

Examination of LGBT people's lived experiences and public perceptions of sexual and gender minorities in Rwanda





The 2003 Constitution of Rwanda (revised in 2015) provides for the protection of all citizens against discrimination based on any form of difference. Article 16 of the Constitution indicates that all Rwandans are born and remain equal in terms of rights and freedoms and should not be subjected to any kind of discrimination.

This policy brief summarizes evidence from a study conducted in Rwanda by the Health Development Initiative (HDI) Rwanda and the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC). The study's aim was to understand the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, as well as the public's perception of LGBT issues. It explored the current situation for LGBT people in terms of factors contributing to, and the nature and forms of social exclusion. Specific aspects examined in the study included daily experiences of stigma, discrimination, human rights abuses, the well-being of and legal framework for LGBT people.

The study used a concurrent, equal status, mixed-methods approach consisting of a quantitative survey of 499 and 1,243 respondents for the lived experiences and public perceptions surveys respectively. The study team also conducted six focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 59 participants as well as 16 key informant interviews.

Key Findings

Experiences of discrimination

- About two-thirds of survey participants had experienced at least one form of discrimination. Respondents reported that this occurred most often when they participated in religious (44.9%) or cultural events (41.7%) and when looking for (or in) housing (30%).

Table 1: Areas where respondents experienced discrimination

Areas where respondents experienced discrimination	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Never experienced discrimination	162	32.5
Housing	152	30.5
Safety and security	119	23.8
Education	118	23
Healthcare access	113	22.6
Employment	101	20.2
Social protection	87	17.4
When participating in cultural events	182	41.7
When expressing religious beliefs	224	44.9
Others	34	6.8



Frequency of experiences with discrimination by sexual and gender identity

- While qualitative data showed that transgender people and gay men experienced more discrimination than lesbian women, quantitative data revealed that discrimination was experienced more frequently by transgender (70%), lesbian (67.5%), and gay (56%) people. See Figure 1.

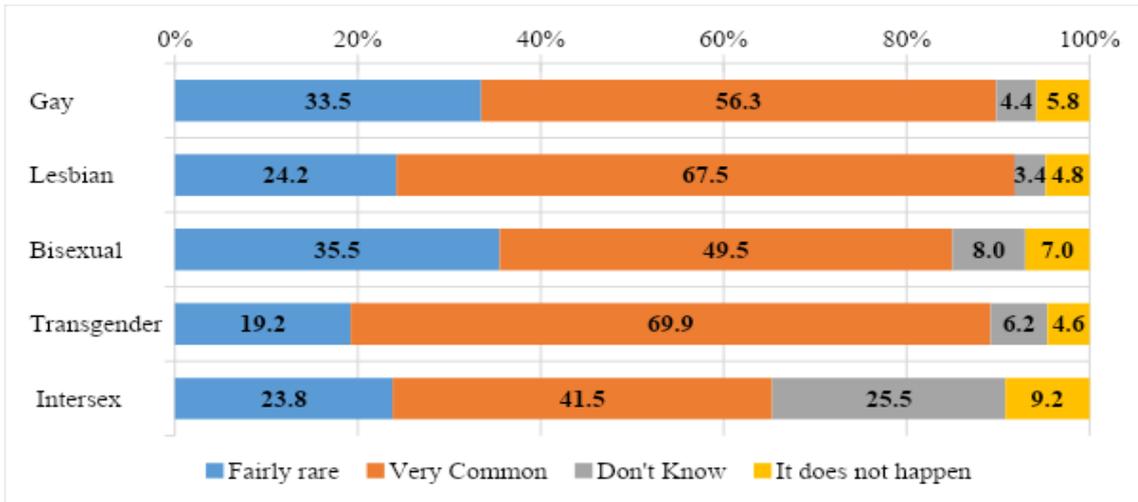


Figure 1: Frequency with which respondents experience discrimination by sexual orientation

Challenges in accessing basic services

- Close to two in every three respondents had experienced psychological abuse, while one in every ten respondents had experienced physical abuse.
Common forms of psychological abuse included being called negative names, being taunted and subjected to isolation, as well as being associated with the devil.

Experiences of domestic abuse

“They call us cursed, rejected, crazy, demons; mentally ill ... they say we are cursed by Satan” FGD participant - Kigali

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Mental health (depressive symptoms) and drug use

- All of the 499 participants reported experiencing mental health issues with approximately a quarter (24%) of them reporting moderate to severe depressive symptoms (Figure 2) on the PHQ-9 self-rating scale.

