

EXTORTION AND BLACKMAIL OF NIGERIAN LESBIANS AND BISEXUAL WOMEN

Unoma Azuah

Extortion and blackmail are fundamental realities of homosexual life in Nigeria. While both men and women are victimized under the oppressive, patriarchal systems that reign in Nigeria, they are targeted in distinct ways. In this chapter, I look at the particular vulnerability of lesbian and bisexual women in Nigeria, noting how they are singled out for extortion and blackmail and the grave consequences this has in their lives.

Patriarchy is in large part responsible for hostility toward homosexuality in Nigeria. Chimaroke O. Izugbara has argued that norms around sexuality in Nigeria “are socially produced and fed by oppressive patriarchal subjectivities and ideologies that try to instill a sense of what is normal, sexually-speaking, for us all.”¹ Homosexuality is one of the strongest challenges to patriarchy, and therefore “is framed as an unruly force which threatens humanity at large and has to be kept perfectly under control, by violence, if necessary.”² While different strategies are used to control homosexuality, all of them reinforce patriarchal power.

One way that male homosexuality is suppressed is through the law. Under Section 214 of Nigeria’s Criminal Code Act, any person who “has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature” may be imprisoned for up to fourteen years – and under Section 215, anyone who attempts to do so may find themselves imprisoned for up to seven years. Section 217 criminalizes an even broader category of “gross indecency” between males, punishing offenders with up to three years in prison.

While these laws are silent on female homosexuality, they still serve to police same-sex activity between women and stifle lesbian and bisexual organizing. Moreover, the laws of Nigeria are not the only means of controlling sexuality, and lesbian and bisexual women must also deal with customary and religious laws that dictate and limit their behavior. In those northern states which have adopted Sharia, both male and female homosexuality have been outlawed, with death as the maximum penalty for male homosexuality and whipping or imprisonment as the

1 Izugbara, Chimaroke O., “Patriarchal Ideology and Discourses of Sexuality in Nigeria” (Lagos, Nigeria: Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Center, 2004).

2 Ibid.

maximum penalty for female homosexuality.³ The strong legal, religious, and social prohibitions of homosexuality empower families, neighbors, and communities to police gender norms among homosexual men and women – and allow practices like extortion and blackmail to flourish.

Generally, extortion and blackmail is especially common in the male homosexual community. This is because homosexual men in Nigeria more publicly transgress gender norms, especially the belief that men should be dominant over submissive women. By rejecting the privilege enjoyed by heterosexual men, homosexual men represent a visible threat to patriarchal values and the sexual ideologies they support.

While lesbianism is more tolerated than male homosexuality, a significant number of Nigerian lesbians and bisexual women are also targets of extortion and blackmail. Like their male counterparts, they also break the rules of their patriarchal community. They tend to be independent of men and therefore step outside of the boundaries of their traditional roles. Extortion and blackmail become weapons of choice for those who police female homosexuality, and are routinely used to punish and silence lesbians and bisexual women who transgress the social order.

In this policing, the extortion and blackmail experienced by Nigerian lesbians and bisexual women are not limited to demands for monetary payments alone. Some women are forced to grant sexual favours or run dangerous errands for extortionists and blackmailers. A substantial number of lesbian and bisexual women are forced to accept and live with the exploitation they face because of their sexual orientation. A few Nigerian lesbian and bisexual women make the difficult choice to quit their jobs in those instances where their bosses threaten to fire them if they do not satisfy their demands. There are others – though not many – who come out to put a stop to the extortion or blackmail, face ostracism and hostility, and are often compelled or forced to move to new cities and change their names and identities.

