



Collection Of Essays By

**LBTQI+**

Nigerian Women On

**PERSONAL SAFETY  
& SECURITY**



## **Invisible Yet Visible: What happens when your safe space is no longer safe?**

**By Foluwasayo**

Outside of biological family, queer people have mastered the art of having a different family—a chosen family. The chosen family makes up a big part of your support system. They are supposed to see you, love you and make space for you even when nobody else does. The friendship in a chosen family is especially deep, accountable, full of love for you and a desire to see you grow, expand and embrace your life. Besides from queer people, women are also advised to have a chosen family, a circle of friends who will uplift you and love you as you weave through the cis-hetero patriarchal waters of life. As a queer woman, I have learnt from a very early age the importance of that support system. And I had my people, people who at least seemed like they were not interested in sustaining the status quo.

We all pray at some point in our lives, our points of prayers different and peculiar to our situations at any moment. As a queer woman who grew up in a very religious environment, I have had to pray many times. I prayed I wouldn't discover myself, I prayed the gay away every time I found myself staring at a woman in church. I prayed when I found myself, embracing all the layers I peeled away, I prayed as I healed my bleeding skin and washed myself of years of religious condemnation.

A state is supposed to protect all of its citizens but in Nigeria, a particular group of citizens have been hunted down, demonized, dehumanized and stripped of human rights, without the state caring about making things right. Everybody exists but queer people in the country are forced to wear a visible cloak of invisibility. I prayed as I navigated coming to terms with the fact that the government actively hunts people like me. But what I did not pray to see was a friend on her knees begging her god not to give her any queer children.

I took pride over the last two years in the fact that I had an impregnable source of strength but nothing prepares you to see the people you trusted pray so hard because deep down, they believe you are an abomination and people

like you do not belong in the society. Nothing prepares you to see that your friends turned sisters simply believe your sexuality is a phase stemming from societal conditioning. It makes you think once again whether heterosexuality is no longer societal conditioning. Queer people in Nigeria grow up under heavy heterosexual influence, so, it comes as a surprise that there are cisgender heterosexual people who believe that homosexuality results from what we see on the television and people around us. Regardless, non-cisgender heterosexual identities in mainstream television are almost non-existent.

Ever since this homophobia was cemented in the legal structures of the country, violence against queer people have been on the rise and sometimes, this violence is almost unseen. The violence is in how queer kids have to slowly detach from their parents so that getting disowned won't hurt as much when it eventually happens, the violence is in how we don't have access to our history even as we participate actively in the society, the violence is in how people can tell us they are friends and allies and boast about how they pray to God not to give them children like us-not because they are scared for the safety of those kids but because queer people are just not normal according to their holy books. The violence is in how people can say to you: 'I am homophobic' while understanding that they have access to your personal safe space and you have no one, not even the state that birthed you to protect you.

Living at the intersections of so many identifies means you should have grown a tough skin to every critique or opinion that comes with embodying who you are. It means your pain is meant to be your second skin and nobody wants to see how it pricks your skin in return. This has led to queer people creating safe spaces for themselves. Your safe space could be with friends who care and will fight for you, a community that offers love and growth. Yet, when these safe spaces are infiltrated, it is simply treated like it hasn't been infiltrated. The microaggressions that come from being queer are not visible to other people. If they are, they choose not to help.

Despite it all, I choose joy.

In the words of my partner: *"In a world that thrives on us not having any joy or love, we deserve to have and enjoy our joy and love"*

I can't guarantee that I won't meet people in the future who will act as friends and say the right things but express disgust in the confines of their homes for my sexuality or pray for my salvation, but my community is queer, and it won't stop me from working for queer liberation. I am not a sin. I am not an experiment. I am a human being who will be respected and will keep living on her terms. E choke.

## **State-sanctioned Erasure**

**By Timinepre Cole**

Last year, a policeman tried to put his hand under my shirt to confirm if I had breasts and was indeed a woman. It was the most unsettling disregard of personal space and boundary I had experienced but it is not the only form of violence I have endured as a masculine-presenting lesbian living in Nigeria.

Nigeria is one of the most unsafe places for women to live as there are barely any enforceable laws protecting us from the sexual harassment, physical violence, harmful traditional practices or socio-economic discrimination we encounter daily. Nigeria has also been ranked as the worst place for the safety of LGBTQ persons as a result of anti-LGBTQ laws which promises fourteen years in prison and in some states, the death penalty for homosexuality. It, therefore, goes without saying that Nigeria is especially unsafe for women like me—who do not conform to societal expectations of sexuality and gender presentation. Consequently, we face an increased risk of violence and discrimination because of our perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

In my experience, acts of violence and discrimination could come from family, friends or strangers and could happen anywhere at any time even in spaces that preach love. I was raised as a Jehovah's Witness and members who indulged in grievous 'sin' like homosexuality faced what was called disfellowshipping. This meant that other members of the church including the family and friends of a disfellowshipped individual were not allowed to talk to them. This was one of my fears when I started to embrace my sexuality – losing my friends and family.

