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## **The Invisibility of LGBT in Nigeria**

### **Introduction**

Did you know that more than 96 percent of Nigerians perceive homosexuality as an indecent practice that should not be accepted by society? According to the research outcomes of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, which investigated the attitudes and acceptability of homosexuality in different countries, 96 percent of the Nigerian respondents voted against the adoption of homosexuality in the society (Mucherah et al. 254). The majority of Nigerians reject not only the practices of homosexuality but also discriminate against the LGBT people in society. To illustrate, LGBT persons include the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Currently, Nigerian state laws criminalize the practices of lesbianism and homosexuality. For that reason, the LGBT persons are heavily punished and penalized if convicted with homosexuality. Unlike in Australia where LGBT persons are protected by the law against discrimination and social prejudice, the LGBT persons in Nigeria conduct their sexual activities with the fear of being prosecuted by the law enforcement agencies and facing discrimination from the public. Why are the perceptions about LGBT persons different between Australia and Nigeria? This paper aims to investigate and discuss the perceptions and attitudes of people towards LGBT in Nigeria. In particular, the research paper would address the major factors that

shape people's thoughts about LGBT in Nigeria and explain the steps that can be taken to enable a more conducive environment for LGBT people in Nigeria.

### **Factors That Shape People's Thoughts about LGBT in Nigeria**

Certainly, the perceptions and attitudes of people toward LGBT in Nigeria are influenced by some specific factors, which govern the lifestyle of the majority of Nigerians and other African countries. Specifically, these factors include the social-cultural beliefs, religious beliefs, legal issues, and lastly the lack of sufficient exposure to diversity (Mucherah 255). The social-cultural beliefs include the norms adopted by people to instill morality in the society. As with the social-cultural beliefs, the research paper would discuss how the social-cultural beliefs of Nigerians influence their attitudes and perceptions toward LGBT. Secondly, the majority of Nigerians are religious and their religious beliefs have a great impact on their perceptions and attitudes toward LGBT. For that reason, the research paper would discuss in details how various religious beliefs of Nigerians shape their thoughts and attitudes about LGBT. Nigeria is governed by the state laws, which indicate what people should avoid and what practices people are permitted to perform freely without fear of conviction. Onuche argues that legal issues have a great influence in the realm of sexuality, especially in the matter in which people choose their sexuality (94). The research paper would discuss how the legal issues shape people's thought about LGBT. Finally, the research paper would the lack of exposure to diversity among most Nigerians affect their perceptions and attitudes toward LGBT.

### **Social-Cultural Beliefs**

Firstly, social-cultural beliefs are among the factors that have an immense impact on people's perception and attitudes toward LGBT because the majority of Nigerians still cling to

their ancient cultural beliefs that were passed to them by their ancestors. According to Onuche, one of the common cultural belief dictates that a man should marry a woman to build a home and bear children (91). In short, the cultural beliefs endorsed heterosexual relationships, as opposed to homosexual relationships. For that reason, the Nigerians who still adhere to their social-cultural beliefs perceive LGBT as going against nature. According to the lifestyle of the majority of Nigerians, the Nigerians have experienced people of different sex marrying each other and bearing children together. For that reason, people wonder how the same-sex marriage can enable a couple to bear children just as they observed couples of different sex bearing children together (Onuche 91). Therefore, most people perceive LGBT as an indecent practice because the relationships are unfruitful, two lesbians cannot bear children together the same way two gays cannot do the same. As such, social-cultural beliefs play a significant role in shaping people's perceptions toward LGBT.

Furthermore, the social-cultural beliefs of most African countries including Nigeria encouraged bearing of numerous children per family unit. In other words, a couple involving a man and a woman was expected by the culture to bear as many children as possible in the attempt to make a certain tribe dominant as a result of having a large population (Onuche 92). Onuche argues that most cultures in Nigeria necessitate the people to bear many children to ensure the continuity of the lineage (92). For that reason, people that practice these cultures perceive the practices of LGBT as unnatural offenses that have the potential to cut their generations short because people would be unable to bear children when they adopt LGBT (Onuche 93). Regretfully, people consider the LGBT people as social deviants who deserve no respect and position in the society. According to most cultures in Nigeria, people that observe cultural practices keenly have the potential to become elders in their lifetime. However, LGBT

people are less likely to become elders or acquire a position in the society because the society considers them as social deviants. In short, the culture plays part in determining who is eligible for a certain position in the society. Hence, the culture would restrict people from electing LGBT people into managerial positions simply because of their sexual position and preferences.