Interviews with lesbian and bisexual women reveal a range of forms of extortion and blackmail that they face. To further explore the issues of extortion and blackmail in Nigeria, I traveled to ten cities – Lagos, Benin, Kaduna, Asaba, Port Harcourt, Enugu, Abuja, Warri, Ibadan, and Makurdi – and interviewed twenty-five lesbians and bisexual women about

3 The states which have adopted Sharia law are Bauchi (2001), Borno (2000), Gombe (2001), Jigawa (2000), Kaduna (2001), Kano (2000), Katsina (2000), Kebbi (2000), Niger (2000), Sokoto (2000), Yobe (2001) and Zamfara (2000). See Ottosson, Daniel. *State-Sponsored Homophobia* (Brussels, Belgium: International Lesbian and Gay Association, May 2010): 17.

the demands they had faced and how they had dealt with them. Women who self-identified as bisexual constituted a greater portion of the sample than those who self-identified as lesbians. Others called themselves married lesbians, because they were lesbians but felt they needed to marry men to maintain social respectability or to have children, as they did not want to have children out of wedlock. The interviewees were primarily reached through the networks and resources of LGBT groups in Nigeria.

Issues of confidentiality, safety, and secrecy posed a number of obstacles during the research process. Some of the interviewees who had agreed to meet with me declined to be interviewed at the last minute, and when I called to find out why they changed their minds, many of them voiced concerns about their safety. Even when I requested that we speak over the phone so they would not have to meet me in person, they were not comfortable enough to speak with me. It often took multiple calls and reassurances before I could convince them that I would not reveal their identity and would respect their confidentiality. Others asked that I interview them in the presence of a close friend or an LGBT activist with whom they were already familiar. The hesitation that lesbian and bisexual women felt in sharing their experiences was further complicated by the usual difficulties of doing multi-sited research – for example, when the vehicles I took broke down on my way to meet interviewees or when I had to wait for days in a city just to accommodate the interviewee's schedule or their readiness or willingness to speak. The difficulty women had talking about their experiences hints at the deeply personal and traumatic ways that extortion and blackmail affect lesbian and bisexual lives.

The interviews reflected certain patterns, and for the purposes of this chapter, I divide the interviewees into five groups based on the kinds of extortion and blackmail they experienced. I consider the dynamics of extortion and blackmail in the workplace, in the family, by friends, by other lesbian and bisexual women, and in schools.

In the workplace, women were subject to extortion and blackmail from co-workers and employers alike. Discussions of partners or families are difficult to avoid in many workplaces, and lesbian and bisexual women use a variety of tactics to avoid talking about their relationships with other women. The discretion they exercise can be used against them, however, when a co-worker or employer learns about their personal life. The workplace is a particularly difficult place to deal with these kinds of threats, as lesbian and bisexual women typically rely on their jobs for their

survival. In areas where unemployment is high, losing a job is a serious matter – particularly if the blackmailer threatens to publicly disclose the victim’s sexual orientation, making it difficult or impossible to find further employment elsewhere. As a result, lesbian and bisexual interviewees went to great lengths to keep their jobs. Six of the lesbians interviewed had to regularly compensate their co-workers to keep them from disclosing the fact that they are lesbians. Two lesbians ended up accepting their bosses’ constant sexual requests, even though they were ultimately forced to quit their jobs when the pressure became unmanageable for them.

In the family, the consequences of extortion and blackmail are emotional as well as material. Four of the lesbians interviewed were blackmailed by their parents, who demanded that they give them their salaries or dictated what they did with their money – for example, one woman was forced to buy her father a car, while another had to borrow money and go into debt in order to buy her mother a house. In these instances, family members not only threatened to disown or expel their lesbian and bisexual wives, daughters, or sisters, but used these threats for their own material gain. The sense that one is being taken advantage of can be as painful for victims as the threats themselves.

Other interviewees were almost in tears as they shared how some of their closest friends had extorted and blackmailed them with information about their sexual orientation or their relationships. The intimacy of close friendships can make extortion and blackmail particularly painful, as secrets shared in confidence are used for threats and manipulation. Like family, acts of extortion and blackmail by friends are not merely about the loss of material possessions, but about the sense of abandonment or betrayal that the victim also suffers.

