



THE EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF LGBTQ+ INDIVIDUALS IN ACCESSING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *LGBTQ persons (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) in several countries of the world including Nigeria have been identified to be repeatedly confronted with sexual profiling, otherwise known as stigmatization. Due to the absence of legal recognition for homosexual relationships in the Nigerian constitution, marginalized communities in this context lack the privilege of freely forming social connections with others in society, unlike their heterosexual counterparts. This paper provided a comprehensive analysis of scholarly literature investigating the experiences and challenges encountered by LGBTQ individuals in their physical and social environments. The study adopted a combination of philosophical methods. The analytical method was used to examine and define key terms; the speculative method was employed to gain insights into the challenges and experiences faced by these marginalized communities, as well as the impacts they have on them while the prescriptive method was utilized to propose strategies to address and alleviate the situation. The paper contended that the exclusion of these individuals from the nation's quota system may result in the loss of talented individuals to addiction, depression, or suicide.*

KEYWORDS: LGBTQ, Challenges, Experiences, Stigma, Discrimination



INTRODUCTION

The LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) people in Nigeria represent a sexual minority unlike their counterparts who are engaged in heterosexual relationships. The challenges experienced by these minorities can be traced to the country's legal renouncement of LGBTQ as an acceptable form of sexual relationship. In Nigeria, the law has had a profound effect on numerous LGBTQ individuals, resulting in increased incidents of homophobic violence, police intimidation and detentions, challenges in accessing healthcare, and well-documented instances of extortion and blackmail (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Additionally, the enactment of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) was a setback to the aspirations and goals of LGBTQ organizations in Nigeria; it altered the political and social climate by inciting intense public animosity towards the LGBTQ community and creating an atmosphere where “normal” citizens believed that they were promoting the interest of the country by acting on homophobic sentiments (Okanlawon, 2018). Although Nigeria is a religious state that has consistently prioritized moral and cultural values, this statement presents a strong argument on the negative impacts of Nigerian laws on the LGBTQ community. The adverse effects of this prejudice include depression, substance abuse, unemployment, homelessness and even mental disorder. However, other reputable sources which further buttress this stance would be closely examined in this paper.

Conceptual Clarification

LGBTQ

The concept of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) encompasses a wide range of identities, and as such, its definition may vary across different communities based on their level of acceptance, positivity, or even animosity towards it. Since every group shares common goals; LGBTQ, as a fraction of the society, can be defined as a community of individuals who are interested in the same sexual objectives. Drushel (2017) explained LGBTQ as a distinct community that is characterized by a collective acceptance of a shared set of experiences. While gay can be defined as the sexual attraction between individuals of the same sex (particularly men), lesbianism can be regarded as a romantic attraction between women. In order to identify as bisexual, an individual must exhibit the traits associated with both lesbianism and gay, as bisexuality entails experiencing sexual attraction towards both genders. Transgenderism refers to individuals whose gender identification does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth while the term "Queer" is a broad phrase used to describe individuals who depart from conventional norms and lifestyles.

Social Work

Etymologically, the term "social" can be traced to the Latin word “socius” meaning “friend”, hence social work can be fundamentally defined as “engaging in work that benefits the people”. Social work, like any other profession, is characterized by a combination of values, objectives, approval, expertise, and approach (Bartlett, 2003). The contemporary definition of social work, as ratified at the IFSW General Meeting (Montreal, 2000) entails promoting societal transformation, facilitating interpersonal connections, resolving issues, and empowering individuals to enhance their overall welfare. As a social worker, the individual's primary concern should be his immediate society. Therefore, he should realize that society is dependent on the individuals, and that individuals bear collective obligations within the society.



