

Understanding & Addressing Homophobia in Ghana & Africa

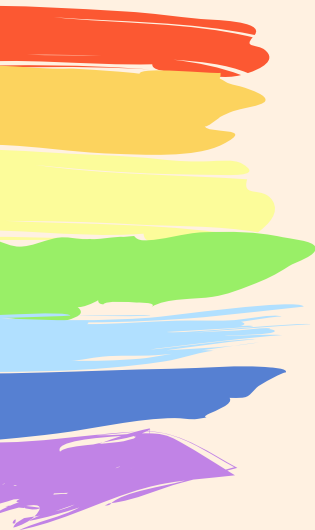
- A GUIDE -

Developed for
the African Women's Development Fund





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Key Concepts

Cissexism: a system of prejudice and discrimination which asserts that all people are or should be cisgender, and that gender expression and identity are determined by sex characteristics such as the appearance of genitals. (See also: *transphobia*.)

Colonialism: a practice or policy of control by one people to gain power over other people or areas, generally with the aim of economic dominance. In the process of colonisation, colonisers may impose their religion, language, economics, and other cultural practices on indigenous peoples.

Heteronormativity: the belief that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, or normal mode of sexual orientation.

Heterosexism: a system of attitudes, bias, and discrimination in favour of female-male sexuality and relationships. It can include the presumption that other people are heterosexual or that female-male attractions and relationships are superior.

Homophobia: a range of negative attitudes, feelings and behaviours directed toward homosexuality or people who are identified or perceived as being gay. (Similar to *lesbophobia*, which targets lesbians, and *biphobia*, which targets bisexual people.)

Hypersexualisation: the attribution of negative and inescapable sexuality to something that is not necessarily or intrinsically sexual.

Moral panic: a mass movement based on the false or exaggerated perception that a cultural behaviour or group of people is dangerously deviant and poses a threat to society's values and interests. Moral panics are generally fuelled by media coverage of social issues.

Patriarchy: a system in which men who conform to social norms are rewarded with power and dominance in political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property, resources and sexuality.

Sex-negativity: the idea that certain kinds of consensual sex between consenting adults are morally right, but other kinds are morally wrong.

Sexual orientation: Sexual orientation is an enduring pattern of romantic or sexual attraction to persons of the opposite sex or gender, the same sex or gender, or to both sexes and more than one gender.

Transphobia: a range of negative attitudes, feelings or actions towards transgender people or transness in general. It can include fear, aversion, hatred, violence, anger, or discomfort felt or expressed towards people who do not conform to social gender expectations.

