

# LEARNING

## SAFETY AND SECURITY

### OF

## LBQT women & girls

# IN ZIMBABWE

Reflections and stories on safety and security by LBQT Zimbabwean women with Feminist Voices Zimbabwe supported by Purposeful Fund.



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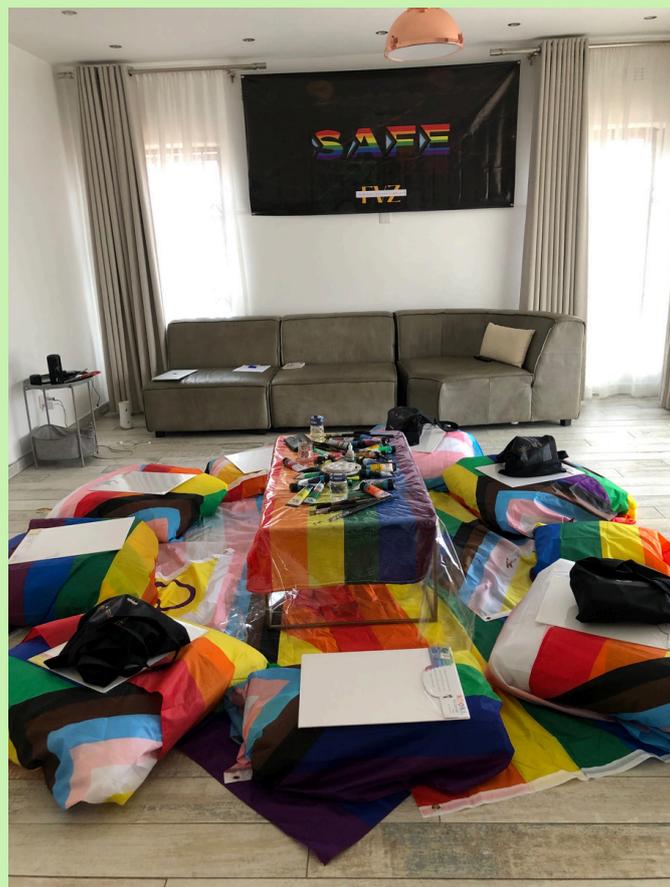
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# ABOUT US

Feminist Voices Zimbabwe is a non-profit profit organization co-creating feminist and queer realities through community, conversation, and building knowledge that comes from women and queer people’s authentic lived experiences. The organization envisions a world where stories, conversation, and creative expression are used to challenge worldviews, values, and practices – by providing frames of references, reliability, and community. FVZ utilizes a combination of holistic security approaches, storytelling, research, and collaboration queer communities to challenge worldviews, empower women, and create a more inclusive and equal society.



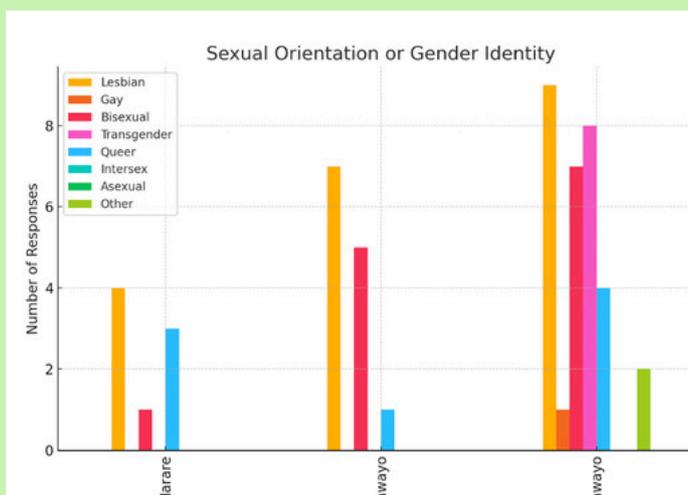
At the center of movement building is the power of community. As co-creators of feminist realities in a conservative country marked by state-sanctioned violence, we operate as community organizers, bringing together women and queer persons to embrace freedom and find joy in all its forms. We are dedicated to fostering a sense of belonging for historically marginalized people and envision a future advocating for a violence-free, prejudice-free world. Recognizing the importance of holistic security, we ensure the safety and well-being of our community members and organizers by being well-informed, supportive, and extending solidarity. Storytelling is central to our projects, platforming and organizing around queer realities with accuracy and nuance. As a young feminist organization, we are decolonizing research methodologies, placing queer experiences at the forefront of our inquiries and explorations.

# INTRODUCTION

## LBTQ GIRLS' RESISTANCE TO SAFETY AND SECURITY IN ZIMBABWE

SAFE is a learning project that focuses on violence, safety, and security experiences by LBQT girls in Zimbabwe. The project aims to utilize the power of storytelling to explore the ways girls in the LBQT community and all their identities in Zimbabwe are navigating various contexts of violence in all facets of their lives. The research sheds light on what violence is, how it manifests in the everyday lives of LBQT girls, the intersectionality of identities and how these relate to these experiences, and how we can collectively build resistance towards these forms of violence for strategies relating to our safety and security.

