strategic question, this discussion topic brought to the surface the range of identities and labels used by different women's groups.

Before planning the next set of activities in December, the project leaders sought to understand the reason behind the low turnout. Their inquiries among the participants, and those who agreed to attend the meeting but did not come, revealed the following reasons:

7 Not her real name

1. Some women were afraid of being called/identified as lesbians if they were seen going into HFC's center, a place known to be frequented by feminine-presenting men;
2. Others said they could not share a space with "les footballeuses", meaning masculine-presenting women, who they said attracted too much attention and have the reputation of being aggressive;
3. Some women responded that they were already part of a group and therefore did not see the need to participate in the work of another group;
4. Other women indicated previous negative experiences with MSM groups as the reason for changing their mind.

Mariane and Syl's inquiries revealed that securing a safe space and encouraging LBQSW women to take advantage of such space was going to be more complicated than expected. They discovered that a complex dynamic existed between different women's groups that needed to be named, discussed and included in their outreach strategies if they were to be successful in realizing their goal.

In December, the project leaders planned two activities – another group discussion on December 18th and a film screening on December 29th. At the first activity, only 4 women were present, and at the second activity, the number dwindled to 3 participants. Furthermore, Syl dropped out of the project, which made continued organizing even more challenging for Mariane.

Very demoralized, Mariane decided to revise her strategy and action plan. As an approach to defining and understanding the challenges barring women from coming together, Mariane used the fact that most of the women seemed more willing to meet in private to conduct several individual interviews to inform her way forward.

She concluded, based on the findings of these interviews, that there was a desire in the women's communities to organize but in order to advance the program she would need to work on reconciling and building trust between different groups, on working with individuals to overcome their fear of exposure and ultimately on convincing the women to put aside their assumptions about other members of the community so that they could all begin to share one space.

Mariane was also limited by her professional commitments, which would only allow her to dedicate two days per week to coordinate the project.

All of these initial obstacles to starting a new LBQWSW-led community organizing initiative in a country as such as Cameroon are at once potentially fatal to the effort but not uncommon and stand out as some of the most difficult challenges facing activists – the reality is that LBQWSW communities are often formed from a place of isolation, marginalization, secrecy, fear and historical fragmentation while the resources available to bridge these communities and provide a sense of security are extremely limited.

Adjusting Strategies to address the complex realities of women's communities

The complexities of connecting to multiple women's networks

In order to increase the number of participants in activities and involve the few beneficiaries who became actively involved in the project from the beginning, Mariane asked two of the project beneficiaries if they would volunteer as peer educators focused on more intensive and personalized engagement with the women. This would involve spending an afternoon, once a week at HFC, to manage a hotline and reach out to peers over the phone. As incentive, their round-trip taxi fares of 1,000 CFA (2 USD) were refunded.

By the end of January 2013, two more women would volunteer to join the team in managing the hotline. Now the project had four peer educators, managing the hotline from Tuesday to Friday afternoons. In January alone, this approach was successful in bringing 7 new participants to group activities.

That month, a group discussion was organized with the theme of *“Being a woman and an activist”*. This debate was guided by two central questions: *“What is your definition of activism?”* and *“What should WSW activism look like in Cameroon?”* The second activity of the month was a meeting between the five-team members to evaluate the impact of their approach. This new monthly evaluation meeting would become a critical part of the project until its end.

Mariane's strategy to ask project beneficiaries to take some ownership of the project would turn out to be the best one and probably the one that saved the project. Empowering four young women with four distinct networks to lead project outreach enabled the team to broaden its outreach and created a solid peer support group among the project leaders.

Building bridges to bring different groups together

In Central as well as in West Africa, complex socio-cultural and personal factors play a role in how LBQWSW communities interact and/or come together and it is not uncommon to find that several distinct pre-existing women's groups are formed based either on social standing, gender identity, relationship status, age, education, sports or other identifiers and that these groups seldom mix. Cameroon was no different and there were a few notable divisions that particularly fragmented the LBQWSW community. What I found striking foremost was the discrimination against masculine-presenting women who are perceived to be aggressive, and to easily attract attention.

The group's activity reports also brought out this recurrent stereotype with project beneficiaries arguing that participation in a group activity involving "*les footballeuses*" would increase one's risk of being labeled a lesbian and that these women were aggressive and prompt in provoking fights. Another notably divisive factor was that professional LBQWSW women, meaning those with office jobs, would not attend group activities with a "*certain category of LBQWSW*", which translated typically to either younger women or women from low-income neighborhoods. Furthermore, generally as would be expected in closed, small communities, most of the more visible LBQWSW women already knew each other and thus had complex histories amongst them. When a relationship falls apart between two in the community, groups would tend to side with one person and further divide groups from each other.

When engaging in community work with LBQWSW communities, activists must become attuned to all these inter-personal and inter-group complexities and be able to overcome the sometimes overwhelming feeling of hopelessness to bring diverse groups together. In facilitating community-building activities with LBQWSW women who have been pushed to the margins, it is equally important, in the initial phase of a project, to bring together fragmented groups around constructive discussions that will surface the various injustices the women grapple with on a daily basis, while also addressing the factors that motivate us to internalize those injustices and replicate them within our communities.