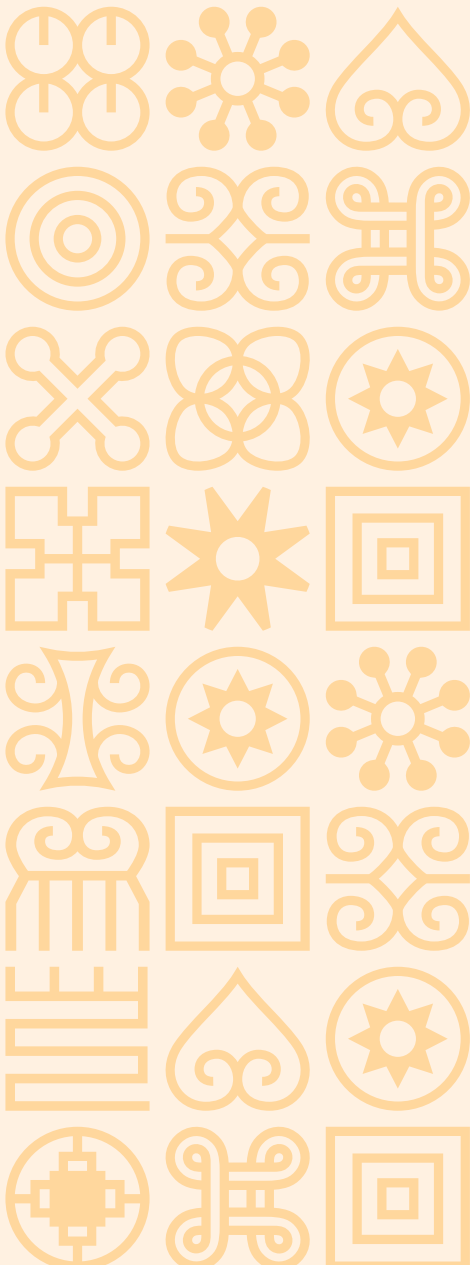


Overview

As a feminist grant-making organisation, the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) is well aware that patriarchal violence is a prevalent problem across our continent. State- and community-sanctioned violence, which maintains patriarchal power, remains an urgent issue for millions of Africans made vulnerable by various social forces of exclusion. This includes Africans who belong to sexual and gender minorities.

At AWDF, we know that it is possible to build societies that are free from violence against people, regardless of their gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. Throughout Ghana and Africa's history, we have had such societies. And across Ghana and Africa today, there are many communities, locales, families and individuals that continue to reject such violence.

This document is designed to be an educational resource for people working to address, reduce and eliminate violence against LGBTQ+ Africans. Conceived as part of the #LoveAndFreedomAfrica campaign, this guide offers information that will help make our societies safer for people whose gender expression, gender identity and/or sexual orientation go beyond cisgender and heterosexual norms.





Love & Freedom **Africa**

Love And Freedom Africa is a digital media campaign of solidarity and rejection of violence that directly addresses the survival of LGBTQ+ Africans. Across our continent, it is not uncommon to see some politicians, religious figures and media practitioners building power by escalating prejudice and violence against queer Africans.

It is therefore vital that well-meaning Africans educate ourselves and stand in solidarity, so as to eliminate all beliefs and practices that harm our fellow Africans using gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation as an excuse.

As an institution, AWDF is committed to the advancement of feminist ideals of freedom from violence, sexual and reproductive bodily autonomy, and solidarity with marginalised people. We remain true to this commitment even as we continue to learn and grow in our role as Africa's first and largest feminist grant making organisation.

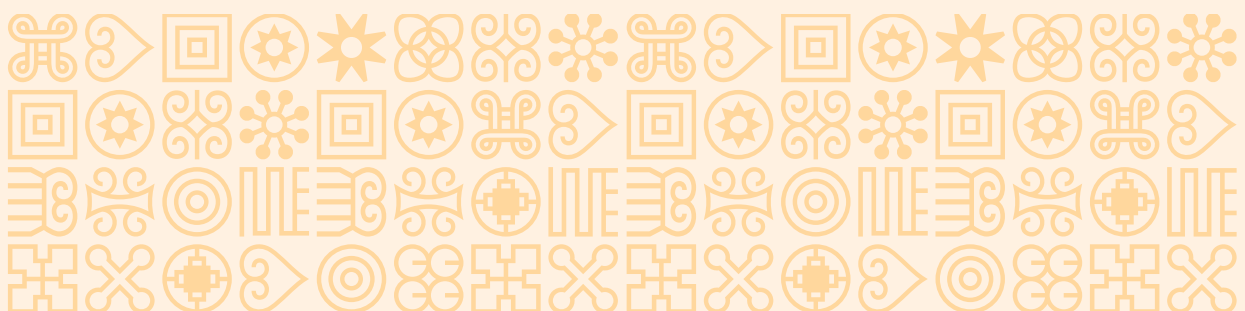
Understanding **Patriarchal Violence**

In patriarchal societies, violence is used to make people comply with social norms. These norms are designed to maintain a social order in which cisgender and heterosexual men maintain control over resources and power. Such resources include money, land and housing, and the power in question can be political, religious, communal etc.

Patriarchal norms disempower people who are not cisgender and heterosexual men, such as women of all sexual orientations and gender identities; gay, bisexual and transgender men, and non-binary and gender non-conforming people. Patriarchal norms produce social, economic and political vulnerability by denying such people their constitutionally guaranteed rights and freedoms, subjecting them to various forms of violence, and claiming that these actions are in line with the 'natural order'.