The project used story circles as a participatory approach to gather narratives from queer girls in different thematic areas. The story circles were divided into specific themes, namely Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence, Public Safety and Security, Access to Justice, Online Violence, and Sexual Reproductive Health. Participants were encouraged to share their personal experiences within these themes while ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.



7 SAFE SPACES

52 STORY CIRCLE PARTICIPANTS

100+ LBQT CO-CREATORS

## THE REPORT DEVELOPMENT

The SAFE report is a comprehensive collection of these stories, experiences, and research into the lived experiences of LBQT women and girls in Zimbabwe, focusing on their safety, security, and resistance. This resource serves as a foundational component of our movement building, aiming to develop strategies to enhance our safety, particularly in the face of growing anti-queer sentiments in the Zimbabwean community.



# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & IPV

## FAMILY CONDEMNATION

Participants who have come out to their families reported experiencing a shift in attitude following their revelation. One participant shared a harrowing experience of being found in a compromising position with a same-sex partner, leading to such severe isolation and mistreatment by their family that they felt compelled to run away for their safety. While some participants noted that their families eventually reached a level of acceptance, it was often conditional, requiring them not to "visibly act gay." Non-binary individuals described the complexities they face, particularly when dating cisgender persons, as they are often subjected to harsh judgment.

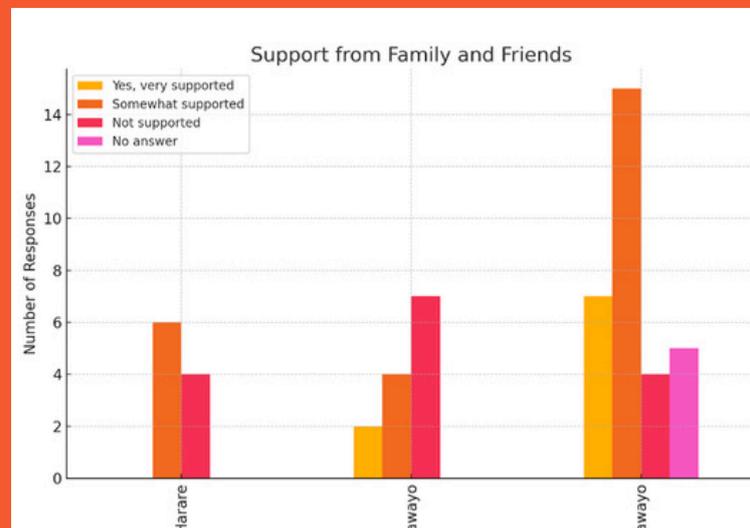
## RELIGION

Christianity was frequently cited as a tool of judgment against queer individuals. One participant recounted being labeled as possessed by demons and subjected to various religious institutions in an attempt to "exorcise the gay demon" out of them. This experience highlighted the question of spiritual safety for queer people, given that homosexuality is often deemed un-African by religious communities.



## PHYSICAL ABUSE

Due to a lack of safety at home, some participants reported becoming financially dependent on their partners, which often resulted in a cycle of abuse. Lacking the financial means to leave and unable to return home because of familial stigma, they found themselves trapped. Some participants shared that they were even taken to the police and physically beaten to "scare them into being normal."



# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

## & IPV

### THREATS OF EXPOSURE

A Participant shared an instance where, upon facing conflict with community members or partners, they were threatened with being outed. This fear of exposure led to significant mental health challenges and heightened anxiety.

### LACK OF SUPPORT

### SYSTEMS/STRUCTURES

A common theme among participants was the absence of support systems, especially when facing intimate partner violence. They expressed an inability to seek help from the police due to the fear that reporting their abuse would necessitate revealing their sexuality.

"My coming out wasn't easy for me. I was raised by my grandparents. They were not impressed to find out, you can already imagine how disappointed they were cause the actually caught me in action with someone who stayed close by. So I've never felt safe since then. They started taking me to Churches, getting prayed for by prophets calling them demons. I remember one time my aunts, my family even beat me up, took off all my clothes saying they were demons if we beat them up they will get out. So at some point I ended up running away from home with the person I was dating. At this point I ended up becoming dependent on them because At home they didn't want to see me. I couldn't talk to my siblings because you know how relatives are; I wasn't allowed to talk to my siblings or anybody because they said I would teach my siblings how to be like me. So this person I started seeing I became dependent on them and it started working as an advantage for them. They started being abusive, they would get upset over the silliest of things like, you looked to the left and there is a girl there so you guys are probably sleeping together. We would fight very often, it became very toxic to the point we would lock the door, throw the keys outside the window and fight for hours. So for now, I think safety for me is anywhere I can control my energy, any chance I get to prevent the past from repeating itself. I am always running away, so if I start to not feel safe I run so I claim my safety." - Anonymous.

