



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



BACKGROUND

Despite the existence of laws and policies that protect human rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) experience social exclusion that constrains their well-being and full participation in society. Rwanda is one of the few sub-Saharan African countries that has assented to international conventions and continental frameworks that protect the human rights of LGBT people. In 2010, the country was the only East African nation that supported the resolution by the United Nations (UN) Economic and Social Council to grant consultative status to the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. In 2012, Rwanda was one of the 57 signatory states of the UN Declaration on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, and one of the six African countries to sign the UN Report on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. Regionally, Rwanda is among 10 countries in SSA that have never enacted any legislation criminalizing homosexuality. Domestically, the country's constitution and human rights provisions guarantee and protect the freedoms and privacy of all of its citizens, including LGBT individuals.

Although Rwanda has made laudable progress in forming a policy environment that affirms the rights of LGBT people to live openly, freely, and safely, LGBT individuals continue to face stigma, discrimination, and various other human rights violations. For example, rigid religious conceptualizations of culture influence public opinion and have consequently led to the perpetuation of human rights abuses against Rwandans who are LGBT and sex workers. The media has also voiced strong rhetoric against the LGBT lifestyle and individuals, likening them to people devoid of moral virtue. The effect of this is the incitement of violence and discriminatory rhetoric against LGBT individuals. Individuals who identify as being LGBT face arbitrary detentions and have their rights denied due to their sexual orientation.

¹Nawamse S. Protecting the human rights of sexual minorities in contemporary Africa. Protecting the rights of sexual minorities in contemporary Africa. 2017. 207 p.

²Iradukunda I, Odoyo R. Landscape Analysis of the Human Rights Situation of LGTI People and Sex Workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. UHAI EASHRI; 2016.

³Iradukunda I, Odoyo R. Landscape Analysis of the Human Rights Situation of LGTI People and Sex Workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. UHAI EASHRI; 2016.

⁴(CJCR) CJECDR. Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda [Internet]. Kigali; 2009. Available from: https://web.archive.org/web/20090325021301/http://www.cjcr.gov.rw/eng/constitution_eng.doc

⁵Iradukunda I, Odoyo R. Landscape Analysis of the Human Rights Situation of LGTI People and Sex Workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. UHAI EASHRI; 2016.

⁶Government of Rwanda. Rwanda's Constitution of 2003 with Amendments through 2015. Const Proj [Internet]. 2017;143(5):1-9. Available from: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda_2010.pdf

⁷Gay Rwanda 2008 [Internet]. [cited 2020 Aug 24]. Available from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120717064516/http://www.globalgayz.com/africa/rwanda/gay-rwanda-2008/>

⁸Government of Rwanda. Rwanda's Constitution of 2003 with Amendments through 2015. Const Proj [Internet]. 2017;143(5):1-9. Available from: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda_2010.pdf

⁹Outrightinternational. Rwanda: Situation Update - The Treatment of LGBT Individuals in Rwandan Law and Society | OutRight Action International [Internet]. outrightinternational.org. 2007 [cited 2020 Aug 24]. Available from: <https://outrightinternational.org/content/rwanda-situation-update-treatment-lgbt-individuals-rwandan-law-and-society>

¹⁰Outrightinternational. Rwanda: Situation Update - The Treatment of LGBT Individuals in Rwandan Law and Society | OutRight Action International [Internet]. outrightinternational.org. 2007 [cited 2020 Aug 24]. Available from: <https://outrightinternational.org/content/rwanda-situation-update-treatment-lgbt-individuals-rwandan-law-and-society>

¹¹The Rights of LGBTI People in Rwanda General situation of LGBTI people. 2014



Insufficient attention has been paid to the challenges faced by the LGBT community. , The few studies conducted primarily focus on HIV and men who have sex with men. Most studies are based on qualitative data that lack in-depth insights into specificities of the lived experience of LGBT people in Rwanda. ,

To gain more insights into the situation for LGBT people in Rwanda, the Health Development Initiative (HDI) Rwanda and the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) implemented a mixed methods study to understand the lived experiences of LGBT people and the general public's perceptions of LGBT issues. We 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.

