

Queer resistance: Online gender-based violence against LGBTQIA+ Ethiopians





“When my identity first came out, I was shocked. My phone was broken and couldn’t see what was happening. Friends told me the post was removed quickly, so I didn’t think much of it at the time. I tried to go on with my life but then more information started coming out... where I lived, who I was, even things about my family. One day, I was attacked outside my school. There were many of them; they shouted “faggot” as they hit me. Some had sticks and others had rocks. After one punch to my face, everything went dark. I remember hearing a woman’s voice saying, ‘This faggot will die on your hands. Let him go.’ Later, I realised how much of my body was sore and bruised. More and more videos appeared online after that. People saying I should be slaughtered, that they needed to find me and make me an example. That’s when I knew I had to flee. When you’ve faced death, fear stops controlling you. That’s what keeps me going. I’ve seen the lowest point one can reach... But above all, my mother’s support is everything...her ‘good morning’ and ‘good night’ messages are all I need. And to my fellow queer Ethiopians and marginalised groups, ውብ ናቸው፣ አበባ ናቸው፣ ለመቅጠፍ ቢሞክሩም ታብባላቸው።”

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FIRN is a network of researchers, activists and practitioners from Global South countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. FIRN focuses on the making of a feminist internet, seeing this as critical to bringing about transformation in gendered structures of power that exist online and offline and to capture fully the fluidity of these spaces and our experiences with them. Members of the network undertake data-driven research that provides substantial evidence to drive change in policy and law, and in the discourse around internet rights.

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Acknowledgments

While we aimed to shed light on the harms of digital violence, our greater hope is that this work honours the quiet yet loud acts of resistance of those we've crossed paths with and others reading this report through pseudo accounts and beyond.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to queer community members for their trust, vulnerability and invaluable time. Your openness has been a source of strength for this research. We also thank the activists on the ground for their unwavering support and dedication. To those whose names we cannot mention, your behind-the-scenes efforts in gathering secondary data and supporting in various ways have been instrumental in shaping this work.

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Abstract

In our increasingly globalised world, social media and the internet often reflect and at times worsen offline inequalities for marginalised groups, including the LGBTQIA+ community. While these platforms can amplify marginalised voices, they also risk perpetuating discrimination through cyberbullying and online gender-based violence (OGBV). This qualitative research explores the manifestations and impacts of OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals in Ethiopia, a context where criminalisation, social stigma and systemic exclusion prevail. The study draws on 48 in-depth interviews with LGBTQIA+ individuals across Ethiopia, alongside eight key informant interviews with feminist advocates. Additional data were gathered through document reviews and social media content analysis. Using an intersectional feminist lens and thematic analysis, the study uncovers the complex and multi-layered nature of digital violence in the Ethiopian context.

The findings reveal that online platforms, while serving as spaces for community-building and visibility, have also become arenas of targeted and coordinated attacks. Among the most harmful forms of OGBV identified are outing and doxxing, which often lead to physical violence, family rejection and community ostracisation. Online incitement to mob justice, frequently fuelled by religious leaders, influencers and public figures, exacerbates this violence by framing queer existence as a threat to national identity and moral values. The psychosocial toll OGBV has on LGBTQIA+ individuals is profound, manifesting as anxiety, depression, fear and digital self-censorship. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrate resilience through strategies such as queer community support, reimagined spiritual practices and grassroots advocacy.

The study calls for intersectional and human-centred responses to OGBV that underscore the urgency of amplifying LGBTQIA+ voices in technology governance, mental health services and human rights advocacy. The study findings will be disseminated through publications, exhibitions and workshops.

1.

Background



In recent years, the internet has become an increasingly important space for social interaction, self-expression and community-building. For LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly in contexts where societal acceptance is limited, digital platforms often provide vital avenues for visibility, support and rights advocacy. However, alongside these opportunities, the internet also presents significant risks of online gender-based violence (OGBV), which disproportionately targets marginalised groups. These online attacks undermine individual well-being and reinforce the broader marginalisation and erasure of LGBTQIA+ identities from public discourse. Despite the increasing global recognition of OGBV as a human rights challenge, there is a notable gap in both research and policy that addresses the digital experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Similarly, in Ethiopia, a country marked by deeply rooted patriarchal norms, and limited legal protections for LGBTQIA+ communities, the online space reflects and often amplifies the abuse faced offline. A 2021 report by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) documented the growing online hostility against LGBTQIA+ individuals and how that extends to mob justice in Ethiopia, especially in the capital, Addis Ababa. Over the years, there have been hundreds of horrific incidents of LGBTQIA+ individuals being attacked or beaten by mobs on the streets, often for appearing “gay,” “flamboyant” or “tomboy”.¹ Despite these realities, the ways sexual orientation, gender identity and digital vulnerability come together are often ignored in local conversations. Consequently, the experiences of LGBTQIA+ communities facing OGBV remain under-documented.

Understanding the pattern and impact of OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals with a feminist lens is essential to crafting inclusive digital safety policies and advocacy strategies. Hence, this research seeks to explore the manifestations of OGBV, its consequences and coping mechanisms of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Ethiopia.

Research questions:

- What kinds of OGBV do LGBTQIA+ individuals face?
- How are LGBTQIA+ individuals affected by OGBV?
- How do other layers of identities within the LGBTQIA+ community impact their vulnerability and effect of OGBV?
- How are LGBTQIA+ individuals resisting OGBV?

This study is intended to contribute to the growing body of knowledge aimed at a safer and more equitable digital space.

¹ Botha, K. (2023). *Our identities under arrest: A global overview on the enforcement of laws criminalising consensual same-sex sexual acts between adults and diverse gender expressions*. ILGA. <https://ilga.org/our-identities-under-arrest>

2.

Literature review



2.1 Global trends on OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals

Globally, LGBTQIA+ individuals are disproportionately affected by OGBV, with data from the Global North highlighting significantly higher rates of online harassment compared to their heterosexual counterparts. The anonymity of online spaces, the speed and scale of digital communication and inadequate moderation or platform accountability contribute to a hostile online environment, which in turn has severe psychological consequences. Victims often experience anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation, exacerbated by the lack of immediate support or recourse.

OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals is a pervasive issue observed across the globe, with studies revealing alarming trends of OGBV and its impacts in various countries.

2.1.1 The rise of OGBV as a global concern

While the proliferation of technology offers many positive possibilities, it also introduces another dimension to gender inequality and marginalisation. The struggles that LGBTQIA+ individuals face in daily life often extend to their digital media platforms. Online violence is exacerbated by factors such as the potential for anonymity, the lack of temporal and spatial constraints, larger audience sizes, absence of physical interaction, high frequency of violations, the variety of media that can be used and the reduced threat of intervention.² These elements collectively create a hostile digital environment, intensifying the challenges faced by these groups.³

Previous studies commonly highlight that LGBTQIA+ individuals face significant risks of online harassment and hate speech, reflecting and paralleling the broader societal attitudes and discrimination they face offline. Studies conducted in the context of the Global North consistently highlight higher rates of online harassment experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals compared to their heterosexual counterparts.⁴ This increased harassment occurs on platforms like social media and online forums, exacerbating psychological distress among victims.

Studies show that OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals in the context of the Global South takes various forms, such as cyberbullying, harassment, hate speech⁵ and an alarming trend of doxxing, where personal information of

2 Vogels, E. A. (2021, 13 January). The State of Online Harassment. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/inter-net/2021/01/13/the-state-of-online-harassment/>

3 Anderson, B. (2025). Doxxing to destroy: The convergence of transphobic hate speech and non-consensual disclosure on X. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590251345736>

4 Vogels, E. A. (2021, 13 January). Op. cit.

5 Ma'rof, A. A., Rosnon, M., & Ayub, N. A. (2023). The Impact of psychological factors on cyberbullying behaviors among youth in Selangor, Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(17). <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v13-i17/19819>

LGBTQIA+ individuals is maliciously exposed.⁶ The situation in the Global South is worsened due to lack of legal frameworks and policies against hate speech to protect marginalised groups, lack of awareness and lack of effective moderation policies to protect communities at risk.⁷

2.1.2 Impact of OGBV on LGBTQIA+ individuals and measures to be taken

The studies reviewed collectively underline the widespread nature of OGBV and its profound psychological impact on victims. A study in the context of the Philippines, for example, indicates a strong correlation between online victimisation and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ youth.⁸ A study that looked into a specific form of OGBV in Korea, which is the distribution of non-consensual sexual images online, similarly reported the profound emotional and psychological toll on LGBTQIA+ individuals⁹, including increased levels of depression and anxiety¹⁰.

To combat this, the studies suggest the urgent need for improved awareness and education campaigns to change societal attitudes, robust support systems, and greater accountability from social media platforms to protect LGBTQIA+ individuals from online violence.¹¹ Legal scholars also advocate for stronger legal protections¹² and policy responses to the criminalisation of OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals.¹³

2.2 Regional context on GBV and technology: Ethiopia in focus

Online activity has opened new avenues for gender-based violence (GBV). OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals in African countries is a pressing issue manifesting in various forms. Studies in the context of South Africa, Kenya and Uganda show the significant online harassment faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly on social media platforms, leading to physical threats and exile, impacting

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- 6 Kim, G., & Stallings, B. (2022). Saving Sexuality from stigma: A perception study on LGBT bullying in Korean international schools. *Journal of Student Research*, 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.47611/jsrhs.v11i3.2886>
 - 7 Singh, R., Nath, L. P., Mishra, P., Jain, S., Singh, A., & Benedict, S. M. (2024). Online hate speech in India: Legal reforms and social impact on social media platforms. SSRN. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4732818>
 - 8 Manalastas, E. J. (2013). Sexual orientation and suicide risk in the Philippines: Evidence from a nationally representative sample of young Filipino men. *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, 46(1), 1-13. <https://pages.upd.edu.ph/ejmanalastas/publications/sexual-orientation-and-suicide-risk-philippines-evidence-nationally-representative>
 - 9 Kim, E., & Park, H. (2018). Perceived gender discrimination, belief in a just world, self-esteem, and depression in Korean working women: A moderated mediation model. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 69, 143-150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.06.006>
 - 10 Cole, T., & Cole, D. (2022). Exploring the effectiveness of legislation combating digital non-consensual sexually explicit image distribution. *Journal of Victimology and Victim Justice*, 5(1), 9-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25166069221117187>
 - 11 Malta, M., Silva, A. B., Silva, C. M. F., LeGrand, S., Seixas, M., Benevides, B., Kalume, C., & Whetten, K. (2023, 28 March). Addressing discrimination and violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) persons from Brazil: A mobile health intervention [Preprint]. *Res Sq*. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-2034975/v1>
 - 12 Duguay, S., Burgess, J., & Suzor, N. (2020). Queer women's experiences of patchwork platform governance on Tinder, Instagram, and Vine. *Convergence*, 26(2), 237-252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856518781530>
 - 13 Citron, D. K., & Franks, M. A. (2014). Criminalizing revenge porn. *Wake Forest Law Review*, 49.

productivity and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation.¹⁴

In Ethiopia, GBV is highly prevalent with 35% of married women aged 15-49 experiencing physical, emotional or sexual violence from their husband or partner, 68% agreeing that wife beating can be justified, and about 65% of women aged 15-49 having undergone female genital mutilation (FGM).¹⁵ It is common that GBV increases during emergencies, including armed conflict, economic crisis or disease outbreaks. In the context of Ethiopia over the past 5 years, the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian crises and changes in the donor landscape exacerbated the already existing injustice including risks associated with GBV, disproportionately affecting women, girls and adolescents.