Most of my friends were Jehovah's Witnesses, we had been raised in this faith and I knew their beliefs. I had heard them voice it out frequently—either about homosexual characters in tv series or about people around them they perceived to be queer. In 2018, I went to one of the church conventions with my friends and they played a video clip of a Jehovah's Witness woman in the United States narrating how she lost her job for refusing to sell movie tickets to

a lesbian couple because it was against her faith. Everyone including my friends celebrated and commended her for enduring persecution for her faith. I walked out of church that day and never went back. I never came out to these friends, but they grew distant when they finally realized I was a lesbian. Eventually, their only form of interaction became occasional likes on my Instagram posts.

It took a while, but I eventually found community with other queer folks. Social media became a place I could be free and openly homosexual without reprisal. Unfortunately, even in virtual spaces, I am not free from harassment. Every other day, there were messages from homophobic heterosexual men hiding behind anonymous accounts threatening me with corrective rape. Another extreme form of violence I experienced was people outing me to my family and employer. I describe this as extreme because in a country as homophobic as Nigeria, people who out queer folks know we are at risk of getting disowned, losing housing or financial support from our families and losing jobs, but they do it anyway because they simply despise our existence. It was not surprising to me when people I used to go to school and church with started sending screenshots of my tweets and pictures from my Instagram to my family in a bid to out me. It was also not surprising when work colleagues started stalking my social media accounts to confirm whether I was a lesbian or not. What followed after was office gossip in hushed tones and debates about what my presentation and 'liberal' views could mean. Occasionally, there were loud comments on how members of the LGBTQ community deserved the fourteen years prison term for engaging in unnatural behaviour in a bid to get me enraged enough to out myself. I remember one time I was to get an apartment with a female colleague, but another colleague told her I was a lesbian and since she was a Christian, she should not be associating with me; she went on to get an apartment by herself without telling me.

Eventually, my work environment became so toxic, the only reasonable course of action when news of my sexual orientation got to my supervisor was to hand in my letter of resignation. It was at this point I decided to control the people

who had access to me on social media. I made my Twitter account private, deactivated my main Instagram account and opened a new private account.

It may be relatively easy to shield yourself from harassment and violence in virtual spaces, but what happens when you step out of your house into a world that is waiting to kill you?

Most of the harassment I encounter on the streets comes from state actors. Policemen are all too happy to keep me hostage at the roadside whilst interrogating me and my choice of clothing. "Why you dress like man?" "You be Tomboy?" "You be lesbian?" Somehow it became part of my daily routine to have little conversations with myself before I left my house as a way to mentally prepare for police harassment; often asking myself if I looked gay enough to draw police attention.

During the peak of the Covid pandemic and amidst calls for the disbandment of the section of the Nigerian police force known as SARS, four armed policemen pointed their loaded guns at my friends and I not so far away from my friend's house. I assume because a bunch of women with dreadlocks, bleached hair, tattoos and piercings did not look like they were meant to be in a high-priced estate. After this, I became too traumatized to leave my house because I was tired of dealing with police harassment. On the occasions I went out, I was very paranoid about staying out late because I did not want to encounter policemen. I was more terrified of the police than I was of getting robbed in Lagos. Seeing any type of security uniform had me in a state of intense panic and evoked feelings of danger. When the policeman tried to put his hands under my shirt while threatening to kill me and leave my body at the roadside without any consequence, I imagined all he had to say to justify my death was that I was a lesbian.

There is not enough paper in the world to detail every form of violence queer women in Nigeria experience daily in virtual spaces and the real world especially when the state is complicit. It does not matter whether I am in

church, on the internet, in a secular space or on the streets. I live in a country that criminalizes my existence; a country that compels me, a lesbian, to pretend that my sexual orientation does not exist, or that the behaviours by which it manifests itself can be suppressed; a country that forces me to deny my identity to avoid being persecuted, a country that denies me the fundamental right to be who I am and that in itself is state-sanctioned violence.



## **What About Him... Your Ex?**

**By TJ**

It was one of those nights when I had to drag myself out of bed, my body had a habit of petulantly becoming feverish when I did this. One foot after the other, I placed my foot on the ground, dreading the cold air about to hit my face, the unwelcome neighbours – whose names I did not remember – saying hello, and the two hours I would spend walking 10,000 steps.

