

Holy hatred: The Ugandan Cleanse

A talk with Ugandan LBQ+ activists



The relationship between religion and sexuality has been complicated throughout history. To date, religion is the basis on which many African countries and those within their borders have an anti-sexuality stance. Sexuality, more so sex, is taboo, one that shouldn't be discussed. This lack of information for individuals and communally as a society means there are many misconceptions fuelled by religious morality. The fact that religion, in particular christian ethics, was brought through colonisation to negate African practices is as foreign to African christians as wearing cow hides.

Background on the Anti-homosexuality Act

In Uganda, the heavy influence of religion became glaring with the proposal to legislate anti-homosexuality. The introduction of this idea came from radical Pentecostal communities from the United States who gained access to the local communities through the National Prayer Breakfast. The groups were sponsoring anti-LGBTQIA+ laws throughout Africa, arguing that the family unit was under threat because of homosexuality.

The draft bill was introduced in the Ugandan Parliament on October 14, 2009, which included a distinction between general homosexuality and 'aggravated homosexuality'. Minister David Bahati, on behalf of Parliament, was at the forefront of the campaign, advocating for punishment to include death. In the documentary, *Call Me Kuchu*, Minister Bahati expressed his beliefs; like many Baganda, he believes that homosexuality is a sin and, accordingly, by God's law, "the wages of sin is death".

The bill was contested from its inception in parliament in 2009. For 5 years, activists such as David Kato subsequently lost their lives in defence and pursuit of justice against the bill's impact. After almost 15 years, shockingly, Uganda's anti-homosexuality bill was signed into law on the 29th of May 2023. [Amnesty International](#)'s Deputy Regional Director, Flavia Mwangovya, called it "A desperately dark day for LGBTI rights and for Uganda".

Stronger together

The world is rallying with LGBTQIA+ activists on the ground in Uganda and around the world, however, there are still reservations in communication and interactions to ensure their safety. Nevertheless, partnerships between grassroots lesbian* groups in Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Germany have led to conversations that discuss emerging issues, progress and highlights from individuals, collectives and organisations. These discussions seek to facilitate a better understanding of the Ugandan experience following the bill's passing and seek new solidarity strategies that are relevant to those on the ground.

The online conversation was held on the 4th of July 2023 with 2 panellists; Gloria and Biggie from Freedom and Roam Uganda, an LBQ women's organisation established in 2003. The conversation covered three areas: (i) an overview of the law (ii) first-hand experiences of the activists and citizenry and, (iii) what solidarity looks like for them.

In response to the questions, the panellists stated that they would not be speaking for themselves alone but on behalf of the entire community as they were not affected in isolation.

Democratic captivity: living in fear

In painting the picture of what it feels like to be queer in Uganda in this moment, they described a dire situation filled with anxiety and overwhelm, bombarded by information and panic from every angle. Gloria expressed that it was difficult to catch a break because every time she went online, there were new developments and constant updates about what was

happening with the bill and how people were being treated. And, these conversations are happening everywhere, including in safe spaces and unsafe spaces such as school groups and family groups; it is all people talk about. They related that the general atmosphere in Uganda is characterised by homophobic abuse as the bill's passing brought a spurt of bravado for citizens.

"People are being physically attacked and beaten. There's been rounding up of LGBT people and mass detention. As we speak, there are currently LGBT people that are being detained in prisons who have not had the opportunity to be paraded in front of a magistrate or a judge because, I don't know, some of them do not have lawyers but also, there is not a clear way in which the language of the act is being framed in the courts of law." – Gloria

As with many punitive countries, under dictatorship and not committed to human rights, laws are sometimes deliberately left vague to make it difficult to defend and allow state actors to manipulate the outcome of the judgements. The current detentions are under the guise of 'promotion of homosexuality' with prosecutors having to figure out a more substantial charge after the fact hence, it takes longer for people to be heard in court.