A fourth theme was the vulnerability of bisexual women to extortion and blackmail by other women. The eight bisexual women who were interviewed did not want to be “outed” to their families – especially to their husbands. As one of the interviewees commented, their lesbian lovers had them “wrapped around their fingers,” and made constant demands for money or gifts. In many instances, they were held emotionally and materially hostage by their lesbian lovers. In a number of instances, they also didn’t want to lose those lovers, putting them in a difficult position when they were forced to choose between the important relationships in their lives.

The five high school students who were interviewed had similar stories of being blackmailed by their classmates or bunk mates because they were

caught in compromising positions with their female lovers or were careless with their love letters. They discussed having to give money, belongings, or their food to avoid being publicly exposed in the school assembly. When a school principal was told that students had female lovers, they were punished by administrators – for example, they were lashed with several strokes from a cane, suspended, or expelled from school. Whether they were expelled from school or simply taken advantage of, extortion and blackmail in schools interfered with the education of the victims – an effect with lifelong consequences.

In this chapter, I focus on five of the women's narratives which were representative of the above categories. These women did not give their real names and are presented as Bola, Efe, Gimbiya, Moreni, and Franca. While the experiences of these women differ, all of them suggest that extortion and blackmail put lesbian and bisexual women in compromising and often impossible positions, and are a serious problem for these women in Nigeria.

EXTORTION AND BLACKMAIL IN THE WORKPLACE: BOLA'S STORY

Bola was a high school teacher in Warri who was out to only a few of her close friends and some of her trusted siblings. She was blackmailed by a co-worker, Mercy, who met her one morning with printed copies of email exchanges between Bola and her lover. Mercy let her know that such “sinful” acts were enough to get her fired. Bola pleaded with Mercy to tell her how she got hold of the email, and was told that she had forgotten to uncheck the box that tells the program to “keep signed on for two weeks.”

Bola asked for forgiveness with a promise to end her homosexual activity and relationships. Mercy, however, did not care whether Bola changed her lifestyle. She was more interested in the money she could get from her. Mercy asked Bola to give her a percentage of her salary so that they could both keep the secret of her sexuality between themselves. Bola was able to plead with her to take a monthly payment of 10,000 naira. After five months, Mercy approached Bola demanding an increased payment, saying she needed extra money for a family emergency. Bola refused, and Mercy gave the email exchange to their boss.

Her boss invited her to his office, grinning. Bola was surprised that instead of being fired, her boss's first question was, “how do you people do it?” He proposed to Bola that she invite her lover for a threesome with him. Bola refused, but apologized to him for her homosexuality and asked him for a second chance, promising that she would change. He kept grinning and told her to show him how she does it with her lover, since

she was not willing to participate in a *ménage a trois*. The meeting led to a series of demands for sexual favours that lasted for months.

Eventually, Bola sent in her resignation letter. Her boss was enraged, and threatened to post her email exchanges on major notice boards around the school. Bola was deterred from resigning by the threat that she would be publicly exposed to the school and the community, and continued with the favours.

Soon, Bola's boss came up with another duty. He instructed her to start picking up fetish objects from a witch doctor and sprinkling them around the school premises as a way of increasing enrollment for the school. Bola knew she could be hurt by the ritual potency of the fetish objects, especially if she missed following the exact directions. She refused, and finally left the school.

Later, some of her co-workers informed her that their boss posted her email exchanges with her lover on the notice board. A good number of them stopped speaking to her, as word spread that she practiced homosexuality. Even her family was stigmatised, since almost everybody around her heard about the scandal. Bola left town, assumed a new name, and started a new life in Lagos. Looking back on her experience, she says, "if I didn't have the option of starting all over again, I would have killed myself."

Bola shared that she has friends who faced the same predicament. Some told her that they ignored the threats and nothing came out of it. Bola, however, was not willing to ignore her boss's threat. She didn't want to be "outed" to the wider community, but she also needed the job. She also didn't have the courage to challenge her boss to carry out his threats. Bola's story also illustrates how difficult it is to prevent extortion and blackmail from escalating, with perpetrators taking advantage of their power to make increasingly difficult demands. Bola's payments to her coworker did not stop the blackmail – instead, the demands escalated, and turned into further demands for sexual favours and then ritual practices from her employer. In the end, the money and sexual favours that Bola used to keep her coworker and boss silent were useless, as both of them ultimately went through with their threats and exposed her secret.

