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Outed on TikTok in Ethiopia: 'How a dance nearly cost me my life'

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IMAGE SOURCE, GETTY IMAGES

By Kaine Pieri

BBC News

When a clip of two men dancing at a party in Ethiopia was posted to TikTok, it unleashed a torrent of homophobic hatred and eventually forced one of them to flee the country.

The pair were unaware they were being filmed. The videos were initially posted to Instagram where someone took a screenshot of them to make a TikTok post that went viral.

"I didn't want to come out [as gay], but social media pulled me out," Arnold, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, tells the BBC.

"Now everybody knows who I am, and my sexual identity," the 20-year-old Ethiopian student says.

Homosexuality is illegal in Ethiopia and punishable by penalties that range from 10 days to three years in prison, according to the UN.

Arnold says opening up about identity or sexuality can be dangerous, with a culture of neighbours taking the law into their own hands.

His life-changing dance took place in May in the capital, Addis Ababa, at a social event, where there were crafts, poems and music for people to enjoy.

"We were drinking, having fun. We were just being ourselves," Arnold says.

It was not until two days later that he realised that videos of the evening had been posted online without his consent, initially by someone unaware of the possible dangers.

"So many people managed to see it on TikTok," he says.

"I was so frightened and felt threatened."

Indeed, a few days later, Arnold was attacked while on his lunch break: "When I left the restaurant a group of men came over to me and said that they'd seen me in that video and told me to admit that I was lying about being straight.

"There were 12 people surrounding me. Then two of them started to beat me up, I managed to run away but they caught me again and stomped on my face and broke my cheekbone."

He hoped the situation would calm down over time, but then in July, another TikTok video was posted, amassing hundreds of thousands of views.

It contained a slideshow with photos of people from the party, including Arnold, along with the caption: "These are gay people living freely in Ethiopia."

It felt like an unstoppable fire had been lit: "It got wild, they specifically tried to find out my name and my address.

"I was all over social media. I ran away from home. They were the scariest days of my life, they were 100% going to kill me if they found me."

A month later, the Addis Ababa Peace and Security Office announced a crackdown on same-sex sexual activities in hotels and bars and opened up a hotline, urging the public to report what they called "abominable acts".

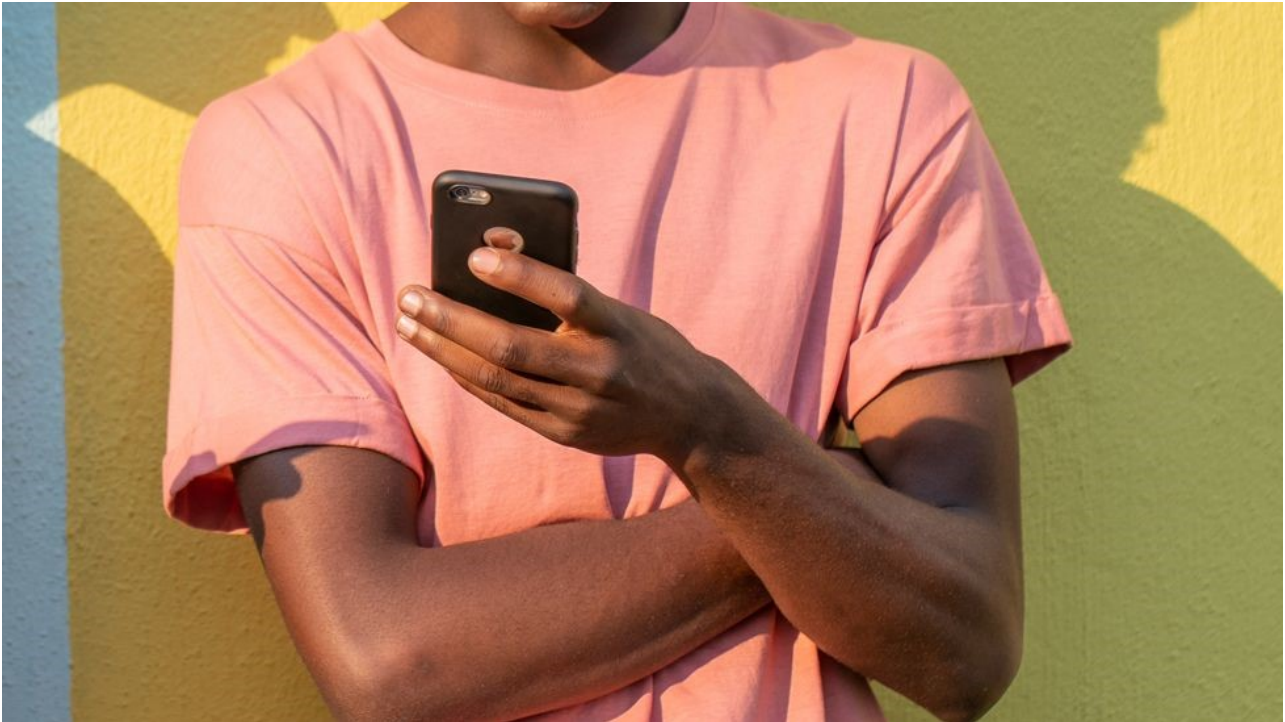


IMAGE SOURCE, GETTY IMAGES

Image caption: A series of homophobic videos in Ethiopia have clocked up of hundreds of thousands views on TikTok

After hiding at a friend's place, Arnold was put in touch with a group of five Europe-based Ethiopian LGBTQ+ volunteers.