Similarly, in an increasingly growing use of internet and social media,¹⁶ hate speech and OGBV are found to be a serious concern that have a range of consequences for individuals, such as fear and other psychological symptoms, lowered self-esteem, loss of dignity, withdrawal from the public, both physically and in terms of participation in public debate, and inciting violence against individuals of certain identity. Although it is understudied, research on OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals in Ethiopia presents unique challenges amidst cultural and legal contexts that often stigmatise non-heteronormative identities. As in many African countries, Ethiopia faces significant gaps in legal protections and enforcement mechanisms, exacerbating the vulnerability of LGBTQIA+ individuals to OGBV. Addressing these issues requires not only legal reforms but also comprehensive awareness campaigns, education initiatives and support systems to foster a more inclusive and respectful online environment for all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Centre for Information Resilience examined the pervasive issue of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) targeting women and girls in Ethiopia.¹⁷ By analysing social media posts across platforms such as Facebook, Telegram and X, the research highlights the normalisation of gendered abuse, its intersection with other forms of discrimination and its significant impact on the participation of women and girls in everyday life. The findings underscore the need for targeted policy solutions and educational efforts to combat TFGBV and promote a safe and inclusive online environment for women and girls in Ethiopia.

14 African Development Bank Group. (2016). *Minding the gaps: Identifying strategies to address gender-based cyber violence in Kenya*; Sundani, N., Mangaka, A. C., & Mamokhere, J. (2022). Social media as a campaign tool against online gender-based violence in South Africa. *ScienceRise*, 5, 30-41; WOUNGNET. (2020). *Bridging the digital gender gap in Uganda: An assessment of women's rights online based on the principles of the African Declaration of Internet Rights and Freedoms*. <https://africaninternetrights.org/sites/default/files/Bridging-the-Digital-Gender-Gap-in-Uganda-WOUNGNET.pdf>

15 Central Statistical Agency (CSA) [Ethiopia], & ICF. (2017). *Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey 2016*. <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR328/FR328.pdf>

16 Nadim, M., & Fladmoe, A. (2016). *Hate speech, Report 1: Research on the nature and extent of hate speech*. Norwegian Institute for Social Research. https://samfunnsforskning.brage.unit.no/samfunnsforskning-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2442521/Report%2B2016_20.pdf?sequence=1

17 Centre for Information Resilience. (2024). *Silenced, Shamed and Threatened*. https://www.info-res.org/app/uploads/2024/11/CIR_Silenced-Shamed-and-Threatened.pdf

While the study comprehensively addresses the intersection of gender with ethnicity and religion, it does not adequately explore how sexuality intersects with gender in the context of online abuse. The lack of focus on LGBTQIA+ experiences and the specific types of hate speech and discrimination they face in Ethiopia represents a gap in the research. This omission means that the full spectrum of intersectional abuse related to both gender and sexuality remains underexplored, potentially overlooking unique vulnerabilities and forms of discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals.

However, the issue of GBV and OGBV is not well articulated and rarely discussed compared to its prevalence and severity. Meanwhile reporting systems, particularly around OGBV appear weak and limited in response. Although Ethiopia introduced a hate speech and disinformation prevention proclamation in 2019, many sexual assaults remain under-reported for fear of victim blaming and shaming, but primarily because there are legal loopholes that leave survivors in a more vulnerable position.

GBV affects LGBTQIA+ people just as much as everyone else, but due to the criminalisation and stigmatisation of homosexuals in Ethiopia, there are no documented cases of GBV within the LGBTQIA+ community. Pedophilia is instead labelled as “homosexual rape”. Article 629 of Proclamation No. 414/200428, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia’s Criminal Code, deals with acts that are deemed indecent or homosexual, stating that “anyone who commits a homosexual act or any other indecent act with another person of the same sex faces imprisonment.” Article 629 of the Ethiopian Criminal Code stipulates that consensual homosexual actions are punishable by up to 15 years in prison. As per the 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Study, 97% of Ethiopian citizens think that homosexuality should be condemned and that those who partake in such relationships should be facing punishment.¹⁸

As a result, LGBTQIA+ people who are perceived as “rapists” live in a more dangerous and abusive environment. This leaves the digital space hostile for LGBTQIA+ individuals with internet access, as digital violence against them is often justified under the guise of freedom of expression due to prevailing societal beliefs that homosexuality is un-African and punishable by law. This usually translates into the physical world and encourages physical violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals.

During the Ethiopian legal reform, the Legal Justice Affairs Advisory Council (LJAAC) was established in June 2018 with a 3-year mandate to advise the Office of the Attorney General in its effort to undertake a comprehensive reform of the legal and justice system. The Council’s initial focus was on reforming

18 Pew Research Center. (2007, 4 October). Chapter 3: Views of religion and morality. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2007/10/04/chapter-3-views-of-religion-and-morality/>

draconian laws such as the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, the Charities and Societies Proclamation, and the Mass Media Proclamation. However, it later expanded its scope to include other areas of law that could contribute to national democratisation and human rights promotion.¹⁹ In February 2020, the Ethiopian parliament passed a proclamation against hate speech, defining it as any speech that deliberately promotes hatred, discrimination or attacks against a person, or a discernible group based on ethnicity, religion, race, gender or disability.²⁰ Despite the focus on human rights promotion, there has been a notable absence of conversation regarding the Ethiopian LGBTQIA+ community. The definition of hate speech as discrimination against gender reflects a heteronormative perspective, excluding LGBTQIA+ individuals from important national and international discussions. This exclusion has created a hostile digital environment for LGBTQIA+ individuals with internet access, as digital violence against them is often justified under the guise of freedom of expression. The prevailing belief that homosexuality is un-African and punishable by law further marginalises LGBTQ+ individuals.

2.2.1 Anti-homosexuality advocacy in Ethiopia

Formation and legal status of the anti-gay association

The association “ስለ ኢትዮጵያ ዝም ከንልም: ትውልድን ከግብረ ሰዶም አንታደግ” (We won't be silent about Ethiopia: Let's save the generation from homosexuality) was officially registered on 19 November 2019, by the civil societies' agency. It holds certificate number 4581 and has attained legal personality in accordance with proclamation 1113/2019. The association claims its mission is to protect Ethiopians from homosexuality through robust online advocacy against homosexual activities.

Advocacy and major public events

The International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA), Africa's largest conference on HIV/AIDS, was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2011. Anti-gender groups and religious leaders attempted to cancel the conference, which was ultimately called off at the last minute following a closed-door meeting between the religious leaders and then Minister of Health, Dr. Tedros Adhanom. A poster that claimed to expose the agenda of the meeting at the Jupiter Hotel was circulated on social media. The headline reads: “Agenda of the meeting at Jupiter Hotel revealed,” followed by the statement: “For the World HIV Conference which will be held at Millennium Hall, the main point of the agenda is to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS and homosexuality as a solution.” The poster further alleged that one

19 Ibrahim, A. M., & Idris, A. K. (2020, 27 February). The silent fighters: The volunteers behind Ethiopia's democratic reforms. *Addis Standard*. <https://addisstandard.com/profile-the-silent-fighters-the-volunteers-behind-ethiopia's-democratic-reforms/>

20 Federal Negarit Gazette. (2020, 23 March). Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020, art 2(2).

of the conference's objectives was to pressure the Ethiopian government to adopt laws supporting what it described as "this extremely bad practice which leads to corrupt families and the country."²¹

A conference at the African Union on 9 June 2012 organised by United for Life and other Christian groups, with participation from government officials and religious leaders, was a pivotal event.. The conference titled "Homosexuality and its associated social disastrous consequences," featured a presentation by the president of United for Life. The findings presented claimed that homosexuality was a result of inappropriate upbringing and linked it to STDs, HIV and severe psychological disorders. This conference was instrumental in reinforcing negative stereotypes about homosexuality within Ethiopian society.²²

The visit of US President Barack Obama to Ethiopia on 26 July 2015 sparked widespread rumours that his visit aimed to discuss the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Social media platforms became a battleground for expressing opposition to Obama's perceived agenda. The then Ethiopian Foreign Minister, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, posted an image of a rainbow over Addis Ababa with a caption marking Obama's arrival, which received thousands of hateful comments.²³ This incident exemplified the deep-seated resistance to LGBTQIA+ rights and the extent to which international influences were perceived as threats to traditional values.

Toto Tours, an LGBTQIA+ tour operator based in Chicago, USA, announced a 16-day tour to Ethiopia from 25 October to 9 November 2019, which included a visit to the Lalibela Church.²⁴ This announcement was picked up by a journalist, who called on the government to act. The subsequent Facebook post sparked online violence towards the LGBTQIA+ community. On 3 June 2019, Dereje, president of the Zim Anilim association, held a press conference stating, "They can't come to Ethiopia and visit Lalibela and other historical places because homosexuality is a crime. If they come here, they will be attacked."²⁵

Dan Ware, founder of Toto Tours, received death threats, with vivid descriptions of how they would be killed if they arrived in Addis Ababa, including methods such as beheading, burning at the stake, being buried alive, shooting and stoning. Ware had to contact the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) after some YouTube

21 Lemma, M. (2011, 1 December). Ethiopia: Homosexuality debate as capital hosts AIDS conference. *Global Voices*. <https://globalvoices.org/2011/12/01/ethiopia-homosexuality-debate-arises-as-ethiopia-hosts-aids-conference/>

22 Stewart, C. (2012, 15 June). Ethiopia balks at Western pressure for LGBT rights. *76 Crimes*. <https://76crimes.com/2012/06/15/ethiopia-balks-at-western-pressure-for-lgbt-rights/>

23 Ghebreyesus, T. A. (2015, 26 July). Facebook post. <https://www.facebook.com/DrTedros.Official/photos/a.555336211202542/819701018099392/?type=3>

24 <https://www.tototours.com/Abyssinia.php>

25 Miller, E. M. (2019, 14 June). Ethiopia tour for gay, lesbian travelers in jeopardy amid backlash from faith groups. *Religion News Service*. <https://religionnews.com/2019/06/14/ethiopia-tour-for-gay-and-lesbian-travelers-in-jeopardy-amid-backlash-from-religious-groups/>

creators shared his home address.²⁶ The tour was condemned by the Mayor of Addis Ababa and leaders of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.²⁷

On 5 March 2022, “ስለ ኢትዮጵያ ዝም ክንፈም: ትውልድን ከግብረ ሰዶም ክንታደግ” hosted an event aimed at raising awareness about homosexuality and how Ethiopians can prevent its spread within the country. This event gathered young Ethiopians from various regional states and sought to educate them on the perceived dangers of homosexuality. The president of the association presented a paper titled “Homosexuality: The Modern Colonization and Silent Killer,”²⁸ highlighting the association’s stance that homosexuality is a form of modern colonisation and a threat to Ethiopian society. This presentation and subsequent discussions underscored the association’s efforts to mobilise public sentiment against homosexuality through fear-based narratives.