Two approaches that Mariane and her new team used to address these realities in their organizing were:

1) The five team members, all from different backgrounds, would work within their personal networks, meeting people where they were the most comfortable and only inviting them to attend group activities when they expressed readiness.



Within the team, two members were civil servants working in different branches of the government; they were responsible for doing outreach amongst professional women. Another team member, a football coach, would connect with LBQWSW sport groups; while the university student would use her network of friends to identify queer women on her campus. The fourth volunteer who was unemployed generally but occasionally worked as a street vendor, would connect to LBQWSW small business owners.

Each peer educator, on the day she was managing the hotline, was to contact a list of peers by phone and encourage whoever was free that day and willing to come to the center to be acquainted with the space and ask any questions they might have about the project. Through these individual interviews, the team had conversations with their peers on discrimination they face based on their perceived or actual sexual orientation, the impact of homosexual stigmas on their lives, its impact on the ability of the communities to come together and how they themselves perpetuated some of these stigmas amongst themselves.

2) Concurrent to this outreach by the peer educators, Mariane was actively working to convince the members of Lady's Corporation, the only lesbian organization in Cameroon, that the project was not a threat to their work.

Lady's Corporation has been doing community organizing through sport activities bringing lesbian and bisexual women and straight people together since 2008. Mariane approached the group's Founder, Berthe, to propose collaboration by planning activities together and participate in each other's activities. This new collaboration began with three joint activities; one organized by Lady's corporation, a group discussion about drug use in LGBT communities; the second, a meeting to further introduced QAYN and the project to other non-project beneficiaries was organized by Mariane and her team during my visit,

and the third was a focus group meeting that I organized with both Lady's Corporation and Mariane's team. These different activities were a first in bringing the different parties together to experience the value of collaborating.

In February, in addition to Lady's Corporation's members and existing participants, the project welcomed 5 new women.

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Acknowledging the limitations of LBQWSW organizing in Cameroon without deterring interest or participation in the project

In most Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa countries, oftentimes women usually come together at the community level to organize tontines (African local group savings collectives) that also enable them to create monthly social gathering spaces. The primary goal of these informal groups organizing is to encourage savings and provide women with an opportunity to belong to different social groups outside of their immediate family circles. A lot of women look for similar arrangements in community-based associations.

Despite all the socio-cultural and political challenges, inter-personal and complex inter-group dynamics, LBQWSW women do show innate interest in

organizing work. Interestingly, LBQWSW women who are more receptive to taking parts in some forms of organized activities are oftentimes young, unemployed and/or single mothers living with their parents, and most survive by engaging in occasional income generating activities. Because most of these women struggle on a daily basis to provide basic needs to their families and themselves; it is not uncommon that they usually come to organizing spaces with expectations that their involvement will improve their economic situation, primarily, and their rights, secondly.

As community organizers, during first-time events, LBQWSW activists are frequently asked questions reflect these expectations, such as:

“What would I gain from this group?” “Will this project help us develop job-related skills?” Or, “Can you provide adult literacy programs?” Frequent comment I have heard from young activists is that community members are likely to respond to their invitation to attend a group discussion with, *“you must be all financially secure enough to now want to organize for your rights. I'm just trying to make sure that I have something to eat today.”*

For the group in Cameroon, their December activity report highlighted the project beneficiaries' expectations; the most common ones were: *“there is the need for professional training to enable us to increase our financial autonomy”*; *“how will the project address our sexual health needs? We need to be screened for cervical and ovarian cancers, STIs and HIV/AIDS since, due to societal pressures, most of us still have to have sexual relations with men”*; and, *“our first need is to have a shelter to receive the homeless LBQWSW women who have been rejected by their families”*. I have witnessed how, faced with the enormity of the needs of their communities, many new activists become overwhelmed with feelings of hopelessness.

Unlike gay men and MSM who were successful in mobilizing their communities around a palpable common threat, the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS within MSM communities, the oppressive system denying LBQWSW women the freedom to enjoy a full life is complex and engrained in all level of social structures that it can be difficult to form an agenda that speaks to the concerns of most groups.

Within such context, the political ambition to claim a space and to organize to ensure women's self-determination can be easily seen as mundane or remote compared to the immediate and daily needs of most women. For young activists working with LBQWSW women, this can mean putting on hold a project work-plan to engage in lengthy exchanges with women from their communities to begin to identify the injustices in their daily lives, to thrive for self-determination and shake off a fatalistic acceptance of their condition as "things will never change". This consciousness-raising process is itself a full project. Through their monthly activity reports, Mariane and her team had shown a great capacity to respond quickly to challenges, adjust to unexpected development and to revise their strategies to challenge their constituency to critically question the influence of deeply-held religious and cultural beliefs that they have internalized.

