
# Queer women making families in Nigeria: negotiating cultural and legal challenges

A Research Paper presented by:

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(Nigeria)

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

**Human Rights, Gender, and Conflict Studies: Social Justice Perspectives**

**(SJP)**

Specialization: **Women and Gender Studies**

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The Hague, The Netherlands
December 2024

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# List of Acronyms

AF – African feminism
CRA – Child's Rights Act
ISS – International Institute of Social Studies
LGBTQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer
PTA – Parents-Teachers Association
RP – Research Paper
QF – Queer feminism

*"The ways one [has come] to know their place in the world has to do with their bodies… and when violations to the prescriptions of such places occur, one's body is punished, often spectacularly" (Naomi Scheman, as cited in Oyéronké Oyewùmí, 1997, p. 2).*

## Acknowledgement

To all my co-creators, the six incredible queer women who shared their stories with me: thank you for your openness and trust. This research would be impossible without you.

I am immensely grateful to you, Wendy, for challenging and encouraging me to write differently, and for pushing me beyond my comfort zone. Your insightful thoughts and feedback throughout this entire process have shaped this research paper into a piece of work that I am genuinely proud of.

To Sree, my passion for this research topic began during the 4226 course. Thank you for a profound learning experience and for your insightful comments that encouraged me to push beyond.

To my family, thank you for all that you do. My chosen family, Bk, Busayo, Toya, Tayo, and Sandra, who believe in me more fiercely than I often do in myself: I love you! Tayo, we literally embarked on this journey together; thank you for being the best friend a girl could ask for.

To Tobi, Tami, Cynthia, and Juliet, thank you for being a home away from home. Emai, *Eyeneka, mbigi kan ntang mma.* Ella, Nilo, and Vale, your care and support throughout this MA journey have meant the world to me. Thank you for the tea dates, café breaks, warm meals, check-ins, tight hugs, and laughter.

To Oyin: I'm not entirely sure why I embarked on this ambitious journey of telling stories through illustrations but thank you for indulging my ideas.

And finally, to 'T boy': although you're not here to witness it pops, we did it!

## Abstract

This research aims to understand how queer Nigerian women form families within Nigeria's socio-cultural and legal context. Through the stories of six queer women, I explore the challenges that queer persons in Nigeria encounter as they navigate their intimate arrangements and attempt to secure autonomy in their lives. Using queer and African feminist scholarship, I interrogate how heterosexuality and heteronormativity reproduce inequalities by governing gender relations within sexual life, and roles and responsibilities within families while critiquing colonist narratives that reproduce the norm of the heterosexual nuclear family as the ideal. Going beyond traditional ways of knowing, I utilise storytelling, creative writing, illustrations, imagination, and art to present an alternative approach to knowledge production, one that listens and engages with those persons whose familiar relations have been made invisible by the law and hegemonic power relations. Through this study, I hope to encourage a shift beyond the binaries of heteronormativity to challenge us to rethink the institution of family, by reimagining all the possibilities for family structures that could exist.


## Relevance to Development Studies

This research contributes to the growing body of queer African family scholarship, an area which is often overlooked in conventional family discourses. The findings highlight the complex and diverse realities of queer persons who are often at the margins of mainstream development debates. In this research, I engage with concepts relevant to development, including gender, sex, sexuality, class, coloniality, and religion. Through a decolonial lens, I critically analyse Western discourses surrounding gender and sexuality, particularly within the Nigerian context, that have resulted in the epistemic oppression of African sexualities and families. In doing so, my research enriches post-development debates that critique colonial narratives that shape perspectives of the Global South. In utilising a feminist approach, this research also advocates for inclusive knowledge production in development studies by encouraging readers to move beyond conventional approaches that have historically marginalised persons.


### Keywords

Queer families, queer Nigerian women, Nigeria, imagining, feminist storytelling, feminist methodologies, queer feminism, African feminism.

# Chapter 1– Introductions

## 1.1 What is this research about

**Figure 1: Two women get invited to a Parents-Teachers Association (PTA[1]) meeting**

*Two women get invited to a PTA meeting*
*A letter, in the middle of a school year, requesting an audience*
*The letter, like bricks on a table waiting to be lifted*
*A child, unaware of the weight that lies before them*

*Two women get invited to a PTA meeting*
*A school meeting, a simple task for most parents*
*For them, a volcano waiting to erupt*
*A child's unanswered questions they must now confront*

*Two women get invited to a PTA meeting*
*They fear, for -*
*A love hidden, that risks coming to light*
*A family pieced together through resistance now threatened*
*A child, whose innocence, they must now protect*
*…*
*So, they rehearse fabricated stories*
*Of a non-existent father's demise*
*A man, whose life, ended too soon*
*A ghost, never born, yet imagined*
*To relieve the pressures of a demanding society*

*For love here must exist within the shadows*
*And families, within unspoken rules*
*Lest lovers be turned into foes*
*And families be exiled inside their own homes.*

*Poem following conversations with Bola, research participant. Author, 2024*

This poem (above) was inspired by my conversations with one of the queer women in my study, Bola, where we discussed the challenges that queer couples face in Nigeria. During this discussion, Bola raised thought-provoking questions. "How do I raise a child in a society that vilifies and criminalises queer people? How do I do that without the child being treated differently? Imagine that I send my child to school, and they request a parent-teacher meeting; what do we do? Would two women walk into a PTA meeting? Imagine the controversy!"

Bola's questions were powerful, and while they may appear to be speaking specifically about raising children in queer families, they are a representation of the broader dilemma that many queer persons encounter as they attempt to "pursue human goals of pleasure, desire, recognition, respect […] and secure small levels of autonomy in their lives" (Cohen, 2004, p. 30). It is that of a queer woman's desire to expand a family with no clear pathways of how such aspirations would be actualised. A queer woman, "seeking to exercise the rights to [family] without having that right, because such rights belong to citizens[1]" (Butler, 2009, p. iv)

The family is a political issue, and debates surrounding its definition and composition hold a central position in our everyday lives. Of all its definitions, the most controversial has been those seeking to legalise different forms of intimacy and care (Huemann, 2024[2]). Dominant/Western definitions of the family are that members involved must be phenotypically related or bound by a marital contract, living together in a heterosexual monogamous relationship alongside their biological children(McEwen, 2021). This dominant definition has resulted in the stringent categorisation of families, into what is traditional (normal) versus alternative (out of the norm) or ideal versus deviant, resulting in many persons being "ashamed of the way [they] live" (Nicholson, 2016, p. 27; McEwen, 2021; Etim and de Rooy, 2024). So, how do we define intimate arrangements that "do not or cannot appear within these hegemonic definitions?" (Butler, 2009, p. iv). And "why [are] some forms of sexual life [desire, orientation, intimacy, care, support] much more possible than others?" (ibid.).

"The power to define normality and to control behaviour is exerted in multiple ways and within multiple institutional structures, including those that promote a specific form of family" – often the nuclear/heteronormative family (Lehr, 1999, p. 22). This control is exercised through state laws and sanctions that reward individuals who conform to this dominant family model while sanctioning violence towards those who seek to "legitimise other arrays of household arrangements" (Thorne, 1982, p. 1); for instance, gender/sexual non-conforming persons. One such state sanction is evident in Nigeria. Despite being a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which protects the rights of persons and guarantees the 'right to family', same-sex unions are illegal in Nigeria and punishable by 14 years in prison – under common law or death – under sharia law(Oladosu-Uthman, 2021). Disguised as an intention to uphold religious and moral values, this law has catalysed discrimination and stigmatisation of queer relationships in the country, fundamentally distorting "the ways in which [they] perceive and perform familiar bonds"(Etim and de Rooy, 2024, p. 7).

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[1] Citizen, in this case to mean people who are held as a subject worthy of recognition by law.

[2] As discussed by Huemann 2024 in 4226 Feminist perspective lecture - The family: mainstream theories, feminist critiques and contemporary debates

Oladosu-Uthman (2021), argues that the reason behind the persecution of sexually non-conforming relationships in Nigeria is that it destabilises the family and destroys the foundation of Nigerian societies. Yet, queer persons continue to organise families, albeit covertly, and find new ways to seek autonomy in defining their intimate relationships. So, "how does the unspeakable lay claim to what they require?" And how do these disruptions to the heteronormative offer new insights on how the concept of family may be changing in Nigeria? (Butler, 2009, p. xiii).

My research seeks to understand the ways in which queer Nigerian women organise or form families in Nigeria. To achieve this, I explore two sub-questions: *How do Nigerian queer women imagine making families?* And *how do they navigate current socio-cultural and legal challenges in family formation?*

In answering these questions, I first provide a brief description of the normative Nigerian family focusing on its composition and function. I then draw on scholarly work mainly from Nigerian and African feminist perspectives to provide a brief overview of the historical evolution of the Nigerian family, citing three examples from the pre-colonial era. My focus is to showcase its diverse organisation and functionalities. With this, I am concerned about how the idea of family is constructed and how one form of family model became legally and culturally imposed. I further utilise decolonial scholarship to discuss how colonialism led to the erasure of these modes of family organisation in favour of a different type of family model rooted in Western, religious, and Eurocentric values and norms. I argue that these values have been normalised into laws and policies, leading to the persecution of families that fail to align with them.

Utilising conversations narrated by six queer women in Nigeria, I further explore broader themes of sexual and gender identity, intersectionality, socio-political, legal, and cultural narratives, and family dynamics, with an objective to showcase the effects and intersection of these factors in queer family formation.

In this study, 'to make or form a family', refers to all the actions, interactions, and processes involved in the development and sustenance of any relationship that provides its participating partners with an environment of care, support, love, and stability, to which one ascribes the term 'family'. Ultimately, my research seeks to highlight the dynamic meanings of family within queer communities in Nigeria.

## 1.2 Concepts used in this research

This study is informed by queer feminist (QF) and African feminist (AF) scholarship.

QF incorporates discourses from queer and feminist theories to understand, explore, and analyse converging issues of sex, gender, and sexuality (Marinucci, 2016). It is grounded in the philosophy that gender and sexuality are critical concepts in understanding broader socio-political issues and must be analysed within the context of broader social inequalities and hegemonic discourses which rationalise the subjugation of persons lacking power (ibid.). QF theories directly contrast normalised/hegemonic/heteronormative sexuality and rather understand the sexual subject as one that is contained by strict regulations that systematically categorise and regulate sexual behaviours into 'ideal versus deviant' (Cohen, 2014).

I complement QF with African feminist perspectives, which emphasise that African women's struggles transcend gender to intersect with broader issues of class, ethnicity, culture, and coloniality. AF analyses how modernisation has altered the role of women in African societies, moving away from the myopic adoption of Eurocentric norms. In this way, AF advocates for the autonomy of African women while critically engaging with and respecting African cultural narratives. It allows for the analysis of gender issues within the broader context of cultural expectations in African societies and aims to renegotiate and redefine African values away from Western norms. In family studies, AF scholars critique the imposed Western rigidity of gender binaries, as well as the dominant idea of the nuclear or normative family, arguing that such ideologies are Eurocentric and un-African (Arndt, 2001).

In this study, I utilise QF to interrogate how heterosexuality and heteronormativity reproduce inequalities by governing gender relations within sexual life and roles and responsibilities within families (Heumann, 2024[3]), while employing AF to critique colonist narratives that reproduce the norm of the heterosexual nuclear family as the ideal. I examine how plurality plays out in African family composition as well as the fluidity in the negotiation of roles and responsibilities of families. In this conceptualization, I draw on feminist critiques of the dominant assumptions of the 'monolithic family' as a biological and unchanging unit(Thorne, 1982). I emphasise the evolving nature of the family, and argue that families are dynamic, socially constructed and historically transformed through social interactions and discourses; hence the meaning of family is constantly re-negotiated (Bengtson et al., 2005; Marinucci, 2016; Ryan, 2020).

## 1.3 Brief context on normative Nigerian families

Families play a critical role in Nigerian societies. They are the fundamental social institution that forms the basis of socialisation, and a form of social security. In addition to their social functions, Nigerian families are the major source for the preservation and sustenance of cultural norms and values(Albert and Fakunle, 2021; Oladejo and Adenuga, 2021). Normative definitions of the Nigerian family are that it is a heterosexual nuclear unit comprising a husband, wife, or wives and child(ren) living together in a household. Since they are formed through heterosexual marriages, the institution of marriage remains the foundation of Nigerian families, carrying vast cultural significance (Oladejo and Adenuga, 2021). Accompanying marriage is the expectation and responsibility to procreate, particularly male children. Nigerian families are predominantly patrilineal, and family lineages are passed on through male children. Notwithstanding, children are important in Nigerian families for many reasons: "securing conjugal ties – [a child is often seen as the solidifier of a marriage], social security, securing rights to property and inheritance, maintaining family lineage, and satisfying emotional needs" (Dyer, 2007, p. 69).

Nigerian societies are hetero-patriarchal in nature, and traditional gender roles and responsibilities are deeply embedded within family structures. Men are assigned productive

[3] As discussed by Heumann in 4226 – Feminist perspective lecture. The family: mainstream theories, feminist critiques and contemporary debates

roles and considered the breadwinners of the home, while women fulfil reproductive roles such as childbirth, caring for the household and its members, and regulating behaviours (Olusegun, 2013), except in situations where it is pertinent to diversify household income. In this case, women play the role of secondary breadwinner, in addition to care responsibilities. Men are also viewed as the protectors and decision-makers in Nigerian households, including in issues related to the health and well-being of women and children (ibid.).

Another function of the family is in the socialisation of children. In Nigeria, the family "is the custodian of the individual"(Racheal, 2019, p. 7). As such, families form the core of communities, provide a sense of belongingness, and are the foundation for which a child's identity is rooted. "Gender is associated with sex [immediately] a child is born" (Dogo, 2014, p. 265), and from a young age, children in Nigeria are socialised to conform to hetero-patriarchal norms and uphold societal standards of masculinity and femininity in adherence to their biological sex (ibid.). One such socialisation is the regulation of sexual behaviours(Oladejo and Adenuga, 2021).

Nigerian communities are built on the foundation of care, interdependence, and mutual affection for each other. Citizens thrive on close-knit family ties, and extended kins may carry the same social responsibilities as nuclear family members. These interdependences permeate all facets of life, including raising children for social security, as well as emotional, physical, and financial support. Transcending emotional and socio-economic support is also the yearning for attachment to the physical world beyond one's earthly existence. As (Adebayo, 2018) puts it, families are a community of people "who can explain who we were to the world when we are gone". This further drives the need for procreation to continue family lineages.

Nonetheless, the normative Nigerian family poses many challenges. For instance, the reliance on the preservation of socio-cultural norms and values often results in a breakdown in the fundamental structure of the family when these norms and ideals are not upheld. As women are burdened with the responsibility of preserving traditional ideals within the family, this breakdown results in dire consequences for them. Further, the gendered division of labour within the household diminishes the role of women in Nigerian societies denying them the right to freely partake in public life. The pressure to procreate, particularly male children, to carry the family lineage further reinforces the heteronormative structures and exerts pressure on women who are unable or unwilling to bear children, as childlessness is seen as the failure of a woman. Further, normalised heteronormativity within Nigerian societies also implies that families who do not comply with these normative structures due to economic, social or personal reasons, for instance, queer families, single parents, and adoptive parents, are marginalised and excluded. (Etim and de Rooy, 2024).

I elaborate further on the normative Nigerian family in chapter 4, utilising narratives from the experiences of the queer women in this study.

## 1.4 Heteronormativity in Nigeria

Heteronormativity is ingrained in Nigerian societies. With the country's population mostly split between Christianity and Islam, Nigeria prides itself on being a conservative society

focused on maintaining cultural and religious values. Issues on gender and sexuality are discussed most delicately, approached by many with caution or avoided altogether. Conversations on sex are perceived as taboo, including within educational institutions, except addressed from the standpoint of abstinence, and sexual practices are reserved for the institutions of heterosexual marriages. Heterosexuality is considered the norm, and irresponsible sexuality such as homosexuality and bisexuality are characterised as un-Nigerian, un-Biblical, sinful, demonic, or resulting from neurological imbalances (Okanlawon, 2020, p. 155). For instance, in an article on *Gender and Sexuality in Nigeria*, Moses (2024), narrates that the response of many friends when asked about queer persons was *Tufiakwa!*[4]. This anecdote encapsulates the prevailing negative attitudes towards gender and sexual non-conforming persons in Nigerian societies.

Nigerian laws punish the sexually deviant and are constituted to reinforce heteronormativity. In 2014, the Nigerian government enacted the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) which prohibits all forms of same-sex unions and support for such relationships. Under this law, individuals involved in same-sex relationships/unions face up to 14 years' imprisonment, and those providing support for such relationships may be sentenced to 10 years imprisonment (Brabant-viciano, 2022, p. 5). Same-sex unions are also prohibited under Sharia law and the Penal Code enforced in 12 Northern Nigerian states (predominantly Islam) in the country. Under Sharia law, men engaged in same-sex relations face the death penalty, while women are either whipped or imprisoned(Okanlawon, 2020, p. 153). These laws equally void same-sex unions contracted in a foreign country "for the purpose of consummation in Nigeria"(Oladosu-Uthman, 2021, p. 102); irrespective of the nationality of such parties.

## 1.5 Heteronormativity as the Colonial project

The control over gender and sexuality is a component of a more complex framework of structural violence, rooted in the hierarchal control of bodies and subjectivities due to the colonial project and its legacy (Icaza and Vázquez, 2016; Etim and de Rooy, 2024).

In her work, *The Invention of Woman,* Nigerian decolonial feminist scholar Oyéronké Oyewùmí (1997), examines the history of Western discourses that have resulted in an epistemological change in the socio-cultural understandings of pre-colonial Nigerian societies. According to Oyewùmí, the contentious gender binary discourse is an "imported problem" (p. ix). She emphasises that Western *privileges of the visual* created a *gendered gaze* which was used to systematically categorise black bodies, perpetuating a form of subjugation that depicted them as inferior, vis a vis the 'ideal' of the white civilised male (Oyewùmí, 1997; Etim and de Rooy, 2024). Latin American feminist decolonial writer, Maria Lugones further describes the ways in which the colonial project resulted in the reproduction of gendered identities. Lugones argues that binary notions of gender were utilised as a colonial tool to control one's sense of self, invalidating pre-existing understandings of identities (Manning, no date;

[4] God-forbid!

Lugones, 2022). "The gendered system is heterosexual, as heterosexuality permeates racialised patriarchal control over production and over collective authority" (Lugones, 2007, p. 206). [5]

Authors such as Wekker (2014), Tamale (2011), and Fitzpatrick (2018), expand on this concept, arguing that with Western/Eurocentric imposition came a phobia of *black sexual anxiety,* one that categorised black sexualities as immoral, insatiable, primitive, and "closer to the pole of animality" (Wekker, 2014, p. 162). As Wekker explicitly puts it, "black sexualities were seen as 'too liberated' with a rampant sexuality, doing it indiscriminately with men and with women" (ibid., p. 161). Civilisation in Africa was then achieved by transforming and governing everyday life via the control and subjugation of black bodies and sexualities (Icaza and Vázquez, 2016) through the introduction of Christianity, Western education, capitalism, and the regularisation of Eurocentric norms and values. These hegemonic Western norms rooted in "white male supremacy" continue to shape post-colonial discourses of human sexuality (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 3), creating rigid biological binaries of male and female, with no concrete phenotypic distinctions between sex and gender (ibid.). These binaries, according to Tamale (2017), played important roles in sustaining capitalism and patriarchy and fulfilling the Eurocentric master plan of population growth for the social reproduction of labour.