"I can't say I know what safety means for me because I'm not "out out". I first had my experience in high school. We were still kids, it was nice. But when we had some disagreements along the way she threatened to tell the whole school that we are gay, she is gay. So from then I never had another experience with a girl. I kind of covered it up for some time, until I knew about this space. When I first came to the wellness event I felt that I was in my community, I was with my people. So I can say this is my safety being somewhere I can share myself, being with someone who understands me." - Anonymous

# PUBLIC SAFETY

## VERBAL ASSAULT

Participants unanimously shared that verbal assault was the most prevalent form of violence they experienced, integrating itself into their daily lives as women. They expressed that this relentless verbal abuse eroded their peace, often forcing them to shrink themselves or adopt multiple personas just to navigate public spaces, which they agreed was mentally and emotionally exhausting.

## HARASSMENT

Participants conveyed a constant feeling of uncertainty and a lack of a voice, often brushing off incidents as a coping mechanism. One participant highlighted the heightened fear in high density areas, where the threat of extreme measures from potential perpetrators loomed due to the uncertainty of who knew about their identity.

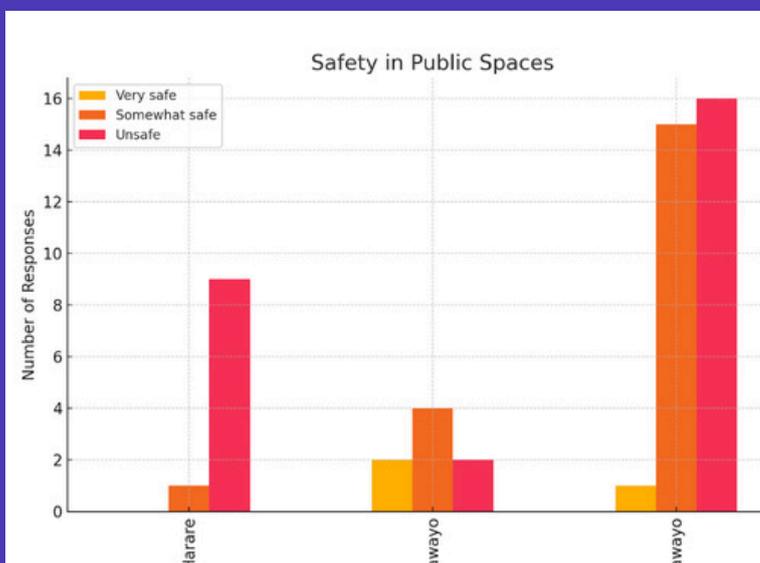


## THREATS

Participants shared that individuals in positions of authority would issue threats of imprisonment upon suspecting or discovering their queer identity. One participant recounted being outed in front of work colleagues, which resulted in severe anxiety, especially when required to travel for work.

## JUDGMENT & FETISHIZATION

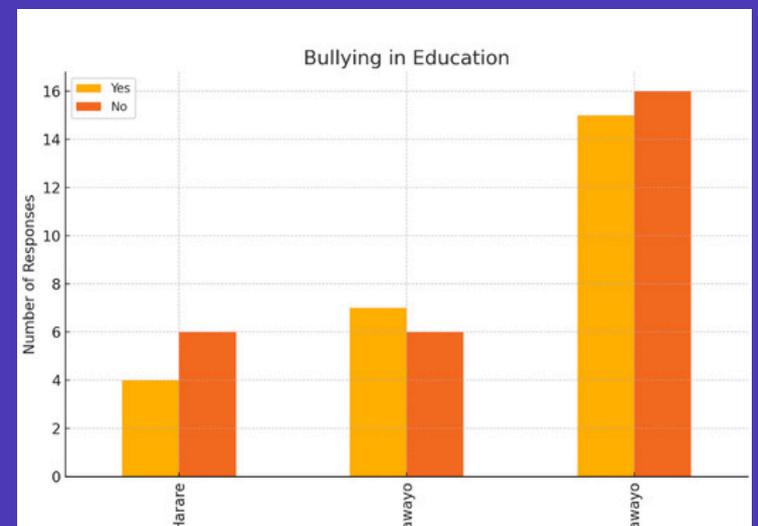
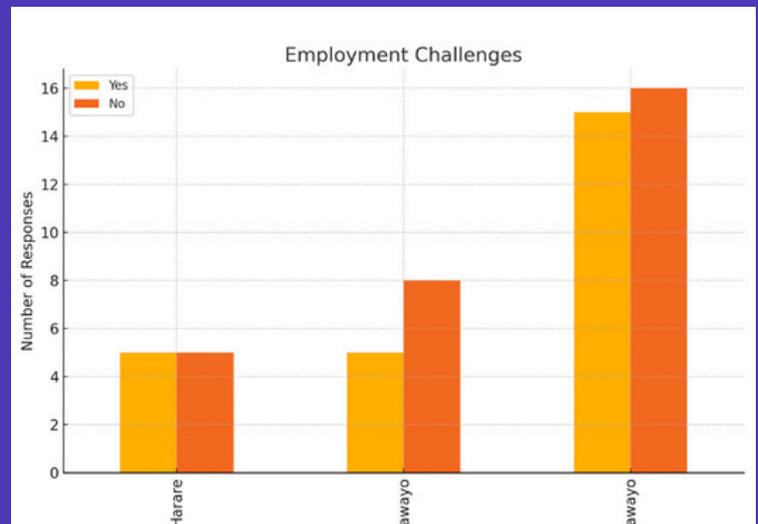
Clothing was identified as a significant issue, particularly for women presenting a masculine appearance, who were immediately judged and suspected to be gay. For more traditionally feminine-presenting queer women, men often imposed their fetishes on them. Both groups agreed that continually explaining themselves was exhausting, but they were learning to claim and own their spaces regardless. Public bathrooms were cited as another setting where queer women frequently faced homophobic violence from other women.





# PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL VIOLENCE

In public spaces, acceptance was conditional, often based on power/class dynamics. For example participants shared feeling safer in locations where they are being provided a service e.g. restaurants in low density areas. One participant recounted experiences where people projected their hatred onto them upon discovering their queer identity, leading them to avoid certain spaces altogether. The comments they received were often discouraging, disrespectful, and demeaning, further isolating them.



Of late, I feel like I don't have my voice, so as a coping mechanism, I've been brushing things aside, pretending things did not happen. A few months back, we went to the shops to get something. We live in the ghetto, and there were these men who just looked at us and started talking, saying, 'Okay, why are two girls walking alone at night? It must mean you guys are f\*cking.' They just started passing these weird comments, and in that instant, I just wanted us to get back home. The funny thing is, the whole time I was just asking myself, 'Why are these people like this? I mean, we did not even talk to them. We just came here to buy something and head back home. We are not inciting violence; we are not being indecent in public.' It was really a lot for me, and I remember when I went back home, we were just so scared. What's even scarier about facing violence in the ghetto is you never know who knows where you stay, you don't know what they can do. They can follow you when you are going home. They can even come when you are not at home and vandalize your property or something. I think for that whole week, I was just so scared. I didn't tell my partner because she was more freaked out, and I was just so scared of letting on how scared I was. I just had to pretend like it didn't bother me, but it was just a lot. I just couldn't understand how people could feel okay with violating you and threatening you. I think it's also part of my coping mechanism. I forget things a lot; I just bury things at the back of my head because sometimes things are just too painful to remember. But they really said a lot of insulting words."



## WHAT IS SAFETY

When asked what safety meant to them, most participants concurred that safety embodied the absence of fear and the freedom of expression and existence. Security was described in various ways, including having a healthy support system, the ability to protect oneself, love and acceptance, and self-exclusion from potentially harmful spaces.





# ONLINE VIOLENCE

## HARASSMENT

Participants reported experiencing online harassment in the form of hate comments below their posts, threats, and dehumanizing statements, which have adversely affected their internal and psychological safety.

## REVENGE DOXXING

A participant shared a story of being caught in a revenge situation where a fellow community member exposed their private information to hurt and humiliate another target. This incident not only endangered them but also compromised their family's safety. Such revenge posts are often strategized to "out" community members who have not fully disclosed their sexuality. Another participant reported that their violation moved from an online platform to newspapers, where their face and details were published on the front page, affecting their personal safety, well-being, business, and livelihood.

## UNAUTHORIZED USE AND CIRCULATION OF MEDIA

Online violence extends into physical spaces, where the public may feel entitled to take pictures of queer individuals without consent and circulate them on social media. Predators online intentionally copy or download content from queer persons' accounts and share it with derogatory captions to generate traffic on their pages and troll the victims. As a result, community members often refrain from posting, commenting, or defending queer content to protect their peace and privacy.

## CATFISHING

Participants also reported that online dating platforms were fraught with dangers, often encountering men pretending to be women to lure them.

# PHYSICAL HARM

It was strongly agreed that a significant percentage of threats received online are likely to be followed up in physical spaces.

# POOR REPORTING

# MECHANISMS

Discussions revealed a lack of process to report online violence, allowing perpetrators to act without consequences. Reports on posts or comments not made in English are often not considered community violations, enabling perpetrators to continue their actions freely.