Government crackdown on LGBTQIA+ activities

On 10 August 2023, the Ethiopian government initiated a widespread crackdown on hotels, pubs, bars and restaurants under suspicion of hosting homosexual activities.²⁹ This aggressive action encouraged the public to report any perceived “heinous” acts to the police. This crackdown was a direct response to a hate campaign known as Gibresdomon Eqawemalew (“I am against homosexuality”) that gained traction on TikTok following the leak of a video showing two men dancing at a party. Celebrities, Christian groups and social media influencers were significant contributors to the August 2023 campaign, sharing threats against the LGBTQIA+ community that garnered thousands of views and endorsements. Some of the videos instilled fear in the audience by spreading misinformation about homosexuality. The campaign quickly spread beyond TikTok, reaching Facebook and Telegram channels.³⁰ These platforms became hubs for disseminating threats and misinformation about homosexuality. Videos aimed to instil fear in the audience by spreading false information, further inflaming public sentiment against the LGBTQIA+ community.

Influence of religious figures

Prominent religious figures also played a crucial role in the hate campaign. A notable evangelical Christian pastor called for gay individuals to be publicly stripped naked and whipped as a deterrent. He suggested that such actions would dissuade gay individuals from visiting Ethiopia, further promoting a culture of violence and discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community.³¹

26 Ibid.

27 Toto Tours. (2019, 25 June). Death threats put off LGBTQ Ethiopia tour.

28 Sile Ethiopia Zim Anilim. (2022, 2 April). ስለ ኢትዮጵያ ዝም ክንፈም. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=SEXdSH-6qAJA>

29 NBC News. (2023, 10 August). Ethiopia cracks down on gay sex in hotels, bars, restaurants. <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/ethiopia-cracks-gay-sex-hotels-bars-restaurants-rcna99492>

30 MambaOnline. (2023, 9 August). Ethiopia: LGBTI+ community facing surge in hate and violence. <https://www.mambaonline.com/2023/08/09/ethiopia-lgbti-community-facing-surge-in-hate-and-violence/>

31 Anna, C. (2023, 11 August). LGBTQ+ people in Ethiopia blame attacks on their community on inciteful and lingering TikTok videos. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-tiktok-lgbtq-threats-attacks-f4ace0e1968d6bad46bb05710feac5cf>

On 12 February 2024, The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church issued a statement condemning the endeavours of Western nations to “advance homosexuality and same-sex relationships” in Ethiopia “through implicit political and economic pressure.”³²

2.2.2 Queer resistance

LGBTQIA+ communities across Africa have found different forms of resisting through public protests, literature, art and religious practice.

In 2018, activists and grassroots organisations in Kenya created #Repeal162 that calls for the recognition and protection of the rights of the LGBTI community in Kenya.³³

During the 2020 End SARS protests in Nigeria in 2020, queer people came out with “Queer Lives Matter” placards. Even though some were being silenced by other protestors, they voiced the unique challenges they from police brutality.³⁴

Even though different religious institutions excommunicate queer individuals, many queer religious leaders have opened different religious spaces for queer people across Africa. The queer imam in Cape Town³⁵ and the church in Uganda for LGBTQIA+³⁶ community are some examples of how queer people continue to gather and fellowship regardless of the religious institutions’ stance on homosexuality.

The arts, including literature, music and visual arts, also plays a central role in queer activism and resistance. These expressions not only challenge homophobia and transphobia but also offer a way to imagine and create alternative futures where queer identities are celebrated. The works of South African artist Zanele Muholi highlight the challenges but also resistance of queer South Africans. Meanwhile, the book *Queer Africa* “celebrates the diversity and fluidity of queer and African identities, offering a sometimes radical re-imagining of life on the continent,” while the Afro Queer Podcast “highlights queer Africans living, loving, surviving and thriving on the African continent and in the diaspora.” Public installations that challenge religious conservatism, such as by artist Neo Musangi³⁷ are some ways queer individuals and organisations are continuously resisting homophobia and transphobia.

32 Addis Standard. (2024, 13 February). Ethiopian Orthodox Church denounces 'Western influence on homosexuality', calls for government resistance. *Addis Standard*. <https://addisstandard.com/news-ethiopian-orthodox-church-denounces-western-influence-on-homosexuality-calls-for-government-resistance/>

33 Kuchu Times. (2018, 28 September). The repeal of the anti-homosexuality laws in Kenya. *Kuchu Times*. <https://www.kuchutimes.com/2018/09/the-repeal-of-the-anti-homosexuality-laws-in-kenya/>

34 Ofoma, D. (2020, 23 November). Queer Nigerians insist their lives matter at #EndSARS protests. *Them*. <https://www.them.us/story/lgbtq-nigerians-end-sars-protests>

35 Fullerton, J. (2022, 19 October). 'I'm hoping there will be more queer imams'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/oct/19/im-hoping-there-will-be-more-queer-imams>

36 Dray, L. (2023, 24 April). Sunday church for LGBTQ Ugandans - in pictures. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2023/apr/24/sunday-church-for-lgbtq-ugandans-in-pictures>

37 <https://neomusangi.wordpress.com/2014/12/09/queer-in-africa-neo-musangi-and-selogadi-mampane/>

Additionally, the underground LGBTQIA+ movement in Ethiopia, while operating primarily through social media, plays a vital role in the broader queer African resistance. It allows individuals to share their stories and support one another by creating alternative safe spaces and creating a sense of belonging. Social media is the only space where LGBTQIA+ individuals can connect with their community while maintaining anonymity. However, even when concealing their identities, they remain vulnerable to daily threats and instances of OGBV. The recent surge in hate campaigns vividly illustrates the extent of OGBV experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals. This includes the dissemination of physical assaults against LGBTQIA+ individuals, image-based abuse where LGBTQIA+ individuals or those presumed to be queer are exposed on platforms like TikTok and Telegram, and harassment or interrogation via Facebook Messenger. Despite these challenges, LGBTQIA+ individuals persist in organising online to safeguard their community and archive their stories.

2.3 Research gaps in OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals

Despite the significant progress made in understanding the scope and impact of OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals, several critical research gaps remain that need to be addressed:

2.3.1 Geographical coverage

Understudied regions: Much of the research focuses on specific countries or regions, leaving many areas underexplored. For instance, while there is some data on South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda, many other African countries including Ethiopia lack comprehensive studies on this issue. Additionally, research is often concentrated in urban areas, neglecting rural contexts where internet access and cultural attitudes may differ significantly.

Comparative studies: There is a need for more comparative studies across different countries and regions to understand the variations in OGBV experiences and responses among LGBTQIA+ individuals. It is also critical to adopt a decolonial feminist framework that looks into masculinist nationalism, heteropatriarchy and colonial ideas of nation state, and its impact on LGBTQIA+ communities.

2.3.2 Intersectionality

Multiple marginalised identities: Research often treats LGBTQIA+ individuals as a homogenous group, without adequately considering the intersectionality of other identities such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability and religion. Understanding how these intersecting identities influence the experience and impact of online GBV is crucial for developing targeted interventions.

Gender-specific analysis: There is limited research focusing specifically on transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, who may face unique forms of online violence.

2.3.3 Coping mechanisms and resilience: Research should also focus on the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies employed by LGBTQIA+ individuals facing online OGBV, to better support their mental health and well-being.

Hence, our research aims to fill the above research gaps in the area by developing a comprehensive understanding of online OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals. By expanding the geographical scope, incorporating intersectional analyses, examining the coping mechanisms and understanding means of resilience, we aim to contribute to a safer and more inclusive online environment for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

3. Research methodology and theoretical framework



3.1. Research methodology

Sampling and data collection technique

Data for this case study research was gathered from a diverse group of study participants, including members of the LGBTQIA+ community both in-country and in-exile, and feminist activists. The selection of study participants was based on purposive sampling with full consent, primarily focusing on individuals from Addis Ababa and Adama, with all regions included. All in-depth interviews conducted with LGBTQIA+ individuals were virtual due to the current aggressive anti-gender movement in Ethiopia. Data collection was conducted in local language by using instruments developed in English and translated into the local language, Amharic.

In total, 50 in-depth interviews were conducted with LGBTQIA+ community members from different gender and sexual identities, along with in-depth interviews with eight feminist advocates in Addis Ababa. In-depth interviews with advocates have been included in the proposal due to the critical roles these groups play in addressing online gender-based violence and related issues within the LGBTQIA+ community. Advocates are at the forefront of the resistance, actively sharing resources and combating violence, providing valuable insights into the depth and impact of such violence. These interviews helped to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals and the strategies employed by advocates to address OGBV effectively.

Although we initially planned to conduct focus group discussions (FGDs) with LGBTQIA+ individuals, queer advocates have advised against this approach due to the prevailing hostile environment, which could jeopardise the safety of both participants and researchers. While FGDs could have been a valuable tool for documenting the collective memory of homophobia, transphobia and LGBTQIA+ resistance, we have decided not to proceed with this method. Prioritising the safety and well-being of participants remains paramount in our research process.

Furthermore, social media content analysis was conducted from 100+ TikTok contents, platforms where a significant portion of hate campaigns are prevalent.

A visual documentary was also created with 10 LGBTQIA+ individuals in Ethiopia and those in exile to creatively curate their acts of resistance.

Data analysis technique

Data analysis was conducted in line with the study questions, and themes generated from data. The analysis was shaped by the intersectional feminist theoretical framework. The analysis was divided under five major themes discussing individuals' experiences, shared values, personal understandings and

existing documents/ records. Content analysis was used to identify recurring narratives, language patterns and visual strategies used in online hate, and to examine their impact on LGBTQIA+ communities.

Outputs and dissemination technique

To ensure the research findings are effectively disseminated and translated into action, different approaches will be employed. Key outputs will include article publications, exhibitions and online workshops. Stakeholder engagement will target embassies and feminist civil society organisations (CSOs) teams to broaden the reach and impact of the work. The online exhibition will visually highlight the resistance of LGBTQIA+ communities and the online workshop will bring together queer activists, researchers and allies to create awareness and collective strategising. Stakeholder engagement will specifically target embassies and feminist CSOs to broaden the reach and policy relevance of the work.

We plan on developing educational materials and resources in local languages to raise awareness about OGBV, in addition to collaborating with queer advocates and underground organisations to implement training programmes for online platforms on addressing hate speech and violent content. The project also seeks to establish support services for individuals affected by OGBV.

The policy recommendations coming from this study are to be shared with the few ally policymakers and legislators in the country to advocate for stronger laws and regulations that combat OGBV. We will also target online platforms such as Facebook and TikTok, and work with international CSOs, academic institutions and advocacy groups to amplify the research findings. Participation in workshops, conferences and other events will facilitate dialogue and collaboration among such stakeholders. Furthermore, the initiative aims to amplify queer Ethiopian stories through international photography exhibitions, fostering global solidarity and awareness.

3.2 Theoretical framework

Intersectional feminist theory considers the many ways each individual experiences discrimination. It is not only a methodological but also a political perspective that discusses the inherent link between gender, race and social class as social identities that are constructed, complex and changing.

Intersectional feminist theory was used to bring out the layers of identities that play a role in making each LGBTQIA+ community's experience unique and distinctive to comprehend the complexity of gender-based violence among LGBTQIA+ individuals. LGBTQIA+ individuals in Ethiopia have several identities that make their lived experiences unique to their stories i.e. urban-rural divide, ethnic identity, religion and disability.

