

THE KEEN MUSTARDS



AN ANTHOLOGY

THE KEEN MUSTARDS

NAVIGATING QUEERNESS IN
NORTHERN NIGERIA



AIHI NIGERIA

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origami

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Sincerely

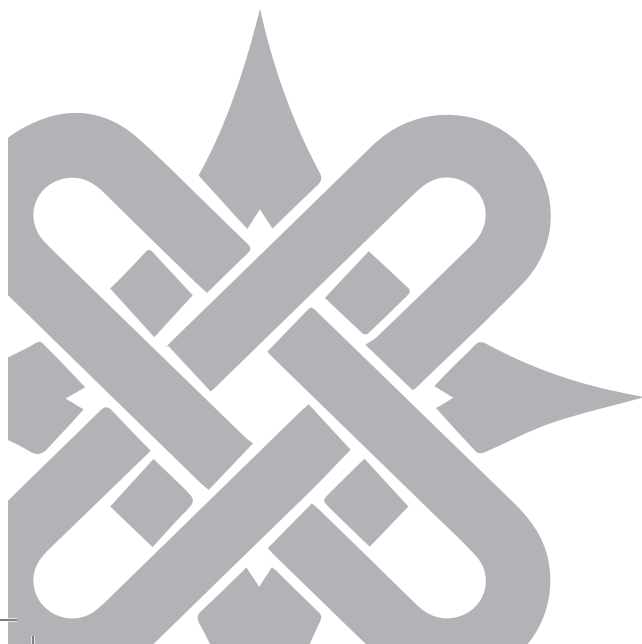
AIHI, NIGERIA

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PREFACE

Navigating queerness in a cisheteronormative society is very difficult. School curricula, the media, politics, health facilities, advertisements, and society in general, do not recognize the existence of persons who are not heterosexual or cisgender. What does this level of invisibility mean for the LGBTQI+ community?

For context, cisheteronormativity is the set of ideas, social norms, beliefs, and culture that govern people whose gender identity corresponds to the one assigned at birth, and people who also identify as heterosexual. This type of social construction is considered the only model for sexual-romantic and parental relationships, and it establishes advantages for people who abide by this system. This means that people who do not conform to this construct are rendered invisible and unrepresented. This impedes their access to resources that will enhance their overall health and wellbeing.

Nigeria is a cisheteronormative conservative country split between two major religions, with their practitioners constantly at loggerheads with claims of superiority, yet something unites them. Homophobia. These religions are

doctrinally opposed to Queer people and inform the harsh laws and negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ people. The media and literature are heavily influenced by religion. Same-sex relationships are sexualized and are perceived as threat to the cisheteronormative rhetoric. Everything is designed with strict binary gender systems. The language, surveys, modes of expression, body modifications, toys, everything. There are no best practices for inclusion and efforts to foster inclusion and representation are met with violence and virulent homophobia.

In northern Nigeria, this is far worse due to the ultraconservative politics. There is a law that subjects gay people to death by stoning. In June 2021, Kano state banned the use of mannequins for clothes display with the claims that they are responsible for invoking immoral thoughts among members of the public. Another reason that was given by the head of the state's religious police force, for the ban was that the mannequins mimicked the human form and therefore violated Islamic teachings. In a recent ruling carried out at the end of June 2022, three men were sentenced to death by stoning on the charges of homosexuality.

The danger of this fundamentalist approach is that it leads to shame, silence, sexual repression, and sets back sexual and reproductive health of sexual and gender minorities. It renders the lives of queer northern people quite miserable as a result of the sense of guilt that makes them imagine that all their actions are sinful and

dirty. It causes internal conflict, self-denial and hatred of one's identity and others who are like them. The mental gymnastics and intrapsychic conflict that come with this, exposes northern queer people to higher internalized homophobia, more depressive symptoms, and less psychological well-being. Homosexuality is compared to pedophilia even though statistics show that the majority of pedophiles and child sex offenders are heterosexual. Pedophilia and homosexuality are as different as apples and oranges.

This book invites us to think outside the box. Systems can be changed through collective action, and complicity with social injustice creates an obligation to join into collective action in some way. It means that LGBTQI+ issues are not only LGBTQI+ issues — they are cisheterosexual issues too. “No one of us can be free until everybody is free”-Maya Angelou

The title of this anthology was inspired by the doggedness of the northern Queer community who continue to show up regardless of the context in which they live.

These beautiful stories are based on interviews with 20 diverse persons and they shed light on what it means to grow up and live queer in northern Nigeria and what it feels like to advocate for queer rights in the north despite the harsh laws. There was so much enthusiasm when we reached out to have them share their stories. The initial plan was to interview 40 persons but some persons backed

down in the process and one would understand why. The names used were named consented to. Some are real names, some are not. The safety of the community is of utmost importance as well.

The Keen Mustards: Navigating Queerness in Northern Nigeria is huge for us, it is a celebration, a part of our lives and the lives of many young northern queer people who would see themselves through these stories.

We hope that it touches you, propels you and helps you remember that you are human and you are enough.



COMING OUT

By Amira Muhammad

Coming out is a difficult thing. But it was easy for me since I had identified as a girl since childhood, and the fact that I was effeminate was common knowledge to everyone around me. I had a feminine structure and was referred to as female by the larger society without mentioning it. As years went by, I decided to become who I was meant to be; a female.

My queerness is innate. I grew up doing all sorts of feminine things; playing with dolls, wearing girl's dresses, toying around with makeup, etc. I came to the full realisation at 12, pierced my ears and wore earrings, but was tortured and sent away from home because my father was not in support of my identity. After my forced eviction, both paternal and maternal relatives refused to take me in. I was devastated and even had to quit my education. This was unfavourable, but I had no option because I was forced to be independent at a young age and fend for myself. I later learned a skill in electronic repairs of phones and computers. The rejection I faced from family and their lack of support increased my vulnerability and led to

sexual assault, blackmail, and harassment by police. I was framed and arrested several times by the police, many of the accusations against me were false, but of course, I was vulnerable and had no one to rely on. At the same time, trying to figure out who I was. Family rejection is the first step that puts queer persons in danger leading to mental health issues, suicide attempts and other issues. At some point in my life, I returned to my family and was forced to get married. It was a major challenge because I could not meet my wife's expectations. The marriage did not last, and we got separated.

Through the skills I learned, I can gladly say that I have been contributing to the larger society. I also belong to the intersex network, where we conduct programs to sensitise the community on the existence of transgender and intersex persons in Northern Nigeria. The pace of LGBTIQI+ rights in the north is slow, but I am optimistic that in years to come, there will be change. There is hope for Northern queer persons because it is clear today that we are not where we used to be 15 years back. This is all due to sensitization and the level of activism done. Years back, people like us were seen as an abomination, rejected and even stoned to death. The level of stigma and discrimination has also reduced and will be better hopefully in the coming years. Awareness should be continuous using the social media platforms, TV stations and Radio stations, and focusing on parents, security agencies and traditional rulers as well as the larger society. If we could

be given an opportunity to be part of some programs, for example, on the existence of Intersex persons, it would go a long way in addressing these threats and challenges. We are also human beings and should be treated as any other person.

I am grateful for my bravery, persistence and support from community members because they have propelled me and helped me surmount my challenges. I will advise young community members who are still on their path to self-discovery to be security conscious and careful on coming out, especially to family. They should ensure to be independent to avoid rejection; this will also reduce the rate of stigma and discrimination by the larger society.





THE CLOSET BEYOND THE CLOSET

By Odi Iorfa Agev

My passion as an activist stemmed from my lived realities as a queer person living in Nigeria. It is challenging for us queer persons to express ourselves freely. The challenges to enjoy the same benefits that heterosexuals enjoy include non-discriminatory access to sexual health services, the struggles to live lives that do not fit the societal standards freely, and generally, everyone just wishing to be free. As a result, an organisation was founded whose vision was to see a Nigeria where all persons have equal access to adequate social services and justice.

I started volunteering for this organisation in 2010, working with a group of young and like minds to promote the health and rights of LGBTIQ+ persons through advocacy, active participation, service delivery and innovative engagement processes. Later on, in 2013, I would find myself leading the organisation as the Executive Director. We implemented several projects, mostly HIV interventions for gay, bisexual men and other men who have sex with men. From 2017 to 2021, I had the opportunity to do some work in North-eastern Nigeria

(Gombe, Taraba, Adamawa and Bauchi states), which also included working with sex workers and people who use drugs. Working in these parts of Nigeria, I realised that the queer community's existence in the North was not just threatened by the socio-cultural and legal factors within the country, but also by Sharia laws, which are even more strict.

The challenges facing the queer community in the north are not very different from the challenges facing queer persons in Nigeria. However, a higher level of stigma and discrimination is mostly influenced by religious and cultural beliefs. There is also a lack of access to information/knowledge around Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) issues, even among the queer community. Access to services like healthcare can also be very challenging for queer persons. There are no queer-friendly facilities, service providers are judgmental and do not have adequate knowledge to deal with queer-related health issues. During my time working in the north, we also recorded a number of human rights violations incidences, ranging from family rejection, mob attack, arbitrary arrests by the police, workplace discrimination, excommunication from religious institutions, to mention a few.

It was easier to navigate the terrain by working closely with my fellow queer persons. Mostly because my work was primarily focused on gay, bisexual men and other men who have sex with men (HIV interventions), it was a bit

difficult to identify queer women, trans persons, intersex persons and other queer persons. Over time, we started identifying the few other persons within the LGBTIQ+ spectrum, especially through human rights interventions. We could also see community organising growing and developing as community-based organisations were born to identify and cater for their needs. At this point, it was easier to provide the technical support that the Community Based Organizations (CBOs) needed to identify and address the existing and emerging community needs.

I learned a lot working in North-eastern Nigeria. The resilience, team spirit and love the community exhibited despite all the challenges they faced was motivating. I was motivated to live life to the fullest, embracing my sexuality and living life to inspire those who were around me. I was also motivated to live life knowing that not everyone will embrace and accept you, and that does not invalidate your existence. As a result, I continued to initiate program ideas that catered to community needs beyond sexual health, including access to psychosocial support services like counselling and safe housing, tracking and addressing gender-based violence and other human rights violation incidences. Also, working with the community groups to identify pressing needs and mobilise resources to address them.

Generally, it was interesting to see how the community navigated queerness in the region. There was a mix of closeted and out queer persons. The closeted were those

who were living largely underground - living lives like heterosexuals, afraid to stand out for fear of being outed and called out by social and religious institutions. There were a lot of married gay and bisexual men snooping around with other men for sex and going home to their ignorant wives. It was also interesting to see the out-queer persons who lived their lives expressively, not minding what others thought about them. The latter often faced discrimination from within the community itself, especially the closeted ones. Internal homophobia is also a major issue that affects how the community navigates queerness and adds another layer of challenges faced within the community. I honestly think that queer people need to educate themselves, understand their sexuality, and come to a level of self-acceptance and love. This can only be achieved when more experienced or informed queer persons are willing to share their information to educate the younger or ignorant ones.

It was interesting to see that the queer community also moved into groups that were divided by social class—lower, middle and upper class. This was clearly evident when you attended social gatherings like parties and saw how the people interacted with one another.

History shows that queerness has been within the African culture since immemorial. When a lot of folks say that queerness is un-African, I laugh. This is because being queer is not something that is taught. We, as human

beings, are born into our sexuality. We experience and share the same sexual feelings that non-queer persons also experience. The only difference is that we are not exclusively attracted to persons of the opposite sex. But then again, even if we were to go with that outrageous idea that queerness was un-African, since when did we start rejecting western cultures? Aren't we the ones who are still practising religious doctrines, educational and workplace systems that are western and also wearing clothes that are un-African? To invalidate the foolishness, I would suggest that we continue to provide accurate and adequate information on the concept of human sexuality. The general public and the queer community need to be well educated on sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sex characteristics. We should introduce age-appropriate information on sexuality (comprehensive sexuality education), in all educational institutions. We must continue to advocate for policies and laws that prohibit the discrimination of people based on SOGIESC, especially in healthcare settings.

On a general note, I would advise the queer community to stay in touch more often. Open and maintain more communication channels that can be used to widely share relevant information to one another. We exist for more purposes other than sex and we should focus on developing the better versions of ourselves. Strive to be happy and do what makes you happy. It is important that we carefully

select our chosen family members and friends who support us and strive to make us better people. We must also leverage on the existing information and structures, as well as maximise the use of technology to strengthen our advocacy for the advancement of human rights, justice and equality for queer persons.



YOU CAN'T PRAY THE GAY AWAY

By Mohammed Salisu

I realized at a very early age of maturity that I am attracted to men. There was the eagerness to have sex; it was the eagerness that came with puberty and I practicalized without regret. I did not know who I was until somebody touched me and I enjoyed it. I kept going back to have sex until I moved on from that and I never had a problem with it or saw it as something bad, until much later when I came to realise that it was not good in my religion, Islam. Later on, I started disliking myself because I thought I was committing a crime. It is difficult being queer in Nigeria. You can enjoy it in the beginning but when I realized it was not acceptable in my religion, I did not really accept myself due to all these factors until later.

While growing up, I could not come out to my family because they automatically thought I should be with a woman until they realized who I was because of the kind of people I mingled with. They were unaccepting and tried using herbs and prayers from Imams to help me stop being gay. Some people thought I was not normal because of the people I mingle with and the nature of my job. This

affected my relationship with my family and even my work, but I stood my ground and kept moving and it all passed.

As a queer person living in the north, I cannot say I am out directly. However, due to my job and circle of friends, people already know and suspect who I am. I am a human right activist that stands for the rights of queer persons. So, with this I can say I am still in the process of coming out which is not easy you know.

There is still a lot to be done about human rights for queer people. The laws are not friendly, we are constantly facing arbitrary arrests and other human rights violations, so there is the need for continuous training and education for community members about their own safety because these trainings will gradually lead to change. You know some people talk too much when they are arrested, they go ahead to out other community members during interrogation, so there has to be continuous safety and security training, human right education training and more of capacity building. Different approaches should be used to address issues with community members to help them understand their sexuality and accept themselves without thinking that they are committing a crime or sin by being who they are or by accepting their sexuality. I feel this will help them to navigate through the challenges.

We also need to debunk the idea, that sexuality is just about sex by educating queer persons on how to focus on themselves. In the course of my work, I engage in different

activities such as mediation between queer persons, queer persons and their family members etc. I also addressing human rights violation cases through pro-bono lawyers and documentation of cases too.

When I started my work as an activist, it was to do fact finding. One of my achievements is getting queer persons the freedom they deserve. Human rights violation cases such as arrest and attack due to sexual orientation occur every day in my community and other neighboring states. I also provide human right education to community members, security agencies and other relevant persons, with this I can say I am making a lot of impact in people's lives especially queer persons. The support I get from community members always motivates me to do the best I can to provide all the necessary support for them.