Anyone can participate in patriarchal violence, regardless of their individual identity(ies). This is because patriarchy is a system of power, and all identities are not equal within it. For instance, cisgender and heterosexual women can perpetrate violence against LGBTQ+ people. Some LGBTQ+ people who are concealing their identities may also perpetrate such violence.

In patriarchal societies, we are all conditioned to see violence as normal. This is why it becomes necessary to understand, disrupt and reject such violence, so that we can make our societies safe for everyone in them.



Forms of Patriarchal Violence

Heterosexism & Cissexism

Heterosexism is a system of attitudes, bias, and discrimination in favor of female-male sexuality and relationships. It can include the presumption that other people are heterosexual or that female-male attractions and relationships are the only norm and therefore superior.

Cissexism is a similar system of prejudice and discrimination which asserts that all people are or should be cisgender, and that gender expression and identity are determined by sex characteristics such as the appearance of genitals.

Heterosexism and cissexism are the two main ideologies that inform violence against people who belong to gender and sexual minorities. These ideologies, like any other, are socially constructed patterns of meaning that people use to make sense of themselves, others, and the wider world. Rather than immutable facts about the way the world is or was, ideologies are narratives or stories that people are told and tell one another to guide their activities and maintain their beliefs. (Sumerau and Grollman)

When combined together, heterosexism and cissexism can be simply described as 'heteronormativity'. Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, or normal mode of sexual orientation. It asserts that the gender binary is an immutable fact of human existence, and that sexual and marital relations are most fitting between people of opposite sex.

In heteronormative societies, people who belong to gender and sexual minorities are subjected to a wide range of negative experiences, including stigma, discrimination, family rejection and extortion. LGBTQ+ people also experience various kinds of violence including domestic violence, mob attacks, physical and sexual assault, and discrimination in access to housing, education and employment.



The Africanisation of **Eurocentric Ideologies**

Heteronormativity as it exists today is a Eurocentric ideology which has now been globalised through colonisation and imperialism.

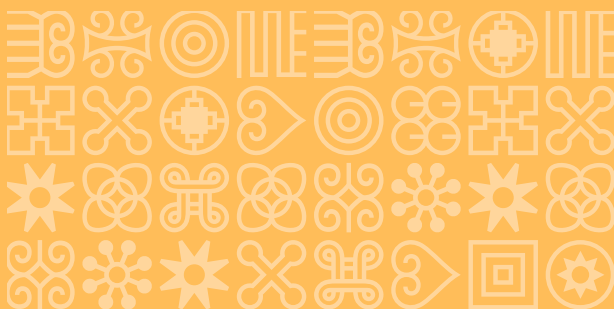
Across Africa, south and north America, Asia, Australia and the Pacific, tens of thousands of indigenous societies had various ways of organising their societies which were not based on a gender binary, and which did not use large-scale violence to regulate sexual conduct.

In West Africa, where the country now known as Ghana is located, colonial forces laid the foundations of the legal, political and social framework that localised heteronormativity. Ghana, which was initially called Gold Coast by British colonial forces, was originally home to more than seventy (70) ethnic groups, among which the Akan are the largest, followed by the Mole-Dagbon and the Ewe.



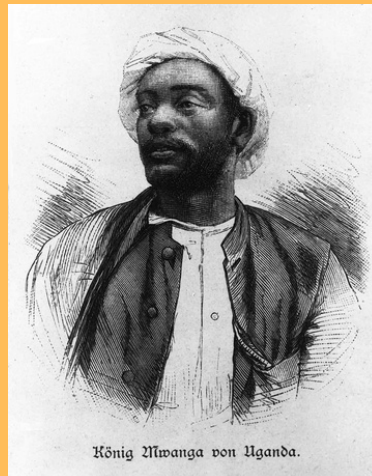
Within these ethnic groups, family formations, sexual conduct and gender identity took various forms. These indigenous social formations were gradually demonised in the legal system through criminalisation, as well as in the public imagination through religious doctrine and academic curricula. Colonial laws were imported to curb local practices and new social norms were enforced.