3.3. Ethical considerations

During all stages of the study, the dignity and protection of the research participants was the fundamental guiding principle. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, the privacy and confidentiality rights of the research participants were protected by making sure that their views remain confidential, and by respecting their right to decline answers to any of the questions when reluctant, and free withdrawal from the study at any stage. By communicating the details on the aim of the study and the mechanism of protecting their confidentiality, the participants in the study were requested to freely give informed consent based on their interest.

Considering the restrictive policy environment, it was challenging to get ethical clearance from professional associations or academic institutions. Hence, presenting our methodologies to be reviewed by colleagues at different levels was our accountability mechanism to ensure that the study does no harm to the study participants and the researchers.

To safeguard their identities, participants used pseudonyms. All interviews were conducted via encrypted messaging and call services like Signal.

The data transcribers we hired were carefully vetted reviewing their experience and reputation to have empathy and a solid awareness and skills in data protection. For more than four years, the transcribers and translators have been integral members of the queer community, providing support to the underground movement. To complete this task, nonetheless, they were strictly supervised by researchers. Study participants will examine the draft report prior to distribution to triangulate the validity and reliability of the data. This will give participants a sense of ownership and engagement and serves as an accountability mechanism for the researchers.

3.4 Research team members and positionality

This research was conducted by two women researchers. They jointly developed the research questions and data collection tools, and both contributed to writing the research report.

One researcher has substantial experience in conducting feminist research, and has led numerous trainings on qualitative research, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education and gender. The researcher's most recent graduate studies dissertation examines sexuality education in the context of Africa.

The other researcher has significant experience in addressing issues affecting children and women's rights and has contributed to several development

projects as a humanitarian photographer. She has worked extensively on matters impacting marginalised groups in Ethiopia and across Africa. She has also led training in photovoice research and ethical storytelling, ensuring that underrepresented voices are depicted with dignity and authenticity.

Four individuals, three of whom are queer and wish to remain anonymous, assisted on the data transcription, social media content review, and participant recruitment for this research.

As feminist advocates and survivors of OGBV, both researchers approached this study with a personal commitment to addressing the ways in which digital spaces are weaponised against marginalised groups and voices. Their experiences in feminist activism informed their methodological approach, ensuring that the research not only critiques the structures of oppression but also centres survivor voices and embraces feminist principles of reflexivity and intersectionality. The researchers acknowledge the potential biases their own experiences may introduce but also highlight how these experiences provide unique insights and a deep empathy for the participants and the issues being studied. Most importantly, the researchers, including the research assistants, are strong allies of queer rights movement in Ethiopia.

4. Research findings



4.1. Conceptual understanding of OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals

Possessing conceptual clarity on OGBV and gender identities remains critical to understand the experience and to challenge the status quo. The study findings indicate that most of the study participants, both LGBTQIA+ individuals and rights advocates, share a general understanding of OGBV. The study participants generally defined OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals as any violation of rights or attack made by using technology. All participants appear to agree that OGBV is a harmful and dangerous act that affects the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals:

When I think of TFGBV, the social media comes to my mind, including revenge porn,³⁸ bullying, stalking, identity theft, usually by targeting women. It's the abuse of rights in the online space. The abuse that LGBTQIA+ individuals face is even more severe, it's mob violence. (He/him, 34-45, Addis Ababa, ally and human rights advocate)

Participants from the queer community specifically defined OGBV from a practical understanding with hands-on experience on the matter. They appear to argue that the OGBV comes in different forms, listed as insults, threats, violent content, misinformation, doxxing, outing, stalking, slut-shaming and non-consensual sharing of intimate images using technology. Most of the study participants defined OGBV in the scope of social media platforms by focusing on the violence LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies face on Facebook, TikTok, YouTube and Twitter:

The hate is clear. There are so many issues and differences in this country, ethnic politics, religion and different ideas but people come together as one when it comes to being anti LGBTQ. I don't think there is a group as strongly hated as our community. Even though imprisonment is given for homosexuality, no one will stop them if someone tries to kill you. (Gay, he/him, 18-24, Addis Ababa)

It seems that there is a slight difference among individuals in the detailed conceptualisation of gender and GBV, shaped by their religion, culture, experience and exposure. The findings reveal, for example, that various individuals possess different levels of intersectional understanding of OGBV. Some seem to perceive that women face OGBV daily while LGBTQIA+ individuals as a group experience it in a more seasonal hate campaign:

38 Maddocks, S. (2019, 16 January). "Revenge porn": 5 important reasons why we should not call it by that name. *GenderIT.org*. <https://www.genderit.org/articles/revenge-porn-5-important-reasons-why-we-should-not-call-it-name>

The OGBV that women face is every single day kind of violence. Women's expressions and social media existence is critically seen, they experience doxxing, and misrepresentation of their stories is an everyday challenge. When you come to other marginalised groups like LGBTQIA+, it's when there is a mass campaign which is usually unpredictable, but you know it when the hate campaign is building up. (She/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa, feminist advocate)

Such arguments may show that there seems to be heteronormative view of being a woman. Their assumption seems to neglect that LGBTQIA+ women are also affected by the online attacks women face daily. This is discussed by Connell³⁹ multiple times with her "hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity" theory where the most "natural" and acceptable femininity is associated with white, heterosexual, "feminine" women.

Such a conceptual gap seems to manifest in the feminist advocacy against OGBV that doesn't own the violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals as its agenda:

Even at that time of a scary campaign, the first targets are feminist advocates because we are already labelled and associated with the LGBTQ community. So, every time there is a hate campaign, you are expected to prove yourself as "anti-LGBTQ feminist" by joining the hate campaign. "Either with us or against us" is the way. Women's rights advocates are frequently targeted both every day and during the hate campaign. (She/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa, feminist advocate)

Humbert et al. explained the need for an intersectional analytical approach that addresses two main aspects.⁴⁰ First, the examination of GBV across various groups, considering factors that may create disadvantages or vulnerabilities, while also acknowledging the role of "those in power." Second, extending the analysis beyond women to include non-binary individuals and men, considering their experiences through the lenses of trans status and gender identity. There are also some advocates that seem to be in line with Humbert's argument and understand OGBV from such an intersectional perspective, that OGBV is a violence that targets marginalised groups as they are the most vulnerable:

TFGBV is a violence that happens online, using digital tools. What happens online is a direct reflection of what happens on the ground. Marginalised groups are the easy target. (She/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa, feminist advocate)

39 Connell, R. (1987). *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Stanford University Press; Connell, R. (1995). *Masculinities*. Polity Press; Connell, R. (2012). Masculinity research and global change. *Masculinities & Social Change*, 1(1), 4-18.

40 Humbert, A. L., Strid, S., Tanwar, J., Lipinsky, A., & Schredl, C. (2024). The role of intersectionality and context in measuring gender-based violence in universities and research-performing organizations in Europe for the development of inclusive structural interventions. *Violence Against Women*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012241231773>

One participant also added:

I think being LGBTQIA+ is the most targeted identity more than any identity. There might be other identities contributing to being targeted, but the main is sexual identity. (She/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa, feminist advocate)

Such differences in understanding of OGBV against LGBTQIA+ seem to be shaped by experience and learning opportunities:

At a personal level, I was raised as a homophobe. I think for the past 10 years I decided to unlearn every day and grew out of it through reading. The people around me who challenged me have taught me a lot. Now I'm an ally. (He/him, 34-45, Addis Ababa, Ally and human rights advocate)

Someone also added:

For example, when I was in high school, I had no idea about OGBV. I received an unsolicited private picture in my Facebook message. I was only 15 at the time. I was shocked, I didn't tell anyone, it was in the middle of the night. When I received training on OGBV in 2018, I realised that it's not only me who experienced this. So, I decided to work on OGBV training targeting high school students in public schools. (She/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa, feminist advocate)

Hence, one can say that the gender and OGBV understanding of individuals can improve through continuous learning and reflection. It is crucial to recognise that adopting an intersectional lens requires deep reflection and, at times, engaging in uncomfortable conversations, as we strive to identify how, as advocates, we may consciously or unconsciously contribute to the marginalisation of others.

Building on existing scholarship, it is important to recognise that privilege and oppression are not static; they can shift over time and vary across different contexts. Furthermore, vulnerability to OGBV manifests in diverse forms, with individuals experiencing it in unique ways. A queer ally from Addis Ababa argued that "online GBV don't usually stay online, it also translates to physical violence" when she defined the scope of OGBV.

The very recent OGBV experience faced by the feminist TikTok influencer that forced her to flee the country is a very good example of this. Lella Misikir, a feminist advocate known for speaking out on GBV and feminism, was recently forced into exile from Ethiopia. The backlash began after someone discovered that she followed queer individuals on her social media. A targeted online campaign against her spread, quickly escalating into threats against her safety. The intimidation became so severe that she feared for her life. Reflecting on how the experience affected her daily life, she shared that she eventually stopped

going out altogether, only feeling safe enough to visit close friends' homes. Speaking about the hate campaign, she said:

It was devastating. My followings were always public, there was nothing secretive about it. I will follow whoever I want on my platforms. It's not illegal. But they tried to control me, who I could follow, what I could talk about. What about my own rights? I've sacrificed so much already, my safety, my social life, my mental health. But I won't sacrifice my voice. I'm fighting for myself too.

As the threats intensified and misinformation spread rapidly online, she felt she had no choice but to leave the country:

I was anxious all the time. People were saying, "I know where she lives." I couldn't even step outside. I was angry. I felt stripped of my identity. This wasn't something I ever imagined. Ethiopia is the only place I want to be, but I can't. Being exiled and away from my family is incredibly hard.

OGBV targeting feminist advocates and LGBTQIA+ individuals as such often impacts their lives beyond the digital space with consequences that extend far beyond online hate.

While feminists often face online violence, celebrities and media personalities are also frequent targets. Their self-expression is framed as a threat and exploited for clickbait on platforms like YouTube. They are often labelled as "Gibre Sodom," "culture destroyers," "666" and "Illuminati" for something as simple as their fashion choices, hairstyles or video clips. This highlights how OGBV targets anyone with attacks coming from any social media users who position themselves as defenders of religion, culture and patriarchal norms.

4.2 Experience of OGBV and the concerning trends

Nearly all participants who use different social media platforms actively have experienced some forms of digital violence. A significant number of participants felt targeted by watching violent content against LGBTQIA+ community on social media. Moreover, a large number of participants shared experiences of violence at a personal level through messaging apps as well as various types of violence through their day-to-day online activities and beyond:

There is that sense of security as I come from a small community. I meet people whenever I want. It is freer. People in my area don't think we exist so it is safer. I saw a lot of hate speech, there was even a challenge, something like "find him and kill him" and a lot of misinformation about our community. Even though I was far from such violence and the contents were coming out of Addis Ababa, I was sad for my friends there. (Gay, he/him, 25-34, Oromia region)

The findings indicate that the evolution of OGBV against LGBTQIA+ individuals intensified with the growth of social media platforms. It is reported that initially, Facebook and YouTube were the primary social media platforms where threats and misinformation spread. The experiences reported by LGBTQIA+ individuals highlight how this violence has shifted over time from platforms like Facebook to newer ones like TikTok, which are now commonly used for targeting LGBTQIA+ individuals:

I think all platforms are the same, I don't think there is any platform that is safe from OGBV. Because TikTok is trending now, many of the Facebook users have moved. Hence, the abuse also migrated to TikTok. (She/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa, feminist advocate)

The study participants highlighted that the frequency of such outings have also increased over the past years, and the risk is not just limited to actual LGBTQIA+ people – anyone can be targeted based on suspicion or false accusations. This shift has made digital violence more pervasive and unpredictable, leaving individuals constantly vulnerable to exposure and violence:

What is scary was the fact that hate comes from all directions. People you don't know and people you know. Knowing that you could be killed for something you didn't choose and you didn't do anything by those you know and love, is too painful. (She/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

The social media analysis conducted for this study revealed life-threatening, dehumanising content on TikTok that included outings and calls for violence against the LGBTQIA+ community. As Butler argued, individuals are expected to conform to the expectations, performance and practices assigned to the binary categories of women and men which also extends to sexual orientation in a society structured by the principle of heteronormativity.⁴¹ The study findings show that the individuals who do not conform to the sex and gender expectations are experiencing different forms of violence coming from the community.

