



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF DIVERSE SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS AND GENDER IDENTITIES IN NIGERIA





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LIST OF ACRONYMS

- AIDS: Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
- CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- GBV: Gender-based Violence
- GEO: Gender and Equal Opportunities
- HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus
- FGM: Female Genital Mutilation
- FSW: Female Sex Workers
- LGBTQIA: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual persons
- LGBT+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender; and other gender and sexual minorities.
- MSM: Men Who Have Sex with Men
- NFF: Nigerian Feminist Forum
- OSS: One-Stop-Shop
- PWUDs: People Who Use Drugs
- *SARS: Special Anti-Robbery Squad*
- *SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals*
- SOGIE: Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities
- SRHR: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
- SSMPA: Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act
- STI: Sexually Transmitted Infection

Religious fundamentalism: The adoption of religious dogmatic beliefs as irrefutable and unquestionable used to impose social, economic, cultural and economic adherence.

Homophobia: The fear and hatred of or discomfort with homosexuals usually based on negative stereotypes of homosexuality.

Transphobia: The fear and hatred of, or discomfort with others because of their actual or perceived gender identity or expression.

Conversion practices: Also known as sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (SOGIE) change efforts. These are attempts to change, suppress, or divert a person's sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

Homosexual: A person emotionally, romantically, sexually or relationally attracted to people of the same sex.

Lesbian: A woman emotionally, romantically, sexually or relationally attracted to other women.

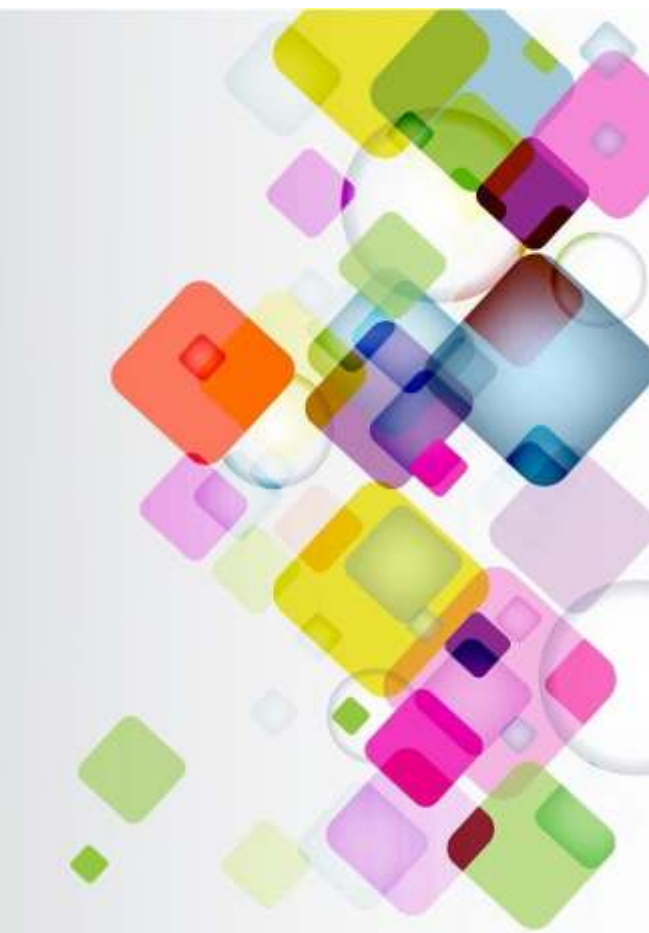
Gay: A synonym for homosexuality in many parts of the world. In this report, it is used specifically to refer to a man who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to other men.

Bisexual: A person emotionally, romantically, sexually or relationally attracted to people of the same gender and other genders, though not necessarily simultaneously; a bisexual person may not be equally attracted to both sexes, and the degree of attraction may vary as sexual identity develops over time.

Transgender: An umbrella term referring to an individual whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned at birth. It may include people who are not exclusively masculine or feminine and people who are nonbinary or genderqueer, including no gender, gender fluid or agender.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS





Gender identity: One's deeply rooted internal sense of their gender, i.e., being male or female, both, or something other than female and male. For most people, gender identity aligns with assigned sex, but this is not often the case for trans persons.

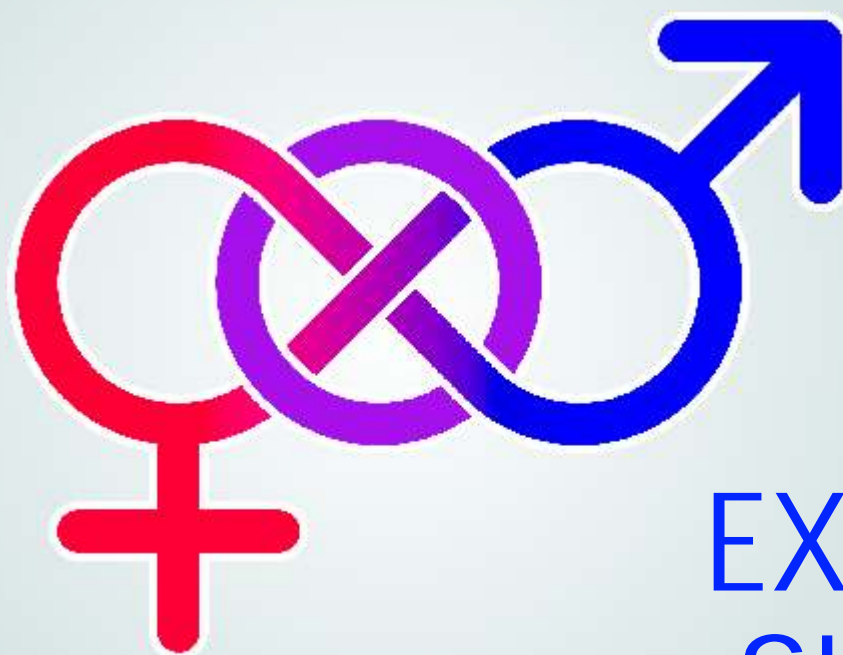
Gender expression: External manifestation of one's gender identity, usually expressed through masculine, feminine or gender-variant behaviour, clothing, haircut, voice or body characteristics. Typically, transgender persons seek to make their gender expression match their gender identity rather than their birth-assigned sex.

Sexual orientation: An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or relational attraction to another person; it may be a same-sex orientation, opposite-sex orientation or bisexual orientation. It is not to be confused with sexual preference, which is what a person likes or prefers to do sexually; a conscious recognition of choice.

Sex characteristics: These are present at birth and comprise the external and internal genitalia (e.g., the penis and testes in males and the vagina and ovaries in females). Secondary sexual characteristics are those that emerge during the prepubescent through postpubescent phases.

Heteronormativity: The belief (and the promotion of said belief) that heterosexuality is the norm, natural and preferred sexual orientation.

LGBTQI+ / LGBTQIA / LGBT+: Blanket terms that refers to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or trans, queer, intersex and asexual.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Nigeria, fundamentalist groups demonise the rights of women and sexual minorities. At the same time, our indigenous histories of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities have been erased, forgotten or replaced by fundamentalist ideologies. This research set out to determine how religious fundamentalists groups fund, impose narratives, promote mainstream ideas of exclusion and project a single, Western standard of behaviour on society. Through a historical analysis, we also sought to ascertain and affirm the existence of diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and expressions (SOGIE) in pre-colonial Nigeria.

We adopted two research methods in implementing this study. First, we utilised qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews for the empirical study of religious

fundamentalism and historical analysis of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions (SOGIE) in Nigeria. We interviewed sixteen Nigerians: fourteen human rights advocates and two custodians of culture; an Igbo priestess and an Ifá (Yorùbá) priest. Although we intended to conduct more in-depth interviews to gain deeper insights into religious perspectives from oppositions of women's rights and sexual and gender diversity, we could not find willing participants. Hence, we adopted robust desktop research for the content analysis of existing data.

Findings reveal that homosexuality and diverse SOGIE were not alien to Africa before the incursion of colonial imperialists. Instead, colonialism and foreign religions imported into Africa established the intolerance,

persecution and prosecution of same-sex relationships that exist today through draconian laws. We found that same-sex relationships, though often not sexual as was the case with the *igba ohu* (female husbands) of the Nnobi people of Igboland, were recognised within the societies. *Oyichi'e*, i.e., are soul mates in Igbo cosmology, accepted the possibility of same-sex relationships. Pre-colonial societies also accepted gender fluidity was also fully accepted. *Sàngó*, the god of thunder in Yorùbá history, was considered gender fluid and is still depicted today as an effeminate male by his worshippers. The Yan Dauda of pre-Islamic Bori society of the Hausa people were (and are) male cross dressers who also took on roles considered traditionally feminine such as cooking food for sale.

These findings mirror the accounts of gender and sexual diversity across pre-colonial African cultures. Non-Islamic Nubian identities from Sudan had men who dressed and lived as women. There were also *lando/tubele* who were “non-masculine” men married to other men. The Azande Islamic-influenced forest nomads found in Sudan, Central African Republic, and Chad had records of boys who served as temporary brides to men. Often, a “bride” price was paid on them. In Lesotho, the women of Sotho/Besotho had intimate relationships with other women. Finally in Angola, the Bayoka people recorded mutual masturbation among men. Among another group the Bangala, it was commonplace for men to have sex with other men on journeys to strange towns, or when they were away camping without their women

While same-sex relationships and diverse gender identities/expressions were not institutionalised in pre-colonial Africa, sexual and gender diversity was neither frowned upon nor condemned as now exists in contemporary Africa. Consequently, we find that the background to blurred lines between authentic African values and imposed cultures are colonial incursions, foreign religious indoctrination and continued fundamentalist interference.

Intolerance of gender and sexual diversity began with the introduction of Christianity and/or Islam by colonialists and Arab traders respectively. Their impacts remain today, especially with their continued efforts to eradicate women's and sexual minority rights. Religious fundamentalist approaches utilise culture to advance the propaganda against inclusion and diversity. Opponents of women's and LGBTQIA rights use the falsity that they are un-African. This method heightens hatred and the spread of misinformation about diverse SOGIE in pre-and post-colonial African societies. Data indicate that religious fundamentalism and the anti-LGBTQIA laws in Nigeria prevent access to healthcare services for women, LGBTQIA persons, and other marginalised groups. Fundamentalist-funded groups influence social perception, political homophobia, and laws that suppress women's and LGBTQIA rights in Nigeria. These groups promote repressive laws such as the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) or shut down progressive laws like the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill. Their actions have led to gross human rights violations by state and

non-state actors, coupled with widespread homophobia and hatred of feminism.

Our findings also highlight creative approaches women's and LGBTQIA rights activists adopt to navigate challenges posed by religious fundamentalism in their advocacy work. Organisations have increased their collaboration, working together to support each other in ways that reduce reliance on support from religious-affiliated groups. Others build allyship with mainstream organisations and engage religious groups to achieve their objectives. Many organisations prioritise safety and security of activists and rights holders while implementing their activities even in very hostile regions.

Our findings show that the assertion of homosexuality and feminism being un-African, and a Western import is entirely false. In addition, it is a strategy by fundamentalist

groups to further their anti-gender and anti-LGBTQIA rights ideologies. In truth, it is state-sanctioned homophobia through criminalisation that is a Western, specifically British-colonialist, import to Africa. Religious fundamentalism erodes the acceptance of gender and sexual diversity, and clampdowns on the rights of women and sexual minorities.

In this report, we have provided succinct recommendations on combatting religious advancing while advancing women's and LGBTQIA rights in Nigeria. These include movement building, awareness creation efforts, fostering education and implementing frameworks that promote inclusion and acceptance. Similarly, it behoves on the government to eliminate state-sanctioned homophobia by prioritising human rights, implementing repressive laws like the SSMPA, and promoting women's and LGBTQIA rights through laws and policies.





INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality is Un-African." "Homosexuality is a Western import." "Homosexuality is against our culture." These are common assertions by some Africans to justify the hatred and marginalisation of persons who are lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA). Africans who follow the introduced Abrahamic religions use these assertions along with "Homosexuality is a sin" or "Homosexuality is a satanic/demonic influence" to demonise, abuse and dehumanise LGBTQIA persons. These statements are responsible for the societal brutalisation of LGBTQIA persons. Law- and policymakers use these beliefs to sustain criminalising and stigmatising sexual and gender minorities in many African countries.