EXTORTION AND BLACKMAIL BY THE FAMILY: EFE'S STORY

Efe was with her lover in her bedroom when her mother stumbled upon them. As Efe and her partner scrambled up to frantically search for their clothes, Efe's mother stood at the door transfixed in disbelief, then began bawling as her daughter's lover hurried off.

Efe initially tried to deny her sexuality, telling her mother that she and her friend had decided to sleep naked and were only fooling around when she walked in on them. Her mother did not believe her. Consequently, Efe was forced to come out to her mother, and told her that she was a lesbian.

Efe's mother stopped speaking to her, and this went on for days. When Efe continued to apologize, she suggested that Efe should go with her to meet the pastor of her church, who would deliver her from her demonic lifestyle. When Efe maintained that she was not going to see any pastor and did not need any kind of deliverance, her mother broke down and cried again. Efe finally agreed to comply with her mother's request.

At the deliverance, the pastor told her that in order for her to forsake her devilish lifestyle, she needed to prepare her mind and be willing to renounce the devil. He asked her to close her eyes while he prayed over her, and she complied. Soon, the prayers reached a point where the pastor started pressing hard on Efe's head. He began to push and shove her around, commanding the spirit of lesbianism to come out and flee from her life. When Efe pleaded with him to stop the pushing and shoving and told him that he was making her uncomfortable, the pastor's response was that her feeling of discomfort meant that his prayers were taking effect. He pushed and shoved her even harder, attempting to cast out the spirit of lesbianism. Efe bore it all, but when he asked her to strip for the next round of prayers, she got up and promptly left the deliverance.

When she reported what had happened to her mother, her mother refused to believe her. Instead, she accused Efe of telling lies about the pastor as a way to escape deliverance from her evil lifestyle. She stopped speaking to Efe, lamenting that she would not know how to live with the fact that her only daughter would not give her a son-in-law or a grandchild. Efe's mother suggested that her daughter would have to find a way to play the role a son-in-law would have played for her, and that would include spoiling her and granting as many of her requests as possible.

Soon, Efe's mother began to suggest that Efe should find other ways to compensate her for depriving her of one of the joys of motherhood, and indicated that a house in one of the best neighborhoods in town would be an appropriate gift. Eventually, Efe took out a loan and bought her the house. As Efe recalls, "I was shocked that even my own mother would go to such lengths to rip me off. For what? Because I am not normal, as she says, so I am paying her for my abnormality."

Efe recognized that her mother was taking advantage of the situation for her own gain, but felt obligated to comply with the request. Nonetheless, she said that she did not see herself granting her mother's requests or demands indefinitely. She hoped the situation would get to a point where she would have supplied her mother enough money and gifts to keep her satisfied. Nonetheless, Efe also expressed worry that if her mother was not satisfied, she could not afford to keep supporting her in this manner, and she was not sure what would happen then.

EXTORTION AND BLACKMAIL BY FRIENDS: GIMBIYA'S STORY

Gimbiya is a hair dresser in Kaduna. Because of mounting pressure on her to get married, she arranged for a male friend, Ayo, to pose as her boyfriend. Ayo became suspicious about the role-playing, and wondered why Gimbiya had not wanted to date him in the first place. When Ayo asked her about the situation, Gimbiya came out to him.

Ayo was enraged by the revelation, and insisted that Gimbiya should pay him for pretending to be her boyfriend. Gimbiya paid him, but he returned demanding more money and threatened to expose her to her parents. At this point, Gimbiya refused to comply with the demands, told Ayo off, and went to her parents to preemptively divulge her sexual preference for women.

Gimbiya first approached her mother. When Gimbiya told her mother about her sexual orientation, her mother swooned, clutched the door post, and asked for a chair. Gimbiya panicked. She got her mother a chair and then fetched her a glass of cold water. When her mother seemed to have calmed down, Gimbiya bolted out of the house to find a friend she could confide in.