“My story goes a little like this. It was business related. I was a competition to someone. The best way they thought of removing me from being their competitor was to bully me and out me to the community that this person is gay, don't buy from a gay person. It was very heartbreaking, I could not take it until it reached the newspapers and I was on the front page of mtunywa because of that, because she was trying to remove me totally from the business side. It really broke my heart but she wasn't successful but the damage was already done. The damage was already done, I was not ready to be outed and I was outed like that and I was bullied.”

-Anonymous

# SEXUAL REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS

## THREATS OF EXPOSURE

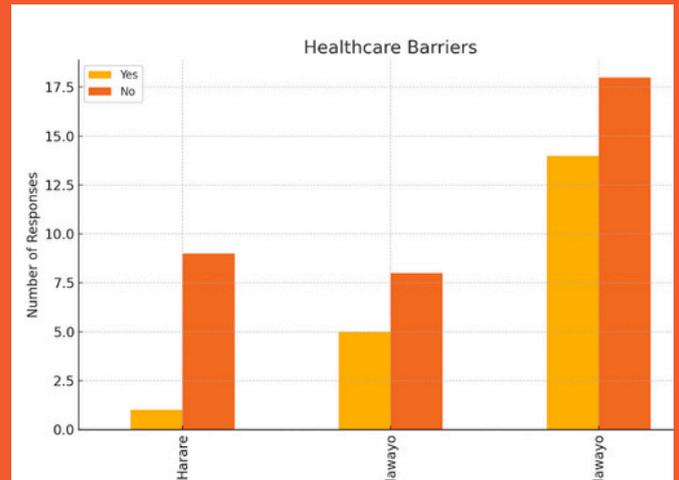
Participants shared that expressing or disclosing their sexuality often led to discrimination and manipulation by those who felt they had power over them. The fear of being "outed" while still in the closet was a common concern, with many recounting similar experiences. One participant revealed that even in adulthood, they still live with the trauma and discomfort from such incidents. Another participant shared that being outed resulted in their family rejecting them. This fear also prevented them from disclosing their identity when seeking services, which in turn affected the efficiency of the help they received from service providers.

## ACCESS TO HEALTH

Participants reported that service access points are limited and not affordable. Available services cater mainly to cis-heterosexual women's needs, often excluding queer women. Additionally, abortion services are restricted due to partial criminalization of abortion in Zimbabwe.

## SEX WORK PREJUDICE

Discrimination on the job due to sexual orientation is common, both from other queer community members and society at large. Participants reported instances of sexual abuse when clients learned they were bisexual. Bullying and abuse were also significant challenges, particularly in personal romantic relationships.



## NON RECOGNITION OF PARTNERS

For closeted individuals, the death of a partner is especially difficult, as their sorrow is internalized and they cannot share or express their grief and loss. This pain is compounded by the non-recognition of their relationships by society, institutions, and sometimes even family members. Without legal or social acknowledgment of their bond, they are often excluded from mourning rituals, denied access to critical information or decisions, and left without support systems that others might receive in times of loss. As a result, they struggle to reach closure and acceptance, facing their grief in isolation and silence.

So I joined this WhatsApp group whereby there were people from the community, from the LGBTI community. And it was sort of a dating site in quotes, and then I met this girl and we scheduled a date and we met in town. And the sad part is she brought her friend. And unfortunately, her friend went to the same school that I go to. So now she knows that her friend is a member of the community. And obviously she concluded that I'm also part of the community. And she goes to school and tells the people that I know that, ah, you know, this, this, this. At that time, okay fine, one thing about me is I'm still in the closet, I'm not out like that. And the friends that I had are not really, what do I say? Okay, they don't believe that there are people like us, right? So they ended up cutting ties with me. So up to date, because of that, I'm struggling to make friends in my class because everyone is talking about me. It's really sad that I'm a member of the community and the minute people knew my sexuality had to cut ties. So this is why I'm in this space. I'm here to make friends. So I hope you guys are as open.

-Anonymous



## LACK OF POLICIES

Sexual reproductive services for queer women are either limited or nonexistent, and there is a need for definitive policies that promote women's sexual reproductive rights. Participants noted that male gynecologists often provide services based on outdated assumptions rather than understanding women's bodies.

## SHAME

Participants discussed how societal assumptions about sexual freedom, viewed from a patriarchal perspective, limit how they understand and interact with their bodies, sex, and sexuality. The absence of policies and rights for queer people in Zimbabwe further restricts these interactions.

## QUEER PARENTING ISSUES

Queer parents fear meeting their children's teachers in public spaces, as this could result in homophobic backlash directed at their children. Those parenting in same-sex households have to ensure schools do not know about their sexuality and blended queer families.