OBJECTIVES

The main aim of the study was to generate evidence to support advocacy for policies, practices, and behavior that protect and promote the rights of LGBT people. The specific objectives were to:

1. Examine LGBT people's experiences with policies and public discourse on sexual minorities' issues;
2. Explore LGBT people's social, educational, security, and economic experiences, and the implications of these experiences on their mental health;
3. Assess LGBT people's access to social welfare and comprehensive healthcare including mental health;
4. Explore LGBT people's experiences of managing sexual identities;
5. Capture the impact of COVID-19 and related response measures on the LGBT community;
6. Assess the general community's knowledge and perceptions on the rights and acceptability of LGBT people.

METHODS

We conducted a concurrent, equal status, mixed-methods study 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 and 16 key informant interviews. Table 1 provides a summary of the categories of the respondents.

¹²Gomes G. Decriminalising homosexuality in Africa : lessons from the South African experience. In: Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity [Internet]. 2013 [cited 2020 Aug 23]. p. 313-37. Available from: <https://core.ac.uk/reader/13120162>

¹³Boyd L. O problema da liberdade: Homossexualidade e direitos humanos no Uganda. *Anthropol Q* [Internet]. 2013 [cited 2020 Aug 23];86(3):697-724. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265769981_The_Problem_with_Freedom_Homosexuality_and_Human_Rights_in_Uganda/stats

¹⁴Schwartz SR, Nowak RG, Orazulike I, Keshinro B, Ake J, Kennedy S, et al. The immediate effect of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act on stigma, discrimination, and engagement on HIV prevention and treatment services in men who have sex with men in Nigeria: Analysis of prospective data from the TRUST cohort. *Lancet HIV*. 2015 Jul 1;2(7):e299-306

¹⁵Arimoro AE. When Love is a Crime: Is the Criminalisation of Same Sex Relations in Nigeria a Protection of Nigerian Culture? *Liverp Law Rev*. 2018 Oct 1;39(3):221-38.



FINDINGS

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%) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Areas where respondents experienced discrimination

Where discrimination is experienced	Frequency	Percent (%)
When expressing religious beliefs	224	44.9
When participating in cultural events	182	41.7
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
Others	34	6.8





Sources of discrimination against LGBT people

Most discrimination originates from individuals (85%). Participants indicated lower levels of discrimination emanating from public institutions (23%) and NGOs and private institutions (19%) as seen in Figure 1.

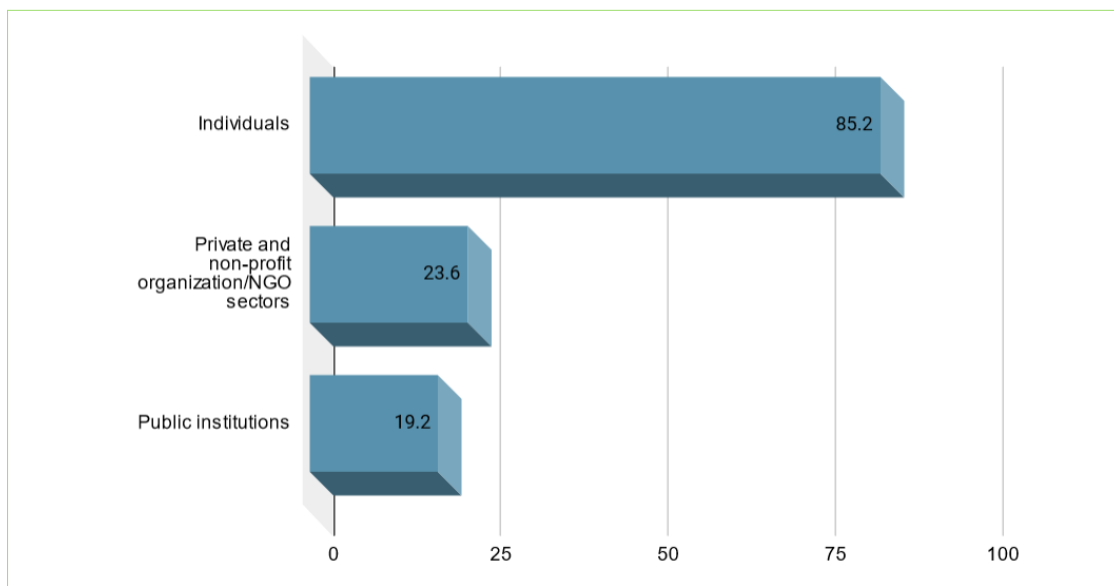


Figure 1: Discrimination emanates from public institutions, private and non-profit organizations/NGO sectors, individuals





