



Gender Diversity and Social Change in Nigeria: Societal Perceptions of LGBTQ+ and Non-Binary Identities

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Abstract

Gender diversity has increasingly become a subject of global discourse within the context of social development and human rights. In Nigeria, however, discussions surrounding LGBTQ+ and non-binary identities remain highly contested due to prevailing cultural, religious, and legal frameworks. This paper examines societal perceptions of gender diversity in Nigeria and explores how these perceptions influence processes of social change and social inclusion. Drawing on sociological perspectives, particularly social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, the study analyses how gender identities are socially defined, negotiated, and resisted within Nigerian society. The paper highlights the influence of cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and state policies on public attitudes toward LGBTQ+ and non-binary individuals. It further discusses the implications of these perceptions for social development, human rights discourse, and the broader trajectory of social change in Nigeria. The paper concludes that while traditional norms continue to shape dominant societal attitudes, increasing globalization, digital communication, and generational shifts are gradually influencing conversations about gender diversity. Recommendations are made for policy dialogue, public education, and further sociological research on gender diversity within the Nigerian context.

Keywords: Gender diversity, LGBTQ+, Non-binary, Social change, Nigeria, Societal perceptions, Social inclusion

Introduction

In recent decades, gender identity and expression have emerged as key concerns in global sociological and human rights scholarship. Increasing attention to diverse gender identities — including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+), and non-binary individuals — reflects broader shifts in how societies conceptualize identity, rights, and inclusion (Oyebanji, 2022). Despite this global trend, gender diversity remains a deeply contested issue in many African contexts, particularly in Nigeria, where cultural, religious, and legal forces strongly reinforce heteronormativity and binary gender frameworks.

Multiple empirical and scholarly studies underscore the complex social reality of gender and sexual minorities in Nigeria. Research suggests that religiosity and entrenched cultural beliefs significantly predict negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals, highlighting the role of deeply held value systems in shaping public opinion (Bankole, Uye, & Olapegba, 2021). Other studies report that sexual minority groups, including LGBTQ+ university students, experience harassment, exclusion, and psychological harm, often compounded by institutional silence and punitive policies (LeeVan et al., 2022). Meanwhile, surveys indicate that while homophobic attitudes remain dominant, there are signs of gradual change, with decreased support for punitive laws and increasing acceptance among some Nigerian populations (Initiative for Equal Rights, 2020).

Nonetheless, even where acceptance increases marginally, stigmatization and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities remain pervasive, with legal instruments

such as the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) continuing to criminalize same-sex relationships and reinforce exclusionary norms. Empirical research illustrates that social stigma experienced by transgender and non-binary individuals contributes to fear, concealment, and unequal access to health and social services, particularly in major Nigerian cities such as Lagos and Abuja (LeeVan et al., 2022). Moreover, studies on minority experiences reveal significant generational variations, with younger sexual minorities often finding online and urban spaces more supportive, even as broader societal intolerance persists.

Digital spaces and social media have become alternative arenas for identity formation and community building for LGBTQ+ Nigerians, offering both opportunities for support and sites of sociopolitical contestation. Linguistic and discourse studies of Nigerian LGBTQ+ social media activity show how queer identities are articulated and negotiated against a backdrop of heteronormative media representations.

Given this diverse and growing body of research, existing literature highlights three key features of the Nigerian context: (1) structural and cultural resistance to gender diversity, (2) emerging but uneven shifts in public perception, and (3) the role of institutions — religious, legal, social — in shaping lived experiences of gender minorities. However, there is still limited integration of these empirical insights into broader sociological theories of gender and social change. While specific studies focus on attitudes, stigma, discrimination, or identity narratives, there remains a conceptual gap in understanding how societal perceptions collectively influence larger processes of social change, inclusion, and development.

This paper therefore examines how societal perceptions of LGBTQ+ and non-binary identities in Nigeria are shaped by cultural, religious, and legal frameworks, and how these perceptions, in turn, interact with evolving social dynamics to influence patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and social change. By situating the study within both recent empirical findings and relevant sociological theory, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of gender diversity as a site of social contestation and transformation in Nigeria.

Statement of the Research Problem

Despite the growing body of literature on gender diversity and sexual minorities in Nigeria, several critical gaps persist:

Prevailing Norms vs. Emerging Perspectives: Most research documents persistent homophobic attitudes rooted in religion and culture (Bankole et al., 2021), but there is less integration of how evolving attitudes among younger generations and digital communities might reshape broader societal norms (Initiative for Equal Rights, 2020).

Legal and Institutional Dimensions: While many scholars highlight legal barriers such as the SSMPA and their harmful effects (LeeVan et al., 2022), there is limited analysis of how legal frameworks intersect with cultural and religious discourses to sustain stigma and discourage open public engagement on gender diversity.

Sociological Integration: Existing studies often focus on isolated aspects of identity or discrimination. There remains a need for a holistic sociological analysis that connects individual experiences, societal perceptions, institutional influences, and larger processes of social change.

Non-Binary Visibility: Empirical research on non-binary identities within Nigeria remains particularly scarce compared with studies on lesbian, gay, or transgender populations. Non-binary experiences are frequently subsumed under broader LGBTQ+ categories, limiting nuanced understanding of their unique social positioning and challenges.