Fundamentalist groups adopt various methods in popularising their anti-women's rights and anti-LGBTQIA agenda into

mainstream Nigerian society. These perspectives lead to the erasure and suppression of indigenous histories and the subjugation of women and sexual minorities. Thus, the Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs) and Education as a Vaccine (EVA), with the support of Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, commissioned this research to ascertain or deconstruct religious fundamentalism and the history of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in Nigeria through an evidence-based empirical study. This study uses an inclusive lens to examine queer histories in pre-colonial indigenous Nigerian cultural practices and traditions. It also addresses the fundamentalist approaches in promoting and imposing alien/Western ideas amongst Nigerian human rights and civil society groups.

We aimed to promote an increased understanding of how fundamentalists import

and impose ideas on indigenous activists and the impact of religion on human rights activism in Nigeria. We also aimed to show how queerness existed and was accepted or rejected before missionaries and colonialists arrived in Africa. To attain these set objectives, the study sought to determine the existence of diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and gender expressions (SOGIE) in the pre-colonial and the early years of colonialism in Nigeria through a historical context analysis. Further, it dissected how religious fundamentalists groups and actors fund, impose narratives, promote mainstream ideas of exclusion and project a single, Western standard of behaviour on SOGIE.

We carried out extensive desk research of existing literature on religious fundamentalism in Nigeria, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews of civil society actors/organisations and custodians of culture, to answer the following questions:

Key Study Questions on Religious Fundamentalism

- What forms of religious fundamentalisms currently exist in Nigeria, and what factors have contributed to their rise?
- What is the impact of religious fundamentalism on human rights advocacy, particularly on women's rights and LGBTQI rights?
- How have civil society organisations responded, and what best practices exist?

Key Study Questions on Historical Analysis of Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities and Expressions (SOGIE)

- How did gender identities exist in pre-colonial Nigeria?
- How did colonialism contribute to making SOGIE into binary concepts in present-day Nigeria?
- Are there pre-colonial concepts of SOGIE that can be used to support current LGBTQI advocacy?



METHODOLOGY

Research Designs and Methods

We adopted a qualitative method through in-depth interviews for the empirical study of religious fundamentalism and historical analysis of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions (SOGIE) in Nigeria. For this research, we interviewed sixteen Nigerians: fourteen human rights advocates and two custodians of culture; an Igbo priestess and an Ifá (Yorùbá) priest. Although we intended to conduct more in-depth interviews to gain deeper insights into religious perspectives from oppositions of women's rights and sexual and gender diversity, we could not find willing participants. Hence, we adopted robust desktop research for the content analysis of existing data.

The study utilised a mix of convenience and snowball sampling approaches. Given the level of detail and knowledge required, we identified and pre-screened research participants to ensure full cooperation and contribution to the study without compromising their perspectives. Research participants were cut across seven states in 4 geo-political zones in Nigeria: Akwa Ibom, Bauchi and Delta, Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Plateau,

and River States. Due to the sensitivity of this research, the organisations and identities of human rights advocates who served as key informants are protected.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was through recorded online, phone and in-person conversations. The researchers transcribed and analysed data using thematic and narrative analysis methods. The pre-colonial historical content analysis through peer-reviewed journals, books, and documentaries focused on case studies on Hausa, Igbo, and Yorùbá as Nigeria's three majority ethnic groups. Through the case studies, we examined the cultural, social, and economic practices of the selected ethnic groups in pre-colonial times to identify and understand their attitudes to SOGIE in Nigeria. The pre-colonial context analysis offered a counter-narrative to the defence that women's, sexual, and other minorities' rights are contrary to African or Nigerian cultural practices and thus are western importations. The analysed fact-based datasets presented a plethora of evidence supporting diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions in prehistoric and pre-colonial Nigeria.

Background



Sexual Orientation, Gender Identities and Expressions in Pre-colonial Nigeria

Diverse SOGIE in contemporary Africa faces stern criticism, rejection, condemnation and criminalisation on account of being tagged “immoral,” “sinful,” “un-African,” “unnatural,” and an “abomination.” These labels lead to untold discrimination and stigmatisation of African gender and sexual minorities. The 21st century events show that in many African countries, opponents violently oppose the clamour for recognising diverse SOGIE rights through human rights violations and the imposition of even stricter laws. Ghana is a recent addition with its proposed Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill, 2021.

This persecution of gender and sexual minority persons in Africa is different from what was obtainable in precolonial and ancient Africa. According to George Olusola Ajibade (2013), same-sex relationships and transgender identities and expressions exist in the Yorùbá cosmological ontology and within masculine and feminine metaphysical lanes as natural occurrences. He states that while not an institutionalised practice in the pre-colonial

and ancient Yorùbá culture, diversity exists as an acceptable practice in the metaphysical and physical realms. Ajibade (2013) also points out that “the handling of same-sex relationships discourse in African works of literature has been greatly influenced by the conventional belief systems of various African societies, the imported views of domesticated religions (mainly Christianity and Islam), and legacies of colonialism and neo-colonialism.” The postmodern effects of sensationalized, profit-driven, insensitive reporting and moral-bearing gatekeeping by the media also continue to obscure the historical context of SOGIE to fuel homophobia (Ajao 2014).

Ifi Amadiume, in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (2015), established the fluidity of gender roles and sexual dynamics of pre-colonial Nnobi people of Igbo land. Here, women embarked on socio-political activities, and same-sex marriages were standard practices. In the igba ohu practice, Nnobi women served as female husbands with female wives. There were no established sexual encounters in these women-women marriages, but the female husbands could decide to have their wives bear children with chosen men in their names (Amadiume 2015). This pre-colonial cultural practice is juxtaposed with women-women marriages in contemporary Africa with established sexual relationships, categorised as lesbianism or where the women are married to men, bisexuality. While there might have been evolutions in the ancient practice of same-sex marriages among the Nnobi people and the lesbian relationships in contemporary

Africa, their non-heteronormativity is unquestionable.

Heteronormativity propagated in Africa through colonialism is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, male or female, and heterosexuality is the norm. Heteronormativity fosters the belief that individuals are either masculine men or feminine women (World Health Organisation, 2016). This rigid Western gender and sexual orientation categorisation establishes the female-male, girl-boy, and woman-man binaries and renders invisible other fluid and accepted diverse sexualities and gender identities in Africa (Oyewumi 1997). The studies by Oyeronke Oyewunmi (1997), George Olusola Ajibade (2013), and Ifi Amadiume (2015) on sexual diversities in Africa show that before colonialism in Nigeria, Igbo and Yorùbá ethnicities lived without these restrictive gender norms. The pre-colonial women from Igbo and Yorùbá regions wielded socio-economic and political powers that became less visible with colonisation. Colonialism also overturned the mystical resonance of powerful female deities such as goddess *Idemili*, *Yemoja*, *Òsun* or the androgynous *Olóòkun* (a revered overseer of all water bodies in Yorùbá spirituality), as well as the public relevance of African women.

Busangokwakhe Dlamini (2011) has refuted that homosexuality is a Western import to Africa. He argued that same-sex relationships existed in African culture, cosmology and spirituality. In the pre-Islamic and pre-colonial Hausa culture in Nigeria, men who acted

female-like in expressions and identities within the *Bori* society (a pre-Islamic traditional religion spread to Tunisia, Syria, Egypt, and Mecca) are known as Yan Daudu (Murray & Roscoe 1998). Although Rudolf P. Gaudio (cited by Murray & Roscoe 1998) deemphasized the *bori* spirit-possession notion of Yan Daudus, he emphasized their effeminate characteristics as feminine men who may or may not engage in same-sex relationships. Thus, the pre-Islamic and pre-colonial Hausa culture accommodated the Yan Daudu, whose gender expressions and identities are effeminate while displaying a strong affinity for cross-dressing (Ajao 2014). Besides serving as transgender entertainers, Yan Daudu's socio-occupational network involved making money by cooking and selling food like *karuwai* (independent women). This was even in the wake of Islamisation and colonisation in Hausa land (Gaudio 2009). In this regard, the Yan daudu gender fluidity challenges the fixed binary gender roles that have permeated modern-day Africa.



Sexual Orientation, Gender Identities and Expressions in Ancient Africa

There are well-documented reports of patterns and variants of diverse SOGIE across Africa before the Western importation of homophobia. In the non-Islamic Nubian ethnicities of Sudan, their pre-colonial sexual

practices include men who dressed and lived as women and non-masculine men referred to as *lando* or *tubele* marrying men (Siegfried 1955 and 1947 cited by Murray & Roscoe 1998). In Lesotho history, Kathryn Kendall (1998) established long-term intimate relationships between Sotho/Basotho women. The Azande warriors of southwestern Sudan, the Central African Republic and the north-eastern Congo, an Islam-influenced forest people, also married boys who “functioned as temporary wives” by paying their bride price (Evans-Pritchard cited in Murray & Roscoe 1998:10-34). The following is a quote from *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands* edited by Murray, and Roscoe (1998:119), indicating accepted same-sex relationships and gender fluidity in Angola.

“

In the early twentieth century, Emil Torday and Thomas Joyce... reported mutual masturbation among young men of the neighbouring Bayaka (Yaka) agriculturalists (1906: 48). Somewhat earlier, Herman Soyaux reported sexual relations between men and boys among the matrilineal Bangala (Mbangala) in Angola, which occurred on lengthy business trips when men were unaccompanied by their wives (1879, 2: 59). Weeks also reported that mutual masturbation was frequently practiced by Bangala men and that sodomy was “very common, and is regarded with little or no shame. It generally takes place when men are visiting strange towns or during the time they are fishing at camps away from their women” (1909: 448 49)... In west-central Angola, missionary David Livingstone observed individuals that he termed dandies among the Temba (Tamba/Matamba). These men adorned their bodies with decorations and used so much grease in their hair that it drenched their shoulders (1857: 452).

”

When Arab slave traders and Western colonialists came to Africa, they displaced Africans' ways of life. They established binary order that institutionalised heteronormative patriarchy and gender inequalities (Oyewumi 1997, 2011). In addition to the Arabian and

Western Atlantic slave trades, the imperialist incursion of Africa Christianised, 'civilised,' and commercialised Africa (Mwambazi 2020). These imperialist efforts replaced African evolution with problematic systems, which bell hooks (2004:66) described as “imperialist

white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy." Imperialists adopted brutal strategies to enslave Africans to replace African values and culture. For instance, they labelled African

spirituality based on the Ubuntu philosophy of togetherness (Tamale 2020) as barbaric, backward and demonic (Maathai 2009). As stated by Wangari Maathai (2009:455-456):

“

For five centuries, the outside world has been telling Africans who they are. In much the same way as happened with the Aborigines in Australia, the native peoples of North America, and the indigenous peoples of Amazonia, Africans were told that their societies were backward, their religious traditions sinful, their agricultural practices primitive, their systems of governance irrelevant, and their cultural norms barbaric.

”

Christianity and Islam in Africa are used to promote disunity, institutionalised poverty, misinformation, and unquestionable servitude among Africans. Rev. Walter Mwambazi (2020) describes religion as the leading cause of poverty, oppression, and subjugation in Africa. In *Violence in Nigeria*, Toyin Falola (1998) pins protracted insecurity and instability on religious politicisation. He explained that religion and politics in Nigeria are bedfellows, as the former was integral to identity construction and self-determination in the colonial era. Consequently, African leaders and elites in the political and religious spaces have continued to use religion to manipulate, control, and subjugate peoples' access to basic needs, healthcare, justice, and rights.

In addition, religion serves as a tool of cognitive dissonance and divisive suppression and oppression. The departure of colonialists from Africa was only physical, as they had already imprinted their religion, system of governance, so-called moral values and

whitewashed education in the minds of Africans that anything indigenous is considered impure and backward. Where indigenous knowledge is applied, it is often through tainted programming of what is Africa or traditional or cultural, thus filled with self-hatred, injustices and stereotypes. It is not uncommon to encounter an African who has limited knowledge of their heritage. Essentially, the loss of indigenous knowledge, learning and progress are inheritances of imperialism. Mwambazi (2020) believes we will only realise Africa's freedom when Africans unshackle themselves from religious dogmatism and mind control.

Extant African scholarships on African (pre)history and colonialism have approached knowledge through decolonized intellectual paradigms to shift one-sided subjective narratives of lived realities and experiences of Africans before invasions. Such scholarship does not propose a romanticisation of pre-colonial Africa without challenges. Instead, they contextualise how colonialists have

displaced and brutalized Africa's self-knowledge and cut short its evolution. They intend to retell the missing stories of Africa's respect for diversity, interconnectedness, and acceptance of fluidity before the one-sided homogeneous lifestyles were systematically enforced and made mainstream. Their works also clarify why Africa still grapples with

oppressive systems entrenched by slave traders and colonialists. Africa currently houses numerous denominations of Christianity and Islam while spreading adulterated African traditions and cultures without critically examining their origins and what they mean for society's collective deterioration or progression.