Social Work Practices

According to *Britannica*, social work practices refer to “any publicly or privately provided services intended to aid the disadvantaged, distressed, or vulnerable persons or groups” (Pinker, 2024). Social work practices encompass a wide range of interventions and approaches aimed at promoting positive change and improving the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Social workers are trained professionals who work in various settings, including healthcare, schools, correctional centers, child protective services, and social service agencies. Social work practices involve conducting comprehensive assessments to identify people's strengths, needs, and resources. These assessments help social workers develop intervention plans tailored to each person's unique circumstances. Another significant component of social work practice is fostering empowerment and advocacy. Social workers empower clients by helping them build on their strengths, enhance their coping skills, and develop problem-solving abilities. They provide support and guidance, enabling people to take control of their lives and make informed decisions. (Martinez, 2022).

Challenges

According to *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, challenge is “the act or process of provoking or testing physiological activity by exposure to a specific substance.” Similarly, it refers to factors, situations or circumstances which affect the success of an intended goal or activity.

Methodology

In order to examine the concepts and their relationships, this paper employs a variety of qualitative research approaches. To facilitate and accomplish a working environment, the research seeks to explore the several challenges and experiences faced by some stigmatized groups in Nigeria, especially the LGBTQ individuals. The study used an analytical strategy to explain related ideas and describe how they connect to the research; a historical approach was taken to shed light on Nigeria's conception on homosexuality as well as the several policies that oppose it; by drawing on victim accounts and the data on the effects of the issue over time, the phenomenological approach to examine how stigmatization, labeling, and discrimination have manifested in people's lives, thereby leading to suicide and depression; while the prescriptive approach to offer recommendations for achieving a progressive and working society, devoid of discrimination and stigmatization.

Theoretical Framework

This study is established on the framework of social stigmatism; a theory that was developed by Erving Goffman, an American sociologist. The social stigma theory posits that stigma arises when individuals or groups are labeled as deviant based on socially constructed norms and values. According to this hypothesis, LGBTQ people are stigmatized due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, as they deviate from the heterosexual and cisgender norms which are prevalent in the society. Goffman elucidated the mechanisms by which individuals who possess features or characteristics that deviate from societal norms are subjected to social devaluation and marginalization. He argues that stigma is a social phenomenon that results from the interaction between individuals and their society, where individuals are labeled as deviant based on their “perceived” differences. Stigma, as defined by Herek (2009), refers to “the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively



accords to people who possess a particular characteristic or belong to a particular group or category” (p. 32).

According to Goffman, stigma can be categorized into three types: physical attributes (such as disability), character traits (such as criminality), and group identity such as race, gender, or sexual orientation (Major & Eccleston, 2004). These stigmatized characteristics can be either ascribed or achieved. However, Goffman argues that the process of stigmatization involves three stages: labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination (Bruce & Phelan, 2001). Labeling occurs when individuals are assigned a stigmatized identity such as being perceived as “gay”, “bisexual”, or “transgender”. Stereotyping refers to the generalizations and assumptions made about stigmatized individuals, often leading to negative attitudes and beliefs while discrimination refers to the unfair or unequal treatment faced by stigmatized individuals in various social contexts.

In addition, Allport and Devine noted that social stigma often produces stereotypes and prejudice which is unhealthy for social cohesion. While prejudice is the result of people accepting stereotypes as true and using the associated generalizations in their attitudes and assessments of those who fit the stereotype, stereotypes are commonly held assumptions about the characteristics of individuals based on their membership in stigmatized groups or possession of a stigmatized attribute (Allport, 1954; Devine, 1989).

Studies have proven that the minorities and the marginalized such as the LGBTQ individuals have been exposed to several threats like stress, symbolic interactionism and among other terrible situations. In their 2021 article, *Conceptualizing Stigma*, Link and Phelan proposed the theory of “Structural Stigma.” They argued that stigma should not be solely understood as a personal attribute or individual experience, but also as a larger societal issue. They emphasized how structural factors such as social institutions, policies, and cultural norms contribute to the creation and maintenance of stigmatization. This perspective highlights the role of power and social structures in perpetuating stigma and calls for broader societal changes to combat it. Gagne also expanded on Goffman’s theory by focusing on the process of stigmatization. In her 2004 book, *Stigma and Perseverance in the Lives of Boys Who Dance*, she argued that stigmatization is not only an external process imposed by the society, but also an internal process whereby stigmatized individuals internalize negative societal beliefs and judgment about their stigmatized attributes. Gagne emphasized that the psychological impact of stigmatization is often on an individual's self-esteem, identity formation, and resilience; therefore, it can be argued that the foundation of every psychological phenomenon lies in its sociological underpinnings.

