

Responses to Information Requests - Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Nigeria: Anti-LGBTQ vigilante groups, including their objectives, structure, activities, and areas of influence; response of the authorities and state protection (2018–October 2020)

1. Overview

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Executive Director of the Women's Health and Equal Rights Initiative (WHER), a "lesbian and bisexual women-led organization focused on promoting the rights and well-being of lesbian, bisexual and queer women in Nigeria," indicated that

LGBTIQ persons have suffered violence from many angles from the society; most of these attacks are identified as vigilante group attacks and mob justice. Very often, people think the two attacks have the same roots.

Generally, vigilante groups are set up within a community to protect the community from criminal acts and, in this case, homosexuality is their target, following the criminalization of same-sex relationships by the law and most religious groups, while mob attacks include any violent homophobic individuals in the community, including the vigilante groups. (WHER 12 Oct. 2020)

Similarly, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior lecturer at the University of Manchester who has conducted research on homophobia in Nigeria, stated that

[t]here continue to be cases in which people suspected of being LGBT are attacked by spontaneous mobs. I have heard of this happening when rumors began to circulate that a couple was engaged in same-sex sexual relations, provoking a mob to form. There are also more organized vigilante groups that terrorize LGBT people. In the northern states, the most noteworthy of these are the *hisbahs* [1], which are quasi-official groups charged with enforcing Islamic law. The hisbahs (and police as well) regularly raid parties where they deem the guests to be gay. These are sometimes interpreted as "gay weddings" or "gay indoctrination sessions." In southern Nigeria, there are also powerful, well-organized vigilante groups that engage in anti-LGBT violence. While there is sometimes tacit cooperation with police, however, these groups don't have the quasi-legitimacy of northern hisbahs. (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020)

The same source further indicated that he is "not aware of single-issue anti-LGBT groups," rather that anti-LGBT violence is "a part of ... [the] more general activities" of these groups (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020). An article published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Australia's national public broadcaster (ABC n.d.), states that the situation of LGBTI individuals in northern Nigeria is "more difficult than for those living in the south" and quotes Dorothy Aken 'Ova, an LGBT and women's rights activist, as stating that "'[w]hat we've seen are people arming themselves with these [anti-LGBT] laws and arresting people indiscriminately'" (ABC 21 Oct. 2017).

Other sources indicate that an increase in attacks against LGBTQ individuals followed the introduction of the *Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2013*, in the form of "lynchings" (Australia 9 Mar. 2018, para. 3.64) or "physical violence mainly perpetrated by mobs" (TIERs [Dec. 2019], 16). According to the Senior Lecturer, attacks by anti-LGBT groups "may not be as common as they were five or ten years ago, but they are still a serious danger" (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020). Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) states that attacks have "reduced in frequency and severity since early 2014" (Australia 9 Mar. 2018, para. 3.64). In contrast, a survey of human rights violations against LGBTQ individuals compiled by The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs) [2], in partnership with several other organizations, including WHER, indicates that there was a "significant spike" in the number of cases of "mass blackmail, mob violence and unlawful detentions" reported in 2019 (TIERs [Dec. 2019], 15). The same survey, examining cases reported by human rights organizations across Nigeria between December 2018 and November 2019 and authenticated by TIERs, found that out of a total of 330 cases affecting 397 individuals, there were 12 cases of "mob attack[s]" (TIERs [Dec. 2019], 7, 15, 17). TIERs' 2018 report, examining cases reported between December 2017 and November 2018, found that out of a total of 213 cases affecting 286 individuals, there were 8 cases of mob attacks (TIERs [Dec. 2018], vii, 1, 5, 14). TIERs' 2017 report, examining cases reported between December 2016 and November 2017, found that out of a total of 210 cases affecting 247 individuals, there were 3 cases of mob attacks (TIERs [Dec. 2017], iv, 3).

2. Objectives

Sources indicate that vigilante groups [and hisbah groups (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020)] have formed in response to a failure of the police to provide protection or safety, leading to a loss of trust in the police (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020; UN 2 Sept. 2019, para. 18). According to the Senior Lecturer, "homophobic violence [is] a function of Nigeria's broader economic crisis and the extreme precarity in which the bulk of the population lives—even the middle classes find day-to-day survival a frequent challenge" (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020).