The denial of diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and expressions (SOGIE) was ingrained in Africa after the colonialists had de-spiritualised and moralised Africa into believing that homosexuality is a Western importation. Professor Wangari Maathai (2009) argued that the colonialists systematically deculturated Africa by labelling it “the dark continent” to achieve moral superiority and advance their economic aims. It was easier to pillage Africa's natural resources after disconnecting Africans from their spiritual practices. To keep the process of deculturation top-notch, like their Arabic counterpart, Western imperialists embarked on ‘civilising,’ Christianising, and commercialising Africa by eroding its knowledge, culture, language, and spirituality.

The faulty premise of homosexuality as a Western importation hinged on a critical question: If diverse sexual orientation and gender identities did not exist in Africa, why did colonialists find the need to introduce colonial sodomy and vagrancy laws in Africa? There have been a series of contested arguments for and against the existence of diverse sexual orientations in Africa. Those viewing it as a Western abomination insist colonial sodomy laws aimed to control the spread of a practice brought by Arab slave traders or Western imperialists (Murray and Roscoe 1998). While others argued it was in line with Christianised condemnation of sodomy, which the colonialists wanted to enforce alongside their religion to “civilise” Africa (Ilesanmi 2013). The seed of confusion was thus sown, to the point that what any

Religious Fundamentalism and SOGIE in Contemporary Africa

uncritical African needs to hear is “Western importation” or “un-African” to stand against diverse SOGIE. The irony is that the opposite is the truth: Christianity *is* a Western importation, not gender and sexual diversity.

Presently, African political and religious leaders have politicised homophobia. For instance, former President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, waged a raging war against homosexuality. He clamped down more on homosexuality after the first Zimbabwean president, Rev. Canaan Banana, was ousted for homosexuality and later sentenced for gay assault when Mugabe served as the first Prime Minister (BBC News 1999). The belief that homosexuality is abhorrent and un-African features in the ongoing injustices meted out against LGBTQIA persons in South Africa through gross human rights violations, despite laws to promote gender and sexual minority rights. In Uganda, homophobic attacks and the brutal exposure of 100 sexual minorities outed by Rolling Stone newspaper in 2010 led to the subsequent murder of LGBTQIQ+ rights activist David Kato in 2011.

Previous research implicates several US conservative evangelical Christian groups as funders and promoters of homophobia in Africa. Lydia Namuburu and Khatondi Soila Wepukhulu (2020) report that these fundamentalist groups have dispensed over \$50m in Africa to fight LGBT+ rights, comprehensive sexuality education, contraceptive and access to safe abortions. They also reported that a secret US religious group, the Fellowship Foundation, supported David Bahati's "kill the gay" Bill and is known to have spent nothing less than \$20m in

Uganda between 2008 and 2018. The Western fundamentalists are heavily invested in promoting laws that derogate women's and LGBTQIA rights across Africa. Similarly, they influence homophobic perspectives by entrenching their ideologies in schools through mentorship and media disinformation through channels like the "television empires of Christian Broadcasting Network and Trinity Broadcasting Network" (Kaoma 2012: 1). This is to show that Western interferences in establishing heteronormativity continue post-colonialism.



Religious fundamentalist groups funding the suppression of human rights in Africa have contributed to the rise of Islamic and Christian Fundamentalism in many countries, including Nigeria. Both contemporary Christian and Islamic fundamentalists groups receive international and national support to propagate their beliefs and moralise society. Instances abound. For example, the Catholic Bishops Conference, Nigeria, a Christian group, strongly advocates against same-sex marriage, abortion, and contraception. The group consistently emphasises marriage as a sacred union between a man and a woman for procreation. The group spreads its messages outside its congregations through press releases while canvassing for policies to meet its agenda. This is an effective way of spreading hatred of gender and sexual minorities within society. Another Christian group with remarkable influence, the National Association of Catholic Lawyers (NACL), staunchly defends the Catholic faith and the anti-LGBT movement.

Fundamentalist groups also mobilise funding through donations, members' subscriptions, fundraising and grants, as highlighted in the glossary of opposition actors in Appendix II. It is also common to have members of elite groups support extremists' causes of oppression and persecution, promoting the colonial legacy.

In Nigeria, religion and politics interweave to feed off each other and assert control and dominance in citizens' public and private lives. For instance, the infamous Islamic sect, Boko Haram in Nigeria, responsible for the

Religious Fundamentalism and SOGIE in Contemporary Nigeria

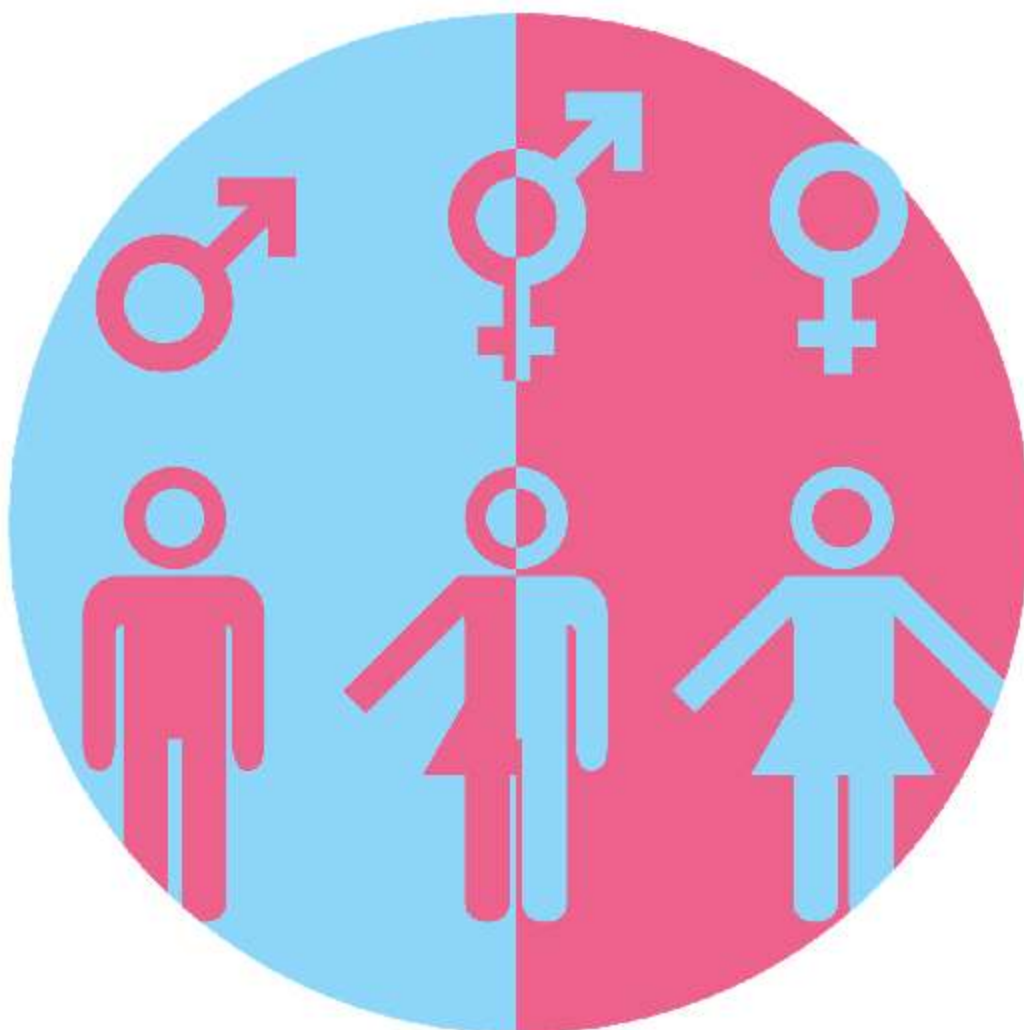
abduction of 276 Chibok Girls in 2014, among other gross human rights violations, receives elitists support for its various nefarious activities (Ajao 2012, 2014). The group uses the Sharia law justification to tyrannize Nigerian gender and sexual minorities. The political elites also use such terrorist sects to spread insecurity and manipulate society for their benefit (Ajao 2012, 2014). Whereas Boko Haram operates locally to terrorise Nigerians, the sect enjoys transnational support from international groups like Al Shabab and Al-Qaeda.

Religious fundamentalists wield power and are highly influential. They weaponise their belief systems through funding and state backing, using religious (including Sharia) laws to violate human rights. For instance, Kano, a state in northern Nigeria and one of the 12 states to adopt Shariah criminal law, instituted religious police called The Kano State Hisbah Corps in 2003 (Hisbah). Since its formation, Hisbah has wrought untold havoc on any group or persons considered to have sinned. They have banned the sale of alcoholic

beverages in Kano and using mannequins to advertise clothes. They have clamped down on women's rights and freedoms and raided and persecuted persons perceived to be homosexual at will.

While Islamic sects are known to mete out overt acts of physical violence on Nigerians, Christian fundamentalists often do so by militarising thoughts and actions detrimental to targeted groups' rights and their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Therefore, both Islamic and Christian

fundamentalists in Nigeria have continued to deny women's rights and refuse to acknowledge the Africanness and human nature of diverse sexuality and gender identities. They promote homosexuality as an immoral and Western disease rather than the West eroding inclusion and diversity in Africa through draconian laws (Tamale 2009, Dlamini 2013). This misinformation is rooted in the advancement of anti-LGBTQIA and anti-feminist ideologies through intolerance and militancy.



The unending religious fundamentalism against diverse sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (SOGIE) is traceable to the colonial legacy in Africa. British-era laws imposed the first criminalisation of same-sex acts and gender diversity (cross-dressing, in particular) (Sogunro 2017). When the Federal Government announced the plan to introduce the anti-LGBTQIA bill in 2006, President Obasanjo declared homosexual unions “un-Biblical, unnatural and un-African” (Horn 2006). The colonial approach of fusing Christianity and culture to nullify peoples' inalienable human rights is unmissed in this statement. Only now, Nigerians and Africans believe that their culture is what the colonialists left behind and not what existed before the foreign invasion. Presently, criminal laws in Nigeria have heavy religious and moral tones, although the Nigerian Constitution declares that there is no state religion, and its provisions are supreme. These laws contravene the Constitution's provisions on privacy, freedom of expression and non-discrimination, and other fundamental rights. The Criminal Code and Penal Code, applicable in northern and southern Nigeria, were inherited from the British. They laid the foundation for criminalising same-sex acts and non-conforming gender identities. Thus, the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act (SSMPA), signed into law in 2014 by the Goodluck Jonathan administration, expanded this colonial legacy of demonising and vilifying diverse SOGIE in Nigeria.

State Sanction of Homophobia Through Sharia Laws and the SSMPA

The SSMPA prohibits marriages or civil unions between same-sex couples, the registration of gay clubs, societies and organisations, and what it terms public show of amorous relationships between same-sex partners (Ajao 2014). While the focus of the SSMPA is same-sex marriages, it did not criminalise being homosexual. However, the Nigerian society interprets this Act beyond its content based on existing prejudices and other draconian laws. While this Act ought not to exist in the first place, the militarised responses by the political elites, religious leaders, and uninformed Nigerians combine to facilitate widespread homophobia in Nigeria.



Religious Leaders and Mega churches Spreading Homophobia in Nigeria

Religious leaders across levels were outspoken in support of the introduction of the SSMPA and used their influence to incite followers. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) a consortium of various Christian denominations in Nigeria made press appearances to denounce homosexuality. The group also declared a West-funded project to advance its objectives (Nzwili 2014). A Kenyan reverend, Michael Kimindu, cautioned against the injustices SSMPA would provoke and became a persona non grata among the Anglican leaders in Kenya (LGBTQ Religious Archives Network, 2021). A similar fate was meted against Rev. Jide Macaulay, a pastor of House of Rainbow, a church committed to ensuring gender and sexual minorities of God's love. In 2008, a National Newspaper outed Rev. Macaulay as gay (Suuntaus Project 2015). The uproar of intolerance and the threat to Macaulay's life caused the founder of the "first Gay Church in Nigeria" to flee Nigeria back to Britain, where he is a dual citizen (Machunga 2016). While House of Rainbow still runs its activities worldwide with a steadfast commitment to protecting LGBTQIA persons

in hostile climates, it remains disreputable among homophobic Nigerians. Within Islam, the Sharia criminal law in 12 northern states penalises homosexual activities with various punishments, including death by stoning. Islamic organisations like the Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC) declared homosexuality un-Islamic and un-African in support of SSMPA (Suuntaus Project 2015).