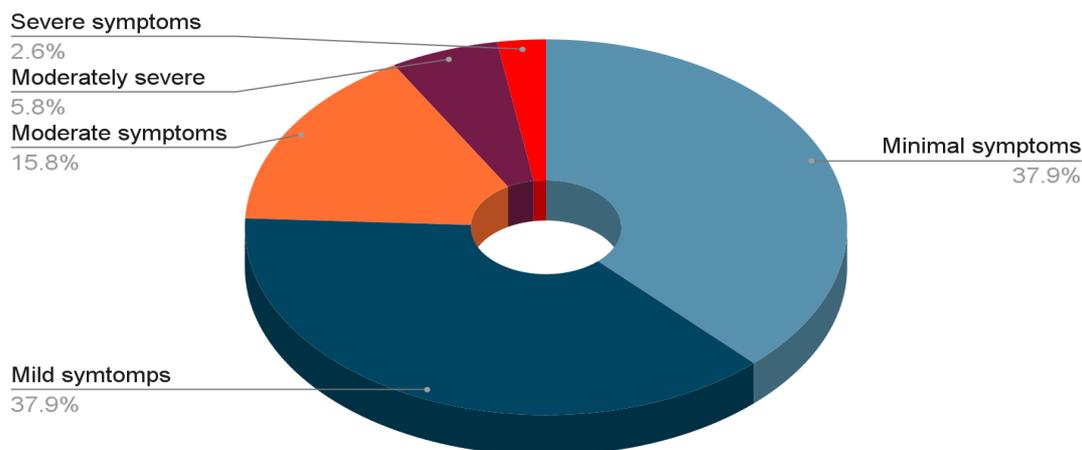


Figure 2: Participants with depressive symptoms in the past two weeks

Awareness of LGBT rights, freedoms, and available support systems

- A minority (13%) of LGBT respondents confirmed knowledge of their rights and freedom in the context of Rwanda’s legal framework.

Awareness of human rights and laws concerning LGBT Rwandans

- Knowledge on human rights encompasses the key values of dignity and respect for all people in society. The majority of participants surveyed (71%) were not aware of human rights issues concerning LGBT individuals. Only about 29% confirmed awareness of human rights protections for the LGBT community. In addition, 86% of the participants were not aware of laws protecting LGBT individuals in Rwanda.

State attitudes

- Majority of respondents thought that the LGBT community should not be accepted in either the community (62%) or the country (56%). About half of them (48%) stated that LGBT individuals are feared in the community

Self-reported actions against members of the LGBT community

- More than half of the study participants reported holding a negative attitude towards LGBT individuals. While one in four participants reported not having attempted to take any action against LGBT individuals, the same participants stated that they would do anything to harm an LGBT person. Conversely, close to half (47%) of the respondents reported that they had not and would not avoid someone because of their being LGBT. Only 17% affirmed that they had avoided someone in the 12 months preceding the survey because of that person being LGBT while 21% of the respondents stated that they had used derogatory names to refer to someone because that person was LGBT. Three percent of the respondents reported that they had physically harmed an LGBT individual in the 12 months preceding the survey (Table 2).



Table 2: General feelings and attitudes towards LGBT+ individuals

Self-reported actions	Have done it in the past year Number (%)	Have not done it, but might do it Number (%)	Have not and would not do it Number (%)	I don't know what I would do Number (%)
a. Avoided someone because they are LGBT	216 (17.2)	331 (26.4)	588 (46.9)	119 (9.5)
b. Teased someone who dressed up and acted like someone of the opposite sex	229 (18.3)	236 (18.8)	678 (54.1)	111 (8.9)
c. Used a derogatory name to refer to someone who is LGBT	257 (20.5)	201 (16)	692 (55.2)	104 (8.3)
d. Beat/physically injured someone because they are LGBT	37 (3)	144 (11.5)	918 (73.2)	155 (12.4)
e. Refused to hire or work with someone because they are LGBT	54 (4.3)	300 (23.9)	721 (57.5)	179 (14.3)

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings in this report present a startling portrait of the stigma and discrimination that LGBT people in Rwanda experience and must navigate to live their lives. We found that there is extreme indifference and hostility towards LGBT people, communities and their rights in Rwanda. Findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data show that the Rwandan society does not accept members of the LGBT community.

The marginalization of LGBT people in Rwanda negatively influences their abilities to access and utilize basic services including housing and employment, or even simply going to a coffee shop. Moreover, this discrimination may also negatively affect the mental health of LGBT people as many of those interviewed described issues of anxiety, depression, social isolation and the need to conceal their identity as LGBT.

While LGBT Rwandans face considerable hostility, a minority of the population believe that LGBT people should have access to the same rights and protections as non-LGBT people. These allies could be instrumental in safeguarding the full human rights and dignity of LGBT people in Rwanda.

However, despite progressive laws and policies assented to by the state, its silence could facilitate the social exclusion of LGBT people in Rwanda. The findings provide important insights into important factors contributing to the social exclusion of LGBT people in Rwanda. We provide recommendations based on the socio-ecological model which incorporates an individual's environment, interpersonal relations with family and peers, community/societal relations (e.g., in school or the workplace), as well as national laws and policies.



We recommend that:

1. The government and civil society partners should conduct awareness campaigns among LGBT people to ensure that they know their human rights and the legal protections available to them.
2. The government and civil society partners should implement programs and campaigns that raise societal awareness about the LGBT community and which foster acceptance of gender and sexual diversity. One avenue to raise awareness may be through community dialogues that bring together LGBT and non-LGBT people for open discussions. In implementing such programs, it is important to identify strategies that frame LGBT people's rights in ways that will resonate with the local communities.
3. The government should enact and implement comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation and policies that address all forms of direct and indirect discrimination including sexual orientation and gender identity. This should be supplemented with capacity strengthening of law enforcement officials to implement and monitor these laws and policies in an accountable manner.





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