




## Queer Affirmative Practice in Africa: A Social Work Practice Model for Working with LGBTQIA+ People

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the legislation put in place by the United Nations, Africa continues to grapple with issues of monosexism and heterosexism. In fact, of the 54 African countries, 33 have criminalised queer relationships, a legacy primarily attributed to colonial rule. However, social work literature has recently introduced a culturally sensitive model for working with the LGBTQIA+ community, known as Queer affirmative action. By utilising available literature and adopting an intersectional approach, which was collected and analysed through PRISMA, this paper aims to discuss the Africanising of sexuality in Africa. It argues that it is crucial to undertake a critical analysis of the colonial legacy and its impact on queer identities. Furthermore, the article posits that social work education must incorporate knowledge of the intersection of gender, sexuality, and other identity markers to form an inclusive and comprehensive approach towards practice. An affirmative philosophy to social work practice can serve as a counterweight to all punitive and discriminatory practices. Thus, in Africa, the most effective way to improve the well-being of queer individuals is to eradicate structural forms of inequality and decriminalise same-sex consensual relationships.

### KEYWORDS

LGBTQIA+; monosexism; heterosexism; queer; social work.

## INTRODUCTION

Africa is the epitome of monosexism and heterosexism throughout the world. This is evident through legislation that keeps on side-lining and criminalising queer relationships in the content, with African leaders and prominent people verbally attacking LGBTQIA+ individuals (Kasa, 2021), with the most recent being the Ugandan parliament passing a bill to this effect (Bhandari, 2023). Africa is composed of 54 countries, and more than half of these countries have criminalised homosexuality, while others still view it as a taboo, thus stigmatising and discriminating against LGBTQIA individuals (Amusan et al., 2019; Byers et al., 2020; Logan et al., 2017; Kaniuka et al., 2019; Kasa & Kang'ethe, 2023; Ndjio, 2020). Kasa and Kang'ethe (2023) argue that culture stands out as a substantial ingredient driving homophobia. According to Ndjio (2020), anti-homosexual laws are intended to protect the so-called traditional African heterosexual family from the dangers of homosexuality, which is generally interpreted as antisocial, anti-kinship, anti-procreative, and, most importantly, bare sexual behaviour.

Sexuality and sexual expression are core aspects of most clients' lives (Brandon-Friedman, 2019). According to Kasa and Kang'ethe (2023), the role of social work in intervening to assist all members of society, irrespective of their social standing, cannot be overemphasised and cannot be overemphasised. Thus, they are put in the spotlight for advocating for the rights of the LGBTQIA community. However, according to George and Ekoh (2020), the socio-cultural contexts in which social workers operate can impede the execution of their work. This is particularly true in Uganda, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Algeria, Nigeria, Zambia and 26 other African Countries (Bhandari, 2023; Ndjio, 2020). For this reason, African social workers should be concerned about the paucity of literature and the use of queer affirmative action as a culturally sensitive paradigm for dealing with LGBTQIA+ people despite it having been introduced elsewhere in the world (Argüello, 2022; Wandrekar & Nigudkar, 2019). To that end, Arguello (2022) contends that social work programmes fail to adequately address the health, mental health, and social inequalities of LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities because social work practice frequently fails to centre sexualities and genders when conducting assessments and interventions.

Queer affirmative practice is defined as a counselling approach that includes counsellor self-work, attitudes, knowledge, ethics, and process skills, with the fundamental principles being understanding and combating heterosexism, recognising heterosexual privilege where it exists, and understanding and combating homophobia in clients and in oneself (Arguello, 2019; Bragg et al., 2018; Hillock, 2016; Howell et al., 2020). The queer affirmative approach has merits for practice with any client system because it is consistent with the social justice values that social work stands for. Overall, it creates much-needed space for LGBTQIA+ people and communities to exist by incorporating education, training, and self-reflection to increase Queer cultural competence.