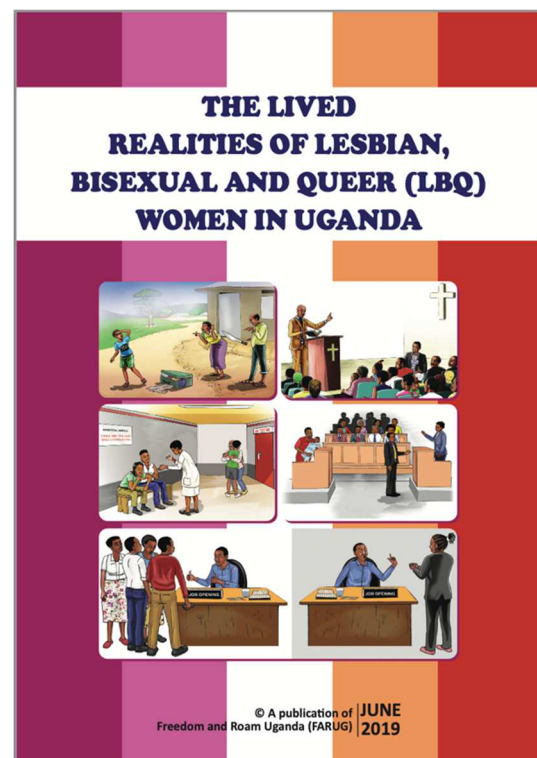
LBtQ+ women, particularly masculine presenting women and gender non-conforming people are disproportionately targeted because of the stereotypical nature of identification among societies, with piercings and tattoos seen as confirmation of homosexuality. Women in sport are further scrutinised and targeted as unfeminine (and therefore by default deemed queer) because of the muscle they build over time.

"When a law passes in Uganda, it's not the actual interpretation of the law but it's how authorities deem, uh, understand the law or their understanding of what the law means. It may not be actually in the law but it's their understanding of what it means for this bill. This bill has so many things but issues that the other community, the heterosexual community does not even ever think that it will affect them yet there are so many things that affect. This law affects generally everyone regardless of whether you are homosexual or not." - Biggie

Freedom of expression which has always been restricted for women, burdened by religious connotations, means that even those who do not identify as queer are not spared the violence that they celebrated at the passing of the bill. Moreover, traditional practices such as pulling of the labia could be deemed as homosexual acts. Interestingly, single mothers are being blamed for the increase in homosexuality and a possible bill will be tabled to fight single-parenting furthering the ideology that the nuclear heterosexual family is seen as the natural unit of society and one that must be protected and, through which sexuality, gender and reproduction is policed. Another example is the 80% tax on pampers for adults. The tax, which disproportionately affects women with fistula, cancer patients as well as the elderly, was imposed with the notion that homosexual men use pampers as they are unable to control their anal secretions.

Since its signing, the far reaching effects of the act are only just unfolding.

Not only does the act lead to interpersonal and state violence but anyone perceived to be homosexual also faces the potential loss of income, eviction, expulsion from learning institutions and harassment for the individual and their family; and anyone else who fails to report or act against said persons. LGBTQ+ persons continue to receive threats of rape. To date, many LGBTQIA+ persons, families and organisations have been harassed and/or evicted from their homes. At the time of the conversation, Freedom and Roam Uganda was not spared. They were asked to evacuate the premises they had made a safe haven for years. Now, working from home to provide home-based care and services to their membership is proving to be challenging as they are short-staffed and underfunded. They highlighted the many risks involved in conducting care work over the phone as one has no idea if they are speaking to a gay person seeking help or someone pretending to be gay in order to entrap them. As such, most of their efforts are now virtual, including socialising.



Fearmongering

The majority of mainstream and online media in Uganda spread misinformation and disinformation on sexuality and fuel widespread fear. Fear is one of the drivers that cause

citizens to act against real or perceived gay persons. Many fear that they will be imprisoned or fined for their action or inaction. Some are reporting as a form of protecting their children, thinking that it would be better for their child to be jailed because at least there, they will be alive. Others have gone to extremes of conversion “treatment” to try and cure their child and save them regardless of how harmful the practice is. In the midst of it, religious fanatics believe that gay people should be killed, and the media is providing cause for such actions and conversations. Consequently, a transwoman was poisoned at a local eatery which she frequented. The LGBTQIA+ community could not pursue the case for fear of being associated, identified and arrested. Accordingly, this fear has had a chilling effect on other non-governmental organisations, including known allies within the women’s rights movement, whose support has become non-existent. Gloria noted that the subsequent outcome of the bill is potentially placing people in sex offenders registry. By the nature of the law, once one is convicted, they must disclose to future employers and others that they had been convicted of homosexuality.