4.2.1. Types of OGBV experienced

Outing and doxxing

The vast majority of participants responded that one of the most common forms of OGBV they have come across or experienced is outing. There are regular instances where names, photos and even contact information of people presumed to be LGBTQIA+ are shared online via TikTok accounts. This doxxing often leads to threats of physical harm and social ostracisation:

41 Butler J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

I wasn't even aware, and it was a friend of mine who told me that my information is on TikTok. I was at work shaking and I immediately resigned. I fled the country within a few days. I received a lot of messages from people asking me to return and get baptised. It was very hurtful. Some family members said that they consider it as I have died. Leaving home felt like being thrown in the desert. I didn't have money, I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know how my immediate family would react to finding my information on TikTok. That was the most difficult part, and I don't even know how I survived it. (Queer, he/him, 25-34, exiled)

Participants reported that their information was posted without their consent, and they do not even know who recorded or took their pictures of them in public spaces that was not an exclusive queer space. As discussed above, these photos and videos target not only LGBTQIA+ community members but anyone presumed to be part of the community:

Before TikTok became common, it used to be Facebook. There is no name and photo, but they would say there are homosexual people. I mean there was still fear because there is no doubt that they would kill us then too. But on TikTok, there were names and photos coming out daily. The ugliest part is that you don't even have to be queer, if somebody says you are, that is it. (Gay, he/him, 35-44, Sidama region)

Some participants reported facing threats from individuals within their own queer community, including friends or former romantic partners. These individuals demanded financial benefits, threatening to expose them as a means of coercion. Participants noted that this heightens their anxiety about being outed to family members. This creates an environment of mistrust, vulnerability and further complicates the already challenging landscape of navigating relationships within the LGBTQIA+ community.

A call for mob justice

According to the social media content analysis, various individuals, including religious leaders, were observed calling for action against LGBTQIA+ individuals. A recent TikTok video was posted amidst public outrage for a seven-year-old girl that was raped and killed. The rhetoric in the video reflects a disturbing trend of mob justice being presented as a legitimate solution, not just for dealing with accused criminals, but also as a weapon against marginalised communities like LGBTQIA+ individuals. The speaker's call for mob justice against a rapist, coupled with the justification that homosexuality remains illegal because of a feared public violence, points to the normalisation of mob-justice in the society.

Numerous participants have shared their encounters with online mob justice, exemplified in the following account:

A year ago, there was a big hate campaign and because I was at the place where the conversation started, for the first ten days I was searching for myself in the videos. There were names and photos of people assumed to be gay. I was terrified and was looking for my photos there. Many people were mentioning religion and how the people in the videos should be killed. Some were sharing people's location and how if they find them that they will kill them. I used to read the comments under these posts and there was no comment that said, "it is their right so let them be whatever they want." Forget that but there was nobody saying, "killing is a sin and we shouldn't say that." (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, Oromia region)

This persistent online harassment and call for violence on TikTok is largely shared by accounts sharing religious songs and verses from holy books. For example, an influential religious leader and a medical doctor by profession is known for his hateful and violent speech that circulates on TikTok saying, "if you are not denouncing homosexuality, you are in support of it." This statement transforms neutrality into complicity, widening the target for harassment and violence beyond just LGBTQIA+ individuals. He also says in one video, "there is a hospital serving them (LGBTQIA+), we will expose." Claims as such appear to deny access to healthcare services, which is one of the basic human rights. This stigma can make healthcare institutions hesitant to offer necessary services to LGBTQIA+ individuals, out of fear of being exposed or attacked. The consequences are severe, not only does this jeopardise the health and well-being of the queer community, but it also endangers anyone suspected of being queer.

Cyberbullying, threats, hate speech and call for violence

Even though members of the LGBTQIA+ community use social media with pseudonym accounts with no personal information, many of the study participants reported that they receive direct threats through social media and messaging apps. Messages vary from religious condemnation ("repent") to death threats ("we will find you"):

During the hate campaign, I was posting encouraging messages via my pseudonym account for my queer friends so that they are not scared. I have received inboxes like "We will destroy you" and "You are cursed and you will never live in Ethiopia." (Gay, he/him, 20-25, Addis Ababa)

Another participant also highlighted the hate speech:

There are all kinds of violence online. Insulting, threatening, hate speech or discriminatory speech. The main message during the campaign was “kill them” and “they should die.” (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

Despite efforts to conceal their identities through pseudo accounts, LGBTQIA+ individuals remain vulnerable to direct threats that range from religious condemnation to violent messages.

The TikTok videos reviewed for the study also show that there is persistent, aggressive and violent content where some were removed by TikTok and some still remain online. Some the examples of common contents of the TikTok videos are as follows:

Religious rhetoric and violence: Religious individuals frequently invoke religious texts, such as the Bible and Quran, to justify anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments.

- “I am against Gibre Sodom” posts by using religious songs as a background.
- A religious man on the street of Addis Ababa calling out “I stand against homosexuality” and calling for people to join the campaign.
- A video of protestant pastor, Ethiopian Orthodox priest, and Muslim religious leaders preaching that humans are being dehumanised by LGBTQIA+ acts, their values being below animals.
- A video of a man cutting a rainbow-printed t-shirt that he found from his store, “We will destroy the Gibre Sodoms, cut them to pieces, and if we see anyone we suspect in our neighbourhood, we will cut and break them, forcing him to believe in his manhood and convincing him he was created for a woman, and the same applies to a woman.”

Derogatory language and tone: The use of derogatory terms in Amharic, often accompanied by angry or hateful tones, is common. These terms are directed at dehumanising LGBTQIA+ individuals and framing their identities as sinful or criminal.

- A woman on a video with text, “If water is water, like you claim that love is love, do you drink the water that’s in the toilet seat?”
- Six men and a young boy with crossed arms (symbol of resistance) “We will not say we are against Gibre Sodom. We say, ‘We destroy you instead.’”
- A poem against LGBTQIA+ communities using vulgar words to spread hate and portraying their sexual act as disgusting and unhygienic.

Public calls for criminalisation: Some content calls for the criminalisation of LGBTQIA+ identities, requesting harsher legal measures or punishment.

- A video of public rally in Hawassa city, “We denounce Gibre Sodom.”
- A video on calling for everyone and famous TikTok users to join the challenge to stand against Gibre Sodom.

Homophobic humour and satire: Satirical videos mock LGBTQIA+ people, portraying scenarios where individuals are afraid of being perceived as gay. This form of humour trivialises LGBTQIA+ identities and encourages hate.

- A video portraying that a man is scared of bending down to pick up a coin on the floor due to fear of rape by another man.
- A satirical video portraying a man who attacked a man for telling him that he has dirt on his behind, “Why did you see my behind, are you gay?”

Use of children’s voices: Children are often featured in videos denouncing LGBTQIA+ identities. These acts may reflect manipulative tactics of using innocent voices to legitimise hate and reinforce societal condemnation.

- A teacher in the classroom makes kids repeat what he says, “Men and men (the kids echo), women and women (echo), are not allowed to get married (kids echo). It is the work of Satan. (echo).”
- Kids sport club video with a “We are against Gibre Sodom” message.

As we can see from the above, nationalism plays a central role in escalating hateful content by framing queer existence as a threat to the purity and survival of the Ethiopian nation. In Ethiopia, calls to “rescue the country from homosexuality” or “kill them” position violence against LGBTQIA+ people as a patriotic duty, labelling queerness as foreign and incompatible with the imagined moral fabric of the nation. Even though the country remains divided with competing political interests, this appears to easily unite the nation with patriarchal and religious rhetoric that legitimises violence as both a sacred and civic duty. It makes the hate campaigns appear acceptable and necessary for preserving the nation’s holiness and stability.

Catfishing

Some participants discussed issues related to dating apps. One participant in exile noted that, on apps like Grindr, “many individuals have been deceived by people posing as fake profiles” asking for money, leading to physical assaults. These encounters have made using dating apps a risky experience for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Another participant who is active on TikTok added:

I'm active on TikTok, and that's where I see a lot of influence. Especially last year, there was a challenge called "I am against Gibre Sodom." I've seen straight men hunting down gay men on dating apps. There were even live videos of men, claimed to be gay, being beaten. (Bisexual, he/him, 18-24, SNNPR)

Queer women have also reported that men frequently create fake accounts often via Facebook, posing as queer women, with the intention of either trapping them or seeking sexual encounters:

The fetish straight men have toward queer women is sickening. I get inboxes and messages from men pretending to be queer. You can tell a woman would never say the things these men say. I often let them know to get a life and block them. (Bisexual, she/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

Misinformation and stereotyping

Participants' responses reveal a widespread and dangerous spread of misinformation about LGBTQIA+ individuals. This misinformation perpetuates harmful narratives that frame homosexuality as a Western import, an addiction, pedophilia, spiritual possession or the result of Western media influence. This widespread misinformation systematically undermines the dignity and safety of the entire queer community, as well as anyone who falls outside of heteronormative norms. It creates a dangerous environment where both groups face heightened vulnerability to stigma, discrimination and violence:

There's a huge amount of misinformation. People believe we're rebelling against God. So-called experts spread lies about us, claiming we would rape if given the chance or that we're pedophiles. The irony is, most of them have never even met a queer person, yet they continue to misinform the public, portraying us as perverts. (He/they, 25-34, Oromia region)

As one might expect, various studies show that LGBTQIA+ individuals experience challenges related to OGBV differently. For example, a study conducted in seven countries (Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda) that looked into the nature of TFGBV and its impacts, revealed that LGBTQIA+ individuals are more likely to experience both TFGBV and offline forms of violence linked to TFGBV.⁴² The findings show that LGBTQIA+ individuals are experiencing severe hostility, then amplified by tech platforms, enabling people to directly persecute and shame LGBTQIA+ individuals. The study explained that

42 Rutgers International. (2024). *Decoding technology-facilitated gender-based violence: A reality check from seven countries.* <https://rutgers.international/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Decoding-TFGBV-Report-2024.pdf>

queer individuals perceived status as outsiders as well as criminalisation of their identity, makes it harder for them to report incidents and access justice.