## METHODOLOGY

The study sought to investigate the use of Queer Affirmative Practice by social workers in Africa. The paper specifically examined the introduction of a culturally sensitive model for working with the LGBTQIA+ community in the African context, following the criminalisation of queer relationships by nearly half of African countries, with Uganda being the most recent. This systematic review's reporting was primarily guided by a literature review using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) statement. In June, July, and August 2023, the author conducted electronic searches of Google Scholar, Scopus, Wiley online libraries, Elicit, and Science Direct. According to Gusenbauer and Haddaway (2020), these databases were chosen based on their suitability for systematic reviews. The search criteria were electronically accessible publications published between 2012 and 2023. In addition to analysing relevant journals, the researcher drew on first-hand observations and intuition to highlight the need for a paradigm shift in social work practice on the continent. The article sought to further influence curriculum development by proposing specific measures social workers can take to mitigate the challenges faced in this complex field.

The table below describes the search terms used for various databases and the number of hits they generated. According to the search criteria, the publications had to be in English and published between 2012 and 2023.

**Table 1.**

*Databases and number of hits generated in specified periods*

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
	Queer in Africa	Intersectionality	Affirmative Practice	Social Work Practice and Anti-Oppressive Practice	Affirmative Practice	Social Work Curriculum	Curriculum development	Social Work Practice and Queer Affirmative Practice	Social Work Practice and Queer Affirmative Practice	Social Work Practice and Queer Affirmative Practice	Social Work Practice and Queer Affirmative Practice	Social Work Practice and Queer Affirmative Practice
Google Scholar	1000	670	107	500	900	1002	1202	1340	1504	1655	1752	1722
Scopus	20	200	48	188	289	345	300	122	213	340	467	563
Wiley Online Libraries	500	302	404	670	450	560	406	513	533	781	866	950
Elicit	105	145	369	730	289	500	342	799	850	950	1050	1002
Science Direct	60	35	80	116	59	78	56	48	67	98	176	188
<b>Total Hits<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>1685</b>	<b>1352</b>	<b>1008</b>	<b>2204</b>	<b>1987</b>	<b>2485</b>	<b>2306</b>	<b>2822</b>	<b>3167</b>	<b>3824</b>	<b>4311</b>	<b>4425</b>

### Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a term that has become popular in academic circles, with some scholars describing it as a lived experience, aspiration, strategy, method of analysing inequality, and even a movement (Al-Faham et al., 2019). It consists of three loose groups of engagements, according to Cho et al. (2013): applications of an intersectional framework or investigations of

<sup>1</sup> Sites last consulted July 2023

intersectional dynamics, discursive debates about the scope and content of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological paradigm, and political interventions using an intersectional lens. These represent a well-established pattern of knowledge production and their fluid divisions (Cho et al., 2013). Intersectionality is a term that has become popular in academic circles, with some scholars describing it as a lived experience, aspiration, strategy, method of analysing inequality, and even a movement (Al-Faham et al., 2019). It consists of three loose groups of engagements, according to Cho et al. (2013): applications of an intersectional framework or investigations of intersectional dynamics, discursive debates about the scope and content of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological paradigm, and political interventions using an intersectional lens. These represent a well-established pattern of knowledge production and their fluid divisions (Cho et al., 2013). As a result, the use of intersectionality as a framework provides excellent value for adequately understanding how multiple forms of oppression intersect and interact to provide complex experiences of both inequality and marginalisation.