The narrative that same-sex relations are non-normative in Nigeria is built on a false premise. Tamale, (2013), in her work, *Confronting the politics of nonconforming sexualities in Africa,* theorises that, although heterosexuality was dominant due to the preference for reproduction, same-sex relationships were also practised, and even culturally accepted, in Africa, pre-colonial times, challenging the dominant idea that it a Western ideology imposed on African societies. One example is Gaudio's ethnographic account of the sexual practices of *Yan dauda* in pre-colonial Hausa communities in Nigeria. These Muslim men in northern Nigeria formed "a liminal category that subverted general views of Hausa masculinity and gender [expressions]" (Gaudio, 2009, p. 152). *Yan dauda* were *feminine men*, who were cross-dressers, had sexual relations with and married other men, and engaged in other activities traditionally associated with women. Gaudio mentions that *Yan dauda* even played around with feminine pronouns. However, the introduction of Christianity and Western theology through the British colonisation in Nigeria saw the condemnation and persecution of *Yan dauda* communities (Okanlawon, 2015, 2020). The documentation of *Yan dauda* practices is further proof against national debates on the un-Africanness of same-sex relationships.

The role of language and its relationship with gender and sex is also relevant to these discussions. For instance, Amadiume (1987) asserts in *Male Daughters and Female Husbands* that the Igbo language in southeast Nigeria had no distinct pronouns for male and female compared to the gendered construction present in the English language. This absence of gendered pronouns allowed certain roles to be categorised separate from gender and sex in Igbo societies (Magadla, Magoqwana and Motsemme, 2021). Similarly, Oyěwùmí, (1997) has argued the same for the Oyo-Yoruba language in southwest Nigeria. Both authors highlight that the colonial influence on language, particularly through the enforced use of English

[5] Components of this section was first written by Etim and de Rooy as part of a team final essay for the 4338 course on Gender and Sexuality

across the British colonies, has resulted in the reshaping and retelling of Nigerian history through dominant Western narratives, ultimately distorting knowledge of African sexuality.

## 1.6 Eurocentrism and Nigerian families

Decolonial Nigerian scholars contend that there is a misrepresentation of the fundamental structure, composition and function of the Nigerian family. They argue that pre-colonial Nigerian families were not always heteronormative and were organised in diverse ways. Authors like Nzegwu, (2006) claim that this new (post-colonial) conceptualisation of the family stems from the lack of understanding of pre-colonial African culture and the Eurocentric epistemic oppression of African ethos. To illustrate Nzegwu's point, I will present three examples drawn from the pre-colonial organisations of Nigerian families.

In her (1987) ethnographic study of Nnobi-Igbo communities in southeast Nigeria, *Male Daughters and Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, Amadiume contends that the conception of the family as a 'rigid[6]' male-dominated and female-subordinate unit was imported through Western colonisation. She suggests that prior to this, it was not unusual (at least in Nnobi-Igbo communities) to have female-led or female-only families. Amadiume argues that "precolonial [Nnobi] women were not an undifferentiated, exploited, and powerless group, rather were disempowered by colonialism" (Hoppe, 2016, p. 499). She explains this by citing the flexible concept of gender in pre-colonial Nnobi Igbo culture, where biological sex was not identical to gendered social expectations as we have come to know in recent/Western discourses(Amadiume, 1987; Arndt, 2001, p. 48). For instance, in Nnobi Igbo culture, it was not uncommon for women to "assume the social and economic role of husbands" (ibid.). This was common with unmarried/wealthy women who married wives - other women who were not economically buoyant -, to care for and support them. These women then assumed the 'social gender' of husbands, thereby becoming 'female husbands' or *igba ohu*[7] - a role that "weighed more heavily than their [biological role]"(Arndt, 2001, p. 49). A Nnobi woman could become a 'husband' to as many wives as her economic power could accommodate. Their wives, and the 'female husbands' themselves, could procreate and have lovers – if they wanted, but any child/children from such relationships belonged to the 'female husbands'. Amadiume, however, says little about or rather refrains from exploring the sexual relationships within these family dynamics, leading some scholars to question whether gender fluidity could have also resulted in sexual fluidity (Lindsay, 2017).

Furthermore, because biological sex and gender were not always aligned in Nnobi communities, it allowed women to take on economic, social, and political roles that are today socially ascribed to men (Magadla, Magoqwana and Motsemme, 2021). Amadiume's work also provided a new lens for analysing the role of women in the social relations of labour in pre-colonial Nigeria. To borrow a phrase from Ossome, "Amadiume proves that [Nigerian]

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[6] I emphasize 'rigid' here because while many discourses cite that this may have been a more common form of organisation, they acknowledge that other forms of families existed and, importantly, were accepted, pre-colonization.

[7] "Female husband"

women were also negotiators of capital" (Ossome, as cited in, Magadla, Magoqwana and Motsemme, 2021).

Another anthropological study of *'Bia-ke*[8]*'* cultural practices in Ogoni, south-south Nigeria, reveals that first daughters or only daughters in *Khana* and *Gokana* Ogoni families were socio-culturally wedded to their fathers to preserve family lineages, mainly if parents had no male children. Nigerian communities are predominantly patrilineal, meaning that rights, inheritance, and family lineages are continued through male children and kins. This implies that if parents had no male children, the family lineage was at risk, as daughters usually took on their husband's family names and continued his family lineage. Although these unions (of daughters and fathers) were not sexual, these daughters were socially treated as fellow wives of their fathers but allowed to procreate with any man of their choosing, provided they remained within their fathers' homes, and the children resulting from such unions bore the family name (Deezia, 2020, pp. 123–124). Deezia, however, clarifies that these practices were not compulsory for every *Khana* and *Gokana* family. *Bia-ke* cultural practice was also the only way in which adoption of children "with known biological background" (ibid, p. 124) was possible within families (one commonality in pre- and post-colonial Nigerian families is the importance of biological children (as discussed in section 1.3.1 above)).

Female husbands (*Wa-Pyakawa*) were also common in Ogoni for the same reasons as in Nnobi communities - to care for each other. But also, so that women unable to reproduce could experience motherhood. In this context, women who had passed childbearing age and wanted children or were unable to procreate married another woman or women to bear children with their husbands. These women became their wives, and they took on the social responsibility as the fathers of these offspring, while their husbands remained the biological fathers. These traditional arrangements were socially and legally recognised but were not sexual. However, these practices were also not innocent, as Deezia (2020), discusses that being a 'female husband' was also a way to lessen the effects of inheritance laws on Ogoni women, which excluded women - with no children/male heirs - from having access to certain rights, such as inheriting land, resources and other forms of wealth from their deceased husbands. Since children are considered solidifiers of conjugal ties, and male children are regarded as continuers of family lineages, only women who had children, particularly male children, could inherit their husband's property. Consequently, being a 'female husband' was viewed as a source of 'socio-economic empowerment' for women (ibid).

Both authors argue that colonisation abolished these structures and cultural practices, first condemning the Nnobi and Ogoni communities as heathens and the practices unchristian and later prohibiting them by law while erecting new social structures which further intensified women's subordination and control (ibid., Arndt, 2001).

I want to clarify, that I am not in any way suggesting that the pre-colonial family dynamics described by Amadiume and Deezia were ideal, without power struggles, or did not adhere to gender binaries in other aspects. In fact, one of my goals is to trouble the idealisation, legalisation, and imposition of one mode of family form as the ideal. Indeed, one could argue that Amadiume's work proves that pre-colonial Nigerian communities had

[8] To be retained at home

"flexible [forms of family organisations] and gender spheres that were not one-directional" (Hoppe, 2016, p. 499). However, in Nnobi culture, for instance, conceptualising these women as 'female husbands' inadvertently reiterates that economic "power in Nnobi society was gendered as male. Therefore, when a woman exercised this power in relation to [roles traditionally ascribed to men], she was considered [male or husband], in a binary system where the only choices were male or female"(Nzegwu, 1998; Lindsay, 2017, p. 95; Magadla, Magoqwana and Motsemme, 2021). Additionally, Deezia's examples show a preference for males and the existence of patriarchal structures in pre-colonial families. Yet, I argue that these historical accounts also convey diverse forms of family organisation which were socially and legally acceptable in Nigeria. While colonisation may have been viewed as useful in abolishing certain practices – as in the case of daughter-father marriages in *Bia-ke* culture, it further erased cultural practices that may have provided some form of agency for women – as with Nnobi women, and accommodated diverse family structures, and rather reinforced gender roles, gendered hierarchisation, and heteronormativity.

## 1.7 Defining 'queer' in the Nigerian context

*To queer is to trouble, to deconstruct, to dismantle, to disrupt, and to radicalise. – Author, 2024*

'Queer' as a word is one not commonly used in Nigerian discourse on same-sex relations; however, it represents an array of sexual orientations and identities. However same-sex relations have always existed in Nigeria (as discussed in section 1.5). Queer feminist scholar, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley defines the term queer not as same-sex sexual relationships but as a "disruption to the violence of normative order: to connect in ways that commoditized flesh was never supposed to"(Tinsley, 2008, p. 199). Black political scholar, Cohen further elaborates on queerness, suggesting that it creates a space that opposes prevailing dominant norms. Cohen believes that "at the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics (2004, p. 440). In essence, to be queer is to actively and deliberately disrupt the heteronormative.

In the Nigerian context, scholars Ekine and Diekera Oloruntoba-Oju discuss queerness as a resistance to the imposition of the colonial narrative on Nigerian sexualities. For them, queerness in Nigeria is marked by multiplicity and nuances, with varied and intersecting experiences such as gender, class, culture, coloniality, and ethnicity (Abbas and Ekine, 2013; Oloruntoba-oju, 2021). Queer life according to Olaruntoba-Oju, is an embodiment of infinite possibilities that enables one to constantly be and become, with a "creative capacity for change" (p. 426).

In this study, I use the term 'queer' in two ways. First, theoretically, as an umbrella/inclusive term to refer to gay, bisexual, homosexual, and non-binary persons, but specifically to the lesbian and pansexual women I conversed with (Sreerekha, 2008; van Eeeden-Moorefield and Benson, 2015). The second is as a political tool; to challenge the dominant and rigid heteronormative norms on gender and sexuality (Ekine 2013). However, this does not imply that all the women in this study specifically self-identified with the term 'queer'. Rather, the

women in my study considered 'queer' as an act of doing, and a process of troubling and questioning, not a static identity or noun that one is or becomes (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2021).

# Chapter 2 - Meetings and Methodologies

## 2.1 Methodology

For this research, I adopted the feminist/feminist future methodologies of storytelling and imagining.

Storytelling as a feminist methodology values the use of personal narration of life stories/histories and experiences to challenge dominant and traditional epistemological approaches that "erase and oversimplify women's experiences" (de Nooijer and Sol Cueva, 2022, pp. 233–234), allowing for the nuanced narration of women's stories in their own words. These stories can be conveyed through different mediums: art-based drawings, words on books, podcasts, and illustrations. Adopting the principles of care, ethics, and reflexivity, storytelling as a methodology centres the voices of 'marginalised' persons and adopts an intersectional lens to convey how several intersectional factors such as sexuality, gender, age, and class, create complexities in understanding and analysing social issues.

Feminist future methodology posits that feminist knowledge production is ultimately futuristic, in that feminism is a resistance to the status quo, and change is a critical component in understanding social reality. Feminist future scholars believe that feminist research can challenge and change sociocultural norms (Harcourt and Calle, 2022) but, envisioning alternative or desirable futures is a first step to achieving social change, even if these alternatives are considered "unfeasible utopias" (Gunnarsson-östling, Svenfelt and Höjer, 2012, p. 914; Inayatullah, 2023, para. 1). It is grounded in the envisioning and imagination of possible future scenarios where gender inequality and gendered discrimination and oppression are eradicated and feminist values are upheld (Gunnarsson-östling, Svenfelt and Höjer, 2012).

Utilising these methodologies, my research centres on capturing the voices of queer Nigerian women to document their experiences of organising families. I further employ scenario-based imaginations to explore family aspirations beyond their current situations, as well as within the socio-cultural and legal context in Nigeria. Imagining was useful in visually mapping out the pathways to actualising these family aspirations. I also use feminist storytelling to narrate the women's life experiences in unconventional ways. For instance, in **Chapter 4** (Re-imagining families), I create an **imaginary/fictional** movie night based on my second conversation with the women. The use of imagining in my research is inspired by the work of Lillian Sol Cueva and Rosa de Nooijer in *Feminist Storytellers: Imagining New Stories to Tell* (de Nooijer and Sol Cueva, 2022), where the authors utilise creative writing and drawings to narrate stories of silencing and finding their voices within *specific geographics of the imaginary* (p. 238).

Following this methodology, in the sections below, I describe the four stages of the conversations I held virtually with six queer women (three couples) in Abuja and Lagos from August to October 2024.

## 2.2 Methods

### 2.2.1 Establishing connections

Through a friend, I was introduced to eight queer women (four couples) whom she believed fit the criteria of the people I wanted to engage in the research paper (RP). These criteria included age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and geographical location. I was interested in women who self-identified as queer, were in a relationship for a minimum of three years, residing with their partners in the two major cities in Nigeria – Abuja and Lagos - and were between 25 and 40 years. I chose these cities due to their accessibility and because the safety of queer persons in Abuja and Lagos is relatively better compared to other regions in the country. Urbanisation, coupled with the influx of expatriates and international development organisations in both cities, has resulted in queer persons being more tolerated than other areas in Nigeria. The age criterion was because I anticipated that older persons would offer diverse and richer life experiences and narratives. Additionally, from my experience as a Nigerian woman, 25 years is the social age of marriage and when women begin to navigate complex decisions around family making, children, and personal life goals.

With their consent, my friend shared their names, phone numbers, and emails. I emailed all eight women telling them about my study and asking if I could schedule a virtual introductory call. Six women agreed to speak with me; the other two (a couple) requested additional information so I mailed them a detailed consent form. Some days later, the couple decided not to participate in the study. Their reason was that despite being together for 13 years, they did not consider themselves a family, as to them, a family consisted of two parents and a child(ren). Despite further clarifying the goals of my research, they ultimately declined.

### 2.2.2 Setting the stage

After the initial emails, I scheduled six introductory calls with each woman to discuss issues around ethics, confidentiality, methods, and positionality, and to address any questions or concerns they had regarding the study. During these conversations, I mentioned that I planned to speak to each person at least three times virtually between August and October 2024. As each conversation would happen via videoconferencing, we discussed privacy and suitable teleconferencing platforms. At the end of each call, I emailed an informed consent form to each person to fill out.

Inspired by the work of (Calle, 2020), I developed a methods table, outlining each theme I sought to explore, the proposed method, and the broad questions I hoped to answer. This table guided future interactions, however, there were no specific predetermined questions for each woman to respond to. Rather, the conversations were informal and fluid, allowing me to naturally explore a set of diverse topics relating to each theme. The questions asked during the conversations were based on each woman's response.

## Table 1: Method Table

| S/N | Themes | Method | Conversations |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Establishing connections | Informal virtual conversations | Introducing the research/discussing ethics/positionality/what's in it for them |
| 2 | Life histories and Identities | Photo/Art-based elicitation/individual conversations | Getting to know participants *(Education, Religion, background, childhood and family dynamics growing up)*<br><br>***Pre-meeting task: Bring an object that describes what it means to be queer? -*** Narration of photos/objects or stories<br><br>How do you identify? What does it mean to be queer? Contextualising queerness in Nigeria. Significant experiences that shaped the decision to embrace their sexuality? |
| 3 | Family (Dynamics and structure) | In-depth virtual conversations<br><br>*Map their family - who supports? whose opinion matters? decision-makers? Restrictive/non-restrictive. Phenotypic families/Chosen families?* | **Conceptualising family:**<br><br>How do you define family? / What does family mean to you?<br><br>**Organising/Making family**<br>Exploring current family situation/structure *(If considered a family)*<br>How are roles negotiated? |
| 4 | Socio-cultural/Legal narratives<br><br>Resilience | In-depth virtual conversations | Socio-cultural and legal narratives-experiences being queer/that influence family formation? *(Share specific stories - of oppression? Resistance?)*<br><br>How do they navigate these? Covert strategies for maintaining relationships/forming families |
| 5 | Support structures | In-depth virtual conversations | What support have they received in their journey to family-making? (community networks, extended family, etc).<br><br>How has this influenced their experience? |
| 6 | Alternative Utopias | Imagining/Speculative dreaming | Future aspirations? What do the queer women envision as an ideal family situation? – (*Describe/tell a story/draw/map out)*<br><br>What can we do to work towards this future? What are their hopes and fears |

### 2.2.3 Conversations

The conversations occurred in three stages: each lasting up to two hours. Prior to our first conversation, I emailed all participants outlining the themes I intended to explore during our two months discussions. I grouped all themes (see Table 1 above) into three categories around which the three conversations were centred: life histories and identity, family/socio-cultural and legal narratives/support mechanisms, and imagining alternative utopias. Since our conversations were informal and flexible, I found that some themes often overlapped. Furthermore, the first two conversations occurred one week apart, while the third took place closer to the end of the research process, after my analysis of the initial conversations. This allowed me to reflect on our discussions and identify any gaps in the stories that could be clarified in future interactions. I spoke to each woman individually. This approach allowed me to capture individual perspectives and experiences and mitigate the potential risk of *desirability bias* that could occur due to the presence of their partners. One-on-one conversations were also crucial for maintaining confidentiality and discussing sensitive issues. Further, all conversations occurred in English. Although Nigeria has three main languages - Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa – English, as a result of its history as a former British colony, is the country's official language.

For our first conversation, we explored life histories and identity. I asked each participant to bring along an item that symbolised their identity (what it means to be queer). I clarified that this could be a drawing, a picture, a write-up, a song, or anything else that spoke to them. Ultimately, only two participants brought an item, and we engaged in conversations around these pictures; the others preferred to simply discuss. Discussions during our second conversation were mostly guided by the resulting questions from the first and were different for each participant. For our final conversation, we discussed future aspirations, hopes and fears for current and future family, and the resources required for their family to flourish.

## 2.3 "Who is asking whom what"[9]

*"Well, tell me, are you queer yourself?" – Ranti, research participant, 2024*

I am a heterosexual Nigerian woman conducting research on family formation by queer Nigerian women. My interest in the experiences of queer persons and my motivation for researching queer women are due to a web of reasons that are difficult to entangle from each other. On one hand, it is driven by my identity as a feminist, and my interest in gender justice. On the other, it is the horror of watching queer friends and families face prejudice for being romantically uninterested in the opposite sex.