While going through the process of educating the project beneficiaries, for Mariane and her team it was first important to communicate the project's limitations to the women, especially after they found themselves facing the fact that several first-time participants never returned to a second group activity. They decided to address some the beneficiaries' expectations and bring some of the women's more immediate needs into the project with their limited resources; the project team decided to include activities that they were initially beyond the scope of the project, such as providing very basic responses to participants' sexual health needs, while also organizing social gathering activities as a way to ease the introduction of some

community members to organizing work. One need that was voiced at practically every group discussion was the need to address the sexual health of LBQWSW communities. The team decided to tap into HFC's resources since the organization was a service provider to MSM living with HIV. They began to organize private consultations with HFC's Psychologist and organized a free HIV testing day in March at which 15 women received free testing. They also dedicated two group discussions to hygiene education and intimate violence in same-sex relations. In April a nurse facilitated their group discussion on STIs between women. In April, they organized one of their activities to allow participants to take part in a "Health Day" organized by HFC. Titled *Eat Well to Stay Healthy*, this was a day of education on addressing the dietary needs of people living with HIV and 9 women participated in this full-day event. They also included some social activities in their project: on the International Women's Day, the team organized a culinary activity inviting both MSM and LBQWSW women at which 12 women were present.

Another strategy the group used to turn their limitations to their advantage was to actively involve the beneficiaries to work with the team to better shape the project; to do that, at each event, they ask one beneficiary decide on the theme of the next group discussion, communicating this theme to the project leaders during the week prior to the next meeting. The day of the event, this beneficiary was responsible for facilitating the group interaction. The goal of this approach was to empower each woman to see herself in a leadership position, encourage her to define her own role in the success of the project, and make the connection between her personal situation and the shaping of the group's collective work. The ultimate goal was to bring each participant to evolve from being a beneficiary to becoming a leader; empower the women to gain enough knowledge of issues within the communities, which in turn would enable the women to communicate the goal of the project to their networks in ways that they relate to the work and make it easier for them to communicate its goal to other women.

“For me as the project Coordinator, the main challenges were to mobilize LBQWSW women individually who live in a context of constant fear, organize activities that would continuously interest the girls while staying within our goals and, to keep the girls motivated enough to continue their participation in the project while persuading them to bring their friends.

The challenges at the community level were to get LBQWSW women to overcome the fear of being exposed, to look past the conflicts between the “footballeuses” and “feminine” women, to look past personal conflicts with the “exes” and lastly, to overcome female rivalry in order to embrace community organizing.

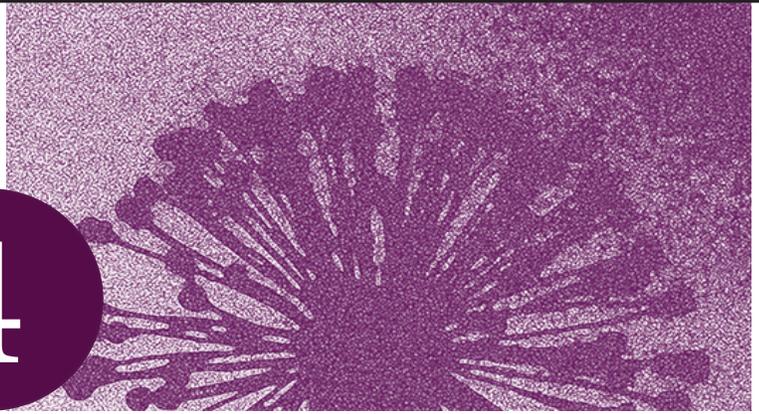
Patience, teamwork and a strong personal commitment were key to us achieving our results. And it is a personal pride for me.” Mariane

For Mariane and her team, after seven months of hard work and surmounting multiples challenges, it is only now that the women’s groups are beginning to understand the values of the project. Their mobilization work is becoming a little easier. Ultimately, from November 2012 to May 2013 (the group was able to stretch its budget to include one more month), the project was successful in mobilizing 35 women, and amongst them, 10 women who participated in almost every single activity.



Four

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Togo Case Study

Country Context

Like in the rest of the West African sub-region, homosexuality is considered abnormal and immoral in Togo. A very religious country, Togolese society vividly condemns same-sex consensual relations between two adults. These acts are penalized as “gross indecency” under Article 88 of the country penal code. This article states that offenders “*shall be punished by imprisonment of one to three years and a fine of 100 000 to 500 000 francs CFA⁸ anyone who commits an indecent act against nature with an individual of his sex.*” According to Tan⁹, one of the project’s coordinators

“What is somewhat ironic is that almost all homosexuals arrested have not been under this article, but for other crimes, even though being gay was the primarily motive of their arrest.”

An ambiguous legal context and a culturally based interpretation of sexuality and gender expression created an environment in which violations against LGBT individuals are very common, ranging from verbal abuse and intimidation to physical aggression. Gay men, especially feminine-presenting men are the most targeted. Violations against same-sex loving women mostly happen privately at the hands of

8 Between \$200 and \$1,000 US

9 Not her real name

family members, relationship partners, and employers. Highly closeted, LBQWSW women, especially young women who still rely on parental support, live with the constant fear of their sexual orientation being found out. Consequently, queer women choose to remain isolated and are afraid to openly participate in community-based activities; those who do attend these types of group events tend to be very cautious. Moreover, I found that there is a great degree of mistrust within LGBT communities fuelled by the past experiences of LGBT individuals, particularly among women’s communities who are quick to resort to forced outing of others to their parents, husbands and employers to score a personal victory during conflicts.

