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African activists fight homophobia

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Many of his compatriots would not hesitate to say Dismus Aine Kevin is a criminal, even though he has never actually committed a crime.

But what the Ugandan authorities object to about this 30-year-old activist is that he is gay - and in Uganda, it is illegal to love someone of the same sex.

His sexual identity appears so dangerous to the authorities that, last October, the Ugandan police searched the office of his organization, [The Rainbow Health Foundation](#).

They wanted to know what the group was doing and an investigation followed.

Not long ago, Dismus was even kicked out of his rented house after a neighbour told his landlord he was gay.

“If you are openly gay in school you would be kicked out. There will be no questions. They will make you vacate your housing premises. In the small health centres, if they suspect you are [gay], they will throw you out. You are going to be thrown out or you won’t be [seen to]. Even if you have malaria. Everyone has to hide,” Dismus told Amnesty International.

Being openly gay in a place like Uganda is incredibly dangerous.

This year, the sub-Saharan country is set to re-introduce the Anti-Homosexuality Bill that seeks to broaden the penalties for ‘homosexual acts’, which are already illegal there. The most recent version of the bill provides for the death penalty for “aggravated homosexuality”.

It also imposes life sentences for consensual same-sex conduct, and criminalizes the “promotion” of homosexuality – a direct attack on the freedom of expression of human rights defenders.

“If this bill passes, Uganda will need to build bigger prisons. This bill will mean that my father, my mother and my brother will become criminals and face prison terms of up to seven years simply for not reporting me to the police for being a lesbian,” explains Ugandan activist Jay Abang.

‘Illegal’ love

Uganda is not alone.

In fact, homosexuality is against the law in 38 African countries yet an increasing number of nations are pushing legislation which will further criminalize lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people.

According to Amnesty International, in the last decade sub-Saharan Africa has seen a surge in levels of discrimination and violence towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals.

The rising tide of homophobia means that LGBTI people face increasing harassment, persecution and denigration across the continent, with activists reporting attacks, arbitrary arrests, evictions and blackmail.

Dismus has seen firsthand the consequences of discrimination against LGBTI people.

He has witnessed, for example, people not being able to pursue an education because they were disowned by their families and individuals who were turned away from hospitals and health services because they were gay.

Jackson Otieno, a 29-year-old bisexual activist from Kenya says the level of discrimination and harassment in his country varies from place to place:

“In some places people wouldn't care. You can sit holding hands with your partner in a restaurant. But in informal settlements, you wouldn't dare do that. We have seen cases of people being evicted from home, people being attacked. We had cases that they threaten people and the police don't know how to deal with them.”

“For some lesbian women, just after teenage years, their family force them to marry or they lock them in the house and they bring men to have sex with them. That's how corrective rape happens in Kenya.”

Facing stigma in Cameroon

In Cameroon the situation is not any better as same-sex consensual relationships are also banned by law.

“I went to hospital for a test, and the doctor said I had a STI [sexually transmitted infection] and told me to come back with my partner.... My girlfriend and I came to the hospital.... But when we sat down, the doctor told us to go away. When we left, he called his colleagues and they were pointing at us saying ‘lesbian, lesbian’,” said Jo Mandeng, a lesbian activist from Cameroon.

Jo said lesbian women in her country face such levels of discrimination and stigma many consider resorting to desperate measures.

“I know friends, gays and lesbians, who attempted suicide. My friends call me and say ‘ I cannot go on’ and I need to comfort them. The most dangerous is the rejection by the family, when you are cut off from any financial support, you get depressed and suicidal,” she told Amnesty International.

Mental health issues amongst LGBTI people were such a concern for her that in 2009 she joined “[Alternatives Cameroon](#)”, an organization that works for equality, tolerance, and respect for people who suffer from social exclusion.

According to Joseph Achilles Tiedjou from [ADEFHO \(Association of Defence of Homosexuals\)](#), the situation for gay men in Cameroon is just as bad, with many being targeted with arrests and violence ordered or condoned by the authorities.

He says the backlash against gay men means that many find it hard to find a job and the law puts them at constant risk of arbitrary arrest, denunciation, extortion and blackmail.

“We have hundreds of cases of people who have been kicked out of hospital because their medical condition was to do with their sexual orientation. Breach of confidentiality, where the doctor says to their assistant, ‘why did you admit this person, he is gay and I don't want them here.’ Or if you have a problem with your neighbour, your neighbour can threaten to go to the police and say you are gay. Gay people practise a lot of self censorship,” Joseph says.

Fighting back

Despite the increasing levels of discrimination and abuse against LGBTI people across Africa, many courageous individuals are fighting back.

Dismus, for example, runs an organization that provides support to LGBTI people in rural areas of western Uganda, where discrimination is particularly high.

His organization, the Rainbow Health Foundation, shares information on sexually transmitted diseases, identifies friendly health workers, provides small start-up loans and delivers human rights training to security personnel.

It was set up in 2010 with seven people and now has more than 300 members.

“We don’t talk about ourselves in the media. We work with a referral system [word of mouth]. I know you, you know your friend. That is how we work within our community. We call ourselves rural LGBTI activists. Our major focus is to give services to people who live where services don’t easily reach them,” said Dismus.

“LGBTI people are humans. They don’t come from another planet. They are not asking for special [treatment]. ...they are people who live with you, these are your brothers and sisters, all they need is to be safe where they live.”