When I began conceptualising my research, I assumed the position of an outsider. I was aware that my experience implementing sexual and reproductive health and rights intervention for sexual minorities while working in a non-profit organisation in Nigeria made me

[9] Chege, N. (2015) "'What's in it for me?": Negotiations of asymmetries, concerns and interests between the researcher and research subjects – as discussed in the 3303 Ethnography course

privy to the inequalities and persecution that many queer persons face, yet I did not and do not consider myself an expert on queer issues.

*"At some point, you must be ready to become the subject of the research too". – Harcourt, 2024*

During my initial conversation with my thesis supervisor, we discussed the inevitability of me becoming the subject of my research. I expected that, like the recurring questions about my interest – as a heterosexual woman - in understanding the lives and experiences of gender/sexual non-conforming persons, 'becoming the subject of my research' would require being prepared to answer the same questions; *"Why is this issue important to you?" "Are you queer?"*. In response to this, I developed a detailed positionality statement that integrated my research intentions with various aspects of my identity and background. I anticipated that my 'outsider' identity as a heterosexual woman would pose the most significant complexity. Since heterosexual women are often viewed as an embodiment of patriarchal and hegemonic femininity, the standard to which queer women are measured by society, I inferred that this narrative would potentially influence how my participants perceive me and, consequently, our interactions, as power imbalances may emerge.

What I had not anticipated, perhaps implied as 'becoming the subject', was how participants' personal stories would blur the lines between the 'subject' and 'object'. I quickly realised that the issue of positionality shifts and is not without tensions, and my position was never fully that of an outsider in the first place. I say this for two reasons. First, I consider myself someone who holds egalitarian views of the family; I believe that a family is socially constructed through mutual benefit, care, and support, and should be judged based on the quality of the relationship and support provided by participating members. Second, as a Nigerian woman, I was raised with certain socio-cultural expectations regarding behaviours, marriage, and childbearing, similar to the experiences of the queer women in my study.

Consequently, throughout the study, my role continually bordered between outsider and insider depending on the context of the conversation. For instance, when the women discuss navigating their sexuality in an all-girls boarding school, I realise I am listening not as a researcher but as an active participant in a similar story. I am immediately confronted with the realities of my own experiences. As conversations on sex and sexuality are taboo in many Nigerian homes, many things I learnt about these subjects, were as a pre-teen in an all-girls boarding school, finding out about my embodied sexuality with hundreds of other girls. The friendships formed in these years were often within a labyrinth of confusion around what is normal behaviour, feelings, and emotions. The obsession with categorising friendship bonds into normal versus abnormal feelings meant that the intimacy and emotional companionship I felt in my daily interactions were constantly in question. For instance, what depth of affection qualified as 'just' friendship? What messages were friendship notes versus love letters? What emotions qualified as romantic versus platonic? The fear of being misunderstood meant that these experiences were never communicated. But as an adult, I have learned that human interaction is complex, and intimacy, love, and affection occur within a spectrum.

When a participant, Abeni, shared that, despite their love for their mothers, they feared their mother's adherence to the socio-cultural expectations associated with 'Nigerian mothers' may potentially supersede any love and affection their mothers felt towards them;

so, they were unsure if they could ever disclose their sexuality for fear of rejection, exclusion, and the resulting disappointment of their unwillingness to bear children. I am further confronted with the difficult conversations on childbearing that I may never have with my mother, because she too, despite loving me, is a 'Nigerian mother'. Yet, "there is no doubt that heterosexuality results in some form of privileges"(Cohen, 2014, p. 459). So, the women's experiences with discrimination, stigmatisation, and encounters with law enforcement agencies based on reasons often as simple as their physical appearances exposed layers of vulnerability that I, as an 'outsider', could not fully comprehend.

Sadjad, (2015) states that insider status can be attained through diverse connections and interactions. Ultimately, while my "social capital" (Reyes, 2020, p. 221) - the network of friends I have built over the years within the queer community - was effective in reaching and communicating with the women I spoke with, it was the willingness to admit that, I, too, have 'queered'[10], which built trust. This trust was visible in many ways. For instance, although the women had signed consent forms which assured their confidentiality and anonymity, the conversations occurred via videoconferencing, and they were aware that they were being recorded. However, none of the women asked not to be video-recorded and trusted that I would honour my commitments.

Lastly, despite the similarities shared with these women and my own personal views on the family, it is important for me to acknowledge that as a researcher, there is always a potential risk that my individual bias can influence the interpretations of my findings. This bias may stem from my experiences, knowledge, motivations behind the research, and my identity as a heterosexual woman. Zavos and Biglia (2009) suggest that the connectedness between the researcher's positionality and the participant is not endemic, compromised, or impure; "the important point is to accept and recognise such impurity and its political context rather than trying to [present] our result as neutral and objective" (p. 162).

## 2.4 Reflecting on the method

The feminist principles of care, ethics, and reflexivity informed all aspects of my research. I strived to be sensitive and considerate throughout my interactions. With every question, gesture, body language, and expression, I wanted to ensure that I was creating an environment where the women felt safe to share their stories. But creating such a space requires trust, and this trust took sessions to build.

Admittedly, being introduced through a friend bridged the initial awkwardness that often accompanies a first-time conversation. Nonetheless, my status as a Nigerian, studying in the Netherlands posed a few challenges in my initial interactions. During my first introductory call, I noticed a shift in body language when I mentioned that I was a master's student in the Netherlands, despite having communicated this in my introductory email. Particularly because when we discussed, one participant, albeit unconsciously, questioned my familiarity with Nigeria. In Nigeria, there is a certain perception of division between people back home and fellow countrypersons in the diaspora, an 'us versus them' mentality, based on a

[10] Queered, in this case, should be interpreted as questioned.

perception of affluence. To address this discomfort, I found myself emphasising that I had only recently moved to the Netherlands for my studies but had lived and worked all my life in Nigeria. This narrative became a recurring theme that I used in subsequent introductory calls.

By our first 'official' conversation, I noticed that the women became more open during our interactions, some, more than others. This openness progressively increased with subsequent interactions. But, with trust and openness came the immense responsibility of managing the sensitive information entrusted in my care, a task I must admit was often difficult to navigate, particularly, when some women related stories of physical, emotional, and sexual violence – for which they currently receive professional help. This trust also allowed us to navigate hard and uncomfortable conversations, many of which the women were processing for the first time. For instance, when Bola narrates her experience of her first relationship, a 16-year-old, in a relationship with a woman in her late twenties, she seems to only just realise the power dynamics within that relationship, and that she may have suffered emotional abuse. In her words, *"Now that I think about it, I was young, and I may have been manipulated and emotionally abused in that relationship. But I stayed for four years… because I was afraid that I wouldn't find someone else. I only knew a few queer people".* But trust also fostered light-hearted exchanges, such as when Simi and I burst out laughing amid a serious conversation because we both felt as though we were interacting with our therapists. Even so, I continuously checked in with the women during our conversations, to remind them that not everything needed to be discussed.

The use of participatory methods also posed some challenges. I wanted to convey stories through art and pictures, but the actualisation of this intention was mostly dependent on the willingness and involvement of each woman. For example, when I requested that participants bring along an item that symbolised their identity to our first conversation, only two participants obliged, others preferred to simply discuss. However, the absence of an artwork or picture did not limit our discussions. In fact, the adaptable nature of a feminist methodology implied that each woman had the liberty to tell her story through her own unique medium.

Finally, the ethics of care also extended to the analysis and write-up of the research. I was in constant consultation with the women as I analysed and narrated our conversations, ensuring that each woman's story was accurately portrayed. Additionally, each woman had the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the final research product.

# Chapter 3- Life stories and identities

Family organisation is fundamental to society and gender/sexuality plays a critical role in the construction of families. Consequently, to understand queer families, we must first understand gender/sexuality in the Nigerian context and how these factors influence the prevailing norms about families (Thorne, 1982; Lehr, 1999). In this chapter, I explore conversations about how queer Nigerian women view their gender/sexual identities and how they frame these identities within the broader socio-cultural context of Nigerian societies. I begin by providing a brief description of the six queer women who shape this research.

## 3.1 The women shaping this research

**Figure 2: Introducing Ada & Ijay**

*Meet Ada and Ijay, a couple who have been in a relationship for four years, living together for three, with their cat.*

*Ada is thirty-one years old and identifies as a feminine presenting lesbian woman. She is a chef and an entrepreneur who loves bead-making. Ada is an only child and was raised in a family home with her mother, matrilineal grandparents, uncles, and cousins due to her parent's separation before her birth. Ada mentions feeling overshadowed as a child because of her family's size, as her voice and opinions barely mattered in conversations. She also reveals being aware of her sexuality in her early teens.*

*Ijay is a twenty-eight-year-old graphic designer. She identifies as pansexual with an attraction to femininity irrespective of who embodies it. Ijay's childhood memories are not ones she prefers to visit frequently. She was an only child in her family for years before the birth of her sister and felt lonely for the most part of her early years. Her parent's separation when she was a child meant she moved around a lot and was raised by different family members. This experience has shaped her opinion of family, she says. Both women are not out to their parents.*

***Source: Author, 2024***

**Figure 3: Introducing Abeni & Bola**

*Abeni is a thirty-one-year-old entrepreneur and identifies as a masculine-presenting queer woman, however, she mentions "she doesn't do well with [dislikes] labels". Raised by a single mother alongside siblings, she describes her upbringing as loving and emphasises that her sexuality was not influenced by her environment, despite dominant Nigerian discourses; "I did not watch this on TV", she says. She reveals being aware of her sexuality as a pre-teen.*

*Bola is a twenty-eight-year-old human rights advocate who identifies as an African queer lesbian woman. Growing up in a deeply religious home – Christian mother and Muslim father - she speaks of tribal divides within the family which led to tensions regarding family values in her home. After a disagreement with her parents as a teenager over her educational choices, Bola was sent out of her home, consequently, she was raised by an aunt whom she considers a second mother. She mentions being aware of her sexuality as early as eight years old. At sixteen, Bola began her first relationship with a woman.*

*Abeni and Bola have been in a relationship for four years, living together for three. Both women are not out to their parents.*

***Source: Author, 2024***

**Figure 4: Introducing Ranti & Simi**

*Simi is a twenty-six-year-old lawyer from a polygamous home and identifies as a lesbian woman. Simi's father passed away a few years after her birth and she never had the opportunity to know him. Growing up, Simi's mother was absent in her life, so, she was raised by various family members. She suffered physical, emotional and verbal abuse in these homes, prompting her mother to move her from one family member's home to another when the mistreatment became unbearable. Simi reveals that she has always known of her attraction towards other women; "I could always see features to admire in women, and not men", she says. However, she 'came out' to her friends and some extended family members at twenty-one.*

*Ranti, Simi's partner, is a thirty-five-year-old entrepreneur and photographer who identifies as a masculine-presenting queer woman. She mentions being raised in a deeply religious (Christian) home. In my home, "you're a church girl, and you have to live by the book [bible]", she says. Ranti does not view these religious norms as a restriction; rather, she reveals that they positively shaped her actions as a child. Ranti perceives her masculinity as a reflection of her experiences and perception of men; "I have no experience of a good man… and I do not believe that men have the capacity to lead me", she says. Despite being raised by both her parents, she mentioned not feeling loved by her father. She believes that his role in her life was solely that of a provider. Ranti and Simi have been in a relationship for over two years, during which they have been living together.*

***Source: Author, 2024***

## 3.2 On being queer (in Nigeria) and embracing identities

> *"The body is the bedrock on which the social order is founded, the body is always in view and on view. As such, it invites a gaze… a gaze of differentiation - the most historically constant being the gendered gaze."* - (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 2)

Oyěwùmí's quote (above) on the *gendered gaze* vividly describes the ways in which our bodies shape our interaction with the world. Our bodies are sites of social, cultural, and political inscriptions, and are central to power relations. Through the privilege of sight, society defines

our roles, expectations, and standards of behaviour, while determining what bodies wield power, deserve respect, embody the ideal, and which bodies deserve to be disciplined or regulated(Oyěwùmí, 1997).

We began our first conversation by sharing life stories and discussing what it means to be queer. I requested that each participant bring along an item they associated with their identity. Ada brought a picture of herself adorned with a striking set of waist beads, and we built our discussions around this picture. In this section, I weave together the women's narratives on 'being queer' in Nigeria, with broader discourses on 'queerness', gender, and sexuality. I further draw from my conversations with Ada, as well as the discussions with the other queer women, to navigate stories on resistance, and embracing identities.

**Figure 5: Ada, on embracing identities**

***Source: Ada, research participant, 2024***

*"Being queer represents how I want to live my life. It means I get to choose how I want to represent and express myself. Like I mentioned to you, I make beads. I don't wear my beads inside my clothes like everyone else does. I wear it outside my clothes because why not? Then you have people staring at you, but well, that's how I choose to express myself, that's my form of identity".*

*"I'm a feminine presenting lesbian woman. I mostly get stares from men and not women, except when I'm in queer spaces where people know I'm queer. So, I have to, you know, find something to hold on to, to express my sexuality, and this is what I choose".*

*"When I was in university, I identified as a bi-sexual woman, but I realised later that that was just about casual sex for me and never about romantic feelings or relationships. Maybe the men thought they were in a relationship with me, but I always knew what it was".*

During my conversations with Ada, she discussed the symbolism of the waist beads as an empowering tool for the expression of the feminine amidst her struggles in navigating her identity. Ada revealed that the journey to embracing her sexual identity has been complex. As a teenager, she was conflicted about her feelings towards other girls. At university, she initially identified as a bi-sexual woman but eventually embraced her identity as a femme lesbian. As our conversation progresses, we attempt to unravel her reasons for pursuing heterosexual relationships despite being aware of her attraction to other women as early as 13 years. Ada described that although she was aware that she liked girls, 'the girls she liked, liked boys", so she was compelled to "do what everyone else was doing". Further, being from a Christian Nigerian family, she was convinced that her feelings towards other girls were wrong. Compounding these issues was her complex relationship with her body. She shared that she "developed titties at a young age" and has always been considered "plus-sized", so, she has always attracted unwanted male attention, even as a teenager. Combined with her family and societal expectations of marriage and childbearing, Ada's complex relationship with her body and sexual identity compelled her to seek validation from men, and only in learning to appreciate her features – something she mentions that the waist beads have helped her overcome – did she fully embrace her sexuality. Ada shared "I can't explain it, but when I wear them, it gives me this air of confidence. I feel good about myself. I don't know if that makes sense".

Waist beads hold social and cultural significance in African societies; they are a "prominent performance site through which the aesthetic of the female body is redefined, recreated and transformed" (Mensah *et al.*, 2024, p. 1). Historically, in Nigeria, waist beads embody femininity, the erotic, status, wealth, fertility, power, and hierarchy, as well as a "spiritual disposition" (ibid. p. 4). However, several misunderstandings about the historical and cultural significance of waist beads have led to controversy. Primarily, men have vilified women who adorn themselves with beads, falsely associating these cultural practices with 'witchcraft' or other 'spiritual practices' aimed at subduing and entrapping men.

Despite these controversies, Ada views her beads as a critical part of bodily autonomy. In emphasising that she wears her waist beads outside of her clothes, contrary to societal standards, Ada is making a statement. In a world that seeks to control bodily expressions and interactions, Ada's bodily expression, through her waist beads, then becomes a sociopolitical statement of defiance, an assertion of individuality, and an attempt to reclaim the body from societal expectations. For Ada, adorning herself with waist beads has helped her appreciate her body and sexuality. She shared, "I look at my body and go, 'My God! You are beautiful, baby!". Indeed, Ada's story of reclaiming her identity through the use of waist beads is not an isolated one, other women have also narrated the use of waist beads to overcome issues of self-image.

Ada's story on the complexities of navigating her sexuality resonated with those of the other five women. We discussed the internalised conflicts that each of them faced as adolescents regarding their sexuality. Some like Bola and Ijay, were aware of their sexuality as early as eight years old. When I asked how they could distinguish that their feelings for girls were sexual or romantic and not platonic, Ijay expressed that she "did not feel that way towards any boy". Ijay does not see herself as masculine or feminine. Rather, she mentions that her identity is more complex than that assumed through gender binaries or labels; "Some

days I feel more masculine, other days more feminine. And I am grateful for a partner that allows me the freedom to express myself in different ways. I do not want to be put in a box, but we are in Nigeria, and I must tick one, so I tick 'She'". Abeni also rejects the idea of 'labelling' herself; "I don't like this idea of having to choose if I want to be 'they', 'it, 'he', or 'she'. There's no need to make a big deal out of this. This is who I am, so I hate that we always sensationalise queer persons as if they're something abstract. This is me".

## 3.3 "We're in Nigeria, what can I do[11]?"

'Queerphobia' is pervasive in Nigeria. Along with the country's harsh anti-LGBTQ+ laws, queer women are socially and systematically excluded from societies (Akram, 2021), including by their families. They are denied the right to health and social services and subjected to double persecution, for both their gender identity and sexual orientation, forcing many to live in hiding. Queer women are exposed to discrimination, stigmatisation, physical and sexual abuse, and targeted by the law for undue persecution. For example, in April 2024, a popular transwoman in Nigeria, informally called Bobrisky, was arrested by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and sentenced to six months in prison by a Judge for destroying the Nigerian money - naira. The maximum penalty for this offence is six months in prison, a 50,000 naira fine, or both. Bobrisky was arraigned for spraying[12] the naira at a Nigerian wedding, a socio-culturally acceptable practice in Nigerian societies that occurs at weddings, birthdays, and importantly, election campaigns.

While it is true that Bobrisky was guilty of this offence, legal practitioners in Nigeria discussed that as a first-time offender, a fine would have been appropriate. Barely a week after this sentence, a male Nigerian governor was seen in a viral video performing the same act from the rooftop of his SUV. Days later, another heterosexual man was also arrested for the same offence by the commission, but neither were persecuted. Despite the offence, the prevailing conversation in the Nigerian media was that although Bobrisky's sentence was harsh, it was justified, because prison was one way to 'tame her [sexuality]'. Bob's story highlights the far-reaching effects of state persecution of queer women. Many activists perceived this harsh sentence as a show of force towards queer communities, an attempt at "queer erasure" (Esene, 2024).

As we reflect on navigating queer identities, all six women mentioned that it was an extremely difficult experience being queer in Nigeria, particularly for Abeni, Ijay, and Ranti, who are masculine presenting. They discussed having to find coping mechanisms or developing 'thick skin' to survive some of the daily prejudices. Ijay shared, "I'm used to the remarks, comments, and frequent stares. I find that men like to 'catcall' me. But in my case, they're shouting, "You be boy abi girl?[13]". She continues, "I also notice that when I'm out in non-queer social gatherings, men keep their female friends away from me because of the way that I look". In Abeni's case, working remotely, coupled with her introverted personality, has

[11] Quote from conversations with Ijay, RP, 2024

[12] Nigerian culture of throwing money/cash in the air and at individuals/couples during weddings, birthdays, and other celebrations

[13] Are you a boy or girl?