In Nigeria, LGBT is not only criminalized by the government but also by the family units. Indeed, parents are committed to ensuring that their children do not engage in LGBT practices. Parents denounce LGBT practices as they give their children some pieces of advice. Some parents go to the extent of demanding the teachers to watch over their children at schools to prevent the acquisition of these strange and deviant behaviors. The majority of these parents are guided by the social-cultural beliefs that pressurize them to bring their children up in the manners acceptable by the society (Onuche 93). Regretfully, in most cases, the society blames the parents if their children indulge in LGBT practices. For that reason, the societal forces that require parents to bring their children up with morals are also factors that influence the perception of parents toward LGBT. Children that involve themselves in LGBT practices risk from being disowned in their families because most families regard LGBT as the immorality of the highest order. Some cultures necessitate the parents to deny their children the inheritance if they violate morality including participating in LGBT practices. Therefore, most social-cultural beliefs in Nigeria are serious in eradicating the LGBT practices through the provision of immense punishments including physical assault, denial of inheritance and dismissal of the LGBT person from the society.

### **Religious Beliefs**

The major religious affiliations in Nigeria that include Muslim and Christianity have an immense influence on people's perception toward LGBT. The north part of Nigeria consists of

the Hausa ethnic group, which is mostly Muslim. The western part of Nigeria, which contains the Yoruba tribe consists of mainly Christians, Muslims and some other traditional religion followers. Moreover, the southern part of Nigeria is occupied by Christians. In short, the majority of people in Nigeria are religious. For that reason, religious beliefs play a major role in shaping the perceptions of people toward LGBT. The Christians use the holy book called Bible that teaches them that the first man on earth was involved in an intimate relationship with a woman of opposite sex as directed by God. The same holy book prohibits Christians from engaging in homosexual relationships including homosexuality and lesbianism. The teachings in the Christian's holy book have a great influence on their attitudes toward LGBT. Firstly, the Christians perceive LGBT as a sin, which makes most Christians reject and avoid the LGBT practices. According to Christians, any practice prohibited by the holy book is a sin. Therefore, the LGBT practices are sins because they are denounced in the holy book. For that reason, Christians in Nigeria are committed to denouncing gay marriages and any other marriage involving people of the same sex.

Secondly, Christians perceive LGBT practices as going against the order of nature. Christians argue that there would be no point of God creating people of different sexes if God's intention was to allow people of the same sex to marry each other. Thus, Christians respect the ideology that God created people of different sexes to form relationships and bear children together and populate the earth. Christians also perceive LGBT practices as an erosion of morals. Indeed, church leaders and followers are required by the Christianity doctrines to refrain themselves from the LGBT practices because they are immoral and against the will of God. For instance, church leaders that are discovered to participate in LGBT practices are expelled from the church and demoted from their leadership positions. In such cases, the Christians say that

they have demoted a certain church leader because of failing to set a good example to the fellow Christians. In short, it is difficult for an LGBT person to become a church leader in Nigeria because Christianity doctrines perceive LGBT as ungodly practices.

Just like Christians, Muslims also have religious beliefs that influence their perceptions and attitudes toward LGBT. Indeed, the Islamic teachings prohibit homosexuality because the Muslims holy book, Koran, denounces sodomy by giving a story of a man called Lot and the consequent destruction of the city of Sodom. Hence, most Muslims perceive LGBT is a violation of the Islamic teachings (Onuche 97). For that reason, most Muslims avoid LGBT practices because they want to uphold the Islamic teachings. Some specific northern states of Nigeria including Borno, Kaduna, Sokoto, Kano, Bauchi, Yobe and Gombe amongst other have adopted Sharia criminal laws, which are utilized in prosecuting and convicting the LGBT people (Onuche 96). In some states including Kano, Gombe, Zamfara and Jigawa, the offenders of LGBT practices are punished with imprisonment and caning. The major perceptions about LGBT imparted to the Muslims by their religious beliefs include the violation of the Islamic teachings and gross indecency to the public.

