

The rise of 21st Century Homophobia in Francophone Africa

“I will never forget that day was September 10, 2016, it was at 10pm when my parents had discovered that I was gay and burnt my clothes and certificates. It was the first time I saw my father react this way, so savagely and viciously towards me ... He said I was Satan, that I had shamed the family. He did not want to see me again, said that I’m not his son and he wished I had died at birth ... My mother told me that I could no longer call her ‘mum’. I was shocked, traumatized, panicked and disappointed by the reaction {of} my parents. I did not think they would drive me out of the house at night knowing that I had nowhere to go ... My life has become uncertain and I’m currently homeless,” said Thomas, a Congolese gay man, in a study on LGBTQ persons in Democratic Republic of Congo (Rumu 34).

The complex narrative of homosexuality and varying LGBTQ identities in Africa exhibits a current human rights crisis. In some countries, LGBTQ people are simply not accepted socially (even if their lifestyle and identity are technically legal) and become targets of persecution and violence, while in other African countries, homosexuality and unique expressions of sexuality and gender are criminalized, including sentences of imprisonment or sometimes death.

LGBTQ individuals fleeing their home countries in Africa as refugees or asylum seekers demonstrate a fairly recent trend, only within the last several decades, even though some level of intolerance dates back to centuries ago based on colonial laws that have never been changed (Awondo et al. 97). This rising intolerance is the result of recent religious and legal clampdowns on LGBTQ lifestyles/identities in Africa.

Abundant evidence and reporting show that in many English-speaking African countries, such as Uganda and Zimbabwe, right-wing Christianity has played a tremendous role in « importing » homophobia from the U.S. in recent years (Religion News Service “Homophobia”).

Here, however, we will focus on a region that often goes unmentioned in the conversation: Francophone Africa. In examining the rise of homophobia in countries such as Senegal, Morocco, Algeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Cameroon (to name a few), we see that a new wave of religious dogmatism in Christianity and Islam has played the primary role in cracking down on the liberties of LGBTQ persons in the 21st Century. In order to address this human rights issue, African leaders and community members and non-African advocates must collectively engage in dialogue, build relationship, and promote education of LGBTQ identities.

The need to flee: Legal and psychological oppression of LGBTQ Francophone Africans

As the law in many North and West African countries prohibits an LGBTQ lifestyle, the suffering inflicted on individuals who identify this way and their inability to truly be themselves can lead to immense psychological distress. Inquiring about the lives of LGBTQ people in

Morocco, one researcher proposed that these individuals are victims of physical, societal, and institutional violence (“Morocco” 10). They may be physically assaulted within their community, shunned by family and friends, unable to receive proper health services, and become homeless, victims of blackmail, and targets of the legal system.

As gay Moroccan writer and film director Abdellah Taïa describes in an interview, “A partir du moment où la loi marocaine dit qu’un citoyen homosexuel est un criminel, elle donne l’autorisation à tous les autres citoyens de maltraiter les homosexuels. Les lynchages sont une continuité du silence du pouvoir. En évitant de condamner les agressions, les responsables politiques les encouragent de fait. La réaction sociale est liée au pouvoir” (From the moment the Moroccan law says that a homosexual citizen is a criminal, it gives permission to all the other citizens to mistreat homosexuals. Lynchings are still a result of the silence of power. By not condemning aggressions, the political leaders encourage it. The social reaction is linked to power”) (Kadiri *Le Monde*)

Homosexuality is also illegal in Algeria. In *Queer Maghrebi French* (2017), a book focused on the Maghrebi African group of gay men who have emigrated and created a community in France, author Denis M. Provencher shares an example of the psychological distress of LGBTQ persons in this region. “Although Nacir was Algerian-born, he states how he never felt totally integrated into Algerian culture... In the end Nacir knew he would have ultimately to leave Algeria in order to not feel like a stranger and a homosexual and explains ‘parce que c’était ça ou se suicider... parce que mon homosexualité était là et...psychologiquement j’étais au bout’” (“It was either that or suicide...because my homosexuality was evident and, psychologically I was at the end”) (Provencher 245-6). The options, therefore, due to the law and inability to express one’s identity, come down to flight or death.