Like in the rest of Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, when we look at who are the people and organizations leading on LGBT issues, we are more likely to find mainstream NGOs focused on the HIV/AIDS sector with projects targeting MSM communities. As more MSM-led organizations take shape, those attempting to work beyond the HIV/AIDS discourse are few and their efforts remain timid. When asked about women’s roles and leadership in these fairly new organizations, the general argument for distancing themselves from LBQWSW issues is that it is difficult to know the issues facing LBQWSW communities due to their invisibility, the perception that these women are “safer” than gay men since they easily blend into the general public or that they are

“too difficult” to work with. These arguments are common across the two regions. The one NGO that attempted to support LBQWSW organizing in Togo did so within their framework of HIV/AIDS prevention, and according to Tan, “they remain blind to the complex realities of queer women, to the risks and challenges we face.” She gave a recent example where an advocacy training was organized for LGBT activists in Lomé, and when she and the other project coordinator applied as candidates, their application was rejected on the basis that the training was for MSM activists, despite that its title said it was open to LGBT activists generally.

Togo Case Study

An encouraging beginning

Unlike the Cameroonian group, the project in Togo had a relatively smooth beginning. The two project coordinators, Tan and Leya, had previous organizing experience within the same organization, Espoir Vie Togo. Leya was an assistant project coordinator and Tan, a volunteer peer counselor. In addition to their work in the MSM communities, they had organized queer women’s support groups, and therefore, both were known in the MSM and LBQWSW communities. Regarding this particular project, the coordinators approached it as

“The opportunity for leading a project specifically developed with LBQWSW communities in mind and entirely outside of the issue of the moment, that is, HIV/AIDS. This is a breath of fresh air for me who is accustomed to the MSM and HIV discourse”. Tan

Based on their previous experience of organizing support group meetings within women’s communities, Leya and Tan adapted the project action plan by focusing on three main activities. Their primary

activity was group discussions, once a month, to bring together members of various LBQWSW communities throughout Lomé. The second activity was film screenings followed by debates to create a social space for beneficiaries and they managed to organize 3 film screenings. Their third activity involved documenting individual interviews of selected project beneficiaries in order to learn from and share their stories. The overall goal was to mobilize 50 LBQWSW over the six-month period, with the overall objective of *“awakening our communities to embrace who we are, share our stories, surface challenges so that we can come together to participate at all levels in the fight for our recognition.”*

To facilitate increased participation, the team chose a safe space that was well known in the LGBT community, a community center run by Espoir Vie Togo, funded through a MSM project. Some members of existing women’s groups knew this space from having participated in MSM-led events at the center. By relying on the familiarity of the place, the team was confident that this would have a positive impact on their organizing activities. To reach out to the different groups, Leya and Tan tapped into their existing networks to connect with group leaders with extensive connections and who were more likely to be interested in the project.

The group organized their first discussion on November 16th and the topic was **“self-esteem”**. They wanted to begin the project by understanding how comfortable LBQWSW women were with their sexual orientation and their body; 9 women attended this first event. The team considered this first effort to have been a success based on the level of interaction during the group discussion and the turnout. Their main goal was to introduce the project to group leaders, spark their interest and ask for their involvement in mobilizing their respective networks. A transportation allowance of 1,500 CFA (3USD) was provided to the women to encourage future participation.

After a successful first activity, the next one was a film screening, which took place in December. They wanted to create a social setting that is informal and would allow the team to move freely to answer individual questions from new participants; 16 women took part in the second activity, including 7 from the first event and 9 new participants. A group discussion and a dance party followed the screening. Leya and Tan were pleasantly surprised by the good turnout, considering their experience with women who often commit to come to an event but oftentimes will not be in attendance, due to various reasons. They were afraid that the fear of being exposed and the inter-group dynamics might negatively impact the level of turnout.

Working to overcome setbacks

What the team would face in their third month of organizing is a much-too common challenge that LBQWSW activists encounter in the beginning of their work in most parts of West Africa. The complex dynamics between different women's groups is such that no matter how much an activist believes she knows her community, at one point, she is likely to find herself challenged navigating through the issues that keep the women's groups apart.

Oftentimes, at the beginning of a new attempt to organize, the turnout level will be high, mainly due to two factors: 1) curiosity about the project will bring some participants to the first event, and, 2) others will attend solely to find out which local groups were also invited. Usually, after the first two activities, the outcome will be that participants will either be excited about the work and will act as community liaisons to support the project; or others will never return to group activities regardless of the organizers' follow up efforts; or, a very few, not only will not return but will work to undermine the project by scaring off potential participants through hurtful rumors or false

allegations about the project or participants.