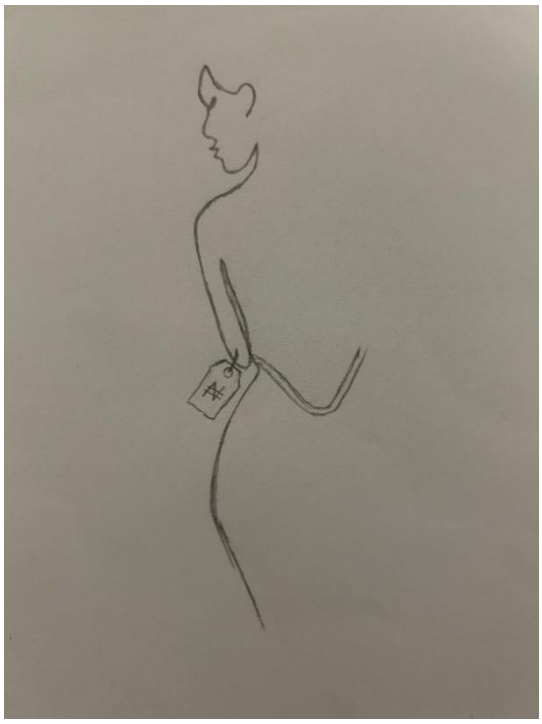
meant that she was unlikely to be found in non-queer spaces, however, this did not always guarantee a life free from prejudice.

> "Now that I think about it, the other day, I was waiting in a queue, and I realised that this woman kept pulling her child back because she was coming close to me. I figured it was because of the way that I looked, and if I'm being honest, I was hurt. I've also encountered the police before. They stopped and asked if I was male or female. But I just played it off and gave them something". – Abeni, research participant, 2024

For Ada, Simi, and Bola, being feminine-presenting queer women, meant that they did not feel pressured to hide their identity – except when they were out with their partners. In this case, they were likely to hang out in queer-friendly spaces since it limited their exposure.

*This one na our fellow man*[14] *– Ranti, research participant, 2024*

**Figure 6: Femininity is profitable**



***Source: Author, 2024***

Another way in which prejudice for queer women, particularly for masculine presenting queer women manifests is in the limitation of economic opportunities. Ijay & Ranti acknowledge being turned down from several job and business opportunities because of the way they looked and expressed themselves. As Ijay mentioned, "Some time ago, I tried to get into real estate but couldn't because they wanted a feminine person who could market their sexuality". Ranti also shared "I carry this sense of male dominance with me, but I'll be

[14] This one is a fellow man

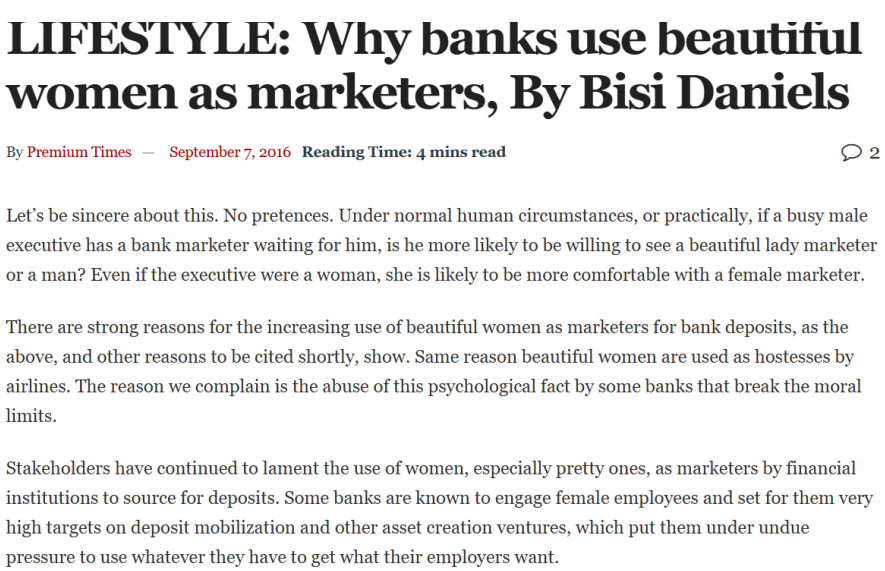
honest, femininity has its advantages. I've lost out on several 'gigs' because men look at me and say, 'this one na our fellow man'. In the end, sex sells". The expectation of women to commodify their femininity for both individual and corporate financial gain is not new in Nigeria. We see it in the banking and hospitality industry, as well as in the creative, advertisement and marketing industries.

These stories further reinforce Oyewumi's words on the privilege of sight; "It is believed that just by looking at [the body] one can tell a person's beliefs and social position or lack thereof" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 1). Thus, the *gendered gaze* simultaneously heightened prejudice for Abeni, Ijay, and Ranti, while providing safety for Bola, Simi, and Ada. Yet, what appears as safety for the latter, is also the erasure of the "erotic of female same-sex intimacy" (Mupotsa, 2019, p. 118).

In spite of the persecution faced by queer persons in Nigeria, sexual non-conforming relationships are practised more openly in Nigerian societies. Oladosu-Uthman (2021), credits this to the increased funding for sexual and reproductive health programs for these groups. This visibility has simultaneously garnered support from organisations and activists. Activists have mobilised support for unlawful anti-queer arrests, non-profits are tackling misinformation and dedicated to enabling queer persons to understand their rights, organisations have established dedicated safe spaces where queer persons can exist, and queer Christians are assisting others reconcile their sexuality and faith (Okanlawon, 2015, pp. 105–106). Okanlawon believes that tolerance for queer persons is growing (ibid.).

Notwithstanding, with increased visibility comes increased persecution, and the women collectively agreed that enacting progressive laws on same-sex relationships would not guarantee freedom or acceptance, as socio-cultural norms may take decades to change. As Simi points out, "Even if queer relationships are legalised, we need another 10 years for people to accept us, another 10 for queer relationships to be normalised, and perhaps 10 more to accept children from queer relationships".

**Figure 7: Commodification of femininity**



# LIFESTYLE: Why banks use beautiful women as marketers, By Bisi Daniels

By Premium Times — September 7, 2016 **Reading Time: 4 mins read** 2

Let's be sincere about this. No pretences. Under normal human circumstances, or practically, if a busy male executive has a bank marketer waiting for him, is he more likely to be willing to see a beautiful lady marketer or a man? Even if the executive were a woman, she is likely to be more comfortable with a female marketer.

There are strong reasons for the increasing use of beautiful women as marketers for bank deposits, as the above, and other reasons to be cited shortly, show. Same reason beautiful women are used as hostesses by airlines. The reason we complain is the abuse of this psychological fact by some banks that break the moral limits.

Stakeholders have continued to lament the use of women, especially pretty ones, as marketers by financial institutions to source for deposits. Some banks are known to engage female employees and set for them very high targets on deposit mobilization and other asset creation ventures, which put them under undue pressure to use whatever they have to get what their employers want.

***Source:* *Premium Times***

## 3.4 "God is not angry at queer people"[15]

Understanding queer experiences in Nigeria requires a critical investigation into the role of religion in shaping the discourse on queer Nigerian sexualities. Through stories of resistance and oppression, we discussed the role of religion in perpetuating the prejudice many queer persons experience in Nigeria, including its impact on the development of laws prohibiting same-sex unions. All the women were Christians raised in conservative families, and they revealed how this influenced their decisions not to disclose their sexualities to their families. For instance, Ranti expressed her fear of what the potential consequences of being 'openly gay' would mean to her mother from their church. She believes that religion punishes queer people harshly, partly because "Nigerians don't ask questions; they just believe anything the church tells them". But perhaps the responsibility also lies with religious organisations, who frown upon asking critical questions.

In the years when I frequented church, I remember the recurrent teachings that Christianity is a religion of 'reckless abandon faith'; 'you don't ask God why, you ask him how'. Your purpose as a Christian was to fulfil the will of God, and the only questions permitted were those requesting the tools to help you accomplish this will. According to dominant religious teachings, to question God's plan is to reveal a lack of faith, and without faith, *it is impossible to please God*[16].

> *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. – (The Holy Bible, Galatians 3:28-29)*

When I find myself in the middle of conversations about the natural and unnaturalness of queer bodies and relationships. I have often reflected on the words of Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians (scripture above). Here, Paul reminds the Galatian people that we are all children of God, created in Christ's image, in a common relationship with Christ, and entitled to his promises – as Abraham's descendants. Yet, religious teaching remains controversial on issues of sexuality, and many religious narratives position sex as a privilege to be enjoyed only within heterosexual marital relations and for the sole purpose of procreation.

One of the recurring narratives during our sessions was the feeling of shame and helplessness while coming to terms with their sexuality. As Bola mentions "Where I am from [religious background], there is a right and wrong way of doing things. I was convinced what I was doing was wrong, but I did not know how to stop. I've taken myself to the church [to pray away my sexuality] many times. Still, it [feelings towards other women] did not go away".

Religious norms have been codified into laws governing sexual relations(Rubin, 1999). In line with Queer and African Feminist theory, issues of gender, sex and sexuality must always be analysed within the broader hegemonic context that privileges and disadvantages certain individuals. Therefore, it is relevant to understand the socio-political

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[15] Quote from conversations with Abeni, research participant, 2024

[16] The Holy Bible - Hebrews 11:6.

contexts of laws criminalising same-sex unions in Nigeria. "Law is a cultural system in itself"(Handmaker and Arts, 2018, p. 11), deeply rooted in societal practices, religion, morality, politics, and cultural norms and values. The Nigerian legal system traces its roots to English colonial laws(Etim and de Rooy, 2024), and the country practices two forms of criminal law system – the penal code in the north and the criminal code in the south, both of which were introduced through "the European style legal system" (Sogunro, 2022, p. 502) during colonisation. Although many formal colonial systems were abolished, this colonial legacy "continues to govern criminal justice administration" (ibid., p. 508; McEwen, 2021) in Nigeria and is now used to solidify state power to benefit political elites.

The first law criminalising same-sex relationships was recorded in the 14th Century (1290) in England as part of an *ecclesiastical law,* which was grounded on Abrahamic and religious teachings (Human Dignity Trust, 2024). Based on the hegemonic belief that same-sex relationships were unnatural, this law was then revised and codified into secular law, at a time directly coinciding with political struggles for authority, land, and resources between the "monarchy and the papacy[17]"(Sogunro, 2022, p. 511; Human Dignity Trust, 2024). This legislation was further employed to secure the interest of the monarchy, restricting the authority of the church and, in turn, shaping the notion of an ideal citizen (ibid.).

The ambiguity of religious doctrines and their impact on state laws in Nigeria has left queer persons at an impasse with religion as they often believe that they must renounce one identity for the other. For instance, Ada chooses to situate her beliefs elsewhere, refusing to subscribe to an ideology that does not accommodate her sexuality. Similarly, Ijay and Bola also disclosed their struggle to reconcile their sexuality with their faith. However, for Abeni, while she no longer attends church, she does not attribute this change to a conflict with her sexuality. Rather, she shares her frustration with how religion is being practised in Nigerian societies: "God is not angry at queer people", she says, and she believes that reducing this spiritual being that transcends any form of gender representation as someone who punishes people simply because of their sexuality or gender identity is to simplify who God is. Abeni says, "I have witnessed the divine at work in various ways, so I don't need external validation of my relationship with him". Simi also mentioned, "They keep saying we are a sin, but how do you reconcile that with the fact that God does not make mistakes? God gave everyone the ability to love".

[17] Authority of the Pope

**Figure 8: "The universe does not punish you for wanting to be your authentic self"**

*I am spiritual, I believe in karma*

*I believe in the earth; I believe in doing good and good coming to you*

*I'm not killing anybody*

*I believe in the power of the universe*

*I go to the beach all the time; I put out all my problems; I talk about my feelings; Water comes and goes; it doesn't judge you*

*So, I won't say I'm Christian; I'm spiritual*

*But I believe in the universe; I believe in Earth; I believe in sand*

*I am living my life; I am not doing any evil*

*The universe does not punish you for wanting to be your authentic self.*

*Poem following conversations with Ada. Author, 2024*

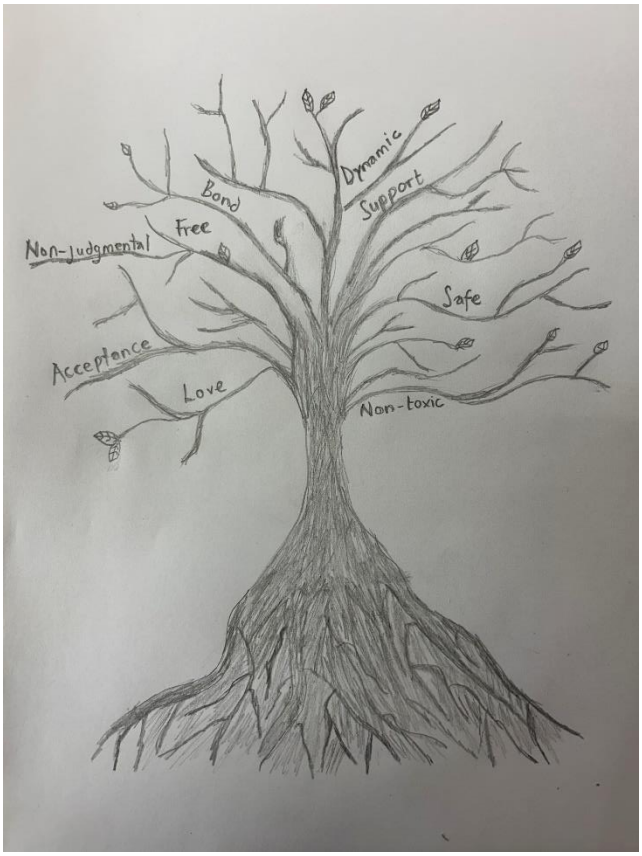
# Chapter 4 - Families

In this chapter, I attempt to (re)define families and explore stories of queer Nigerian women navigating their relationships with their biological families, as well as their individual strategies for making their own families.

## 4.1 (Re)Defining Families

*"A bond that supports each other". – Ijay, research participant, 2024*

**Figure 9: Queer Family Tree**




***Source: Author, 2024***

We began our second conversation by attempting to construct our definitions of families. We each described families in different ways, however, the recurring words were 'support', 'bond', 'non-judgemental', 'dynamic', 'safe', 'community', and 'freedom'. Importantly, we established that our definitions were not restricted to biological families or families of origin; but rather to the relationships to which we ascribed the term. Ultimately, we co-constructed families in the context of our conversations as; *a community of (love) and support who know and accept one another for who they are, not a façade of who one is supposed to be.* The intentionality of this

re-definition was important in the construction of new families (Oswald, cited in Roberts et al., 2023).

One thing was common in my interaction; all the queer women I spoke with considered their partners their family and their biological family, an extended family. While the word 'acceptance' took centre stage in our definitions, we contemplated the use of 'love', as we believed the word did not appear to be a pre-requisite for acceptance - in the context of the queer women's experiences in my study. As Ada puts it, "I love my mother, and she loves me too. She's kind-hearted and one of the sweetest persons I know, but she's a 'Nigerian mother'. She's judgmental, and that's not the type of family I want to create". The expression, 'But she is a Nigerian mother' recurred across conversations with the six women throughout my study. It was prominent, when we discussed disclosing identities to parents, when we shared experiences of family expectations, and when navigating conversations on family aspirations.

*"My father took care of me, but it was out of a sense of responsibility. His role was solely that of a provider." – Ranti, research participant, 2024*

Renate Bridenthal (as cited in Thorne, 1982) describes that the family assumes a gendered division of labour where husbands are the breadwinners – "identified with activities in a separate economic sphere" (p. 4) and wives/mothers are the "core of the family, rather than simply being a member of it" (ibid).

The role of the "Mother" is critical in families. To quote Spiegel (1982), "Family is the code word for mother" (p. 95). Unlike fathers, who are viewed as financial providers, mothers are responsible for bearing and nurturing children, uniting the family, and maintaining family ideals, tradition, and reputation. In Nigeria, when a child is said to have 'brought shame on the family', it is mothers who are blamed for their behaviours. As homosexuality is considered un-African, the role of the mother then extends to the policing of gender and sexuality, ensuring that children maintain normalised ideals of masculinities and femininities.

The recurrent use of the term 'but she is a Nigerian mother' during our conversations implied that the socio-cultural expectations ascribed to being a mother may often supersede the obligations of love to the child in a family. By this, I do not imply that Nigerian mothers do not love their children. On the contrary, it is the love for children that motivates the actions towards ensuring compliance with traditional gender norms. In Ranti's case, this love was sometimes expressed by her mother's attempt to 'beat the masculinity' out of her as a child.

Sara Ruddick's (1982), work on *Maternal Thinking* puts into perspective the attitude governing a mother's needs to "shape an acceptable child" (p. 83). According to Ruddick, one of the demands of 'motherhood' is to ensure that a child's growth is "shaped in a manner that [is acceptable by society] or that makes life acceptable" (ibid.). In response to this, mothers, rather than balance the demands of socio-cultural norms with the needs of their children, tend to be focused on raising ideal children, and the desperation to achieve these pursuits may likely lead to cruelty for deviant children. In this way, Ruddick argues that maternal instincts betray their own interest in the growth of a child (ibid. p. 85). Further, a woman's

acceptability and respectability in Nigerian societies depend on the degree to which she is able to conform to social norms (Berlingozzi and Raineri, 2023). Consequently, a good mother then becomes someone who colludes in shaping destructive outcomes for her child due to societal pressures – in this case, by perpetuating hetero-patriarchal norms. Hence, in Ranti's situation, what may appear as hostility towards Ranti is the consequence of societal expectations of motherhood.

Once we defined families, we drew contrasts between our definitions and the normative definition of a family in Nigeria. There was consensus that the normative definitions/notions of family are limiting, as a family must not always be a biological unit and, in the Nigerian context, is an 'unsafe space' for queer persons or individuals who deviate from socio-cultural norms. These varying views on family were shaped by multilayered factors of experiences with current families and sexual identities. In Simi's case, for instance, her experiences of physical and emotional abuse with her biological family led her to look outwardly for a family. For others, it was the fear of rejection because of their sexuality.

## 4.2 The normative family as an 'unsafe space'

*"The true enemy of the family is not queer persons, rather the enemy of family love is violence".*
*(Osborn, as cited in, Lehr, 1999, p. 11)*

The increased visibility of queer relationships in Nigerian societies has seemed to have little influence on family acceptance. All the women I spoke with were apprehensive about disclosing their sexuality to their parents or immediate biological families, except Simi, who already has an estranged relationship with hers. This fear is not unsubstantiated, as families have been known to disown members who identify as queer due to shame or fear of ostracization, hence, queer persons must conceal their sexualities from family members to avoid contempt and rejection. Queer women who disclose their gender and sexual identities to family members are often coerced to either undergo conversion therapies or are pressured to commit to heterosexual relationships to conform to societal ideals. These situations have forced many to adhere to hegemonic standards of masculinity and femininity to avoid prejudice, ripping off their agency to remain one with self. For Ijay, this implies that, when she visits her mother, she must wear her shorts a little shorter and tighter, opt for dresses, and apply lots of make-up, which she clearly states that she dislikes; "I don't like it because, again, it feels like I'm being put in a box".

