

**LGBT Movements in Africa:**

**Reshaping Identity and Power through  
Mental Health, Interpersonal  
Connection, and Audacity**

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## 1. Introduction

LGBT individuals in Africa endure severe persecution, prosecution, and discrimination, largely due to the criminalisation of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In several African countries, same-sex relations or acts are illegal, with penalties ranging from lengthy imprisonment to the death penalty (Pew Research Center, 2023). Sodomy laws, along with regulations prohibiting 'cross-dressing' or 'impersonation,' reinforce the systemic criminalisation of LGBT identities.

This criminalisation is deeply rooted in a combination of colonial-era laws, religious conservatism, and political expediency. During the colonial period, European powers imposed legal frameworks that criminalised homosexuality, viewing it as incompatible with Western moral standards (Tamale, 2014). These laws, which have persisted into the post-colonial era, were often embraced by African leaders seeking to consolidate power by aligning with conservative religious groups and appealing to traditional values. This historical context is critical in understanding the contemporary legal and social challenges faced by LGBT communities in Africa (Gloppen & Rakner, 2020).

While these sociopolitical factors contribute to the marginalisation of LGBT individuals, the psychological impact of systemic persecution cannot be overlooked. The constant threat of violence, discrimination, and legal consequences takes a heavy toll on the mental health of LGBT individuals (Kasujja & Hama-Owamparo, 2022). Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) offers a framework for understanding how these stressors contribute to mental health challenges, including internalised stigma, anxiety, and depression. The psychological effects of living in hostile environments also hinder identity formation, as many LGBT individuals struggle with self-acceptance and belonging in societies that actively

reject them. This intersection of sociopolitical oppression and mental health is a crucial aspect of the challenges faced by LGBT individuals in Africa.

In addition to this complexity, the current activism landscape in Africa is both diverse and dynamic. LGBT activists have developed various strategies to combat growing hostility, ranging from grassroots community organising to leveraging digital platforms for global advocacy. In countries like Uganda and Nigeria, where anti-LGBT sentiment is deeply entrenched, activists have adopted a more clandestine approach, focusing on building underground networks, utilising digital platforms and providing discreet support services (Landman, 2023; Anene Ejikeme, 2021). Conversely, in South Africa, where legal protections for LGBT individuals are more advanced, activists are pushing for broader social acceptance and challenging residual societal prejudices (Westman, 2023).

In light of these challenges, the fight for LGBT rights in Africa requires a nuanced understanding of the cultural, political, and social dynamics at play. This paper examines the need for strategic recalibration within LGBT movements in Africa to continue advancing LGBT rights amidst growing hostility. By focusing on reshaping identity and power through mental health, interpersonal connections, and bold activism, this paper explores new pathways for LGBT movements to progress and thrive. Central to this analysis is the strategic importance of tenacity and innovation, emphasising the role of psychological wellness, community building, and audacity in renewing the movement.

## **2. Mental Health as a Transformative Power**

Research conducted on a global scale has revealed a greater occurrence of mental health difficulties among those who identify as LGBT (Hwahng & Kaufman, 2024). Although data on trans\* populations remain limited, substantial evidence points to an

increased risk of suicidal behaviour, substance misuse, and mood and anxiety disorders within LGBT communities. Crucially, these mental health challenges are not inherently linked to gender or sexual diversity itself but are largely a result of heightened exposure to minority stressors such as stigma, discrimination, and violence. These factors contribute to a syndemic vulnerability, exacerbating poor mental health outcomes among LGBT individuals (Wittgens et al., 2022; Hatchel et al., 2019).

*Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003)* offers an essential lens for understanding these mental health disparities. This theory posits that the chronic stress faced by LGBT individuals, resulting from both overt and subtle forms of discrimination, leads to an accumulation of negative mental health outcomes. The internalisation of societal stigma—often referred to as internalised homophobia—further exacerbates these issues, leading to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Therefore, addressing the mental health needs of LGBT individuals in Africa requires more than just access to services; it warrants systemic change to reduce the stressors that negatively impact mental health.

*Applying Western models of mental health care in African contexts presents significant challenges* due to the cultural and social norms that shape perceptions of mental health across the continent. Traditional and religious healing practices, community-based approaches to care, and the pervasive stigma surrounding mental health play central roles in determining how services are accessed and delivered (Okunade et al., 2023; Wondimagegn et al., 2023). For LGBT individuals, these challenges are further compounded by the fear of discrimination and criminalization, making it essential that any mental health strategy be culturally sensitive and tailored to local contexts (Adebayo et al., 2024).