The concept of intersectionality has been extensively researched. Cho et al. (2013) studied how intersectionality can help us understand the dynamics of difference and sameness in various political and academic settings. Similarly, Collins and Bilge (2020) argue that intersectionality can be used as an analytical tool to comprehend the correlation between power, privilege, and oppression. They also note that its flexibility can overcome the compartmentalisation of learning sites, practices, and institutions reinforcing privilege, domination, and oppression. In social work, an intersectional approach is gaining recognition, as clients' multiple intersecting identities can lead to disparate and disproportionate outcomes (Simon et al., 2022). Social workers deal with clients whose outcomes may be worsened by the intersection of their various identities with multiple systems of oppression in settings such as health care, education, child welfare, and criminal justice. Thus, social workers must be adequately prepared to recognise these oppressive cycles and intervene appropriately (Simon et al., 2022). Intersectionality offers a critical lens for creating awareness and capacity for social justice efforts to expand and deepen interventions to address the systemic oppression of clients. Almeida et al. (2019) suggest that intersectionality can reflect the complexity of lived experiences with multiple hierarchies. Intersectionality can play a crucial role in understanding and addressing systemic oppression.

### **Africanising sexuality**

A critical examination of the colonial legacy and its impact on queer identities contributes to a more complete understanding of the prevalence of nonheteronormative identities in Africa. Chitando and Mateveke (2017) in their argument to Africanise the discourse of sexuality, with particular reference to homosexuality, that one of the most persistent allegations in the debate about homosexuality in Africa is that the entire operation is Western. As a result, it lacks an authentic African flavour. In postcolonial Africa, hegemonic heterosexual identity has become internalised. Both men and women feel that in order to be a decent citizen or a true African,

one must become a repressed subject who not only restricts their sexuality to heterosexual wants but also has an innate dislike for other forms of sexuality, such as Queer relationships (Ndjio, 2012).

According to Henningham (2023), throughout the colonial era, Christian missionaries around the world stigmatised and condemned various and fluid queer identities, thereby building a white, heteronormative hegemony. Due to colonial influence, the imposition of heteronormative gender and sexuality frameworks resulted in the marginalisation of queer identities in African civilisations, which were then referred to as settler sexuality and branded unAfrican. This, in turn, resulted in the erasure of nonheteronormative identities from the African cultural landscape, with these identities pushed to society's margins. Furthermore, the imposition of settler sexuality not only reinforced Western, heteronormative sexual standards, but it also generated a binary concept of gender, in which the male/female binary was deemed the norm and any divergence from this was considered abnormal. Consequently, African communities were compelled to embrace a narrow and inflexible concept of gender and sexuality that ignored the flexibility and diversity of Queer identities. In light of this, it is critical to recognise and acknowledge the colonial heritage and its impact on African nations' perception of nonheteronormative identities. Doing so makes it possible to create a more inclusive and welcoming society that recognises and celebrates the diversity of Queer identities.

### **Queer Affirmative Action in Social Work Education**

The exploration and deconstruction of traditional and hegemonic societal constructs pertaining to gender identity and expression, sexual desires and sexuality, relationships, and familial and communal structures have been necessitated by the discourse on gender and sexual diversity in social work education. This has been a necessary component of modern social work curriculum, allowing practitioners to better comprehend and assist various groups. Furthermore, social work students are encouraged to develop general competencies during their studies, distinguishing between specialist knowledge, professional and methodological abilities, social competencies, and self-competencies (Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2021). According to some scholars, in order to build an inclusive and complete approach to practise, social work education must include knowledge of the intersection of gender, sexuality, and other identity markers (Mishna, 2012; McNamara & Keenan, 2016). Social workers may create secure, supporting, and affirming environments for all persons and communities while confronting oppressive systems and structures in this way.

Jacques (2014) opines that social work education should strive for cultural competence, allowing students to effectively work with clients from varied backgrounds. As a result, sexuality should be included in the social work curriculum as an essential component of cultural competence. This entails becoming self-aware of one's cultural background, recognising personal biases toward persons from other cultures, and accepting variety (Jacques, 2014). Lifelong learning for social workers is consistent with an empowerment approach to practise, incorporating praxis. Thus, social work educators should incorporate sexual orientation into the

execution of their functional roles. This is described by Van den Bergh and Crisp (2004) in Logie et al. (2015) as a constant process of action, reflection, evaluation, and potential modification to improve one's practice. This is especially important given how frequently sexual orientation is overlooked in social work assessments, referrals, and service delivery (Logie et al., 2015).