On nights like that, I would recite all the reasons for my daily walks; to manage my anxiety, to keep a promise I made to myself, to learn to be consistent, to ensure I move daily since my work is sedentary, to help navigate my experience of the pandemic. A flat stomach is the cherry on top. So, I moved.

I was barely five minutes out when I saw her. Her hands were casually wrapped around her chest, her pace significantly slow compared to my brisk steps. I didn't give her much thought. I reached for my AirPods to find the soundtrack for my walk and when I looked up, she was staring at me, like she was waiting for a cue to say something.

When our eyes met, she waved at me and said, "I have always seen you around, I don't know a lot of people in this estate, I've been looking to make new friends ....?"

The statement felt like an invitation to something I wasn't interested in, but I smiled, maybe because I admired her attempt at shooting a friendship shot.

"Can I join you?", she asked.

"No", I thought.

"Sure", I said.

She talked about herself. She was going to spend the holidays with her mom, she lived with six other flatmates, she enjoyed her job and the perks that it

came with. She also just got out of a relationship. Her hands tightened around herself as she vented about walking the thin line between doing too much and not being enough. When she got to the part about him being with someone new, her voice thinned out. Soon, she declared her resolve to withhold, but I recognized the look. This is what an open wound looked like.

And while I wanted to say all the things about being open while she waded through pain, her hurt spoke louder than her stoic pose, so I asked instead "Can I hug you?".

She nodded and fell into the hug, we stayed that way for a bit and then as if suddenly realizing that she had overshared with a stranger, she leaned back and scrambled to throw some questions back at me.

"Are you still friends with him?" she asked.

"With who?"

"Your ex"

There are many things I am open to calling my ex, a man isn't one of them. While I am open to slowly letting people in, it is contingent on my safety, and the thought of living five minutes away from potential harm prompted my simple response "no".

Three weeks later, I am splitting a cab with a woman I met at a clothing store. We had just exchanged the film-esque moment of her picking the right outfit for me, so I offered her a ride. During the ride, I learn that she lives in London but visits Nigeria four times a year because she is close to her family. She works in investment but is considering moving to the start-up space. She will move back to Nigeria if she finds a job that is worth her time, or a partner that is. Speaking of ... men. Then came the rant about the long-suffering act dating in Lagos was. I would be smug about the "cishet" experience, but queer

women will use your tears as their skincare routine and take their glowing skin to the next woman so, I empathized.

“So, what about you? What has your experience been like with Lagos men?”

“Ummmm, I don’t date men”

“Oh”

It was probably not a good idea, saying this in an Uber at 8 pm on Lekki-Epe expressway. It would be uncomfortable to get a different ride if anything went wrong. I moved closer to the door, if anything, to avoid letting her think I wanted to hit on her.

“So, what is that like?”

I thought about all the cliches of being best friends with your ex or dating an ex of an ex, et al. But none of that had been my experience. I wished I knew the collectively agreed-upon narrative in the queer space. The way all straight women sprouted the “Yoruba demon” trope even if they hadn’t ever dated one. But I wasn’t that involved in the community to know any, so I said “different”.

I scrambled out of the car when I got to my stop, thankful that that went well.

It’s my last therapy session for the day, my client is talking about her relationship, her sentences are careful. Her ability to turn pronouns into a protective cloak is skilful, almost admirable. While the work of therapy is contingent on the clients’ openness, most people have adapted to the cold shoulder they receive when they disclose same-gender relationships. For me, the work begins with letting them know that they can drop their guard here, that there is no need to be vigilant here, that all the pronouns used won’t be weaponized here, that they are safe here. I tell her this and she exhales, there is a readjustment, “Ok, when she .... “.

The hypervigilance that comes with living as a queer person seeps into everything. It's in the passive sentences we use, "I was told" rather than "she told me". Every day, we disappear those that we love or once loved to keep both them and us, alive. The assumption of harm affects just as gravely as the harm itself. Learning this either through personal experience or the stories we hear could drive us to adopt coping mechanisms that could be healthy or unhealthy. On the other hand, this knowledge about the lack of external support has also created the perfect petri dish to brew harm within the community.

One can only hope that the safety margins will be widened soon, but till then, I'll do my bit to build a sense of security for me and mine, wherever and however I can.

**A Silent Pain**  
**By Anonymous**

I first noticed I liked girls when I was 14. I knew that telling my mom or siblings wouldn't help me, so I kept it to myself. I changed schools around that time and at my new school, I met an old classmate from primary school. She recognized me and came to talk to me, and we became close friends. It was hard not to fall for her. I didn't tell her anything though. I didn't want to ruin our friendship.