**Figure 10: Bola on 'coming out' to family**

***Bola***

*"I cannot 'come out' to my parents. I have this feeling that… my friends will always say I'm overthinking it, but I feel like if I tell my family or my family finds out [about my sexuality], they'll kidnap me and lock me up at home. They have these expectations of me that they've groomed me well. I'm homely. I'm supposed to get married to a man, not just any man, a good man. Be a good mom… So, if anything should make me skip out of that box, I don't think it'll go well"."*

Bola's fear of rejection and the possible harsh consequences of revealing her identity to her parents is vivid as we explore the difficulties in embracing her sexuality within the context of her biological family. While some may dismiss her fear of being "kidnapped and locked up" by her parents as irrational – for instance as with her friends, her experiences have revealed that this fear is not unfounded. When we shared childhood memories in our first conversation, Bola mentioned that as a teenager, she was sent away from home by her parents and had to live with a family member for years due to a disagreement about what university to attend and what degree to pursue. Bola's fear is also one that the other queer women echoed and that is present in many Nigerian homes, as the prevailing attitude of parents in Nigerian societies is that one must discipline[18] a child into obedience.

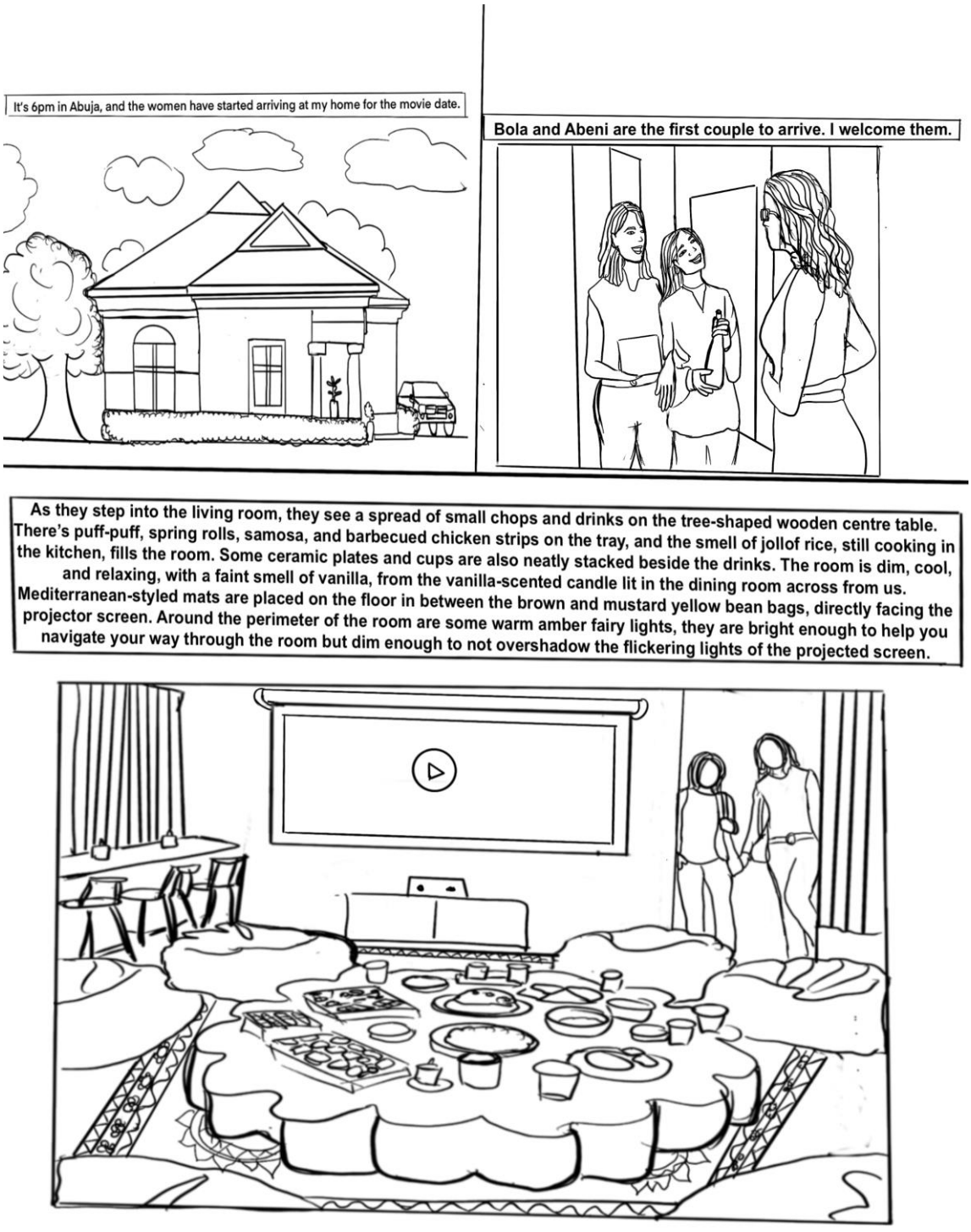
'Good' is a word that recurs in Bola's story. She refers to her family's expectation of her to marry 'a good man' and become 'a good mom'. The expression 'a good man' is one that holds many connotations in Nigeria. When Nigerian parents express their intention for their daughters to marry 'a good man', what they imply is a man who is family-oriented, religious, hardworking, and most importantly, can financially provide for the woman and her family; in Nigerian societies, a man does not only marry a wife but her entire family. Therefore, 'taking care of the woman and her family' implies that he must be able and willing to financially provide for them. A 'hardworking man' refers to the ability to do 'what is necessary' to provide for the family. Further, when women introduce a potential partner to her family, the first question asked is, 'What does he do?'; an assessment of his ability to provide. The emotional connection between both partners is often a secondary concern. On the other hand, when women are introduced to their potential husband's parent; they are evaluated on fertility, their ability to cook and care for the home, previous lifestyle (an assessment of morality), physical attributes, and, importantly, religion – because women are also expected to be the spiritual foundation of the home. 'A good mom/woman' is then assessed by a woman's ability to conform to these criteria. This further highlights the function of the normative/dominant Nigerian families, where unions are primarily for financial and social security and procreation, and less about emotional connections.

[18] Discipline here should be interpreted as beat, scold, isolate, disown

## 4.3 (Re) Imagining families

Feminist research is an embodied practice often evoked through illustrations, reflections, and stories (Harcourt *et al.*, 2022). In this section, I use creative writing and illustrations to narrate the stories of queer family organisations, discussing how roles are negotiated within their family, and the strategies employed to navigate socio-cultural norms. The dialogues take place in an **imaginary/fictional** movie night at my home in Abuja, Nigeria, but are shaped by the one-on-one discussions I had with each woman during our second conversation. This approach provided a medium to depict the complexities within these families and capture the richness of our conversations; I wanted to leave our dialogues untouched. Through creative writing and illustrations, I hope to convey the emotions in a more comprehensible manner, fostering a deeper connection and empathy among the readers(de Nooijer and Sol Cueva, 2022). The illustrations complement the writings by providing visual dimensions to the words and bringing the characters to life. I begin by setting the stage for the movie night, then transition to our dialogues.

**Figure 11: The freedom to be who we are**



Bola and Abeni sit on the mat side-by-side facing the screen, and Ada & Ijay arrive 10mins later, just as the other women are already helping themselves to some wine and chicken strips.

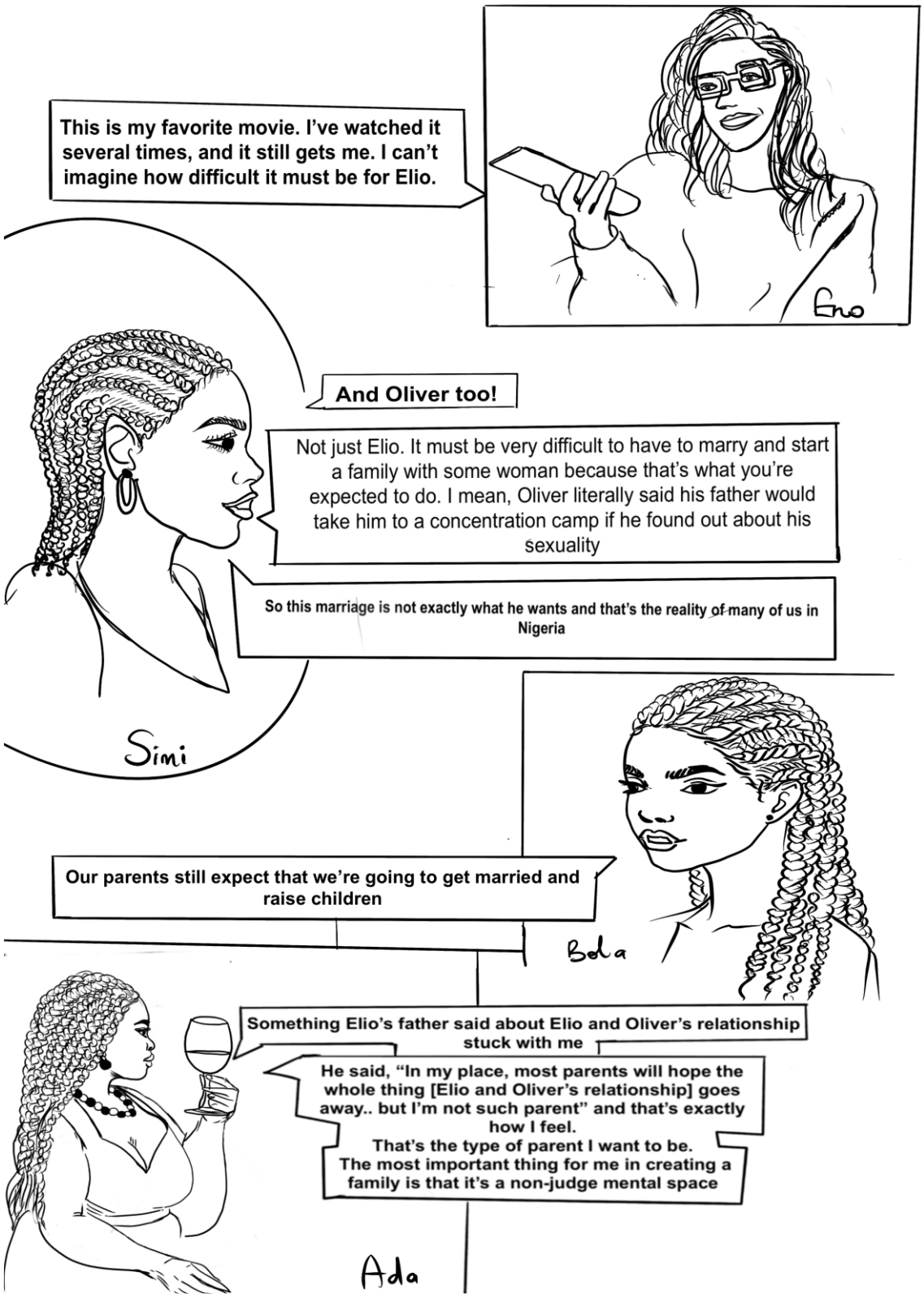
Ranti and Simi arrive, and everyone takes their position on the mat, each woman seated closely beside her partner. I play the movie and proceed to sit at the edge of the mat, slightly leaning to the right with my right hand in the beanbag while holding a cup of lemonade on my left.

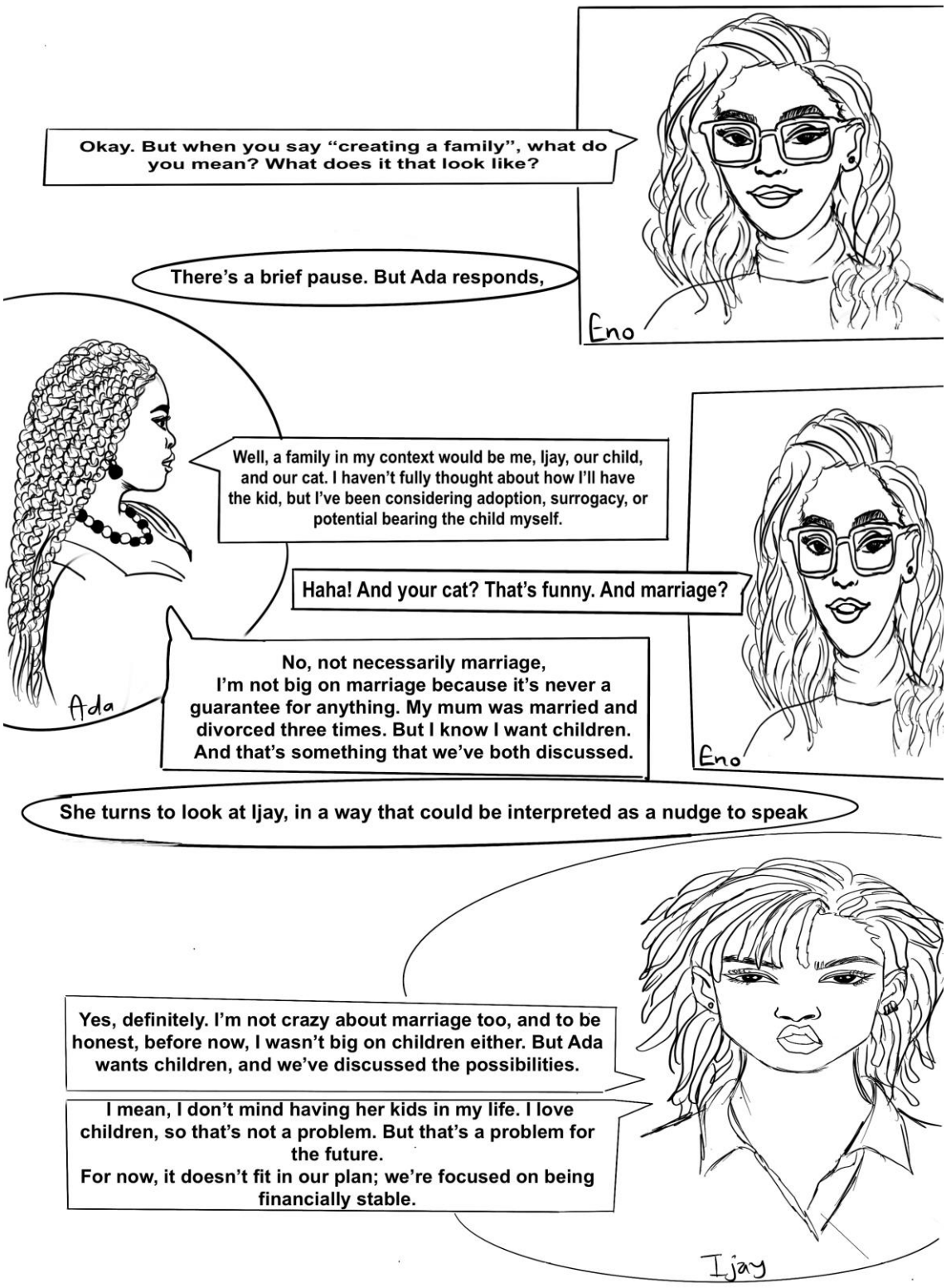
Images from the film, "Calll Me By My Name" illuminates the room, and everyone immediately goes quiet. We watch as Elio and Oliver's romance unravel in the heat on 1983 Italian summer: two men navigating an intimate journey of desire and sexual discovery.-

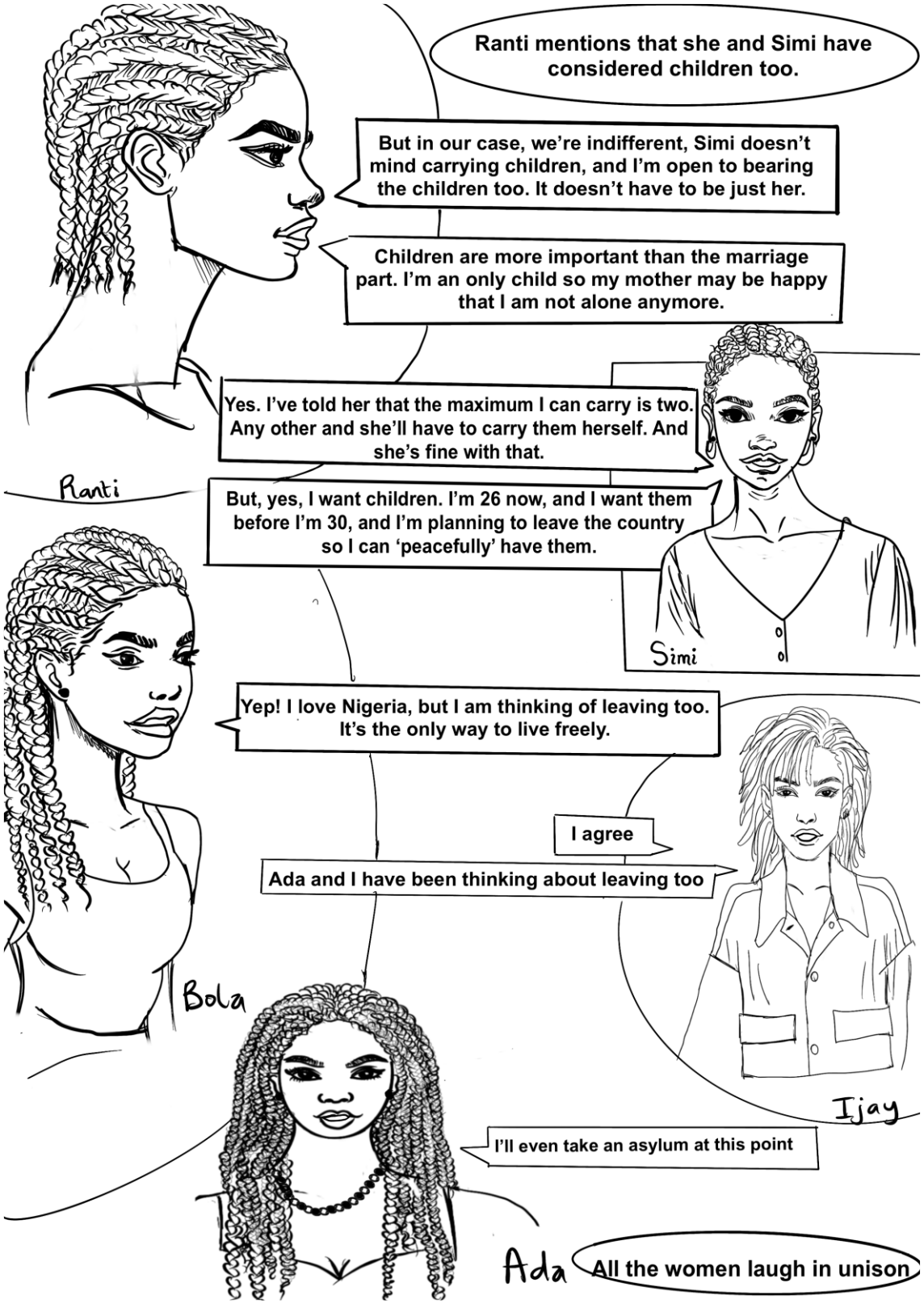
Two hours go by, and there is a little conversation, except an occasional hushed exchange between each couple, however, the tension can be felt in the room. When Ellie watches Oliver, when Oliver's hand brushed Elio's shoulder, and when both men attempt to resist the longing desire to pursue affection towards each other, everyone shifts slightly in their position. The look on each woman's face reveals the movie is taking them on an emotional journey, one that only they could fully comprehend.