The importance of developing knowledge and skills among all stakeholders in social work education cannot be overstated, especially in fostering environments that uphold queer individuals' dignity and respect (Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2021). According to Craig et al. (2016), this aspect is critical in promoting cultural humility and competency in social work practice. Despite the need to prioritise this aspect, the literature suggests that social work education does not adequately prepare students to work with queer people (Dessel et al., 2018; Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2021). Consequent to this, queer people in social work schools, including academics, support staff, and students, frequently face hostile environments. This necessitates a more comprehensive approach that includes the development of specific competencies and a specific queer consciousness, also known as "rainbow competencies" (Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2021; Mehrotra et al., 2023). Such abilities are critical in developing positive attitudes toward queer people and ensuring that attitudes are free of heteronormativity and sexual prejudice, also known as heterosexism, which is defined as an ideological system that denies, denigrates, stigmatises, or segregates any nonheterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship, and/or community (Al-Natour & Mears, 2016; Craig et al., 2016). As such, it is critical to prioritise the development of these competencies in social work education to ensure that social work practitioners are adequately prepared to work with queer people and create safe and welcoming environments for them.

### **Affirmative Action for Queer People in Social Work in Africa**

In defining affirmative action, authors advance a model that explores modest remedial adjustments and seeks to provide qualified members of minority or disenfranchised groups an equal opportunity, which would not have materialised if such adjustments had not been made (Logo, 2016). According to Zwelendaba and Obioha (2024), affirmative action is a policy comprising several anti-discrimination measures to provide access to the positions preferred in a society to benefit historically disadvantaged groups. Citing Darity et al. (2011), Zwelendaba and Obioha (2024) argue that affirmative action addresses historical mishaps in variegated types, including gender, race, and ethnicity-based affirmative action. Wandrekar and Nigudkar (2019) argue that queer affirmative action is essential for validating queer identities instead of pathologising them. The approach is based on an understanding of societal structures and their impact on mental health while also recognising queer individuals' strengths and resilience. Although it has been introduced in the literature as a culturally sensitive model for working with queer people, it is rarely used in practice (Wandrekar & Nigudkar, 2019; Zwelendaba & Obioha, 2024). According to Arguello (2020), the social work profession is committed to supporting diversity, promoting social justice, and challenging oppression; however, a Queer-affirmative approach can be elusive in practice despite this commitment.

According to Pillay et al. (2022), an affirmative stance is not only an ethical practice but also a necessary one that involves the respectful recognition of individual diversity. It necessitates critical and contextual awareness of the struggles and strengths that shape queer people's life experiences. The affirmative practice agenda is inextricably linked to efforts to decolonise not only public and global health (Pillay et al., 2022) but also psychosocial wellness and the thinking of social workers and educators who work with queer people and communities. Affirmative social work practice is a counterbalance to all punitive and discriminatory practices. In Africa, the surest path to improving the well-being of queer individuals lies in eradicating structural forms of inequality and decriminalising same-sex consensual relationships. Thus, an African social work affirmative action and approach can transcend local, national, and political boundaries to give voice to these goals.

Arguably, affirmative action is amongst other ways to advance societal transformation (Logo, 2016; Manning, 2017). Its measures remedy past inequalities by preferring previously disadvantaged people subject to discriminatory practices (Kaniuka et al., 2019; Manning, 2017). In the context of affirmative action measures, the principle of equality serves as a guide for addressing historical, customary, and other imbalances that have resulted in discrimination (Argüello, 2022).