About a year later, she was at my house one weekend and said she had a funny question. I asked what her question was, and she asked if I liked her. I nodded without thinking about it and she shook her head and asked if I liked her more than a friend. I just kept staring at her and she suddenly kissed me. I used to think there was a possibility it was a phase, but that kiss confirmed it wasn't.

Days later, I was waiting for her to join me for lunch where we usually ate when a guy from our class walked up to me. I was still wondering why he was there when he said,

"I heard you have never dated any guy in this school".

I looked up and said, " And?"

He hissed and said, "Sha don't influence your friend with your lesbianism".

I smiled and said, "too late" and immediately regretted it.

He beat me to a pulp that day. The empty classroom was close to the school generator and the generator was running, so nobody heard me scream. He left me crying there and because I fought back, his shirt was ruffled. He reported me for attacking him and because I had a history of fighting in school, nobody listened to me. I was suspended for a week.

I thought things couldn't get worse.

In my second year of university, I met a girl online. She was a tomboy, and I was instantly attracted to her. She only lived a few houses away from mine so, during my long breaks, she would come to my house. We were unofficially together for a while.

One day we were walking around the neighborhood, we decided to take a short route. While we were walking, she began touching me. As we were about to kiss, a man walked by and we quickly sprung apart, startled. I started to avoid her after that day. I was just too scared.

Two weeks later, my mom sent me on an errand and on getting there, the vendor wasn't available. I decided to leave but noticed that someone had locked the gate after coming in. The rooms in the house were also all locked.

I noticed one door wasn't locked from the outside, so I knocked on the door. In a split second, the door opened, and I was dragged inside. It was the same man that had seen my 'partner' and I almost kiss two weeks back. He beat me till I couldn't move, and then he raped me. I must have passed out at some point because I woke up in my room.

I wished it was a nightmare but the pain I felt all over my body confirmed it wasn't. I hated myself and even tried to hurt myself for a very long time. It's something I can't deny. I'm queer and although, I can't come out and say it right now, one day I definitely will.

## **A Non-Binary Perspective**

**By Anonymous**

In a country where the human rights of LGBTQIA+ people are not prioritized due to the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (2014), traditional and religious beliefs, being queer, non-binary or a transgender person is considered civil disobedience by patriarchal standards in Nigeria. Women's groups and religious bodies advocating against sexual and gender-based violence in Nigeria are mostly centered on cisgender women, with a few human rights organizations focused on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgender and intersex community. Queer women in Nigeria like other women are faced with violence including forced marriages, coerced sex in marriages and intimate relationships, unemployment and underemployment, rape by strangers and organised rape in war, financial abuse at home, emotional and mental violence, and forced exposure to pornography. Queer women's rights are still constantly debated and trampled upon due to personal beliefs and sentiments which form the basis for which ignorance is upheld. While we are united by a defined struggle and movement, it is disheartening to see that many queer people in the Nigerian LGBTQIA+ community who look down on non-binary and transgender folks, do not want to live a life of relearning old and harmful cis-sexist ideas thereby fostering a never-ending cycle of abuse at the detriment of our collective queer liberation.

### **On Friendships and Relationships**

Friends and partners of non-binary people often do not put much effort into the usage of correct pronouns when speaking to and about non-binary folks. It is expected that there may be some difficulty in adjustment at first but even after a year or two, we often find that those who are closest to us still misgender non-binary folks when speaking to and about us. I find that when strangers do this, it does not cut as deep as when friends and acquaintances continuously misgender non-binary people. Everyone reacts strongly to being called the wrong names; even when the right names are mispronounced, they go out of

their way to demand their names be pronounced right but they fail to extend the same courtesy to non-binary folks who constantly have to remind people to not misgender them, which sometimes push non-binary people to adopt easier binary pronouns for the comfort of others. Some friends and acquaintances of non-binary folks have made a habit of questioning experiences of non-binary queer persons which leaves me beyond shocked. Some non-binary queer folks are also in the business of discounting and dismissing people's truths simply because they do not have the same experience. In my experience, when speaking of violence meted out on queer womxn in Nigeria, masculine of centre non-binary people are made to feel like they need to bring evidence to defend themselves or explain their emotional experiences. On occasions when I have spoken about violence against queer womxn using my lived experiences such as sexual harassment and assault, evidence of truth for my feelings has been demanded from me. I have encountered so many people who know the right words, who know how to navigate with the progressive presentation and allyship but in their interpersonal relationships, they are missing it. I have also grown to understand that if you need to bring evidence for your feelings and traumas, then you are being gaslighted.

