

Persecuted for being gay

The voices of people from around the world who have found themselves stigmatized for their sexuality.

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Bisi Alimi, from Nigeria

In 2002, I was at university in Nigeria and standing for election. A magazine wrote about me and exposed me as being gay. This led the university to set up a disciplinary committee. I was very nearly dismissed. When I did graduate, people wanted to refuse me my certificate on the grounds that I did not have good enough morals to be an alumnus of the university. While this was going on, the then-president, Olusegun Obasanjo, declared that there were no homosexuals in Nigeria, and that such a thing would not be allowed in the country.

I talked with a friend of mine, who is a famous Nigerian talkshow host, about challenging this opinion. Nobody had come out publicly before. So, in October 2004, I appeared on her breakfast show, *New Dawn with Funmi Iyanda*. I talked about my sexuality, the burden of the HIV epidemic in the gay community.

The reaction was immediate and violent. I was subjected to brutality from the police and the community. I was disowned by my family and lost many friends, including in the gay community. They were afraid to know me. I was isolated, with no support and no job. The TV show was taken off the air by the government. It led to the introduction of the Same Sex Prohibition bill of 2006. All I had done was say who I was.

I was arrested, detained and beaten by the police. Until I fled to the UK in April 2007, my life was in constant danger.

Nassr, from Iraq

I was working for the Americans as a translator. When I got back to Iraq, I found that my house had been confiscated by the Mahdi militia. They are Shia, I am Christian. When I knocked on the door, I said: "This is my house." They said: "This is not your house. Either you go or we kill you." They beat me. They hit me on my head with their guns. I ran away, so they went after my sons instead. I heard they had asked my neighbors about me, and the neighbors had told them I am gay. I was now in real danger.

The militia captured my eldest son. They killed him to get to me. After that they found my other son and tortured him for information on me. They eventually killed my other son too. I fled to Syria, and now I'm alone without any family.

Skye Chirape, from Zimbabwe

As a lesbian growing up in Zimbabwe, I was non-existent and my visibility would have costed me jail time, "corrective" rape, forced marriage, banishment, beatings or even death. There was not one single portrayal anywhere of gay sexuality or lesbianism combined with Africanness. Due to my middle-class and strict Christian upbringing, life was tough and every day was a challenge.

Homosexuality was never discussed in the community, in the media, or within the family, unless negatively. Anyone who is perceived to not follow the norm is viewed as a disgrace or shame. So I decided to leave Zimbabwe for the UK.

However, while sexual relations between men are illegal in Zimbabwe, lesbians are not specifically legislated against. This has allowed the British Home Office to conclude that many lesbians of Zimbabwean origin have not established a well-founded fear of persecution and do not qualify for asylum. After a seven-year odyssey of bureaucratic red tape, including false imprisonment as an illegal immigrant, I was finally granted asylum in the UK. I am now studying forensic psychology and work in the British justice system. I believe that visibility is a step towards fighting the criminalization and persecution of LGBT. I also feel that it is important to reclaim our history, as many Africans believe that homosexuality is a foreign import, despite the fact that it was Europeans who imposed bans on homosexuality in their African colonies. As a refugee, I denounce the two great evils that menace African society: hatred and ignorance, influenced by religion.

Ali, from Sudan

Along with 11 of his friends, Ali was detained when agents from the Sudanese intelligence agency raided a private party. They were put in solitary confinement. Ali was deprived of water and food for two days. Of the 11 friends Ali mentioned, eight were later flogged with 100 lashes each, while the fate of another three members, including his boyfriend, remains unknown.

They stripped me naked and they started to interrogate me. They asked me about everything: whether I was gay, about my friends, family, my politics and my LGBT association activities.

One of them put a pistol to my head and said: "I wish I could kill you right now." They dragged me by my legs and they tied me upside down, and they started hitting me with a metal stick all over my body; they grabbed my penis and hit me there too. They used the metal stick to rape me, and they were laughing out loud, asking: "Do you like it, do you want more?" I was screaming with pain and bleeding from everywhere. They kept doing it until I lost consciousness.

I remained there for almost four weeks and spent another three and a half months in prison. I was waiting for my trial, expecting to be sentenced to death. Then some family members succeeded in smuggling me out of prison and I fled the country with a fake passport.

Tarik, from Tunisia

Five years ago, before I left Tunisia, I not only heard homophobic remarks, I also made them myself. I used to belong to an extremist religious group and I was taught that homosexuals should be killed by throwing them from a high place. I was taught that being gay is because of the devil we have inside. I liked men and hated myself.

The main reason I don't want to go back to Tunisia is that I don't want to lose myself – I am afraid of the "old" me; I like the "new" me. Being gay in Tunisia can lead to prison. The authorities regularly issue propaganda in order to manipulate or satisfy public opinion, so people are relieved when a gay group is arrested and feel the police are doing good job.

In rich places, gay people can survive, but in other quarters gays have two options: they can get married, say prayers, be good Muslims; or they can become prostitutes, abused by frustrated bisexual men and treated with contempt and hate. They are threatened by STDs and are in a very bad financial situation.

The anti-gay laws in Tunisia are also used in revenge. One can, at any moment, accuse his enemy of practicing sodomy, even if it is false.

A gay man from Karachi, Pakistan, who asked to remain anonymous

When it comes to being homosexual, there are two Pakistans. The first concerns the majority of the country, people who are relatively poorly educated with little money and no access to the internet. For them it's very difficult; there isn't even a consciousness about what it means to be gay. That said, it's not a situation where people are being caught and found hanging from lampposts.

I came from the other Pakistan – a more privileged urban community that is connected to what's going on in the rest of the world, through fashion and movies and culture. I have a normal social life like everybody else, it's simply not an issue. But it's all very discreet and under the radar.

We have draconian laws that outlaw homosexual activity, and a slew of political parties that recently made statements showing they are unwilling to accept gay people. Fighting for gay rights would be counter-productive here – it's a fight we would be guaranteed to lose. In India, they used HIV as a platform to get the community together. In Pakistan, that would be a recipe for disaster, leading to terrible recriminations.

Despite our laws against homosexuality, which go back to the British colonial era, prosecutions are rare.

For most people it's a problem of space. We have an extended family system here that affords very little privacy. People live in close proximity to their close relatives for many years. The internet has created an immense amount of space for people to meet one another, through dating

sites and so on. Some people have no compunction about showing their faces or revealing their identity, which shows that there's a young, urban educated class that couldn't give a damn.

Rowland Jide Macaulay, from Nigeria

My father first discovered I was gay in 2003 and for three years we did not exchange many words, except a few hurtful letters that he wrote to me. Many years later my father has become an advocate for families who have gay and lesbian children.

My father being a community and national leader in Nigeria, and a representative of Christian ethics, morals and theology, makes him a greater target of hate.

Nigeria, in my opinion, is a society of sympathetic people and at times the media sensationalizes headlines on homosexuality, making it difficult for ordinary people and families to deal with the situation, dramatizing stigma and deep-rooted hatred. I am not surprised that many LGBTI Nigerians seek refuge in the UK and other foreign countries.

I say "leave my father alone", because he has done nothing wrong. He is a great dad and marvelous grandfather. He is delighted in the success of his children and grandchildren. He has many more adopted children and those that he truly cares about. Some are gay and some are successful. I cherish and love my father, not just for his stand on issues that affect me but for many uncountable issues that he faces and deals with every day, his energy and his goals, and I could not wish for a better friend.