Challenges in accessing basic services

More than half of the participants reported that they had experienced challenges while accessing food services (64.1%). Approximately half of the survey participants experienced challenges while accessing social services (54.3%), health services (47.3%) and financial services (42.9%) as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Challenges experienced by participants in accessing services and factors hindering access to health services

Services with access challenges	Frequency	Percent (%)
Food services	320	64.1
Social services	271	54.3
Health services	236	47.3
Financial services	214	42.9
Other services	62	12.4
Factors implicated in healthcare access		
Money for treatment	313	62.7
Distance to facility	230	46.1
Transport availability	247	49.5
Concerns about treatment by healthcare provider	262	52.5
Concerns about availability of healthcare provider	172	34.5
Concerns about availability of drugs/medicines	179	35.9
Other concerns	27	5.4

Members of the LGBT community fear seeking care especially when they acquire sexually transmitted diseases as one participant explained during a focus group discussion:

“Also, we face consequences of sexually transmitted diseases because some hospitals cannot deal with us. Personally, the issue that I would like to prioritize is that when you get a problem such as a sexually transmitted infection and you go to the hospital, they will treat you as if you are crazy and give you service after making you wait for everyone to go home.” FGD participant - Nyanza

Experiences of domestic abuse

The findings show that close to two in every three respondents has experienced psychological abuse, while one in every ten respondents has experienced physical abuse.

In terms of psychological abuse, focus group discussion participants mentioned being called negative names, taunted and being subjected to isolation from others, as well as being associated with the devil. One respondent stated:



"They call us cursed, rejected, crazy, demons, mentally ill ... They say we are cursed by satan." FGD participant - Kigali.

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 on the PHQ-9 self-rating scale.

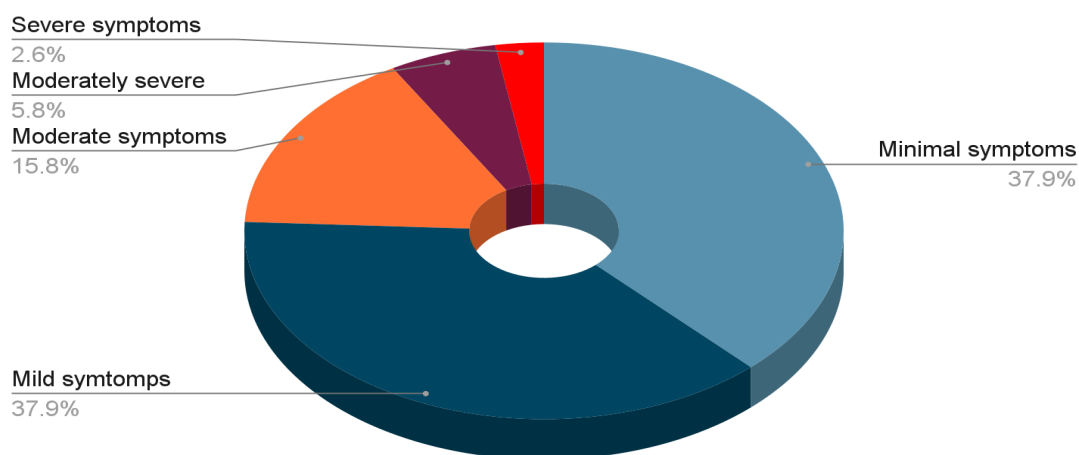


Figure 2: Participants with depressive symptoms in the past two weeks

Qualitative data confirms mental health issues among LGBT people, some of whom turn to drug abuse as a reprieve from psychological abuse:

"The things they say about us destroy us. And this leads to unplanned drug abuse. We use weed as a way to help us forget about it all." EB, 22 year-old Bisexual man, FGD - Gasabo

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

Overall, 61% of respondents reported difficulty in accessing basic services during lockdowns and 89% reported negative effects on their income while 82% were in support of the COVID-19 containment measures (Figure 3).