There is hope for the advancement of queer rights in the north. I would say we are moving because there is much enlightenment, there is more visibility and acceptance unlike before. Even though in Bauchi up until now queer persons are afraid to attend human right events and other gatherings. But there is hope that it will be better in the future because this is not where we used to be and with continuous movement building and engagements things will be better.





THE AWAKENING

By Marian Nwaakolo

Dating a northern queer woman triggered my interest in the rights of northern queer people. Her experience and the things she talked about made me quite interested in how queer women in the north are able to navigate and so, as an activist I was already thinking of how fertile the north is and the advocacy opportunities that exist.

My ex-partner was someone who had come into a place of knowing and self-awareness, her family was very accepting of her decisions like quitting wearing the hijab even though they knew nothing about her sexuality or irreligiousness. She had her fair share of worries which included excommunication, and she still had to pretend to pray whenever she went back home. So, I wondered how she could be experiencing this even with her educated and 'liberal' background. In my head I was like "hmmm, if this was termed 'liberal' in the north, then it must be really tough looking at the northern context and how they take religio-cultural values very seriously. I mean, Nigeria generally takes religion very seriously but when

you look at the north in comparison with other parts of Nigeria, you will see that there is a lot of conservatism here, with extreme penalties for nonconformity. I did not stop worrying and asking questions about how northern queer women were navigating the north because if I have to be marginalized because I am a woman and lesbian, then you can imagine the experience of women who are northern, queer, Muslim or irreligious. This was my cue to start advocating for northern LBT+ women's rights and when an opportunity to relocate to the north came, I took it with both hands and have not looked back since. I have programmed in the north for about two years now. It has been quite challenging because there are days you want to throw hands and tables but the only option you have is negotiation. You are not going to be telling an Imam that you are a lesbian and he either accepts lesbians in the mosque or dies, lmao! It has been quite challenging but very fulfilling working in the north and doing the best I can in my little corner.

Queerness is beautiful. Queerphobia is not an African value or politics, but rather, a colonial legacy that was not recognized in pre-colonial Africa. We have queer gods in this part of the world, androgynous deities that reflect our diversity as a people. The forceful infusion of western religion into our culture has brought so much confusion. The syncretism does not give enough clarity on where our energy should be channeled more because everything has been muddled up. There are always questions. What

is responsible for these laws, stigma and discrimination? Is it religion that is the problem or the culture? There is no separation. This makes advocacy quite tough because you don't even know what to attack and say "let's face this place and channel all our efforts and resources".

Living queer and organizing for queer rights in northern Nigeria is tough because there is the Shari'a law in addition to the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA). I am an activist but I am a queer person too with the understanding of the need for self-preservation. I am out of the closet but from time to time, I still play by the books. There are times I have to thank people in my neighborhood who pray for a good husband for me. Lmao! I try not to get so close or exchange phone numbers because Truecaller is that bad bitch that will bring out your first and last name; I also try to deactivate my social media handles from time to time.

Nothing thrills me like the impact of ripple effect. You can clearly see how showing up and creating safe spaces for one person gradually makes way for ten more people. Many are scared to show up and are still battling internalized homophobia, but with the assurance of safety, the love and care you show, you can see the impact of inclusion, the sense of belonging, the solidarity.

My biggest achievement so far in this context was filming and directing a documentary that actually captured the experiences of LBT+ women. There is a lot of work to be done. There are about 19 northern states and many

activists and advocates would like to bring the “good news” here but the north is quite harsh. This is why it is important to build movements across to aid access to certain regions. The more visibility there is, the more attention will be given.

It is a very beautiful community here because northerners live communally and look out for each other, so you can imagine bringing all that warmth into our queer space. It is very inspiring to see them thrive and love up on each other. I remember how I was looked out for when I newly relocated. There was so much eagerness to help me settle in and every time I wanted to tip (because this is the energy I brought from Lagos), I was turned down and reminded that kindness was not paid for in the north.

Change will come. I think that knowledge is very powerful. It is the radical tool that will eventually spur social change, it is already doing so because you can see that the shift is gradually happening. People are now gradually moving from ‘Oh, I hate gay people’ to ‘well, what people are doing, is not my business. They are humans just like me and can do as they wish if they are not hurting anyone’. So, there is that shift and it is knowledge that has done that. We will not tire. We will continue to educate and change perceptions. One person at a time.



BOUNCING BACK

By City Boy

At about the age of 14, I started experiencing sexual attraction towards people who were same sex with me. I approached my friends because I could not differentiate those who were like me except for those who boldly identified themselves as gay persons. Looking at the fact that I was young, my preference was towards my peer group and friends and some agreed while some denied but kept quite without exposing me to other people. The norm is that a male is to be attracted to the opposite gender, that was when I realized that I was different from other persons.

Even with the awareness that my Islamic religion is against homosexuality, I still could not compromise my feelings and attraction towards same gender. I felt I had the right to choose what I wanted even with the wrong perception of queerness. This made me careful in choosing those I approached. Religion and culture are all not in support of being homosexual. When I realized all these, I started becoming quiet and alone because of family rejection. When they realized my queerness, they

did not send me away from home but all other forms of support including my education, were cut off. That was when I stopped schooling. I also encountered a problem with security agents, vigilante to be specific. I approached a guy in my area without realizing he was not queer and the guy outed me to all the neighborhood and also reported to vigilante. My family members were not surprised as they were already aware and they denied me. A meeting was arranged in an uncompleted building where weapons were used to beat me mercilessly. I had to leave the area afterwards to avoid subsequent experience with jungle justice but had to lead a low life to reduce my exposure to danger. I also reduced how I mingled with others for fear of being outed again. There was a time I was chased from a polling station and was denied access to vote simply because of how I identify. I was faced with so many challenges; stopped schooling at secondary level due to lack of support from my family, but luckily, I had support from another queer person who was successful and independent. Through this partner I was able to overcome the challenges and continued schooling with his support. Afterwards, he supported me psychologically, financially and emotionally till I became self-reliant. My family that rejected me now want me back because they now need my support. I thank God and all the queer persons that supported me directly or indirectly. I believe there is true love in the queer community as I was privileged to have love, care and concern from a queer person who

supported me unconditionally through my endeavors, and I can gladly marry this partner if the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) can be lifted, because of the experience I gathered while staying with him.

I am really glad that the north is gradually opening up for queer rights. Despite all the criminalizing laws, culture and religion, there seems to be gradual and positive change. With continuous sensitization to traditional/religious leaders, law enforcement agencies, family and the general community, there will be hope in future because this is not where we were years back.





KYAKKYAWAR YARINYA

By Aleeyah

Navigating queerness was easy with the help of my sister who is also queer. My self-realization happened when I was 16 years old. During puberty, I saw something different from my gender identity. I cried out loud because I was expecting to see a drop of blood on my bedsheet. I cried so hard and said to my sister, “this is not who I am. I see myself as a very beautiful lady that wants to see her monthly flow but unfortunately, what I am seeing is different from what I expected”. She cuddled me and made me understand that I am still valid and I can continue to be whoever I chose to be. I came out to my family and I was able to tell my mom, “this is who I am”, but I don’t throw it in her face. I made her understand that I registered myself in a religious school, learned about myself and ended up finding myself trapped in this wrong body. I am a transgender lesbian woman, I am beautiful, but I don’t impose it on my mum to accept me for who I am. But rather I made her understand and know who I am so that she won’t hear the information from persons outside the family.

It has not been so stressful being myself around family, however, my experience with religion is very different. It was difficult for me to be part of any religious movement or campaign because I ended up being the topic of discussion. My courage and self-esteem went to nothing, and I started wondering what being queer was and why I was condemned in religion. I decided to start studying Islamic related books on my own to see what the outcome will be. I prayed consistently for six weeks and ten days keeping my gender identity a secret while playing the role of the person the community sees me as. It was difficult doing this because my identity became even more pronounced with each passing day.

In our northern culture, there is knowledge of queer persons. We have what is known as “Yan-Daudu” that is used to refer to persons who are said to be transgender and persons with same sex feelings. It was so easy to be around people when I was younger but being an adult, it became more difficult due to the stigmatization and discrimination because people began to say things like “we thought you were a boy while growing up, why this? You should have been a much better person than this”. It was difficult walking past friends because they shamed me each time they spotted me, making me feel like dirt, like I brought shame upon my entire family. Although I was able to maintain good relationship with some of my friends and some of the community people because when it is business, it is strictly business and nothing more.

For instance, if I am invited for programs and meetings, I keep my queer identity a secret and try as much as I can to contribute without bringing information concerning my sexuality because when people realize you are queer, they think you automatically want to have something to do with persons who are not queer. I try as much as I can to contribute, give back to the community and also bring something reasonable to the table without focusing on making only queer persons my friends, but also making allies and intermediaries. This makes it easy to penetrate everybody because they are not basically concerned with your sexuality but what you can bring to the table first.

When I was schooling in Niger state, I had this experience with lecturers. They perceived me wrongly and saw my sexuality as a taboo within the school. They also believed that as a queer person, you can't be ahead of your mates in the class but the least. I tried my best to be brilliant and expressive of who I am and this made it really difficult for me to pass tests and exams. They stigmatized and discriminated against me at every given opportunity, it even led to physical assault sometimes from school mates. The entire situation began to affect my mental health. There was a time I travelled to Gombe to see a friend, not knowing this friend of mine was a bully. To cut the story short, I was raped, although I always told myself that is was a birthday gift to me. I had nobody to call, cry or talk to. I was in pain and I was stranded. It was so hard for me to ease the pain and process who this person really

was to me. I couldn't go to the hospital to tell them what happened to me because if I go there the narrative will change. I will be criminalized and made to feel bad, so I found a way to heal on my own. It was so bad because at that time I couldn't defend myself, but now I can speak up anywhere and defend myself. Basically, I have not fallen a victim to the religious police because I try as much as I can to not put myself at risk by doing what I think is fine by the community. I have a time for going out and coming back home. I avoid gatherings and if I notice it is getting really late and I am still far away from home, then I sleep over where I am. Although, I have been arrested by the police in katsina where I went to see my friend. The place my friend was staying was tagged a bad place, my friend and I were exchanging words that particular day when the police raided the place. We were beaten, arrested and taken to the police station where we were forced to accept the identities they imposed on us and got beaten some more like criminals for refusing to accept their imposition. We were even forced to take pictures without knowing why and eventually had to bail ourselves from the cell.

It is incorrect that queer people have nothing to offer other than sex. We have contributed positively to the world. We are good, beautiful, intelligent and intellectual but if we are not given the chance to speak, people will not have an idea of who we are. We are denied different types of jobs because of the idea people have about us but if we

are allowed to spread our tentacles, we will do better than your expectation.

I am this person that is fun to be with and asides that I happen to be this type of person that once I pick interest in a certain thing, I do that thing with my whole heart and my best understanding. I try to take up space. You can't talk ill about queer people and expect me to keep mute, I make sure I sensitize you and make you learn those things you don't know.

There are queer couples I have seen that I really adore and love, both in Nigeria and abroad because of the way they live their lives. The way they contribute and impact the community is really beautiful. I have not been financially and emotionally stable, so I am trying to be all of these things so I can travel and also live openly.





SHOULD HAVE BEEN ME

By Paulie

I have always had a thing for boys for as long as I can remember. At age 8, I knew I was attracted to boys, “so much for being in a Nigerian Christian home”. They would always talk about how wrong and ungodly it was. As a kid, they played mind games on me. I was so scared and lonely because I was not even sure of what was happening to me, but I knew I had a thing for boys. So, I stayed low because that’s what a kid would do when you can’t voice out and you have little understanding.

As I grew older, I did things that made people question me a lot. I acted girly and liked the things they said were for girls. My family members fought themselves because of me; my brothers would put the blame on my sisters saying they were the reason I acted the way I did. I would sit and cry and ask myself if I was normal or there was something wrong with me that I was unaware of. I didn’t really get a breathing space during my childhood, even as an adult, these things are still happening. Not just to me, it is happening to 95% of queer persons if I’m not mistaken. So if you ever think you are alone, you are not.

At age 13, I was sent to live with my brother in the southern part of Nigeria. That was where it all began, lol. I met or rather I was living in the same building as this boy who was my neighbor at that time because we no longer stay together but we still keep in touch.

I finally realized I was queer at that age. I wasn't really attracted to girls as much as I was attracted to boys. Change of environment really helps sometimes in self-realization and gives more room to grow. In the north things are way different than they are over the other side, I would always dream of him and would want us to spend much time together. I knew I was connected to him. Whenever my friends talked about girls, I was never into the conversation and I would want to talk about boys.

We became best friends and shared secrets. That was how I told him I loved him. How did a 13-year-old know he was in love or even know what love is? You may ask. At that time, I really didn't know what love was but I knew I liked him.

At this age, I now understand that it was not mere likeness I felt for him. I loved him. I was in love with him. We even attended same school which made things easier for us. I put myself at risk telling him about my feelings for him but I was sure it was not going to be so bad telling him about it because he had worse secrets than I did. Not judging, we had so much in common. We laughed about it at first and days went by, we didn't talk about it.

One day he came telling me he had sex at school. Was I

surprised about it? No! I wasn't because he had girlfriends and was my senior at school. I was so eager to know how it happened and what it felt like. He went further to explain the whole thing to me but I can't say that here, Hahaha!! In that moment, I was imagining myself with him while he said all he said, asking myself if I would ever get the chance to do those things with him. I should have been thinking about having fun with girls but no, it was with boys and always boys when I try not to.

Even at school, I found my classmates very attractive but as kids you know how it goes. We bully ourselves and just want to be known as the funniest, smartest or have lots of friends around us. Not even as kids only, but as adults we still do that to ourselves. I guess this is just how we humans are. We feel better by making others feel worse, we think it's the right and fun thing to do, but it's not. "You don't hurt people to feel better"

It was my neighbor's daughter's wedding day, everyone was busy with work and all. We decided to help them out with the little we could by assisting them with errands and putting some things in place. We were left alone in the room to watch over the food that was to be shared to guests and his girlfriend was also with us during that time.

I watched them kiss right in front of me. I felt nothing but pain and anger watching him kiss her. I felt like hitting her with something or pretend that someone was coming so they would stop but I didn't do that. I just sat down and watched someone else kiss the guy I was in love with

and there was nothing I could do. I only wished it was me and I kept wondering why I was so upset about the whole thing. They finished and she left the room with just myself and her boyfriend. I was so pissed to the point he noticed and walk down to my direction asking what the problem was. I was mute because I didn't even know what or how to say it. He just smiled at me and said I shouldn't worry that someday, I will get a girl of my own. I looked back at him without saying a word.