### **On Documentation**

To this day, trans and non-binary persons who need to fill intake forms are made to pick a compulsory option between the binary genders – female and male, no in-betweens. Some non-binary persons keep their birth names while others do not. Those who do not share a connection with their birth names are still forced to input these names on government-issued identifications, intake forms and applications online and offline, even in queer-affirming spaces. I recently filled a form from a queer-focused organisation looking to mobilize queer womxn, trans, and non-binary folks; rather than make full names optional or provided with an option of nicknames, organisations catering to LGBTQIA+ youths still make the option of birth names compulsory on registration forms. It is not enough to employ non-binary people in queer-affirming organisations and spaces, doing the extra work of listening to these



employees matters especially during the Needs assessment and analysis phases of projects. The sensitivity of the issue of names is equally as important as that of gender on forms. A vital step like this, often termed little and unimportant and constantly brushed off by the cisgender community, may mean the world to some non-cisgender people and goes a long way in affirming folks who interact with these spaces in any capacity. To foster inclusion, adequate care should be taken to prevent avoidable issues like demanding old/dead names from some non-binary and trans persons who may or may not be willing to give out such information.

### **On Workplace Ethics**

Offentimes, we tend to excuse and ignore abhorrent and discriminatory practices at work because we live in a capitalist society where livelihood and sustenance largely depends on saviours and demigods like some Nigerian employers – respectfully. Job security and Work-Life balance have become fairy tales where queer women, non-binary and trans folks who work in predominantly heteronormative work environments and even queer spaces have to work twice as hard to constantly prove several points to colleagues and management that they are equally deserving of job retention as others. I used to work with colleagues who took pleasure in performing trans allyship to visitors but will never affirm me outside the watchful eyes of strangers. It was difficult to talk to people who knew them of the transphobia that abound in a supposedly inclusive queer-focused work environment. I worked with colleagues whose favourite pastime was correcting people outside the organisation on the usage of my pronouns, but they never kept the energy during work hours when addressing me. It was almost a fetish for them to interrupt conversations just to inform people of my non-binary pronouns when they do not care to affirm my gender in the absence of office guests or when the cameras were off. I got purposefully misgendered every waking morning from champions of transgender inclusion and only got affirmed when I was being reported for alleged unacceptable behaviour so it would be on record that my actual pronouns were used. I often got misgendered out of spite when tempers were high or when my performances were not up to expectation,

mostly during staff gatherings and meetings as if I was being punished in their very little way because they understood how much my pronouns mattered to me. When they were in better moods, I got jokes about my pronouns and how it was somewhat difficult to use but was assured they were all trying their best as though their benevolent transphobia struck out all the bigotry I constantly had to shoulder. I witnessed a situation where a former transgender colleague complained about being deliberately misgendered, got waved off, and sternly warned to quit overreacting, after all, it was something everyone was trying to get used to. She however resigned because she said she never felt safe from the get-go and could not continue with the pretense. This nonchalance was very exasperating and was responsible for several bouts of anxiety because the disregard for transness was very invalidating and bordered on trans-erasure. Seeing the sadness in the eyes of some workshop participants especially trans women and hearing them recount their ordeal about being told to stop acting like little girls by facilitators while getting cisgender-heterosexist bile thrown at them at events and workshops designed for queer and trans women in a supposedly progressive queer space was reason enough for sleep deprivation. It is as if cisgender folks respect transness only at their discretion. When it is not convenient to do so, when it does not serve them, they completely denigrate and seek to weaponize our vulnerabilities to invoke pains and anguish against our personhood. Having worked with cisgender queer folks for the longest time, I know how much they embrace domineering language against non-binary folks and use this to harm the transgender community, but they do not care about that because they understand the lingo and terminologies and can use it to appear trustworthy. For trans and non-binary persons, no matter how much we say these behaviours do not surprise or affect us, the memory of these abuses creeps up in the most unexpected times because our body has a way of remembering trauma. What is most painful is that you do not get a say on how people choose to treat you as a person, no matter how much you try to convince them you are deserving of respect, they do not change. It is important to let such people go.