Some of the social formations that were delegitimised by colonisation include multiple marriages in one lifetime by either men or women, same-sex sexual relations, and gender fluidity as can be found in people known indigenously in Ghana as kwadwo/kojo besia ('effeminate' men) and obaa barima ('manly' women).



Throughout the 20th century, colonial laws, norms and ideologies were increasingly integrated into African ways of thinking, being and socialising. This process of cultural and ideological replacement happened both before and after many African nations won their independence. Today, there are many Africans who believe same-sex sexual relations and expansive gender identities are 'un-African' or 'foreign'.

Across Africa, countries colonised specifically by the British Empire have laws worded similarly to one another, with "carnal knowledge against the order of nature" forming the foundation of such legalised homophobia (Chappell). Many francophone African countries have never criminalised homosexuality, since France had different sexual politics from Britain during the colonial era. In the same vein, many lusophone African countries have overturned the laws they inherited from Portugal, including Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde and Sao Tome.



Portrait of King Mwanga II of Uganda. Bisexual ruler of Buganda from 1889 to 1897, known to consort with male members of his royal court along with his 16 wives.



Portrait of Nzingha Mbande, Queen (Female King) of Ndongo and Matamba, Angola from 1624 to 1663.

At this point, it becomes pertinent to ask: **if homosexuality was not present in Ghana and Africa at the time of colonisation, would British imperialists have felt it necessary to introduce laws criminalising a non-existent phenomenon?** *If gender expansiveness was not present in our indigenous cultures, would we have words and concepts in African languages which describe gender fluid individuals?*

Identifying, Addressing and Rejecting Heteronormative Violence

Rhetorical Violence

This is the type of violence that uses negative language and ideas to restrict the lives and constitutional freedoms of people who belong to sexual and gender minorities. Such rhetorical violence includes the use of slurs, debates about whether or not queer people are human, and the encouragement of non-queer people to ostracise, attack or withhold resources from queer people.

In Ghana and other African countries, the media is often guilty of publishing prejudicial, sensationalised and even outrightly false information about LGBTQ+ people in order to foment hostility towards sexual and gender minorities. According to a 2018 report, "The negative public discourse about LGBT people, who are referred to in derogatory terms in public spaces, combined with the risk of physical violence has severe psychological implications." (Human Rights Watch)

The negative publicity and violent condemnation of homosexuality dramatically reduces the safety of anyone whose real or perceived sexual orientation is not heterosexual. When a hostile environment is created through hateful, discriminatory or violent rhetoric, it increases the risk of people losing their livelihoods, social networks, and homes. Many people are forced out of their families and communities because negative media coverage increases the stigma attached to queerness.

Religious Violence

Due to colonisation, Ghana and many other African nations have very large Christian and Muslim populations. Many sects within these Abrahamic religions espouse the teaching that queer identities are sinful. However, instead of taking the approach laid out within these religions that stipulates faith as a personal journey, many religious sects treat queerness as a 'special' sin that has collective implications, and use this teaching to encourage violence against queer people.

Today, some religious figures seek to use their social power to turn their religious beliefs into laws. For instance, in Ghana, entities like the Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values encourage legislators and other elected officials to embrace heteronormative violence and publicly deny rights to LGBTQ+ people. These positions are often espoused and sometimes even funded, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars, by right-wing conservative Christian individuals and organisations such as Scott Lively and Family Watch International.



Identifying, Addressing and Rejecting Heteronormative Violence

State Violence

Political figures use homophobia as a way to gain popularity in the media and with citizens who may be homophobic, or who have internalised the belief that LGBTQ+ people are some sort of threat to society. Such political figures tend to use violent rhetoric to gain publicity and to distract from real issues that cause problems in society.