There are overwhelming amounts of printed and online Newspaper articles dutifully disseminating inciting statements and hate speech orchestrated by religious leaders against homosexuality since the National Assembly passed the SSMPA. There is also a plethora of Christian devotionals widely distributed across Nigeria that speaks against homosexuality regularly, furthering the spread of hatred and misinformation about gender and sexual diversity in Nigeria.



The religious war against women's rights goes together with demonising LGBTQIA rights in Nigeria. Homophobia in Africa rests on the same axis of patriarchal and heteronormative submergence of African women's presence and visible roles in socio-political, cultural and economic spaces. Laws and policies help to sustain this subjugation of women. In 2008, under the pretext of protecting women from sexual harassment and violence, Senator Eme Ufot Ekaette presented a Bill "to prohibit and punish public nudity, sexual intimidation and other related offences in Nigeria" (Bakare-Yusuf 2016). Popularly known as "The Indecent Dressing Bill," it was a method of controlling women's dressing while entrenching purity and rape culture. This proposed law would have only advanced the social control of some megachurches and the wider Nigerian society.

When the legislature proposed this Bill, the Redeemed Christian Church of God and some tertiary institutions banned women from wearing revealing clothes, skimpy dresses and trousers (Bakare-Yusuf 2016). Police extortions and harassment of women and men who wear earrings ensued under the pretence that they were ridding Nigeria of indecency and vices (Pambazuka 2009, Bakare-Yusuf 2016, Human Rights Watch 2016). The *Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian police would later continue the profiling, fostering systematic harassment and extortion of anyone who looks 'immoral' or 'criminal' in appearance, which partly culminated in the #ENDSARS protests in 2020* (Ajao 2020).

Religious and Political Violation of Women's Rights in Nigeria

Ill-conceived anti-human rights instruments and proclamations above only foster exclusion and the continued subordination of women and LGBTQIA persons. In many instances, these lead to the loss of lives of marginalised persons. For example, a group of young men attacked and killed Grace Ushang in 2009 for wearing the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Khaki trousers (Pambazuka 2009). The climate of controlling women's bodily autonomy emboldened this act of jungle justice. The politicization of religion as a tool of control in the hands of Western imperialists has continued unabated as a device of oppression in the hands of postcolonial Nigerians/Africans. While the misunderstanding of authentic African culture is central to human rights abuse of women and LGBTQIA persons in Nigeria, Christianity and Islam remain the unwavering conduits of disbursements.

In 2016, a Gender and Equal Opportunities (GEO) Bill was proposed to the National Assembly. This Bill would domesticate the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ratified by Nigeria in 1985 with the optional protocols signed in 2000 and ratified in 2004.

Yet, in line with the government's continued poor commitment to women's rights, the GEO Bill has been blocked from enactment multiple times. Government leaders have deprioritised and trivialised women's rights, hammering on cultural values and religious beliefs to shut down progressive instruments that promote gender inclusion and equal rights.



There are direct effects of religious fundamentalism on gender and sexual minorities in Nigeria. Bigotry usually stems from supposed cultural values and religious beliefs under Islam and Christianity. As shown above, in both the pre-colonial history of SOGIE in Africa and religious fundamentalism, many Nigerians merge their indoctrinated religion with Westernised understanding of African cultures. They use this to justify the myth that homosexuality is incompatible with African family values.

Political propaganda, religious fundamentalism, and cultural prejudices foster the society victimising and abusing LGBTQIA persons, even by family members. State and non-state actors are implicated in these human rights violations. It is common place for persons to perpetrate arbitrary arrests, torture, mob attacks, sexual violence, intimidation, kidnapping, blackmail, verbal harassment and other forms of violence against LGBTQIA persons. For instance, in Anambra, a state in south-eastern Nigeria with a majority Christian population, two vigilantes trapped a gay person and killed him (Gay Star News 2020). In this light, the Nigerian police is one of the major assaulters of sexual minorities in Nigeria. Extortion, intimidation, physical abuse, profiling, mass arrests and arbitrary charges are prevalent. In 2017, the police arrested about one hundred people in hotels and a “gay wedding” (BBC News 2017, Lui 2017). The direct and indirect brutal police violations witnessed by LGBTQIA rights activist and lawyer Richard Akuson led to dubbing Nigeria “a cold-blooded country

Direct Effects of Religious Fundamentalism on LGBTQIA Persons in Contemporary Nigeria

for gay men” (Akuson 2019). Police officers are also culpable of evoking the wrath of God and “sins against God” when they apprehend, torture and violate the rights of perceived or actual sexual minorities (Akuson 2019). Since 2014, TIERS annually reports the prevalence of human rights violations based on sexual orientation, gender identity/expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) (<https://theinitiativeforequalrights.org/>).

TB Joshua, a popular televangelist pastor of Synagogue Church of All Nations mega church, was banned on YouTube in April 2021, shortly before his death, through his promotion of conversion practices against LGBTQIA persons. He was shown live on social media slapping a woman he claimed he was exorcising a 'demonic spirit' out of (BBC News 2021). TB Joshua was not the only influencing religious leader in Africa who dedicated their time to exorcism, conversion practices and homophobic preaching to stigmatise and dehumanise LGBTQIA persons.

While influential Christian religious leaders promote conversion practices, homophobic speech, and incite abuse, Islamic leaders and the Hisbah do similar through raids and indiscriminate attacks on LGBTQIA persons (The Nation 2020, Vanguard 2021). The witch-hunting of sexual minorities in northern Nigeria has a perilous human security implication (BBC News 2014).

The Nigerian media is equally complicit in fuelling homophobia. While reporting LGBTQIA-related incidences, they often reveal their inherent religious or cultural biases through click bait headlines and reportage. Just as the overzealous interference of the Rolling Stone Newspaper led to the murder of Uganda gay activist David Kato in 2011, and a reporter's outing of Rev Jide Macaulay led to him fleeing Nigeria in 2008, journalistic predispositions continue to endanger the lives of LGBTQIA persons in Africa. Headlines such

as *'Hisbah raids gay party, arrests 15 homosexuals'* by The Nation (2020) exemplify how the media influences societal mindsets towards LGBTQIA persons in Nigeria. Nigerian media jumps to victimising conclusions without confirming whether the detained people are actual homosexuals. The media also does not carry out objective reporting when cases involve gender and sexual minorities.

Whether it is the police, the religious extremists, political elites, religious leaders or the media in contemporary Nigeria, their justification for spreading homophobia hinges on religion and myths about African values. Therefore, the terrain in which the LGBTQIA persons live in present-day Nigeria is precarious and not comparable to the pre-colonial and prehistoric SOGIE described before colonialism and the spread of foreign religions in Africa.



FINDINGS



Preamble

This section presents our findings on diverse SOGIE in pre-colonial Nigeria and post colonial efforts at religious fundamentalism targeted against women's and LGBTQIA persons' rights in the country. The fourteen research participants we interviewed provided relevant insights on these two issues. Most respondents presented evidence of direct or insidious effects of religious fundamentalism in their lives, their work and as observed, especially concerning women's rights, sexual

and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and the erosion of diverse SOGIE in Nigeria. Others argued that law and culture, more than religion, are responsible for suppressing LGBTQIA rights in Nigeria. The two cultural custodians among the interviewees provided views on pre-colonial practices of SOGIE in Nigeria while unequivocally implicating colonialism and foreign religions in the erosion of African spirituality and its understanding in shaping Africa's renaissance.



Ifa ndlgbgbo Spirituality on Gender and Sexual Diversity in Pre-Colonial Nigeria

Munonyedinma Frieda Ogbolumani, an Igbo traditional religion (?d?nani) priestess initiated at the age of five, discloses that Westernization has eroded the 'togetherness' of her lineage. As opposed to current practices in Nigeria, pre-colonial Igbo

spirituality and culture accommodated gender fluidity, same-sex relationships and cross-dressing. For instance, *Oyichi'e*, translating to "soulmate" in Igbo spiritual ontology and cosmology, accommodates same-sex connection. A woman's *oyichi'e* can be another woman, or a man's *oyichi'e* can be another man. She clarifies that while not defined in the ancient Igbo as homosexuality (as this labelling was a colonial invention), the same-sex union could be seen as a queer relationship in the modern world. In line with Ifi Amadiume's argument about the imperialist erosion of Nnobi's people culture, Ogbolumani asserts that the dismantling of pre-colonial women's economic, political and socio-cultural power succeeded through the colonialists' demonization of Igbo deities, goddesses and spirituality.

“

[In ancient Igbo], Eke and Oma are well respected, and they are female deities. Even the patron goddess of my place, Onishe, is female. [Due to westernization] People shy away from wanting to be identified as worshippers, even if they are not worshippers, or having anything to do with the deity. Take, for example, something as simple as pouring libation or something as simple as closing prayer with Ise... Some parts of our traditions are actually not linked back to religion; they are just customs and things that we do. People don't want to even do those things because they don't want to be tied to "juju", and people would rather try to put a Christian touch to it so that it's more acceptable to them. And doing that waters down the whole thing because western religion and traditional worship are like oil and water, they don't mix.

”

Ogbolumani expatiates further that *Oyichi'e* (same-sex soulmate connection) and men in touch with their emotions have become taboos due to the Western invasion of Igbo culture. She points out that the pre-colonial Igbo community was based on inclusion, hence communal protection through *Umunna*

(kinship guides) instead of ridiculing or shaming people. Consequently, shaming and judging individual shortcomings and challenges was an alien practice in prehistoric Igbo culture. It has become acceptable through Westernisation in the same way toxic masculinity is celebrated. Instead of shaming

and exclusion, people in need of help got assistance through their guide-deities. With the advent of Christianity through colonialism, ancient Igbo practices accommodating people's differences and struggles have been swept aside, and people's ways of life are misconstrued and judged sinful.

Moreover, women wielded matrilineal powers in pre-colonial Igboland, where children's identification is maternal rather than paternal. Colonialism has also led to its erasure. Imperialists excluded women from public lives and implanted self-hatred through Western education, acculturation, and Christianity.

“

...In the last 10 to 15 years, I have seen how women [are] been erased and society [becoming] more patriarchal compared to those days [where] everybody had their roles. For example, there are certain things you can't do without a female being present; there has to be equal representation of both gender, but in recent times it's more of 'let men do the talking while women do the watching'. People are being punished for trying to remind them that this is not how we do it... We have to also look at not only the colonial influence but also the education that we are getting. The education that we get now distances us from our people because after a while, you begin to [think] your people are beneath you or there is something wrong with your village people, especially if you don't stay in the village. You already have a sort of distance, and you quite don't understand the philosophy of your people. So, you are looking from the outside and trying to judge people you don't know anything about. Also, people want to seek more by going to church, and we have the education and religion that have been foisted upon us and imposed painfully.
- Interview with Munonyedinma Frieda Ogbolumani, 2021.

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An Ifá priest of Yorubá lineage, Òlúwó Olákunlé Oláwolé, corroborates Ogbolumani's assertions that Westernisation has erased inclusivity and gender fluidity in practice. Oláwolé is a tech enthusiast who believes an inherent relationship exists between indigenous scientific knowledge and technology. Oláwolé, who was certified as an

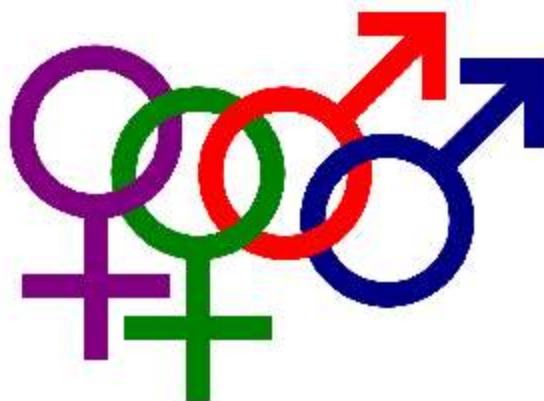
Ifá priest in 2017, belongs to a new generation of priests who advocates for young people and serves as a link between “what is ancient and what is current” as such, using Ifá knowledge to leverage technology in the contemporary world. His belief in Ifá as a holistic spirituality that supports human rights, gender equality, and neutrality has propelled him to spread his knowledge for a better humanity.