The social exclusion that LBQWSW women face, both within LGBT groups and society at large have a damaging effect on their selfhood, which in turn greatly contributes to their personal perceptions as women of lesser value. There is tremendous amount of preparatory work that must be done within LBQWSW communities to encourage women to break away from the chains of resignation and powerlessness in order to embrace their sense of resilience and leverage it into the courage to address the cultural and social barriers that oppress us.

One way to start this process is consciousness raising and that was the first goal of this project: create safe spaces for marginalized women to come together to share their stories in order to begin to see the pattern of injustice that they suffer daily, and link their personal experiences to others in the group until they begin to see the value and power of collective action in addressing these issues.

The importance of these group discussions is to bring the women to critique their own conditions and arrive at the pivotal stage where they will be able to articulate that they must not silently surrender to the injustices in their lives and that they can turn a possibility for resilience into self-determination and courage to challenge various engrained oppressive systems. The danger is that setbacks in the process will seem insurmountable and even outweigh the benefits of continuing, it can in fact take years before a group will arrive at the point of transformation that will allow for a sustainable movement to take hold. And with a current funding trend that only tends to support project-only activities and often time for a year, funders have been reluctant to support these types of consciousness-raising initiatives.

In January 2013, the team experienced great

difficulties keeping previous participants interested in the project and engaging new ones. This is how Leyla explains the challenge,

“Initially, the biggest challenge was to mobilize the girls, as they had evolved into clans and of course there are never ending conflicts between them. This affected our work because when we would send invitations, few would come because a particular clan wouldn’t want to share the same space with the members of another clan.”

The second challenge was for us, the project coordinators, to find the right way to explain our vision for the project to the girls, to be able to explain the purpose of our activities in a way that would capture their interest and encourage their involvement. It is clear that in every community there’s a whole host of diverse opinions, especially when you bring people from different socio-economic backgrounds together. At the beginning, the groups were suspicious of the project, they were used to hearing about our participation in MSM projects and explaining to them how our work was different from the usual MSM projects without being too abstract was a struggle for us.”

Leya

To immediately attempt to ease the growing tensions between participants, the team decided to organize two activities in January with two separate groups the same day. Despite this strategy, at the first group meeting, only three women were present and four women attended the second meeting. Both groups discussed the same topic, **“Accepting one’s sexual orientation”**. This topic was further divided into, **“What is acceptance for you?”** and **“How does this definition affect your acceptance of your own sexual orientation?”**

The setbacks encountered, however, pushed the team to reconsider their overall strategy moving forward. Instead of working with the same groups from the

women who do not feel a strong tie to any particular group or clan. This strategy was successful: at the first activity hosting a group discussion in February, 16 women were present, 11 were at a follow-up discussion for the second event and 20 women were present at a movie screening for the third group activity in February. The first two group discussions focused on the topics, **“Should one come out to her parents or remain silent forever?”** and **“The importance of solidarity within a community”**. The third activity was projection screening of the movie, *Pariah*.

I was in Lomé the first week of February to evaluate the project and I attended the team’s first activity at which 16 women were present. What I observed was how young the participants were, between the ages of 19 and 26, and the wide spread in socio-economic backgrounds that separated them, from a nurse, to a sports journalist, to businesswomen, to a high school student. From where I was observing, it was easy to see how the team was facing challenges. The women shared experiences of discrimination due to their sexual orientation, but the individual realities of participants also varied widely due to diverse socio-economic statuses.

Against this backdrop, how do young activists frame a multitude of issues directly enough to minimize disillusionment and keep the scope manageable, but broadly enough so that they resonate with most women in the groups?

Some of the major differences between the group in Cameroon and the one in Togo were the ages and economic background of their members. In Togo, the women were young, with the majority still living with their parents, and the rest either businesswomen in the informal sector or with an active career in the private sector. Although coming out to their families might never happen, these women still believed that they have “less to lose” compared to older women in their mid-thirties to early forties who would be

further constrained by being mothers, wives and expected to build and preserve their social standing. Young queer women tend to be more radical with their vision for change, but that is not to say that organizing with younger queer women is any less challenging.

Leya and Tan moved to engage their peers and harness the urgency to organize in the community while being cautious to communicate the limitations of the project. During their March activity they asked this question, “Why should we unite?” To attempt to gather participants’ perspectives on what the team was grappling with. This is what one of the participants said:

.....
“Before any external action, we must educate ourselves internally, that is to say that we should learn to accept ourselves, accept our sexual orientation, we should avoid discriminating amongst us, we should avoid harming ourselves just because we are afraid of the reaction of others, we must learn to know what we want for ourselves before we can articulate what we want for the community as a whole.”