While identifying as LGBTQ is not technically a crime in the Democratic Republic of Congo, these persons become targets of exploitation as LGBTQ identities are still socially unacceptable, and they are not overtly named as protected individuals in the country’s Constitution or human rights laws, which is the case in many Francophone countries (Rumu 11). We learn of the ways other laws are therefore taken advantage of to persecute these individuals. “In Kisangani a few years ago, a friend was arrested and taken before the court on charges that he is a homosexual. The judge used article 176 of the penal code as a basis for his judgement and I had to go help my friend pay the fine. The judge did not seem to care that it is not illegal to be gay in DRC,” notes another individual who participated in the study on LGBTQ persons in DRC. Article 176, updated in 2004, states “Whoever publicly outraged morals by sections that offend modesty, shall be punished with imprisonment from eight days to three years and a fine of 25-1000 zaires or one of these penalties,” which provides no specific mention of LGBTQ people, identities or acts and yet is used to intimidate and criminalize them (Rumu 12, 15).

In Senegal, the problem is equally visible, where homosexuality is illegal and imprisonment is enforced. “Les Sénégalais occupent la plus haute marche du podium des demandes d’asile liées au genre... En 2015, ils étaient 144 (1/3 étaient reconnus réfugiés) alors qu’en 2014, le commissariat aux réfugiés et aux apatrides (CGRA) avait traité 206 demandes d’asile basées sur ce motif” (“The Senegalese occupy the top step of the podium in asylum requests of this nature. They are in effect the most numerous to seek asylum in Belgium based on the risk of persecution

due to their sexual orientation. In 2015, there were 144 – 1/3 of them refugees – while in 2014, the Commissioner for Refugees and Stateless Persons received 206 asylum requests based on this reason”), states an article in *La Libre* (“Parcours”).

While these are just a few examples highlighting the daily conditions of Francophone African LGBTQ persons, the harm and damage stretch across the region. Due to legal persecution and systemic/institutional oppression, more and more members of the LGBTQ community are seeking safety and life outside of their country or outside of Africa. This wave of immigration is based solely upon sexual and gender identity.

History and background: How religion has reignited LGBTQ intolerance

Many African leaders have been quoted to promote a fictitious belief that homosexuality itself came from the West, that it was not “natural,” and that it did not exist among Africans previously, an idea that therefore supports the need to endorse anti-LGBTQ laws and actions within their communities (Whitaker *The Guardian*).

The recent tide of renewed homophobia returned during the 21st century in some countries as Christian priests and missionaries from America have influenced governmental and religious leadership, according to “Raisons Politiques,” a French political journal (Awondo et al. 96). These conservative American missionaries and evangelists, bringing a version of Christianity that promotes literal translation of Biblical texts, have established a significant relationship with some governments, offering them compensation to pass laws criminalizing homosexuality and promoting an overall LGBTQ-intolerant mindset (Religion News Service “Homophobia”).

The Christian influence is also promoted within communities, and not just through the corruption of leaders. Christian missionaries of the Church of Christ, a fundamental protestant sect, have set their sights on recruitment of native church planters within Francophone Africa. The Benin Bible Training Center trains young Africans, some of whom have converted from Islam to Christianity, to plant churches in 10 surrounding French-speaking countries (Tryggestad *Christian Chronicle*). Generally, a church that promotes “equipping the Lord’s Army,” as stated on the French African Christian Education (F.A.C.E.) [website](#), does not tolerate homosexuality in its tenets, and the Church of Christ is known to be one of the most conservative American Protestant sects.

There is also evidence of a return to and imitation of colonial laws penalizing “unnatural acts,” or sodomy, which existed in both British and French colonies, as a reason for this relatively recent shift in societal intolerance (“Sodomy Laws” [pbs.org](#)).

In a recorded 2020 online dialogue by The Other Foundation, an organization currently serving LGBTQ individuals out of southern Africa, faith leaders from in and outside of Africa discussed the role of this “religious import” from America and other Western countries, supporting that this is the primary reason for oppression in areas where they serve as leaders.