4.2.2. Predators

Religious leaders and conservatives

Many participants identified religious leaders across various faiths as some of the most prominent perpetrators of OGBV. These leaders not only preach against LGBTQIA+ rights, but also invoke religious doctrine to justify and legitimise violence. Conservative followers and religious extremists often take up this rhetoric, actively engaging in digital violence campaigns. They view it as a moral obligation to condemn, shame and punish LGBTQIA+ individuals, further intensifying the cycle of hate and discrimination under the guise of religious duty. As noted by Jessica Horn, “Conservative religion has re-constricted the moral space in which sexuality is defined and engaged. These monologues of intolerance have also contributed to further misunderstanding and misinformation about same-sex practice and identities.”⁴³

During the hate campaign in August 2023, state media, including the Ethiopian Press Agency, prominently featured religious leaders voicing strong opposition to the LGBTQIA+ community. Anti LGBTQIA+ groups and heteropatriarchal nationalist movements such as Sile Ethiopia Zim Anilim Association president, for instance, declared that “homosexuality is a generation-killing act that is not accepted in Ethiopian culture and religion,”⁴⁴ urging the government to strictly enforce laws and create legal frameworks to punish such “crimes”.

Similarly, Haddis Alemayahu Eshetu, another religious leader, called homosexuality “an abomination against nature and the Creator,” insisting that the government take action against those committing such “crimes” to safeguard societal peace.⁴⁵ Additionally, Ustaz Abubakar Ahmed, Advisor to the President of the Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, advocated for “measures that could be a lesson to others” and emphasised the need for monitoring children’s online content to prevent them from adopting western ideologies.⁴⁶

Cherinet Belay, another prominent religious leader further intensified the rhetoric by stating that “homosexuality is an attempt to destroy the human

43 Horn, J. (2006). Re-writing the sexual body. *Feminist Africa*. https://feministafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/fa_6_feature_article_1.pdf

44 Ethiopia Press Agency. “ግብረሰዶች በኢትዮጵያ ባህል እና ሃይማኖት ተቀባይነት የሌለው ትውልድ ገዳይ ተግባር ነው” [*Homosexuality has no acceptance in Ethiopian culture and religion - it is an act that kills generations*]. August 18, 2023. Originally published online (now removed); archived copy held by the researchers.

45 Ethiopia Press Agency. “ግብረሰዶች ከተፈጥሮም፣ ከፈጣሪም የተጣለ አጸያፊ ተግባር ነው” መጋቢ ሀዲስ አለማየሁ አቮቶ።” [*Homosexuality is an offensive act that is hated by nature and God” Megabe Hadis Alemayehu Eshetu*]. August 17, 2023. Originally published online (now removed); archived copy held by the researchers.

46 Ethiopia Press Agency. “ግብረሰዶች ከተፈጥሮ ሕግ ያፈነገጠ ኢትዮጵያን የማይመጥን ወንጀል መሆኑን ኩስታዝ አቡበከር ገለጹ።” [*Ustaz Abubeker expressed that Homosexuality is a crime that deviates from the natural order and does not fit Ethiopia*]. August 15, 2023. Originally published online (now removed); archived copy held by the researchers.

race” and that “the government should take a firm stand against homosexual offenders.” He emphasised the need for punitive measures to prevent what he described as a great shame condemned by society, calling for unified condemnation from individuals, security forces and religious institutions.⁴⁷

Moreover, a TikTok video of a prominent pastor is seen calling on the community to stay vigilant against “Gibre sedomites,” mockingly suggesting that if they find one in their neighbourhood, they should strip them and force them to walk around the city naked. This same pastor was seen preaching about love, forgiveness and coexistence, while simultaneously spreading deep hatred and violence against the LGBTQIA+ community.

These portrayals and statements underscore the significant role that media can play in shaping public perceptions through misinformation and disinformation. They reflect a broad spectrum of religious and cultural viewpoints within Ethiopian society, highlighting the deeply entrenched opposition to LGBTQIA+ identities.

Influencers and celebrities

Many participants highlighted that influencers, particularly those with large followings on platforms like TikTok and YouTube, exploit anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments to increase their views, earnings and followers. They noted that they spread misinformation, incite violence or promote harmful stereotypes. In some cases, celebrities also join these hate campaigns to preserve or enhance their public image, especially when facing societal pressure or threats.

Our social media analysis supports these claims, as we found numerous TikTok videos of influencers and celebrities participating in the “I am against Gibre Sodom” campaign, reinforcing the harmful narratives described by participants.

Individuals facing external pressure

Based on participants’ responses, some LGBTQIA+ individuals who have not fully accepted their identities or fear being outed were identified as joining anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns. Participants noted that this behaviour often serves as a strategy to deflect suspicion and conform to societal expectations. As a result, these individuals are forced or left with no choice but to become perpetrators of online gender-based violence (OGBV) against their own community in an attempt to “fit in”:

47 Ethiopia Press Agency. “ግብረሰዶም በየትኛውም የኢትዮጵያ ክፍል የማይደረግ ፅድቅ ተግባር ነው” መጋቢቱ ቸርኒት በላይ [Homosexuality is an offensive act that is not accepted in any part of Ethiopia. Pastor Cherinet Belay]. August 28, 2023. Originally published online (now removed); archived copy held by the researchers.

My life is very private, but I was afraid that my photos would be posted. Some homosexuals, scared of being exposed or wanting to avoid suspicion, were joining the anti-LGBTQ+ campaign. (Gay, he/him, 18-24, Harari region)

Another participant who was pressured into changing his profile picture also added:

The campaign went big like the country has no other issue to worry about. They acted as if this is the biggest issue the country is facing. Friends and family that don't know about you would ask why you aren't changing your profile picture to the campaign poster "I am against homosexuality" and I was forced to change my profile to that." (Gay, he/him, 20-25, Addis Ababa)

Similarly, another participant recalled a previous hate campaign, the Toto Tours incident, that compelled her to align with others' opinions against homosexuality:

During the Toto Tours campaign, many people around me were discussing it, and I found myself pretending to be against it too. I recall some saying, "Girls are much better, but the men are disgusting," and I would disagree, insisting, "No, they're all the same." But once I get home, it breaks me. It felt like I was betraying myself. I wanted to stand up and speak out, but I know the consequences I would face. (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

The stories reveal the painful reality of having to choose between being true to oneself and staying safe in a society filled with discrimination. Ultimately, the need for community support and acceptance becomes even more vital. For LGBTQIA+ individuals navigating these complex challenges, it can serve as a crucial source of resilience and survival.

Anti LGBTQIA+ groups

According to queer activists and community members, organised anti-LGBTQ+ groups, including anti-gay organisations, actively use social media platforms to disseminate misinformation and propaganda, incite hatred and participate in coordinated campaigns targeting LGBTQIA+ individuals. These groups strategically leverage digital spaces to amplify harmful narratives and fuel discrimination against the queer community:

Another violence that happens is these anti groups looking for low-income individuals in our community to provide finance and get information to later spread misinformation. The anti-group is pushing for the maximum penalty which is death. They don't act like religious leaders because you don't order death on anyone as a religious leader. (He/him, 35-44, exiled)

Anti-rights groups in Ethiopia and across broader Africa are reported to be funded by far-right Christians.⁴⁸ Groups like Family Watch International reportedly funnelled millions of dollars into anti-rights advocacy efforts in Ethiopia.⁴⁹ This influence amplifies local homophobic rhetoric by framing LGBTQIA+ rights as a western imposition, while paradoxically relying on western far-right networks to fuel these hate campaigns. This transnational alliance strengthens patriarchal and religious leaders in Africa, it empowers nationalist narratives of “defending cultural sovereignty,” and pushes state-sponsored homophobia under the guise of protecting tradition and morality.

It is also noteworthy how the pressing issues in Ethiopia, such as war and inflation, are diverted to intense campaigns against LGBTQIA+ individuals. One study participant from Sidama region powerfully argued that despite the prevalence of war, inflation and other critical problems, the public discourse focuses less on these urgent matters and more on policing who loves whom.⁵⁰

This finding interestingly aligns with Sylvia Tamale’s reflection on the broader socio-political context of homophobia across Africa, where she notes:

The current homophobic upsurge and the legal winds of recriminalization of homosexuality that are sweeping across the African continent from Dakar to Djibouti and from Cairo to Cape Town are not coincidental or mere happenstance. The homophobic gusts blow amidst rising inflation, high unemployment, corruption, repression, and increased hopelessness among the populace.⁵¹

These accounts underline that in times of economic hardship and social unrest, LGBTQIA+ people often become easy targets for the frustrations of others. Oftentimes, forcing individuals to either publicly conform to anti-LGBTQIA+ narratives or face exclusion and violence.

48 Namubiru, L., & Wepukhulu, S. K. (2020, 29 October). Exclusive: US Christian Right pours more than \$50m into Africa. *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/africa-us-christian-right-50m/>

49 New Internationalist. (2024, 14 June). Fertile Ground. <https://newint.org/interactives/2024/fertile-ground/index.html>

50 አሁንም ደብዳቤ ስለሚገኝ ችግር ማንም ማየት አናመለከትም የሚቻለው ነው። በተለይ ባለፉት ዓመታት ስድስት ዓመታት አንድ ሃገር ያለንበት ሁኔታ በጣም አስከሬ ነው። ለከብነት ያህል የተገራጩ ጦርነት ያደረሰው የሰው አልቂት፣ የሕፃናት እና የሴቶች መድፈር፣ ያወደመው የደሃው ሕዝብ ሐብትና ንብረት እና የባከነው የሕዝብ ሃብት። የተገራጩ ጦርነት ሰቆቃ ሰንጨርስ አሁን በአማራ ክልል ያለው ጦርነት፣ መቼ እንደሚመረ የማናስታውሰው በኦሮሚያ ክልል ያለው ሃይማኖትን እና ዘርን መሠረት ያደረገ የአርሲ በአርሲ ግጭት። በግጭቶች እና በጦርነት ምክንያት ቤት ንብረታቸውን ጥለው የተፈናቀሉ እና በመጠለያ ውስጥ ፣ በዘመድ አዝማሚያ ቤት በጥገኝነት ያለው ሕዝብ ... በዛ ላይ የኑሮ ውድነት፣ ድርቅ እና ለሃብት ብቻ ምኑ ቅጡ። ሃገራችን ያለችበት ችግር ለማንም ግልጽ እና ግልብ ነው። በዚህ ሁኔታ ችግሮች ተጠምዶ ለላቸው ሃገር ችግሮችን ከመሰረቱ ከመፍታት ይልቅ፣ የህዝቡን የዕለት ተዕለት ሰቆቃ ከማቃለል ይልቅ የራሳቸውን ምቹት የሚጠብቁ የሃይማኖት እና የፖለቲካ መሪዎች የተመሳሳይ ፆታ ፍቅርን የሁሉም ችግር ምንጭ አድርገው ማቅረባቸው ምን የሚሉት ፈሊጥ ነው? በጦርነት ለሚማቁ ሕዝብ ፣ በልቶ ማደር ለከበደው ማህበረሰብ የአኔ ወንድ መውደድ አንዱት መሰረታዊ ችግሩ ሊሆን ይችላል? (Translation in English: Everyone can clearly see and understand the current situation in Ethiopia. The condition of our country has been especially severe, particularly over the past six years. For instance, the massacres of people, the sexual assault of children and women, the destruction of the wealth and property of the poor, and the squandering of public resources caused by the Tigray war. Before we even recover from the tragedy of the Tigray war, now there is the war in the Amhara region, and the ethnic and religious conflicts in the Oromia region, whose origins we can hardly recall. People have abandoned their homes and belongings due to conflicts and wars and are living in shelters or in the homes of relatives. On top of this, there is the rising cost of living, drought, and hunger. The problems in our country are clear and evident to everyone. Instead of addressing these critical issues, how can religious and political leaders, who prioritise their own comfort over alleviating the daily suffering of the people, blame same-sex love for all the problems? How can my love for another man be the root issue for a society struggling just to eat and sleep and a nation devastated by war?)