A couple other challenges impacted the continuation of the project:

The first challenge was an incident during the April group discussion when one of the participants, without consulting the project leaders, brought a male journalist to the meeting. This caused an immediate panic within the group and compromised both the safety and anonymity of the participants. Although the woman and the journalist were asked to leave and did so, the resulting effect almost put an end to the project. News of the incident quickly spread within women’s groups and the trust that Leya and Tan worked to build in five months was severely tarnished. The second challenge came from the fact that the same woman subsequently went on a series of radio

shows to speak out for LGBT rights, but did so in a manner that endangered the entire community by naming on air the spaces where members of the LGBT community gather and other compromising information. Following these radio shows and public reactions, the entire LGBT community avoided attending organized activities. For Leya and Tan, they were forced to change their venue and to work twice as hard to bring the women back together. The unpredictability of the socio-political environment where LGBT Africans live and organize can very quickly destroy some of the gains that groups are able to achieve. Threats can also come from within the activist community where personal motivations and agendas, ill intentioned or poorly executed, can have serious implications on the work of others activists. Unavoidable personal plans or family obligations can also impact the work of women’s activists. In the case of Leya, she had to leave the project in May due to her relocation to another continent.

Despite these various challenges, the work of Leya and Tan brought 102 LBQWSW women together. ***“I have found a family”***, according to the project team, is one of the responses that participants gave when asked what they perceived to be the main impact of the project.

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“Participating in this project enabled me to expand my circle of friends and deepen my knowledge of certain topics. The space allowed me to share my experience with my peers without fear. I feel like I have a better understanding of who I am and am more secure in my sexual orientation. I hope that in the future this project would reach LBQWSW women in other parts of Togo and the sub-region, so that they can also have access to spaces to meet and share their experiences.” Augustine

“I continued to participate in this project because I have found a family and the project objectives were refreshing and interesting.”

For the second phase of the project, I would like to see an improvement in communication and an appropriate and permanent space for our gatherings.”

Calypso

“My hope is that this project continues because it is very important to our community. This is the first time that there’s a project that focuses solely on LBQSW women, led by us and I must say that it’s only now that we are starting to see the fruits of our efforts, after all the difficulties experienced. It would be a shame if we stopped now because we feel that the girls are increasingly interested in the activities, and they really want to contribute to shaping the project. We feel they are now beginning to see our vision.”

Leya



Five

5



Lessons Learned

There is very little literature looking at the beginning of organizing work led by African LGBT groups and certainly none focused specifically on Francophone and LBQWSW activism. Such literature is very important not only to build the body of knowledge about different work happening on the continent, but also to provide new activists with learning tools. The following highlights key lessons we learned through this project, which we hope will be a starting point for conversations about LBQWSW communities and the potential impact of collective actions led by LBQWSW if their work is supported.

Setting the right beginning-the importance of a good training

Francophone Sub-Saharan LGBT activists are in general underserved with regard to their access to training opportunities; for LBQWSW activists such opportunities are almost non-existent. When we do get invited to training, it is usually to find ourselves amongst MSM activists, in a workshop specifically developed for these groups. The Isis and QAYN workshop conducted in September 2012 was the first of its kind in the region, purposefully addressing the capacity-building needs of LBQWSW activists.

LBQWSW activists, in informal ways, have been doing some types of organizing work in their communities even though most will not acknowledge their efforts as such. Given the commitment and

resilience of LBQWSW leaders who continue to brave the challenges of their context and threats to their security to bring members of their communities together, providing these women with adequate skills building tools is essential. The training that Isis and QAYN conducted with the eight women did not have the pretention to “teach” the participants any given skill, but rather to work with the women to identify their personal leadership and community-building skills, to bring them to valorize these existing skills so that together we could identify ways to strengthen them.

The workshop was a critical component of this project:

- a) It provided the participants with the opportunity to review their work through a different lens, a more critical lens guided by a feminist leadership principal;
- b) It empowered the participants to acknowledge their leadership skills and learn to value their contributions to their community;
- c) It provided a networking opportunity to the women who were used to working in the margins;
- d) It enabled the women to expand their understanding of LBQWSW issues in the sub-regions and learn about various ways of organizing happening in different countries.

e) More importantly, it supported the women to develop a sense of urgency to address their needs.

Lesson one: Francophone LBQWSW activists need the training, tools and resources to further improve their existing skills and build new ones so they can lead the social change they aim to see in their communities.

The added values of active and supported network

From my own experience, I have seen list-serves being created during a workshop so that the collaborative spirit grown from going through a learning process together continues beyond the physical training; but it is very rare for such networks to survive past the first post-training months. Thus I was skeptical when the participants of the workshop decided to create a virtual network to exchange information about their work and learn from each other. An obvious obstacle that jumped to mind was that out of the eight women, only one owned a personal computer; I was afraid that frequent trips to Internet cafés and the related personal costs would demotivate the women after a month or two.

In fact as it turned out, being able to communicate “live” with other project leaders and share tips and challenges once a month, contributed to shaping the way the women related to their work. There was a sense of pride at being present at each meeting, month after month. There was also a self-imposed rigor in respecting the monthly deadline to submit both their financial and activity reports for all to read and comment on through the listserv created for that purpose. Slowly, the women were able to experience how leading organized work through a well coordinated and sustained network of LBQWSW leaders could further impact their own leadership skills and how they approach challenges in their own context.

Even unpredictable power shortages, slow Internet connections and last minute obligations did not deter the women in keeping their monthly Facebook meeting and listserv alive throughout the entire project.