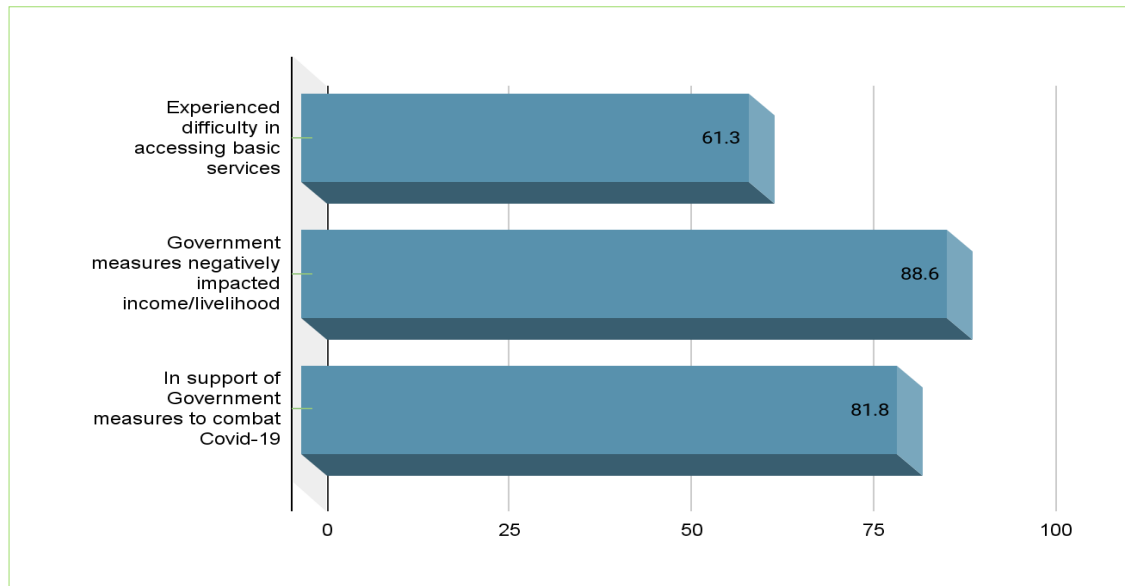


Figure 3: Effects of government COVID-19-related measures

Awareness of LGBT rights, freedoms, and available support systems

A minority (13%) of LGBT respondents confirmed knowledge of their rights and freedoms. On further exploration, qualitative interview respondents revealed that this understanding is in line with laws that generally protect all Rwandan citizens, as one participant clarified:

"... but in general there are laws that support all citizens alike. We are also included." JU, 20 year-old student, bisexual, Nyanza FGD

The rest stated that they were not aware of any laws and policies in Rwanda that support LGBT people in the country.

"No, I don't know any." GT, 33 year-old chef, bisexual, Kigali city.

The different sexual identity groups had varied levels of understanding on knowledge of available support systems. Table 4 shows that 57.7% of gay people and 56.1% of lesbians indicated their awareness of available support systems while 53.7% of bisexual and 52.7% transgender people reported knowledge of the same.



Table 3 : Participant's knowledge of government programs or support organizations against discrimination

Knowledge of support organizations for:	Frequency	%
Lesbian	280	56.1
Gays	288	57.7
Bisexual	268	53.7
Transgender	263	52.7
Intersex	222	44.5
Government programs/awareness campaigns against:		
Lesbian/Gays	223	44.7
Transgender	203	40.7
Intersex	172	34.5
Minority groups	179	35.9
Sexual discrimination	271	54.3

Public perceptions survey

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 (Figure 4). In addition, 86% of the participants were not aware of laws protecting LGBT individuals in Rwanda (Figure 5).

