



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

PxPulse: The Advocacy Chronicles with SMUG's Allan Mwasa

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Manju Chatani-Gada: This is PxPulse, The Advocacy Chronicles, where advocates highlight key issues and get into the details of what's at stake and how to win. Each episode is a discussion with one leading advocate and explores a campaign at the forefront of global health equity. We spotlight strategies that work, winning tactics and improvised solutions. I'm your host, Manju Chatani-Gada.

We're speaking with Nsubuga Allan Mwasa or Allan, a Ugandan activist, clinical psychologist and an advocate for mental health and Lgbtq+ rights. They serve as Strategic Initiatives Manager at Sexual Minorities Uganda, or SMUG, which has been at the forefront of the fight for LGBTQ rights, often facing severe challenges including legal battles and violent opposition.

Despite these challenges, SMUG continues to advocate for the fundamental human rights of the LGBTQ community. It does this through legal action, public awareness campaigns, and international advocacy. SMUG is also part of Convening For Equality CFE, a coalition of civil society groups dedicated to challenging Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act and other legislation that discriminates against LGBTQ plus individuals. CFE has been an important voice in the fight against Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act, signed into law in May 2023. The law has significantly increased discrimination and violence against the LGBTQ plus community, despite widespread international condemnation and ongoing legal challenges. It was upheld by the Constitutional Court in April 2024. Petitioners have since filed an appeal to the Supreme Court seeking to overturn the law, which remains one of the strictest in the world, including life imprisonment and death penalty for certain offenses. Welcome, Allan. Thank you for making time to talk to me today.

Allan Mwasa: Yes, I'm glad to be talking to you.

Chatani-Gada: Let's get started. In what way has the formation of CFE strengthened your effort to advocate for the LGBTQ community and fight against the law. CFE also tracks how the law is harming people in a public report, can you also go into why and how this report has become important?

Mwasa: When the Anti-Homosexuality Act was still a debate, we saw physical attacks increasing. We saw sensationalized reporting that was laced with a lot of disinformation. There were raids on organizations and things like that. We also got to understand that one of the things that was standing between us and with advocacy was the fact that there was a notion that we are not organized as a movement or we are not working together, but we are organizing, and we've created a lot of mechanisms that bring us together to organize and be able to make sure that LGBTQ persons are safe in Uganda. So when we formed CFE, CFE cemented our strategy against that homosexuality Bill and it has also continued to be a force when the act was signed as well. Now, when it comes to the CFE report, the report has been a very good body of evidence of what is happening to community members. There is a lot of understanding to folks who are not in Uganda who just read the news that, 'oh, the law is not being implemented', but each and every day our reactors and the Strategic Response Team is reacting to cases of human rights violations. So for us to be able to make sure that those cases are put into the spotlight, that this is actually happening to people, and at this moment where we are in May 2024, yesterday was a year since AHA was signed into law, and we know from the data of reacting to human rights violations that this law is actually being implemented. And having that report and possibly building on that report will continue to show the world what is happening to LGBTQ people in Uganda, and also to our partners to continue to know that we cannot let this law remain in the country because it's affecting so many people's lives.

Chatani-Gada: The report, and an update just re-issued, describes a climate of fear gripping the LGBTQ+ community in Uganda. It documents more than 1,000 cases, including raids of civil society organizations, mob attacks, arrests, denial of health services, evictions. Much of this, now institutionalized, persecution is being carried out by police, local government, and just members of the public who feel emboldened to harass anyone perceived to be LGBTQ— it's harrowing reading.

So, Allan, CFE is doing tremendous work in pulling together this report and more. And this work is not new. And, we should explain here, that the 2023 law was an echo of an earlier law passed in 2014 but nullified by the courts...on a technicality. So how has the formation of the CFE strengthened advocacy efforts compared to activism that was triggered in 2014?

Mwasa: In 2014, the forces behind the Anti-Homosexuality Act, which we call the Kill The Gays Bill, the dynamics around it were very much different. So in this time, we saw that it is important for us to have a streamlined crisis response, have a streamlined mechanisms for all of the needs of LGBTQ persons, from communication, how are we going to communicate? Who is going to communicate and things like that? Communication was a challenge back then. So when we looked into how the debates

were happening around the Anti-Homosexuality Act this time around that led to the creation of CFE itself. It has really been important to give updates, and everything that we need from anybody is within our statements. For the longest time, you know we feared we don't know what to say so we just keep quiet. But now every time there is need for a statement to come out, it comes out. It has information on updates of what is happening in Uganda. It has community worries, it has what community needs. And so many partners have relied so much on that communication.

Chatani-Gada: So the CFE has been an important platform it sounds like, to ensure your voice is getting out there, to communicate your message and communicate with a united voice about what's happening to LGBTQ people in Uganda, and it also give allies direction about what you need. It's a mature movement now compared to 2014, but it's clear the fight has become really dire. You're waiting for the Supreme Court's decision, but what else are you watching and hoping for, to know that we're going forward? What do you want to see happen next?