He held my hands. I could feel how soft his hands were and my heart was beating so fast. Was I scared of what was about to happen? In that moment, all the anger and pain went away. Felt like nothing even happened or I wasn't even mad at him few minutes ago. He held me close and kissed me. It was my first kiss so the whole thing was kinda weird to me and also him. He said I shouldn't talk about what just happened with anyone outside here and we should act like it never happened. "I only did this to make you happy", he said. But to me, I felt like I had him already. It didn't just end there because we kissed so many times after and still kept it secret.

I kissed a girl in school one day but it felt nothing like it did with him. I thought maybe because I didn't like the girl, so I kissed one of my classmates again but at this point, I knew it was just him I wanted. I was so attracted to him and most of the boys in my class. I kept this little bond I shared with him, we stayed low and kept having an affair behind closed doors. So much for a 13-year-old.

I was fully aware that society was against it and I knew what would happen if anyone found out. So, we stayed low. I have never been happier in my life. I was still trying to force myself to like girls as much as I liked boys. I was praying for it to stop. After the whole prayer, I found myself going back to him and liking boys. These things never stopped.

Years passed and I was sent back to the north to complete my education with my family. Here, I just knew I could never trust anyone and I even barely associated with anyone because I already got criticized for looking like a girl. So, I just stayed low and played by the rules of society for my own safety.

The more I tried to control my emotions and feelings for boys just to stay in line with society and family, the more I was hurting myself. I'd say it all goes same way for us all. I mean, not every one of us have that accepting family. Being queer in Nigeria is like going to war every single day of our lives. The laws have been there to make us feel unsafe, afraid, and all alone. It never gets easy keeping a good relationship with a non-queer person. You are not even sure if they will be friendly or unfriendly. Most times, they might still be the same people to turn you in. So, it never gets easy living in fear and not being your true self. That hurts more than anything.

I already knew things were going to be so hard for me. Someone who is alone and so scared to share secrets. All I did was push people away, even queer family members,

because you don't even know who to trust. But pushing people away was never the right thing to do. Sometimes, the people you need the most are the ones you take off. I just had to keep on a low profile, do the things the society wants to see and play along with the Christian family. But that was never enough, you know. There was hope that someday things would get better and those days would surely come sooner or later. I carried that hope in my heart every day. The hope that things would get better, and they did.

Somehow, the media is here to help us make things easier, faster and nice. It plays a huge role in creating depression, dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, but it can also get you a successful career, wealth, knowledge, and help you discover a whole lot more. It all depends on your perspective. I chose to use mine, positively. It has helped me a lot by connecting me with more community members. Getting to know people's stories and telling mine. I put my work out there mostly in the media because that's where the audience is as we now live in a digital world and the media is really how people connect and interact now. Being a content creator, I focus on creating contents that change the narratives of who we are as LGBTQ+ persons. Letting community members know that they are not alone. Giving hopes and sharing love. Most times, all we need is just that one person who's there to listen, who's there to advice you, and also there to make sure it goes

well. Letting you know that “if the world is against you, they will be there for you”.

I’m not really out to my family. Sometimes I just want them to know and live with whatever happens. I was so tired and depressed about the whole thing; living a life full of lies and pretending. So, I spoke to a few persons and they gave me reasons not to come out. They said family would always be family no matter what and I needed to be financially stable, build relevant skillset, and be conscious of my safety.

I came out to my friends earlier 2021. Some of them walked out of my life while a few stayed back trying to talk me out of it but when they saw the conversations made no difference, they let me be. To the society I was not really out but I was still painted as one. The bullying never stopped, the harassment, body shaming and all the things they were doing or saying never stopped. I always believe that humans will always hate even when it’s easy to love. So, I take precautions and I am mindful of what I do and where I go to.

Developing self-confidence and having a sense of community have greatly helped me stand up for myself. Without the community, I won’t be where I am today. It made me stronger, patient, thankful and also shameless.

Get to know who you are. Do not let anyone tell your story or paint your picture for you. It does not really matter how long you have to stay low. If what you are fighting for

is worth it, I'll advice you do so. Never be a toy to anyone and have at least a community member in your circle to share your stories or problem with. Work hard and go after the things you know would help you. I was willing to put in time to tenderly hold the pain I have inside of me because I was sure it will get better. It always does.



YOU CAN BE

By Zee

In 2009, there was this prominent movie I randomly came across that eased my feelings of weirdness. Before my encounter with the movie I used to think there was something wrong with me. I was barely 15 with no access to social media but when I watched movies, I realized I got attracted to the women in them. My encounter with the prominent movie made me feel seen with the understanding that there are different people in the world and I was not the only lesbian in existence.

The following year I turned 16. I had an official engagement with my partner at that time and the event was picked up by a radio station. The news got to my school authorities and I was outed publicly. I narrowly escaped expulsion.

Living authentically has cost me family love and friendship. It has taken away my smooth interactions with other people. When you move with people who are straight, they automatically assume you want to “possess them with demons” or change their perception about your sexuality. It has never been easy for me but

I am someone who is so determined to be my authentic self, regardless of the prejudices that comes with it. As somebody who is very inquisitive, who loves learning and with the knowledge that I am not alone, I started digging. As years passed, technology advanced and I started seeking conversion therapy. At that early point in my search for help on conversion therapy, I found an online space where I met a Barrister who works with a women's rights organization and who would later become my boss for a period of time. I told her what I was going through, and she told me that there was nothing wrong with me, that I was not sick or insane and that it was okay to be who I am. It was a privilege to have someone help me see my life better, made me feel like I was not alone and that nothing was wrong with me.

The prejudice that came with my sexuality was so much that I could not get a good job or even friendship. People automatically assume that you are going to make them queer or you are going to harass them sexually. Many will sexualize you because the moment they hear queer, the only thing they think about is the sex part, without realizing that there are queer persons that are not sexually active. The fact that I am like this doesn't mean I want to have sex or be sexually active, but these people do not understand, they attach that directly. At the early stage of my life I was so alone that I attempted suicide many times because I felt that I wanted a better version of myself where I am not getting rejection from school or anywhere.

I was even trying to convert and do this religion and that religion. I just wanted a cure because I thought I was sick and that this was the infection given to me. But with time I got to understand that there is nothing wrong with me and ever since then, I have been pushing, despite the prejudices and the sacrifices that have come with it. The sacrifice of the love of family, not being able to get a good job because any job you apply for, they would want your social media handle, and immediately they get a hint that you identify as a queer person, they will not select you. I had challenges with finances because of that but I still tried as much as possible to learn and gather knowledge on advocacy and apply for trainings so I can at least sustain myself. That is how I have been able to navigate the lack of employment. When it comes to family and people around, I have learnt to be on my own and create another network knowing that there are people like me. Meeting and networking with other queer persons and forming the family bond that serves as compensation or something that just holds me on has given me a sense of belonging. The queer community has greatly impacted me.

I was not given the privilege to come out, because I was outed. My chance of coming out from the closet was taken away from me. Being outed in the manner I was and, in such magnitude, in a city like kano, was a lot. I was walking in the market and people were literally throwing gravels at me, even in school, people will call me names and shame me. For this reason, I kept moving from place

to place. In the space of 5 years, I had moved to 3 or 4 states. I moved from kano to Kaduna, then the same thing happened in Kaduna because it is still North, so I moved down to Abuja; moved up and about like that. Not to forget that I left the house at 16 and started living with my partner at the time because it would have been difficult for me as a teenager and minor, to live alone. We were both ganged up against and were always on the run due to the episodes of death threats. I've not been stable since I was outed, my sense of stability was stolen from me because you cannot be stable in a place where people would want to attack you anywhere.

I officially started my activism in 2016 and since then, I have been big on visibility. For someone like me who was put in the box trying to be told what to do, visibility means everything to me. So, since 2016, I've been using my social media space to do strong advocacy for the rights of LGBTQI+ persons. There are a lot of persons in the North who have been influenced strongly by me, and have been propelled to do certain things just by knowing that Zee did it.

I think there is need to work on the visibility of queer persons. They want to silence us and push the notion that queerness is an imported behavior and un-African, but that is totally wrong because queerness is as old as Africa itself. I think we should strengthen advocacy for LGBTQI+ persons and channel more energy on visibility because they have to know we exist before they can table

our agenda, they have to know that we are here and we are queer especially for Northern queer persons because when I came as a queer person and started advocating for LGBTQI persons in the North, it was literally just me as a lady and a few other guys that were involved. But today because of so much visibility on my part and the other people who have been involved, there are more and more people coming out, more queer people getting involved from the North. I think with time we will be able to bridge the gap, there is more advocacy on queer rights in the south and west unlike the northern part. They don't even believe that we exist, but we are here, we are queer and we exist. We need to strengthen LGBTQI+ rights advocacy strategy in Nigeria, especially in the Northern region.

I went to kano last year and the turnout I saw for a program, an event for queer persons, was so marvelous. I was shocked because this was me. It was me alone before but I came for this program and saw a lot. My life is my activism. I am the reflection of the change I want to see in my community, so basically, I've used my social media space, I've used my life to influence a lot of queer people in the North, to make them believe that regardless of whatever you want to do, you can do your best. We need to keep proving them wrong. We are not bunch of rascals, queer persons are doctors, nurses, lawyers we are everywhere. On my own part as a writer, I have tried to use my medium to tell the story of queer persons, especially to tell my story and lived experience. I have a handwork that

I do in my field, I am a therapist, so I give in time to show that just like heterosexual persons, queerness does not stop us from being ourselves, from being career oriented. I am a rainbow academy scholar, so I represented in the last year world pride where I was a speaker. I was supposed to be in Denmark for an international organization's event, but I joined them from their office in Abuja. It's a big one for queer persons and there are a lot of other queer persons out there doing their thing and advocating for the rights of queer persons, women and children.



DOUBLE JEOPARDY

By Emeka Chukwu

Growing up in a polygamous home; one where you have 45 children and 7 wives or stepmothers, and seeing the injustice that happened, built my siblings and I to see how things turn out and showed us what to expect in future. Later on, when I started working as an activist and going to the field to help women, girls and people who are marginalized, it reminded me of childhood and I saw the things that happened as background check. My background in tandem with volunteering at an organization about fifteen to eighteen years ago, were the origin of my journey to activism. An organization I volunteered at in Niger state would always call us for trainings, to come for psychosocial support and counselling. At the time, we didn't even know that those trainings will help us later in life. The founder also opened a group, a network where community members who had issues like arbitrary arrest, physical abuse and extortion could easily report cases. The organization would send us to various places like Zamfara, Jigawa and Maiduguri to talk with the police to see how community members could be bailed. The

experience really built me, and my activist journey will never be complete without my gratitude to my superior who happened to also be the founder of the organization.

The past ten to fifteen years have seen me either programming for my organization or for other organizations or for networks because I belong to several networks both here and outside Nigeria. We are always having meetings where we constantly have to plan projects, plan activities and program for minorities.

One of the reasons I am this passionate is because the security agents and even members of the LGBTQI+ community weaponize the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) to blackmail and extort LGBTQI+ persons and render them voiceless. I try to create an environment where people can reach out to me, talk about their issues and then I can link them to organizations and lawyers. I have a lot of pro-bono lawyers who are always willing to help community members resolve their issues.

People in the north suffer two or three times more of what people in east or west suffer because in the north there is the religious and cultural extremity. Even for people who are heterosexual, it is still like a double jeopardy for them living in the north because there are things they can get away with in maybe Lagos and Port-Harcourt, but in the north they can't. For instance, a man can't hold a woman and walk on the street of the north. You cannot openly show affection. Imagine how hard the north is for heterosexual people. Now, bring it

back to the queer community and you will see that it is a hundred times worse for them. Being queer in the north is a whole lot of work because if people are aware of your sexual orientation, you might lose your family privileges. I know parents who have told their kids “you cannot be my child anymore”. There are also parents who take their queer children to churches or even to the mosques to ‘cast out’ spirits of queerness. Some parents will in the name of conversation, lock up their lesbian daughters in the room to get her raped by two or three men and pay the men afterwards.

I hear stories were people just talk randomly and say things like gayness or queerness is not African, and I laugh because history has shown how even in 18th centuries, religious and traditional leaders who die or who are about to ascend a throne, are told not to sleep with women for three months. The male servants at the palace are the ones who prepare the foods that the chiefs and traditional rulers eat. They are the ones who keep the traditional rulers’ company and even in some traditions till date, they have traditions that will never let a woman who is menstruating cook food for her husband who is a traditional leader. So, in those periods the male servant are the ones who do the food, the inner room, bedroom matters and all of that. All across Africa, these things have been happening. People just live in self-denial. We live in a hypocritical world where the same person who comes out publicly to criticize and carry the first stone to stone a queer person or

a community member, strangely is the same person who goes back at night to beg. Many years ago, I interviewed a guy in Zamfara, after many were arrested during a party, and this guy said the ‘mai unguwa’ of that area who was the first person to out him publicly was the same ‘mai unguwa’ that came back later with gifts to beg him and still proceeded to sleep with him. So, you just look at some of these things and you see people publicly come out and castigate and criticize the community and they still go behind to date some of these community members.

It’s hard to win the trust of community members, it’s extremely hard because they hardly open up, even with issues that affects them. Take for instance, in the course of my work, we also empower young people, build their skills and then link them up with organizations who need workers or workforce. I remember a time, I won’t mention the state but a northern state gave me like twenty slots to get community members with disabilities. I had fought so hard for those slots. I sent out that link for community members with disabilities to apply and kept following the applications every day until the application closed. None of the community members agreed to apply.

Community members sometimes don’t leverage empowerment opportunities even when there are starter packs and seed funds involved. This lackadaisical attitude also reflects in how they handle their health matters. You have to beg them to go for tests, beg and follow them up to take their drugs. There is this impression

community members have of activists, even when you are also a community member. They see you differently and assume funders give you dollars to come and use community members to update data and figure to make money and go. I remember when we were supposed to do a training in Abuja, I called community members to send their details so I could nominate them for the program and they assumed I wanted to use their name for 'ritual'. I was confused at the possibility of 'killing' them with their email addresses or phone numbers. When they see you travelling for work and doing so many things, they start accusing you again for not traveling with them, but these are the same people who never apply for travel opportunities when you send them application links and will get jealous when you travel. It doesn't work like that. If you want to be a doctor, you can't sit in your house and after ten years, you say you are a doctor.

