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Queer Ugandans reveal devastating impact of anti-gay law

A month after the Anti-Homosexuality Act was signed into law, LGBTIQ people have told of fear and violent attacks



A trans woman at a safe house for LGBTIQ residents in Kampala, Uganda

Luke Dray / Getty Images

- *Warning: This article contains mentions of sexual assault, homophobic violence and institutional queerphobia*

At least nine people have been charged under Uganda's repressive new [Anti-Homosexuality Act](#) in its first month, according to a local legal aid organisation.

But both out and closeted LGBTIQ people say the impact is much wider, with the threat of violence and blackmail putting them under intense psychological pressure over fears their identity could be weaponised against them.

"It's like there's a camera and you are being watched. Anything can lead you into danger," Angel*, a closeted queer university student in Kampala, told openDemocracy in an interview this week. She says her hypervigilance has led to anxiety.

"You cannot even dare to come out [as lesbian], since what you face now is worse than a moralised view. You are facing prison."

The new law prescribes life imprisonment for the offence of homosexuality and – under section 14 – imposes a legal duty to report any LGBTIQ people to the authorities, with the threat of five years in prison for failing to do so.

According to a [June report](#) by the Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF), the new law has sparked a wave of violence against LGBTIQ people. More than 69% of people surveyed by the organisation reported: “some form of negative treatment or action targeting individuals because of their presumed Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE)”.

For LGBTIQ people who are openly known in their communities, including those who are community organisers, their days are now plagued with uncertainty and fear.

Exercising vigilance and overcoming panic

Nicholas Nyanzi, a 26-year-old trans sex worker, is navigating heightened safety and financial difficulties since the law came into force.

“[The law] is now a stamp for the homophobes. The suffering and the torture is too much,” she said.

Nyanzi, who narrowly escaped police arrest in March, fled to Nairobi but decided to return to Uganda last month because she could not afford to survive in the Kenyan city. She says queer sex work in Uganda is now tougher than ever.

“There is a lot of risk involved,” she said. “If the police get you and check your phone, you implicate [other queer people] too.”

Meeting clients is now difficult: Nyanzi left her rental home because of safety issues, but using motels for work is risky. She has also had to cut out new clients because she doesn’t know if she can trust them. “I can’t know whether they take their own safety as seriously as I do mine,” she said. With finances dwindling and options narrowing, Nyanzi has turned to hand-washing clothes at a guesthouse for pay.

The day President Museveni signed the law, Freddie, a nonbinary filmmaker in their mid-twenties, got phone calls from their sister and partner. They talked about Freddie’s gender expression going forward.

“There were two weeks of proper panic. I didn’t leave the house,” they told openDemocracy.

A year ago, they started to research the spiritual significance of trans and nonbinary people in pre-colonial Africa and around the world. They began to lean more into this spirituality in the face of the law.

“I view what is happening now as a spiritual war where homophobia and transphobia are a manifestation of it,” they said. As a result, the initial fear they felt is subsiding: “Being afraid is not working for me. I don’t think I deserve to be constantly afraid.”

Organisations targeted by offence of ‘promotion’

For those who run LGBTIQ-focused organisations, their work is criminalised under the dubious but overreaching offence of “promoting” homosexuality, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years.

The Anti-Homosexuality Act makes it illegal to “encourage or persuade” others to perform homosexual acts, disseminate pro-homosexuality material online, or provide financial support for the “normalisation” of homosexuality. Those who breach it, including legal organisations, face the cancellation or suspension of their operating licences for a minimum of ten years.

Ugandan rights campaigners have criticised the clause as overly vague.

In March, a leaked report by Uganda’s charity regulator – known as the NGO Bureau – revealed it had investigated four rights organisations that it “suspected to be involved in the promotion of LGBT activities in the country” last year, even before the new law was signed. The report listed 22 other organisations that are still under investigation.

Organisers said the bureau was pre-emptively targeting queer organisations and that many had closed their premises and paused their activities as a result.

Zahara* – who heads a Ugandan organisation advocating for the digital rights and freedoms of marginalised women – said the Anti-Homosexuality Act had opened her and her staff members up to a high risk of imprisonment.

Even her home may not be safe any more, she says: when she takes work calls there, she has to consider whether family and friends who don’t know about what she does for a living might be able to hear.

“I keep wondering if anyone has heard me mention ‘queer’ or ‘lesbian’ while on my Zoom calls,” she said.

“My work as a queer organiser could be weaponised against me and the people I work with. My sole responsibility as a leader is to ensure the safety of my staff. But I am a target.”

Joan Amek, executive director of the queer-focused Rella Women’s Foundation, faces similar difficulties. The foundation runs a shelter – something that is criminalised by section 9 of the act, which makes it illegal to rent out premises “for purposes of homosexuality” with the threat of a seven-year jail sentence. This has made landlords nervous about renting property to people they suspect may be queer, with many reporting evictions from homes and shelters.

“We are trying to keep on the low so that the landlords do not get to know and evict us. I am walking on eggshells,” Amek told openDemocracy last week. The mental health of the people in the shelter and the staff has been greatly affected by these anxieties and “unknowns”.

Anxiety over online safety

Social media is not a refuge either. According to HER Internet, there has been an exodus from online spaces for both queer individuals and organisations. Heightened homophobic conversations around the law for the past several months have had an effect.

“Harmful discourse around their identities – ranging from the religious to political – means people choose to just check out of these spaces,” said Zahara.

Some of the remaining organisations have ended up censoring themselves.

“We have had to find alternative language, changing the words we use to describe or identify ourselves so that we [can] continue doing the work that we do,” she added.

Online attacks have also escalated into physical ones for some queer people. Sanie, a lesbian woman who regularly posted advocacy messages on her TikTok account, was harassed and stalked by some of her followers.

In the midst of the anti-gay hysteria that gripped the country for several months leading up to Museveni signing the bill into law, Sanie was among the queer people online trying to wade through the madness and dispel the prevalent homophobic stereotypes.

“People were offended that I was using a public platform this way,” she said. “Strangers online would comment that they had seen me around [town] and knew where I stayed.”

One night in May, while walking back from visiting her sister at a university hostel, Sanie and a nonbinary friend were viciously attacked, and physically and sexually assaulted. Sanie, who has asked us not to publish her full name, did not feel safe enough to report the attack to the police, and – still recuperating – she had to flee to Nairobi where she is today.

“I have stopped using my TikTok and doing lives [live broadcasts on social media platforms],” she said. “Before, I was standing tall as a proud Black African queer woman; now I’m just a queer woman who was raped. That is not something that you can [easily] work through mentally.”

‘If we give up, they win’

But amid all of this, queer Ugandans are determined that times will get better – and are organising to counter the hate and violence they face.

“My work at this point is to add to the fire that changes the way things happen, even if the results are not necessarily seen in my lifetime. This is about the long game,” said Freddie.

For Amek, leaving the country is not an option yet, and the work continues. “I still choose to be an out queer activist. I will live in this country and be buried here,” she said.

Even as Sanie recovers in Nairobi, she continues to speak with and encourage other closeted queer women back in Uganda. “I have to show them that it does get better even when I don’t know if it does. It will get better for queer women. If we give up, they win,” she said.

A [petition challenging the Anti-Homosexuality Act](#) was filed before Uganda’s constitutional court last month, but a judgement on the case is not expected for several months to years. Human rights campaigners remain hopeful that it could be annulled, just as a similar 2014 law was ultimately quashed.

**Names have been changed*