# ACCESS TO JUSTICE

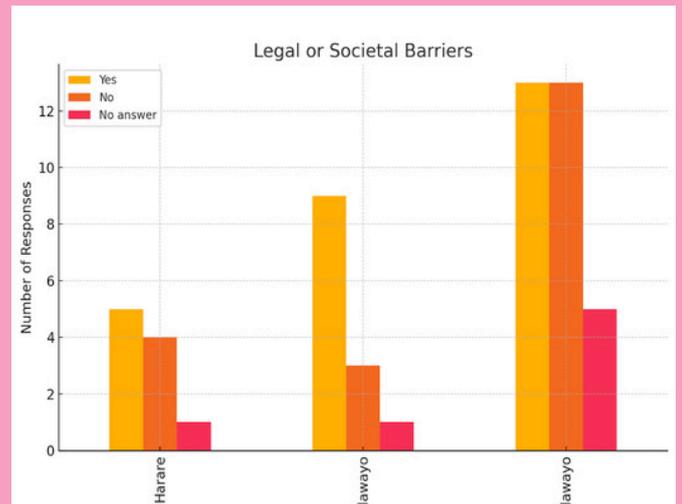
## INTIMIDATION & UNLAWFUL

### ARREST

Queer people are frequently detained without clear charges, making the experience traumatic. Participants reported a lack of trust and faith in the justice system, even though they must rely on it for functional purposes. Participants working with queer organizations shared that on several occasions events have been disrupted and canceled without warning or explanation and threats of arrest made.

### LACK OF SOGIE EDUCATION

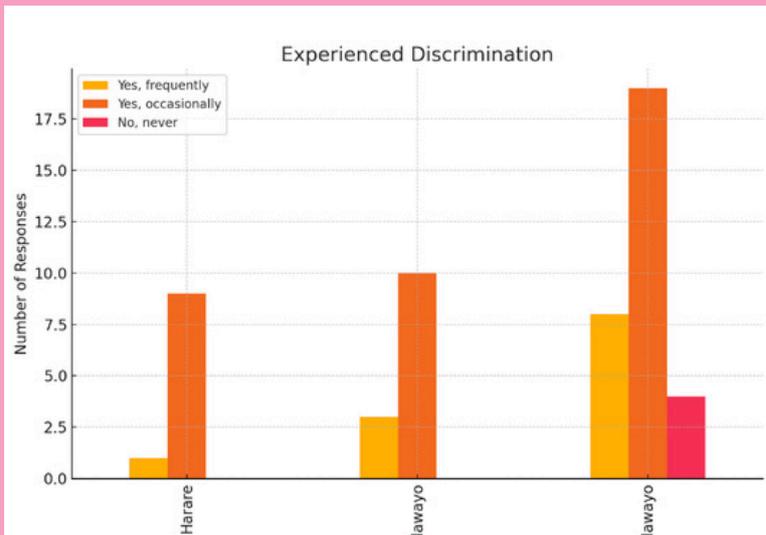
Participants emphasized that SOGIE education should also be used to build capacity of the police, as some violence may stem from a lack of understanding and knowledge about the LGBTQIA+ community.



## DISTRUST OF FORMAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

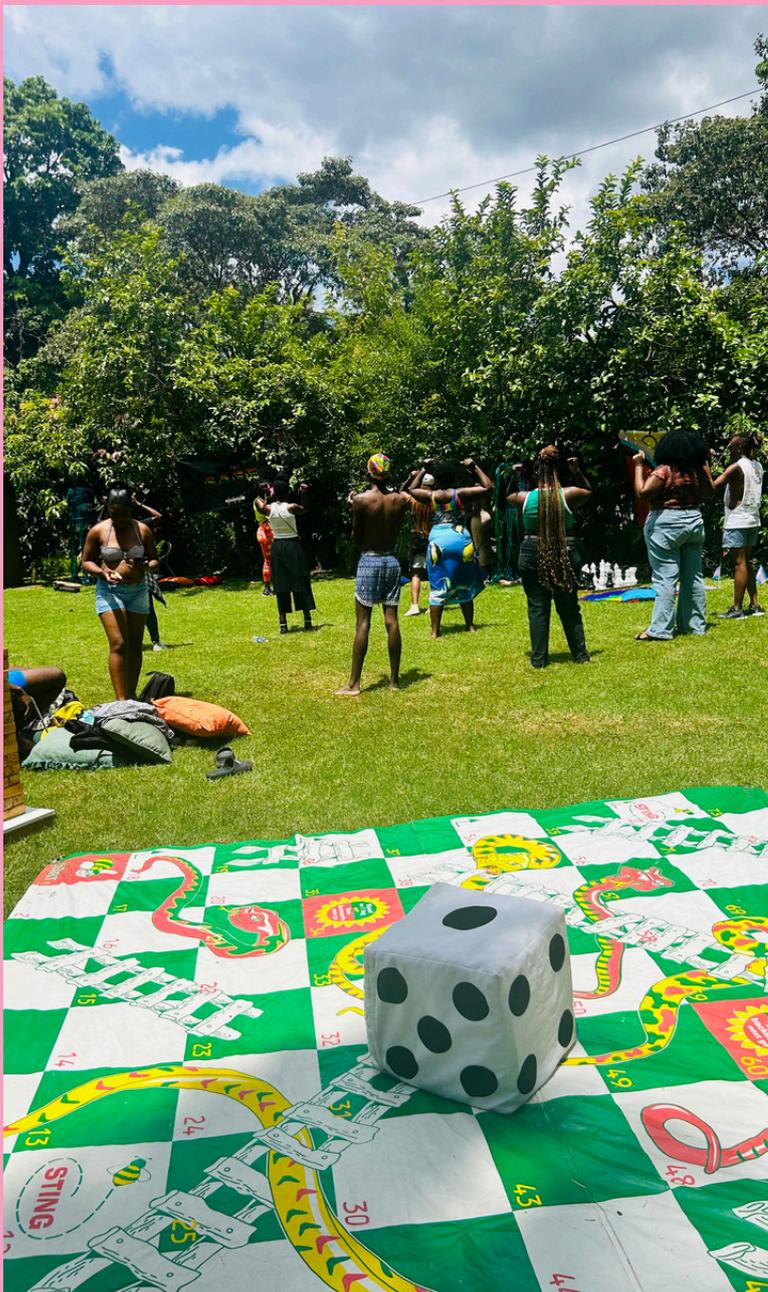
Community members often avoid law enforcement agents, which poses a challenge because interaction with them may be unavoidable when doing administrative tasks (e.g. obtaining police clearance). It was noted that the queer community's access to justice is limited due to the inaccessibility of law enforcement remedies for queer persons.