Social Conception of LGBTQ in Nigeria

It is evident that the social conception of LGBTQ individuals in Nigeria is deeply ingrained, leading to widespread discrimination, violence, and neglect. These conceptions of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) individuals in Nigeria are complex and voluminous. Nigeria, like many other countries, has a cultural, legal and religious context that strongly disapproves of homosexuality and transgender identities. From a legal standpoint, homosexuality is criminalized in Nigeria. The Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act (also known as the Anti-Gay Law) was signed into law in 2014; this Act criminalizes same-sex relationships, public displays of affection, and organizations or activities that support LGBTQ



rights. It stipulated that perpetrators of homosexual acts should face up to 14 years imprisonment as punishment for such acts.

According to the Act:

“(1) A marriage contract or civil union entered between persons of same sex:

(a) is prohibited in Nigeria; and

(b) shall not be recognized as entitled to the benefits of a valid marriage.

(2) A marriage contract or civil union between persons of same sex by virtue of a certificate issued by a foreign country is void in Nigeria, and every benefit accruing therefrom by virtue of the certificate shall not be enforced by any court of law.

(3) Only a marriage contracted between a man and a woman shall be recognized as valid in Nigeria.

(4) (a) A person who enters into a same marriage contract or civil union commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a term of 14 years imprisonment.

(b) A person who registers, operates, or participates in gay clubs, societies, and organization, or directly and indirectly makes public show of same sex amorous relationship in Nigeria commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a term of 10 years imprisonment.

(c) A person or group of persons who administers, witnesses, abets, or aids the solemnization of a same sex marriage or civil union, or supports the registration, operation, and sustenance of gay clubs, societies, organizations, processions, or meetings in Nigeria commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a term of 10 years imprisonment” [Laws of Nigeria].

Proceeding to a religious outlook, Nigeria is an overtly religious country; hence religion plays a central role in shaping the society. The majority of Nigerians practice Christianity or Islam, with conservative interpretations of scripture leading to the condemnation of same-sex relationships. Religious teachings, combined with traditional cultural beliefs, reinforce negative attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals, often branding homosexuality as a western import or a demonic affliction. These religious and cultural factors lay the foundation for a hostile social environment, where LGBTQ people in Nigeria are ostracized, rejected, and subjected to conversion therapies, religious exorcisms, and even violence.

Traditional Christian teachings often view homosexual acts as sinful based on specific Bible passages. Leviticus 18:22 states, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." Similarly, Romans 1:26-27 condemns homosexuality by terming it “an unnatural same-sex relationship.” In Romeo Oriogun's *Burnt Men*, the unsympathetic reception given to gay men in society was explained in a few lines of poetry: “the preacher said gay men will burn in hell/ I swear my tongue burns every time I say the word love.” In the poem, Oriogun also condemned the hypocrisy of the church that embraces presupposed morality, instead of humanity. The implication of this bias is that orthodox individuals consciously opt to disregard the fact that humans are inherently humans before adopting notions of gender or sex.



Adamczyk and Cassady (2009) claimed that sentiments toward homosexuality are significantly predicted by one's religious beliefs. Certain homosexual men and women perceive traditional religion adherents as oppressors while on the contrary, many orthodox believers also feel that homosexual men and lesbians wish to marginalize Christians (Hodge, 2005). The argument over homosexuality is still going strong around the world, with differing views on whether homosexuality is acceptable and if laws prohibiting same-sex relationships and punishing homosexual behavior are appropriate.