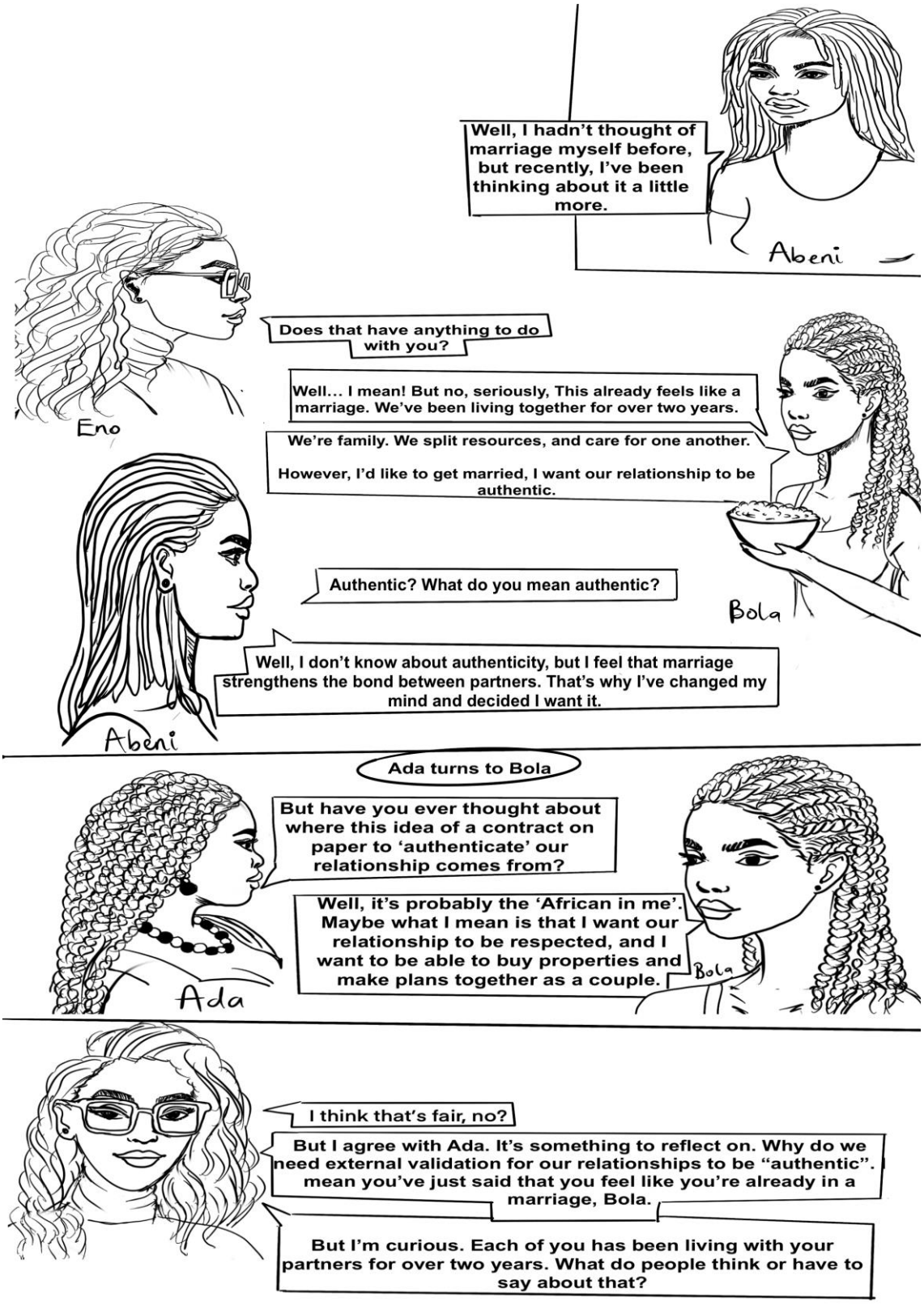
As the movie comes to an end, we watch Ello mourn his love for Oliver after he learns that Oliver is set to marry next spring..

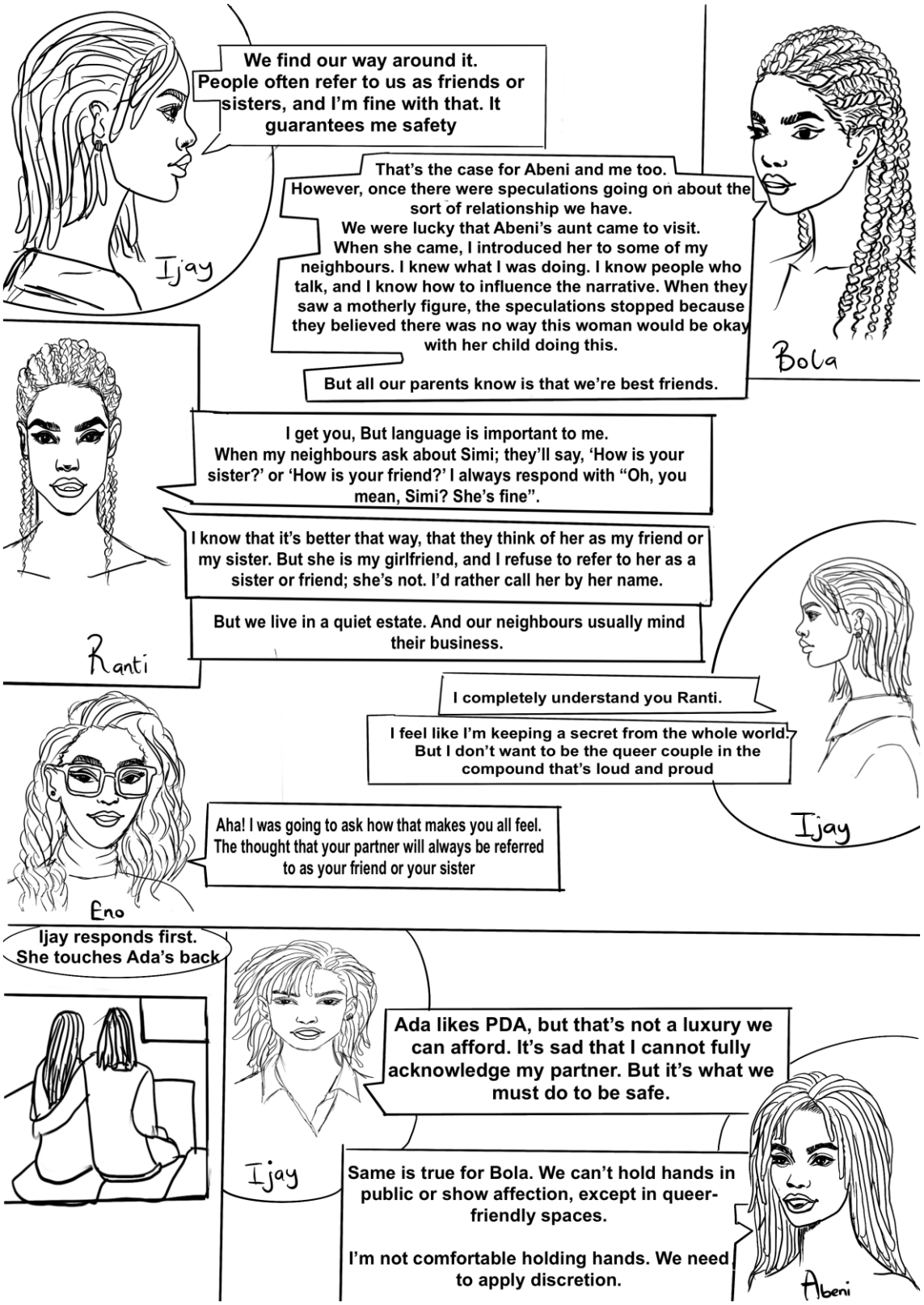
And the dialogue begins….

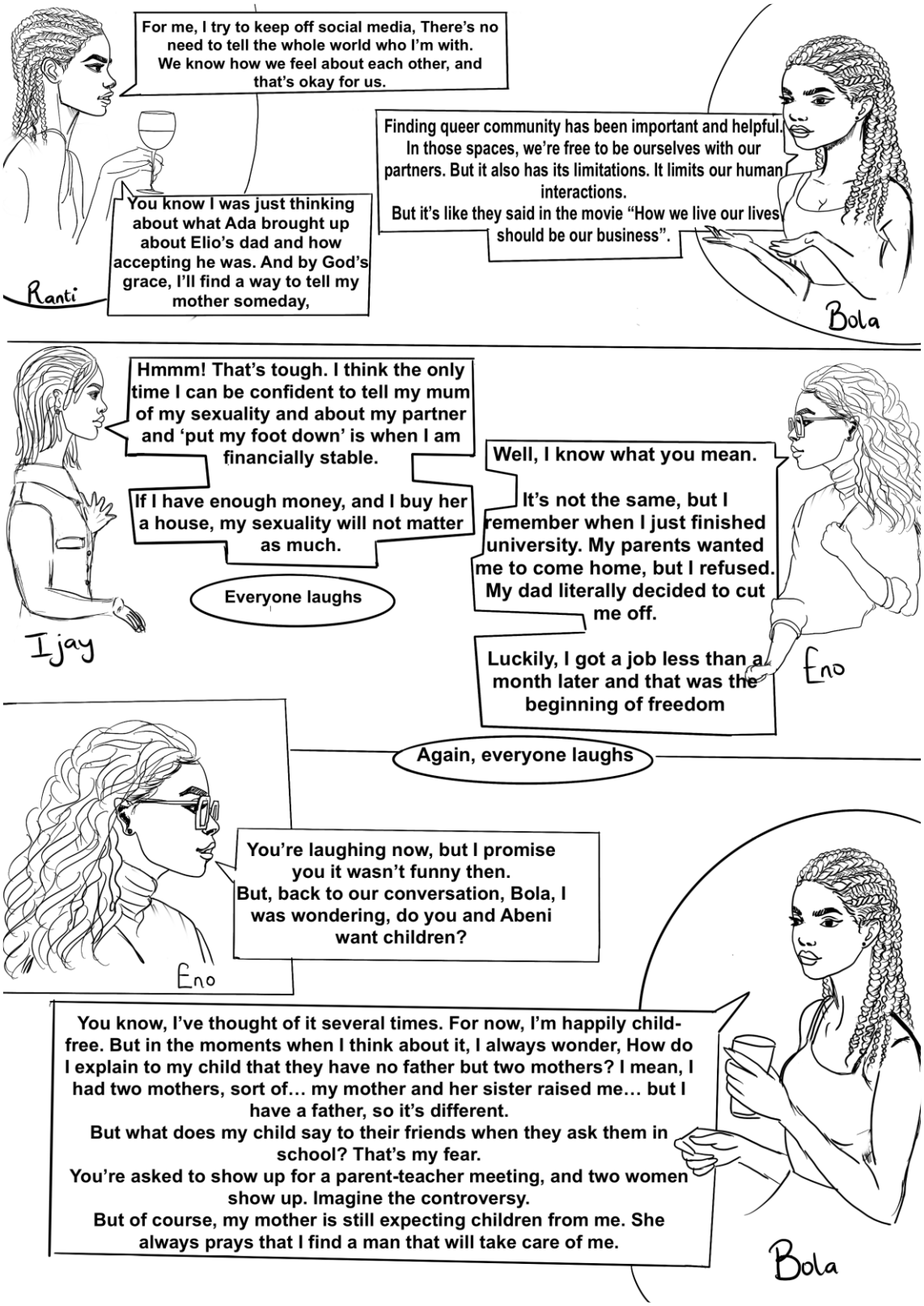

This is my favorite movie. I've watched it several times, and it still gets me. I can't imagine how difficult it must be for Elio.
Eno
And Oliver too!
Not just Elio. It must be very difficult to have to marry and start a family with some woman because that's what you're expected to do. I mean, Oliver literally said his father would take him to a concentration camp if he found out about his sexuality
So this marriage is not exactly what he wants and that's the reality of many of us in Nigeria
Simi
Our parents still expect that we're going to get married and raise children
Bola
Something Elio's father said about Elio and Oliver's relationship stuck with me
He said, "In my place, most parents will hope the whole thing [Elio and Oliver's relationship] goes away.. but I'm not such parent" and that's exactly how I feel.
That's the type of parent I want to be.
The most important thing for me in creating a family is that it's a non-judge mental space
Ada

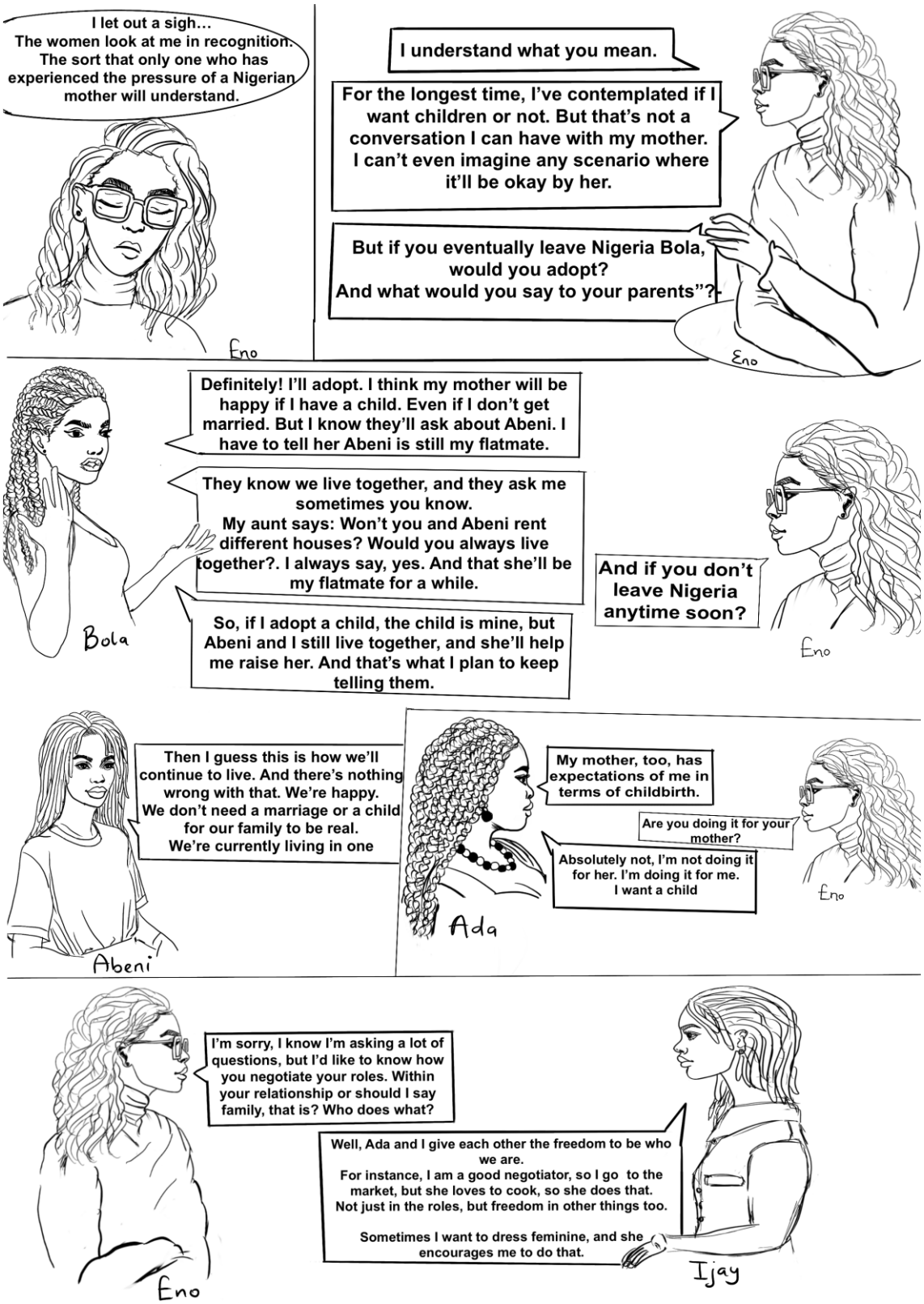

Okay. But when you say "creating a family", what do you mean? What does it that look like?
Eno
There's a brief pause. But Ada responds,
Ada
Well, a family in my context would be me, Ijay, our child, and our cat. I haven't fully thought about how I'll have the kid, but I've been considering adoption, surrogacy, or potential bearing the child myself.
Haha! And your cat? That's funny. And marriage?
Eno
No, not necessarily marriage,
I'm not big on marriage because it's never a guarantee for anything. My mum was married and divorced three times. But I know I want children. And that's something that we've both discussed.
She turns to look at Ijay, in a way that could be interpreted as a nudge to speak
Yes, definitely. I'm not crazy about marriage too, and to be honest, before now, I wasn't big on children either. But Ada wants children, and we've discussed the possibilities.
I mean, I don't mind having her kids in my life. I love children, so that's not a problem. But that's a problem for the future.
For now, it doesn't fit in our plan; we're focused on being financially stable.
Ijay