“The police/ law enforcement knows that these people are not committing a crime. Let’s say we are holding a meeting or our neighbors start thinking that this is a same-sex couple, they will involve the police. The police will just come and get those people. Arrest them or hold them in the cells for less than 48 hours and release them and they don’t charge. I think that also coming from a place of, the system of catching and releasing in itself its traumatising. If you are kept in a jail cell, even for a night, that’s traumatizing on its own.”

-Anonymous



# DEFINING OUR OWN SAFETY

“Avoid town at all costs. When I have to, I dress to blend in. I try not to go anywhere where I wouldn't be comfortable. I carry mini little weapons, I carry stuff to make me feel safe and also share my location.” – Violence in public spaces story circle.

“In the workplace, as a coping mechanism, I do not tell about my personal life or my orientation” - Violence in public spaces circle.

“We don't go out a lot, we just don't go anywhere, we never go out alone. We just chill at home, home has become our safe place.” - Violence in public spaces circle.

“I am still trying to navigate and find a way. I avoid more than I face the problem. I dress in a very minimalistic way, just to avoid.” - Violence In public spaces circle.

“Looking out for each other, defending people when you have the chance, fighting back where it's safe to fight back. Trusting community members and passing on the button. Also taking responsibility for the people around me” - Violence in public spaces circle.

“To feel safe, I do not share my gayness in my day to day. My strategy is to keep my business to myself; to keep to my community, to always put my boundaries with the way I'm interacting with people.” – Domestic Violence & Intimate Partner Violence circle.

“My safety strategy is born of a journey I've been walking before the queerness, in a space where I've owned it. My strategy is so in your face, you will adjust to me as we go.” - Domestic Violence & Intimate Partner Violence circle.

"I am not out there with my gayness but it's not something that I am hiding. If it gets to a point you have to know about it, I am not going to lie that I am straight because I do not want my sexuality to be the reveal that defines me." - Domestic Violence & Intimate Partner Violence circle.

"Safety online would mean expression of love and sharing of love without fearing that there have to be consequences. I would love to see one day that I post my partner and there's no single negative comment." - Online violence circle.

"Online safety to me means posting anything about me without anyone who will come to my inbox or to my comment section with negative attitudes saying sthabane or ngochani." - Online violence circle.

"For me online safety would be happiness, freedom to be who you are, to post your pictures" - Online violence circle.

"I think I am going to feel safe when I finally see someone from the community running for parliament and getting there." - Sexual Reproductive Health Rights circle.