“

Ifá is so magnanimous, and the knowledge of Ifá is endless, but we have failed as a people to utilize this knowledge beyond physical growth. One of my objectives as a priest is to use my interest in technology to help young people attain a level in which they can convert the knowledge of Ifá to solve problems in their various spheres of life, in terms of health challenges, difficulties, politics and other aspects of our lives as humans. - Interview with Òlúwó Olákunlé Oláwolé, 2021.

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According to Oláwolé, Ifá recognizes that its balance rests on the feminine and masculine energy in the metaphysical realm for the world to run smoothly. If tilted towards any side in excess, this can lead to too much positivity or negativity in the physical world, hence the need for continual balancing. Thus, the colonial incursion of Africa eroded the feminine energy that balances the affairs of humans as and maintains gender neutrality, which Sàngó, a Yorùbá deity, exuded.



“

There [are] some male Òrìṣà who plait their hair, especially Sàngó, who is a warrior, and the plaiting of [his] hair shows that he can be able to attain a godlike level irrespective of his masculinity. There is an iota of femininity in him that balances gender value... For you to attain a spiritual godlike feature, you need to go through gender neutrality. According to Ifá, gender neutrality can be attained when we, as humans first of all, represent the power of feminism. Ifá talks about the story of òrìṣà pantheon and ?l?un as a feminist on the surface of the earth. - Interview with Òlùwó Olákunle Oláwolé, 2021.

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At every turn in Oláwolé's account, Ifá displays Yorùbá spirituality as a balancing force with female energy, a force upon which the physical world exists. Ò?un, a water goddess who controls the realm of rivers and fresh waters, has power in the physical realm, equally with male deities. According to Oláwolé, Ò?un championed the first “feminist coalition” in the physical realm, leading to the formation of *Ilúbìnrin*, a female-only community. The erosion of African spirituality, however, has

also erased the holistic understanding of the unique differences and intrinsic values, which *Olódùmarè* (a divine entity in Yorùbá religion) blesses everyone with, in Oláwolé's interpretation of Ifá. In attaining spiritual transcendence, a person can obtain both the male and female energy in one body and merge as one. Ancient Yorùbá culture does not shun, judge or condemn this androgynous entity but accepts and celebrates them as part of religious and cultural norms.

“

The male and female gender can be in one body, and Ifá makes us understand the concept of gender neutrality for the positive and negative gender to become one, that is the point where there is no barrier to the power behind gender neutrality, that is when you begin to have the attribute of a higher being because you have been able to balance the polarity of life together in one entity.” - Interview with Òlùwó Olákunle Oláwolé, 2021.

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Oláwolé's account establishes diverse gender identities and expressions through cross-dressing and *Sàngó's* effeminate appearance, which his worshippers emulate in contemporary Nigeria. The metaphysical understanding of the gift an individual embodies through *áko??ljayě*, the template of self-discovery a child comes into the world with, allows Yorùbá spirituality to be open-minded about gender fluidity and neutrality. However, the erosion of this knowledge through Colonialism and foreign religions makes it abominable in modern-day Nigeria

unless you are stereotyped as a traditional religious practitioner. While it is slightly acceptable even though you are judged as a pagan or an evil worshiper, an individual who shows up without any spiritual connotation is harshly judged as a person of no moral value.

Oláwolé elucidates that while Ifá adjudged gender neutrality or fluidity as an ascension into higher spirituality, homosexuality in the Yorùbá religion is considered an imbalance within the polarity of positive and negative energy. He explains that it must be rectified for procreation even though it is not judged.

“

Ifá talks about Olùnmilà who wants to marry a woman Gbagbon. Obviously, Olùnmilà has a more positive gene in his body. Unfortunately, this woman also has a more positive gene in her body, so the woman is more masculine sexually. After divination, Ifá told them that they could not marry because a male and a male cannot produce offspring; the woman had to marry a man with an active female gene, but Olùnmilà went ahead to marry the woman, and they did not give birth. After so much research, Olùnmilà discovered that for him to copulate with the woman, he has to convert the active gene to a passive one and the passive gene to an active one, which means that for Olùnmilà to impregnate the woman, the sex position must be doggy. So many people are going into marriages that don't [know] all these spiritual implications. - Interview with Òlùwó Olákunle Oláwolé, 2021.

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Ajibade (2013: 970-971), in his study, presents a contrary view to Oláwolé's. Not only did he discover Yorùbá deity worshippers being seen as the wives of these deities, whether male or female, but also that one of the deities, Orùnmilà, which Oláwolé narrated above, was conceived through an unsanctioned lesbian union.

From existing literature on diverse SOGIE in Africa to the documented accounts of the Igbo priestess and Ifá priest, cultural practices in

pre-colonial Nigeria neither criminalised nor demonised same-sex relationships, cross-dressing or fluid gender expressions or identities. The systematic erosion of gender and sexual diversity was in line with the Western subjugation of African women and the institutionalisation of patriarchal systems across Africa.

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Among the Yorùbá, the priests or priestesses of a particular deity, regardless of the sex or gender of such deity, are regarded as the wife of that deity (làyawó òrì?à). New initiates (male and females) of Yemoja, Ò?un, Obàtálá, ?ànp?lnná, and Sàngó to mention a few of the gods in the Yorùbá pantheon that possess people are specifically known as “brides/wives of the god/deities” (làyawó òrì?à)...From my interview with an Ifá priest, I discovered that the idea of lesbianism existed in Ifá mythology. The story has it that Òfurufú-ko-?e-feyinti and Láárúfin were both females who slept together and that Láárúfin subsequently gave birth to Oìrùnmilà. The myth concludes that this is why Oìrùnmilà has no bone inside his body: because he was the product of a traditionally unsanctioned union. However questionable this myth is to a logical mind; in religious thought, it has merit from a cultural analytic standpoint. Also, it validates the reality of the idea of lesbianism in Yorùbá thought and belief system. - Ajibade (2013).

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We interviewed fourteen key informants from civic society. Their works centre around LGBTQIA rights, women's rights, female sex workers' access to healthcare, sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), interventions for people who use drugs (PWUDs), HIV and cancer interventions, and youth wellbeing and empowerment. These participants shared insights into the concrete realities that necessitate their work. These realities include government neglect of the vibrant youth population, societal and institutional lack of care and empathy for PWUDs and the enduring injustices against women and sexual minorities in Nigeria. Some highly critical services in their work are access to healthcare services for LGBTQIA populations, especially men who have sex with men (MSM); reproductive health and rights for women (especially rights to abortion), gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, female genital mutilation (FGM) elimination, and access to medical care for female sex workers and PWUDs. Nigerian society has negative perceptions of all of these issues. Thus, all face prejudices and inequalities, including backlash from the government, religious groups and cultural, moral bearers that prioritise opinions over human rights.

On 9 August 2021 one of Nigeria's most influential pastors, who owns a megachurch and faith-based university, made controversial proclamations that negatively affect women's human rights struggles in Nigeria. David Oyedepo, one of the richest pastors in Nigeria, who founded the Winner's Chapel International Network and Covenant University, berated feminism and asked his

Present-day Impact of Religious Fundamentalism on Human Rights Advocacy

female followers not to 'join the club' if they wanted good marriages (Olabimtan 2021). According to him, "feminine revolution leads to feminine frustration and destiny devastation", and to his female followers, "...if feminine revolution is your vision, don't attempt to get married because it won't work" as feminism is unbiblical (Olabimtan 2021). As an uproar was brewing online with those shell-shocked speaking out, Faith Oyedepo, his wife, made a similar declaration on 13 August to strengthen her husband's position. She declared feminism demonic and that any woman questioning a man's authority is under diabolical influence (Adewole 2021). The Nigerian Feminist Forum's (NFF) response that stirred Faith into a rejoinder (Alozie 2021) clearly stated the unceasing control Nigerian churches continue to demonstrate over women's lives and rights, including those outside their jurisdiction. The influence of these and similar religious leaders (across religions) is extensive and goes a long way in dictating societal perception. As observed by research participants, there is still a long way to go to achieve gender parity in Nigeria.

Effects of Religious Fundamentalism on Women's and Sexual Minorities Rights in Modern Nigeria

Most interviewees presented evidence of direct or insidious effects of religious fundamentalism in their lives, their work and as observed, especially concerning

women's rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and the erosion of diverse SOGIE in Nigeria. A few others argued that law and culture, rather than religion, are responsible for widespread homophobia and persecution of LGBTQIA persons. The informants presented overwhelming scenarios of how religious fundamentalism affects their work, how they navigate these problems and what it means to attain human rights in Nigeria. Consequences of their efforts include attacks by anti-rights actors, direct criticisms by religious leaders in their places of worship, community ostracisation, and societal persecution, both in their professional and personal lives.



1. Facing Patriarchal, Political, Cultural and Religious Resistance

One of the key informants works with a Lagos-based women-led feminist organisation. They reported that, in promoting gender justice through policy advocacy, they grapple with politicians, faith leaders, and custodians of traditions who consider their work wrongful. Their work on comprehensive sexual reproductive health, safe abortion, gender equality and LGBTQIA rights meet patriarchal, political, cultural and religious resistance.

"We don't really work well with religious organisations because of issues around equality and women's right. Sometimes we have issues with faith actors [and] custodians of traditions because they don't also believe in gender equality... For religious organisations, they don't believe in feminism, gender equality, [or] homosexuality and that conflicts with our mandate because we promote teachings and learning in those areas. Most religious bodies don't believe in women having abortions, and that also conflicts with our mandate. If we look at the traditional settings, we also have issues with them because of the patriarchal nature of the way information takes place there. They believe that women should not be in a position where they can speak out or take decisions. They are also enablers of different types of violence that we have because the cultural norms and practices are some root causes of gender-based violence. We also have issues with the politicians because the people in a position of power do not believe that women should be

Impacts of Fundamentalists Interferences on Women's Rights

allowed to be in a position of authority."

This interviewee has dealt with insidious religious militancy in their work. They have had heated arguments with religious moral bearers when they raise essential issues on women living with disabilities, rights of sexual minorities and inclusivity. Their organisation continues to come under religious vitriol as a platform that fosters Western imports to Africa. This societal push back confirms the modern-day erosion of prehistoric acceptance of SOGIE and women's political powers contextualised by the Ifi Amadiume study.

2. Framing Services for Key Populations under HIV Interventions

We also found insidious and direct religious interferences in the work of the five female sex workers (FSWs) organisations interviewed in Akwa Ibom, Delta, Lagos, Plateau and River States. The interviewees from these organisations discussed the varying degrees of religious interference in their work and how they address these challenges. The first FSW

organisation focuses on reducing HIV, STIs, cervical cancer and genital warts among key populations and adolescents. Sometimes, the organisation resorts to reframing these services in a manner publicly acceptable even where they provide services to gay and bisexual men and FSWs. Failure to do so would mean exposing rights holders who access their services to further stigmatisation and self-denial.

“Two weeks ago, we wanted to treat an MSM for Anal warts, and during the interview, we found out that this man has been suffering from warts for over a year, but he couldn't access treatment in the hospital because of the fear of stigmatization. But he was able to open up to us, and he was treated... Another effect is self-denial. For me, I've faced a lot of discrimination, and I've learnt to overlook it, but what about others that cannot overlook it? They begin to experience this self-denial and start stigmatizing themselves, and before you know it, such a person may commit suicide... In terms of advocacy, as an organisation, when we pay advocacy visits, we don't make open that we [are] targeting the FSW or MSM. We let them know we target the youth, and we do HIV screening, prevention and treatment, but when we see a community member, we are able to identify them, they walk up to [us] and ask for our office address. But when we visit the hotspot, we are free to open up on who we are and the services we offer in our OSS. I believe that if advocacy is done this way at the grassroots, people can come out because a lot of LGBTQI persons cannot come out, and they are dying gradually.”

The allyship and HIV funding support by Caritas, an agency of the Catholic Church, has assisted an FSW organisation in running a one-stop-shop (OSS). The OSS provides services to over 2000 key populations. It makes it possible for marginalised populations –FSWs and lesbian, bisexual and gay persons – to access healthcare services without discrimination. Ironically, while the Catholic Church, through Caritas, supports HIV interventions, it is the most prominent antagonist of sexual and reproductive health rights, contraception, premarital sex, homosexuality and abortions. The Catholic Church also actively supports the anti-gender movement and ideology. As a result, despite having the OSS in place, the key populations and their service providers are not free from the claws of bigotry and discrimination from religious leaders and the wider society.