*Decolonising mental health care is a critical component of this approach.* It involves challenging the dominance of Western mental health models and integrating

traditional African practices or perspectives to create accessible services that are more relevant to the lived experiences of LGBT individuals. For instance, initiatives that involve local community leaders, peers and healers in the design of mental health programs have proven effective in bridging the gap between cultural beliefs and modern therapeutic approaches (Anjorin & Wada, 2022). These efforts not only address the stigma associated with mental health but also enhance the accessibility of services by fostering trust within the community.

*Psychological wellbeing has transformative power*, particularly in the lives of LGBT individuals who face continuous marginalisation. When mental health is prioritised and improved, it does more than alleviate symptoms of distress; it can fundamentally reshape the way individuals perceive themselves and their place in society (World Health Organization, 2022). Individuals with positive mental health are more likely to develop a strong sense of self-worth, tenacity, and the ability to navigate hostile environments. This internal metamorphosis enables individuals to establish their identities with greater confidence, actively participate in advocacy efforts, and confront the societal systems that oppress them (Pachankis et al., 2020).

*Moreover, the impact of positive mental health extends beyond individual well-being*—it has profound implications for the effectiveness of LGBT activism. Research by (D'anna et al., 2022) highlights that positive mental health fosters resilience, enabling LGBT activists to remain engaged and sustain their efforts over the long term, even in the face of adversity. Additionally, mental health influences the capacity of activists to build and maintain social support networks, which are essential for collective action and community-building. Therefore, mental health is not just an individual concern—it is a

cornerstone of the broader effort to reshape identity and power within LGBT movements, reinforcing both personal development and the effectiveness of activism

***Diminished mental health can negatively impact identity***, leading to self-distancing from one's community, expectations of rejection, internalised stigma, and a diminished sense of belonging. These processes often result in individuals feeling powerless in comparison to others. Additionally, LGBT individuals may be less likely to access mental health services due to concerns that their sexual orientation or gender could adversely affect the therapeutic relationship, delay timely interventions or subject them to further discrimination within healthcare settings (Hama-Owamparo, 2023; Crockett et al., 2022). Recognising the poor mental health outcomes experienced by LGBT individuals compared to their heterosexual counterparts is essential in understanding the connection between mental health improvement and empowerment. Positive mental health can reverse these negative outcomes, transforming internalised oppression into tenacity and the ability to lead within the community

### **3. Interpersonal Connection: Building Strength in Diversity**

***Interpersonal connection and solidarity*** are vital components in the fight for the liberation of LGBT individuals in Africa—especially in a context where societal rejection and isolation are common, fostering connections within and across diverse LGBT communities is a critical step in reshaping identity and power (Watts & Thrasher, 2023). These connections not only provide emotional and psychological support but also build a foundation for collective action, which is key to advancing LGBT rights (Selvanathan & Jetten, 2020).

***Creating supportive networks and communities*** is one of the most effective ways to strengthen LGBT movements. In many African countries, LGBT individuals often lead clandestine lives due to the threat of violence, discrimination, and legal repercussions. This



isolation can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and alienation. However, the creation of safe spaces—whether physical, online, or through informal networks—allows LGBT individuals to come together, share their experiences, and provide mutual support (Opeyemi, 2024). These spaces play a critical role in countering the narrative that LGBT identities are inherently isolating or deviant, instead fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity (Onanuga, 2024).

***Intersectionality*** is another crucial element in building strength through diversity. LGBT individuals often face multiple layers of marginalisation, including those based on race, class, and gender. The concept of intersectionality recognizes that these identities cannot be separated, and the oppression experienced by LGBT individuals is often compounded by other forms of discrimination. For example, a lesbian woman in a rural African community may face not only homophobia but also sexism and economic hardship, making her experience of marginalisation more complex. Addressing the needs of LGBT individuals through an intersectional lens ensures that movements are more inclusive and effective in their advocacy efforts (Hwahng & Kaufman, 2024).

***Integration into broader social movements*** is also crucial for amplifying LGBT voices and ensuring that their struggles are recognised as part of wider human rights efforts. The Social Movement Theory (Tilly, 2004), highlights the importance of alliances between marginalised groups and broader social justice movements. Collaborations between LGBT activists and movements focused on gender equality, racial justice, and healthcare access can create broader coalitions that drive systemic change.

