



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

LGBTQIA+ Advocacy in Uganda: Facing down fear and fighting for justice.

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Jeanne Baron: On March 21st, Uganda moved forward broad-reaching legislation to further criminalize LGBTQIA people. The bill would make it a crime to even identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, with sentences up to life imprisonment. It gives authorities wide powers to crackdown on anyone who does not report on same-sex couples or who promote gay rights, including prohibitions on news coverage. And the law could impose death sentences in some cases, including for the transmission of HIV. Uganda's President Museveni has the power to stop the bill. But so far he is issuing statements for other African countries to follow Uganda down this path.

Anti-gay hate laws are sweeping across the region with recent action in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania and Zambia.

After the news broke, AVAC and partners came together for a call with advocates in Uganda. They are fierce and imperiled voices who are readying to fight for LGBTQIA + people in Uganda, but at AVAC, we know they are fighting for all of us.

On the call, allied advocates dug into the specifics of how these attacks have gained momentum and their ties to US-based religious extremists. And advocates discuss what needs to happen next. In the following conversation, the voices we hear, in order, are Richard Lusimbo of Sexual Minorities Uganda or SMUG, Ruth Muganzi of the Uganda Key Population Consortium and Chapter Four Uganda, Kenneth Mwehonge of HEPS Uganda, Angelo Kaggwa-Katumba of AVAC, Lilian Mworeko of the International Community of Women living with HIV/Eastern Africa or ICWEA, Mitchell Warren of AVAC and Jim Pickett, an AVAC advisor.

First, Richard, then Ruth and Kenneth, explain conditions, right now, in Uganda.

Richard Lusimbo: The last weeks have been very dramatic, but also worrying and concerning. In record time, we had legislation from Parliament, passed within six weeks, which also showed how much the members of Parliament or the speakers are hellbent to have this legislation passed.

But also due processes have not been well followed, by having over 30 days as mandated by the law to have public hearings. And all that didn't happen. And as we're all aware, the bill was passed with 75% in support.

And there are a couple of things that are happening. There's been concerns of safety and security for the community, but also what it means for the programming that we are all passionate about. Because those will be taken and looked at as promotion, which would mean we cannot even provide services to the community because of legislation. But also people identifying who they are, it will be criminalized. And of course there's the push for death penalty.

Convening for Equality

Lusimbo: I also want to say that as a community and allies, we've come together in the process of fighting this bill, and that's under Convening For Equality, the C.F.E., and this is bringing communities together, bringing allies and partners together.

Last week we had a retreat. To discuss the legal options. If the president goes ahead to sign the law, the bill into law, then definitely we will go to the courts of law to challenge the legislation. So there's also that front. And also we're looking at how we can provide security, cause cases are increasing. We've been seeing demonstrations across the country by various religious leaders. And this is actually putting more at risk, the people, but also ourselves who are known. It's a concern cause we don't know what will happen if this bill is passed or signed and what kind of danger we face. I can never explain, but one thing I know is that at the moment I walk with my eyes also on the shoulder.

So if the president doesn't sign or send it back to Parliament after 30 days, it automatically becomes an act of parliament. And automatically becomes a law. And this is why, with everything possible and asking partners, those who have direct contact to the president, that he needs to do something, and this something should be done as soon as possible so that we are able to know what our fate is. Are we taking the legal side or do we think we have gotten a bit of life for the next 10 years? It seems every other 10 years we come back the same issue. But I think what we really want this time as a community is, we want to deal with this once and for all. Because we can't continue living with this kind of fear, all the time.

Ruth Muganzi: In terms of how we, as LGBTI people on ground currently feel, it's overwhelming, first of all to know that over time, again and again, our parliament comes to the question of the use of LGBTI people to cover up so much political questions.

Cause you realize that when the issue of LGBTI people came [before], criminalizing LGBTI identities, came to the floor of parliament, there was a lot of debate going on in terms of corruption and misuse of public funds. And just like we've seen in the past years, the use of our lives and our identities comes in, is used as a political token by politicians to cover up questions or issues that they feel that the public could have so many questions about.