In their book *Law, Religion and Homosexuality*, Johnson and Vanderbeck (2014) explained how religion influences the laws that control the lives of LGBTQ people. The authors argued that religion remains crucial to both promoting and impeding the advancement of sexual orientation equality through a thorough investigation of how religious discourse influences the formulation of law. This also covers the official interventions made by religious groups and communities against these marginalized communities as well as the religious statements made by lawmakers.

Another factor that contributes to the unjust treatment shown on this stigmatized group is cultural perspectivism; in Nigeria, religion, morality, and culture are often intertwined. Homosexuality is highly controversial in Nigeria, due to the cultural beliefs prevalent in the country. The traditional Nigerian culture defines the family as the cornerstone of society and lays a great deal of importance on it (Ajayi & Adefolajc, 2013). This perspective typically prioritizes procreation and the continuation of family lineage thus, same-sex relationships and non-binary identities may not be readily accepted, as they are seen as deviating from the traditional expectations of family and marriage. Due to these beliefs, homosexuality is widely stigmatized in Nigeria, leading to widespread discrimination and a lack of acceptance for LGBTQ+ individuals. Public opinion polls indicate that a majority of Nigerians perceive homosexuality as morally wrong (Okanlawon, 2020). Consequently, LGBTQ+ individuals often face rejection from their families and communities, making it difficult for them to openly express their sexual orientation or gender identity.

From the foregoing, one may argue that Nigeria is a homophobic society, and in this position, cultural and religious beliefs are important factors. The attitude against same-sex relationships stems from the conviction that these relationships are not a part of African culture. However, to ascertain the level of hostility Nigeria has towards homosexuality, homosexuality was already illegal before the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act was introduced in 2014. This was due to the Criminal Code Act (which was applicable in the South), the Penal Code Act (which was applicable in the North), and Shariah Law (which was applicable in 12 Northern states). Ajibade (2013) argued that lesbianism and homosexuality are a foreign culture and alien to us in Africa. This widely held opinion is not unrelated to the dominant heterosexual orientation in the community. The drawback of heterosexual orientation, which is contingent upon the politics of sexual representation, is that in African tribes, where it is a forbidden sexual ethic, homosexuality is perceived as genocide meant to exterminate the human race (Nmah, 2012).

Challenges/Experiences of LGBTQ individuals in Social Relations

The LGBTQ community faces numerous challenges in their social relations; however, this paper aims to illuminate the hurdles and experiences encountered by these individuals in various social contexts. By examining acceptance, rejection, stigma, discrimination, and



support, there can be a comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by this marginalized community. LGBTQ individuals often face stigmatization and discriminatory attitudes within their broader communities. Society's preconceived notions and prejudices frequently result in marginalization of these individuals, limiting their opportunities for personal and professional growth. This discrimination can manifest in various ways, including hate crimes, workplace discrimination, and bullying. Homosexuals experience labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination because society has developed a negative image of their behavior, identity, relationships, and community (Herek et al., 2009). Also, Laura et al. (2000) argue that heterosexism (the discrimination against LGBTQ individuals by heterosexuals) plays a substantial role in creating structural discrimination against LGBTQ people. For this reason, several economic challenges have befallen the LGBTQ community due to discrimination in the workplace. Despite advancements in LGBTQ rights, workplace discrimination remains prevalent, leading to limited job opportunities, wage gaps, and disparities in career advancement (Cech et al., 2020). Economic hardships further exacerbate the challenges faced by LGBTQ individuals, hindering their ability to secure safe housing and access necessary healthcare services.

Another significant challenge faced by the LGBTQ community is the burden of acceptance and rejection. For instance, coming out as a nonconformist to the heterosexual belief in the society can result in a wide range of reactions from friends, family, and other members of the society. This attitude can lead to an outright rejection from those who had previously shown them an undying affection. The theme of fear has surfaced as a common concern for Sexual Minority Men (SMM). This fear encompasses physical assault and harm as well as creating a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ activities (Shamrock et al., 2023).