## **On Healthcare**

One major significant challenge LGBTQIA+ people face is discrimination and exclusion in the healthcare sector. Barriers in the system can take many forms including an inadequate understanding of individual-specific conditions, trauma-related health issues, denial of care based on individual and religious bias, inadequate or substandard care, lack of patient confidentiality by providers, and avoidance of treatment due to fear of discrimination. Some medical professionals look at queer, non-binary, and trans bodies as something of an anomaly. They see it as an error to be repaired/corrected with medicine. Non-binary people and transgender women already have less access to healthcare, are less likely to have health insurance, less likely to refill prescriptions, more likely to use the emergency room due to delay in getting care, more likely to refuse healthcare services, and are more likely to be harassed by health-care providers. There have been instances where queer womxn and trans men seeking diagnosis for illnesses have been asked to feminize themselves with medication and do that which is of the will of God. Every medical consultation has been turned into an avenue for proselytization by some licensed medical professionals in Nigeria who still think gender is set in stone. This is one of the reasons why many queer womxn and non-binary people self-medicate, have a higher rate of depression and anxiety, alcohol and substance abuse, suicide, and suicide ideation as a result of chronic stress, social isolation, and disconnectedness from a range of health and supportive services. I was once told by a male doctor to come back when I was ready to be pregnant when I took my endometriosis diagnosis to his office. He completely ignored the fact that I was a menopausal twenty-six years old and asked me to find a man to impregnate me to cure my debilitating illness. A gynaecologist told me to get pregnant and see how the physical changes will make me "a happy and fulfilled woman". A doctor wanted to pump me with oestrogen medication to make me fertile to the best of his abilities in a bid to cure my PCOS because according to him, it will cancel out all hormonal abnormalities as shown in my hormone profile. One doctor while smiling, called my body lazy and unwilling to heal as typical of most women's he has

encountered when I presented with a diagnosis for fibromyalgia. A doctor took it upon himself to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to me when I told him I was sexually active – the non-heterosexual way. He went further to ask if he could prescribe me over-the-counter aphrodisiacs that could be found in any pharmacy to correct my sexual inclinations because the medication will make me willingly “give it up to anyone readily available.” For the longest time after that encounter, I thought about the definition and purpose of aphrodisiacs and wondered how the prescription would lead me straight towards men and supposedly fix my homosexuality. I once went to a hospital for a bad cold which made my voice deep and hoarse and had the doctor tell me to do a voice training by joining a church choir to compensate for me looking like a teenage boy so I could retain some femininity. On one of my bad endometriosis flare days, a gynaecologist asked if he could prescribe me medications to make my breasts more supple and visible while asking if I was happy with my body when I looked at my naked self in the mirror. Reverse psychology has been tried, body dysmorphia has been weaponised, ancient medical texts have been cited, worst-case scenarios have been emphasized, eternal damnation has been preached and the fear of God has been employed but not once have people thought to treat others who do not look or act in societal acceptable standards with the respect and dignity that we all deserve. When licensed healthcare providers fail to understand the dangers of health violation and its relation to physical/mental health and social exclusion, there is bound to be a loss of confidence in the healthcare system by LGBTQIA+ people in Nigeria.

### **In Conclusion**

Queer womxn in Nigeria including trans women and non-binary persons need not be infantilised or pathologized. Trans women and non-binary folks often receive harsh treatment and care under the diagnosis of “gender dysphoria” but the trans identity is not a mental disorder. Friends, partners, and colleagues of non-binary folks should adopt a gender-neutral language when speaking to and about non-binary people except stated otherwise by said individuals.

As a person assigned female at birth, having worked in several different establishments over the years and having had superiors of all sexes, every work situation I have found myself in has been a den for abusers to thrive. Empowered by their position of authority, the near-non-existent policies on professional ethics and code of conduct, and also the complacent attitude of their fellow superiors, harassment in the workplace has become an all-too-familiar sore thumb in my professional adult life. The rights of women in the workplace include being protected from a rather hostile work environment where womxn are made the subject of unwelcome sexual comments and advances that put them in fear of losing their jobs if they do not comply or feign ignorance of these practices perpetrated by colleagues and superiors who should know better but continue to act with impunity. These create a work environment that is intimidating, hostile, and offensive to reasonable people, so the issue at hand begs the question of whether there is total accountability for everyone or if top management of established workplaces is utterly accountable to no one. To ensure offenders are held accountable for the use of power as a tool for oppression in today's Nigeria, there should be a functional body that holds colleagues and management accountable for their discriminatory attitudes and practices towards queer womxn including trans and non-binary folks in every work environment. This way everyone is made to take full responsibility for their actions when called upon.

LGBTQIA+ people in Nigeria receive healthcare services that can only be fully accessed in organisations advocating for the rights of queer people under the umbrella of human rights. While that is good considering the circumstance, this puts a strain and increases the health risks for queer womxn and non-binary folks who need healthcare and cannot easily or readily access them due to unavailability and unwillingness from healthcare providers. We can push for advocacy that says all hospitals should publish their privacy statement and confidentiality rights of patients because we need to have medical privileges protecting all queer womxn against unethical medical practices and language. Advocacy should be taken to medical regulatory bodies to address the issue of personal biases by medical professionals and push for the inclusion

of core components of rights to health including sufficient quantity of healthcare facilities, respect for medical ethics, and sensitivity to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE), healthcare that is available to everyone, and quality health services which should be safe, effective, people-centered, timely, equitable, integrated and efficient. These discriminatory practices have a long-term negative impact on every realm of life, causing deep, lasting trauma, which contributes to internalized homophobia, depression, anxiety, suicide and suicide ideation, and substance abuse as a coping mechanism. In many instances, individuals have taken their lives. The LGBTQIA+ community should continue to work together to dismantle the patriarchy which fuels misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. Queer womxn as a sexual and gender minority group, must also remember that abusers do not need an excuse to abuse. They abuse because that is who they are and not because of something you said/did not say or did/did not do.