State violence also takes the form of police brutality, harassment, extortion and even extrajudicial murder. Misinformation campaigns by the media and by religious figures often contribute to a culture of impunity which allows state actors to abuse and harass LGBTQ+ people.



Social Exclusion

Social exclusion of people who belong or are perceived to belong to sexual and gender minorities, often results in extreme difficulty for such people. Social exclusion leads to unemployment, homelessness, and a lack of other resources every person needs to survive, including healthcare. Discrimination, family rejection and displacement strips LGBTQ+ people of the social networks that sustain life and well-being.

Social exclusion often starts at home, as LGBTQ+ people are often disowned by their family members for 'bringing shame' onto the family. This often happens whether or not there is any 'evidence' of same-sex conduct, and is always the result of heterosexist ideologies. Often, LGBTQ+ people are subjected to verbal, emotional, psychological and physical abuse by their family members.

Ostracism also happens in the workplace, at school, and in other social settings. The reputational destruction that usually accompanies homophobic violence can make it extremely difficult for people to recover, and many people end up having to leave their neighbourhoods or even regions.

Ending Violence Against **LGBTQ+ People**

In fomenting a moral panic which escalates violence against marginalised people, powerful figures often claim that such marginalised people are a significant threat to collective wellbeing. In the case of a homophobic moral panic, these claims tend to stick because of how sex is treated as a taboo subject in post-colonial societies, and how LGBTQ+ Africans are hypersexualised in these societies.

Violence against LGBTQ+ Africans happens at the intersection of sex-negativity (the idea that certain kinds of adult, consensual sex are morally right and others are morally wrong) and hypersexualisation (the attribution of negative and inescapable sexuality to something that is not intrinsically sexual).

It is important to end the kind of patriarchal violence that targets LGBTQ+ Africans. Such violence has no place in a democratic or just society. More importantly, every person deserves to enjoy the freedoms and rights that are available to all in society.

Combating Misinformation

Many people lack knowledge about what it means to have a gender expression, gender identity or sexual orientation that transcends heterosexist norms. This is particularly dangerous because not only do people lack information, but they are constantly provided with aggressive misinformation about who LGBTQ+ people are.

For instance, a common misconception about LGBTQ+ people is that they are sexual predators who target and abuse children. In reality most child sexual abusers are family members or people who otherwise know the children they target, and such abuse has nothing to do with queerness.

Another common misconception is that LGBTQ+ people 'convert' others, or that being queer is a phase. Gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation are intrinsic. Regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of gender and sexuality, all people are born with these traits. In the same way that people do not 'choose' to be straight, people do not choose to be queer. Identities are innate and cannot be arrived at by 'conversion'.

Queer, trans* and intersex people exist across a wide spectrum of gender identities and expressions, sexual orientations and biological characteristics. Some fall in love with people of the same or different gender. Others experience no romantic or sexual attraction at all. (Young Feminist Collective.)

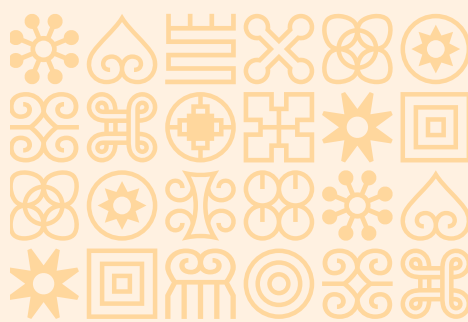
The more we know about human sexuality and social realities, the better equipped we will be to end homophobic violence in our societies.

Embracing the African Concept of Multiple Identities

For heteronormative violence to work, queer Africans have to be reduced from complex human beings to nothing more than sexual deviants. However, LGBTQ+ people are not defined entirely by sexual behaviour. In fact, sexual behaviour is only a small part of what constitutes even the single identity known as 'sexual orientation'. LGBTQ+ people, like all people, have multiple identities based on their relationships to others, religion, mode of work, and various other social constructions.