After her mother's dramatic reaction, Gimbiya began to doubt whether it was worth it to tell her father. Her friend told her that she should never have told her mother, but should have confided in her lesbian friends. They could have made it clear to Ayo that blackmail would not work and that Gimbiya would be supported regardless of what happened. Nonetheless, Gimbiya's friend praised her for being brave. Together, the two of them decided that since Gimbiya had already told her mother, her father would find out whether or not Gimbiya approached him directly. Gimbiya decided she had to come out to her father.

When Gimbiya got home, her mother was nowhere to be found. She went to her mother's bedroom and found her reading the Bible. The two did not exchange a word, but Gimbiya figured that her mother did not look like she planned to tell her father about her revelation any time soon.

Nonetheless, Gimbiya found she could not summon up the courage to tell her father about her sexual orientation. She recognized an opportunity to do when her father asked for his dinner and sat in the living room reading a newspaper. Gimbiya contemplated sitting down close to him and letting him know, but found that she could not go through with it.

Gimbiya changed her mind about telling her father and got his dinner ready for him. She served him the meal and went to take a shower. By the time she stepped out of the shower, she heard her parents talking with raised voices, and quickly realized that her mother had divulged the secret. She wanted to run out of the house, but only had a piece of towel wrapped around her.

Gimbiya's father did not take the news well. He went on a rampage, saying he would do whatever was necessary to straighten her out. He went so far as to threaten her with a gang rape if that was what it would take to put a stop to her wayward life. Gimbiya did not wait to see how serious her father was about the threat. She left home. As she remembers, "I had a feeling that he would seriously plan to have a group of men rape me to prove his point."

Gimbiya's story illustrates the importance of identifying friends and family who can be trusted to offer unconditional support. When Gimbiya was blackmailed by a friend, she went to her family hoping to tell her them directly to neutralize the blackmailer's threats. Instead of helping with the situation, Gimbiya's parents rejected and threatened her. Her strategy prevented Ayo from blackmailing her, but allowed her father to extort her, threatening to have her gang raped if she did not comply with his demands to live a heterosexual life. The story shows how important it can be to have a support network that can be trusted in situations like these, and that can provide advice and guidance when a victim does not know where to turn.

EXTORTION AND BLACKMAIL OF BISEXUAL WOMEN: MORENI'S STORY

Moreni is a married bisexual woman in Lagos. She had a lesbian lover, Ladi, who complained that Moreni was spending too much time with her husband and children and was not giving her enough attention.

Ladi's desire to spend time with Moreni had already caused strain in the marriage. Once, the two were at Moreni's house and Moreni's husband saw them indulging in a quick kiss. Moreni had to lie. She told her husband that she was only giving Ladi a friendly kiss for passing her exams. He was skeptical, and suggested that there were better ways to encourage

her for doing well in school – for example, buying her a gift or making a token gesture of support. Moreni replied that she had already given her a gift, and that there was nothing excessive about such a small gesture of encouragement. Shaken, she dismissed the interrogation.

A few days later, after she thought the whole incident had been forgotten, her husband called her into the bedroom and voiced his suspicion that her relationship with Ladi was more than simply friendship. He asked Moreni to be open with him and tell him if they were lovers. She insisted that they were not. Moreni's husband surprised her by telling her that he did not mind if she were lovers with Ladi or any other woman, so long as she was not having affairs with a man. Even with that assurance, Moreni denied the relationship.

After the incident, Moreni resolved to stop having Ladi in the house. She did not want to risk being caught again by her husband, or to fuel his suspicions about their relationship. To find ways to spend time with Ladi, Moreni had to lie to her husband about how she needed to meet urgently with either her parents or her friends. When she found ways to do so, she would leave for periods that sometimes turned into weeks of vacation with Ladi.

Despite all the time they spent together, Ladi was not satisfied with the relationship. She kept demanding that Moreni abandon her husband and settle down with her. Moreni agreed to leave her husband, but only if she could wait until after her children had grown up and left their home. Ladi refused this compromise, and threatened to out Moreni to her husband to force him to leave his wife.