So you give them LGBTI people, under the clock of we are recruiting children— how else do you get people to be angry, unless you tell them ‘children are being manipulated or recruited’. The last time we heard, [inaudible] now we are ‘recruiting children in schools’. But as the LGBT people on ground, we would love to push this conversation in a more radical way— to say, ‘our lives cannot be simply a token for politicians to get to cover up misuse of public funds or corruption cases.’

We need to ensure that at this time around we are very intentional about ensuring that the fight for LGBTI equality and non-discrimination goes all the way. We are not willing to settle for technicalities like in the last legislation, when there was no quorum to pass the bill.

Criminalizing Identity

Muganzi: We would love to have our allies out there and people who understand what it's like to live as a criminalized identity— cause the new law goes beyond simply criminalizing the act of sex to now saying we cannot organize. We cannot identify ourselves. We literally cannot have information that is pro LGBTI out in public spaces. We cannot share information.

Yet, we know that, when you look back on the history of our organizing, information that affirms our identities or affirms who we are, to say ‘you are not the only person’, when you are struggling with self-identifying, to see other people publicly speak, ‘I am a lesbian woman who has lived in this Uganda culture, as oppressive as it is, but I own my identity, I am free to live’ — It's that self-affirmation is very important for many of us. For many queer people who are simply coming to start to identify themselves, it's important for us to have that information present. And now the new legislation says we can't even have information that says ‘as an LGBT person these are the places that you can access healthcare free of discrimination. This is what it means. Gender diversity or sexual orientation can be diverse, and it is okay. You are not an anomaly to identify as transgender or lesbian.’

Community Resilience

Muganzi: But what I know from my communities, we are a resilient lot. We are willing to take on this fight. But we're also conscious about the need for us to turn this conversation away from being sexual objects, or simply the conversation being around about recruiting children. Cause people need to understand that there's a very big difference.

And I hope that, where the president's mind is at, where he needs to have scientific facts that affirm that we are not recruiting children, cause we've seen, even in 2014 when president was [considering] signing that bill, he said he

needed scientific facts to speak to, 'Is it nature or nurture that creates LGBTI people?' And this time around there needs to be radical voices.

We also have to understand the political question that is currently present. The last election was quite intense for Uganda as a country. The rise of a younger opponent, and we saw the conversation on LGBTI people start then. Where the LGBTI community was being linked to the opposition. To say, that 'the LGBTI people are the ones supporting the opposition' is a political question is there, that we need to be conscious about. And we have to be conscious to know that even as we go into the next election, that the president is looking towards, that so many politicians in this parliament are also looking towards the run towards that next election.

But my movement, my community, my friends are very resilient and very intentional people. We intend to fight this. It'll take time and we need voices out there speaking out to say, 'educate the president' as we say, but we're going to fight this.

This Bill Targets Everyone

Kenneth Mwehonge: This bill targets everyone. Whether you are heterosexual, whether you are LGBTI, it targets everyone and it's something that puts at risk the gains we've had in terms of reaching criminalized populations in terms of health services, and even those allies of LGBTI community, we are targeted as promoters.

So it's something that has different dimensions this time. They've mobilized like everywhere. It's never like this before. We are seeing attacks on the MPs that were opposed to the bill. And people swearing that they should never step back in their communities and address them. And that's the sort of environment.

I know they might use it as a tool to distract the country from the other transparency and accountability issues. However, this time I think it's way beyond that. Because, they've mobilized like practically everywhere. They started in the communities and it came, as opposed to the previous one, which was top down. This time it's bottom up. That's really, really concerning. And, I think, it'll take quite a lot to have the situation under control. It's very very worrying for many of us.

Angelo Kaggwa-Katumba: And just to throw a little bit more light on the implications for even allies is that they're not just criminalizing homosexuality and related behavior.

They have actually thrown in HIV. Aggravated homosexuality. I think the charge now also is, if it leads to HIV infection, the death penalty. So they've brought HIV into this as well. So it does touch, all of us.