Queer Africans are everywhere, often hiding in plain sight. However, the hostility and violence of queerphobic societies forces our friends, siblings, uncles, aunties, children, colleagues, and members of our faith group to hide this aspect of their identity. The population of queer Africans is estimated at between 5 - 20% of the entire African population, which means that about one in every ten people you know has a gender identity, gender expression and/or sexual orientation that transcends heteronormative rules.

The indigenous African concept of multiple identities asserts that all people are complex and have different identities that constitute their whole self. When we embrace this idea, we can begin to reject the idea of LGBTQ+ Africans as one-dimensional caricatures that pose a threat to collective wellbeing.




 *Destigmatizing Sexual Behavior Through Comprehensive Sex Education*

Homophobia makes it easy for us to accept violence against queer Africans by telling us that specific sexual behaviours are deserving of punishment, violence and even death. But sexual behaviour is not specific to any sexual orientation or gender identity. All kinds of people enjoy all kinds of sexual acts. Anal sex, which is the sexual act that is most commonly demonised by homophobic people, is enjoyed by many people of all sexual orientations and sexual identities. There is no shame in experiencing sexual pleasure or specific sexual acts, nor should these things be stigmatised.

In Ghana recently, there was public outcry against comprehensive sex education which saw people insisting that such education is part of a 'Western' agenda. This outrage and moral panic follows similar patterns to the waves of homophobic rhetoric and violence that we often see across our continent, with claims that such education will 'corrupt' people and is against African culture and tradition.

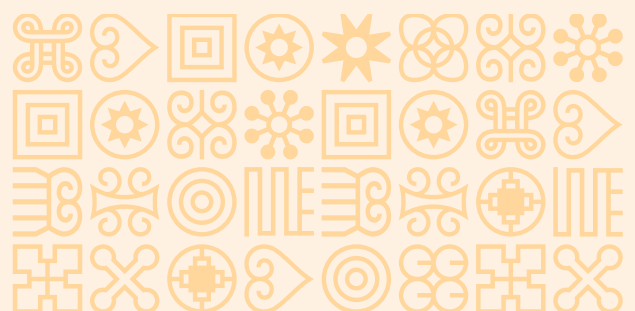
It is important to assert that education is not dangerous, just as the identities and behaviour of consenting adults are not dangerous either. All human beings have a sexual identity and the more accurate information there is about the entire scope of human sexuality, the better for everyone.

 *Creating a New Culture*

Culture is not fixed, but rather collectively created. This means that traditions evolve both based on the needs of the people who belong to the tradition and based on interaction with people and ideas from other cultures.

Across Africa we no longer murder twins or maim people with albinism to protect our societies from "evil". For decades, Africans have worked hard to end cultural practices such as female genital mutilation and sexual violence against children via 'child marriage'. Therefore, we cannot justify state-sanctioned murder or brutality against our siblings, children, friends and colleagues in the name of 'tradition'.

Regardless of what some highly visible and powerful figures might say, we all have the ability to create a new culture by choosing practices that sustain the lives and wellbeing of the people around us, rather than subjecting them to harm and violence. Wherever we encounter a culture or tradition that causes harm, we have the power and the responsibility to transform it. This is true whether the tradition originates from our culture or from external sources.