The Executive Director of WHER stated that

[t]he pattern of crimes committed by these groups has shown that the agenda and goals of these groups are fueled by homophobia, hate and discrimination against the LGBT community. Hence, their obsession to eradicate and suppress members of the LGBT community. In other words, they are fueled by discriminatory laws [and] homophobic cultural, traditional, and religious norms; the jobless young men within the community took it upon themselves to clean their community of homosexuality by attacking perceived same-sex couples and [transgender people] using the law and religious beliefs as the justification for their cruelty and intolerance. (WHER 12 Oct. 2020)

The 2019 TIERs survey indicates that

[v]iolence against LGBTQI people is propelled by prejudice rooted in certain interpretations of culture and religion, and based on low levels of knowledge on LGBTQI identities and issues. State and non-state actors have leveraged these views, beliefs and discriminatory laws to perpetrate violence. (TIERs, et al. [Dec. 2019], 18)

3. Structure

According to the Senior Lecturer, the organization of these groups "var[ies]. The major vigilante groups and the hisbahs are well organized, with defined leadership; ties to politicians, the judiciary, and the police; and economic resources" (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020). The Executive Director of WHER indicated that "[t]he vigilante groups ... exist openly within each community in Nigeria, mostly they are led by religious fundamentalists who, through homophobic preaching, convince people to join their groups in an attempt to clean their community of homosexuality" (WHER 12 Oct. 2020). The same source added that

[t]he vigilantes are mostly males in their early 20s to 40s, who have taken it upon themselves to clean their communities of homosexuality. These groups are made up of a network of radical patriarchal men ...

These vigilante groups have no specific structure and [no backing] from the traditional rulers or law-enforcement agencies. They are mostly a gang of homophobic young men. (WHER 12 Oct. 2020)

The same source further stated that "[t]hese groups are decentralized and therefore operate in an unorganized pattern" (WHER 12 Oct. 2020). An article in the *Sun*, a Lagos-based newspaper (US n.d.), quotes the Executive Director of an NGO in Minna in Niger state as indicating that vigilante groups are organized by "community members, [who have been] given authorisation by the community to maintain some sort of order and security" (*The Sun* 25 Sept. 2019).

4. Activities

The Senior Lecturer indicated that the attacks by these groups "vary. They can be organized attacks by well-armed and relatively disciplined groups, or it can be disorganized violence" (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020). According to the Executive Director of WHER,

[m]ost of these mobs are known for utilizing catfish accounts on social media to lure their victims into an impending doom which involves blackmail, extortion, assault, rape or even death. This action is referred to as KITO in the LGBTIQ community in Nigeria. These groups engage in different forms of abuse and inhumane treatment of LGBTIQ people in Nigeria. (WHER 12 Oct. 2020)

The same source added the following:

These groups ... lure gay men on the pretext of a fake date from dating apps, [to] humiliate and expose them by videotaping them naked [and] putting dildos in their private parts and in some cases exposing their anus or telling a lesbian victim to penetrate herself or her partner. They also use women to lure lesbian and bisexual women and then rape and brutalize them in the name of curing them of 'lesbianism'. (WHER 12 Oct. 2020)

Other sources similarly report that "kito" refers to "a person" (*Mail & Guardian* 28 May 2020) or "criminals" (Reuters 24 Feb. 2020) using social media and dating apps to lure LGBTQ individuals to meet in person in order to harm them (Reuters 24 Feb. 2020; *Mail & Guardian* 28 May 2020). The 2019 TIERs survey also found that there were "many cases of entrapment: perpetrators pretending to be LGBTQI

to lure and attack others" (TIERs [Dec. 2019], 18).

The Executive Director of WHER further indicated that

[t]he advancement of technology has been both an advantage and a disadvantage to the LGBTIQ community because it has provided a means for the creation of awareness [of] these mob attacks. It has also provided various platforms to expose the identity of these groups and their agenda. However, it has made it easy for vulnerable sexual minorities to be exposed to these groups through social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Grindr and Tinder. In some cases, LGBT persons are set up by their neighbours and friends, [and] they then hand them over to the vigilante to punish. ...Members of the vigilante groups often aid the attacks and encourage violence until law enforcement agents intervene. (WHER 12 Oct. 2020)

Other sources similarly indicate that LGBTQ individuals have posted their kito experiences online in order to warn each other; the sources provide the example of the website "Kito Diaries," which collates these experiences (*Mail & Guardian* 28 May 2020; African Arguments 26 Mar. 2019).