### **Legal Issues**

As stated previously in this research paper, LGBT practices are criminalized by the state laws in Nigeria. The fact that LGBT practices are criminalized in Nigeria not only makes Nigerians perceive the LGBT practices as illegal practices but also perceive them as obnoxious practices (Onuche 94). Therefore, the illegalization of LGBT practices influences people thoughts about LGBT and convince them that these practices are unpleasant for the citizens. Most people might be asking themselves the reasons as to why LGBT practices were criminalized in Nigeria if they were indeed good for the people. Regretfully, most people are

inclined to believe that the LGBT practices were criminalized and illegalized because they are threats to the lifestyles of the Nigerians. According to the criminal codes in the southern states of Nigeria, the offenders of homosexuality are entitled to a punishment of not less than fourteen years of imprisonment (Onuche 94). For that reason, parents are committed to watching over their children to prevent them from engaging in LGBT practices to avoid imprisonment. Therefore, the provision of harsh punishment against the LGBT people by the Nigerian laws has contributed to change in perceptions of people toward LGBT because most people are discouraging their loved ones from being LGBT persons to avoid imprisonment if convicted with LGBT crimes.

### **Lack of Exposure to Diversity**

Sincerely, some of the negative perceptions and attitudes of people toward LGBT in Nigeria are influenced by lack of sufficient exposure to diversity. A research study conducted in Barcelona exhibited that people who had LGBT friends have low homophobia that people who hardly have LGBT friends or exposure to friends that practice LGBT activities (Mucherah et al. 255). The research study also revealed that people who have gay or lesbian friends have positive attitudes and perceptions toward LGBT. The same situation applies to Nigerian people because they lack exposure to a social diversity where they can interact with LGBT people and listen to their rationale for adopting LGBT practices. For instance, teachers in African countries including Nigerian hardly teach students about homosexuality, especially when giving sexuality education (Mucherah et al. 257). Mucherah et al. argue that most teachers focus on heterosexual topics, as opposed to homosexual topics (257). However, most teachers teach their students about LGBT practices and homosexual topics only in the contexts of sexually transmitted diseases and when warning the students against risky sexual behaviors. Teaching homosexual topics in bad contexts

only including during HIV/AIDs awareness campaigns has the potential to change and influence people's perception and thoughts about LGBT, making them develop negative attitudes toward LGBT practices.

Unlike in Australia where people have a deep understanding of homosexuality and vast exposure to diversity, people in Nigeria still lack a thorough comprehension of the construct of homosexuality because they are not exposed to diversity. In Australia, the exposure of most people to diversity has assisted them in shaping its perception and attitude towards LGBT (Mucherah et al. 256). As a result, LGBT people in Australia are protected by the laws and nobody can discriminate against them on the basis of sexuality. The fact that most schools in African countries including Nigeria are based on religious doctrines including Catholic and Islamic schools makes it difficult for the students to experience the diversity because most of these schools enroll religious students only (Mucherah et al. 257). Furthermore, teachers in religious schools are discouraged from teaching homosexual topics because the school wants the students to acquire knowledge about heterosexual topics only. Additionally, teachers are influenced by their religious and social-cultural beliefs to teach students about heterosexual topics while neglecting homosexual topics, exposing the students to a great deal of heterosexual information but very little information about homosexual information.

### **How to Create a More Conducive Environment for LGBT People in Nigeria**

Although a great number of people advocates against the adoption of LGBT practices in Nigeria, there are two ways in which the government of Nigeria can create a more conducive environment for LGBT people. The first way is amending the law to legalize the LGBT practices and to give LGBT people the rights that protect them against discrimination and social prejudice. Secondly, the government of Nigeria through the ministry of education should incorporate



homosexual topics in the sexuality education to revamp the exposure of students to various social and sexual diversities. By so doing, the perceptions and attitudes of people toward LGBT practices would change tremendously, creating a more conducive environment for LGBT people.

Firstly, the most efficient way to create a conducive environment for LGBT people in Nigeria is through the intervention of the government to legalize the LGBT practices and outline LGBT and intersex rights. According to Kenny et al., Australia is one of the states where LGBT people enjoy their rights to the fullest without discrimination and prejudice. Since Australia legalized same-sex marriage in 2017, LGBT people in Australia started enjoying their sexual preferences without social prejudice. The same action can be taken in Nigeria to end the ever-growing prejudice and discrimination against LGBT people. The government of Nigeria can change the perception of people toward LGBT in various ways by decriminalizing LGBT. Kenny et al. argue that legalizing homosexuality changes the perceptions of people toward it. For instance, most people would stop discouraging their loved ones from engaging in LGBT practices for fear of seeing them imprisoned for being LGBT people. Hence, people would be responsible for themselves and choose whether to participate in LGBT practices or not, without being influenced by relatives and friends.