Dreier et al. (2020) affirmed that the rights of sexual minorities have become more politicized and restricted throughout Africa, despite clamoring for more LGBTQ rights in developed nations. It is believed that religion plays a crucial role in influencing perceptions of people towards this underrepresented group by exposing people to different religious viewpoints and fostering tolerance for them. One may argue that religious variety helps people challenge dogmatic assumptions about social concerns. It was found that residents in religiously diverse communities are more likely than residents of homogeneous communities to show tolerance for their LGBTQ neighbors.

In Nigeria, cyber-bullying and victimization towards LGBTQ individuals is also a significant issue worth mentioning. Cyberbullying and online harassment of LGBTQ individuals are prevalent in Nigeria due to the anonymity offered by these platforms. Cyberbullying has recently become a critical social issue, which severely threatens not only the physical, but also the psychological health of adolescents (Ogunkuade & Kenku, 2023). Social media platforms, online forums, and messaging apps are used to attack, humiliate, and expose individuals, further exacerbating the challenges faced by these communities. Olaseni and Adewoye (2014) revealed that LGBTQ individuals report higher experiences of psychological distress due to cyberbullying victimization, compared to their heterosexual counterparts. They face constant threats to their safety, both in public spaces and within their own communities, and suffer from physical and psychological trauma due to the fact that they have limited legal protection and recourse against discrimination and violence in Nigeria. The criminalization of same-sex relationships makes it difficult to seek justice for hate crimes, effectively leaving them vulnerable and without avenues for legal protection. Resulting from this, higher rates of mental health problems are reported among LGBTQ such as severe depression or untreated bipolar



disorder due to the discriminatory experiences they face (Makanjuola & Oginni, 2018). Studies have proven that these health challenges can further affect sleep patterns, appetite, and energy levels of individuals in question and may as well significantly increase the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Ogunbajo et al. (2021) asserted that individuals with mental health challenges resort to substance abuse as a coping mechanism which can lead to addiction and various physical health problems including liver damage, lung disease and other physical ailments such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and autoimmune disorders, hypertension and strokes.

According to Sokolec and Dentato (2014), LGBTQ individuals may endure life-long marginalization within heteronormative environments. Ferguson et al. (1992) defined marginalization as the process whereby a group is excluded from access to and participation in the dominant culture. More than 30 African countries currently criminalize same-sex relationships, with some carrying punishments as severe as life imprisonment or even the death penalty (Ssenyonjo, 2023). This legal discrimination creates a climate of fear and vulnerability for LGBTQ individuals, restricts their access to justice, and fuels further stigmatization. The fear of discrimination and stigma often deter LGBTQ individuals from seeking essential healthcare services, including HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. While recent news regarding LGBTQ rights may promote the view that LGBTQ discrimination is on the decline, the picture is less clear globally; LGBTQ people have faced and continue to face discrimination rooted in homophobia across multiple areas of political, economic, and social contexts (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). Additionally, healthcare providers may lack awareness or sensitivity to their specific needs, leading to inadequate or discriminatory care. The lack of comprehensive anti-discrimination laws and weak legal protection mechanisms further exacerbate the marginalization of LGBTQ communities which makes them vulnerable to arbitrary arrest, detention, and abuse by law enforcement officials. LGBTQ individuals in Nigeria face significant social stigma and discrimination. They can be subjected to verbal abuse, physical violence, and societal rejection. Also, being identified as LGBTQ often leads to ostracization from family, friends, and communities. Many individuals are forced to hide their identities, leading to a significant impact on their mental health and well-being.