Sources report the following incidents involving vigilante groups:

- The Executive Director of WHER indicated that in April 2020, "two gay men were arrested in the middle of the night by a [vigilante group] who molested and paraded them naked before handing them over to the police" (WHER 12 Oct. 2020);
- The *Nation*, a Nigerian national newspaper (*The Nation* n.d.), reports that a police constable and another man in the Umueze community in Imo state were stripped naked and beaten by "security men" or "the village vigilante [group]" for alleged "homosexual acts" (*The Nation* 22 Apr. 2020). The same source quotes a police spokesperson in Imo state as indicating that after receiving a call reporting the incident, the police rescued the attacked police officer and that an investigation into the incident has been launched (*The Nation* 22 Apr. 2020);
- Human Rights Watch (HRW) indicates that a "vigilance group" provided information that a group was performing "gay initiation rites"; this led to the arrest of 57 people in a Lagos hotel in August 2018 (HRW 17 Jan. 2019);
- The Executive Director of WHER reported that in November 2019, "a young man was outed to his community and handed over to a vigilante group that treated him inhumanely and painted him with blood before taking him to the Emir's palace, where it was decided that all people that he has ever made advances at should wipe him" (WHER 12 Oct. 2020);
- Media sources state that a homeless male returnee from Europe, suspected to be gay, was "lynched" by the "local vigilante and some youths" in Ibadan in Oyo state (*The Sun* 22 July 2020; LiveTimes 24 July 2020); and
- The Executive Director of WHER indicated that in August 2020, "a trans woman was attacked by some members of a vigilante group who ha[d] been targeting her; she was beaten, taunted, stripped naked, and paraded around in public" (WHER 12 Oct. 2020).

5. Areas of Influence

Sources indicate that there are no "statistics" (WHER 12 Oct. 2020) or "systematic

information" (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020) on attacks against sexual minorities by vigilante groups (WHER 12 Oct. 2020; Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020).

The Senior Lecturer indicated that the "violence is omnipresent" (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020). The same source further indicated that "[v]igilante groups tend to be active in cities, towns, and markets, [and] less so in very isolated rural areas. There are variations between regions" (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020). In contrast, the Executive Director of WHER stated that "[m]ob attacks and lynching are often common in many parts of the country. However, these groups can mostly be found in rural and semi-urban areas where they can readily prey on vulnerable sexual minorities" (WHER 12 Oct. 2020). The same source further indicated that vigilante groups operate

across the country but [are] more prevalent in the northern part of the country where the Sharia laws are rooted, a law that encourages the public to stone perceived and real LGBT persons to death and whipping or imprisonment for women. ... [T]hese homophobic vigilante groups publicly attack LGBT persons with the backing of the Sharia law. These attacks are also prominent in Lagos, Edo, Port Harcourt, Enugu and Abuja. (WHER 12 Oct. 2020)

Based on a review of media articles, an article on "jungle justice" [3] by *Daily Trust*, an Abuja-based newspaper (allAfrica n.d.), found that there were 104 or 105 victims of jungle justice between January and December 2019 in "at least" 25 of the 36 states of Nigeria (*Daily Trust* 24 Feb. 2020). According to the article, the victims included "alleged homosexuals," police officers, suspects in robberies and motorcycle thefts, and cattle rustlers (*Daily Trust* 24 Feb. 2020). The same source further states that the highest number of cases were found in Lagos and Bayelsa states, followed by Abuja, Cross River, Benue and Delta states (*Daily Trust* 24 Feb. 2020). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

6. State Response and Protection

A country guidance note on Nigeria by the EU's European Asylum Support Office (EASO) states that "[h]omophobic violence is occurring without fear of consequences" (EU Feb. 2019, 59). A UN special rapporteur, who visited Nigeria in 2019, states that "[t]hree alleged killings of individuals because of their perceived sexual orientation were reported, with the individuals beaten to death for belonging to the LGTBI community. In general, victims and families do not file complaints for these cases" (UN 2 Sept. 2019, para. 65).