Lesson two: Networks can play pivotal roles in fostering the building of a movement; young women who begin their organizing work through a network have an extra support system to help them navigate personal and collective challenges while they provide support to their communities in addressing issues in various aspects of their own lives.

Meeting the communities where they are most comfortable

The expectation that LBQWSW women will immediately embrace consciousness-raising processes was unrealistic and the difficult beginning of the group in Cameroon attests to that. The project would have benefited by dedicating the first few months to creating a social space for the women to come together, getting to know each other and to just be able to enjoy the company of other women in similar situations and to come to realize that they are not alone. Due to financial limitations, and our need to maximize a tight budget, we overlooked this pivotal step and the result was losing several women in the beginning who either could not understand our vision or who thought that the discussions were “not in their league” because we might have been moving too fast for some women.

The emphasis of these types of community building projects should be on participatory learning through group discussions, and to minimize attrition, it is necessary to openly acknowledge the limitation of such process for those looking for immediate benefits from their participation. There is not a one size fits all process, rather trial and error, but the one underlining threat should be a support system that guides each woman through her individual journey at her own pace.

There will be attritions, even among the leaders who started the process.

Lesson three: An important starting point of a community building project with LBQWSW women, a marginalized group that has historically has been pushed to the margins, is to first create a social space to enable the women to come together in a convivial manner encouraging the sharing of experiences. The uplifting effect of discovering that one is not alone and the need to get personally involve in an organized movement will grow organically from such a space.

Gauging the impact

“The impact of QAYN’s FSF PROJECT was positive, particularly because it allowed beneficiaries who were isolated to meet other community members and to share their experiences. To those who were ashamed of their sexual orientation, it allowed them to regain confidence in themselves. For LBQWSW groups that were no longer on speaking terms, they could reconnect within a shared space. At the same time, the project has allowed other beneficiaries to discover their interest in peer education and thrive within an organizing space.” This was part of Mariane’s assessment of the project’s impact.

How do we evaluate the impact of these types of project in only six months?

The four groups in the project set a quantitative goal of 50 women per group as one of their benchmarks, although only one in four groups was able to exceed this by more than doubling this goal, important ground was broken in the course of just six months and seven for the group in Burkina. The project has had several long-term impacts:

1) It enabled the women to mobilize their peers and

facilitate discussions around issues with a wide range of community members, easing some of the inter-group animosities that are common in LBQWSW women’s communities;

2) It encouraged the project leaders to reflect on their own experience, develop their own sense of agency and define their own purpose in leading initiatives with and for their communities.

CM, one of the peer educators, said, *“This project came at the right time for me. In my family, I had become a pariah and I was constantly stressed. Now I have found friends. I feel good. I can finally talk freely about what I am.”*

Another peer educators, RB shared *“This project was a chance for me. Before, I did not feel I had friends, now I know I can count on some people and not only to defend my rights in case of a problem, but as real friends. So I do not feel alone. In addition, I’m glad to finally lead action within the community.”*

3) It encouraged several women’s groups to see beyond their internal issues to come together to discuss shared challenges and surface mutual purposes to engage in collective action.

4) The project highlighted some of the ways MSM-led organizations can support LBQWSW-led initiatives. And,

5) The outcome of the project rejected the notions that internal problems between women’s groups have crippled their ability to come together to shape their collective actions.

Lesson four: In the attempt to capture the impact of LBQWSW-led community-based activities, the focus should be less on quantitative measurement, but rather assess the broader outcomes, including the empowerment process of the beneficiaries and the project

leaders, the quality of discussions and reflections that came out of the project and their potential to shape the agency of beneficiaries as effective advocates for social change.

Support of MSM-led organizations

I have witnessed first hand during my evaluation visit, how invested HFC's staff was in supporting the project leaders. Mariane developed a strong partnership with Jules, HFC's Director, who would always share his experience and personal stories of his own debut organizing the MSM communities in Yaoundé. The sense of mutual respect that developed between the project team and HFC's staff created a convivial atmosphere that eased the women's reluctance to share the same space with MSM groups. Not only did HFC provide a space for the women to organize, but it also provided resources, such as a safe-sex kit and access to its Psychologist, which enabled Mariane and her team to respond to the participants' basic needs of access to sexual health. Jules also made it a point to read each activity report the group produced before it was sent to QAYN, supporting the group in producing the more comprehensive reports out of the four groups. The group in Togo could have benefited from similar support from Espoir Vie Togo.

Lesson five:GBTMSM-led organizations should not frame their lack of support for women's organizing efforts as the unavailability of financial resource when most of the time what these groups really need are access to available resources such as space and learning through sharing from relatively more developed GBTMSM organizations.