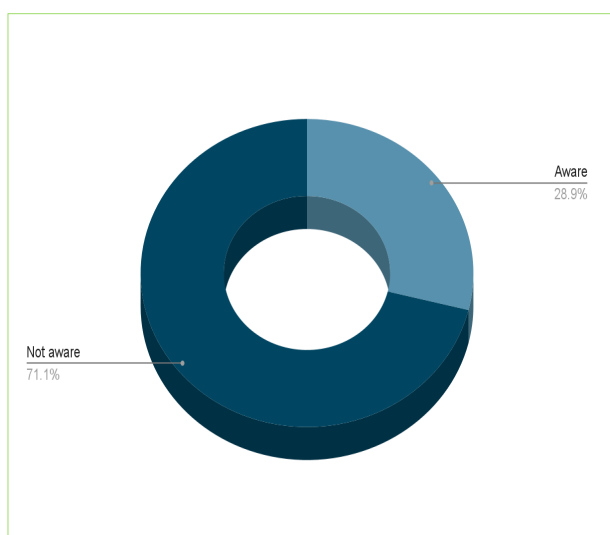


Figure 4: Awareness of the human rights issues concerning LGBT individuals in Rwanda

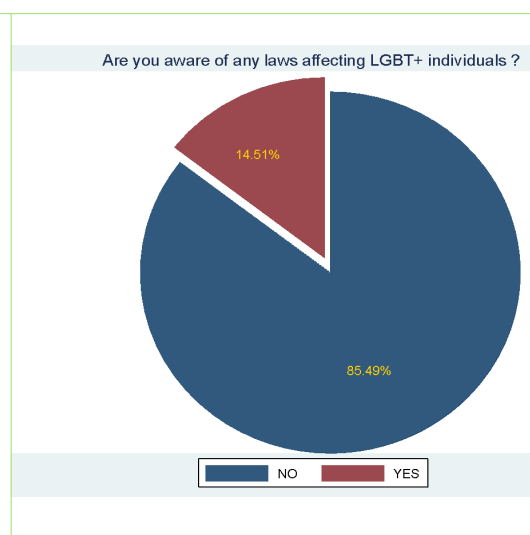


Figure 5: Awareness of the laws affecting LGBT individuals in Rwanda

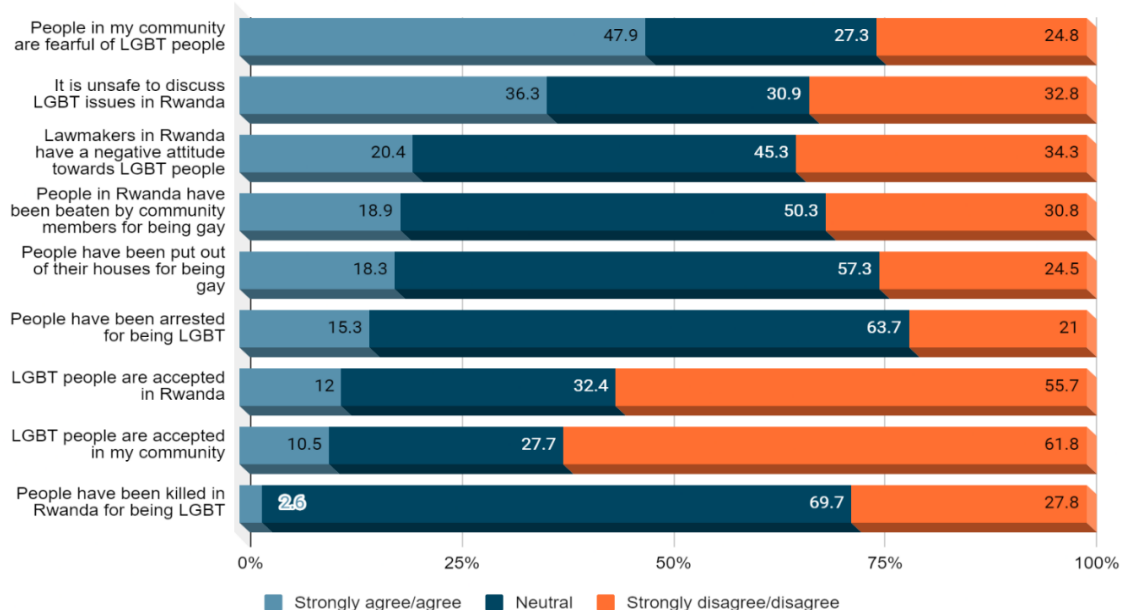


Figure 6: State/Community reactions to LGBT individuals

Feelings and attitudes towards LGBT individuals

More than half of the participants had negative attitudes towards LGBT individuals. About three in four (74%) of the respondents indicated that the sexual acts or gender expressions of LGBT individuals went against God's intentions while almost half (49%) were of the opinion that LGBT individuals are unnatural. Over 50% believed that homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism are a result of too much freedom and liberty (Figure 6).