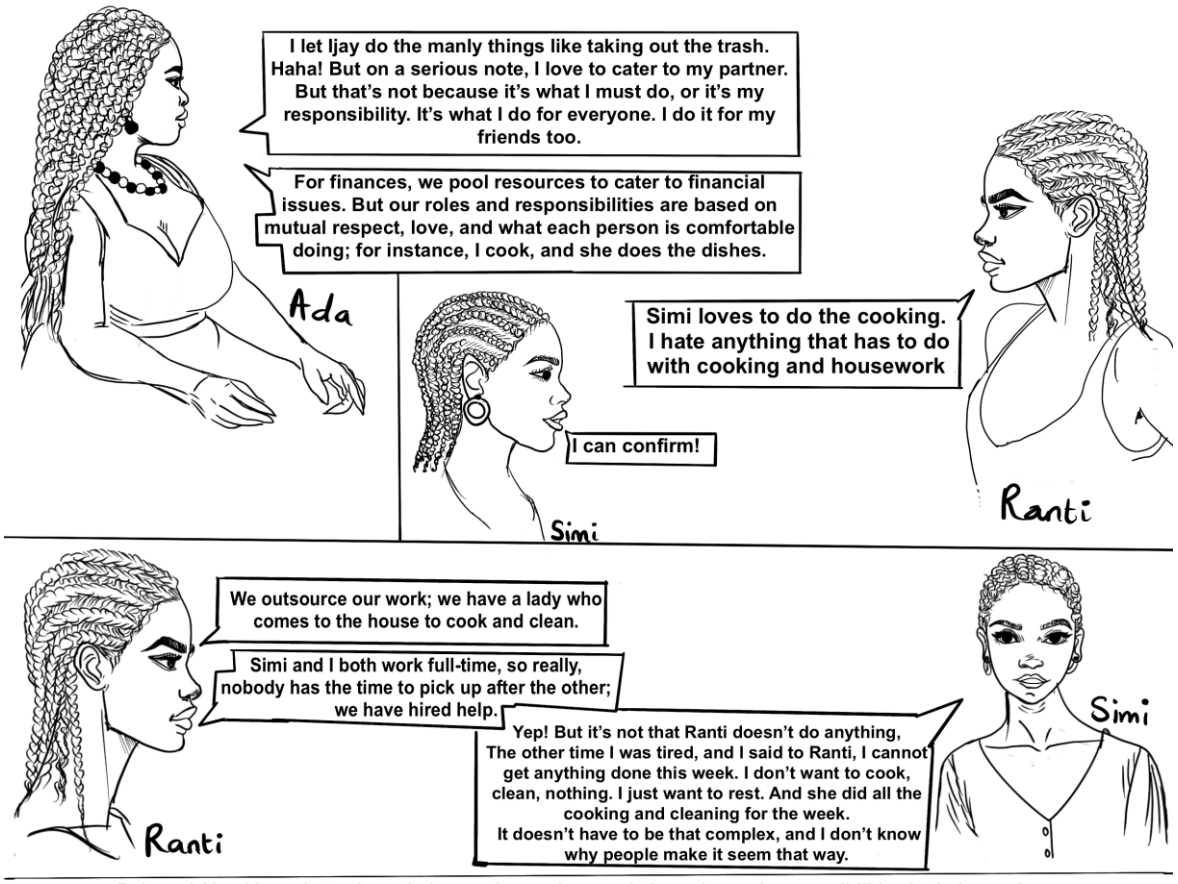

Ranti mentions that she and Simi have considered children too.
But in our case, we're indifferent, Simi doesn't mind carrying children, and I'm open to bearing the children too. It doesn't have to be just her.
Children are more important than the marriage part. I'm an only child so my mother may be happy that I am not alone anymore.
Yes. I've told her that the maximum I can carry is two. Any other and she'll have to carry them herself. And she's fine with that.
Ranti
But, yes, I want children. I'm 26 now, and I want them before I'm 30, and I'm planning to leave the country so I can 'peacefully' have them.
Simi
Yep! I love Nigeria, but I am thinking of leaving too. It's the only way to live freely.
I agree
Ada and I have been thinking about leaving too
Bola
Ijay
I'll even take an asylum at this point
Ada
All the women laugh in unison


Well, I hadn't thought of marriage myself before, but recently, I've been thinking about it a little more.
Abeni
Eno
Does that have anything to do with you?
Well… I mean! But no, seriously, This already feels like a marriage. We've been living together for over two years.
We're family. We split resources, and care for one another.
However, I'd like to get married, I want our relationship to be authentic.
Bola
Authentic? What do you mean authentic?
Abeni
Well, I don't know about authenticity, but I feel that marriage strengthens the bond between partners. That's why I've changed my mind and decided I want it.
Ada turns to Bola
But have you ever thought about where this idea of a contract on paper to 'authenticate' our relationship comes from?
Well, it's probably the 'African in me'. Maybe what I mean is that I want our relationship to be respected, and I want to be able to buy properties and make plans together as a couple.
Ada
Bola
I think that's fair, no?
But I agree with Ada. It's something to reflect on. Why do we need external validation for our relationships to be "authentic". I mean you've just said that you feel like you're already in a marriage, Bola.
But I'm curious. Each of you has been living with your partners for over two years. What do people think or have to say about that?

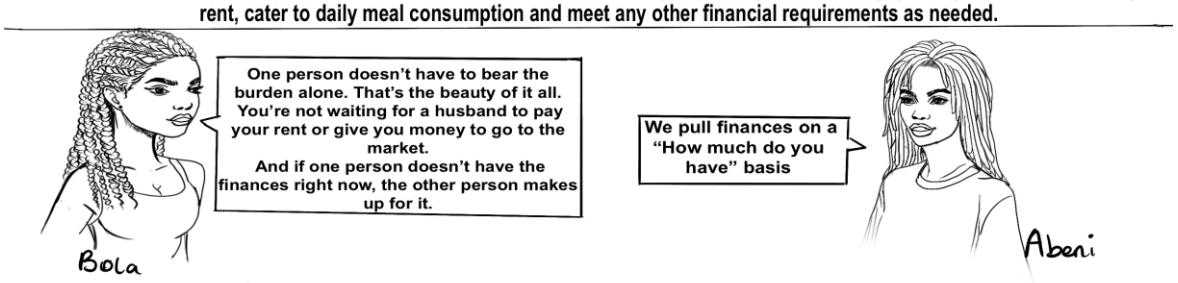

We find our way around it. People often refer to us as friends or sisters, and I'm fine with that. It guarantees me safety
Ijay
That's the case for Abeni and me too. However, once there were speculations going on about the sort of relationship we have.
We were lucky that Abeni's aunt came to visit. When she came, I introduced her to some of my neighbours. I knew what I was doing. I know people who talk, and I know how to influence the narrative. When they saw a motherly figure, the speculations stopped because they believed there was no way this woman would be okay with her child doing this.
But all our parents know is that we're best friends.
Bola
I get you, But language is important to me. When my neighbours ask about Simi; they'll say, 'How is your sister?' or 'How is your friend?' I always respond with "Oh, you mean, Simi? She's fine".
I know that it's better that way, that they think of her as my friend or my sister. But she is my girlfriend, and I refuse to refer to her as a sister or friend; she's not. I'd rather call her by her name.
But we live in a quiet estate. And our neighbours usually mind their business.
Ranti
I completely understand you Ranti.
I feel like I'm keeping a secret from the whole world. But I don't want to be the queer couple in the compound that's loud and proud
Ijay
Aha! I was going to ask how that makes you all feel. The thought that your partner will always be referred to as your friend or your sister
Eno
Ijay responds first. She touches Ada's back
Ijay
Ada likes PDA, but that's not a luxury we can afford. It's sad that I cannot fully acknowledge my partner. But it's what we must do to be safe.
Same is true for Bola. We can't hold hands in public or show affection, except in queer-friendly spaces.
I'm not comfortable holding hands. We need to apply discretion.
Abeni

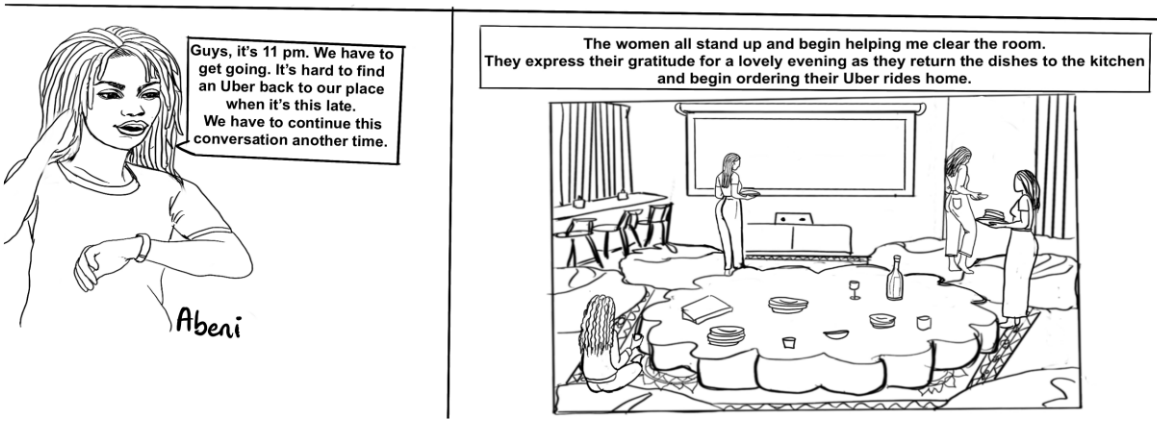

For me, I try to keep off social media, There's no need to tell the whole world who I'm with. We know how we feel about each other, and that's okay for us.
You know I was just thinking about what Ada brought up about Elio's dad and how accepting he was. And by God's grace, I'll find a way to tell my mother someday,
Ranti
Finding queer community has been important and helpful. In those spaces, we're free to be ourselves with our partners. But it also has its limitations. It limits our human interactions.
But it's like they said in the movie "How we live our lives should be our business".
Bola
Hmmm! That's tough. I think the only time I can be confident to tell my mum of my sexuality and about my partner and 'put my foot down' is when I am financially stable.
If I have enough money, and I buy her a house, my sexuality will not matter as much.
Ijay
Everyone laughs
Well, I know what you mean.
It's not the same, but I remember when I just finished university. My parents wanted me to come home, but I refused. My dad literally decided to cut me off.
Luckily, I got a job less than a month later and that was the beginning of freedom
Eno
Again, everyone laughs
You're laughing now, but I promise you it wasn't funny then.
But, back to our conversation, Bola, I was wondering, do you and Abeni want children?
Eno
You know, I've thought of it several times. For now, I'm happily child-free. But in the moments when I think about it, I always wonder, How do I explain to my child that they have no father but two mothers? I mean, I had two mothers, sort of… my mother and her sister raised me… but I have a father, so it's different.
But what does my child say to their friends when they ask them in school? That's my fear.
You're asked to show up for a parent-teacher meeting, and two women show up. Imagine the controversy.
But of course, my mother is still expecting children from me. She always prays that I find a man that will take care of me.
Bola


I let out a sigh…
The women look at me in recognition.
The sort that only one who has experienced the pressure of a Nigerian mother will understand.
Eno
I understand what you mean.
For the longest time, I've contemplated if I want children or not. But that's not a conversation I can have with my mother. I can't even imagine any scenario where it'll be okay by her.
But if you eventually leave Nigeria Bola, would you adopt?
And what would you say to your parents"?
Eno
Definitely! I'll adopt. I think my mother will be happy if I have a child. Even if I don't get married. But I know they'll ask about Abeni. I have to tell her Abeni is still my flatmate.
They know we live together, and they ask me sometimes you know.
My aunt says: Won't you and Abeni rent different houses? Would you always live together?. I always say, yes. And that she'll be my flatmate for a while.
So, if I adopt a child, the child is mine, but Abeni and I still live together, and she'll help me raise her. And that's what I plan to keep telling them.
Bola
And if you don't leave Nigeria anytime soon?
Eno
Then I guess this is how we'll continue to live. And there's nothing wrong with that. We're happy.
We don't need a marriage or a child for our family to be real.
We're currently living in one
Abeni
My mother, too, has expectations of me in terms of childbirth.
Are you doing it for your mother?
Absolutely not, I'm not doing it for her. I'm doing it for me.
I want a child
Ada
Eno
I'm sorry, I know I'm asking a lot of questions, but I'd like to know how you negotiate your roles. Within your relationship or should I say family, that is? Who does what?
Eno
Well, Ada and I give each other the freedom to be who we are.
For instance, I am a good negotiator, so I go to the market, but she loves to cook, so she does that.
Not just in the roles, but freedom in other things too.
Sometimes I want to dress feminine, and she encourages me to do that.
Ijay




Bola and Abeni jump in to share their experiences in negotiating roles and responsibilities in their own homes. Their situation is no different from what the other couples have previously said. They add that they typically pull finances to pay the rent, cater to daily meal consumption and meet any other financial requirements as needed.



# Chapter 5 – Queer family formation

In this chapter, I reflect on our imaginary movie night conversations, guided by my research questions: *How do Nigerian queer women imagine making families?* And *how do they navigate current socio-cultural and legal challenges in family formation?* As I explore these questions, I highlight the peculiarities between queer and heteronormative families and discuss the challenges that continue to constrain queer persons/couples in their efforts to form families in Nigeria.

## 5.1 To marry or not to marry

The role of marriage in queer family formation raised thought-provoking conversations. As the 'ideal' family is one formed through marriage, we explored its role in the women's family intentions. The women were conflicted towards the institution of marriage, feeling that a contractual partnership was not necessary to solidify their families: the arrangements they had with their partners were sufficient. Essentially, they were more concerned and actively involved in *doing family* rather than in the formal institution of family [through marriage] itself (Acosta, 2018).

However, marriage remained a valid consideration for a few women. While the desire to marry was not an issue itself, the underlying intentions behind this desire raised interesting conversations. For instance, Bola's use of the word 'authentic', in discussing her family aspirations raises important questions. As she puts it: "I want to be officially married because I want our relationship to be authentic" (read as recognised and respected). But why is the legalisation of a relationship through marriage so important? Where do these notions originate from? And why does Bola feel that a queer relationship will be respected once married, and, respected by whom?

The issue of marriage is one that is highly debated in many queer/feminist discourses. On one hand, activists argue that same-sex marriage is important for realising rights for queer persons and an important step in dismantling traditional gender roles. On the other, some believe that the binary gender status is foundational in marriage and that the removal of such gendered constraints within marriage will not result in an overall change in the sexual division of labour, as the institution itself is a site where the "sexual subordination of women, heteronormativity and inequality between genders has been formally regulated"(Lehr, 1999; Josephson, 2005; Nuti, 2016, pp. 285–286). Yet, both proponents and opponents agree that marriage plays an important role in shaping the ideal of a responsible citizen and is a "prerequisite to the provision of certain rights and benefits" (ibid., p. 270). Perhaps this is the recognition that Bola speaks of. One that affords her the right to citizenship and the ability to "buy properties as a couple" – as she says. By citizen, I am not referring to an individual with a government-issued paper certificate; rather, the broad notion of who has the right to belong, who counts as a life; as a subject worthy of recognition, and in this case, who's intimate and familial relations are recognized under the law(Butler, 2009).

As our discussion progressed, I questioned if Bola realised that her unconscious use of the word 'authentic' in describing her family intentions might suggest the inauthenticity of her current arrangement. By raising this point, I hoped to encourage her to trouble the idea of a contractual agreement as the solidifier of a relationship, and to question if marriage was truly a pathway to recognition and freedom. We both acknowledged that the aspiration to marry is one that is rooted in hetero-normativity; "it's what I've come to know and been taught to want", Bola says. However, if what one wants "is only produced in relation to what is wanted from [one]", then one's desire is only negotiated within what has been wanted from them. (ibid., p. 11). With this, I do not attempt to invalidate the desire or intention of queer persons to marry. Instead, I aim to demonstrate – at least in this situation - how heteronormative "norms are acting on us before we have a chance to act" (ibid.). Even then, the women embraced unconventional marital living arrangements. For instance, Ada and her partner, Ijay, have considered living in separate homes after marriage.

## 5.2 On children

*"I wasn't big on children. But Ada wants children, and we've discussed the possibilities. I don't mind having her kids in my life" – Ijay, research participant, 2024*

Children were also important in queer family formation but not essential. In normative Nigerian families, having biological children is crucial, and the absence of children often leads to the breakdown of the family. However, in this context, having genetic children was not a priority for the women; all were open to alternative paths to parenthood, including surrogacy, adoption and other technology-assisted reproductive methods (i.e. in-vitro fertilisation, artificial insemination), but the women must then navigate the costs of these methods. When the women did not want kids themselves – as with Ijay – they were open to being a second parent to their partner's biological or adoptive child.

Adoption, surrogacy, and technology-assisted reproduction are often taboo in heteronormative families because 'womanhood' is measured by a woman's 'natural' ability to bear children. In Simi and Ranti's case, however, both partners were open to the possibility of bearing children, implying that the responsibility of childbirth was not solely that of one partner. This decision is in opposition towards prevailing heteronormative parenting ideologies where children must have fathers – preferably biological, and one partner – the father – is the productive parent, and the mother is the reproductive partner (van Eeeden-Moorefield and Benson, 2015).

Nonetheless, the criminalisation of same-sex unions in Nigeria left little opportunities for the actualisation of these arrangements. If Nigerian laws do not recognise these unions, then adoption may be an impossible feat. According to The Child Rights Act 2003 (CRA), the legislation guiding adoption in the country, single individuals must be 35 years of age to adopt a child, and such children must be of the same sex as the adoptive parent (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2003). These criteria do not apply to married couples. Further, under this law, same-sex couples are prohibited from adopting children. Although the women

could consider other parenting means (i.e. sperm donation from other members of queer communities, discreet agreements with health facilities or adoption agencies), they feared for the legitimacy and safety of such children, as well as the potential stigma and negative influence on the mental health and life of the child. "I do not want to deny a child the knowledge of family/community", Abeni explains, "I don't want them to face the same prejudice". Yet, if migration to queer-friendly countries is not feasible and same-sex laws do not change in Nigeria, what then happens?

Bola, Simi, and Ada were open to raising children in Nigeria in the next five years if certain conditions, such as financial resources, are met. Financial resources, according to the women, could potentially buy silence and security. "If I'm driving in my car with my tinted windows, living in my own home, and minding my business, no one will bother to ask me about my life. I'm able to control my environment", Ada says. Support from friends and queer communities was also essential in this decision-making process. For instance, Bola's confidence in her ability to navigate parenthood in Nigeria, despite state sanctions, is a result of having observed her friends [other queer couples] navigate this journey.

It is important to mention that although all the women shared egalitarian views on children, certain heteronormative perspectives regarding childbearing may remain in queer families. For instance, as mentioned in section 2.2.1, one couple declined participation in this study because their notion of family was rooted in conventional beliefs that a family should consist of parents and biological children. This was particularly striking because they were a married queer couple who had been together for over a decade. Thus, although they queered the institution of family in one regard, they conformed to hegemonic definitions in another. This situation reveals the far-reaching effects of heteronormative norms, which continue to shape individual perceptions and decisions on the family even while holding progressive views.

## 5.3 Egalitarian distribution of roles and responsibilities

*The real strength of the family lies in this notion of role flexibility, that all members of the family are motivated to do what is necessary to preserve the well-being of all its members. - (Spiegel, 1982, p. 106)*

Exploring the division of labour within households provides an opportunity to assess how queer couples may "redo gender" while organising their social life (Kelly and Hauck, 2015, p. 438). Among the queer women I interacted with, there were new ways of negotiating roles and responsibilities within the family; ways which were democratic, based on capabilities, and a sense of responsibility to each other. "My partner and I allow ourselves the freedom to be who we are" and "We negotiate roles based on what each other prefers to do", were all phrases that recurred in different ways. For instance, Ada enjoys cooking, while Ijay is "a good negotiator", so she handles the market runs. Abeni launders and Bola cooks, and the couple take turns cleaning, and Ranti and Simi outsource domestic work. Tasks were not necessarily assigned based on gender identity and sex categories, and the responsibility of domestic work did not fall solely on one partner. Nevertheless, according to van der Vleuten, Jaspers and van der Lippe (2021), *gender theory* assumes that two partners of the same sex (particularly women) being products of the same gendered socialisation will have similar

behavioural choices with respect to a preference for gendered roles in the household. Hence, it is possible that the socio-cultural expectation of women regarding household and care work also played a role in the egalitarian distribution of domestic work in this case. In terms of financial responsibilities, the allocation of resources towards things like rent and household expenses was influenced by labour market factors such as earnings, job types, and income stability. In Abeni's case, for instance, as the higher earner, she was the primary financial contributor in the home.