Social Change Dynamics: There is a paucity of research on how gradual shifts in perceptions — whether through globalization, media, education, or youth movements — are influencing the social inclusion of gender minorities, especially beyond urban, online contexts.

The research problem, therefore, is to understand how societal perceptions of LGBTQ+ and non-binary identities in Nigeria are constructed, reinforced, and contested within cultural, religious, and legal spaces, and the implications of these dynamics for social inclusion and broader trajectories of social change. Addressing this gap is vital for both academic scholarship and policy formulation directed towards inclusive social development.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

- Examine societal perceptions of LGBTQ+ and non-binary identities in Nigeria
- Assess the influence of cultural, religious, and social norms on attitudes toward gender diversity
- Analyse the implications of these perceptions for social inclusion and social change in Nigeria

Research Questions

- What are the prevailing societal perceptions of LGBTQ+ and non-binary identities in Nigeria?
- How do cultural, religious, and social values shape attitudes toward gender diversity?
- What are the implications of these perceptions for social inclusion and social change in Nigerian society?

Conceptual Clarifications

- **Gender Diversity:** Gender diversity refers to the range of gender identities and expressions that exist beyond the traditional binary classification of male and female. It recognizes that individuals may identify with different gender identities or expressions that do not strictly conform to societal expectations (Connell, 2012).
- **LGBTQ+ Identities:** The acronym LGBTQ+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual or gender minority identities. These identities reflect diverse experiences of sexual orientation and gender identity (Okoye & Eze, 2021).
- **Non-Binary Identity:** Non-binary identity refers to individuals whose gender identity does not fall exclusively within the traditional categories of male or female. Non-binary individuals may identify with a combination of genders or with neither (Adebayo, 2020).
- **Social Change:** Social change refers to significant alterations in social structures, cultural norms, values, and institutions over time. It often results from shifts in economic, political, technological, or cultural conditions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Social Constructionism and Symbolic Interactionism, providing a robust lens for understanding how societal perceptions of LGBTQ+ and non-binary identities are formed, experienced, and contested in Nigeria.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism posits that social realities—including gender roles and identities—are not biologically fixed but are created and maintained through social interactions, cultural practices, and institutional arrangements (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In Nigeria, dominant understandings of gender are socially constructed through cultural norms, religious doctrines, and legal frameworks, which reinforce binary gender roles and heteronormativity.

Social constructionism explains why Nigerian society generally perceives LGBTQ+ and non-binary identities as outside the normative social order, creating conditions for stigma, discrimination, and exclusion (Bankole et al., 2021; Adebayo, 2020).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals actively create meaning through social interactions (Blumer, 1969). While social constructionism explains the macro-level formation of societal norms, symbolic interactionism examines the micro-level negotiation of identity in daily life.

For LGBTQ+ and non-binary individuals in Nigeria, identity is continuously negotiated within families, religious institutions, workplaces, schools, and digital spaces. Labels such as “non-binary” or “queer” carry socially negotiated meanings that influence both self-perception and societal responses (LeeVan et al., 2022).

Intersection and Relevance to Social Change

By combining these frameworks, this study addresses both macro and micro dimensions of gender diversity:

- **Macro-level:** How Nigerian cultural norms, religious beliefs, and legal frameworks collectively construct societal perceptions of LGBTQ+ and non-binary identities.
- **Micro-level:** How individuals experience and negotiate these societal perceptions through interaction, highlighting acceptance, resistance, concealment, or self-definition.

This dual lens illuminates why gender diversity is contested in Nigeria, and how social change emerges through globalization, youth perspectives, social media, and civil society advocacy.

Societal Perceptions of Gender Diversity in Nigeria

Societal perceptions are shaped by cultural values, religious doctrines, and legal frameworks (Okoye & Eze, 2021). Nigerian society generally promotes heterosexual relationships and binary gender roles. Religious institutions reinforce moral attitudes that often stigmatize LGBTQ+ identities (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Legal frameworks such as the SSMPA further institutionalize social intolerance.

However, younger generations, globalization, and digital media have created spaces for alternative discourses and dialogue around gender identity (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Gender Diversity and Social Change in Nigeria

Social change emerges from tensions between traditional norms and new ideas (Connell, 2012). Urbanization, education, and social media facilitate exposure to global perspectives on human rights and equality (Adebayo, 2020). Civil society and human rights organizations also play roles in advocacy, gradually shaping new forms of social consciousness (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Implications for Social Development

Stigmatization leads to exclusion, mental health challenges, and limited economic opportunity for gender minorities (Adebayo, 2020). Inclusive societies can better harness citizen potential, making dialogue, public education, and policy reform essential for sustainable social development (Connell, 2012; Okoye & Eze, 2021).

Conclusion

Gender diversity is contested in Nigeria due to entrenched cultural, religious, and legal norms (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Contemporary shifts, including globalization and generational change, are gradually influencing public discourse. Understanding these dynamics is critical for sociological research and inclusive policy development.

Recommendations

- Promote public education on gender diversity and human rights
- Conduct empirical studies on gender identity and social inclusion
- Encourage civil society dialogue to reduce stigma
- Develop policies that balance cultural values with social justice and human dignity

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