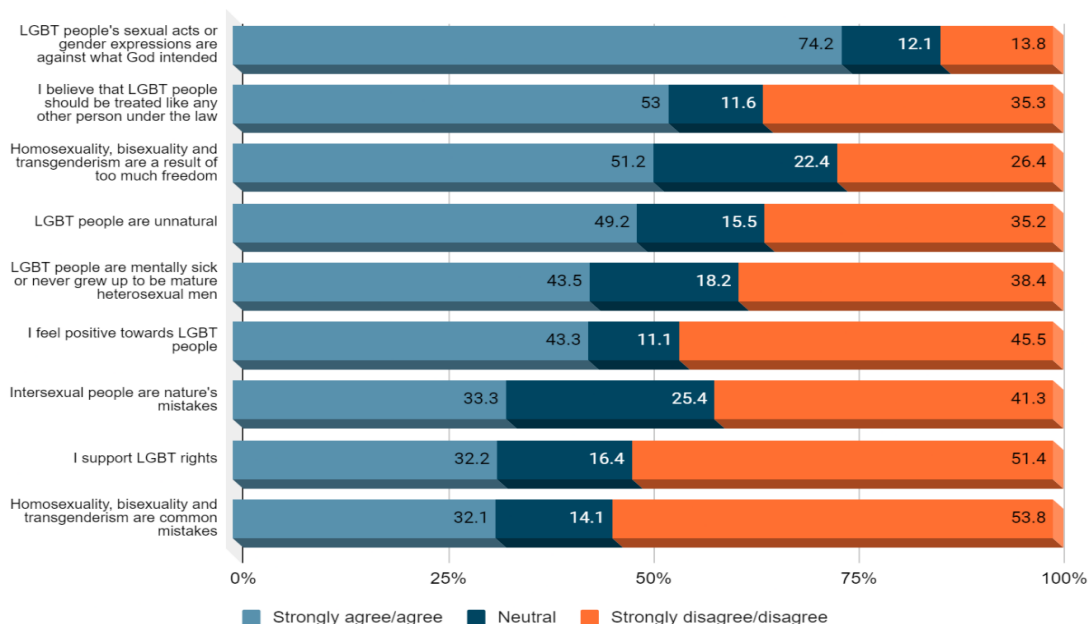


Figure 7: General feelings and attitudes towards LGBT individuals

Participants Self-reported actions against the LGBT

More than half of the participants reported holding a negative attitude towards LGBT individuals. While one in four participants reported not having attempted 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.

"For example, if it was me meeting them in private, I would beat them or shout and say that I have caught a thief so that the police would take them away. These people live like criminals, they cannot report me anywhere." KII, 32 years-old, hospitality business, Kigali.

**Table 4:** (Participants) Self-reported actions against the LGBT

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

The findings in this report present a startling portrait of the stigma and discrimination that LGBT people in Rwanda experience and must navigate to simply live their lives. We found that there is extreme indifference or 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 LGBT people.

The marginalization of LGBT people in Rwanda negatively influences their ability to access and utilize basic services, including housing and employment or even simply going to a coffee shop. Moreover, this discrimination may also negatively impact 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 believes that LGBT people should have access to the same rights and protection as non-LGBT people. Working with people and organizations who already have this belief could be a starting point towards safeguarding the human rights and dignity of LGBT people.

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.



Recommendations

The study findings demonstrate low levels of awareness on LGBT rights among Rwandans generally, which contributes to the social exclusion of LGBT people. Increasing public awareness on the human rights of LGBT people may influence social support for them. Members of the LGBT community should also be aware of their rights and the legal protections available to them. To address the social exclusion and marginalization of LGBT people, governmental and non-governmental organizations should:

1. Conduct awareness campaigns among LGBT people to ensure that they know their human rights and the legal protections available to them.
2. Implement programs and campaigns that raise community awareness about LGBT people 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. Advocate for, 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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