If, any organization or media house publishes material, promoting homosexuality, they risk, a \$300,000 fine and revoking of your license for 10 years. That's just publishing. If you dare publish anything that the government says is promoting homosexuality, that's what you get. I think to Ken's point, this touches all of us.

Lilian Mworeko: The fear is real and it cuts across, and even the strongest people that should be out there speaking against this are living in fear because you don't know what happens next.

The attacks are real on social media. Individually, people are being attacked. We've really received attacks. Day in, day out. It seems like the movement is bigger. And what I see as the biggest challenge to the communities being in danger is service delivery is going to really be affected.

And the conversations are really tense. And it feels like nobody wants to be seen or to be supportive, just because of the social media. What is going on, people being beaten up, you know. People being harassed and, and you really see people saying, 'if I see anybody who is even seemingly like supportive I'll kill them.' You know, people are to that level.

And I think one of the other dangers that we are in, is that all this has taken us away from the bigger issues that we are faced with.

For instance, nobody's talking about gender-based violence, nobody's talking about defilement, nobody's talking about all these other issues that are big that we've been struggling with, that we think are big issues in our country. But everything is being focused on one area.

And I think, important also is ICWEA together with HEPs Uganda and Sexual Minorities Uganda, we are leading the implementation of the community led monitoring, and we have monitors in over 50 districts. And, it is yesterday when we had the meeting, because the monitors have been threatened, monitors have been attacked in some districts. And so the situation is getting— to that extent that the communities are now the ones that are leading in terms of being violent. Because at the national level there's some little level, you know, of being sensitive and holding back. But in the communities, people are not holding back. And I think that's what Ken was talking about, the bottom up in terms of how communities are addressing this.

And as you can see, the bill is comprehensive enough that it won't give any stone unturned. And therefore, if there's a way we can get rid of this bill in the nearest time possible, I think that's what needs to be done.

Jeanne Baron: That was Lilian Mworeko. All these voices paint a stark picture of conditions in Uganda and what's at stake as this legislation awaits Museveni's decision. It's

vital to understand why this is happening now, in so many places. Richard talks about a well-documented, US-based, anti-gay movement, working in African countries to push gay-hate laws. For some of the press coverage of this movement, go to the landing page for this podcast at AVAC.org to find links. Richard and then Ruth talk about how these laws stem directly from this evangelical movement and how it gains influence in Uganda.

Role of Western Missions

Lusimbo: The issue really started from the right extremists who have been coming to a country in the name of missions. And as you'll see from the first law that got nullified, it had clear traces— including sexual minorities Uganda suing Scott Lively, an American Evangelical from Springfield, Massachusetts.

So it has direct connections to the extremists from the United States. And they do this in the way of funding churches, building schools, building hospitals, providing safe water through bar halls. And what this all does is that they build trust within the communities. So they became the proper saviors whose word is later on believed as gospel truth.

The other thing that they've been very systematic at doing is, from time to time, having seminars and workshops. And meetings with our policymakers, but also pushing for the change in wording and language in our policy documents. And this is something that has been taken for granted. But they started dismantling... This is why you see like at WHO language around MSM is being thrown out by countries. It's not coming by surprise, but it's been very, very systematic.

Geopolitical Situation

Richard Lusimbo: The other thing that we find ourselves, is that we are dealing with a geopolitical question here. Where we are seeing the American Evangelicals joining Russia in this process.

And the hand of Russia is very vivid in this too in Uganda, at the particular moment. And unfortunately, we Ugandans find ourselves as the pawns in these bigger nations fighting and trying to assert influence. So we find ourselves at crossroads, but also at a very tricky moment whereby it's either the West or it's China or Russia, which is really making our life very difficult.

Mitchell Warren: Do you think helpful to kind of call out that connection to the right wing evangelicals in the US as part of that, Richard, in terms of people's statements and advocacy here?

Lusimbo: They need to be called out because they are responsible, and I think there's no better way to do it than people in the US holding them accountable.