Moreni pleaded with Ladi, but to no avail. Ladi insisted that she could not share Moreni with anybody else. Ladi knew that Moreni was more attracted to women than she was to men. She had always suspected that Moreni had gotten married simply to stop the pressure from her family after she reached the age to get married and settle down. Moreni attempted to make Ladi understand that her mind and soul was with her, but this failed to convince her lover that they could have a meaningful relationship even as she and her husband raised their children.

As a way of placating her, Moreni rented a place for Ladi close to the home she shared with her husband and children. Ladi wanted more, and demanded a car. Moreni bought her a car, but started withdrawing emotionally from Ladi. Eventually, she was able to negotiate a deal where Ladi received a monthly allowance until she was able to get a well-paying job. The relationship ended over time. Moreni says, "I felt betrayed. It was

no more about being together, it became about what she could get from me since she couldn't get me on her own terms.”

Moreni hoped to meet a lover who would be able to accept her marital status, and understand that it was something she had to do to please her society and her family, not necessarily because she was in love with a man. In the interview, she talked about her friends who kept lovers even though they were married. Some had that option because they were married into a polygamous home. Others were able to reach that compromise because they cared for their lesbian or bisexual lovers, but wanted the economic support that their husbands provided for them. With that support, they were able to take trips and take care of their lovers materially. When their lesbian or bisexual lovers also wanted their full time and attention, the arrangement became more difficult. For Moreni, it resulted in her lover manipulating her with the threat of disclosure, and blackmailing her into spending time together and buying her what she demanded.

EXTORTION AND BLACKMAIL IN SCHOOLS: FRANCA'S STORY

Franca is a high school student. She is a prefect, and one of the privileges she enjoyed was having a room to herself. One of the duties of her “school daughter,” Ngozi, was to clean up Franca's room as often as she wanted.⁴ One day, Franca realized that Ngozi was snooping around her room and stealing her money and provisions. Franca not only confronted her about it, but proceeded to punish her by making her cut a yard full of overgrown grass and weeds.

Ngozi did not take the punishment well. She stole a bag of letters exchanged between Franca and her female lover, and threatened to take them to the school principal unless Franca gave her pocket money, supplied her with provisions, and relieved her of her duties as her school daughter. Franca complied with all of these demands. “If I let her take my letters to the school Principal, that would be the end of my secondary school career in this school,” Franca says, “and I don't want to put my parents through that type of embarrassment.”

Franca talked about the common knowledge in her high school that a good number of girls were lesbians and nobody minded or bothered about it. It was considered a strong part of an all-girls boarding school culture. It became a problem, however, when a jealous lover wanted to get back

⁴ A system in boarding secondary schools where seniors and prefects enjoy the privilege of being assisted by junior students.

at her ex-girlfriend or cheating lover. Alternatively, girls who could not find themselves lovers reported their coupled classmates to the school authorities out of envy. In these environments, close friendships and relationships between students could be used against them to disrupt or prematurely end their education.

LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN'S NEEDS AND CONCERNS

Across all these categories, the extortion and blackmail that women faced was also related to other power dynamics in their lives. The relationships between bosses and their employees, parents and their children, husbands and their wives, and educators and their students were prominent in the narrative, and often gave perpetrators very real power over their victims, which went above and beyond the threat of disclosure. The difficult position in which lesbian and bisexual women found themselves was exacerbated by the lack of support they had in dealing with extortion and blackmail. The interviewees usually attempted to deal with the threats themselves, without friends or family to assist them. They felt helpless and were unaware of how and where they might get professional advice.

As long as lesbian and bisexual women face stigma from those around them, they are likely to face extortion and blackmail. In light of that reality, it is essential that women who are victimized have networks and resources they can turn to for help. The feminist movement should be a source of support for lesbian and bisexual women dealing with extortion and blackmail. Pinkie Megwe describes feminism “both as an activist movement and as a body of ideas that underline the need for a positive transformation of society such that women are not marginalized but are treated as full citizens in all spheres of life.”⁵ Indeed, the interviewees described the same kinds of subtle and explicit pressures that women across Nigeria face – for example, expectations around marriage and child-rearing, sexual harassment from employers, the threat of assault or rape, and a lack of legal and professional support for women. These are not lesbian or bisexual issues, but the result of a much larger patriarchal structure.