Mwasa: I find it hard to even answer this question, based on what is currently happening to the community in Uganda. Not everything is going in the right direction, because we still don't know whether the Supreme Court will make a decision or not, even though we do believe that our justice system works and it will work, but we don't know what is going to happen yet. And in this time, we're still in that reaction state of making sure our people are okay. And that is what we worry about every day. When you hear the stories of the reactors, and the mental health service providers, and the doctors that we've also talked to about their experiences in providing services, things are not really okay in Uganda. It's no longer global news that there is a legislation in Uganda that threatens people's lives, there is a sense that things are okay in Uganda or okay because we are not seeing on the news that somebody is being killed. So many things that are happening to people that don't make it to the news. In East Africa in general, Tanzania just had its legislation and when you look into the legislation that it had to do with the run up to 2023, it means that we are still under attack.

Chatani-Gada: Let's get specific. What actions do you need to see more of from international allies, from advocates? What voices do we need to hear that can really support the work happening now and in Uganda?

Mwasa: There has been a lot of support from international allies on different platforms in 2023 upon the bill being discussed, the bill being passed. but also now as we progress within the aftermath, there are so many consequences. Now when we focus our energy on taking that legislation away, that is just one thing. But also there are other ways that just discussing the Anti-Homosexuality act affects the LGBTQ community because of hyper-exposure, which leads to so many human rights violations, where people feel like they can do anything to anyone. The support that we got, be it statements, be it solidarity, be it funds to support the community really, really helped us keep LGBTQ people safe. But we feel like that has all started to fade away. We feel like the international community is becoming a little bit complacent. And funds, for example, for the React Program that reacts to human rights violations in Uganda is not having

funding this year to make sure that human rights violations are reacted to and people are put to safety. So I want to call upon partners to continue supporting the efforts as much as we did in 2023, because we have not moved away from the place where we were last year. You saw things have become worse. And every time there is a new headline, like the Constitutional Court has refused to annul the act, it means the hyper-exposure happens again and violence happens to people. If we are not able to support the community, if we don't have the resources, if we don't have that continuous solidarity as well, then we feel left out as a community. We feel like, 'okay, now, what's next?' Now, how are we going to be able to make sure that LGBTQ people around the country are taken care of and they are able to receive quality services to make sure that they have lawyers in case they are arrested. How can we make sure that they don't get forced examination upon arrest?

Chatani-Gada: And Allan, here we're talking about forced anal examinations, which authorities are subjecting people to, and it's one of the violations the CFE is documenting in their report.

Mwasa: That's right. And right now we are in that state where we expect the worst, but also we feel like that sort of support is leaving. But, we're still in the same situation. And I hope that partners can be able to know that we are not okay yet in Uganda.

Chatani-Gada: Thank you Allan. That's really specific clarion call to action. As you referred to Allan, there's a wave of anti-LGBTQ bills being debated across several Africa countries and the US and Asia. There are coalitions of advocates and all these countries focused on blocking their passage. What would you want others to know or how would you advise them on what they can do, based on your and the CFE's experience and efforts?

Mwasa: Based on our experience, I want people who are doing this work in other countries to know that we are not dealing with the same thing we've dealt with before. And their movement has mobilized itself in a way that they have infiltrated our political systems. So understanding it from that point shows that our political systems are vulnerable to radicalization from anti-gender groups. If we do not engage our politicians as much as we need to, we lose them to science that is not right. -We need to engage our people that we elect. And we need to also get people within the LGBTQ community into elective politics so that we are able to be heard as a community. Also planning ahead and reacting is also very important because when what happened to us ten years ago, we knew it would happen again and because we knew it would happen again between 2014, 2015, 2016, we set up very strong strategies. And we thank ourselves that we were able to realize that it will happen again. And they hit us harder this time again, but at least we had a buffer because we had a few plans that we had made years ago. We still did not have a policy that supports LGBTQ rights or LGBT marriage. So we knew that this is going to happen again. When we win, we do not sleep, we're thinking of strategies as well as learning what is happening in other countries, which is very, very important.

Chatani-Gada: When we win, we don't sleep. There's a lot we can all learn from CFE's experience and ongoing advocacy efforts. Thank you Allan, for the relentless advocacy. We are with you in solidarity. The CFE and its Strategic Response Team released the latest report showing a continuing rise of the violent persecution of LGBTQ+ communities, with more than 1,000 documented cases. Links to the report, *Unwanted, Outlawed and Illegal: The Cry of LGBTQ+ Ugandans*, can be found on this episode's landing page on AVAC.org. As we honor gay pride around the world in 2024, we hope you will read the report, share it, and demand justice. Thanks for listening, I'm Manju Chatani-Gada