Known as House of Guramayle, they work to secure funds and safe passage for LGBTQ+ people out of Ethiopia and helped Arnold flee the country.

The volunteers were among the first to notice the trend of TikTok videos harassing people and their doxxing - the leaking of private information online.

Faris Cuchi Gezahegn, who uses "they" and "them" as personal pronouns and co-founded House of Guramayle, says Arnold's experience of being outed on social media is something many gay Africans can relate to.

"Coming out for us, most of the time is not a choice," says Gezahegn from their apartment in Vienna. They fled to Austria after their pro-LGBT+ activism put their life in danger.

The activist has compiled 110 now-deleted TikTok videos, including the ones that outed Arnold.

Some show people being beaten, kicked or punched in public. Others contain pictures of people, asking for their names and addresses in the comments.

In one, a popular evangelical Christian pastor calls for LGBTQ+ people to be stripped naked and whipped in public.

These videos remained on TikTok for weeks before being deleted, during which time they amassed hundreds of thousands of views.

"One of the major issues is the majority of this content is being produced, written in our local language, which is Amharic and also sometimes Afaan Oromoo and Tigrinya," says Gezahegn, explaining why it took so long to have the content identified and removed.

House of Guramayle now works with the social media company to flag videos that call for violence against LGBTQ+ people in these languages.

But without pro-active restructuring of the way content is monitored, it is only a matter of time before more videos fall through the moderation net, Gezahegn says.

TikTok declined to be interviewed for this article but referred the BBC to its community guidelines: "We're committed to seeing that our policies and practices are fair and equitable, which is why we partner with global organisations to consult with them when creating new policies, updating existing ones and building new safety features which might benefit our LGBTQ+ community members."

These issues with TikTok are not confined to Ethiopia.

Celia, a Ugandan lesbian who also requested her name be changed for her protection, says she faced similar experiences.

Same-sex relations have been illegal in Uganda since it gained independence in 1962. **But this year, the government brought in additional harsh anti-gay legislation** - now anyone convicted of engaging in homosexual acts faces life imprisonment and the death penalty for cases of "aggravated homosexuality", which can involve sex with children or vulnerable people.



IMAGE SOURCE, AFP

Image caption, Ugandan MPs have enacted some of the world's most draconian anti-gay laws

After being reported by a neighbour in the capital, Kampala, Celia says she and her girlfriend were arrested: "They [the police] told me: 'If we get to know that you are gay, you're going to be in prison for 20 years.'"

The couple spent two days in jail. The official arrest documentation states that they were held for the suspected possession of narcotics.

"That's what they put [on my file] to release me, because they didn't have evidence of me being gay or lesbian," says Celia.

Following their arrest, the couple, who are active TikTok users, received abuse and threats to name and out them when they posted on the platform. Fearing for their safety, they fled to Kenya in March.

With TikTok's growing popularity in Africa, there have been calls from a number of countries around the continent to moderate or censor content. In August, both Senegal and Somalia took the decision to ban the social media app.

In Senegal it was mainly on political grounds, where it was being used by the opposition to organise protests. The Somali authorities said it was being used by terror groups and others "responsible for spreading immorality".

In socially conservative Kenya, a businessman petitioned parliament in August urging MPs to outlaw TikTok, warning that some content could be a "serious threat to the cultural and religious values of Kenya".

This provoked a pushback from Kenyan content creators who asked for regulatory frameworks to be implemented instead of an outright ban. In September this year Kenyan President William Ruto spoke to TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew to establish various restrictions.

"Inappropriate or offensive content will be expunged from the platform," President Ruto's office stated after the virtual meeting.

Yet despite TikTok's use to out and harass members of the LGBTQ+ community, those affected do not necessarily want to see it banned.

"We face a lot of problems out here but I think TikTok would be a good platform to just teach other people who we are; that we don't want to harm anyone," says Celia.

"We are just human beings."

Arnold agrees. He hopes one day to return home to Ethiopia and is trying to use his experience in a positive way.

"I want to study psychology and human rights because it inspires me to help my community," he says.

"I don't want anyone to go through what I went through."