***Solidarity across diverse LGBT communities*** is essential for building a unified front in the struggle for equality. While the diversity within the LGBT community can sometimes lead to fragmentation (Tessa Devereaux Evans, 2023), efforts to build solidarity across these

differences can strengthen the movement as a whole. Collaborative efforts, such as regional alliances and cross-country coalitions, have proven effective in amplifying the voices of LGBT activists. The Pan Africa ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) is an example of how regional cooperation can foster solidarity across different LGBT communities and enhance advocacy efforts at the continental level (Pan Africa ILGA, 2024)

*Strengthening identity and power through collective action* is another critical outcome of interpersonal connections within LGBT communities. Collective action not only challenges the status quo but also reinforces the identities of those involved, giving them a sense of purpose and belonging. The passage of Resolution 275 by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights serves as a powerful example of successful collective action in Africa, highlighting how advocacy campaigns and legal challenges have brought attention to LGBT issues and pushed for social and legal reforms. Adopted during the Commission's 55th Ordinary Session, Resolution 275 condemns acts of violence, discrimination, and other human rights violations against individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. This resolution marked a significant step toward affirming the rights and dignity of LGBT persons across the continent (IJRC, 2014).

*However, building interpersonal connections in such a hostile environment is not without challenges.* Activists often face significant barriers when trying to establish supportive networks in regions where LGBT identities are criminalized, and societal acceptance is limited. One of the most pressing challenges is the issue of visibility versus safety (Svensson et al., 2024). Many LGBT individuals may hesitate to join support networks or participate in collective action due to the fear of exposure, arrest, or violence. Overcoming these barriers requires innovative strategies, such as the use of encrypted digital platforms for

organizing and the establishment of covert meeting spaces (Acconcia et al., 2022). Furthermore, divisions within the LGBT community (Lariba, 2024), such as those based on gender, class, or regional differences, can complicate efforts to build a unified movement. For example, in some contexts, the needs and priorities of Trans\* individuals may differ significantly from those of gay or lesbian activists, leading to fragmentation. To address these issues, activists are increasingly employing intersectional frameworks that recognize and accommodate the diversity within the LGBT community. This approach not only strengthens the movement internally but also broadens its appeal by showing solidarity with other marginalized groups.

In summation, building interpersonal connections within LGBT communities and integrating these efforts into broader social movements serves as a powerful tool for empowerment. These connections garner solidarity, promote tenacity, and enable collective action, all of which are essential for reshaping identity and power in the face of adversity.

#### **4. Audacity: Challenging Constructs and Overcoming Adversity**

*In the face of pervasive discrimination and legal persecution, audacity has become and must continue to be a cornerstone of LGBT activism in Africa.* Bold actions, whether through coming out publicly, public demonstrations, legal challenges, or social media campaigns, have been instrumental in challenging entrenched societal norms and overcoming the adversity faced by LGBT communities (Adeyemo, 2024). This audacity is not only a form of resistance but also a powerful tool for reshaping identity and reclaiming power (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

*However, bold activism carries significant risks.* The potential for backlash, both from state actors and conservative elements of society, is ever-present. For instance, activists

in Ghana who have vocally opposed the Anti-Homosexuality Act have faced threats, arrests, and even violence (The Guardian, 2024). This highlights the high-stakes nature of audacious activism in Africa, where simply asserting one's identity can lead to life-threatening consequences. One example of this risk can be seen in the experiences of David Kato, a Ugandan LGBT activist who was murdered in 2011 after his name was published in a local newspaper under the headline "Hang Them." Kato's death serves as a sobering reminder of the dangers faced by LGBT activists in Africa. Yet, despite these risks, the courage and tenacity demonstrated by activists like Kato continue to inspire others in the movement to push for change (Pillay, 2012).

*To mitigate these risks, LGBT activists have developed strategies to balance visibility with safety.* For instance, some activists choose to engage in digital activism, using anonymous online platforms to organize and raise awareness without exposing themselves to physical danger. Others opt for more covert forms of resistance, such as creating underground networks that provide support and resources to LGBT individuals without drawing the attention of hostile authorities.