51 Tamale, S. (2013). Confronting the politics of nonconforming sexualities in Africa. *African Studies Review*, 56(2), 31-45. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43904926>

4.3. The online and offline impacts of OGBV

The impact of digital violence on LGBTQIA+ social media users is profound, leading to silencing, severe emotional, psychological and social consequences. Many participants expressed feelings of fear, isolation and self-doubt. Similarly, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's Accessing Connection: Bridging the LGBTI Digital Divide report highlighted that those who experience violence may leave platforms or close accounts out of fear. LGBTQIA+ victims often struggle to find legal protections, as their experiences and identities are frequently dismissed or ignored by authorities.⁵²

4.3.1 Impact on their online presence

The online presence of LGBTQIA+ individuals is severely impacted by the constant violence and threats they face. Some have chosen to distance themselves from social media due to fear and exhaustion:

I was really scared, so I deleted my social media apps. The misinformation around me made me think I should change myself, and it pushed me into a deep depression. For those of us on our queer journeys, the fear is intense – watching videos of people being attacked or coming across false information about ourselves is heartbreaking. (Gay, he/him, 18-24, Addis Ababa)

According to participants' responses, the misinformation online has caused lasting harm, leading some to disconnect from social media. The hate and threats pushing queer individuals away from the online space are silencing them from expressing themselves and standing for their rights:

I used to be very active on social media. But I had to make a conscious decision to step back because of fear really. Social media is a great place for connection and learning new things, but I had to choose my mental health. There is so much hate. I was constantly afraid of being outed and worried that my likes and online connections might be scrutinised, revealing my sexuality. (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

Similar studies also show that TFGBV has severe effects, often silencing and discouraging participation in online spaces. A 2022 poll found that 24% of women reduced internet use due to harmful content.⁵³

52 Johnson, O. & Deutch, J. (2024). *Accessing Connection: Bridging the Digital Divide for LGBTI Communities Worldwide*. ILGA. https://ilga.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Accessing_connection_bridging_LGBTI_digital_divide.pdf

53 Statista. (2022, 12 April). Global internet users reactions to harmful online contacts as of February 2022, by gender. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1301606/effects-of-harmful-online-contact/>

4.3.2 Psychosocial impact

The psychological impact of the OGBV has been significant, with many reporting depression, anxiety, paranoia and a loss of self-confidence. The fear of being publicly outed and targeted online has caused some to withdraw from both social and family life, while others expressed deep mistrust in society and their communities:

The August hate campaign was incredibly difficult because many of the homophobic TikTok users lived near my area, and I would see them daily. Even though I don't have any pictures on social media, I was constantly stressed and scared to go out or meet my friends. It's one thing to know everyone hates us but watching celebrities and so many others join in the hate campaign made it unbearable. Some were even calling for us to be lynched in public, while streaming live videos of men being beaten, simply for being assumed to be gay. It was traumatising. That could have been me at any moment. People I went to school with, or grew up with were joining the campaign. The hate was extreme and close – everyone was talking about it, and it wasn't just outside; the hate was inside our homes too. (Gay, he/him, 35-44, Sidama region)

The August campaign on platforms like TikTok intensified these experiences, leaving individuals with fear of physical attacks, arrest and even death:

I spent my days at home, becoming invisible to the world. I used to have nightmares about being attacked. Honestly, it felt like I was dead inside during that time. (Lesbian, she/her, 35-44, Oromia region)

One also added:

During the hate campaign, I distanced myself from my colleagues because they were saying so many things about it. I stopped going out with them for lunch and would put on my headphones at work just to avoid the conversation. It was during that time I realised that even the people you consider family don't accept or want your existence. That realisation pushed me into depression. (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

Some of the participants reported that they experienced identity crises, and even contemplated self-harm or suicide. This environment of hate has profoundly affected their sense of safety and connection:

The misinformation deeply affects how people see themselves. Some start to believe they are cursed, carrying this belief throughout their lives, thinking things aren't working out for them because they are queer and cursed. This is what we're taught from a young age, and even when you try to live your queer life, that belief can persist due to the continuous misinformation you hear.

Many leave their faith because of the hate and self-doubt it causes. (Gay, he/him, 18-24, Addis Ababa)

Another participant reflected on the fear of abandonment:

I feel a deep fear whenever I see calls for mob justice. I worry about how my family would react if they found out – I can't help but wonder if they would deny me as their child or abandon me altogether. In public, I often view my partner as a stranger, constantly on guard and thinking about how to stay safe and invisible. It's a heavy burden to carry, and it's not easy at all. (Lesbian, she/her, 18-24, Tigray region)

Reflecting on the pervasive anxiety related to privacy and societal judgement, one participant shared:

When I see someone holding their phone a certain way, I wonder if I'm going to be next. If someone took my photo, manipulated the story, and shared it, there would be no way to disprove it. Just thinking about this gives me anxiety. This will also affect my family and friends. In a country where we are often used as scapegoats in the news, these negative narratives shape my daily life. Even the smallest effort to hide my gender expression leads me to feelings of dysphoria. I feel impacted in many ways. (Queer, they/them, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

One participant, who fled the country after narrowly escaping an attempted physical attack during the August hate campaign, shared:

I was so scared that my freedom of movement was limited. Leaving my house to go to work or returning home became terrifying because people would stop me, judging my style – even though straight people dress the same way. I wear what feels comfortable to me, but they tried to attack me. I feared for my life, worried they might come for me at home. My self-confidence was shattered. In the end, I had to flee the country. It felt like my only options were to fight for my life or leave to save myself. (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, exiled)

In line with previous studies, these experiences highlight how the threat of OGBV creates an atmosphere of fear and isolation, making public spaces feel increasingly unsafe for those who do not conform to societal norms. Previous studies also show that lower self-esteem, anxiety or stress, and reluctance to voice opinions remain to be some of the few mental health impacts of TFGBV.⁵⁴ The study also reveals that the survivors of online abuse, like non-consensual intimate images, appear to be experiencing symptoms similar to those of sexual

54 National Democratic Institute. (2019, 14 June). Tweets That Chill: Analyzing Online Violence Against Women in Politics. <https://www.ndi.org/tweets-that-chill>

assault survivors, such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Moreover, LGBTQIA+ individuals may also grapple with internalised homophobia and self-hate, which compound the psychological toll of OGBV and further erode their sense of safety and belonging.

4.4. Intersecting factors

The following intersections highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ communities.

4.4.1. Internalised homophobia

Many participants emphasised that internalised homophobia is a critical intersection in experiencing OGBV within LGBTQIA+ communities. They noted that those who have not accepted themselves often become easy targets, as their internal struggles make them more vulnerable to external violence and discrimination:

Because I have accepted myself, the hate doesn't weaken me as much. But for those who haven't found self-acceptance or lack support, the impact of hateful comments and speech is incredibly difficult. It disturbs so many lives, and I genuinely hurt for them. It's so painful to be told you're not human. Imagine being born human and having everyone around you insist that you aren't. There's nothing as heartbreaking as losing friends, family, and your community, many people are going through this. And the worst part is that you can't even speak up or know where to turn for help. It's just sad. (Queer, she/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

4.4.2. Youth vulnerability

Another layer of intersectionality involves younger LGBTQIA+ communities. Participants highlighted the significant impact of OGBV on younger queer individuals who are seeking community. For many, social media serves as an alternative space to connect and build relationships. However, this demographic is particularly vulnerable to catfishing and the spread of misinformation:

Accepting myself has made things a lot easier. I believe that young people who haven't accepted themselves or lack support will be more impacted. (Gay, 25-34, he/him, Amhara region)

Another young participant added:

I was really scared, so I deleted my social media apps. The misinformation around me made me think I should change myself, and it pushed me into a deep depression. For those of us on our queer journeys, the fear is intense.

Watching videos of people being attacked or coming across false information about ourselves is heartbreaking. (Gay, he/him, 18-24, Addis Ababa)

In contexts where resources on gender and sexuality are inaccessible, young LGBTQIA+ individuals often turn to online spaces in search of community. However, with little to no awareness of digital security, they become easy targets for both online harassment and offline violence. The lack of formal support systems such as affirming education further compounds this vulnerability. As a result, these digital spaces function simultaneously as lifelines and as sites of harm. While these spaces offer connection and affirmation, they also expose young LGBTQIA+ Ethiopians to heightened risks of exploitation.

4.4.3. Gender norms

The tension between traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity complicates identity formation and acceptance, contributing to unique experiences based on gender expression. Many participants reported that feminine men and masculine-presenting women are particularly vulnerable to physical attacks due to online stereotyping. Individuals who deviate from conventional gender norms, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, are at a bigger risk of being targeted. As one participant explained, “People with a unique style, whether they are queer or not, people will just label them.” Another participant added that even “men who take care of themselves” could easily face harassment. A queer participant noted:

These spaces are heavily male dominated, leaving individuals who don't identify within that framework particularly vulnerable during hate campaigns. Those who don't conform to the gender binary are at a consistently higher risk and never receive a “pass.” (Queer, she/they, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

4.4.4. Patriarchal influence

LBQ women highlighted the additional layers of violence they face as women, particularly the societal pressures to marry and have children. Many participants shared that these expectations create significant challenges. Some have left their families and relocated to escape this pressure, while others are still seeking ways to achieve independence and leave their family homes:

Being a woman makes it harder. I have uncles older than me who aren't married, yet I don't see anyone pressuring them about marriage. I don't visit my family often because I know what they will ask. Everyone wants to know what kind of example I'm setting for my younger sisters by being single in my 30s. Even though I have been in a queer relationship for over five years. (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

4.4.5. Backlash against feminist and queer activists

Feminist advocates in Ethiopia face societal resistance and online backlash for allegedly being LGBTQIA+ rights advocates. Some are threatened not only for being allies but also suspected as LGBTQIA+ individuals. These issues have left feminist activists in fear and silenced their online advocacy efforts:

Feminist groups online face backlash, and they spread misinformation about them. They force the feminists to speak against our community. Queer activists are highly affected mentally because they are there to support the community and you hear a lot of cases. (Gay, He/him, 35-44, Sidama region)

In line with the findings from UNFPA report, feminist and queer activists are disproportionately impacted by TFGBV, especially when they speak out on issues like queer rights, feminism and gender equality.⁵⁵ Activists who regularly use digital platforms for activism are frequently targeted, often reporting experiences of TFGBV, including trolling, harassment and threats.

4.5. Coping mechanisms and resistance

In this section, participants provided their perspectives on coping mechanisms and strategies of resistance against OGBV and discrimination. Their stories reveal a variety of approaches used to overcome the challenges and demonstrate that existence is a form of resistance within LGBTQIA+ communities.