“Solidarity is very selective... so many allies and entities that we had been working with previously are scared of being seen as promoters or being branded as promoters, so it’s very selective. Even within the women’s movement, I can count off my hand how many organisations have come through for us.” – Gloria

The conversation provided only a glimpse into the reality of the lives of LGBTQIA+ in Uganda. One that many will not fully understand, as hate is such a nuanced framework. Coupled with religious bias, hate surpasses logic even for those with the love of God in them. What could be determined from the discussion is how solidarity and support looked like for the activists and their organisations.

Loving each other from afar: solidarity and support

From their responses, it was clear that support in many forms would be welcome, as they were being isolated in the system. They both noted the importance of staying in touch, not only for sanity purposes but for encouragement and as a reminder that they are being seen and would go some way in addressing their underlying depression, despite their resilience.

“So, we are doing it for ourselves (ha ha) we are giving ourselves that one solidarity. So it’s very good that we as an organisation, for instance, even before the bill passed, we were very intentional about our wellness and selfcare of our staff and the communities that we serve. So there are deliberate practices and strategies in regard to wellness that we had

adopted as an organisation and those are still being very helpful to us as an organisation and as a community”. – Gloria

In more practical terms for their communities and organisation, they highlighted their need to fundraise for the purchase of a permanent property that would allow them and their members freedom of association and safety against evictions and harassment. They asserted that owning the property would ward off unnecessary attention and allow them to continue providing services to their members and protect them against arbitrary raids and detention.

“...If where we were staying was a permanent structure, owned by us, then we would not be getting intimidation or being pushed around because we must leave. If we own a space, then that is permanently ours. No one will have to come in with rules on how to use, how to stay within our premises. So for us, we are embarking on that drive to have our permanent place. We must have our own place that we are not renting...” - Biggie

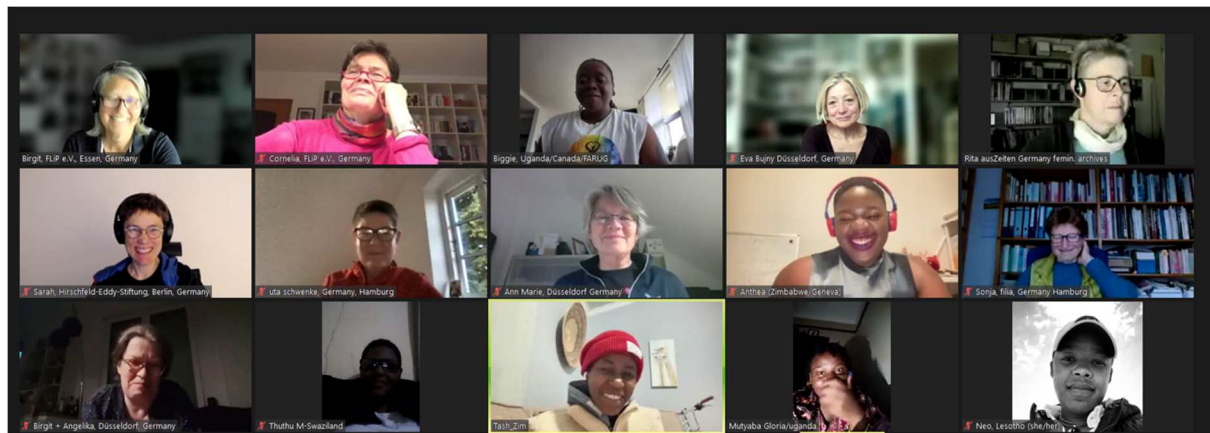
In relation to messaging, social media activism and speaking up against the bill, they asked that they be consulted before and during publication of any information; bearing in mind that the language of the law is vague enough to warrant backlash from any miscommunication. Citing that [Kasha](#) had spoken at the recent UN session and mentioned the issue of sanctions, Biggie clarified that what they had been asking for was not sanctions on Uganda but rather, they were asking for travel sanctions on members of Parliament that were advancing this hateful and violent bill.

Overall, the activists were resolute in fighting for their rights and ensuring their communities are well serviced. They have not yet decided to flee in pursuit of greener pastures as they believe saving themselves will not liberate the many queer Ugandas that will remain in the country.

And to that, we say, Aluta continua comrades!

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Info about the partnership project who initiated the talk: <https://www.flip-ruhr.de/partnerschaft-afrika/>

The talk was supported by Hirschfeld-Eddy-Stiftung, here's the link: <https://blog.lsvd.de/holy-hatred-the-ugandan-cleanse/>

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