Besides decriminalizing LGBT in Nigeria, the Nigerian government should provide LGBT people with discrimination protections. Although the Australian government did not exhaustively outlaw discriminations and prejudices based on sexual orientation, its attempt in developing LGBT and intersex rights assisted most people in avoiding discrimination in their occupations and workplaces (Kenny et al.). The government of Nigeria should adopt the same initiative as the Australian government and put in place strict laws that protect LGBT people from prejudices. However, the government of Nigeria should provide religious exemptions to the

religious educational institutions to allow them to discriminate against LGBT teachers and students, in good faith, to avoid compromising the religious expectations of those specific institutions. Consequently, the government of Nigerian should be committed to convicting people that discriminate against the others on the basis of sexual orientation except those exempted by the law. The provision of discrimination protections by the law would not only strengthen LGBT activism but also eliminate discrimination and prejudices of people against LGBT people in Nigeria.

Additionally, the government can create a more conducive environment for LGBT people in Nigeria by exposing people to various cultural and sexual diversity. The most effective way to accomplish this tasks is through incorporating homosexual topics in sexuality education. As indicated previously in this research paper, most schools in Nigeria focus on teaching heterosexual topics in sexual education. Indeed, most schools address homosexual topics in rare contexts, especially when discussing sexually transmitted diseases. As a result, students grow with little knowledge about homosexual topics and with negative attitudes about the same because these topics are usually linked to risky sexual behaviors. The initiative of the government to introduce homosexual topics in sexuality education would not aim at encouraging the students to adopt LGBT practices but to provide the students with the required exposure to diversity that would enable them to select their sexual preferences appropriately.

Fundamentally, incorporating homosexual topics in sexuality education would not only assist people in getting exposed to diversity but also learn to respect the choices and preferences of other people (Jones 149). The cases of discrimination against LGBT people would drop drastically if people learn to respect the sexual orientations of other people. Moreover, exposure to diversity would play a significant role in eroding traditional social-cultural practices that

encourage people to discriminate and disown LGBT people. As a result, LGBT people would enjoy a conducive environment in Nigeria that is free from discriminations and prejudices.

### **Why Universalizing View Can be Better for LGBT Activism in Nigeria**

In Sedgwick's article, *Epistemology of the Closet*, there are two views that guide one's sexual identity, which include the minoritizing and universalizing views. According to Sedgwick, the minoritizing view dictates that specific individuals were born as gay and only people born with deviant characteristics are interested in them (9). This is not a good view of LGBT activism in Nigeria because it states that only people born to be gays can be involved in gay activities. Additionally, only individuals with deviant traits are interested in forming sexual relationships with the gays. However, the universalizing view is a better approach to LGBT activism in Nigeria because it states that homosexuality is vital to individuals with various forms of sexualities. Essentially, the universalizing view narrates that nobody has a stable erotic identity (Sedgwick 9). Secondly, Sedgwick argues that the universalizing view clarifies that although not every person is bisexual in physical behaviors, everyone to some extent is bisexual in either their character or psychologically (10). Unlike the minoritizing view, the universalizing view is factual and can be utilized by LGBT activists to advocate for LGBT in Nigeria.

### **The Response of Activists to LGBT in Nigeria**

In 2017, LGBT activists in Nigeria has a reason to smile because a survey conducted in the same year revealed a 7 percent upsurge in the acceptability of LGBT among the people of Nigeria compared to a previous survey conducted in 2015 (Nwaubani). Nwaubani argues that there was a remarkable increase in the percent of respondents that accepted LGBT people to acquire equal access to the essential public services including education, healthcare and housing.

The surveys aiming at accessing the acceptability of LGBT among people in Nigeria are some of the activities that show the dedication of LGBT activists toward the advocacy of LGBT practices. Additionally, LGBT activists are committed to ensuring that LGBT people are not discriminated on basis of their sexual orientation. In particular, the activists are ensuring that LGBT people acquire public services including housing, education and healthcare just like other heterosexual people. The activists have collaborated with other non-governmental organizations such as The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERS) in a bid to protect LGBT people and other people of sexual minorities against social prejudice (Nwaubani). Lastly, Nwaubani states that most LGBT activists are providing training to people in the attempt to change their negative perceptions and attitudes toward LGBT practices.



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