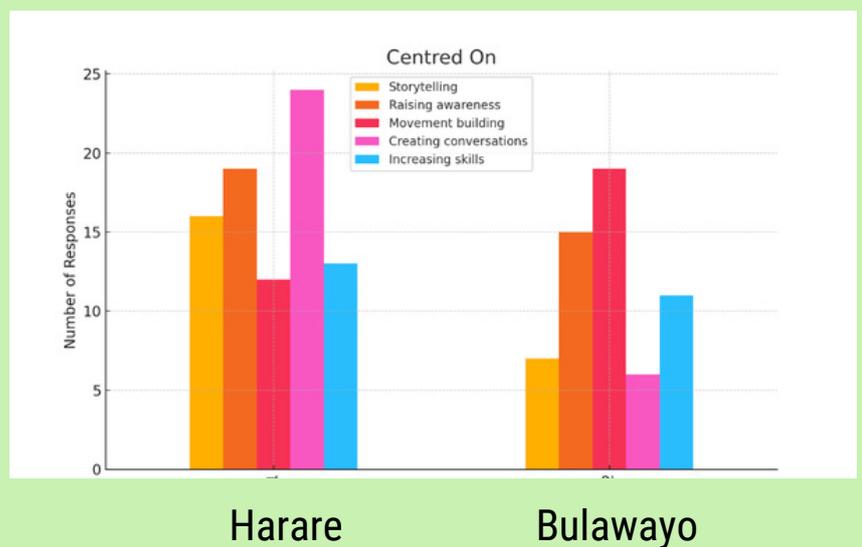
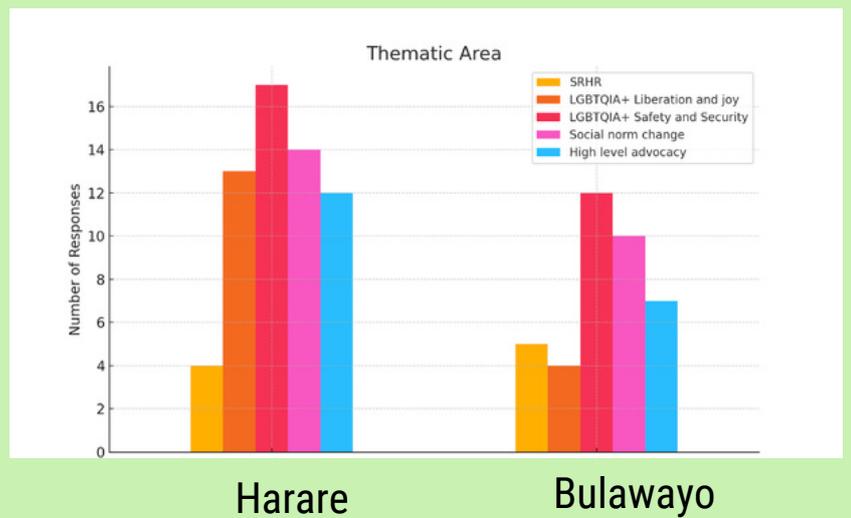
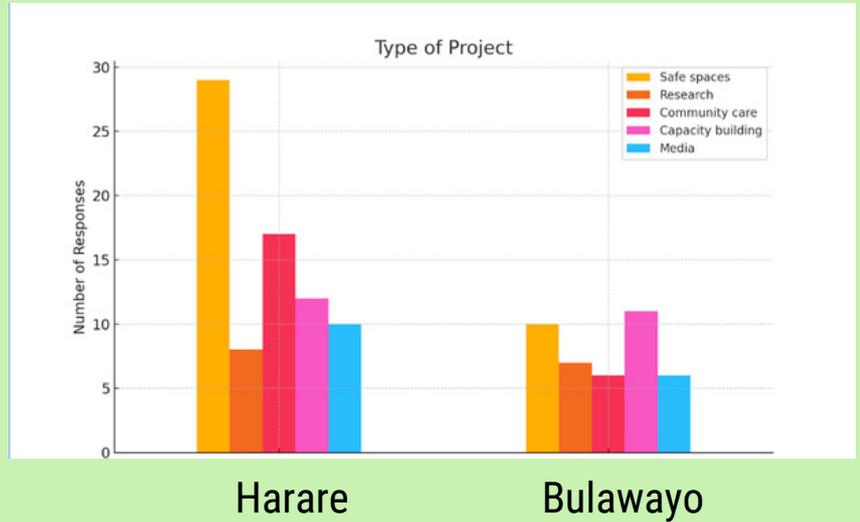
"For me to start, safety would probably mean maybe having a space to have trauma-informed sessions where you are actually building and developing yourself through your trauma, where you are working towards being a better person, also harnessing the trauma." - Sexual Reproductive Health Rights circle.

"I will start feeling safe when we can represent ourselves. Nothing for us without us." - Sexual Reproductive Health Rights circle.

"I think I would feel safe if we were included. If we are left we won't feel safe." - Sexual Reproductive Health Rights circle.

# WHAT ARE OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS?

During our cocreation consultations, we asked community members to understand their needs, providing them with an opportunity to envision and 'build an ideal project'. The following reflects those needs.





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the entire Feminist Voices Zimbabwe community, our dedicated stakeholders, and our generous funders at Purposeful Funded for their unwavering support of this learning initiative. Your commitment and belief in our mission have been instrumental in enabling us to co-create meaningful spaces for dialogue, learning, and growth. Thank you for being an integral part of our journey towards achieving a more intersectional future.



**Website:** [feministvoiceszimbabwe.com](http://feministvoiceszimbabwe.com)

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**WE THANK YOU  
FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT IN  
OUR PROGRAMS**