Queer families, through these egalitarian arrangements, although not driven by political motives, make the *personal political,* by opposing hetero-patriarchal and capitalist structures that exploit queer persons and women through the gendered/sexual division of labour. This creates new structures that enable us to rethink how gender roles within families can be transformed (Thompson, 2002; Cohen, 2004)

To fully make meaning of how this differs from heteronormative arrangements, we must consider these arrangements within the context of what is normative/dominant in Nigerian families. Here men, irrespective of their earnings, are the primary providers. As often put in Nigerian lingo, 'my husband's money is 'our' money, but my money [woman's money] is 'my' money'. In many normative Nigerian families, women, irrespective of their earnings, are not expected to contribute financially to the home. In fact, if a woman earns more than her husband, she may be pressured to quit her job to preserve the husband's ego and the heteronormative family structure. When women are the primary financial providers, they must make such provisions away from the extended family/society's knowledge because, as a Nigerian wife, you must protect your family's reputation.

**Figure 12: Societal pressure on women to conform to norms on income differences**


**Source:** iHararenews

## 5.4 Class and financial resources

*"To consider a queer family or any family, only in terms of sexuality, gender, and family (i.e., heteronormativity) is to inadequately consider it." (Allen and Mendez, 2018, p. 76)*

Another detail that stood out during my interactions with the women was the role of financial resources in queer family formation or as the women phrase it, the financial implication of

'living freely'. The capacity to create and sustain a family is conditional on the availability of financial resources that are inaccessible to many (Lehr, 1999). Financial security and stability seemed to offer a way for queer women to navigate the fear of family rejection from biological families while forming their own families. This is visible when Ijay, for instance, shared that the only time she would feel confident in sharing her sexuality and introducing her partner to her mother was when she "had enough money to buy her a house". For Ijay, the ability to financially provide for her mother could potentially silence and/or cushion the backlash from 'being queer'.

Finances were also necessary to assess technology-assisted reproduction, care for children, and migrate to foreign countries with queer-friendly laws. "I want to get married, and I can't do that in this country", "I want a child, but not here", "I have to leave Nigeria if I want to peacefully be with my partner", "I'm saving up to migrate", and "I don't mind seeking asylum", were all sentences that came up during our conversations. Everyone wanted to leave, yet they acknowledged that the financial burden of migrating to a new country meant this was a long-term plan. Considering the challenges in navigating jobs due to sexual identities (being masculine-presenting) – as Ranti and Ijay discussed, the current dwindling situation of the Nigerian economy, stringent immigration laws, and border politics in many queer-friendly countries, I wondered how long these women would have to wait to truly achieve the family that they want.

While heterosexual privileges increased the need for financial resources for the women, the intersection of class further shaped the experiences of each woman and/or couple. This was particularly evident in my conversations with Ranti and Simi. Their economic status enabled them to outsource domestic work and live in an environment that granted them an additional layer of safety. For instance, living in an estate in the capital city, Abuja, where "everyone minds their business" – as Ranti describes it, suggests that they may belong to a specific financial class, as upscale urban residential areas are known for their secluded living. The fact that Simi and Ranti were also the only couple with immediate migration plans further supports this point.

Social and economic class also provided certain privileges, which played out in diverse ways. For Simi, it was the privilege of her knowledge of the law as a human rights lawyer which helped circumvent prejudice. For Bola, it was that of working with queer communities as a human rights activist. However, as working-class women, their exposure to precarity was not the same as with other queer persons. For instance, Bola says, "There are some situations that my background, work, and status provide for me that it doesn't provide for other people". Simple things, such as being able to afford an Uber or Bolt car ride instead of using commercial taxis on the road, provided an additional level of safety because it limited exposure. Furthermore, the women's status could also potentially factor into the democratic division of roles in the household, as economically disadvantaged queer families with less access to resources and economic opportunities may have to make tough decisions about who plays the economic and reproductive role, resulting in the reliance on traditional gender roles.

## 5.5 Navigating co-habitation, socio-cultural, and legal norms

*"I don't want to be the queer couple in the compound that's loud and proud" – Ijay, research participant, 2024*

The socio-cultural and legal context in Nigeria resulted in nuanced experiences for each woman. The women found discreet ways to navigate their relationships within public and private spaces. Among neighbours and families, using euphemisms like 'sister', 'friend', 'cousin', and 'flatmate', to refer to their partners was one way to evade the consequences of socio-cultural and legal norms. "If people think that we're sisters or friends, then no one raises an eyebrow or asks questions", Ijay says. However, while this strategy guaranteed safety, the challenge was the conflicting emotion of wanting to outwardly express love for a partner while navigating the risk posed by the law, particularly in cases where their partners loved public displays of affection. "I must admit. It's sad that I cannot fully acknowledge my partner", Ijay says. In contrast, Ranti stresses the importance of language in her relationship and resists the idea of labelling her partner as a sister or friend; "I know that it's better that way, that they think of her as my friend or my sister. But she is my girlfriend, and I refuse to refer to her as a sister or friend; she's not. I'd rather call her by her name". Perhaps, this is how Ranti makes the best of the limited options that queer life in Nigeria presents (Cohen, 2004). Here, language becomes a form of resistance, and by defying society's expectations, Ranti is able to regain some agency in her relationship (ibid.).

The women also applied discretion in public spaces. Everyday things like hand-holding in public were avoided altogether, particularly because their partners were masculine-presenting; the same-sex prohibition law in Nigeria, also "prohibits direct or indirect public show of affection by people in same-sex relationships under (section 4(1) and (2))"(Adebanjo, 2015, p. 257). While finding queer communities where they could express themselves and openly show affection for their partners made a difference because it provides a sense of safety, it also confined and limited their human interactions.

Limiting their interaction in digital spaces was another way to avoid being targeted by the law. As Ranti says, "My partner and I know how we feel about each other; we don't need to tell the whole world". But, for Ranti, it was also about ensuring that her sexuality remained hidden from her mother and other family members.

Regarding the socio-cultural expectation of marriage and childbirth, it seemed that for the women, the expectation of childbirth weighed heavier than that of marriage. For instance, Ranti, as an only child, mentioned that her mother's aspirations for her to have children were far more pressing than that of marriage. "I'm an only child so she [Ranti's mother] may be happy that I am not alone anymore", she says. Similarly, Bola, though not an only child, shared this sentiment. "It is more important to my mother that I have children". These narratives further emphasize the importance of children in Nigerian societies. Here children are crucial for the continuity of lineages, for social security, to leave a mark in the world, or as Adebayo (2018) phrases it, to narrate who we were to the world when we're gone. As a result, the women found themselves negotiating tradeoffs. If they could bear children, then they could circumvent the expectations of marriage from biological families, or at least lessen the pressure. However, these sentiments towards marriage by mothers may

be rooted in their personal experiences with marriage. All the women, except Bola, were either raised by single mothers and/or had difficult relationships with their fathers. Ada, for instance, mentioned that her mother had been married and divorced a few times, so marriage was not an institution her mother believed in. Asides from state sanctions on queer unions; this experience might also explain the women's indifference towards marriage.

# Chapter 6 – Conclusion

In this chapter, I conclude my research by sharing an email I wrote to a friend and fellow ISS colleague in response to the questions she asked during my research proposal presentation. At the time, I did not feel that I sufficiently responded to her question. However, these questions have troubled me throughout the entire research process, prompting this correspondence.

*Dear Emai,*

*I know my email may seem unexpected, but as I attempt to conclude my research paper, I keep reflecting on a few questions you asked during my research proposal presentation, and indeed numerous times in these past months; "In the end, what do you hope to achieve with this research? Are you trying to advocate for queer families? Is it an attempt to shift family norms? What exactly is this research for?".*

*I believe my intention with this research has always been clear – at least in my perspective, and I hope that of Wendy, Sree, and the readers of this work: 'I aim to highlight the dynamic meanings and fluid organisation of families within queer communities in Nigeria'. Norms take decades to change, and it will take more than this research paper to attempt to shift perspectives on families in Nigeria. But, for some reason, I have never felt justified in my response to you, so I'd like to revisit your question as I round up this research, particularly, as I have had months to reflect during the writing process.*

*During my final conversations with the women in my study, one statement from a participant, Bola, stuck with me. She said, "Five years ago, I could not go out comfortably and be okay with being queer. Now I can. Do people accept me? No, and they don't have to. But are they aware that I exist? Definitely! That's all I can hope for, that I am acknowledged". I believe it was this comment that influenced my decision to revisit your question. Bola's words made me realise what my research may represent, or at least what I hope it represents. It is not merely about advocating for behavioural change towards queer people – although that goal is noble, important, and should be advocated for. At the core, my research is about 'recognition'.*

*With this study, I hoped to encourage a shift beyond the binaries of heteronormativity to acknowledge all the "infinite possibilities for family structures" that could exist (Acosta 2018, p. 409). To recognise the complexities that many persons outside of the heteronormative family structure face in organising their intimate arrangements and how these could potentially challenge us to queer or rethink the institution of family itself. Guided by African and Queer feminist discourses, I sought to present an alternative way of understanding families in Nigeria, one that involves listening to and engaging with those persons and families whose familiar relations have been made invisible by the law and colonial/hegemonic power relations (Cohen, 2004).*

*In many ways, I believe that this goal has been achieved. Through the stories of the six queer women in this study, we get a chance to witness the power of those at the margins, "whose everyday life decisions challenge, or at least counter, [the normative assumptions upheld] by a society intent on protecting structural and social inequalities under the guise of*

*some normal and natural order to life" (ibid., p. 33). Their stories remind us that even within repressive systems and limited options that queer life in Nigeria presents, queer persons continue to find ways to regain autonomy over their lives (ibid.).*

*Using a feminist approach was vital to this process. Feminist storytelling enabled me to centre the lives and voices of these women in a way that acknowledged and respected the complexity of their experiences. The concept of 'imagining', as a feminist future methodology encouraged the women to envision the various ways that their families could transcend dominant family structures. By imagining, the women could visualise various possibilities that might seem unfeasible yet are crucial for nurturing hope. These "specific geographies of the imaginary" also serve as a site of resistance because it represents the defiance that is fundamental to queer existence in Nigeria (de Nooijer and Sol Cueva, 2022, p. 238). However, using feminist methodologies was not without its challenges, which I have discussed extensively in Chapter 2 of my work. Throughout this process, I renegotiated my positionality and navigated the often-overwhelming responsibility of representing the women's stories while staying true to the feminist principles of care. Despite these challenges, I also rediscovered the true meanings of accountability and trust, especially pertaining to the research process.*

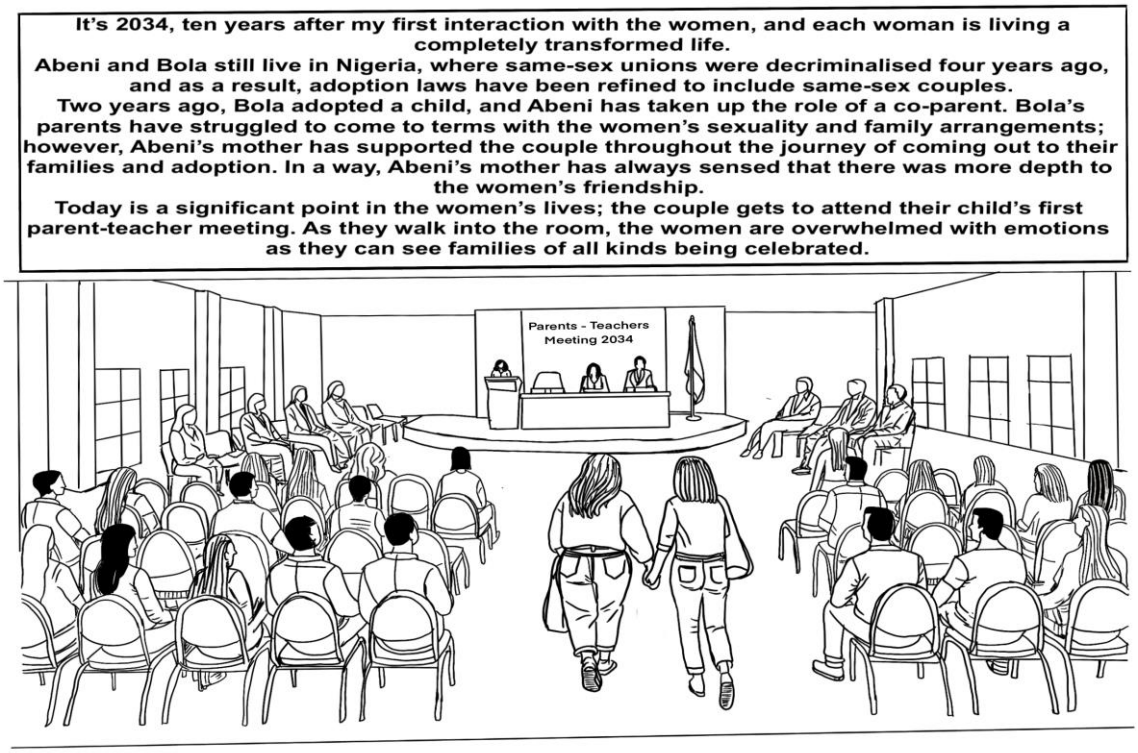
*I want to emphasise that queering the family should not be viewed as something exclusive to queer persons. Indeed, individuals who organise their sexual lives in ways that may still appear heteronormative can contribute to queering the family (Acosta, 2018). For instance, single parents, women who choose not to have children – at least in the Nigerian context, partners who embrace unconventional living and intimate arrangements, and chosen families, all contribute to queer family discourses because they create an opportunity to reimagine traditional and hegemonic notions of the family.*

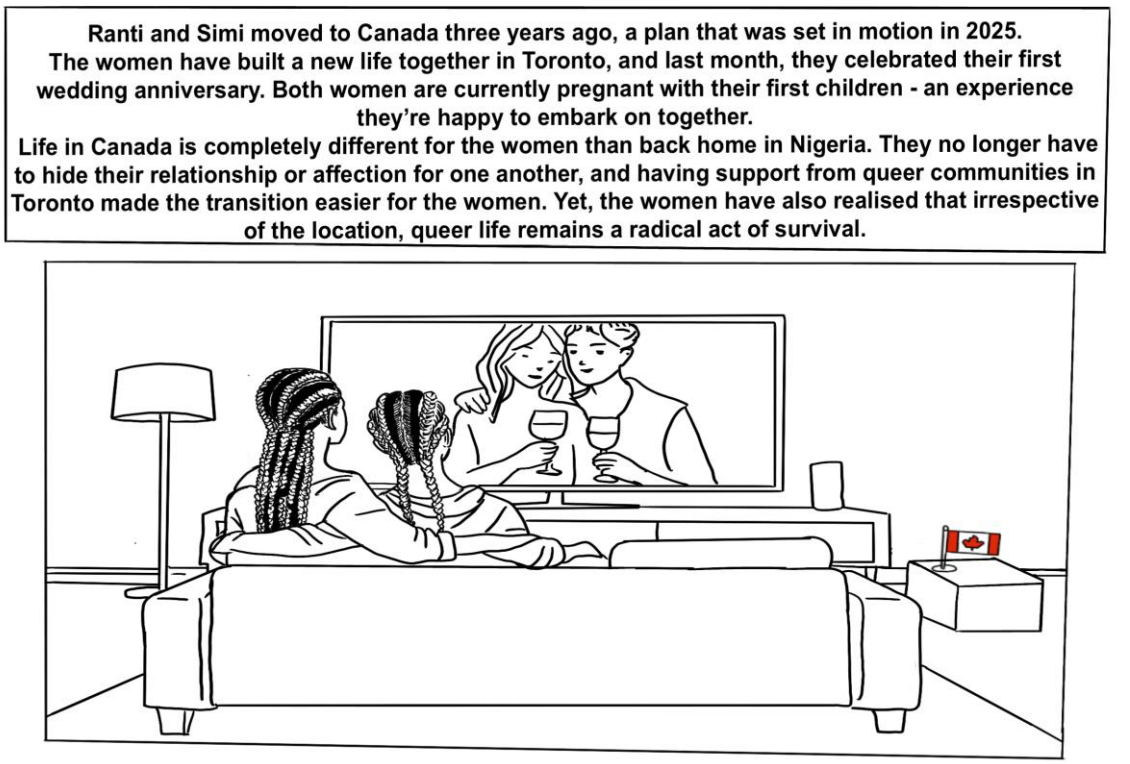
*Emai, I hope that my reflections provide clearer answers to your questions and that when you do get a chance to read my work again, these writings offer you a fresh perspective as to why this research is necessary and what it hopes to achieve.*

*As I wrap up this journey, I invite you and the readers of this work, once more, to reimagine the family with me and the women in this study. One that is not confined by rigid dominant categorisations of sex, gender, and sexuality, but formed through care, support, acceptance, resilience, and new ways of belonging.*

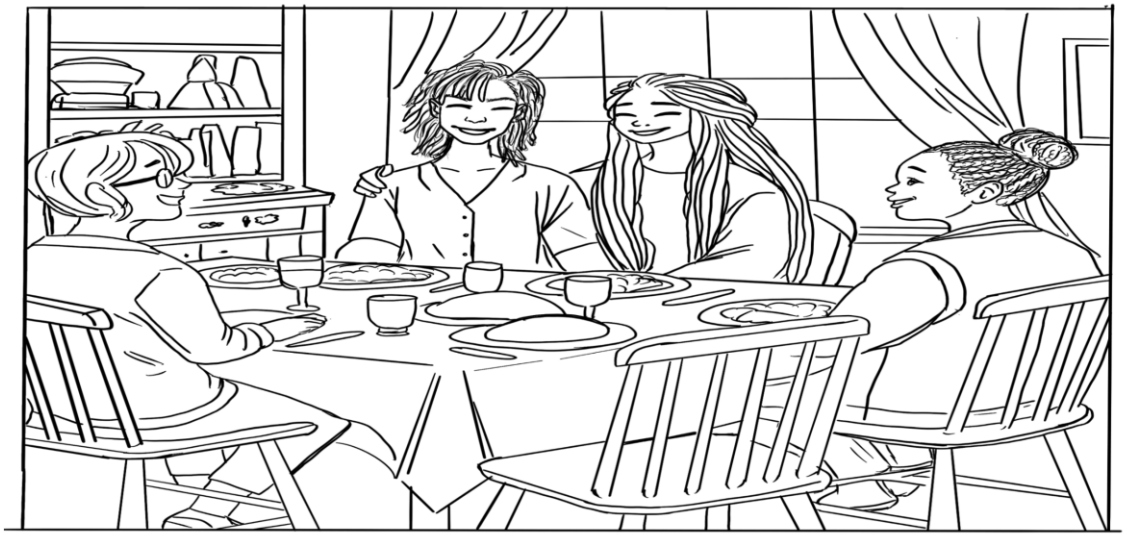
*Warm Regards, Eno*

**Figure 13: Alternative Utopias**



**Ijay and Ada were finally able to disclose their sexualities to their mothers.**
**With the decriminalisation of same-sex unions in Nigeria, societal acceptance of queer relationships has increased. Both mothers have struggled to come to terms with their new reality. Yet, they have been open to learning from and listening to the women.**
**Ada and Ijay now own their own apartment in Lagos, where both mothers and Ijay's sister visit frequently, often spending the weekend.**
**This weekend, the family has gathered for dinner in the couple's home. They recognise that their family dynamics may be unconventional, but they are committed to supporting one another.**



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