



Understanding Our Experiences

A Community-Led Survey on the Realities of LGBT People in Rwanda

Safe Friendly Society (SFS), June 2025

1. Introduction

In June 2025, the Safe Friendly Society (SFS) launched a community-driven survey titled "Understanding Our Experiences" to document the voices and realities of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) individuals in Rwanda. This initiative emerged from a growing need for accurate, community-led data to inform donors, policy stakeholders, and civil society partners about the urgent challenges and lived realities faced by LGBT individuals, especially in a shifting political, Social-Economical and health landscape.

The survey focused on key themes such as identity, safety, healthcare, police interaction, and community support. It gathered insights from 80 LGBT respondents across the country and serves as a powerful evidence base for advocacy, service delivery, and protection programming. In a time where LGBT people in Rwanda experience increasing vulnerability, this report brings forward voices that are too often ignored or silenced.

2. Methodology

This survey was designed using Google Forms and distributed through peer networks and trusted community channels. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. The survey remained open for three days in June 2025 and collected responses from a total of 80 individuals who identified as part of the LGBTQI community.

Key methodological features:

Digital self-administered format (smartphones or internet cafés).



Digital assisted format for respondents who don't know how to read and write or don't definitely have access to internet

No collection of names, locations, or IP addresses.

Community-trusted dissemination through LGBT leaders and support groups.

Focus areas: demographic profile, lived experiences, safety, health, and access to services.

The goal was not to be statistically representative but to gather qualitative and quantitative insights that reflect the diversity and urgency of the LGBT lived experience in Rwanda.

3. Demographic Snapshot of Respondents

Age Distribution

The majority of respondents were young people, with:

71% aged between 18–34 years,

17% between 35–44 years,

The remaining 12% were either above 45 or chose not to disclose their age.

This confirms that young LGBT people are a vital demographic within the movement, yet they often face the harshest forms of violence and exclusion.

Gender Identity

41.2% identified as men.

27% identified as transgender women.

12.7% were nonbinary or gender non-conforming.

8% identified as trans men.

10.1% identified as women

This diversity points to the need for intersectional responses that do not only focus on sexual orientation but also on gender identity and expression.

Sexual Orientation



47.6% identified as gay,

19% as bisexual,

15.9% as lesbian,

17.5% identified as queer.

This reveals the fluidity and diversity in sexual identity within Rwanda's LGBT community, and the importance of language and services that reflect these lived experiences.

Geographic Location

Respondents came from across the country:

54% from Kigali City,

31.7% from the Western Province, especially areas near the DRC border,

12% from Southern province

A small portion came from Eastern Province.

The high number from border areas highlights how regional conflicts and displacements may intersect with LGBT vulnerability.

HIV Status (Self-Reported)

60.3% said they did not know or preferred not to disclose,

25.4% reported being HIV-negative,

14.3% reported living with HIV.

This reflects both the stigma around HIV and the need for accessible, confidential, LGBT-friendly health services.

4. Experiences of Discrimination and Insecurity

One of the most disturbing findings of the survey is the extent of fear, insecurity, and violence faced by LGBT persons in Rwanda.



Feeling Unsafe

76% said they felt unsafe in their communities due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Many reported being harassed or followed, especially in public spaces, bars, or markets.

Family Rejection and Housing Insecurity

58.7% had been rejected by their family after coming out or being outed.

31% had been evicted from their homes, often with no warning or legal support.

Some respondents were homeless at the time of the survey.

Forms of Discrimination:

Verbal harassment: 69.8%

Exclusion from family events: 41.3%

Being outed without consent: 38.1%

Job loss or school expulsion: 22.2%

Online hate and blackmail: 34.9%

“They called me a curse and told me to never come back.”

“Even when I move to another neighborhood, I live in fear. I am never safe.”

5. Police Abuse and Lack of Protection

The survey exposed systemic abuses by law enforcement:

33.3% reported being harassed, detained, or profiled by police especially in transition centers.

71.4% said they would not feel safe reporting violence to the police.

Why People Don't Report to Police

Fear of further abuse or arrest: 45%

Mistrust or corruption: 38%

Police inaction: 27%



One respondent noted:

“The last time I was beaten, I went to the police. They laughed and said I deserved it for being like that.”

The absence of legal protection exposes LGBT people to both state officials and community violence without any form of recourse.

6. Barriers to Healthcare and HIV Services

Access to healthcare remains a major challenge, especially for those living with or at risk of HIV.

Key Findings

49.2% had delayed or avoided care due to anticipated stigma.

22.2% experienced direct discrimination in public health facilities.

Only 28.6% felt comfortable accessing HIV testing or treatment.

Among trans women, this dropped to 16.7%.

Barriers Cited:

Misgendering by providers

Fear of being outed

Gossip and lack of confidentiality

Hostile attitudes of nurses and lab technicians

“I went for HIV testing and the nurse asked why I talk like a woman.”

“They always call you by the wrong name and then laugh with their colleagues.”

This creates critical barriers to Rwanda’s HIV prevention goals and leaves key populations unserved.

7. Support Systems and Sources of Strength

Despite structural oppression, LGBT individuals continue to create systems of resilience.

Support Networks

Friends and chosen families: 68.3%



Peer support groups: 57.1%

Local LGBT organizations (like SFS): 44.4%

Mental health programs such as Yoga etc...: Only 9.5%

Access to Safe Spaces:

Only 23.8% said they had access to a safe or affirming space.

87.3% expressed urgent need for drop-in centers, safe housing, and psychosocial support.

“I have nowhere to go when I’m in danger. We need real shelters.”

“My queer friends are the only reason I’m still alive.”

8. What Would Make Life Safer and More Dignified?

Respondents were asked what would most improve their lives:

Legal protection from discrimination: 82.5%

Income-generating opportunities: 71.4%

Non-stigmatizing healthcare: 69.8%

Access to emergency shelter: 61.9%

Mental health support: 55.6%

This reflects both structural needs (legal protection, housing) and social ones (affirmation, healing, belonging, economic independence).

9. Recommendations for Donors and Stakeholders

To meaningfully respond to these findings, we recommend:

1. Fund Safe Spaces

Establish drop-in centers and temporary shelters in Kigali and Western Province.

2. Support Emergency Response

Resource rapid-response teams to provide assistance during arrests, evictions, or crisis events.



3. Promote Healthcare Access

Train healthcare workers in LGBT sensitivity.

Establish confidential referral pathways for HIV and sexual health services.

4. Back Legal and Advocacy Initiatives

Support legal literacy and community-based paralegals.

Monitor and report rights violations systematically.

5. Invest in Economic Empowerment

Offer small grants, vocational training, and micro-enterprise for LGBT youth and those displaced by conflict.

6. Center Mental Health and Healing

Develop trauma-informed psychosocial programs in safe and trusted environments.

10. Conclusion

The Understanding Our Experiences survey reveals a sobering truth: LGBTQI people in Rwanda continue to face layered, systemic marginalization. Yet, their courage and resilience offer a path forward. With strategic investment, community partnership, and donor solidarity, we can create systems where LGBTQI people are not only safe but seen, heard, and supported.

This report is both a mirror and a call to action. Let it be used to shape policies, fund interventions, and spark dialogue across sectors. Dignity is not negotiable. Safety is not optional. Rights are not conditional.

Prepared by Safe Friendly Society (SFS)

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