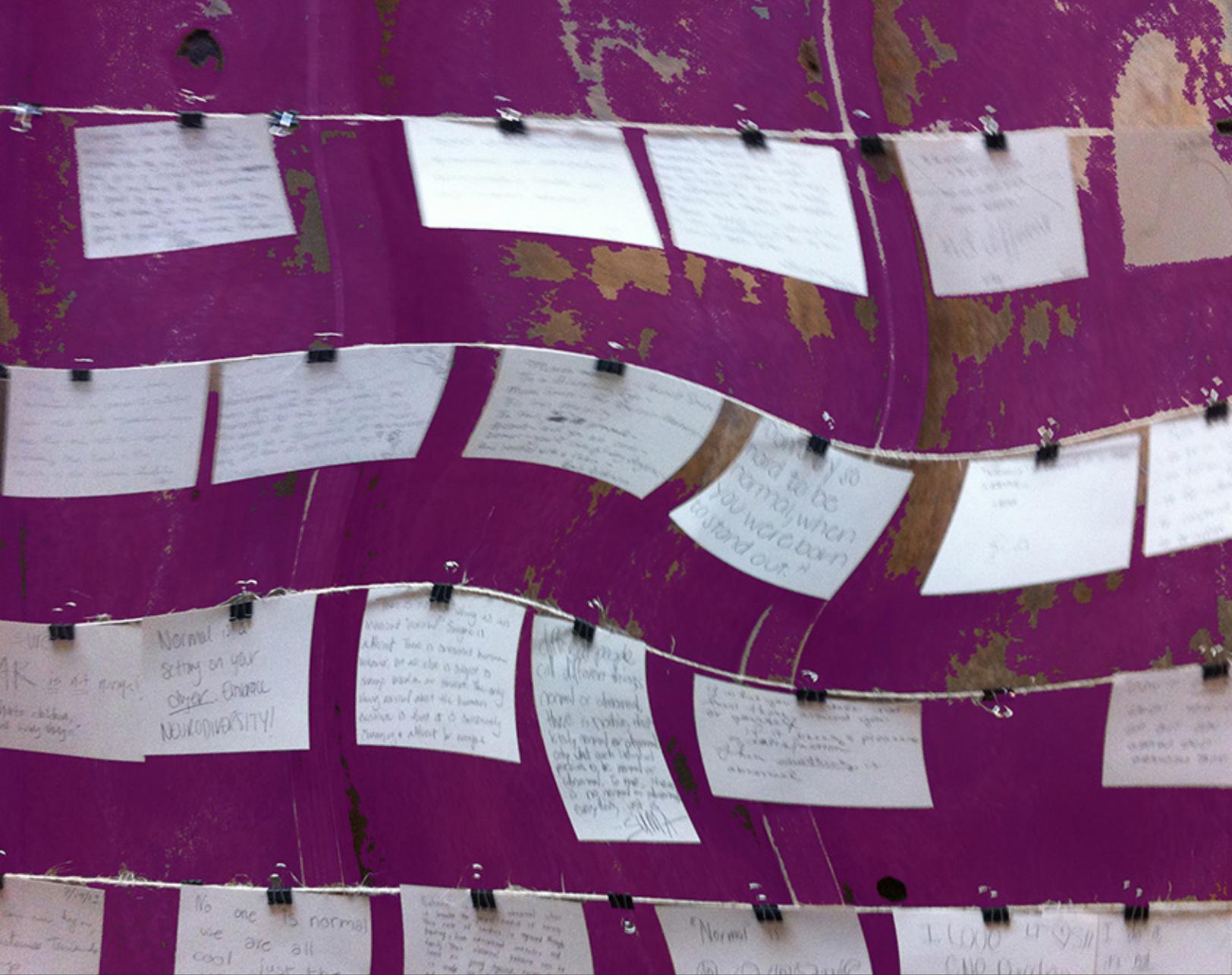
Conclusion

In Central and West Africa, young lesbian, bisexual, queer and women who have sex with women (LBQWSW) activists are increasingly mobilizing in contexts where strong patriarch norms continue to overshadow their existence and realities, and despite the fact that they have few available opportunities to engage with the broader LGBT civil society. Although most LBQWSW-led efforts remain small and local in nature, the initial results of this project show what modest seed funding, combined with strong technical support could do to spark new organizing activities and movement building across regions.

Yes, the initial conclusion is a very fragile and tenuous success story in which young queer women driven by their passion and vision for social change were able to navigate the complexities of their own LBQWSW communities in addition to their socio-cultural realities to begin to build their own movement. The case studies provide concrete examples that this work is possible, and that it is necessary despite the many challenges. The realities of LBQWSW women as a whole are again an example of how underserved the diverse range of LGBT needs are within a context dominated by HIV/AIDS discourse and MSM-led initiatives.

Examining the issues faced by LBQWSW women such as those in Togo and Cameroon, the unavoidable conclusion is that inclusive women's and LGBT social movements cannot happen if we remain under the cover of politically appealing humanitarian issues, which do not necessarily address the root causes of discriminations and oppression of women and LGBT Africans, and within these oppressed groups, the realities of queer women.

However, as the case studies in this report show, fearless and resourceful young LBQWSW women are leading new ways of organizing that are not based on a single issue, and they are proving that such efforts are possible and are happening in small communities around Africa. What these leaders need to expand the impact and scope of their work is the meaningful engagement and support of diverse stakeholders to join these efforts and together we have the potential to link local LBQWSW-led initiatives to social justice movement at local, national and regional levels, to eventually grow into a more inclusive social movement.



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