They need to know that every LGBTQI life that we are losing, that blood is on their hands. And they must know that, and I think they should be called out and many Americans are donating lots of money, thinking they're building churches, but what they're doing is actually building a win for homophobia in this country and other parts.

And if you look at how it's been growing, it's the same thing they do in every country. If you read the legislation that is in Ghana, it has the same language like what we had in the first bill in Uganda, and the same what they're trying to propose in Kenya. So you really look at it, it's very systematic, and they use the same script. And they have the cover of government officials, and this is something that we don't have as communities.

Misinformation

Jim Picket: Thank you, Richard, Ruth, Kenneth and Lilian for sharing all of this. This is also directly happening on the ground in the United States. It is getting worse and worse and worse and terrifying is absolutely terrifying. But we see at least I'll say from the United States perspective, when you share facts, it doesn't change anything for people who are already there. And so I'm wondering the best way forward, recognizing that for people who are deeply entrenched in this hatred and this misinformation, facts may actually entrench them further. So I just struggle with how to change the narrative towards a factual direction, knowing that for these folks, science isn't going to change their opinion and nor are facts. So I wonder if you could kind of comment on that.

Muganzi: As LGBTI people, we've existed in our societies without people ever having to discriminate against us, by looking into our bedrooms to see what we do with each other.

The facts that we seek must speak to the fact that what is imported within our societies is this anti-gay rhetoric that is pushed by religion, that is pushed by financing from these western nations. Those imported narratives— cause they're not coming from our everyday societies— The fact that they're rooted in religion, religious groups that are coming as foreign entities into this space and allowing politicians to be bold enough to speak about how LGBTI people should be castrated.

The import thing is not we, the everyday Ugandans that have never had a chance to cross borders or learn our sexual orientations or gender identity from foreign entities. We have been here. When you come down to grassroot communities, where we live, people have come to understand that we are their neighbors, we are their children.

Cause facts need to be known that when you say you're protecting children, we are also somebody's children. We are children of this nation.

We need to be very intentional about educating our societies and saying they're giving you this narrative of LGBTI people are the problem. But when you look at the everyday reality of Ugandan, all this, we all suffer the same injustices. That they're trying to turn people away from.

Let's be factual. When people start to complain about the lack of services in health systems, the broken down education systems, the poor service delivery, you give them LGBTI people, as if we are the issue to distract them.

They're corrupt systems that are robbing people of access to services that would benefit them. It is not the LGBTI people that are causing that. It is not us that are robbing our cultures of morality or those are the words that they use. It is this imported hate.

It is allowing people to be bold in their hate and hate mongering. And other broken systems that are the problem. And we, our lives as LGBTI people are simply used as a distraction.

Need Access to Speak for Ourselves

Muganzi: The LGBTI movement here has organized itself. We, we've done a lot of work to ensure that we are able to own our voices. We have strong leadership that must be allowed to speak to what our realities are. Yes, our allies have access to rooms that we are yet to have access to.

But space must be created for LGBTI people, leaders like Richard who have done so much work to ensure that we're organized and able to have voices that are empowered, and own our narrative, [so they]can step into those rooms and speak to our reality. This is a time when allyship needs to be intentional. You cannot step away from speaking up simply because the cost of speaking up has gotten high.

Ugandans Must Hear From Us

Muganzi: When we speak, I believe that every day Ugandans are much more able to understand. Cause if they're hearing us and look and seeing our voices and seeing our stories, and understanding what our realities are, it humanizes the issue that they fear. It humanizes the challenges, and they come to understand that, oh, we are the same. It's a matter of life and death for us.

Jeanne: These veteran voices of HIV activism are fighting to protect hard-won gains in HIV prevention, and to advance justice. And they are fighting for their lives and

for world that is safe for all of us. We must bring everything we've got to the struggle, we must ensure they prevail. In the days and weeks to come, there will be actions, appeals, protests and more. To join the effort, find contact information for Convening for Equality at AVAC.org/px-pulse