During the periods of constant party raids in Sokoto and Zaria, I suggested at a public meeting that community members stopped partying for a while. Community members attacked me, suggesting that I took sides with other people instead of the community and that it was their human right to party. The one that happened in Zaria was the one that shocked me. I went to Zaria to do an intervention and then from Lagos we got a call that there was an arrest in Zaria. When we followed up that case with the lawyer and the people we went with, due to the kind of religious police they have, the people that were

arrested were telling us that it was some guy who was not invited by the celebrant of the party that gave information to the police about a gay party and its location. A major crisis was that one of the guys at the party got a job and was supposed to go for the physical interview in Abuja. He decided to pass through Zaria, attend the party and travel from there. His bag was in that hotel and that was how he ran without the bag, and till date he doesn't have his original credentials. So, we as community members, can be our own problem as well. Some are gradually opening up like I said but you will be shocked that some community members even when they have as little as STIs they can't tell someone, and that's something I like about the straight community. A guy will have sex with a girl now, and if he starts having gonorrhea or hitches, he will tell his friend, "guy yawa don burst o, that girl wey I carry 3 days ago o, e get as my body dey do me o, ah", and they will all start laughing. They will laugh over the matter and proffer solution, they will say "O boy come, you are not a graduate in this society, you know if you have not had gonorrhea, you are not a lover boy, oya come let's go to the hospital". This friend will carry him to the hospital and the matter will die down there. How they see the doctor, how he takes the medication for STI, everything will die down there. But in the community, before you even tell someone, they'd have sent a message like "ah don't go near that one, eh!! If you have sex with him, you are in trouble". They will always screenshot the message you

sent them and spread it across. I can also understand from the point of view that community members are scared, but my question is, how are we always united when there is a party? You will see people begging to get invited for a party, you will see people gatecrash and say “Ah, I must attend this party”, you will see everybody, even people who were quarreling before will become united and will dance, eat, and enjoy themselves. Why is it hard to mirror this same behavior in other aspects especially when something will benefit the other person? For instance, I want to paint my house and I know a community member is a good painter, why will I go outside to get a painter? We are only about getting them into our beds, we don’t know how to empower ourselves. If a community member is a caterer and cooks very well and you are having an occasion or you know someone having an occasion, you financially empower your community member when you give them that opportunity.

Being united just by parties has given the community a bad name. People look at it and say “dama na wayward people na”. Life goes beyond that. I am not saying parties are bad but as you do that, also do things that empower yourself and that is why I am happy with what AIHI is doing. You will see a lot of skills acquisition beneficiaries making bag, shoes, cooking, baking, empowering lives, because there are lots of gifts that community members have, and they can give more.

Part of the challenges we face as activists is finance

and continuity. Sometime donors think they know what goes on in your community, so what they will tell you to do might be completely different from what you see on ground, and I think we need to constantly talk to donors to make interventions suitable to the unique needs of each geo-political area because yes, we are all community members, but our challenges are different. Even if we had same challenges, the manner of approach that a queer person needs to be attended to in the north is very different from the manner of approach in the south. You could meet a queer person at a bar in Lagos but in the north here, to start with, you can't see public bars, they are very few, and then the cultural thing, you can't hangout everywhere.

I think we need to keep doing a lot of training and sensitization. We must call out everyone, every homophobic person, be it from the community or outside the community. We also have to do our own part if we must stop internalized homophobia because when you let something just go away you are also aiding and abetting that behavior.

For me as an activist and human rights advocate, I say this all the time and sometimes they don't listen but I will still say it because as they say "the truth is bitter and better", learn to watch your environment, even abroad where you feel that human rights are hundred percent protected. We feel like queerness is open there, but there are people who are still closeted, there are some states in America where they still frown at queer issues. So, watch

your environment. I want to also advise everybody, not everybody must come out, not everybody must tell their family that they are queer. Before you take a decision, please look at the consequences because nobody will be there when you start suffering, especially if you are working and living with your parents(s), and you still get money and support from them or they are paying your school fees.

Another thing I will tell young community members is to get educated and education is not just going to school, learn a trade, learn something. Don't add to the number of people who feel every community member is wayward, it's a lie. We have professors, bank and medical doctors that are community members, we have business people who go to China, India, everywhere. Find your bearing, find what you do well and hold on to it. Be a celebrity chef, be a celebrity gateman, be a celebrity in what you do. You don't have to be like the other person, if we learn to empower ourselves, people will talk to us with respect now, even your family.

Empower yourself and the sky will be your starting point.





DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

By Ruggedy

In secondary school, I found myself being attracted to women but at that time we used the word “mummy”. It was a general term in school. People would ask you “who is this person?” and you’d say “she wants to be my mummy” or “she is that person’s mummy”. I had so much passion, soft spot and love for women, but I did not know why. I remember being called nigga by my friends because they said I walked like a guy. They always laughed at the way I walked.

Someone made me realize who I was in 2004. I went to fetch water and a girl called Lily saw me and asked how I was doing. We spoke for a bit and she asked for my room number saying that she had been seeing me around. I told her my room number. That night, she came to call me to sleep in her room because her roommate was not around. After much pleading, I went to her room to sleep, and later that night she started touching me. I was not even sure of what I was doing at that point, I was reluctant, but I allowed her to do what she wanted because it was late at night. The following morning when I was leaving, she

started apologizing saying she thought I was into it because of the way I behaved and that she was shocked I had never done it before. I told her she did not have to keep begging me because I liked what we did. That was how we started a relationship. People thought I was “Gay”, when I did not even know and had not discovered myself. People saw me and knew I was gay at that time.

I have been castigated in the church because of my appearance. My sexuality has nothing to do with my religion. Sometimes pastors preach against lesbians. They shame girls who sleep with girls and call them homosexuals derogatorily. When pastors preach like that, it makes me feel weird but then I know who I am, so, the preaching cannot change me or move me. This is me, this is what I found myself to be, it is not something I learned in a book and I am cool with being this way. I used to be in the choir but I stopped singing because I do not want a situation where people will say “ah, imagine! They are allowing a lesbian to come and sing for us in the church.” I do not want to be the reason people will think the church of God is damaged and so to avoid small talks, I decided to be myself, to serve my God, but not get involved with any church activity.

I have people who do not want to be associated with me because they feel I dress like a man. Some see me and say “Oh Debby, you should buy small clothes. I can even buy them for you, don’t worry about the cost. I want to see you wear them. Small clothes will fit you,

don't you know that?" They are always imposing and I will just laugh and laugh. Some will say "Oh Debby, if you want to go to this place, don't dress like this oh!!!" and I will say "I will not go because you cannot impose this on me, you can't tell me what to wear. You can tell me if are not comfortable being my friend because of what I represent, there's no point being around me because most times, I just want to be myself." That's why I make sure to surround myself with gay people. I cannot keep straight people around me. There are people around me that are into it but undercover. They don't want people to know, so I give them space because it is not easy. I don't want my problems to affect anybody, I don't want to be a problem to anyone such that people see them with me and think they are lesbian. I have friends who would cut out my face when we snap pictures together. A lady and I went to a restaurant to enjoy ourselves, after everything I posted the pictures on Facebook. Before I knew it, she sent it to my god-father, telling him that someone had reported her to her dad and she had been called a lesbian for taking photos with me. This very person I'm talking about is gay too, bisexual. I was so angry that I had to call her. I told her that this was something she could have met me for personally and I'd have taken down the pictures, instead of going straight to my god-father that I respect so much. So, I gave her space and she apologized but I don't get over things easily like that.

I have said to myself countless times that I won't get

worried about what people think about me. You know, there's a saying that goes 'The best advice is the one you can give to yourself.' If a person does not like me, it's fine. I can't judge them for not liking me, and if they like me, it is also fine. No matter what people say about me, even when I hear it, I'd just laugh and let it slide. It is not a problem to me. I already have enough problems. Normally, I don't associate myself with my family, that's the problem my mother faces till today, not because of my lifestyle, but because I know who I am. I don't want to come close to the extent that family will start interfering in my affairs. So, I keep a distance. The only person in my family that I am close to, that knows what I am into, who can call and even talk to my girlfriend, is my mom's younger sister's daughter. She went to a boarding school and has also been with women in the past. So, she knows I am gay but has never said that to her family, or discussed it with anybody. She's the only person that knows me best, that's why I call her my favorite. Sometimes she will even ask me, "sister, what about that your girlfriend?" I remember when my brother asked me about it a long time ago. That was when I was in College of Education, and I still denied it because of my mother. I grew up knowing just my mother because I was four when I lost my dad. She's the one person I can give my all to, so I know that if she finds out, it will break her, and that why I don't agree to my identity whenever my brothers bring it up. Whenever they ask me, I will just say I don't know about it, and that quenches the fire

because if I say it is true, they'd say I am selfish and I am not thinking of others. They will tell her eventually and I know what can happen to her if she ever finds out.

Some people will come and say "Ruggedy, I heard you are a lesbian", and I will "yes" without looking at their expressions to know if they are happy or not. I don't even care how they feel when I tell them I am a lesbian. What I care about is myself and how I feel about certain things. So, your opinion does not matter. Like my god-father, I was the one that told him I was a lesbian. When I told him, he said "nice, it is your life". When his girlfriends want to advise me, he will say "she's into girls. Don't start imposing things on her or trying to advise her because it's her lifestyle." He is one person I can take a bullet for because he has accepted me for who I am. When people see me walking with someone in Kaduna, they will say to the person, "Ha! You are walking with a lesbian", but my god-father, a man who is Muslim and Fulani, goes anywhere he wants to travel to with me. People have said all sorts but he doesn't care and I see that as a huge favor done to me, a big sacrifice.

In this Kaduna, there is nothing like lesbian community where they do meetings or things like that and it breaks my heart. That's why I wish I live in Kano sometimes even though I don't like the city. Here in Kaduna, they only talk about gay men in our group discussions. A lady once asked why all we ever talk about on the group is gay men when women are actually going into depression because they are

lesbians. In Kaduna we don't have any organization like AIHI that we can go to. We need awareness and support in Kaduna.

I have been in love in so many ways but my current relationship is a different one entirely. What I do to someone I am in love with, is exactly what she is doing to me, so that alone makes me love her more. As a queer person, I have dated married women like twice or three times, and the last one I dated was a horrible experience. She cared about me so much and we had codes we used whenever her husband was around, but at the end of the day, he figured out these codes and I ended up chatting with him thinking it was my her. He had gone through her phone and I did not realize. After that experience, I resolved to never date married women again. You can't even post their pictures, you cannot show that you are dating this person, you can't do certain things, you cannot live your truth and that was not what I wanted for myself. If we are not out, then it is pointless. So, at the end of the case, I begged her and we settled but I fell out of love because it was not easy, that was when I started dating this very person that I am dating and I am happy where I am because the feeling is mutual.

Lesbian marriage is so sweet but it is something you cannot do in this Nigeria because even when you are behind closed doors, you have to keep it in like you are friends who simply live together. That's not what I want. If I am ever going to marry, I would leave the country so

I can enjoy it. I love it because it's so beautiful. The love is so real and it is hard to see divorce in lesbian marriages. All these NGOs that are springing up are helping people find themselves and I am proud to see pure Muslim girls in kano gradually coming out and even partaking in events now. I am impressed by how much the community has grown. At least now, people are posting pictures on social media, showing their love style on Tiktok, without harassment. In the next five years, I see people getting married and nothing will happen.





IT IS WHAT IT IS

By A

My earliest memory of my innate queerness was when I was 5 years old. I happened to (accidentally) watch a passing x-rated scene in - if I remember correctly, Tony Montana. I was instantly aroused by the man who was half naked rather than the woman that was fully naked. Things like this, I learnt later, happen frequently to children.

I couldn't understand what it was - the implications with respect to culture and tradition (religion was far from my 5-year-old mind) - until much later. I began to understand who I am from the language of my parents (Hausa). From conversations picked here and there about that kindly neighbour who is effeminate (like me) who everyone is sure sleeps with the neighbourhood young men desperate enough to seek a man's comfort to quell their raging desires before they marry. That was my first impression of what it means to be a man who is attracted to men. 'Yan Daudu. But I was not one then, nor am I one now, so my confusion persisted.

Later on, as a teenager I began to understand better. To see what I felt at five years old for what it is and to realise the only language that has defined it in my hometown of kano. I felt an almost irresistible pull towards the male body in much the same way many of my peers did towards the female body.

Yet, where they are just boys being boys, I learnt that people like me are ‘Yan Luwadi, a borrowed term from Arabic that has its root in the story of the Prophet Lud (Lot) and his people who were destroyed by Allah for their many transgressions. I remember clearly how the sin most harped on was homosexuality. I remember the sheer dread my 12-year-old heart felt because even if I hadn’t already explored the male body - and I already had with my peers around the block - I had harboured thoughts about being with men. I was a pious child, so the dread was crippling. I remember praying and fasting harder, for forgiveness, for healing. The self-flagellation did not work, so I switched focus.

From then onward I basically dedicated my life to finding a language that is kinder to me and to people like me. I found that in English and held on for dear life. I was gay in my secret heart and that was enough. Since the last two years I’ve also found grounding in Hausa - almost like a homecoming - so I don’t mind someone referring to me as “Dan Daudu” in insult because it doesn’t mean a bad thing, it means somebody who cross dresses and that doesn’t define me because I am not a cross dresser. I know

nothing in my mother tongue of Hausa that defines who I am - something that was evolving until as recently as last year.

Because I am introverted, I always hold both truths and confusions in my chest till I figure them out somehow. I did this even as a child, and later as an adult who after defining themselves as queer knew that is unsatisfactory as a definer of all that I actually am - a **non-binary pansexual** person.

Non-binary is used to describe people who feel their gender cannot be defined within the margins of gender binary. They understand their gender in a way that goes beyond simply identifying as either a man or woman.

A pansexual person is someone who is attracted – either emotionally, physically or both – to all genders.

For the longest time my queerness was not an issue in my life because from age twelve, I was committed simply to finding a language to define me - a language that doesn't carry the history of shame 'Dan Luwadi' does. I put the queerness at the back of my chest for years and did not try to explore. I just read and read. But the thing about burying something so integral to one's humanity is that it does not mean it goes away, it is still in your chest and will emerge sooner or later.

I had my first crush when I was 13 - at least my first male crush. and I remember being so confused and terrified. It is what happens to children who are not straight (aka heterosexual) the world over. A 13-year-old boy could

look at another 13-year-old boy and feel emotional and sexual attraction, they will understand when they are in love with this boy, but where their straight peers will find joy in this understanding, they will find confusion and fear simply because everything they see and hear about love is anything but that kind of love. Men love women and vice versa, according to the Gospel of **Cisheteronormativity**.

Cisheteronormativity is a pervasive system of belief that centers and naturalizes heterosexuality and a binary system of assigned sex/gender when there are two rigid, distinct ways of being: assigned-male-at-birth masculine men and assigned-female-at-birth feminine women.