According to the Executive Director of WHER,

law enforcement agents consider the vigilantes' attacks as an intervention to ease their work to enforce peace in the community; therefore, the victims are the ones who get arrested on [the] basis of homosexuality and face more stigma, discrimination, unlawful arrest, and detention, extortion and rape.

Also, some law enforcement agents are part of the vigilante groups; they lure real or perceived homosexuals into lonely spaces and rob them of their valuables, harass them sexually, blackmail them and in some cases, victims don't make it out alive. ... [T]hey are sometimes arrested but rarely prosecuted. (WHER 12 Oct. 2020)

The Senior Lecturer similarly indicated that he is "not aware of prosecutions for

anti-LGBT violence as such. Many LGBT peoples who have been assaulted, however, have ended up being arrested and prosecuted" (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020). The *Guardian*, a Nigeria-based newspaper (*The Guardian* n.d.), cites the investigating police officer as indicating that a man who was "attacked and mobbed" for an alleged same-sex relationship was subsequently being investigated by the police for homosexuality, as was his partner (*The Guardian* 21 Sept. 2017). The 2019 TIERs survey indicates that

[a]ctions by non-state actors are further validated by the behaviour of state actors who also extort LGBTQI people by evoking fear of legal reprisal. There are many cases where [p]olice [o]fficers arbitrarily arrest people perceived to be LGBTQI based on information illegally obtained from their phones, or based on circumstantial evidence. The [p]olice [o]fficers then demand huge sums of money from them to process their release. These violations often go unreported due to the lack of trust in law enforcement institutions. This is not surprising given the fact that these government institutions are often the perpetrators of harm themselves or act in collusion with non-state actors. (TIERs [Dec. 2019], 18)

The Executive Director of WHER further stated that

victims face multiple discrimination after supposedly reporting the violation of their rights to law enforcement agents. According to reports from [complainants], they often get responses like 'why do you act like a woman too, don't you know it is against the Bible' [or] 'why are you dressed like a woman if you're not guilty of the accusation'. (WHER 12 Oct. 2020)

The Senior Lecturer similarly indicated that attempts by LGBTQ individuals "to report violence would likely result in violence from the police, arrest and prosecution" (Senior Lecturer 16 Oct. 2020).

For additional information on anti-LGBTQ vigilante groups, including incidents involving these groups, and treatment of sexual and gender minorities by authorities and state protection, see the report on *The Situation of Sexual and Gender Minorities in Nigeria (2014-2018)* of February 2019, prepared by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) indicates that in northern Nigeria, hisbah groups "consist of mostly locally recruited young men who patrol neighborhoods to observe any violations of Shari'ah law" (US Dec. 2019, 14). The same source states that "[s]ome observers have compared hisbah groups to vigilante groups, particularly in states that do not have an official hisbah association but where unofficial hisbah groups patrol" (US Dec. 2019, 16).

[2] The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs) is a Nigeria-based non-profit organization working to "protect, uphold and promote" the human rights of all Nigerians "regardless of their identity, orientation, and affiliation" (TIERs n.d.).

[3] A UN special rapporteur, who visited Nigeria in 2019, describes "'jungle justice'," which occurs "particularly in the Southern part of the country," as the "local population tak[ing] matters of protection into their own hands," including killing alleged gang members and others (UN 2 Sept. 2019, para. 19).

References

African Arguments. 26 March 2019. Caleb Okereke. "[Duped Through Dating Apps: Queer Love in the Time of Homophobia](#)." [Accessed 13 Oct. 2020]

allAfrica. N.d. "[Daily Trust \(Abuja\)](#)." [Accessed 1 Oct. 2020]

Australia. 9 March 2018. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). [DFAT Country Information Report: Nigeria](#). [Accessed 1 Oct. 2020]

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). 21 October 2017. Declan Cooley. "[I Didn't Want My Mum to Know': The Men and Boys Arrested for Being Gay in Nigeria](#)." [Accessed 13 Oct. 2020]

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). N.d. "[ABC History](#)." [Accessed 13 Oct. 2020]