*While audacity often carries risks, it can also lead to significant victories,* exemplified by the landmark rulings of the Botswana Supreme Court in 2019, the Mauritius Supreme Court (Aradi & Mohabuth 2023) and Namibia's High Court in 2024, which decriminalized same-sex relations. These rulings are a testament to the power of bold legal challenges and the impact of persistent advocacy. Local LGBT organisations, such as Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals of Botswana (LEGABIBO), played a pivotal role in these legal successes (Rickard, 2021). Additionally, individual, audacious efforts were crucial, as demonstrated by Friedel Dausab in Namibia, who personally brought the case that led to decriminalisation (Allsop, 2024). These cases, which courageously confronted and changed

the legal status quo in a hostile environment, illustrate how strategic legal activism can effect transformative change, even in contexts where there is strong resistance to LGBT rights

*However, not all audacious actions lead to immediate success.* While audacious actions in advocacy sometimes lead to legal victories for LGBT rights, they can also trigger severe backlash, complicating the struggle for progress. For instance, the annulment of Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2014 initially marked a significant win. However, it was followed by the re-introduction and eventual enactment of an even more oppressive version of the law in 2023. This pattern of reactionary legislation has not been isolated to Uganda alone; following these developments, there has been a notable surge in similar anti-LGBTI bills across the region, including Nigeria, Kenya, and Burkina Faso—a fortified response to the increasing visibility and activism of the LGBT community (Kagoe, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024). This scenario highlights the intricate equilibrium that activists encounter: as they endeavour to bring about change and foster the welfare of the community, they must also navigate the possibility of heightened oppression and unfavourable outcomes.

Analysing the achievements and setbacks in different African countries provides useful insights into the effectiveness of different techniques. In African countries such as South Africa and Namibia, where legislative safeguards for LGBT rights are more firmly entrenched, bold action has resulted in increased public acceptance and visibility for LGBT individuals. These achievements can be ascribed to a blend of legislative triumphs and tenacious advocacy, which collectively have progressively altered popular attitudes. Nevertheless, not all bold actions result in quick advancement. In nations such as Uganda and Nigeria, where legal safeguards are limited and societal animosity is strongly ingrained, audacious advocacy frequently leads to heightened suppression rather than advancement. For example, although Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act was invalidated in 2014, it was

subsequently replaced with a more draconian iteration of the legislation in 2023. The continent has seen a replication of this pattern of regressive legislation, which highlights the intricate challenge that the LGBT movement has in navigating its way. These divergent results emphasise the significance of tailoring techniques to the particular cultural and political environments in which the movement organises, stressing the necessity of strategic adaptability and innovation in the presence of challenges.

## 5. Conclusion

LGBT movements in Africa are at a crucial turning point. Despite facing entrenched societal norms, legal discrimination, and widespread stigma, these movements have shown remarkable tenacity and adaptability. By prioritising mental health, fostering interpersonal connections, and embracing audacious activism, LGBT individuals and their allies are not only challenging oppressive systems but also reshaping the very notion of identity and power in African societies.

Mental health is a transformative force, creating pathways for LGBT individuals to reclaim their sense of self and navigate the complex layers of discrimination they face. Community-based mental health initiatives, culturally sensitive care, and policy advocacy are essential ingredients in shifting power dynamics and fortifying collective action within these communities. Additionally, the integration of LGBT rights into broader social justice movements ensures that these struggles are not isolated but interconnected with the broader fight for human rights across the continent.

Interpersonal connections, solidarity, and collective action have proven vital in building and strengthening the LGBT community. By creating supportive networks and leveraging the power of intersectionality, LGBT movements can herald unity and drive

systemic change. These efforts, when integrated with broader social justice movements, amplify the impact of LGBT activism, ensuring that their struggles are recognized as part of the wider fight for equality and justice.

Audacity remains central to LGBT activism in Africa. Bold actions—whether through individual acts of what some would deem as unfathomable bravery, public demonstrations, legal challenges, or digital advocacy—are redefining our notions of the impossible. Courage in the face of adversity has led to significant victories, such as the decriminalisation of same-sex relations in some African countries however, the fight is far from over, and sustained efforts are needed to build on these successes and ensure lasting change.

## **6. Future Directions for LGBT Movements**

The future of LGBT movements in Africa hinges not only on legal reforms but also on the well-being of the communities that drive these efforts. While legal victories are crucial, they represent only one part of the broader struggle. For these movements to thrive, movements must prioritise mental health as a foundational element of sustainability. Without ensuring the well-being of the individuals within these movements, progress will be fragile, and the momentum gained through legal victories may falter. Embedding mental health and well-being into the fabric of activism will be essential in maintaining the strength and longevity of these movements paving the way for a more inclusive just and equitable future on the continent.

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