“There was a time a pastor asked me about the work I do, and I told him I reach out to the key population, and he called me a sinner and started quoting bibles for me. Even in the course of our work, I discovered that some community members told the pastor that I would like to educate the young girls and boys, but he kicked against it. I have had this encounter several times... [Also], we lost one of our clients recently. Before his death, we noticed that he stopped coming for treatment and during our follow up visit, we discovered that his pastor told him to stop taking medications and hope for a miracle, but after a while, he died. These are some of the challenges we face.”

3. Religious and Legal Pushback

The second FSW organisation interviewed protects sex workers against gender-based violence (GBV) and has experienced extensive push backs from the religious community and the legal system. These severe challenges spur the organisation to create safer and holistic ways to protect its community. The organisation runs a secretariat where they fight against unending discrimination and for FSW, PWUD and LGBTQIA rights. The interviewee believes that religious people provide the majority of oppression against LGBTQIA persons in Nigeria. They recalled an instance in Ikotun, a town in Lagos State, where queer persons caught having sex were burnt to death. They considered this jungle justice one of the consequences of over-religiosity and lack of state protection. The organisation has witnessed instances where the police would arrest LGBTQIA persons, leading many to disappear from public life and lose access to adequate healthcare. Some religious interferences have also led to fatal outcomes for their clients.

“The only organisations we have issues with are faith-based organisations; they see us as evil people, they stigmatise and discriminate against us. They hardly want to associate with us. Anytime we come across these organisations or persons, it is always a bad experience. This usually happens when community members go to the hospital to access treatment, these persons will start bringing out bibles to preach to you, especially when you have STIs. It's a big issue because lots of community members here can't access

treatment because of these religious people...

There was a time we had a client that was HIV positive, and she was on medication. But she went to church, and the pastor told her to stop taking her medication and start taking olive anointing oil that she would get better. Along the line, we lost that client because her pastor asked her to stop her ART medications and have faith that she will be healed. There are lots of effects of these religious fundamentalists groups in our work. [For instance], we went to the field to implement a grant and were attending to community members. The church people came around and asked us to pack our things and leave because we are encouraging people to engage in immorality and drove us away...”

Part of this organisation's tactics is retreating when necessary to remobilize then or find neutral grounds to administer treatment to community members as they continue to grapple with religious and legal systems' push back.



4. Contending with Religious Interferences in FSW Healthcare Services and Protection

The third FSW organisation we interviewed for this research caters to female sex workers deprived of healthcare services and survivors of GBV. This organisation stands as a formidable platform for providing healthcare services, navigating uncooperative legal environments, and protecting rightsholders. According to the informant, FSWs experience high rates of GBV. This situation called for proactive solutions that their organisation provides. They provide services through cancer awareness-raising efforts, menstrual hygiene education, complete package STI services and skill-building empowerment programmes. This coalition aims to change negative narratives about sex work and provide access to comprehensive SRHR services.



The interviewee exposed a different method of religious interference where SRHR service providers and decision-makers shove church pamphlets in the faces of those needing access to healthcare services. They believe that religion and culture deny women, sex workers, and sexual minorities access to contraceptives, abortion, and other sexual and reproductive health services. The interviewee has witnessed multiple instances of religion and culture restricting women's right to integrity, bodily autonomy and making informed choices. To them, faith is the gasoline fuelling unceasing stigma and discrimination against LGBTQIA persons and women.

“For me I will say... religious fundamentalism contributes a lot to the issues that the LGBTQI communities are facing in Nigeria. When a pastor comes out and says the same-sex relationship is a sin, the whole congregation takes it as a sin... Meanwhile, some of these pastors belong to the LGBTQI community, we know a lot of them, but they don't come out openly to say that this is who they are. But when they come to church, they start saying many things about LGBTQI people. Religious fundamentalism limits the right of LGBTQI to come out openly; it increases a lot of family rejection. No pastor wants their child to identify as an LGBTQI, and that can affect the child in the process of trying to hide. It can lead to mental health challenges and loss of lives. You see a lot of people killing themselves due to family [rejection]... Religious Fundamentalism affects the LGBTQI community negatively; it limits their freedom

of association [and] freedom to seek help when they need it. It affects their education because the moment the school finds out about it, they stop them from attending the school. What if the person doesn't have an opportunity to go abroad and study? The future of such child is cut short because of the person's perceived sexuality."

The informant had also come face-to-face with religious bigotry when protesting the murders of sex workers in Rivers State. While marching to the government house to seek justice alongside other women's rights activists, they encountered resistance on the street. People threw stones at them and shouted, "prostitution is not work."

5. Navigating Religious Hypocrisy

The work of the fourth FSW organisation encompasses HIV screening, condoms and lubricant provisions, human rights advocacy activities, SRHR services for young FSW, and gender-based violence mapping among women and people living with HIV. This organisation once benefited from Caritas' support. While none of the data findings and literature review explicitly implicate Caritas as overtly homophobic, it remains a Catholic healthcare initiative with solid Catholic values and works with LGBTQIA groups mostly on HIV interventions. The Catholic Faith remains in strong opposition to sexual rights and equality of LGBTQIA persons and women. This is unsurprising as the Catholic Church is reported to have also played a significant role in slavery and the cruelty of colonialism in

Africa (Brown 2018).

The informant from this organisation identified the hypocrisy around what is moralised and condemned as a religious problem. They have witnessed judgmental preaching by religious groups against the use of condoms, homosexuality, cross-dressing and abortion. This organisation also experienced attacks from religious people when their colleague, a sexual minority, was beaten up during an advocacy outreach over an accusation that he tried to convert people to his way of life. They have been accused of trying to convert Muslim girls into prostitution instead of training them as community agents to educate people on SRHR and the use of condoms. They view religious fundamentalism as a stumbling block to women's rights.

"Religious fundamentalism has always been a problem to the reproductive and sexual rights of women because they don't have the liberty to do whatever they want with their bodies... For someone like me in Plateau state, I've seen a lot of things that women go through. Women are not allowed to take decisions on their own. You see a lot of young girls being forced into marriages even when they are not interested. They marry these girls off to men old enough to be their grandfathers. They give birth to a number of children that they don't want to give birth to, but they have to please their husbands. Women cannot even think of family planning without the approval of their husbands. Some don't even go for antenatal care. Men marry as many wives as they want, and the woman cannot say anything about it because of religious beliefs. Even our culture

favours men more than women. Women are dying in silence.”

The fifth FSW organisation is similar to the fourth in service provisions but provides additional legal services for GBV survivors. Many of their community members face police harassment and arrests, stigmatisation, and condemnation. They are not spared from the unfounded judgment of the healthcare service providers when they seek treatment. While the informant considers new generation churches enlightened, they still judge women based on their appearances, such as having tattoos or their choices, such as doing sex work.

“I have a case of a brothel-based lady. One day she wanted to go to church, and she went far away to where she wouldn't be recognised. But, unfortunately for her, she met a lady that came to sell clothes to them at the brothel. The lady started behaving somehow when she saw her. She was surprised when the pastor called her aside to preach to her because of the work that she's doing.”

The informant believes religious fundamentalism impacts the freedom of women and LGBTQIA persons in ways devastating to their mental and emotional wellbeing. They have also witnessed direct community policing of gender and sexual minorities by moral bearers.

“I know of individuals and community leaders. For instance, if they see a boy trying to behave like a girl or notice that it's only guys that come to visit a particular guy, they will call the guy

and tell him that they don't accept such in their community. Some communities can even send such persons away or report to the police.”

The informant from the youth-focused group, which provides vocational empowerment, SRHR and access to informed decision-making, views law and tradition, not religion, as repressing LGBTQIA persons' freedom. They think that religious people are allowed to air their opinions.

“Basically, religious fundamentalists only have a public view of what people should do and not do according to their own religious beliefs. However, these beliefs sometimes change when the table turns.”

Yet, the informant did not engage with evidence surrounding how these opinions shape other people's realities and inflict upon their rights as law and culture do. Nonetheless, they shared an example of how religious fundamentalism affects their work on FGM and their proactive steps to overcome this. They responded to a radio attack to stop the pushback on FGM eradication by inviting an ally Islamic Cleric to educate the public on the Quran's position on FGM.



We interviewed four LGBTQIA organisations for this research. One of these organisations provides enlightenment on sexuality issues, SRHR and defends the religious rights of LGBTQIA persons. They provide shelter for sexual minorities in need and intend to use talent development for advocacy and sensitisation. The informant from this organisation has seen tremendous improvement in how women and LGBTQIA groups leverage movement-building to change the status quo. Still, religious fundamentalism extensively influences the freedoms marginalised groups have in Nigeria.

Religious Fundamentalism and LGBTQIA Persons' Persecution in Nigeria

“ I believe religious fundamentalism is the idea of promoting religion or the ideology of religion against the tenets and promotion of human rights. For instance, making laws based on religious sentiments and not based on respect and promotion of human rights. [The] penal code and the sharia law, and the SSMPA that was passed by Goodluck Jonathan revolves around what the Bible say and what the Quran says. Even the penal code is all about colonialism, which was embedded under the missionary movement. That's why I said the majority of anti-LGBTQIA rights in Nigeria revolves around religion. I share that sentiment, but I equally share another sentiment that it's still political because some persons who may not be highly religious may be hiding under the platform of cultural beliefs and political ideology.”

This interviewee also expressed that contemporary Nigeria has a patriarchal culture intrinsically tied with religion. For instance, a patriarchal Christian Igbo man would combine religion and culture to justify his anti-LGBTQIA

stances. He would believe that “culture has a lot to do with religious fundamentalism and the impacts of all this against LGBTQIA persons.” The informant also highlighted the adverse effects of religious fundamentalism as impeding real progress in this manner:

“ Nobody comes out to tell you that I'm a religious fundamentalist, but the actions of such persons speak a lot. Let me give you an instance; I was with a Christian group called Praise Creation International. We usually came together to sing; it's a music ministry, and we spent all nights praying and speaking in tongues against the spirit of homosexuality in the church. At some point in 2015, when I started my work, I started gaining more enlightenment and understanding about what the Bible

actually says about homosexuality. I began to challenge some of the leaders in the group with theological arguments from the scripture, and I was thrown out of the group. Most evangelical and orthodox Christians in Nigeria are religious fundamentalists, take as an instance, the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church. In fact, as a worker in the Anglican church, you have to renew your oath in the church against homosexuality every year. You take an oath that you are not homosexual or doing anything related to homosexuality as a worker in the church, and they renew this vow yearly. Most evangelical and orthodox Christians in Nigeria are religious fundamentalists. It's just a few that are neutral, but they still hold that pertinent [belief] that homosexuality is a sin. I had a conversation with a general overseer in church recently where he likened homosexuality to being a kleptomaniac.

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This interviewee believes that US right-wing evangelical groups are funding organisations such as PraiseCreation International, amongst several others, to fuel the anti-LGBTQIA agenda in Nigeria. They also implicated Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) as funding anti-LGBTQIA programmes and interventions in Africa. Through this support, anti-LGBTQIA churches can mobilise “against abortion, sex work and legalization of drugs usage. They generally advocate against vulnerable communities. They advocate against women being leaders in the church; they would rather say women should be under

their husbands.” Working in Asaba, Delta State, they view the prevalence of teenage pregnancies as a direct repercussion of religious interference in clamping down on human rights. They also relayed cases of health workers stigmatising persons seeking sexual and reproductive healthcare by admonishing them that their “body is supposed to be a temple of God.”

The informant sees similarities in religious fundamentalist efforts against LGBTQIA persons and the system of enforcing men's subordination over women.

“

I understand that religious fundamentalism is treated under culture. We believe that a man is the head, and we believe that anything that is not male as the head is the root where men who are gay are actually discriminated against because the person is not assumed the role of headship as a man. That is why lesbians are being discriminated against because they are taking the place of a man as a woman. I believe that these are the ideology that religious fundamentalists [use to persecute] LGBTQIA persons. Not entirely because all LGBTQIA [persons] have sex but entirely around the fact that [toxic] masculinity is at stake. You can even see some persons who will say that a man is entitled to marry more than one wife. Some men will say, 'I don't care if my wife sleeps with another woman so far as she's under me.' But when it comes to women, they prefer their husbands to sleep with other women but not with men. We see this disparity and discover that the sentiments and attitudes against homosexuality are not because two people love each other but are about the idea of masculinity.

