

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	234
Land:	Nigeria
Kilde:	Integrated Regional Information Networks
Titel:	Nigeria: Tightening the noose on gay rights
Udgivet:	15. november 2011
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	13. januar 2012

Title	Nigeria: Tightening the noose on gay rights
Publisher	Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN)
Country	Nigeria
Publication Date	15 November 2011
Cite as	Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), <i>Nigeria: Tightening the noose on gay rights</i> , 15 November 2011, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4eca020d.html [accessed 25 November 2011]
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Nigeria: Tightening the noose on gay rights

Rights groups in Nigeria fear a same-sex marriage bill being discussed in parliament could boost already prevalent discrimination against homosexuals. The bill goes much further than banning same-sex marriage; it threatens to ban the formation of groups supporting homosexuality, with imprisonment for anyone who “witnesses, abet[s] or aids” same-gender relationships, and could lead to any discussion or activities related to gay rights being banned.

Under a colonial-era law, sodomy is punishable by a 14-year jail sentence; and in the country’s mainly Muslim northern states, where a version of Shar’ia law applies, the penalty is death by stoning, although this has never officially been carried out.

The National Assembly began debating the latest version of the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill in November. Most high-ranking officials have voiced their approval of the bill, signalling it is likely to pass.

Intolerance prevails

Analysts see the bill, which has been shelved twice in five years, as a potential boost to the popularity of a government whose approval ratings have stalled since elections in April this year. Most Nigerians strongly disapprove of homosexuality, with many seeing it as a foreign import at odds with a deeply religious society.

A 2008 survey by non-profit, Nigeria’s Information for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, of 6,000 Nigerians on their attitudes to homosexuality, found that only 1.4 percent of respondents said they felt “tolerant” towards sexual minorities.

A university student in the northern state of Jigawa was killed in 2002 when classmates set upon him after rumours that he was gay.

In September 2008, several national newspapers published the names, addresses and photographs of the pastor and congregation of a church in the port city of Lagos that ministered to sexual minorities. A few days later a mob that included policemen attacked the church. Members of the congregation lost jobs and homes and had to go into hiding; others are still harassed and threatened with physical harm, Human Rights Watch said in a [statement](#).

“Homosexual and lesbian practices are considered offensive to public morality in Nigeria. The... bill is crucial to our national development because it seeks to protect the traditional family, which is the fundamental unit of society, especially in our country,” said the influential newspaper, *This Day*, in its editorial on 10 November. “It will be

difficult to import practices and lifestyles which are alien to our country and the majority of our people.”

Homosexual rights are narrowing [across Africa](#). In Uganda, gay rights activist David Kato was [killed](#) in January 2011 after opposing the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in 2009.

In Malawi a gay couple was imprisoned for “gross indecency”. The United States and British governments have threatened to cut off aid money to African countries seeking to curb gay rights.

Religion not a help

Leaders of Nigeria’s main religions - Islam and Christianity - rarely promote tolerance of homosexuality, according to Damian Ugwu, a rights activist at the Lagos-based Social Justice Advocacy Initiative.

“There is no religion that welcomes the same-sex marriage, whether Islam or Christianity,” National Tourism Director Olusegun Runsewe told reporters on 7 November. “We need to be careful and do all it takes to shun this practice, because same-sex marriage is satanic and it can destroy any system, as well as cause bad image for any country.”

Religious disapproval can have a devastating impact on gay people, said Ugwu. “The church has zero tolerance for homosexuality. The only time they will accept someone being homosexual is if they come to ‘confess’ and ‘repent’ of it, to say they are cured so they can be forgiven.”

[Fear of “coming out”](#) also means many homosexuals - who are at high risk of HIV - are unable to access medical services or receive adequate treatment, as they give incomplete personal information, activists say.

“Gay people who are courageous enough to come out have reported being humiliated by medical staff,” Ugwu noted. At least two homosexuals who spoke to IRIN on condition of anonymity said they feared even going to hospitals for fear of being “outed” by staff.

Implications for all

NGOs and activists say the bill could have serious implications even for people who aren’t gay. Migrants in search of work in bigger centres are a vulnerable group. “It’s going to give the Nigerian police, who are already known for [abusing their power](#), a license to violate the rights of both gay and non-gay people. It’s going to create an avenue where young men and women, who often live together in big cities for financial reasons, will become targets for extortion,” Ugwu said.

“This is an insidious bill that appears to be limited to same-gender marriage, but is actually an attack on basic rights,” said Human Rights Watch spokesperson Graeme Reid. “The definition of ‘same-gender marriage’ is so broad as to include anyone even suspected of being in a same-sex relationship. And it threatens human rights defenders by targeting people who support unpopular causes.”

Nigerian writer and gay rights activist Unoma Azuah told IRIN the government should be focusing on other priorities. “I think it’s a distraction from real issues at hand, and an absolute waste of time and resources... How does what two consenting adults do in the privacy of their spaces provide a solution to the crippling problems of unemployment in Nigeria? There are few major good roads; education is in shambles; there’s extremely poor electricity supply, food and oil have to be imported by the ton - and legislators are busy debating same sex marriage?”

The barriers to acceptance are hard to breach. “Gay people face discrimination from their families, from religious groups and from society,” Ugwu said. “So it’s quite understandable people aren’t speaking out [in support of them].”