My crush was in the same class with me in the Islamic school I attended (**Khulafa'urrasheedun**). He was one of the most brilliant in the class and I was also part of the top performing in the class. So, we tend to compete sometimes. And then I turned 12, and began to see him in a new light. For a year I thought my constant thoughts of him were because he was getting an edge over me in class. I took every opportunity to annoy him. Then after crushing for a year without realising what it was it became too intense - it was like my entire hormones decided IT IS TIME. Every morning I woke up he was my first thought. Every night I went to bed it was his face that transported me into unconsciousness. I finally realised that I loved the boy and I had been taught in the very same Islamic school that the love I felt is sinful. I was at a loss. That was my biggest teenage challenge.

That challenge will morph into worry about criminalisation much later.

Criminalisation was not an issue in the 1990s, kano and most of Nigeria had bigger worries than dehumanising queer Nigerians - the MaiTatsine riots for instance. I remember witnessing sex workers and cross-dressing food business owners living in a brothel not far from our then-house in *Panshekara*. Hardly anyone cared save for the occasional preachers (Muslim and Christian alike) that occasionally visit the sex workers who they believe are into sex work for lack of better options. There was not much prejudice and the level of stigma was low.

The early 2000s saw the rise of a kind of Islam that I did not know growing up - a kind that says not only that I will be pious, but that I will force you to also be pious exactly how I understand piety. It made me realise that to enjoy safety I may have to leave my hometown. I set my mind to it.

Then just when that dream was on the horizon in 2014 - I was in my penultimate year in university - the SSMPA was passed. I remember my feeling about that law being an overwhelming sense of resignation. The SSMPA stole the hope that I had for being able to move to another region of the country where the people will not judge me based on culture or religion since we share neither.

All of a sudden, the arm of the law that was supposed to be neutral in this matter decided to make it difficult for queer people to find safe harbour anywhere in their own

homeland. It is foreign countries or nothing. So, a Hausa queer person who is trying to seek safe harbour in Eastern Nigeria, suddenly can't because the SSMPA happened and all of a sudden made the rest of Nigerians feel like they have a shared responsibility to violate queer Nigerians whether they are Christians or Muslims, they now have the Nigerian law too giving them confidence to violate queer bodies of all iteration regardless of cultural and/or religious differences. We are fair game for all. I remember falling into depression but I had to write exams, so I just kept it moving.

What I learnt as a grown 25-year-old in kano is that being gay isn't the problem, speaking about it is the problem - speaking about it without shame.

Kano is a town where the elite wear homosexuality like a magic spell - something too powerful for the common man to indulge in that they give themselves permission to. I can say with relative confidence that almost everybody knows somebody who has slept with someone highly placed that we all respect.

People, myself included, have slept with big men who are highly respected, men who in public say, *"Yes let us lock the gays and the trans people and the non-binary people,"* yet the same men will pay for a queer person's hotel in Abuja that is worth somebody's annual salary. Yet still, because queer bodies are disposable, they know they can use them for their pleasure then throw them under the buss for a crumb of power and get away with it. That HAS TO STOP.

I am not out to everyone beyond what they can glean from my work and social media activities and reach conclusions that are often wrong. I am only out in words to precious few, my favourite people in the world, some of whom didn't take it lightly. I am out to my mother and two older sisters, and my best friend in the whole wide world – F. A.

When I say I am out to them, I mean that I sat them down, looked them in the eyes and told them I am queer-not straight - something that is still evolving because I knew even then that my humanity is just unfurling.

They have been devastated by the fact – each in their own way - that I could say that, but it is my truth and they have tried to make peace with it. They have also been grappling with how I could live safely in a world that they know is much more unkind to people like me and how I can exist in an afterlife that they believe I don't belong in if I die a practicing queer man. They are worried that I would not make it to heaven, they also deeply believe in the concept of *Qaddara*, so it is an enduring conundrum.

Looking at the experiences and challenges faced by queer persons when they are out (whether by choice or by accident), I advise queer Nigerians who are determined to live a dignified life to remove themselves from hostile environments (whether that is family or acquaintances) as often as possible, especially when they are rejected. What that does is show your loved ones that you can do without them, that being with them is a choice of love. Even if

you fail at this, when you are back, there will be a level of respect that you get for trying, for choosing to love them rather than just doing it for what you can get - of free food and housing.

Queer people are constantly contributing and weaving a lot of loving magic into the world even when it openly hates us. Yet when people talk about queer people it is our sexual activities they fixate on - who we fuck or get fucked by, how we are fucked and how we fuck. They are more focused on what we do with our genitals.

I am a writer. A fantastic writer - if I say so myself, who has written a whole lot of articles on topics ranging from mental and emotional health, disability, faith and spirituality, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, etc. A whole lot of people in my circle are successful and make a positive impact through the various work they do. They have created a sense of community that has touched my life in every way possible, from giving me the confidence to walk worthy, to reminding me of the boss bitch I am - capable of building not just my career but that of others too.

So, the statement that queer people bring nothing to the world is baseless - nay a blatant lie meant to malign so our abusers can shield themselves from repercussion for hurting us by selling us as useless, disease-ridden freeloaders to a public that is already afraid of 1001 things. It is time we collectively reject that lie. We are bigger than that. We are human and invaluable. kapish?



WHERE CAN WE BE SAFE?

By Marie Pally

The lack of safe spaces in Nigeria prompted my career. I have programmed in two northern states for 9 years, three years and six years respectively. I found myself not being able to express myself as a queer person due to the religious and cultural norms in the country. Tell me where I can be safe? There are no safe homes, safe places to express ourselves, to properly communicate, to talk about what matters to us and our identities as queer persons; there is the existence of a compromised legal environment, stigma and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity with high level of physical, psychological and sexual violence against queer persons. In the course of my work, I have made sure to establish communication channels where people can speak up if violated, even if it is within the LGBTQI+ community because community members violates each other too. We've been able to establish a platform that gives room for people to express how they feel, their pains even if they are not calling out the person's name, but at least they are able to air their views, get ideas, and get suggestions. Then the trainings

and capacity building being done by my organization are safe spaces for community members and have also helped impacting positively or contributing positively to the lives of queer persons.

I came to terms with my queerness in 2016/2017 and I did nothing about it. I just tried to be more careful, knowing how the country and how issues affecting LGBTQI persons are addressed. All I could do at the time was stay silent. I did not tell any family member and I simply continued mingling with my friends without telling them anything. You'd find me expressing myself only when I am around community members because I can freely say what I want and I can relax. As a queer person living in the north, coming out is not even an option for me right now because of my religio-cultural realities and family. My partner and I are willing to stay in the closet until it is safe to come out in Nigeria and the laws criminalizing us are decriminalized. However, if we are unable to come out in Nigeria, we will find a country to relocate to eventually and live our truth. Coming out to the public is a big challenge because you are going to be arrested, jailed for life or even killed on the spot, so it's to keep it in, act like everyone else and go about our daily life.

The media is one of the places that has greatly helped me gain access to community members and has linked me to other organizations that are safe spaces for community members. The use of Facebook, 2go and WhatsApp have been very helpful. There are a lot of organizations in

support of LGBTQI+ rights and they have been doing great work but there is still much work to do as far as the LGBTQI+ community is concerned. I work with every group of persons regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, race, social status because all our issues are connected. I am a human rights activist; a sex worker and I also belong to the LGBTQI+ community. I think that makes me very valuable in Nigeria because I have been able to work on different levels of health and empowerment project. Over the years, I have worked very closely with the sex workers' community. I was part of the coalition that rallied when the police raided a hotspot in Abuja, demolished it, arrested and raped sex workers. We held a protest, walking round Abuja demanding justice for these women. We actually achieved what we wanted because we had the names of all the women involved. Rights movement cannot exist in silos because we have bisexual women who are sex workers, we have lesbian women who are sex workers. We engaged the human rights commission; our views were heard and judgment was passed. Victims were identified and compensated and it was clearly stated that there is no law that criminalizes sex work in Nigeria.

In Benue state, I know there was a time the bill for the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) was about to be passed, but then we walked in. Movement building was one of our major strategies. We came together, worked in coalitions to visit law makers who were about to sign the

bill, told them the implication of passing the SSMPA and looking at the fact that these communities are drivers of HIV, the prevalence rate is high and the moment that bill is passed, they will go into hiding meanwhile one person, one member of each of these people who are about to pass this bill, one member of their family or relative, might be in the LGBTQI+ or Sex workers' community and they won't know, even them as men, buy sex from these young girls, they might not see it as buying sex, they feel like they have a girlfriend but that's buying sex because she is gaining something from you, you don't know this person's status in the community, what virus, what STI this persons is with, you take it home to your wife, she gets pregnant and gives birth to a child that has HIV and like a circle, it keeps going round. Instead of achieving the Zero HIV by 2030, we are still moving in circles. We spelled out the implications of their decision around the SSMPA and I am grateful that the bill has not been signed in Benue state.



THE EXPEDITION

By Kayode Gomes

Activism for me started way back in 2010. As one of the pioneers of LGBTQI+ activism in the Northern part of Nigeria, kano state to be precise, I would say it was worth it and I am glad we took the steps even though it was a risky move activating what seemed not to be widely accepted at that time. But we had little or no choice as we could not exclude the strategy of human rights from the healthcare programming component.

We were quick to realize that reaching out to the queer community in Nigeria with health intervention seemed difficult without human rights protection. Personally, I have the passion of supporting marginalized groups as my organization was established for the purpose of addressing issues that affect marginalized groups; people with disabilities, rural communities and vulnerable youths. A partner organization; an international nonprofit organization, consulted us for a survey on; Qualitative and Quantitative study of Queer persons in the Northern part of Nigeria which was a successful study that gave birth to many other projects including; Funds for

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) Most-at-Risk-Populations (MARPs) Intervention and in the same year 2010, we conducted the HIV Integrated Biological and Behavioral Surveillance Survey (IBBSS). As at that time, I was the Mobilizer of Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) based on my network with young people and social workers. We used peer to peer strategy, community slangs and coded languages we had learned, to identify the queers and the hotspots they hung out. This was passionate for me because from all the studies conducted during this period, I realized the need to intervene in the queer community especially in Northern Nigeria based on the health conditions, stigma and discrimination.

Being Queer in Nigeria is already a crime *moreso*, in the northern part of Nigeria which is highly homophobic (dislike or prejudice against gay people), hypocritical and fanatical. Personally, I would say being openly queer in the northern part of Nigeria is a dangerous identity. Queer persons are faced with stigma, discrimination, arbitrary arrest, jungle justice, and sharia criminalization, and as a result, many are faced with health situations that are left unattended to due to fear of being identified. These were the major issues on ground at inception and even though we intervened and mitigated the risk of coming out and creating friendly services for queer persons, these problems still linger but at least, it has reduced and we have paved way for the present activists.

I think programming in the northern part of Nigeria was interesting with a mixed feeling of risk, but understanding that I was doing serious work, was fulfilling for me. I was able to mitigate the risk with the support of numerous organizations, stakeholders and even some key people and offices within the government sector. We had the backing of health ministries as HIV was the primary entry point in engaging queer persons and protecting their rights as well.

When people say being gay is western culture, I laugh and take them back to the days when being gay was also a criminal offense in the western world. I inform them of tribes in Africa that recognized queerness as way of life. I bring them back to an existing Igbo tradition where women lived together as couples and even to the north where we had crossdressers and “yan daudu” patronized by big men considered to be “Alhajis”. Queerness has been in existence since creation and if we agree that black people were the first humans on earth, then we can also agree that queerness is African.

Talking about queerness does not have to do with sex but the community makes it difficult to debunk the perception because most queer persons make sex a priority. Meanwhile, I understand queerness as a way of life, preference, how you wish to be identified and whom you choose to love or have sex with. But sex is rather a degrading way of identifying a particular group as everyone

deserves to be human without being stigmatized. However, the queer community must change the narrative through behavioral change.

The queer community is a unique group of people that understand the risk of being openly gay and are beginning to find ways to navigate through life by remaining who they are and loving who they want without getting caught, or let me say without being misunderstood. However, we still have a long way to go in terms of behavioral change and acceptance which applies to both the queer community and society at large.

As an activist, the community has impacted me to a large extent in helping me understand that some of us are born differently and some are not able to choose who they are or how they want to be identified. Activism actually found me. I realized there are people who are scared of their own existence while some people find pleasure in who they are. There was and still also a lot of hypocrisy in the queer community, and the less privileged queer persons suffer the pain of stigma and discrimination while others enjoy the privileges and connections. The real activism began for me when I discovered the real danger of being a less privileged queer person in a homophobic, fanatical and hypocritical society.

Queer rights are human rights. I personally don't differentiate queer rights from human rights because that is discrimination on its own. I believe everyone has a right

to access health services, right to freedom of expression and association, right to life, right to love. And being queer is not a criminal offence as it is not a threat or insecurity to anyone or any society, it is just a preferred way of life. We can advance this by putting the message out there and educating community members to live a modest and normal life. They need to stop flaunting around and stop sexualizing queerness. Everyone has a phobia for something and I consider being homophobic as sickness. However, it is still important to sensitize community members on the need to live a modest, sensitive and normal life. We need to differentiate sex work from queerness. There are a lot of queer persons in the international world, even at National and Regional level who are living normal lives and people don't feel homophobic around them because they are modest. We need more sensitization within the society, families and friends. We need behavioral change.

Activism is quite fulfilling knowing you are fighting for the right cause. Navigating the space was a huge challenge while negotiation was a deadly game being a face of the queer movement especially in the North. My colleagues and I had to always watch our backs but perseverance, passion and patience led us through and helped us achieve milestones. The passion to want to make impact and support vulnerable groups led me to the right sources, opened doors and it was at a time when the intervention was needed as the Federal Government of

Nigeria soon criminalized being gay and even advocating for LGBT rights. Above all, God was faithful and, on our side, as we had to face arrest, torture and shamed but we still scaled through. I would say we paid our dues but the struggle continues.



KINSHIP

By Claudia

I was in JSS 3 when I discovered that I felt some type of way when I was among women. It was a way that I never felt when I was with men and as I grew older, I was able to put a name to what I felt as a teenager and discovered that what I felt was attraction. When I was a teenager, I shied away from gatherings that involved just women, because of fear, so you would always find me in the midst of men. I hid it so well, even when I had a partner in SS 2 and even now, I do well to hide it because of the society we live in. You cannot just come up and say who you are or publicly express yourself in public. I have not experienced any challenges just yet because I am still very much in the closet.