## **The Journey To Me**

**By Mariam Sule**

2015 was the year everything changed. I had just turned 19. I was supposed to graduate with my degree in education along with my mates who also did four-year courses at the university. Whenever my friends and I gathered, they talked about their plans after graduation — getting jobs at media companies, travelling, etc. I couldn't tell them that talking about the future made me anxious, so I avoided them. I stayed in my room most of that year.

2015 was also the year I started dating my first girlfriend, Isoken. I had known I was a lesbian since I was about 6 years old but 2015 was the year that I named my attraction towards women as lesbian. She gave me the first book I read where queer characters were portrayed positively. I was happy to spend my time escaping my real life to fall into a world where women loved women, and everything was okay.

Before then, I had been with women, but it wasn't the sort of thing you talked about. I had a friend I would have sex with all night but the next day, we would be unable to look each other in the eye. Reading those books opened my eyes to a world of possibilities. I started to learn that I wasn't supposed to be ashamed of being myself.

While I was in the university, I lived in the same apartment with a group of four of my friends — Yemisi, Ese, Nsikak and me. We spent our days together and shared almost everything we had amongst ourselves — clothes, shoes, and money. Sometimes we didn't want to sleep apart, so we'd join our beds together and spend the night talking. We loved playing Rihanna's music on blast and dancing to it. On most days, Ese cooked and Yemisi dished it out but Nsikak and I always felt cheated, so we fought over food portions a lot. We called each other family. We would often paint scenarios of our friendship lasting till we were all married and had kids. Even though I knew then that I couldn't get married to a man or have kids, I agreed with them because I didn't want to be different.

But I had always been different. I grew up always being the youngest person in my class every year. My mates would avoid interacting with me because I was the teacher's pet — nobody wanted to get in trouble for mistreating me. This meant I was often alone.

Boarding school was hard. I spent the first few months walking to class and back alone because on my first day, the headmistress announced that I was the youngest and so everybody was tasked with the responsibility of tending to me. The opposite happened because, in boarding school, it's every person for themselves. The stories I told about my life came easy to me. One of the perks of being alone is falling into books. I pulled out stories I had read, made them bigger or smaller to fit a narrative of myself I assumed people would want to be friends with. I told anyone who cared to listen that I had a boyfriend back home and his family was friends with mine, even though the first time a boy asked me out, I immediately declined because I was repulsed. I told them my parents were richer than they really were, and we travelled often for holidays. I learned that otherness was often punished with exclusion and likeness would most likely be rewarded with companionship.

I played the script for a while. In university, it's easy to be cool when you smoke and are sexually active. My personality trait stopped being my age. I started being the girl that always had weed. Yemisi often described me as someone that has mind. I wanted to be liked and I wanted the people that liked me to never stop. I did anything my friends asked and sometimes, things they didn't ask for.

I had a boyfriend when I met Isoken. I knew I liked her, but it took a while to admit that the pull I felt towards her was because I was a lesbian. Before her, I thought my sexuality was just another contrarian feature of mine, one that men would appreciate me for. I described myself as a wild cat. I told my boyfriend about the other women I had sex with while I dated him. He didn't have a problem with it as long as I told him. But meeting her was different because



before her, I had never considered dating a woman. 2015 started a ripple of events that caused me to define myself and review my value system.

Yemisi was the first person I told I was a lesbian. She echoed it; 'you are now a lesbian', like I wasn't sure of what I had just said. When I said yes, she asked how we had sex. As I began to explain it to her, something else drowned the conversation. Another day, as we were walking back from school with Ese, she blurted out, "Do you know Mariam is now a lesbian?" Ese made a sound with her tongue and asked me how girls had sex with other girls. Yemisi laughed and said that was the same question she asked me. I laughed too even though I didn't find it funny. Later, Ese said she watched lesbian porn and she still doesn't understand how tribbing was supposed to give pleasure. I explained it to her the best way I could, but she scoffed and said, "Nothing like penis."

It was the first time I realized that ignoring how different I was from them meant trying to fit my life into a context they could understand. For me, this meant self-erasure. I laughed about it with her because I didn't want to be the friend that couldn't take a joke but soon enough, I had to draw a line.