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Another interviewee who works with the second LGBTQIA organisation we surveyed points to Islam, not Christianity, as the backdrop upon which the persecution of sexual minorities in Nigeria rests. Their work entails raising awareness of LGBTQIA rights in northern Nigeria. They work to support victims of arbitrary arrests, providing psycho social support, capacity building, safety and security and healthcare services, including HIV screening for gender and sexual minority persons. This organisation collaborates with

MSM, PWUD, FSW organisations and The Inner Circle (TIC), an Islamic faith-based organisation in South Africa that supports LGBTQIA rights.

The interviewee stated that religious fundamentalism deprives women in northern Nigeria of their rights. Where these women are lesbians, they pretend to or have actual relations with men so as not to incur the wrath of their highly religious society. They are forced to marry in many instances.

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LGBTQI+ advocacy hides under the coverage of providing HIV screening and treatment. They just talk about their health. You can't talk about the right to do whatever they want. I've witnessed several cases in court where they arrested men for gay marriage whereas they were just having a party. If we want to do advocacy in a small community, we have to tell them that because of the risky behaviours of young men having sex, that's why we are doing this programme. When I see that they are a bit relaxed, then I can just chip it in a little that the Yan Daudu (gender fluid, effeminate men or transgender women) can also benefit from what we are doing. But if you come out boldly to talk about men who have sex with men, they will just be looking at you because they don't believe that such exists here in [location withheld]. I will say there is no serious advocacy here because they don't accept them, and they believe they don't exist. And, these persons are not willing to identify themselves because of the sharia [law]. In meetings, you can't identify yourself as an MSM even in NACA, the National Agency for the Control of AIDS.

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This interviewee also observed that sharia law affects every aspect of women's human rights leading to more subjugation and silencing. Women who do not conform to their husbands' decisions and choices are told they are tampering with their paradise beneath their husbands' feet. Thus, accessing family planning is considered *haram* (proscribed by law), although this is said to contradict Quranic provisions. Religion also dictates the criminalisation of gender and sexual

minorities. The punishment for same-sex acts is death by stoning after trial. People can also execute 'justice' themselves if the court does not prescribe this punishment. Therefore, LGBTQIA persons go into hiding in northern Nigeria. The informant stated that they themselves remain in hiding, lest they expose themselves to attacks or even get killed because they work in a very unfriendly environment.

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Yes, most of the Islamic schools, but they don't come out to say that they are religious fundamentalists. They just hide under the umbrella of helping the less privileged, but you will know that they are religious fundamentalists through their actions and words. For example, we have the Al Bayan organisation located in Jos; most of their Imams are fundamentalists. There is one of them who is an MSM. There was a time he came to preach to me, but I gave him a sign, and he couldn't proceed because he knew that I was aware of his sexual orientation, but his colleagues were not aware. If they get to [know], then his life will be in danger. There was an incident in Kano two weeks ago; they asked a gay man to either sell his house or they burn it.

”

The fourth LGBTQIA organisation we surveyed for this research is in southwestern Nigeria. It focuses on defending sexual minorities, especially queer women. Their programmes centre on mental health, economic and livelihood empowerment. They also build solidarity with mainstream feminism and women's rights activism.

Recognising women's emancipation in this region as a work-in-progress, the informant from this organisation takes the good with the bad concerning the current state of LGBTQIA rights advocacy in Nigeria. While there is increased backlash, there are also increased activism and interventions by LGBTQIA rights activists.

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I would say at the moment, few things have happened with the passing of [the] SSMPA in 2014. There was increasing attention on queer issues. Prior to that time, it wasn't really a [widespread] topic of discussion though it was in some places. With the SSMPA, the attention increased, and it became a national public health issue. [Now], there has been an increase in persecution, marginalization and obsession in Nigeria that portends a lot for activists. People who call themselves activists in the real sense of it become more emboldened to call themselves so and take up more vocal work to say this is wrong. There is a rise in the number of queer activists across this country. Social media has also impacted positively on that and become a space for some of these activists to use. Because you need to know where I am staying to come and persecute me. On the social media space, you can do that with a little fear of being singled out. However, there are cyber bullies and a host of others. There has been increased attention on queer issues and the fact that we also have an increase in the number of queer activists who are really speaking out and doing more.

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Their encounter with religious fundamentalism stems from their Christian faith and personal struggles to be who they

are. This interviewee faces persecution and judgment from their pastor. They shared a friend's experience with abuse through conversion practices:

“

I will give you an instance that happened to a friend who was a very passionate Christian and was very involved in religious activities. He was not just doing this because he's a Christian but because he enjoys it. When some church members discovered who he was, he was singled out for persecution. His parents didn't let the matter go. There were lots of [interventions and spiritual analysis] that he is possessed and needs deliverance. He had to go through all these because he wanted to please his parents and the religious group. He had to go through conversion practices. This really broke him to the point that I felt bad for him. He couldn't come out of that for a very long time, mentally. All these are realities of sexual minorities in Nigeria with regards to religious fundamentalism.

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Beyond religious leaders, mainstream organisations, including women's rights groups, impose their cultural and moral views and bias on queer women. This interviewee observed that in addition to religious fundamentalists controlling women's bodily autonomy agency and sexual and reproductive health and rights,

they also enforce male subordination of women. Their influence causes society to shun independent women, which is considered insubordination to established and 'predesigned' male authority. The informant realised it is a double tragedy to be a woman who is queer while facing religious bigotry and an unjust legal system.

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If asexual minority woman is raped and tries to take it up and the legal system finds out that you are a queer woman, the whole stories changes. You might not find justice. I've seen that a lot. If you are blackmailed as a sexual minority, and you try to seek justice, if the basis of your sexuality is discovered, then you've signed in for a different ball game. All these are at play, and the full human rights protection for sexual minorities in the country is not there.

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Injustices Against People Who Use Drugs (PWUD)

The informant from the youth-led organisation working with people who use drugs (PWUDs), transgender persons and FSW on SRHR recounted several interferences by religious persons in their work. The interviewee cites their judgement, humiliation and pushback as barriers against the effective implementation of the organisation's activities.

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Looking at the women's rights advocacy in Nigeria, one of the things I found out based on my own research and understanding is that so many challenges that women are passing through are based on their religious background. Some people are stigmatised and discriminated against based on their religious backgrounds. This is a major problem we are passing through in this community. You know they see the female PWUD as people that are wayward, vulnerable, violent in the making, and don't have anything to contribute to society. That's how they see us. But they are not seeing our other side. You know, so many people went into drug use; they did not just choose to, but something led them into it...You see, that Pastor comes to church on Sunday; instead of preaching, he would preach about me. Now, when he is preaching about me, within me, I alone know that it's because of what I shared with him. Now he will use it to humiliate me and make me look stupid.

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This interviewee shared that, in one instance, a group of men accosted them and demanded to know if they were lesbian, using the bible to justify their verbal violence and near-physical assault. They also shared that religious leaders exposing the sexual orientation of sexual minorities can result in mental health challenges, including suicide contemplations and actual suicide. Also, humiliations by church leaders contribute to the vulnerability experienced by sexual minorities in society. They also cited women's lack of autonomy over their own SRHR as another contributing factor to violence against women.

Another PWUDs organisation with a strong focus on tuberculosis screening and comprehensive interventions for drug users feels the heat of a judgmental environment in their work. The interviewee disclosed condemnation from members of the Islamic Group of Nigeria, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria and the Christian Association of Nigeria of sexual minorities. The effect is to make LGBTQIA persons in the north, which is included in their area of focus, retreat into the background and never fully live their lives. They have borne the adverse effects of being judged by a hypocritical society as drug users.

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“The society perceives us to be useless people; that's how they see us. That's my community, and I'm going to tell you that there are many persons that I've seen achieve high in life, but they are drug users, like chronic drug users. But they are doing well in their fields, but the society frowns at these groups of persons... The effect [of religious fundamentalism] has been damaging. Have you experienced someone talking down on you? I have seen that. People tell you that you will never amount to anything good; you are just useless. And there is no defence, just religious backing. The Bible said this. The Quran said this. In the North, they tell you the punishment is death. They will choose to stone the person to death. But there are many Alhajis that are actually men who have sex with men. Many of them also patronize the FSW, and many of them are PWUD, but because they have attained a certain level in society, people feel they are untouchable. We on the streets feel the effect more. A presidential advisor on drugs and narcotics said [in 2019] the PWUD should be taken off the streets, killed or sent to jail.”

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In their work to provide healthcare for vulnerable persons in Edo and Akwa Ibom States, this group meets resistance from girls, women, and others due to religious beliefs and influence. One girl was told not to get tested for STIs or collect condoms, while a woman, on the one hand, believed in their pastors that God had healed them

of HIV, and on the other hand, that there was no such thing as HIV. This sort of misinformation, which sometimes leads to victims' death, also negatively impacts the organisation's work in preventing avoidable deaths and providing needed interventions.



Civil Society Advocacy Interventions to Combat the Effects OF Religious Fundamentalism in Nigeria

Some interviewees shared approaches their organisations adopt as advocacy interventions to counter the impacts of religious fundamentalism on their work.

1. Allyship

The realisation that social change lies in collaborations has pushed some key informants' organisations to build

partnerships with allies within religious movements, political institutions and cultural platforms. While a few listed Caritas in HIV interventions, another acknowledged Soulforce. Soulforce is a non-partisan social movement working "to end "the religious and political oppression of LGBTQI people by decloaking the ideologies of Christian Supremacy and healing [their] communities' spirits from weaponized religion." The movement engages in radical analysis, political education, and spiritual powers for activists threatened by Christian fundamentalism.

2. Intersectionality and Inclusion

The women-led feminist organisation adopts an inclusive approach in their design interventions. In their organisational workforce, they employ and create spaces for LGBTQIA persons.

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"For us as a feminist organisation, we believe in an inclusive program. We believe in women's access to adequate information to make informed choices. Because it's a feminist organisation, we don't discriminate against sisters from the LGBT community. We create space for them to be employed in our organisation. What we do to address these challenges is to keep doing the work because we can stop [religious fundamentalists] from airing their views."

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3. Grassroots Education and Community Advocacy

For the first FSW organisation we interviewed, recognising the debilitating effects of oppression on LGBTQIA persons and FSW made them resolve to grassroots education. Through grassroots education, they reach out to religious leaders in mosques and churches

to advocate for the rights of FSW and the sexual minorities.

The second FSW organisation engages in community advocacy with street gatekeepers, community leaders and brothel managers. In the same light, the third FSW organisation includes religious groups in their community advocacy to sensitize them and reshape their

perceptions of homosexuality and sex work. Their community advocacy includes stakeholders' meetings with media involvement where funding is available. The organisation does not underestimate the importance of media as a tool of influence in changing perceptions and misinterpretations of sex work.

The fourth FSW organisation sensitizes young Muslim women to educate their community about sex work. Upon sensitization, the organisation recruited two young Muslim women to reach out to more people in their environment for community advocacy.

4. Prevention Method Education and Advocacy

The PWUD organisations we spoke with for this research engage in re-orientation exercises, advocacy and education to prevent drug abuse. Their advocacy strategies comprise engaging with community leaders, Pastors, Imams, atheists, youth groups,

women leaders, and local government chairpersons. These also encompass SRHR education and preventive methods against STIs infection while engaging in educative dialogue about PWUD and why they use drugs. Educating religious leaders not to cast away people deemed sinners is germane in their advocacies.

5. Reframing Narratives to Promote Safety and Security

One of the LGBTQIA organisations revealed that it was necessary to couch their activities under different narratives to avoid endangering rights holders. They often couch their interventions under HIV counselling and screening to avoid exposing themselves to harm. They also include persons who are not sexual minorities in their HIV community outreach programmes to avoid suspicion and reduce security risks. In addition, they prioritise their safety. When and if they sense danger is imminent, they relocate or stay away from their location until things quiet down.





In this study, we showed through both the desk and interview data sets the erosion of African acceptance and accommodation of SOGIE that existed before the colonial incursion of the continent. The spread of religious fundamentalism impacts and is in tandem with the erasure of diverse SOGIE recognition in African spirituality and people's ways of life. Both have Western influences at their core. Thus, it is erroneous to pin the existence of gender and sexual diversity in Nigeria on Western importations. There is abundant theoretical and empirical knowledge that debunks homosexuality as sinful immorality imported into Africa by the West.

While this study establishes the existence of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity/expressions in ancient Africa, it affirms that Africa is no exception to the diversity of human sexuality. Nevertheless, Africans neither criminalised nor condemned diverse SOGIE until Western interference through colonialism. The same is applicable in weaponising foreign religions against LGBTQIA and women's rights in Africa. Women and sexual minorities fight for their rights and freedom from discrimination and stigmatization against cultural, religious and political ideologies that combine to oppress these groups. In Nigeria, religious fundamentalism trumps respect for the human rights of gender and sexual minorities.