I think I was discussing with somebody some time ago and I watched this person reduce queerness to sex and it is painful because we have a lot of successful queer persons, we have a whole lot of them but I cannot call names. I am queer and I am successful, and in my own little way I have and I am still reaching out to younger queer persons. I have talked to two or three persons. One said she could

not go back to school but wanted to get enrolled in a skill acquisition center. Myself and some other persons had to come together to ensure that we enrolled her into the skill she wanted to acquire and to God be the glory, she is now done and has her own shop where she runs her business. She even has two other persons now who are learning the skill at her shop. I know we have a lot people who are still doing that, a lot of organizations who are also doing skills acquisition programs and all that, so this is what I do on my own.

I am a Christian. There was a time I would just sit down and feel very guilty, I would say to myself, “don’t you think you are committing a sin? God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of this.” You know these are the things that are being preached to us. There was a time I even said I had given my life to Christ and said, “Ah Hallelujah, I am no longer queer”, but this is just who I am so I found myself again. The entire situation got me confused, so when I met a friend who is also Christian and queer, I discussed it with her, I told her exactly how I felt about my identity and she made me understand that, I am not committing a sin, and that this is just how I was created. She said if I wanted to be a Christian then what is expected of me was just to serve God, to do the right things and let God be the judge. That was how I reconciled my sexuality with religion. I go to church every day, I do whatever it is that my Christian faith requires of me and I live my life. The Bible says “do not kill”, so I won’t kill,

“do not fight”, so I won’t fight. After my conversation with her, I had a change of heart and I was like “God loves me, Hallelujah” I am very grateful for the community because before I found the community, I was just this queer girl living with her partner and in fear. After a breakup, I was just alone, without access to the community, but coming into the community now, I know a lot of people and I have achieved a lot of things personally through community members. They have helped and are still helping my growth.

Queer love is so beautiful and right now, I am in love. So, yes, it’s a very beautiful experience, in fact it is one of the most beautiful experiences when it is a person you want to spend the rest of your life with. When you wake up in the morning and see her, you’d be like “Oh, thank God I am in love with this person, thank God I am sharing this bed space with this person.” I encourage queer marriages too, it’s just unfortunate that we don’t have access to that here in our country but if I have the chance, if I am given the opportunity, I will love to get married to my partner.

Since we are in the north and we know how they perceive queer people in the north, I always advise and I will keep advising that northern queer persons be very careful with their day to day activities. That is the more reason I am very keen about people getting skills and trying to be useful in society. If you are successful, if you are responsible, nobody will talk about your sexuality, even if people want to talk about your sexuality, they will

be like “this person is not a nuisance to the society, look at how successful their life and career is.” Also, community members should be very careful of the kind of friends they keep if they are not ready to be out. They should not even do it because it is very risky. Let’s just hope and pray till when we have the freedom to live, then we can come out and say “yes I am gay, I am this and that.” But first things first, try to make good use of your life so you don’t find yourself in danger.



PROFESSION THROUGH PASSION

By Dennis

It has been a bitter-sweet experience working in the north. Since 2011, I have had the opportunity of coordinating HIV response for key population in Kaduna, kano, Adamawa and then Maiduguri. But also, the Shari'a law we have in the north is a challenge. The Shari'a police have come to look for me twice but unfortunately for them, I was not available so they didn't see me. While the community is one that I am proud of, my motivation to start volunteering and providing support, was the fact that I figured they were no specific centers where LGBTQI+ persons could go to access treatment. We had people who were dying of HIV, they were dying in silence, there were people whose rights were being violated and they had nowhere to go to access services.

The Same-sex Marriage Prohibition Bill that was fired into law in 2014 to prohibit same-sex marriage in the country is a major problem that the community gets to encounter but also there are anti same-sex laws in Islam, and religious institutions in the north are very powerful. Each person tends to practice a particular religion and we

know that in the north the Muslims are like a majority. The northern part of Nigeria is so unique because we have the religious police and we also have other traditional law agencies that are committed to arresting LGBTQI+ persons. Just recently, about two transgender persons were arrested and told to go naked just to find out if they were really man or woman, and this was done in broad day light in Kaduna but we do not get to see or hear about these things because a lot of people today do not know their rights. The laws criticize same-sex marriage and those caught in the act but most times people have been arrested because the police think these persons look gay. One thing I have noticed is that majority of these arrests do not even get to court, so what happens is blackmail and extortion. The police and other traditional institutions leverage on the laws and use it to blackmail LGBTQI+ persons and extort money from them. This is why many are hiding but we are able to access the community through social networking, friend of friend, and through other implementing organization or peer groups.

When I first moved to Kaduna, nobody knew anybody in the community and people just lived separate lives, but as time passed, I was able to bring community members together in an apartment to discuss health issues, human rights and other issues that affect the community. I was also able to tell them that there are places where they can access treatment without being discriminated against.

The community has really impacted me. Working with

the community has exposed me to a lot of opportunities that have impacted my life today. Being a licensed social worker as a result of working with the community was what gave me the drive to go and study. My first degree is accounting but when I started working with the community, I realized that accounting is not where my passion lies and providing support for community members has always been my number one passion. I had to go back to school over again to study and become a social worker and a therapist. I have met great people; connected with a lot of people that I call brothers today, people who I am sure would show up for me if any issue came up today, and this is a result of me working in the community and providing chances for the community.





IN MY WORLD

By Kenny

My self-realization happened way back in secondary school. I noticed I was very comfortable around women so I owned up to how I felt about them and was conscious of my environment. Being a discreet and secretive person has really helped me navigate my identity because it is pretty much easy for me to not disclose my identity to anyone, and if I had to disclose, then it had to be someone who I also knew about their sexuality. How I choose to express has got to be the only challenge I have because in this part of the world, dressing masculine will sell you out, they believe every tomboy is queer, but I have never been one to pay attention to whatever anyone was saying. What matters most is that I am not naked. Hahaha. I am not out to society just yet, but as a queer woman, I have been able to achieve my life goals as an entrepreneur because I believe that whatever a man can do, a woman can do much better. I also think that community members can make the best out of life regardless of whatever situation and that is why in my own little way, I talk to some community members to focus on achieving self-

development, becoming entrepreneurs and adding value to society. Many of them just need to be sensitized and given access to correct information. If more efforts are put in place to sensitise community members on their rights and how to comport themselves in the society, I think the sky will be our starting point. We may not have achieved so much as a community but the future is bright.

As an advocate of Christ, I firmly believe that God almighty is interested in all kinds of relationships and that is the God I serve not human beings. So, I do not experience feelings of guilt or condemnation because I also understand that I am human and imperfect.



RAY OF HOPE

By Echezonachukwu

This year 2022, happens to be my twelfth-year programming for the LGBTQI+ community and it has been a partially smooth ride. There is the audience that is available and ready to be part of the picture you are trying to create but also there is the fact that northern Nigeria is guided by a huge Islamic law that has penetrated their culture and values, so breaking through has not been easy but we keep on seeing results. You do your little thing and begin to see how progressive it becomes. The activism of today would not be visible without the battle of some years back, so you could see some improvement but it has not been easy all through the years.

Here is a little history of how I understand myself and how I began to understand my personality. At the age of 7, I had an encounter with 4 men and all turned out to be rape issues, so I couldn't share that experience because it was terrible. I was a small boy who was not close to anyone because I came from a broken home, and that was what instigated a whole lot of reasoning on how to survive and how to meet up to societal standards, and then it got me

exposed to wrong hands. After the episodes, some years later, when I was 9, I also had an encounter with one other person but I already understood that I could personally blend well with the same sex than the opposite sex. I had no knowledge at that initial stage but my curiosity got me exposed to information, understanding people like me and I knew I was definitely not the first person to exist and be this way. Looking at the fact that I had been exposed sexually, I couldn't tell anybody, but I started thinking that there'd be some boys out there with such experience who needed a voice, who needed someone to amplify their voices, so I began to seek for persons who have been abused and started making friends with like minds especially feminine guys, then you end up hearing their stories and you be like "okay, yes something like this exist" and before you know, you meet this person and then the next because the queer community is like Bluetooth; you meet one and that one introduces you to another one and it happens that you people are just part of a family and before you know it, we began to build networks. This happened before we had an idea that there was a program for LGBTQI+ persons. When we found out, we decided to enrol, we all started with a support group, from being a support group they start picking up the best out of the multitude and fortunately for me, I had the passion so, I became a peer educator, a volunteer from the year 2010 and that was how I continued from being a peer educator into a palliative care officer with HIV programming process in a hospital. I was

volunteering and advocating for grassroots empowerment and I was partnering there until the whole contract ended. I had opportunity to work with a community-based organization, where I also worked as a volunteer but basically a mobilizer, from there I morphed into an outreach worker, where I was able to train young persons with passion to go into volunteering job and come into self-realization. As an outreach person, we train, mentor young persons and then send them to the community. So, from the community-based organization where I worked as a volunteer and mobilizer, I got acquainted with another community-based organization where I worked as an outreach coordinator and a community mobilizer.

We would have sessions and then meeting with community members, you will find out that even within your small environment, your neighbour is also a part of the program but because they don't have the basic knowledge, they won't want to be part of it and by the time you begin to shed some light and try to make them understand certain things about their health, sexuality and even other activities, it changes their lives. The experience and knowledge you share with them makes them become interested in being peer educators. That was how we recruited peer educators after mobilizing them and then send them back to their friends. So, it was a chain of network, a friend to a friend, that's why it is called peer educating because you have your peers and you are among them as an instructor, you begin to give

them the basic knowledge of HIV. After a period of time, I moved to another nonprofit where I was also part of the counsellors and case managers. We did case management for HIV and STI services and also provided referrals for paralegal services when human rights are violated. I was given the opportunity to work as their media person to do all the social media advocacy and spread information using pamphlets and flyers. From being a media person, I became a gender focal person working with trans persons and creating visibility for the trans community. So, it has been a long progressive drive, from one stage to the other and because there is passion, you don't get tired, you just always want to hear people, you always want to proffer solution.

My rape episodes made me determined, I became my own inspiration because I understood that I came to this world alone and possibly I will be leaving alone, so whatever doesn't add to making me happy, I do not find it relevant but looking at the fact that the environment is Islamized and then growing up as a church boy, you try to balance spirituality and sexuality. It has not been easy but what I did initially when I got enrolled into the programme for LGBTQI+ persons, was to target my family because I came to this realization that the society at large is a composition of multiple families. I gave my family basic knowledge about LGBTQI+ persons, made them understand that the reasons LGBTQI+ programming was being done for these people was not

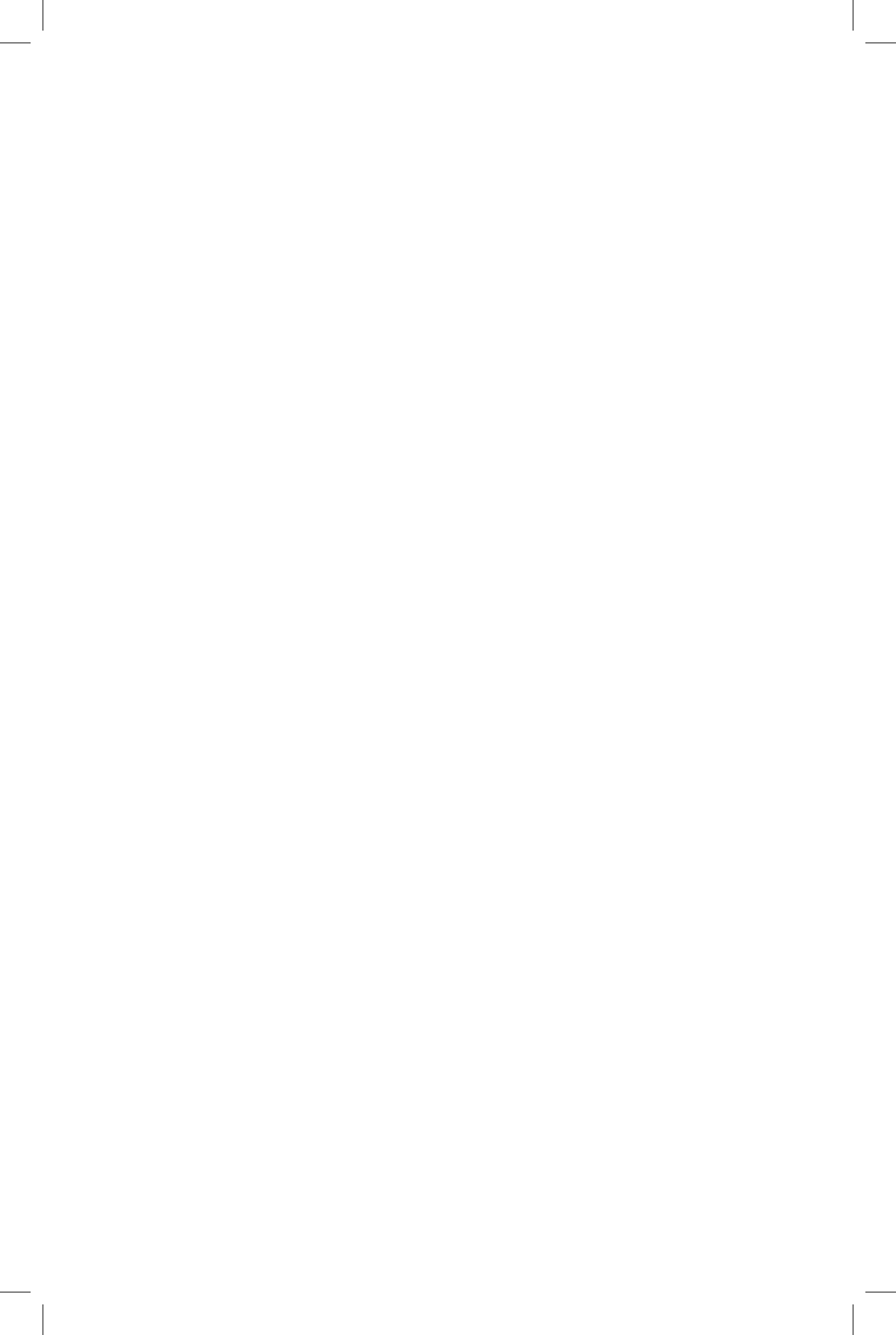
to promote immoralities or fornication but to promote a healthy lifestyle. I made people understand that these people are humans before they are sexual and they are created sexual beings. At the initial stage it wasn't easy because I had issues with my dad, he even threatened me with security persons and all that but it was a wonderful episode when everything turned out in my favour because when the security persons came to my house, I told them to give me few minutes, then I began to educate them, something that should have been an arrest ended up becoming a meeting where we gisted, one where everyone had fun and was very comfortable. Instead of saying "this is who I am", I came from the perspective of empowerment. Then I started looking for a place to build myself to become self-sufficient because I needed to make family understand that I did not give a damn or expect anyone to pay my bills. I knew I was entitled to my own happiness and because I needed to be happy, whoever came around me also needed to be happy. I went to catering school to learn crocheting and baking skills and I was able to empower myself to the extent of getting an apartment to accommodate some persons. I called family and it was awesome because they found out that I was relevant, I was not a nuisance or a liability. I made them understand that if people kept criminalizing LGBTQI+ persons, how will they find safe spaces to harness the beauty of life? I hosted meetings in my space for my family because if your family is your safe space, then the world has no choice than to

accept you. I have also had personal sessions with religious clergies like pastors and I have made friends with Imams too, I have given them some basic information to help them understand that queer persons are humans before anything else. So far there has been progress because I have been building allyship with these religious persons and I believe in the nearest future, it won't be as hard as it was 15 or 20 years ago.