Emotional and mental well-being

4.5.1. Self-acceptance

Self-acceptance emerged as a crucial coping strategy for many participants, helping them better withstand societal hate and external pressures. The theme “accepting myself has made things easier” was frequently mentioned, highlighting how internal validation provided strength in the face of external hostility. Many expressed the sentiment, “If it comes down to being myself or losing my life, I would rather die.”⁵⁶

Some of the responses on self-acceptance:

I have been through a lot. Even attempted suicide because of the societal pressure and hate. But I came to realise I am born this way. Accepting myself

55 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2021). *Making All Spaces Safe: A Toolkit to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls*. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA-TFGBV-Making%20All%20Spaces%20Safe.pdf>

56 “The support from my community gives me hope. I feel encouraged. I know I may face death, but I can't change who I am. It's in my blood, and there's nothing I can do about it. I was created this way. I want to teach others. When I'm ready, I want to share my life with the world so that others don't have to go through what I did.” ሞትን መጋፈጥ ካለብኝ በማንነቴ አሞታለሁ አንጁ ማድጋላ የምልበት ነገር የለም in exile.

has given me some sense of freedom. I chose myself. I reconciled with myself. (Gay, he/him, 25-34, Somali region)

I've overcome the biggest challenge: accepting myself. When I think about the future, I feel good. I may not know what life with a partner would be like, but everything else feels right. I am who I am. Sometimes it's not even about hope – I just live my life. People don't understand us, but I simply focus on being me. I've accepted myself, and nothing will change that. I once hated who I was because of all the pressure and misinformation, but that's no longer the case. (Lesbian, she/her, 18-24, Oromia region)

I have known about myself for over twenty years and have gone through so much. So, I have a better understanding than the younger generation. The hate doesn't directly impact me, but it is my duty to think of the youth who haven't accepted themselves and are in search of community. As for me, I am who I am with no outside influence. Nobody forced me to be gay. I knew about myself at a very young age, and I am happy with my life. I won't let anyone take that joy away from me. I do believe things will change. All the sacrifices paid by activists here and abroad won't be in vain. One day we will be liberated and live freely. (Gay, he/him, 35-44, Addis Ababa)

Seeing others live their lives gave me strength. Through the campaign, I saw that we are many. This is who I am, and no campaign is going to change it. My self-acceptance is my strength. (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

4.5.2. Queer friendships and allies

Many participants stated the importance of having trusted friends who provide a safe space. Additionally, online communities have emerged as vital sources of encouragement and belonging. Participants described finding solidarity in these spaces, where they could connect with others who understand their experiences.

Some of the responses are as follows:

I have friends I talk to about my stress. Sharing my feelings with them helps me feel lighter. We laugh and have fun together, which allows me to let it all out. (Gay, he/him, 25-34, Sidama region)

I have queer friends and ally friends that I share my life with, and that brings me so much comfort. (Lesbian, she/her, 18-24, Addis Ababa)

Being with my queer friends is truly healing for me. There's so much hate in my family; they are very religious and talk about it all the time. But when I'm with my friends, I gather new energy. (Lesbian, she/her, 18-24, Tigray region)

Regarding online spaces, a participant said:

I was actively communicating with queer community online and that made me feel like I wasn't alone. We were available for each other 24/7. (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

4.5.3. Romantic relationships

The experience of love, even in secret, is a significant source of strength and resilience. Participants mentioned that having a partner provided emotional grounding and helped them endure difficult situations.

Some of the responses are as follows:

Even though it all sounds hopeless, I tell myself maybe someday I will also have the chance to express myself. I don't care how hard it is, I have found love. Even though it is in secret I still get to love her. And she gets to love me back. Whether we have to do it in public/ in private, 10 years, 20 years. As long as I have her, I can keep going. (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, Addis Ababa)

I have a partner I talk to and that helps me release my stress. We talk about our challenges and be there for each other. (Gay, he/him, 18-24, Sidama region)

I have little hope that Ethiopia will change. My hope is because of my girlfriend. I really think I am living for her. She is my hope. As long as I am with her, I can survive. We have sacrificed so much together. Even when there is killing and attack, I am just going to wait my turn while loving her. (Lesbian, she/her, 35-44, Oromia region)

4.5.4. Faith and prayer

Several participants noted that prayer and spirituality play a crucial role in their coping strategies, providing comfort through their beliefs during difficult times:

A repeated lie can start to feel like the truth. The more I saw how many people hated me, the more I began to feel like a criminal. At times, I even wondered if God was punishing me when things didn't go well in other areas of my life. But I worked on myself, I know God created me in His image. I have so much that others don't. I am my own role model. Through all of this, I know I can rely on myself. The work I've done on myself is my greatest victory. (Gay, he/him, 18-24, Harari region)

Another participant added:

Just like straight people, queer people also want love, respect, a place to belong, family, and acceptance. I know I love my God, and my love for a man doesn't diminish that. I find peace in this understanding. My resistance comes from knowing that my feelings are an expression of love. I don't attach myself to anything but God. And until my last day on earth, even if I remain single, this is who I am. (Gay, he/they, 25-34, Oromia region)

4.5.5. Collective advocacy and support

Participants shared that collective advocacy and online support have been crucial in building a sense of community. During the recent hate campaign, they described a strong queer presence online, where people came together to report hate speech, share tips on digital safety, and offer constant words of encouragement through social media posts and direct messages. This created a powerful feeling of "I am not alone," as many participants expressed. Our analysis suggests that LGBTQIA+ individuals resisted homophobia and transphobia by uniting through pseudonymous accounts to mass-report hate speech. Although it took time, many hateful videos were eventually removed, and some accounts were banned:

The online community was incredibly strong. We actively reported these videos, and there was always someone to talk to. It reassured me that even if my photo were to become public, I had a community to rely on. Many videos were taken down, and TikTok accounts with large followings were banned. No matter what happens, we're there for each other, and that is our resistance. (Lesbian, she/her, 25-34, Oromia region)

4.5.6. Protection and privacy

Many participants reported that the lack of acceptance from their communities forced them to lead double lives or adopt very private existences, often keeping a low profile to avoid discrimination or violence. As a coping mechanism, they would suppress their queer identities in certain social circles while seeking community in more accepting online spaces:

I'm scared of the number of people I will lose in my life. To keep myself safe, I hide my identity and live as a straight person. (Lesbian, she/her, 18-24, Oromia region)

In addition, participants shared that, during periods of intense hate campaigns, they would delete social media or drastically reduce their usage to protect their mental well-being:

I deleted all my social media apps, and I was just by myself. I stayed at home and didn't even meet my queer friends for safety. (Gay, he/him, 18-24)

Despite all the challenges, study participants appear to maintain hope for the future, often expressing the sentiment “ከዛረ, የማይሻል የለም,” which loosely translates to “tomorrow will be better than today,” expressing that love and community sustained them and provided reasons to persevere. Others expressed a desire to leave their home country in search of freedom, while those in exile are motivated by a shared hope to unite and advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights in Ethiopia, determined to create a better future for themselves and others.

In summary, the study reveals that LGBTQIA+ individuals and rights advocates in Ethiopia endure unimaginable horror and trauma in the digital space due to relentless harassment, threats and public shaming. Despite these extreme challenges, many demonstrate extraordinary resilience in their own terms. Their resilience not only helped them cope with the emotional toll of OGBV but also allowed them to assert their identities and resist erasure in environments that are deeply hostile and unsafe.

5. Conclusion and recommendations



5.1 Conclusion

The study highlights the complex and multi-layered nature of OGBV targeting LGBTQIA+ individuals in Ethiopia. Online platforms, while often considered spaces of visibility and community for marginalised identities, have simultaneously become battlegrounds where LGBTQIA+ individuals and feminist advocates face targeted, systematic and often coordinated forms of digital violence.

One of the most alarming forms of OGBV identified is outing and doxxing, where personal information such as sexual orientation, home address or private images is maliciously exposed without consent. This form of digital exposure leads to offline consequences including physical violence and family and societal rejection. Consequently, the LGBTQIA+ individuals are also experiencing calls for mob justice, a phenomenon in which online users incite collective violence or vigilante actions against individuals perceived as LGBTQIA+.

The online hate is not isolated, it is often amplified by coordinated groups, public figures, or influencers who use their platforms to demonise LGBTQIA+ individuals and legitimise violence under the guise of cultural or religious morality. The findings show that the violence also comes from religious leaders, social media influencers and celebrities, whose digital reach allows them to frame LGBTQIA+ existence as an existential threat to Ethiopian culture and values.

The study revealed the profound impact of OGBV on queer individuals including psychosocial consequences ranging from anxiety, depression and fear of exposure to chronic stress and feelings of isolation. It also impacted the online presence of LGBTQIA+ individuals, resulting in digital marginalisation. Many are forced to anonymise their identities, restrict their digital engagement or completely withdraw from social media.

Despite these challenges, LGBTQIA+ Ethiopians show remarkable resistance and agency through various coping mechanisms and resistance strategies. Many turn towards self-acceptance, queer friendships and romantic relationships as sources of strength and healing. Faith and prayer, often reinterpreted through a queer-affirming lens, provide spiritual grounding. Meanwhile, collective advocacy, both online and offline, continues to challenge dominant narratives, provide protection from abuses and offer solidarity.

This study highlights how ongoing resistance to OGBV points to the urgent need for intersectional and human-centred solutions. Meaningful responses must look beyond punishment and address the deeper causes such as social stigma, legal exclusion, religious fundamentalism and limited digital literacy.

There is also a critical need to amplify LGBTQIA+ voices in shaping technology policy, strengthening mental health support and advancing the human rights discourse in Ethiopia.

5.2 Recommendations

The study findings show that the online space is aggressively and increasingly becoming a violent platform against LGBTQIA+ individuals and a silencing tool against feminist advocates in Ethiopia. This study sheds light on the pervasive and multifaceted nature of online OGBV experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in Ethiopia and the profound impact it has on their lives both online and offline. Despite the brutality and frequency of such violence, the resistance and agency demonstrated by LGBTQIA+ individuals is a powerful finding.

The findings highlight the urgent need for the following actions to be taken.

Increased regulation and policy

The findings indicate the need for the implementation of stronger community guidelines and policies among various social media platforms. This helps to quickly remove harmful content, particularly in local languages like Amharic, to ensure efficient moderation against hate speech and violent contents.

Advocacy and community building

The study reveals the importance of continuing to build movements that raise awareness and cultivate allies. Strengthening local and online LGBTQIA+ communities is essential for mutual support, solidarity and collective resistance to harmful narratives. The study also highlights the need for educational campaigns aimed at challenging harmful stereotypes, misinformation and anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric.

Mental health and psychosocial support services

The study findings highlight the urgent need for accessible and LGBTQIA+-affirming mental health and psychosocial support services in Ethiopia. Strengthening trauma-informed care, increasing the availability of queer-friendly counsellors and supporting peer-led support networks are essential steps toward addressing the psychological harm caused by OGBV.

Digital security awareness

Queer individuals and rights activists need support for continuous awareness creation on digital safety measures to protect online presence and minimise the risk of OGBV. Facilitating the capacity building opportunity goes a long way in creating safe online space for queer individuals and rights advocates.

Collaboration with local and international organisations

Participants highlighted the potential for collaborations between local and international organisations to drive meaningful policy changes. They believe these partnerships could provide essential resources for safe online spaces and establish emergency support networks for individuals facing threats and violence. Local organisations bring invaluable grassroots knowledge and cultural expertise, which can help international allies tailor their support to meet the community's specific needs.

Further study on the matter

OGBV is an emerging concern, and it is understudied in Ethiopia. Hence, there is a need for more research that contributes to broader conversations about the role of power, vulnerability and utilisation of technology, advocating for a more inclusive and responsive approach to the digital space.

Queer resistance: Online gender-based violence against LGBTQIA+ Ethiopians