While official statistics on LGBTQ violence may be limited due to underreporting caused by fear and stigma, several organizations and reports provide insight into the scope of the issue. In a 2016 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) titled "Tell Me Where I Can Be Safe": The Impact of Nigeria's Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act," the organization documented numerous instances of violence and abuse against LGBTQ individuals. The report highlighted vigilante violence, police harassment, and extortion targeting this community. It also stated that the law had further intensified homophobic violence and stigmatization. Furthermore, Amnesty International has also documented human rights abuses against LGBTQ individuals in Nigeria. They reported on the case of the "Jungle Justice" incident in 2014, where four people suspected of being gay were attacked, beaten, and humiliated in public. The organization has also highlighted a range of abuses faced by LGBTQ individuals, including forced marriage to "cure" homosexuality, denial of health care, and discrimination in employment and housing. A study conducted by NSVRI examined the prevalence of sexual violence against men who have sex with men (MSM) in Nigeria. The research found that violence, including rape, was a common experience for MSM, with 38% experiencing forced sex due to their sexual orientation. The study also highlighted the deeply rooted societal stigma that contributes to this violence.



In the long run, according to available statistics, there is an upsurge in the rate of violence towards LGBTQ in Nigeria resulting in inequalities in access to available resources. Since the enactment of Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA), violence against LGBTIQ+ Nigerians has risen by 21.4% (Giwa et al., 2020). Recently, survivors complain of arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention, invasion of privacy, blackmail, battery and extortion. According to a study conducted by Sekoni et al. (2014), alcohol use among gay men in Nigeria is about 57%, and about a quarter (25%) of them smoke cigarettes while 11% was revealed to be involved in hard drugs. About 60% reported verbal, physical, and psychological abuses. Stromdahl et al. (2019) revealed that 36% of men living in Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria, reported discrimination due to sexual orientation while 17% are afraid to walk freely in the society. Due to their sexual orientation, 41% of those who experienced enacted rights abuses were blackmailed, 36% were beaten, 13% were refused housing, and 11% were imprisoned.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that the challenges faced by the LGBTQ individuals in the society are multifaceted and require urgent attention. LGBTQ individuals often encounter discrimination, stigma, and prejudice in various aspects of their lives, including family, friends, workplaces, and communities, and these challenges can lead to social isolation, mental health issues, and a limited sense of belonging. These individuals face rejection, strained family dynamics, and lack of support from loved ones. Coming out as an essential process for self-acceptance and authenticity are often met with hostility or confusion, leading to fractured relationships. Moreover, LGBTQ individuals experience discrimination in hiring, promotion, or workplace policies, further exacerbating their daily challenges. Also, community acceptance and support vary widely, with some LGBTQ individuals finding refuge and belonging in LGBTQ spaces, while others face hostility and exclusion in broader society. The continued perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and prejudices further contribute to the challenges faced by these individuals. However, to address these issues, it is crucial to foster awareness, education, and empathy among people cohabiting in the same society by challenging discrimination and biases, and promoting inclusive policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the violation of rights of LGBTQ individuals and discrimination requires a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach. However, some recommendations can be made to improve the standard of living of this marginalized community. First, legal protection is very vital if the LGBTQ community would live a life free of harassment and stigmatization. Advocate for inclusive laws and policies at local, national, and international levels such as anti-discrimination laws in employment, housing, healthcare, and education that explicitly prohibit discrimination against LGBTQ individuals. Also, there should be a sensitization program that would foster understanding and empathy, and also promote LGBTQ inclusion and diversity in schools, workplaces, and communities. This can help dispel stereotypes and prejudices, reducing discrimination. Since mental health drainage is rampant among LGBTQ individuals, there should be provisions for accessible healthcare services that address the mental health needs of LGBTQ individuals, including specialized counseling and affirmative therapies;



hence psychological assessments and insightful counseling should be encouraged among LGBTQ adolescents. Lastly, to curb discrimination and stereotypes within the LGBTQ community, there should be good media representation and a well projected public-image. This will encourage accurate and positive portrayals of LGBTQ individuals in media, entertainment, and the arts.

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