

LGBTI Tanzanians are still living in hiding

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17 May 2019, 12:22 UTC

“Life as an LGBTI activist in Tanzania is horrible, it’s a total disaster.”

When Halima, an activist, told us this, she had been living in hiding outside of her home country for nearly six months. Halima fled Tanzania in October 2018, after Dar es Salaam’s Regional Commissioner Paul Makonda announced plans for [a task force](#) to hunt down and arrest LGBTI people. Makonda even provided the public with a phone number where they could report anyone they suspected of being LGBTI to the police. When Halima’s photo was posted on social media, she knew she had to leave.

No one should live their lives in hiding and away from their loved ones.
Halima, not her real name, LGBTI activist

“No one should live their lives in hiding and away from their loved ones,” Halima, not her real name, said.

Six months after Makonda made that horrifying announcement, life for LGBTI people in Tanzania remains a nightmare.

Khamisi, also not his real name, has not been back to his home in Zanzibar since December 2018, when his neighbours started threatening him. Khamisi, 28, is an LGBTI activist who works for an organization that provides training on how to prevent and manage HIV/AIDS. The organization was accused of “training people on homosexuality”, and the Tanzanian authorities regularly arrested the staff and raided their offices, confiscating documents.

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“I had to move out of my home because my landlord was pressured by my neighbours to make me leave. He was told that if I stay and anything happens to his house then he should not complain,” Khamisi told us.

“I want to move far away from the city centre, to an area where people don’t live close together. That way I can at least be able to live peacefully without being judged by my neighbours.”

Like Halima, Khamisi is currently in hiding. He is looking to relocate to another region in Tanzania where he is not known, or even to another country, if possible.

The Tanzanian government tried to distance itself from Makonda’s comments through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs terming his statements as “personal opinion”. Tanzania’s legal system criminalizes LGBTI people and imposes steep penalties. The Penal Code states anyone found guilty

of “carnal knowledge against the order of nature”, can be sentenced to anything from 30 years to life in prison.

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Homophobia in Tanzania is not new. In December 2017, President John Magufuli called out foreign NGOs working on LGBTI rights for “promoting homosexuality”. His comments gave others in authority the green light to use inflammatory rhetoric against LGBTI people, putting their safety and security at great risk. As a result, LGBTI people in Tanzania are facing more blatant harassment, and discrimination.

In October 2016, the Ministry of Health issued a directive suspending provision of HIV/AIDS services and ordered the closure of some clinics for providing services to LGBTI people.

Khamisi's organization suffered the same fate having its offices closed and staff arrested. When police have no proof that an organization is working on LGBTI rights, the staff are ordered to report to police stations on a weekly basis as officers ‘conduct further investigations’.

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Halima, not her real name, LGBTI activist

As Halima explained: “We do not have the right to access healthcare or go to school just because of who we are.” Because of the stigmatization of LGBTI people, while they can go to school, they are severely bullied forcing many of them to drop out of school.

In December 2016, a meeting organized by the Open Society for Eastern Africa in Dar es Salaam for organizations providing health services for vulnerable groups such as LGBTI people and sex workers, was abruptly shut down. Eight participants were arrested and detained in police stations for eight hours then released without explanation or charge.

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Halima, not her real name, LGBTI activist

Makonda's announcement last October sanctioned and emboldened the crackdown on LGBTI. Shortly thereafter, 10 men [were arrested](#) in Zanzibar on suspicion of being gay, after police received a “tip-off” from members of the public. After international outcry, the men were released.

In Tanzania, LGBTI people can be arrested, charged and sentenced without evidence. They are sometimes subjected to dehumanizing medical tests, such as forced anal examinations, in an attempt to obtain ‘evidence’ against them.

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Juniper Muitha, Amnesty International

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The International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, is a good moment for the government of Tanzania to start a repeal of all laws that criminalize people simply for being who they are. Nobody should have to live in hiding and in fear; but until the Tanzanian government starts protecting the rights of LGBTI people, in words and in action, people like Halima and Khalisi will remain.

We should be celebrating our differences, not punishing people for them. As Halima put it: “The government of Tanzania should know that, as much as we are LGBTI, we are human beings first.”

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