Unfortunately, the feminist movement in Nigeria has been reluctant to take up the issues of lesbian and bisexual women. In Nigeria, “feminism” is associated with contemporary western feminism, including the belief in

5 Mekgwe, Pinkie. “Theorizing African Feminism(s): The ‘Colonial’ Question,” *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy* XX (2006): 13.

some quarters that feminism is the theory and lesbianism is the practice. As a result, the feminist movement in Nigeria is held with much suspicion. Evidence of this is seen in the work of many women writers in Nigeria – for example, Buchi Emecheta refers to feminism as foreign, Akachi Ezeigbo prefers to be called a womanist, and Zaynab Alkali flatly rejects the feminist label. The feminist movement in Nigeria is fraught with so much controversy that it has not yet become a firm platform for all women to fight and topple patriarchal hegemony.

Thus, it is important that LGBT groups consider the needs of lesbian and bisexual women and make themselves available to them. Some lesbians and bisexual women rebuff patriarchal expectations – for instance, the pressure to marry a man – and live with their lovers, but they have not yet formed groups which would be a visible resource for those in crisis. Instead, the networks that do exist for lesbian and bisexual women are usually informal. Although some LGBT communities hold underground meetings weekly or monthly to discuss their problems and weigh their priorities, most lesbians and bisexual women fight their fights as individuals. Few of the lesbian and bisexual women interviewed for this project were familiar with non-governmental organizations like the International Centre for Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights (INCREASE), Alliance Rights Nigeria (ARN), House of Rainbow Metropolitan Community Church, and Sexual Minorities Against AIDS in Nigeria (SMAAN). All of these organizations cater to the needs of the LGBT community in Nigeria, and attempt to address the persecution and violence they face.

So long as there is stigma against homosexuality, LGBT people of all kinds will be at risk for extortion and blackmail. In this sense, the needs and concerns of lesbian and bisexual women are similar and in most cases indistinguishable from those of homosexual men and transgender people. All of these groups will be easily victimized as long as their behaviors and identities are policed and punished by the wider society. It is therefore unlikely that extortion or blackmail of lesbian and bisexual women in Nigeria will end anytime soon.

Nonetheless, LGBT groups must be supported in their efforts in Nigeria. Programs should be undertaken to raise awareness that LGBT communities exist in Nigeria, which is not widely known since most LGBT people in the country remain in the closet. The visibility of LGBT groups fighting for their rights and offering them support will give them

the confidence to “come out,” even if only to other people within these groups. This creates networks of support that victims can turn to in times of need, and can give victims the confidence to report any abuses meted out to them. For this to occur, LGBT groups have to be more visible – and need to be supported by the larger and international human rights bodies that can assist them in the face of attacks or backlash.

As LGBT groups try to raise awareness about these issues, they must also build mechanisms to respond to extortion and blackmail against lesbian and bisexual women. In light of hostility from friends and family, these women need an easily recognizable and accessible body that is open to protect and defend them. Such a body should have a physical space where complaints can be lodged and where lawyers are available and willing to defend them. Ideally, it would be able to work closely with some government agencies and lawyers. It could also help spread the awareness that the extortion and blackmail of homosexuals in Nigeria is a violation of the National Human Rights Act, and can pressure the National Human Rights Commission to take action against the problem.

The lesbian and bisexual women interviewed for this project described a variety of types of blackmail and extortion. While their experiences may seem personal and very specific, they all reflect the ways that patriarchy limits the options available to women and prevents them from getting the support they need in times of crisis. The interviews suggest that extortion and blackmail is not just a lesbian or bisexual issue, but an issue that should be of concern to all LGBT people, all women, and all Nigerians invested in a society where all human rights are observed and respected.