I remember an encounter I had with my dad and he said when he noticed I was extremely girly, he was worried because while growing up in the north, he noticed that guys who were feminine ended up selling food by the road side, and becoming slaves and liabilities to men. This is why I try to encourage young LGBTQI+ persons to engage themselves because there is a saying that goes "the quality of your life is the quality of your thought." So, if you are in a space where you are making your mind active and productive, you will not have that thought of low self- esteem. You begin to understand that you are reasonable and relevant. You begin to realise that it is far beyond just being identified as a queer person but also a relevant solution bearer in the society. You are making money and paying tax, so definitely you are relevant. People get attracted to successful people, you don't even need to make friends, just be successful and then you start seeing the friends everywhere. Empowerment is the cure to self- inflicted stigma.

Knowledge is power. I have had people call me and

say “because of the information I heard about HIV, I know it is not a killer disease, so I’m going to take up space and live life to the fullest.” When some come around, they will say “mama, e don happen but I thank God I met you so I understand my sexual health better.” I am referred to as “mama” in the community. It gives me joy that someone out there who would have committed suicide because he is HIV positive, ends up celebrating it, because I make them understand that “it is not just a second chance but another space for you to live positively” and whatever has to do with positivity has to do with good things, good tidings. Even in spirituality, when you check both religions, whatever has to do with positivity talks about addition, it talks about balance, so forget medical report but keep up with your drugs. I even go as far as saying “the drugs you are taking won’t work if your mind is not at peace, so try to give yourself that balance” These success stories are enough for me and even if I do not make the whole money in the world but I look back and see these multiple success stories in the north that is enough for me.





MOVING FORWARD

By Damina

Over the years, queerness in the north has been made to look like a curse, an unforgiveable sin in the eyes of God, and queer people are treated like unwanted species that deserves termination. In the course of my work, I have seen queer people go through various forms of challenges; depression, stigmatization and human rights violation, discrimination, poverty, as well as malicious constitution. I was opportune to contribute a little through psychological counseling sessions for some queer victims across the north, mediation and consolation efforts, and provision of referrals in cases of conflict or hardship or cases that are beyond the capacity of my local organization or my expertise. We also carry out behavior change communication, public advocacy, and I have taken part in public interest mitigation initiatives together with Nigeria queer community in Lagos to challenge the deficiency act which is ongoing. I have been a part of alliance building and networking with all movement to succeed in Nigeria and this alliance building is not only within the country but beyond the shores of Nigeria. My program can

be traced back to when I joined an outreach team of a feminist organization in Zamfara state in 2007, I attended an internship in the headquarters of that organization in Lagos, coincidentally at that time the organization was hosting the secretariat of collation for the defense of sexual rights in Nigeria. So, that opportunity connected me to feminist activists in Nigeria with whom I continued to work with even after my internship. As a result, I was part of many projects across Nigeria including those with queer rights components. I participated in implementing the human rights and sexual diversity project in Minna in 2011 as well as legally assist on projects in northern Nigeria late in 2014 in kaduna among others. I was able to engage with religious law enforcement agencies in Zamfara state, kano state, kebbi state, Vigilante command as well as the Nigerian police in various occasions on the account of liberty and dignity of queer communities in northern Nigeria. I co-founded Nigerian sexuality adviser to the board on the international feminist Institute at Minna. During the course of my interaction with feminist activists and the opportunity offered from 2007 to 2021 to work in programs that involve queer community, this essentially brought about the first awareness of my sexual orientation as a person and my gender identity, and then progressively, through information that were available to me in the course of feminist activities and programs. I initially gained access to the community members in 2011, during the implementation of the human right

sexual diversity project in the north in 2011, I had my own sexual orientation and you know sexuality is a complete large circle that is beyond debating because it is from the day I came on earth, but formerly my formal introduction of access to the community was 2011 as earlier stated.

In Minna, in 2011, during the implementation of the human rights sexual diversity project, I had an impressive contact with queer NGOs from other parts of the north that attended and participated in the project and I was sure there was none from my state Zamfara, that challenged me and as soon as I went back home, I set up a small informal group. This was done with caution, taking into consideration the particular nature of Zamfara state. This small informal group served as a contact point for the other NGOs in northern Nigeria because what happened in Minna 2011 was to keep in touch as a movement to change the narrative of the conviction of community in northern Nigeria, so we maintained the group of contacts around 2011 and this has resulted in success especially in the areas of retrieving some members from illegal arrest and detention, sending some of them to meetings outside the state for capacity building networking, alliance building as well as taking down the information acquired bothering on sexuality and human rights to other members who could not attend locally. So only in 2011 that informal group was registered in Zamfara and I was able to navigate and negotiate, due to deployment of effective communication and negotiation skills which

are assisted by knowledge of sharia, culture and the law. Infact the peculiarity of northern Nigeria must be so difficult as you know that to achieve any result and respect for religion and culture for instance, I have to remove my sandals while entering the religious law enforcement commission chairman's office because they said it's the praying ground. Sometime in kano, some queer members were arrested and we were there to intervene, they asked us to remove our shoes before entering the office because they were using the place for prayer and you have to respect that. We used to be their first contact both from the local activist to the international development agencies when human rights violations against queer persons occur, we also gained the ability to challenge passage of SSMP bill in 2016 at the national assembly, I was part of those who contributed to that during the public hearing, we also succeeded in challenging the constitutionality of SSMP Act 2016 in the court, even though the case is pending in federal high court, Lagos. But we are part of the team that engaged in mitigation surveying and organizing of the legal brief, and so on and so forth. We facilitated various sessions of sexual diversity and human right in Nigeria and we used our technical expertise or advisory services to international Feminism Institute in Minna, Nigeria. I think that I find myself in a difficult environment and I think my situation is complicated due to religious and cultural antagonism that is deeply rooted in the North, it

makes it extremely dangerous to navigate. I personally see northern Nigeria as a forgotten island, the eyes of donors are mostly concentrated in Lagos and other southern cities and have forgotten people like you and I who direly need assistance, after all we are here to defend civilization and human rights because queer rights is an integral part of human rights, and human right is an integral aspect of democracy, you cannot have democracy without human rights guarantee, so I see this as a betrayal of the northern community by the global democratic civilization.

The community is majorly navigating queerness by way of silence, pragmatism and queer co-ordination. The northern queer persons choose to remain in the closet maybe because they majorly lack the necessary resources and skills to openly operate. The northern movement is a parasite of the southern movement, in terms of innovation, in terms of initiatives at times you can't even initiate action, you have to wait for the southern queer movement to initiate, honestly to the extent that if the southern queer movement does not do anything, nothing happens in Nigeria. And unfortunately, the southern movement pays less attention to the northern movement; there is also the inability of the northern movement to neutralize our religious and cultural biases and the resource mobilization that are necessary for a more conducive region to operate is a big challenge.

My experience about queer rights in Nigeria is the pre-

2015 SSMPA freedom of programming and organizing by and for queer persons without much fear, but such level of freedom became largely limited now with the passage of SSMPA 2015 by the out –gone president Jonathan. I believe queer rights can be advanced for better impact in Nigeria if we focus on reform to get rid of the SSMPA which is hindering or criminalizing the process of organizing for the right of queer communities in Nigeria, and other laws, because there are other laws in our sharia court criminalizing queer persons in Nigeria. We also have to focus on funding, to mobilize enough resources for queer rights guarantee in the north, we should actively participate in the civic and political processes including the political economy of religion and culture with the view to own the narratives and direct public opinion toward prospects for queer rights.



JAPA-ING (RUNNING AWAY)

By Enoch

There was this uncle that was staying with us when I was 12, he's not really my uncle, he's my mum's elder sister's son. I was naïve at the time and acted like a girl, so every night when everyone was asleep, he'd come to my room to wake me up, he'd be hard and would ask me to suck his dick at times. I will do. When I started doing that for him, I did not like it, I was just doing it for doing sake, I did not know what I was doing. I will do that to him and he will cum in my mouth and all that, not until when I started developing feelings for what I was doing for him, then I started liking it. This went on even till when I was in JSS3. It was when I was in SS2 that I fully understood what I was and why I was even agreeing to do what my cousin was asking me to do all the time. It was not easy for me at a time sha because this is something that is not accepted in the family or in the society. I felt I was alone, there was nobody like me that was doing what I was doing, so there was nobody to talk to or to share what I was experiencing with my cousin. I kept it to myself and was even been scared to disclose to anyone. I had no friends

then, it was just me and my brothers who I couldn't even tell anything because it would have caused problem. With time and as I grew up, I started trying to understand where I was headed and the kind of person I was, so I had to leave my family house to my elder sister's who was married. I was staying with her and helping her with house chores and everything. My sister saw me as a girl. At times when she showers, she will stay in my presence and rub cream. I was having those kinds of feelings that made me feel like her as I watched her and the whole feelings were crazy, I liked the feelings sha because I was seeing what I was in somebody else even though I could not express it. I was very fat at the time and the neighbors in my sister's area would say I had a woman's shape. Sometimes they'd call me names like "Na-mata" and all those kind of Hausa names. At times I will ignore them and just go my way, it now got to a stage where I stopped going out, I only went out when my sister sent me on errands, so when she was not around, I would be home but even at that sef, people that understood who I was, still came around when they were sure my sister was not at home. They will come to me, they will play and do all those kinds of stuff, sometimes I gave them blow-jobs too because that was the only thing I knew then. It was after secondary school that I had sex with my secondary mate that was staying on the same street with me. That was the first person I had sex with, and since then I have been having sex continuously, I also started meeting other queer people around.

I had so many challenges with my family after trying to hide from them and when they eventually got to understand that this is who I am. I had issues with my elder brother, I used to be best friends with my immediate elder brother before he knew my identity, after finding out, he stayed away from me, we fought and quarreled all the time. Whenever my male friends came to the house, my mum would send them away, she always chose who she wanted me to go out with. If you are male and you come to the house, if she doesn't like you, she will send you out of the house. I didn't have the liberty to keep friends, the whole thing was crazy. It now got to a point where something happened, I think that was in 1999 or so, I was in school in Zaria, one of my male friends came to the house, he used to come to the house when nobody was around but on that fateful day, he came to the house and I was not around. He now saw my younger brother and started making advances towards him but my brother didn't tell me anything, he went on to call my immediate elder brother and narrated what had happened. My immediate elder brother and my younger brother both decided that my younger brother would plan, play along and pay attention to the guy and whatever he wanted so that they would lure him to the house, the guy was so foolish, so he fell for it. My younger brother lured him and made sure that the guy was naked before calling my elder brother to tell him what was happening. They beat the hell out of him, dragged him from our family house

to the district head of my area. The issue escalated and people around started asking the guy who he came to look for. My name was always mentioned. I was in school when that happened, it was when I came back, I started noticing some changes. Everybody was looking at me like one evil spirit or somebody that was not wanted in the family, even in my area too, the people looked at me strangely, people that I greeted and played with normally, started giving strange responses, it was crazy. I started feeling a type of strange behavior from my family. I had to call my younger brother and ask him what was really happening. He narrated everything to me, and that was how I left kaduna entirely to Lagos. I went to Lagos, stayed for few months, but hated the fact that I was there so I came back to kaduna. I was still very uncomfortable around my family and my neighbors, so I had to change my environment. It's still because of that I left even my sister's house that I was staying because one of her husband's friends who always came to the house, noticed I was always alone. Whenever my sister and her husband were not around, he would come to the house and molest me. I won't say molest per say but he will be touching me and doing all sort of things. I never complained to anybody because I did not want any scandal. One day I got back from school, we were in the compound, he couldn't even wait to know who was coming, in the process of dragging me, one of their housemates came and saw me, so it's like anywhere I go, the people turn their backs on me. I had nobody to

run to for assistance or advice, I was just on my own, even till now. That is why I have learnt to be on my own, when I have problems, I share with myself. I had to adjust, I worked on my behavior and the way I move because back in the days, I used to be very feminine, but because of the situations that were happening around me, I had to switch the kind of friends and the company I kept. At that time, I used to mingle more with LGBTQI members, but my experience led me to mingling with people that took drugs so that my family won't see me as that queer child they use to know those days. I won't lie, I am not at peace with my family even though I no longer move around with queer persons. I am still a queer person but just to make them have that picture that I am not a queer person, I had to start mingling with lesbians and other female friends just for family to see me as a changed person. Mingling with persons who use drugs now made me start taking drugs too and it's crazy, from my own side it's really crazy. I have never really had anybody to call me or ask about how I have been coping on my own. And now because of the drugs I am taking, I can't mingle with LGBTQI persons, I am one, till tomorrow, till I die but because of family's perception of me, I have changed and want people to see a different person. It is really destroying my life presently because I don't have normal friends I can discuss my queer life with or seek advice about issues I am having about my queer life, health and all that. I only have people that do drugs and sometimes when I sit down, I wish I can just

take back the hands of time and correct everything, so I don't know, I am still fighting.

I know there are activists for queer persons but I have never come across anyone exactly. It would be great and helpful if LGBTQI persons can just be given opportunities. We need someone to come and speak with us and educate us on our personal experiences and how to go about life, because we are in a country where sexuality is not accepted by everybody, so being in a country as this, you have to understand the environment, the people you live around, if they are people that will expose you because at times it is what we do, the way we expose ourselves that's how they see us. If we can just work on ourselves, I think it will go a long way. The problem is that most times things escalate because most of us depend on "umm, let me have sex for money", they don't really want to work for money, they believe when they just see a partner that has little change it is "ok, I can just sleep with the person and I will be paid." They feel they want to have all the connections and that's why they expose themselves, do the show as they say and make some kind of moves so that people will understand that this person is like that, even though they don't know all these people. It is not everybody that will see you and like you, some people will just come with a kind of vibe pretending to like you, you don't know they might be setting you up, so you don't really know who you are meeting and what their plans are

for you. I feel skill acquisition and psychological help will also go a long way.