Maintaining Social Networks For The Sake Of Protecting Wellbeing

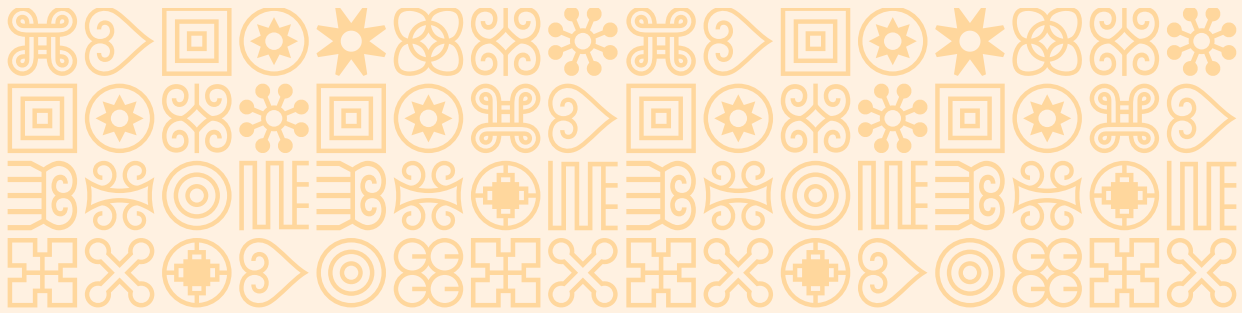
Historically, extreme stigma was attached by colonising forces to specific sexual behaviours, through dehumanising language like 'sodomy'. This stigma is now broadly applied to any and all people whose sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression doesn't fit within heterosexist norms. As a result, many people reject, violate and harm their family members, friends or colleagues who they perceive or know to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or otherwise nonconforming.

Family rejection is a significant aspect of heterosexist violence which destabilises the lives of LGBTQ+ Africans, especially women (cis or trans). Family rejection produces severe psychological, social and economic problems, and it is often the result of stigma, ignorance and religious indoctrination. In the same vein, the loss of social support at work, church or other social spaces is very devastating to LGBTQ+ people.

Human beings are social animals, which means that we need social networks to survive. The first and often most important social network for human survival is the family, so it is important for LGBTQ+ people to be able to maintain their relationships with their families.

Social units are sources of support, companionship, joy and love. When we realise we have social relationships with LGBTQ+ people, we should not allow heterosexist conditioning or homophobic prejudice to inspire acts of violence or rejection. Instead, we should seek to learn more about our LGBTQ+ friends, relatives and colleagues even as we maintain the loving and supportive relationships we share.





Challenging & Intervening in Harrassment

Whenever there is an escalation in homophobic rhetoric and/or violence against LGBTQ+ people, it can seem daunting or even impossible to stop the wave. However, the loudest factions aren't necessarily the majority. De-escalation is an important aspect of protecting LGBTQ+ people from prejudice and violence.

De-escalation or being an active bystander involves understanding your personal power as an individual or member of a group, and using that power to safeguard someone who may be in danger. It can involve challenging misinformation wherever you encounter it; refusing to platform, share or promote homophobic content; advocating for someone who is being unfairly targeted, or otherwise promoting and ensuring the safety of a vulnerable person.

For instance, you can interrupt a homophobic interaction when you encounter one. You can do this by speaking directly to the person being harassed in ways that let them know you're trying to intervene on their behalf, or by causing a scene that forces the harasser/attacker to become defensive. It is often most effective to ignore the harasser and get the person being attacked away from the scene.

In some situations, you may need to get help or support. If you don't feel powerful or safe enough to de-escalate a situation as it is unfolding, you can rally for backup from others. There is always safety in numbers. Alternatively, you can ask someone with more authority to step in.

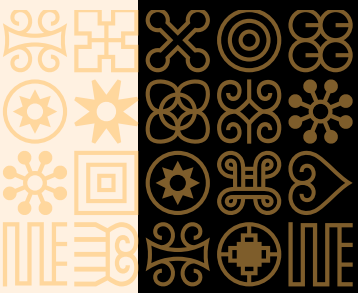
Most importantly though, offering empathy and support to the target is an effective way to practice the values of communal care and love for your neighbour. Even if you are unable to completely stop an act of harassment, it is always valuable to empathise with the target and check to make sure they're okay.

Building **Power**

In all patriarchal societies, violence and abuse are perpetrated when power imbalances are maintained. We can build power to reject violence by gaining knowledge, nurturing our relationships, and working to ensure that our communities are examples of inclusion, safety and harmony.

Human diversity is a gift that makes us all richer. So it is up to each of us to celebrate the beauty and complexity of humanity, and promote safety for all people.





further reading

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- **Human Rights Watch, 2018:**
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