Daily Trust. 24 February 2020. Fidelis Mac-Leva, et al. "[Jungle Justice: 73 Killed, 31 Injured in One Year](#)." [Accessed 1 Oct. 2020]

European Union (EU). February 2019. European Asylum Support Office (EASO). [Country Guidance: Nigeria](#). [Accessed 13 Oct. 2020]

The Guardian [Nigeria]. 21 September 2017. Ruth Omasheye. "[Clampdown Pushes Homosexuals Underground](#)." [Accessed 13 Oct. 2020]

[The Guardian \[Nigeria\]. N.d. "About Us."](#) [Accessed 13 Oct. 2020]

Human Rights Watch (HRW). 17 January 2019. "Nigeria." [World Report 2019: Events of 2018](#). [Accessed 1 Oct. 2020]

LiveTimes. 24 July 2020. "[Man Escapes Mob Death in Ibadan](#)." [Accessed 7 Oct. 2020]

Mail & Guardian. 28 May 2020. Vincent Desmond. "[What It Means to Be Kitoed](#)." [Accessed 13 Oct. 2020]

The Nation [Nigeria]. 22 April 2020. Damian Duruiheoma. "[Angry Mob Strip Police Officer, Homosexual Partner Naked](#)." [Accessed 7 Oct. 2020]

[The Nation \[Nigeria\]. N.d. "About Us."](#) [Accessed 7 Oct. 2020]

Reuters. 24 February 2020. Alexis Akwagyiram. "[A Police Raid, Viral Videos and the Broken Lives of Nigerian Gay Law Suspects](#)." [Accessed 13 Oct. 2020]

Senior Lecturer, University of Manchester. 16 October 2020. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.

The Sun. 22 July 2020. Taiwo Oluwadare. "[Suspected Homosexual Escapes](#)

[Lynching by Mob in Ibadan.](#)" [Accessed 7 Oct. 2020]

The Sun. 25 September 2019. Austin Ofoma. "[Need for Nigerian Govt to Review Its Same-Sex Law.](#)" [Accessed 13 Oct. 2020]

The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs). [December 2019]. [2019 Human Rights Violations Report: Based on Real or Perceived Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Nigeria.](#) [Accessed 1 Oct. 2020]

The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs). [December 2018]. [2018 Human Rights Violations Report: Based on Real or Perceived Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Nigeria.](#) [Accessed 1 Oct. 2020]

The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs). [December 2017]. [2017 Human Rights Violations Report Based on: Real or Perceived Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Nigeria.](#) [Accessed 1 Oct. 2020]

[The Initiative for Equal Rights \(TIERs\). N.d. "Who We Are."](#) [Accessed 1 Oct. 2020]

United Nations (UN). 2 September 2019. UN Special Rapporteur for Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions. "[End of Visit Statement of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions on Her Visit to Nigeria.](#)" [Accessed 1 Oct. 2020]

United States (US). December 2019. US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). [Shari'ah Criminal Law in Northern Nigeria: Implementation of Expanded Shari'ah Penal and Criminal Procedure Codes in Kano, Sokoto, and Zamfara States, 2017-2019.](#) By Heather Bourbeau, with Muhammad Sani Umar and Peter Bauman. [Accessed 19 Oct. 2020]

United States (US). N.d. Library of Congress. "[Daily Sun.](#)" [Accessed 13 Oct. 2020]

Women's Health and Equal Rights Initiative (WHER). 12 October 2020. Correspondence from the Executive Director to the Research Directorate.

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Associate professor who has conducted research on gender and sexuality in Nigeria; associate professor who has conducted research on vigilante groups in Nigeria; Improved Sexual Health and Rights Advocacy Initiative; The Initiative for Equal Rights; Initiative for Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights Awareness; International Centre for Sexual Reproductive Rights; Queer Alliance Nigeria.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Bisi Alimi Foundation; *Daily Post*; ecoi.net; Erasing 76 Crimes; Factiva; Freedom House; International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association; Legit.ng; Nigeria Watch; Pulse.ng; *The Punch*; Queer Alliance Nigeria; *This Day*; UK – Home Office; UN – Refworld; US – Department of State; *Vanguard*.