The last community work I have done on an international organization's fund project that just ended, that was two years, I have been able to work with persons who use drugs, you know we also have LGBTQI persons that are doing drugs too, so I have been able to meet with such people that are into drugs too, talk to them and give them my own experience, what I have encountered and how I have been able to overcome all those challenges too. I think I have done my own little quota and if given more opportunities, I will do more things because we have a lot of LGBTQI members that are into drugs and we don't know. You know some people act like they want to save LGBTQI persons from the community because they do not think queerness is okay, but they end up feeding them with drugs and cause them to be soaked into drugs. But I am telling you, they are dying in silence because they don't talk to anybody, nobody knows what they are passing through, if you are not like them you won't know. I feel training people like us that are LGBTQI member that are into drugs too, will help in a very long way. I have a couple of friends that are like me that we share similar stories and one of them, as I am speaking to you, just because of such things, his self-esteem is so low that he can't do anything. Currently he is having problem but he can't go to any LGBTQI center to access treatment because

he's shying away from LGBTQI persons. Anytime I mention LGBTQI persons, he gets curious, so I believe we need friendly spaces for people like that. I don't know what organizations could just do but I know there are people like us that need safe spaces where they can just access treatment freely without any kind of stigma or discrimination. What I feel is hindering them from going to access treatment is that stigma and discrimination.

I do not think there is any hope in northern Nigeria because we know how things happen in the north, their own things are always different. If they ever catch a queer person, it would be a different story. I have not seen anything change about that since that's why I am always saying and hoping I will just leave this country.



CAN'T HIDE LOVE

By Siyama

I actually realized my queerness when I was very young, around fourteen or fifteen years old when I was in boarding school. I was very close to one of my friends that people even called us twin sisters. I loved that girl, I loved her, I really did. There was one of our teachers that was having interest in me. She hated him and with time, she made me hate him too because he was trying to separate us. Anything he wanted me to do or wanted to give me, I'd tell him to bring two if not I wasn't going to collect it. We were in JSS3 at the time. I tried to hide my feelings but I could not and she felt same way too. She was the one that showed feelings first, explained to me what she felt and asked me what I felt about her. Actually, she was my senior in school. She was in SS3 and I called her mummy. I was not washing my clothes or going to the dining because she provided everything for me, my only job was to bathe myself, and after sometime she started bathing me.

My sexuality is prohibited in my religion but this is who we are, we don't know what to do, we are just doing it because we just find ourselves in that situation, so we

cannot hide it. The community and the culture are against us causing us to face stigmatization from people. Even when we were in school, we met our first experience with stigma. They divided the rooms and called our room LGBTQI room, they reignited curses saying that one day the roof will fall on us because of what we were doing. In the community back home, they tried separating my family and I when I came back during the holidays. Imagine being so tired of the disturbance in school, then coming home to feel some level of comfort, only to be met with an even harsher environment. One time my friend and I went to the zoo, there was a guy following us up and down telling my friend that he wanted to talk to her sister (me). When my friend told him no and asked him to leave me alone, he insulted us and called us lesbians. Then I said “how? Is it because I don’t want to talk to you or because my friend stopped you from talking to me?” Next thing, he started trying to gather people, calling us lesbians in Hausa language, calling us “madugo” even though he did not catch us red-handed doing anything, he simply met us sitting down, eating, she was feeding me and I was feeding her. There was one woman that met us there, she is friends with my aunt, she went to tell my aunt, describing the event to her and how she met us at the zoo during Salah break. My aunt started asking me about the event and if I knew the woman in the woman’s presence, I said I didn’t know her, but the woman kept insisting by narrating the event at the zoo claiming that my

friend and I were hugging and kissing, insisting that she had evidence because she caught us on video but that the phone was broken. That was when the situation at home got hotter for me. But my father loves me so much, so he tried to resolve everything. He said we were still young and the event was nothing but since then, I don't relate with my aunt again. She used to really love me before that incidence, whenever I was home on break, I'd go to her house and we would do things together, she was the one who taught me to cook. Things have changed. Now, if I greet her, sometimes she will answer, some other times, she will not. She still uses that incidence against me, she would sarcastically ask why I am unmarried while all my younger ones are getting married if I wasn't lesbian.

I had an encounter with the police. My brother was arrested, so he called me because I am the senior one at home. Immediately he finished explaining to me, I rushed down there from the office. When I got there, the policeman said he won't talk to me because I was not married and he could not talk to a single woman. He said if I called my boyfriend, then he would assist me to bail my brother. I called that my friend, when she got to the station, I hugged and kissed her, then the policeman started asking why we would do that and what was between us. I told him she's my sister, he said she is not my sister and maybe she was my lover and that he was suspecting us. He claimed he had been hearing something about lesbians and our actions have proven that it's true. He forced us to enter

the cell, we refused, next he removed his belt and started beating us. He put us in the cell and asked us to give him our parents' numbers. My phone was locked, he broke it because I refused to unlock it. My brother was crying as he watched the way they beat us up. When the DPO came, I narrated everything. I told him my friend and I are not pure Hausa; my mum is Arab and Arabs hug and peck their sisters on the cheeks. The DPO in turn explained to the other policemen that we were not pure Hausas and they were not supposed to beat us up. The DPO resolved everything and asked us to go home together with my brother but those religious police force will give you a very tough time. I remember when they arrested some of our people and the Executive Director of the NGO I was working with asked me to intervene as a paralegal. By the time we got there, one of the religious police force was showing interest in me. He even asked for my number, I refused, he started insulting us that we were the ones giving these people power in the community that is why they did whatever they wanted and that he was sure we were like them if not we won't support them to the extent of coming to bail them. He started insulting us calling us lesbians, he said I should prove him wrong by giving him my number so he can be in a relationship with me, I said "I am not interested, it is not by force, relationship is by agreement and you are not even my type." They refused to allow us see the person in charge of those people that were arrested. He refused because he was even trying to bring

another issue on top of the already existing issue. We just had to escape from that place.

Forced marriage is a major challenge in the north. I remember one time my parents travelled to Saudi Arabia, I had no option than to stay with my grandmother. While I was there, one of my cousin-brother showed interest in me that he wanted to marry me. I refused. My aunt started again, calling me a lesbian asking what I was waiting for to get married and that I was supposed to be married by now. She had to invite some people in the community asking them to rape me, claiming that if they raped me, I'd start having feelings for men. Almost three of them raped me when my parents were not around. They raped me and I got pregnant. I was not happy and we were about to start fasting, that was when this thing happened. I realized I was pregnant because I wasn't having appetite, I was very weak and my breasts became much bigger. I experienced all the signs of pregnancy. I didn't know what to do. I met one of my friends who did a PT on me and the result came out positive. I had to do an abortion. What kept running through my mind was that if my parents came back and found out, my father could faint because he loves me so much. My friend got me abortion medication, I used them and started hiding like I had menstrual pain. I started bleeding but the bleeding got worse so my friend had to take me to the hospital. When we go to the hospital, they were asking what happened. No woman at the hospital wanted to attend to us, it was one man that finally accepted

to help. He is a medical doctor at the hospital so he helped me do all the necessary things. I came back to my normal self but was still bleeding for over 40 days of Ramadan that I was even unable to do even one single fasting.

With time, I had to leave my community to another community because my younger sister got married and my dad started asking me when I would get married. I explained to him that I wanted to be a medical doctor before marriage especially after my experience. I told him I had no interest in any man and that the lady that took me to the hospital during my experience was the one I loved more than everyone else because when he went on his business trip and when I had my terrible encounter, it was this lady that was there for me and I have interest with just her. She was the one that helped me, did not rape me and helped me survive what happened.

I think people should just mind their business. When you talk to some people, they bring in their religion. Everybody will die and if you die, they are not going to bury you with anybody. Everyone will sow what they reap, so there is no need to start insulting a person because you may find yourself in their position someday. When you find anybody in a position that is unclear to you, rather than insult them, advise them and pray for them. They will say that queer people have nothing to offer than sex. I am a queer person, I am also a health worker even in my community and I'm helping so many people. There are

so many pregnant women who do not go to the ANC in the hospital, when they want to give birth, they will call me because they know that I'm here, they don't have the resources for other options. When they call me, I will do everything and help with their delivery. I help sick people in my community and I am doing so much, so, anyone that says sex is all we have to offer, is simply lying and I am here to prove them wrong.



CONTRIBUTORS

Kayode Gomes is a Nigerian residing in the Netherlands and the founder/chairman of Love Planet; an organization promoting sexual health and rights in Africa and Europe. Kayode Gomes is presently leading his organization in emancipation of African LGBTQI in the Netherlands by hosting African LGBTQI during Pride events (Amsterdam, Utrecht and Zwolle) in the Netherlands. Kayode Gomes consults and volunteers in various projects around the world to promote rights of sexual minorities and migrants amongst which is a study “research” & publication on Queer Asylum; *ESTRANGEMENT AND HOME IN QUEER ASYLUM STORIES*.

Amira Muhammad is a transgender woman and a human rights activist from northern Nigeria. Born a boy but identifies as a girl, a Muslim and Hausa by tribe, living a natural life, no smoking, no drinking or any kind of drugs, and has never engaged in sexual activities. Living a full life as a woman, but hoping one day to have the right person to take care of her.

Damina is a lecturer, traditional leader, and a human rights activist. He is a feminist whose activism started in 2006 when he joined membership of an outreach team of a feminist organization operating from Lagos which he later joined as an intern in 2007. He also worked with TIERS and LEDAP Lagos to develop strategic legal responses to the enactment of the SSMPA in Nigeria in 2015.

Damina is a member of the coalition of the Defense of Sexual Rights in Nigeria as well as a fellow and a member Technical advisory board of the International Feminist Institute (IFI). He chairs an organization in Gusau that works for Human and public health rights of all persons.

Claudia is a human rights activist and a bisexual woman, married to a man with lovely kids. She has lived all her life in Kano Nigeria and has been working within the LBQ women space for quite sometimes. Claudia envisages a society where folks will be free to express themselves.

Odi Iorfa Agev is a human rights Activist and consultant focused on advancing the sexual health and rights of LGBTQ+ persons. He is the former Executive Director of an LGBT-led and focused organization founded to promote the health and rights of sexual and gender minorities in Nigeria. He has over 10 years' experience working with the LGBTQ+ movement and community in Nigeria, especially in the areas of HIV interventions, research and advocacy.

His passion and drive are to continually advocate for an enabling society, address inequalities, patriarchy, stigma and discrimination and other human rights violations using a feminist approach; And will not stop until equal rights for all is achieved and same sex love is not a crime.

Aleeyah is a trans-lesbian rainbow scholar from Borno State. She is a mental health counselor who loves to Network. She is an advocate defending the rights of Trans persons in Northern Nigeria with the hope of eradicating stigma and discrimination as well as inequalities.

City Boy is a passionate health worker and human right activist who fights for the rights of marginalized persons as a paralegal officer. He is an indigene of Kano in Northern Nigeria. He has over 8 years of experience working with the LGBTQI+ community especially in the area of HIV intervention and Advocacy.

Zee is a lesbian, talk show, story teller, masseuse, and radical LGBTQI+ rights activist born in Kano state Nigeria. She is big on LGBTQI+ visibility and is working to break stereotypes in Nigeria through her strong advocacy for the rights of LGBTQI+ persons within and outside the region.

Echezonachukwu is a 26-year-old sexuality and human rights activist based in Kano, Nigeria. Echezona identifies

as an intersex, they were measured with the National Certificate of Education as a Linguist at a College of Education in Kano. They work with LGBTQI+ persons and other marginalized populations with focus on issues that affect people living with HIV such as ensuring proper access to health care services within an enabling environment for more equitable rights and social acceptance.

Siyama is based in Kano State, a community member who is self-reliant. She is also a nurse and a community health care worker. She is a human rights activist and also working as a gender & advocacy officer in a community based organization.

Paulie is a queer community member living in the northern part of Nigeria. Paulie is a media content creator and a volunteer working to promote the health and rights of marginalized/minority persons through a community based organization located in Northern Nigeria. Also, a quality analyst in one of the best and leading rice mills in the region. Paulie is hardworking , easy going, ready to learn and open to new things in life.

Dennis is a human rights activist from Nigeria who has worked for sixteen years in the nonprofit sector for many organizations, including Journalists Against AIDS,

Initiative for Equal Rights, and Population Council in northern Nigeria. He formerly worked at the AIDS Foundation of Chicago and co-founded the Chicago LGBT Asylum Support Program, or CLASP. Dennis received several bachelor's degrees and masters in Nigeria and abroad and upon his return to Nigeria, he started a PHD program in one of the Nigerian Universities. Dennis is currently the Deputy Executive Director for the Centre for Population Health Initiative (CPHI), a community health and research center in Lagos and Rivers, Nigeria.

Ruggedy is a stud and easy going person, she loves adventure and networking. She is a paralegal person who assists community members with legal issues as well as a business woman. She is passionate about her community and has their interest at heart.

Marie Pally is a humanitarian enthusiast with outstanding experience and innovative contribution to HIV Program, gender equality and SRHR across two geo-political zones in Nigeria. She is a queer sex worker with over 5 years' experience in implementing project for queer sex workers and passionate about her community. She seeks to develop and implement quality, cost effective and efficient health care programs especially in areas of infectious diseases, HIV Sexual and reproductive health services and rendering vulnerable women friendly services.

Enoch is a community member and health care service provider. He is from Kaduna State, Very hardworking and always open to helping the queer community especially those who are affected by harmful drug use in the North. He is currently working in an organization where he provides services to People who Inject Drugs (PWID) in Kaduna State.

Emeka Chinedu is a seasoned broadcaster and a social worker. He has over 15 years of media experience and also community work where he does field work in rural communities, surveys and researches. He is passionate about human rights issues, sensitizing the public about gender-based violence and addressing issues that affect the Queer community members.

Kenny is a lesbian who lives in Northern Nigeria. She advocates for womens' rights and is passionate about gender equality.

Marian is a writer, a radical feminist and activist junkie working at the intersections of Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights, LGBTQI+ rights, disability rights and sex workers' rights. She loves knowledge, very passionate about the community, and has worked in rural, remote and urban regions to support change initiatives. She loves building connections to learn from and with community members.

Muhammed Salisu was born in Kano. He is a human rights activist currently working in northern Nigeria. He is passionate about human rights issues, sensitizing the public about human rights and addressing issues that affect community members.

A is a nonbinary queer northerner; an aspiring TV writer with published works on global publications, exploring the themes of sex and sexuality, faith and spirituality, mental and emotional health and disability. Their drive is to expand human stories in the hope that it will help us be kinder to each other. When not reading, writing or communing with the spirits of their ancestors about the great reawakening that is upon us, you'll find them daydreaming about their next cup of Hibiscus tea. You can follow them on Twitter @PettyMuse for bants and giggles.