RECOMMENDATIONS



We must design sustainable solutions to advance the rights of women and LGBTQIA persons in Nigeria against imperialism, political sexism and homophobia, and religious fundamentalism. The following are the recommendations stemming from our findings in this study:

To Civil Society Organisations

1. Civil society organisations, especially those serving women and sexual minorities, must invest in socio-economic empowerment initiatives to help marginalised persons achieve economic independence.
2. Activists must sensitise the general public on gender and sexual diversity. Activists should engage in mass awareness-creation campaigns to eradicate myths and messages of fundamentalists on the Africanness of diversity and inclusion.
3. Organisations that work with gender and sexual minorities must institute safety and security measures for staff and the populations they serve.
4. Women's and LGBTQIA rights organisations should engage in movement building with mainstream civil society organisations, build political

power and engage with policymakers and stakeholders.

5. Gender and sexual minority rights organisations should also engage with religious leaders and groups to foster education on inclusion and diversity.
6. Women's and LGBTQIA rights organisations should implement advocacy frameworks that promote African values of inclusion and acceptance.

To the Federal and State Governments

1. Repeal the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act and all laws criminalising same-sex acts, cross-dressing, and gender and sexual diversity across Nigeria.
2. Formulate and implement measures to enforce the promotion of human rights over religious sentiments and opinions.
3. Formulate and implement measures to provide comprehensive sex and sexuality education across levels in Nigeria.
4. Promote the study of African histories across Nigerian schools to foster decolonisation.

APPENDIX I

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS' LIST

- Òlùwó Olákunle Oláwolé (Ifá Priest), Lagos, interviewed on 4 July 2021 ■
- Female sex worker Organisation, Lagos, interviewed on 5 July 2021 ■
- Women-led Feminist Organisation, Lagos, interviewed on 6 July 2021 ■
- Female sex worker Organisation, Rivers, interviewed on 6 July 2021 ■
- Women-led feminist organisation, Lagos, interviewed on 7 July 2021 ■
- LGBT+ Rights Organisation, Ogun, interviewed on 12 July 2021 ■
- LGBT+ Rights Organisation, Delta, interviewed on 3 August 2021 ■
- Female sex worker Organisation, Delta, interviewed on 4 August 2021 ■
- PWUD Organisation (1), Akwa Ibom, interviewed on 6 August 2021 ■
- PWUD Organisation (2), Akwa Ibom, interviewed on 6 August 2021 ■
- Female sex worker Organisation Akwa Ibom, interviewed on 6 August 2021 ■
- LBGT+ Rights Organisation, Bauchi, Interviewed on 6August 2021 ■
- Female sex worker Organisation, Plateau, interviewed on 7 August 2021 ■
- LGBT Organisation, Lagos, interviewed on 16 August 2021 ■
- Frieda Munonyendinma (Igbo Priestess), Rivers, interviewed on 16 August 2021 ■
- Youth Empowerment/SRHR organisation, Ekiti, interviewed on 23 August 2021 ■

APPENDIX II

GLOSSARY OF OPPOSITION ACTORS AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS WITHIN AND OUTSIDE NIGERIA

1. **African Anti-Abortion Coalition (AAAC):** The AAAC was founded on 8th August 2006 and now comprises a collaboration of major Pro-Life groups active in 53 African countries. Its mission is to fight against abortion and contraception, oppose the legalisation of same-sex marriage and support the Annual February 14th Millions of People March Against Abortion. AAAC Organisation Members include Christian organisations, Islamic organisations, non-governmental organisations, government agencies and institutions, intergovernmental institutions/foundations and organisations contributing to pro-abortion and pro-contraception programs. AAAC activities are funded independently by the member organisations in their geographic locations. <http://www.chidicon.com/AAAC.html>
2. **Association of Catholic Medical Practitioners of Nigeria (ACMPN):** This unites all Catholic medical doctors and dental surgeons in the 56 dioceses across the country. The Association works to promote Catholic medical ethics. ACMPN opposes euthanasia, abortion and contraception. The Association also collaborates with Human Life International USA, the Human Life Protection League of Nigeria, the Islamic Medical Association of Nigeria, the Baobab Press of the USA, and other local and international pro-life organisations.
3. **Association of Concerned Mothers (ASCOM):** The ASCOM is a non-governmental organisation comprising mothers and other allies, committed to 'protecting' children from "dangerous modern ideologies and harmful educational and political policies." ASCOM has a record of pushing back against changes to the curriculum, such as the inclusion of the Comprehensive

Sexuality Education, through conferences and petitions against the government of the day.

4. **Catholic Bishops Conference, Nigeria:**

This is an influential advocate against same-sex marriage, abortion and contraception. They never fail to emphasize that Marriage is the sacred union of one man and one woman for the begetting and care of children through press release statements. They also canvass for policy implementation and regulation to meet their objectives. <https://www.cbcn-ng.org/docs/g20.pdf>

5. **The Centre for Corrections and Human Development (CCHD):**

CCHD is a correctional facility that rehabilitates drug users and victims of human trafficking and child abuse. They see sex work as undignified and provide services such as reorientation and counselling for sex workers and drug users. To fund their programs, they partner with other organisations such as Shell, Exxon Mobil, Golden Penny, MTN, 7up, etc.

6. **Citizen GO:** is a community of active citizens who work together, using online petitions and action alerts as a resource to defend and promote life, family, and liberty. It ensures that those in power respect human dignity and individuals' rights. CitizenGO offers campaigns to influence institutions, governments and organisations in 50 countries. Its headquarters is in Madrid, but it has team members in 15 cities on three continents.

Technology makes it possible to cooperate in a virtual (international) office with an extensive network of thousands of volunteers worldwide. CitizenGo has an online petition platform where they write petitions and campaign against LGBTQI rights, abortion and euthanasia. CitizenGO is wholly financed through small online donations made by thousands of citizens throughout the world.

7. **Family Watch International:**

This organisation works within the United Nations and with countries around the world to further anti-LGBT and anti-choice stances. Its founder, Sharon Slater, promotes anti-LGBT pseudoscience that includes the falsehood that homosexuality is a mental disorder derived from childhood trauma and that "conversion therapy" can effectively eliminate same-sex attraction. The organisation opposes all it sees as contravening the heterosexual, divinely ordained, "natural family" including abortion, birth control, and homosexuality. More recently, Slater has focused her effort on opposing "Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE)," a battle that other Christian Right groups have also taken up. Though FWI occasionally dabbles in domestic policy, it is an international outreach group with an intense focus on Africa and the U.N. It works with a network of other religious fundamentalists in Africa to spread homophobic, anti-choice, abstinence-

only agenda by claiming that the U.N.'s push for equal rights for LGBT+persons and women is part of a Western neo-imperialistic project.

<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/family-watch-international>

8. **Femm Foundation:** This is a reproductive health organisation led by anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQIA rights Catholic campaigners. According to developers, the foundation developed a fertility app that collects personal information about sex and menstruation from users and has been downloaded more than 400,000 times since its launch in 2015. It claims it has users in the US, the EU, Africa and Latin America. Femm receives much of its income from private donors, including the Chiaroscuro Foundation, a charity backed almost exclusively by Sean Fieler, a wealthy Catholic hedge-funder based in New York.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/30/revealed-womens-fertility-app-is-funded-by-anti-abortion-campaigners>
9. **Foundation for African Cultural Heritage (FACH), Nigeria:** A non-profit founded in 2009 and committed to preserving and promoting "African cultural values." Founded by Theresa Okafor, FACH is committed to advocating for the truth of the dignity of the human person and all its attendant implications: the right to life from conception to natural death, the right to freedom, justice, progress and health. FACH work collaborates with similar international organisations like Family Watch International, an organisation committed to preserving the natural family and parental rights. It is represented in the World Congress of Families, a coalition fuelling religious fundamentalism and US right-wing agenda in Africa.
10. **Good Parenting and Youth Empowerment Initiative (GPAYE):** GPAYE's primary goal is to foster 'life-building values and good morals among youths.'
11. **Global Pro-life Alliance:** is an anti-abortion advocacy group. It opposes euthanasia, human cloning, abortion and experiments on human embryos.
12. **Heartbeat International:** This is the first network of pro-life pregnancy resource centres founded in the U.S in 1971. It is now the most expansive network in the world. Heartbeat has over 2,800-affiliated pregnancy help locations, including pregnancy help medical clinics (with ultrasound), resource centres, maternity homes, and adoption agencies in more than 60 countries to provide alternatives to abortion. Their vision is to make abortion unwanted today and unthinkable for future generations. All funding to Heartbeat is through private donations and grants.
<https://www.heartbeatinternational.org>

13. **Human Life International (HLI):** Human Life International (HLI) is a Catholic organisation with a long history of vicious and hyperbolic attacks on LGBTQ and reproductive rights. It opposes contraception, in-vitro fertilization, comprehensive sex education, and abortion in all circumstances. The organisation insists that "human life begins at the instant of conception" and "the willful taking of innocent human life by any means constitutes homicide." HLI's director of education and research, Brian Clowes, has suggested that condoms are ineffective in preventing HIV/AIDS. Founded in 1981, Virginia-based HLI operates in more than 80 countries. It has established a global network for distributing books, films, audio, photographs, and other materials to expose the "dangers" of contraception and abortion. After years of being rejected, HLI was granted consultative status at the United Nations in 2014, joining other prominent anti-choice Christian rights groups at the UN, such as the Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam). HLI is financed through donations.
<https://www.politicalresearch.org/2018/05/08/profile-on-the-right-human-life-international-hli>
14. **Islamic Education Trust (IET):** IET is a non-governmental, charitable organisation headquartered in Minna, Niger State. It was founded to merge the modern school curriculum with Islamic perspectives in promoting education.
15. **Islamic Medical Association of Nigeria (IMAN):** IMAN was founded to unite Muslim medical professionals to ensure that they practice in line with Islamic beliefs.
16. **Islamic Platform Society of Nigeria (IPSN):** IPSN is a Muslim organisation founded to share knowledge and understanding of Allah. It seeks to ensure the application of Islamic principles in everyday life through public lectures.
17. **The National Association of Catholic Lawyers (NACL):** NACL is known for its strong defence of the Catholic faith and support for the anti-LGBT+ rights movement.
18. **Nigerian Association for Women's Advancement (NAWA):** is committed to empowering women and girls through education and life skills coupled with moral values.
19. **Pro-Life Action League:** This is an anti-abortion group founded by Joseph M. Scheidler in 1980 with the aim of saving unborn children through non-violent direct action. The Pro-Life Action League has become the recognized national leader in effective pro-life activism, including abortion clinic witnesses, public protests, confronting abortionists and fighting Planned Parenthood. The

- Pro-Life Action League is funded solely by charitable donations.
<https://prolifeaction.org/about/>
20. **Project for Human Development (PHD):** PHD is a Pro-abstinence NGO committed to preventing HIV through abstinence alone. They have established PHD chastity clubs in schools where they educate students to abstain from sex until marriage. PHD uses the media to achieve its aims and get funds through donations.
21. **Save the unborn babies Pro-life initiative:** is an anti-abortion organisation committed to making abortion unthinkable through anti-abortion campaigns, counselling, prayers and programs.
22. **Sympathy Worldwide Foundation (SWWF):** is an organisation in the fight against human trafficking and sex slavery/prostitution. SWWF provides rehabilitation to sex workers and creates awareness to abolish sex work.
23. **The Helpers of God's Precious Infants:** Situated in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, this is a group of people who view abortion as a grave sin. They organize prayers and campaigns against abortion. They also provide counselling services and relief items for pregnant women considering abortion.
<https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/helpers-of-gods-precious-infants-12008>
24. **The World Congress of Families:** The WCF is the largest annual gathering of pro-family leaders worldwide. International Organisation for the Family (IOF), whose mission is to unite and equip leaders worldwide to promote the 'natural' family order, organises WCF. This is one of the most influential organisations involved in exporting hatred across the globe. Since 1997, WCF has held conferences and events worldwide that foster homophobia and transphobia under the guise of protecting the "natural family." It is connected to some mainstream conservative organisations and to the very highest levels of government in the countries where it operates. Active across five continents, WCF's activities range from holding conferences in Nigeria focused on denying rights to LGBTQIA persons to initiating the 2021 anti-LGBTQIA rights Bill in Ghana and working to silence Russian LGBTQIA+ persons and organisations.
<https://www.hrc.org/resources/exposed-the-world-congress-of-families>

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