Despite being the foundation for policy formation and constitutional enactments, the definition of equality remains flawed and essential (Logo, 2016). In most cases, guarantees of equality lack elaboration on the meaning of equality or discrimination. As a result, Logo (2016) argues that courts have had to define the meaning of these concepts and develop substantive and formal conceptualisations of equality using a range of formulations, including disparate impact, indirect discrimination, systemic discrimination, unfair discrimination, and reasonable accommodation. In social work, equality is paramount (Davis, 2017; Howell et al., 2020). Social workers must understand the various formulations of equality and discrimination to advocate for their clients effectively (Austin et al., 2016). The concept of dignity has also been used by courts to explain the fundamental value of human dignity and how society should not tolerate legislative distinctions that treat certain people as second-class citizens, demean them, or treat them as less capable for no good reason (Motshabi, 2020; Pillay et al., 2022). This is especially important in social work, as social workers must uphold all individuals' dignity and worth.

### **Implications for social work practice**

Evidently, in social work, interactions and exchanges with people are essential, and there is an increasing growth in diversity in terms of various aspects, which include but are not limited to the socio-economic, cultural and sexuality of the individuals (Tétreault et al., 2021). Moreso, Tétreault et al. (2021) note that social workers might face difficulties due to potential misinterpretations regarding intentions and actions, beliefs and practices, or verbal and non-verbal communication. Despite social workers' ability to provide affirmative, anti-oppressive services to Queer people, queer affirmative practice has been rarely used in practice with the said community (Craig et al., 2016; Wagaman et al., 2018; Westwood,



2022). Thus, social workers are being urged to reconsider their pedagogy as well as their work with sexually diverse groups and minorities. According to Austin et al. (2016), queer issues are largely absent from social work education; Mehrotra et al. (2023) agree that more scholarship within social work education that centres on the lived experiences of queer individuals is thus required. As such, Hamd and Ibrahim (2023) opine that improving people's professional abilities to handle changing demands skillfully is one way that the social work sector demonstrates the value of embracing current changes.

According to Wagaman et al. (2018), social workers should always choose anti-oppressive practice over anti-discriminatory practice because it focuses on challenging structural and systematic discrimination rather than tackling or reducing immediate discrimination. This is premised on the basis that the social work discipline is based on an operational framework that prioritises promoting individual growth, advancing social change, and utilising human potential while adjusting cultural norms (Hamd & Ibrahim, 2023). To make this a reality, Logie et al. (2015) advocate curriculum development and agency-based training to fill gaps in knowledge and competence regarding queer affirmative approaches. These findings are based on a study conducted by Logie et al. (2015), which revealed differences in competence in queer affirmative practice across attitudes (managing personal reactions), knowledge (addressing diversity; terminology and information), and skills (readiness; challenging heterosexism). These findings support Argüello's (2022) contention that social workers lack competency in dealing with queer people.

### **CONCLUSION**

The article made a compelling case for the inclusion of queer affirmative social work practice in Africa. It begins by emphasising the pervasiveness of monosexism and heterosexism in the African context, and it identifies culture as a significant contributor to the criminalisation of Queer relationships. The paper emphasised the importance of social workers being equipped to break down oppressive cycles and intervene effectively using an intersectional lens. In addition, the article emphasised the importance of Africanising sexuality and not viewing queer relationships as Western identities. It provided a brief history of how African societies were compelled to become rigid in their understanding of gender and sexuality while ignoring their fluidity. According to the article, social work education must include knowledge of the intersection of gender, sexuality, and other identity markers in order to form an inclusive and comprehensive approach to practice. The article emphasises the importance of developing knowledge and skills in order to maintain queer people's dignity and respect. It promotes affirmative action for African queer people, claiming that it is essential for validating queer identities. The approach is founded on an understanding of societal structures and their impact on mental health, as well as an appreciation of queer people's strengths and resilience. The article notes that, despite being introduced in the literature as a culturally sensitive model for working with queer people, it is rarely used in practice. As a result, the article concludes by



emphasising the critical importance of social work practitioners incorporating a queer affirmative approach into their practice in order to promote social justice and equality for all.

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