Naming myself as a lesbian changed a lot of things. It was a revealing experience. One time, Ese complained about not being able to reach her boyfriend during certain hours of the day and she didn't trust that he wasn't cheating. I asked her if she had spoken to him about the distrust. She said, "I can't talk to him about it. Our relationship is not like lesbian relationships — this is a serious relationship." I asked myself what made a relationship a serious one? The presence of a man and woman or the presence of people willing to make it work? Since when, did our relationships have to be serious before we talk about it? I was hurt but I couldn't tell her because I didn't want to have a long conversation where she would dismiss the things that make my existence because it didn't look like hers. I stopped volunteering my opinions after that.

As the first daughter of a small family from an ethnic minority group, I was expected to be a good girl who believed in the infinite grace of God, who would marry a man from our tribe, handpicked by my parents and

recommended by my extended family members. I had never felt that urgency to worship a god I could not connect with, so I gave up a long time ago. The person I was at school was a sharp contrast to the person I was at home. When the awakening happened in 2015, it dawned on me that I had long failed their dreams. I stopped going home and when I did, I kept the visits short. I evaded questions about school or flat out lied about it.

At the end of the year, when my mates had graduated and my rent was due, I came clean — I told my parents I had dropped out of school and I intended to chase a career in writing. To my surprise, they were supportive and reassured me of their love. I sat in my room that night crying from relief and anxiety, with Isoken at the other end of the call. I wondered if their willingness to love me would falter if I told them that I am a lesbian. I cried my eyes red that night.

I moved shortly after. My new city gave me a chance to define myself as I pleased. I rented a small room with a bathroom and a kitchen. I painted the room shades of yellow with the leftover paint my neighbour offered me. As we painted the room, covering the brown stains on the wall, he asked if my boyfriend was okay with the fact that I smoked. I said, "I am a lesbian." He nodded, letting my words sink before asking if I had a girlfriend. I said I did. "I hope I get to meet her sometime." I was grateful for the questions he did not ask.

A few months, after I moved, Yemisi got engaged to a man she had been dating for a while. He was a Christian and she often talked about how he wanted to improve her life. I was happy she found love, even though she had started to send bible verses to our group chat and stopped indulging us in conversations about things like sex or smoking. I found out about the engagement from Ese. She called to check on me. It was an attempt to salvage our friendship which I appreciated. We went through the pleasantries and in filling up the awkward silence, she asked me if I was coming for Yemisi's engagement party. I told her I wasn't invited, she pleaded with me to not tell Yemisi she told me. I waited for Yemisi to tell me herself, but she never did. I saw

the pictures from the wedding on social media. I cried as I typed congratulations to her — a message she never replied to.

I tried to seek comfort with Isoken but one thing I did not account for was how naming myself meant naming her too. With everything that had happened, I couldn't understand why she would be averse to it. Her presence in my life led me to myself. How could she not see that? In our private space, she cuddled me and talked about our future together — a small brick house at the side of town with no kids racing the hallways but when we were in public, she was different. She would laugh with her friends at me about things like me double texting her or me expecting her to say 'I love you' at the end of every call. They thought I was too soft, and she agreed, often saying that I was too emotional to be logical. One time, we were hanging out at her house with her friends and family — all of whom at the time knew we were together. Someone made a joke about weddings and somehow, everyone was painting possible scenarios that could happen at Isoken's wedding — who would be doing what and when. They talked about her husband like I wasn't in the room. I tried to talk about it afterwards — point out that her girlfriend was present, yet they were talking about her getting married to a man. She couldn't understand why I didn't find it funny. "It's just a joke", she said, but why did it hurt? It took both of us a couple more emotional scars to see that our journeys were different, and we needed to part.

I put the rainbow sign in my bio on social media and engaged in conversations about queer people. I was curious about all things that we couldn't talk about with the people in our lives and in a bid to connect the experiences of queer people living in Nigeria and build community, I started a podcast. It was liberating to introduce myself as a lesbian for a group of listeners who were queer like me. Every day, the desire to tuck parts of myself in for another person's comfort wilted.

Naming myself also meant naming the trauma that came with. As a queer person living in Nigeria, navigating discrimination sanctioned by the state,

enabled by the church and endorsed by the streets, trauma is ingrained in our collective experience. Therapy helped me define trauma as it applied to me. I learned late that it takes the precision of self-awareness to not spill trauma on everything you touch. My healing came in waves that threatened to drown me. One time, I opened my eyes and people were holding me up, reminding me that I am not a burden. Not a projection of dreams or something to endure. These people saw me as I am and accepted me. With them, I am unfolding to discover parts of myself I never knew. They teach me that though naming myself came with the price of solitude, it also gave me community, a world of people like me who had shunned the outside, who know it's okay to be us. I call them my family christened with love, bound by truth.