Many Francophone countries have a majority Muslim population and are led by Muslim leaders, such as is the case in Algeria, Senegal and Morocco. These countries have also seen an uptick in violence toward members of the LGBTQ community in recent years. Various sources report that

Muslim countries have undergone a “moral panic,” with leaders competing with each other to crack down on ‘immoral behavior,’ an area where homosexuality becomes a target (Mittelstaedt et al. *Spiegel*). The more that homosexuality is depicted in media and becomes a regular topic in Western news, the more these leaders feel they need to respond by taking stern measures against it to prevent the prevalence of it in their countries, since homosexuality is, after all, “imported from the West” (Whitaker *The Guardian*). Senegal, for example, had been considered one of the most accepting countries in Africa, even having offered public health initiatives directed toward the gay population, prior to 2008 when laws were changed (Awondo et al. 107).

In previous centuries, Morocco was viewed as a safe haven for men escaping discrimination due to their sexuality (Whitaker *The Guardian*). Now, according to interviews from 2019, there is agreement that community hostility toward LGBTQ individuals in Morocco is rising, and that it is related as well to increasing religious principles, including mention of « the Minister of Human Rights, who has been quoted for voicing condescending remarks on homosexuals in 2017 » (« Morocco » 8-9).

In Algeria, the Minister of Religious Affairs was quoted in 2015 as saying that “combatting individuals who promote the deviation of morality and the dismantling of the family (a reference to the behavior of LGBTI individuals), was more important than the fight against Da’esh [the Islamic State, or ISIS].” While some claim that the government had not taken an official stance on sexuality and gender, it had used language in accordance with conservative and faith organizations (Stewart *76 Crimes*).

We see the mentality shift highlighted between the years of 2005 – 2017 when governments proposed new or updated and harsher anti-homosexuality laws in at least 5 different Francophone countries: Cameroon, Senegal, Guinea and Chad, and a constitutional ban was placed on gay marriage in Democratic Republic of Congo (Awondo et al. 109; Makia 682; “LGBT rights in Africa” 5 March 2021).

LGBTQ - serving Organizations (Services and limitations)

Fortunately, a number of organizations and groups have formed during the 21st Century to protect and advocate for the rights of LGBTQ persons fleeing for their safety, both in Africa and abroad. The religious and legal intolerance of these individuals in Francophone Africa necessitates such organizations and services to provide physical protection as well as social, psychological and financial assistance. If they are unsafe within their country, they may need help navigating day-to-day needs, and they may also need to seek refugee or asylum status in order to escape.

It is important to note that LGBTQ Francophone individuals have the added challenge of receiving proper services and advocacy due to the French language barrier when they arrive to safety elsewhere (unless they are able to emigrate to France, which is not a decision refugees and asylees get to make). This additional problem highlights a sub-layer of the importance of promoting LGBTQ acceptance and understanding specifically within Francophone African society.

Within the continent, organizations such as Association pour la défense des homosexuels au Cameroun (Association for the Defense of Homosexuals in Cameroon) and the association Kifkif in Morocco advocate for the protection of LGBTQ rights. Rainbow Sunrise Mapambazuko is a nonprofit working to protect and support the rights of LGBTQ persons and educate the community on stigmatized topics such as HIV/AIDs in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Other Foundation is a relatively large organization operating out of southern Africa that promotes the rights of LGBTQ individuals all over Africa and offers them resources of support.

The Interfaith Diversity Network of West Africa (IDNWA), started by a gay pastor and headquartered in Ghana, holds offices in 11 countries and assists LGBTQ persons who need support in areas such as employment, health services and housing. Here, we see the extensive network the organization is building but also the limitations of its operations. While the founder and Director of IDNWA works toward tolerance and acceptance through dialogue and personal connection with local government and religious leaders, the organization does not currently have French language resources for their many French-speaking clients. Upon clicking on the designated “Français” [section of the website](#), one only finds “Coming Soon,” even though the organization was founded in 2016 and operates in Francophone countries.

Outside of Africa, FrancoQueer is a Francophone LGBTQ-serving organization in Ontario, Canada helping individuals who have fled as refugees and asylees and providing the necessary services for resettlement in a new country and culture. This association completed an Evaluation of the Needs of Francophone LGBTQIAS Immigrants and Refugees in 2014 and also identified the lack of French speakers in various service organizations as a common problem for their clients (Gates-Gasse and Lassonde).

Queer Refugees Deutschland, an organization located in Cologne, Germany, provides some resources for French-speaking LGBTQ refugees arriving in Germany. Their website does provide a French option to review information, but upon heading to [their Facebook page](#) where they direct individuals to contact them, one only finds English and German posts and information.

