

LGBTI Ghanaians Left With Nowhere To Turn

“The police service is the most homophobic institution; reporting only puts you at risk.”



In Ghana, the controversial Human Sexual Rights and Family Values Bill, which imposes severe penalties for same-sex relationships, has sparked increased discrimination and violence against the LGBTI community. Yet the authorities responsible for protecting LGBTI individuals from such violence often play a role in perpetuating it.

The Ghana police service, for example, has been implicated in numerous cases of abuse and harassment targeting LGBTI Ghanaians. In 2020, 16 of the 38 cases of anti-LGBTI abuse reported to the national watchdog, the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), involved the police, including allegations of extortion and verbal abuse. Weak oversight and lack of accountability allow these violations to continue unchecked, heightening fear and insecurity for sexual minorities.

One chilling incident in 2023, verified by the LGBTI rights group Rightify Ghana, involved a young man in the Ashanti Region who was lured into a forest. Speaking to IWPR on condition of anonymity, the young man described how he was tied to a tree by his attackers, who threatened to kill and bury him in the forest unless he contacted his family for ransom. He was rescued by Forestry Commission patrol officers, who brought the young man and one of his attackers to a police station.

Instead of seeking justice for the victim, the police accepted an 800 cedi (50 US dollars) bribe from the attacker and promptly released him, while the victim remained in custody. The police then demanded 500 cedis (30 dollars) from the victim's family before releasing him. Intervention from Rightify Ghana led to the victim's release after they reported the incident to police headquarters.

In another case documented by Rightify Ghana, a young man in Agona Swedru, in the Central Region, was attacked after being lured on a dating app to meet a potential partner. Police extorted 5,000 cedis (300 dollars) from him before human rights defenders stepped in to ensure his money was returned. Rightify Ghana attributes these attacks to the prevailing belief that LGBTI individuals are undeserving of justice or protection.

"When LGBTQ persons report attacks, the police often justify them by saying, 'oh, he's gay,' as if that excuses the crime," said the founder of Rightify Ghana, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "A person's sexual orientation does not diminish the severity of the harm or abuse they endure."

'Reporting Only Puts You at Risk'

This lack of police accountability has discouraged many LGBTI individuals from even reporting attacks.

Kelvin, from the Eastern Region, was attacked after being lured to a meeting via a dating app.

"When I arrived, I called him, and he came to get me," Kelvin recounted. "Once we were inside his house, he stepped out briefly, then returned with four other men. One of them had a machete, and the others carried sticks and various weapons. They threatened to attack me and demanded my phone.

"I logged out of my account and handed it over. They took my money and clothes, slapped me, and hit me on the forehead, causing me to bleed. They even wanted to call my parents, but I told them I didn't have their contacts."

Kelvin did not report the incident, fearing further mistreatment from law enforcement.

"In Ghana, the police service is the most homophobic institution; reporting only puts you at risk. If you have money, they might extort from you; if you don't, you're not safe," he explained.

The police service did not respond to a request for comment on these allegations.

Rightify Ghana reports that attacks were occurring even before the introduction of the anti-LGBTI bill, which provides for prison sentences of up to 25 years for same-sex acts.

"We documented between 104 and 107 cases [in 2023], but that's just a fraction. Many survivors don't report their experiences, and we can't track every case," said the Rightify Ghana founder.

Tracking cases is another area in which the state fails to protect LGBTI people. The CHRAJ is the official body tasked with protecting human rights in Ghana, but its data differs from that of Rightify Ghana – an independent organisation – due to the commission's limited resources. A freedom of information request revealed that the CHRAJ recorded just 52 cases of abuse against LGBTI Ghanaians from 2019 to 2021, including assault, extortion, and privacy violations.

Backlash

Same-sex acts in Ghana currently carry penalties of up to three years in prison. In January 2021, Ghana's first LGBTI community centre opened in Accra, creating a safe space and offering resources for individuals facing discrimination and persecution. However, just weeks later, Ghanaian security forces raided it, forcing the centre's temporary closure to protect staff and visitors from threats and abuse.

The backlash to the centre's opening led nine lawmakers to introduce the Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill, aimed at criminalising LGBTI identities, advocacy and support. In February 2024, parliament approved the bill, which will come into effect if signed into law by Ghana's president, Nana Akufo-Addo. Some of the bill's supporters have ties to American far-right religious groups like the World Congress of Families (WCF).

In 2019, the WCF held a regional conference in Accra, Ghana, bringing together anti-LGBTI activists and faith-based groups. This conference served as a platform to advocate for policies supporting "conversion therapy", promote the view of LGBTQ people as deviant and attack sex education and women's rights. Groups such as WCF often frame LGBTI rights as a foreign concept that contradicts traditional African values.

A recent Global Info Analytics poll found that 59 per cent of Ghanaian voters back the new anti-LGBTI bill. A 2020 Afrobarometer report also showed that nearly 90 per cent of Ghanaians are intolerant of LGBTI individuals, with 86 per cent supporting the criminalisation of same-sex relationships. Although Akufo-Addo strongly opposed legalizing same-sex marriage in 2021, he had earlier [suggested](#) that decriminalising homosexuality in Ghana was "bound to happen".

Two lawsuits are currently challenging the anti-LGBTI bill in the Supreme Court. Gender activist Amanda Odoi's case challenges it on procedural grounds, while a second, filed by journalist and lawyer Richard Dela Sky, argues that the bill infringes the constitutional rights of LGBTI individuals, including freedom of expression, association and protection from discrimination.

It remains uncertain when the Supreme Court will hear the cases related to the bill, and the delay could push the decision on whether to approve it into the hands of the next president. With Akufo-Addo set to leave office at the end of the year due to Ghana's two-term presidential limit, he is ineligible to run in the upcoming December election.

Mac-Darling Cobbinah, a director of the Centre for Popular Education and Human Rights NGO, asserts that attacks on the LGBTI population in Ghana are fuelled in part by the state and the media.

"Instead of critically addressing these issues, the media has taken sides and frequently spreads fake news, when they should be defending human rights," he said, attacks on gay Ghanaians could be tackled by a stricter stance from the government and law enforcement.

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