While it is reassuring to know that these organizations and many others exist in different corners and regions of the world, the lack of French language accessibility especially affects and adds stress to Francophone LGBTQ people who leave their homes, often alone, in order to seek safety.

How to address this human rights issue

While LGBTQ intolerance continues to bubble up in today’s Francophone Africa, action must be taken from multiple angles to stem the flow of persecution. To change community understanding and sensitivity toward LGBTQ lifestyles and identities, we must approach it in three manners: dialogue and relationship building from a faith perspective, education and providing destigmatizing information within the community, and media exposure through artistic expression.

Priority places focus on religion as it was the primary avenue for bringing African homophobia back into discussion. One model example is the [Global Faith and Justice Project](#). This advocacy resource is a Journal of Theology on Sexuality in Africa with contributing members in the United States and globally. It contains articles written by African and American theologian activists alike, highlighting different aspects of this continent-wide human rights issue and trying to change the conversation from a faith perspective. The founder and contributors have already seen some slow success and change in English-speaking African countries such as Uganda and Zimbabwe.

There is, however, a delicate balance between external involvement in this issue and a change of mindset coming from internal sources within Africa. As an American who identifies as a Christian and a member of the LGBTQ community, I propose that outsiders' roles in helping to change the narrative should be positions of support of their African colleagues and friends, rather than leading the charge. Additionally, American "evangelical influence" on the church and government in Africa clearly needs to be withdrawn and should not be used as a tool for political or any other type of power.

Building relationship is also an important aspect of this change. Founder of the Interfaith Diversity Network of West Africa, Davis Mac-Iyalla, a gay Christian, is doing just that. When you don't "know someone" personally who identifies as LGBTQ, it can be easy to pass a quick judgement, especially if you have been taught by religion that this way of life is wrong. He says that he "studies the hostile environment and finds entry points," connecting with religious and government leaders through projects by finding an area that will interest the other party in initiating dialogue. He has had success in changing mindsets by using this strategy and getting to know his fellow community members.

Education is also key. Learning to understand people who identify as LGBTQ can help destigmatize the lifestyle that so many fear or shun. According to Rumu, author of the study on LGBTQ persons in DRC, "the topic of sexuality is a taboo including in our schools, and within our families. If we could create radio broadcasts or youth-parent discussions on sexuality... why not also create more spaces for sexual minorities to exchange their experiences and how to deal with our social, economic, family and cultural experiences" (Rumu 30). Rainbow Sunrise Mapambazuko is one of these organizations attempting to destigmatize the topic of HIV/AIDS, as it is frequently associated with the LGBTQ community.

Artistic expression through media can also be a key ingredient in shifting mentality on this issue. An initial reaction to a new appearance of the LGBTQ world on screen might provoke a sudden backlash from the government. However, the more that sexuality and gender expression become mainstream and exposure to this identity/lifestyle is generated through cinema, music, drama and visual arts, the more it becomes normalized and accepted, especially for young people who are nowadays consumed with social media and may be struggling to come out. For example, Ghanaian singer Amaarae released a music video depicting men dressed in drag in 2018 entitled "[Fluid](#)." She said "What I'm trying to do with my art is just teach respect and understanding," and accordingly, the song and video were well received by the Ghanaian public (Peyton Reuters). Novel and film "L'armée du Salut" ("Salvation Army") by director Abdellah Taïa document navigating his life as a Moroccan gay Muslim. He has released a number of books and

become a well-known figurehead in the gay community, allowing him to be known as the “first openly gay Arab writer,” and while the Moroccan government has spoken out against his work, his success and fame continue to grow. Taïa says “I wanted my work to have that critical eye, and to take on the struggles of others. I wanted to be a powerful gay voice, a strong and political voice” (Athena “Arab new spring”).

LGBTQ people worldwide still struggle with full acceptance into their homes and societies, but those coming from French-speaking Africa represent a minority that have a particularly difficult time. Seeking to start a peaceful life free to be oneself outside one’s country of origin requires necessity and dedication, and a language barrier can further complicate this opportunity. Unfortunately, Francophone African countries, many forementioned in this article, have been influenced by this tide of stricter religion and have reignited an intolerant view of LGBTQ lifestyles and identities in recent years. While it may be a delicate and complex topic and situation, there is hope that through dialogue, education, and exposure, the communal and societal perspective can and will change.

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