



First come the Americans. Second, comes the law. Third, comes the protest. According to a recent article published by The New York Times, the Ugandan politician who promoted the blamed bill on homosexuality – **the 2009 Anti-Homosexuality Bill** - had been previously inspired by “his evangelical friends in the American government” and by the meetings which took place in Kampala to educate people in “curing gays”. But apart from the role of religious emphasis on this issue, which is breaking walls, uncovering sufferings, leaving scars and splitting the Ugandan community, it is the whole of Africa that has to face the anti homosexuality movement in its borders. One of the most committed entities protesting and trying to defend gay rights is **the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission** with its base in Africa. Afronline interviewed **Monica Mbaru, IGLHRC Africa Program Coordinator**, to better understand the plight of the LGBT community in Uganda and Africa and get to grasps with the measures that will have to be undertaken in order to face the threats.

What is the situation in Uganda like now?

The Parliament is still discussing the bill, mostly because it is supposed to do a second phase of reading. After the first reading, the bill is given to a committee, but after the second reading it is also given to constitutional experts that should state whether it is in line with fundamental rights. After that, it comes out for a third reading and it is sent to the President for the final consent. By now, we still are in between the first reading and the second one, and because of the unusual attention this bill has attracted from different stakeholders, - this has never happened before – it has been given to two committees, the Parliamentary Committee on Legal Affairs and to the Presidential Advisory Committee.

Do you think that there are possibilities that the law will eventually be modified?

There has been a lot of groundwork. We are still deeply involved into getting the whole bill removed in its integrity. But there are also different actors that have come and said that since there is the death penalty they are campaigning only against the death penalty, which for us is not enough. It is not only about that, because Uganda already has legislation on homosexuality, so this bill will cover issues that are already covered. This is a law that bears a double discrimination for people because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. It needs to go in its integrity.

Are there other NGOs and associations that have joined you in this protest?

Yes. As the International Gay and Lesbian Commission we work largely with local organisations. We have, for example, Sexual Minority Uganda, AIDS Breakers and other national groups, some for lesbian and some for gays, for transgender people or for bisexual people. We call on them first of all to start a campaign and then we come in for support. The other thing that we have to take into account in Uganda and in the largest part of the continent is that homosexuality is viewed as a Western concept. We want to say that it is not so, that there are activists on the ground and that they need to be respected as equal citizens in the countries. That is why we employ this strategy of having local activists we support.

Where does this idea of homosexuality as a Western concept come from?

When politicians want to derail or take people's attention away from a problem to another one, when they just don't want to take responsibility or when it is convenient to push the idea that something is not African. And this is the routine. Let's take corruption: it is not Western or African, it is a human thing, a human behaviour.

And is this a common idea, spread in different countries?

Yes, it is a rhetoric they use when talking in public that allows them to be pleasant to different sectors of the public. They say that it is not part of our culture, that it is not part of our religion. It is the idea that homosexual people are not human enough, because it is a western concept. Our leaders must recognize fundamental rights for us, because as a politician you have to promote a positive image of the people that you represent.

How many African countries have such severe legal measures against homosexuality?

There are different levels of measures within the region. Out of South Africa, which is open and is the only country where there is a constitutional mechanism that protects gay people, we have Mozambique as the next most positive country. Then we have another series of countries that still have death penalty. We are talking about Sudan, some parts of Nigeria and Mauritania. And then we have the level of imprisonment without specified length, in countries like Angola and Namibia. After that we have another level with imprisonment going from one month to ten years. This happens in Ethiopia, Somalia, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Niger. At a different level we have other countries that have imprisonment from 11 years to life imprisonment like Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia. These different situations are often due to their background, to their colonialism past and it varies a lot.

Do you think that this case of Uganda could be a dangerous example for other countries too?

It is a very dangerous case. It could tempt countries around Uganda. Take for example Rwanda, who has discussed the penal code in the last year and was seeking to introduce the criminalization of homosexuality in itself. Fortunately it has been defeated and we are all celebrating this, which is the kind of little victory in the continent that we need to celebrate. However, recent developments in Uganda are negatively affecting Kenya too. A month ago a gay Kenyan couple married in London and the reaction in Kenya was really bad, particularly in the way media covered this situation. So what is happening in Uganda is moving to Kenya too, and the danger is that what passed to Kenya can be borrowed by other countries.

Could you make an example?

Take a country like Ethiopia, where homosexuality is punished from one month to ten years of imprisonment. When gay people are abused or violated, very little information comes out of the country and it is often the case that political leaders and the government become very outspoken against the local gay community. That is why I think that our main fear that the Ugandan law could affect other countries is real.

Leaving aside politicians, are gay people afraid of being victim to prejudice particularly in families and not only because of political propaganda?

Yes, a lot. There is a kind of stigma for gay people, that they can be changed into normal people and that when you are gay or lesbian you are abnormal. In a family, when a person comes out saying that he or she is gay, it is often such a hard trauma that people decide to keep it closed in the closet and hide their sexuality for the sake of the family. We have witnessed many suicides or ambiguous accidents in the families that often came out to be murders. This is the challenge we are facing also on HIV and AIDS because when you are suffering such a discrimination and the stigma in the community is spread or you are forced to have a double life – for example having a girlfriend – but you know that you are gay, this all leads to not have proper medical attention and you tend to do things in hiding without taking the protections required. But we have projects on it and we work closely with parents.

Are you doing projects with churches too?

Yes, we have started a campaign working with religious leaders. We have tried to open the discussion within the Church, with some of the priests and the pastors in mainstream churches who are willing to come on board in their private capacity. Because of the position of the Church, they are not allowed to talk about it from the pulpit but they are able to address people privately. It's a dialogue we are starting with religious leaders and parents as well.

Is there a country where you are working particularly well with the Church?

We are working particularly well with a pastor in Zambia and of course in South Africa. In November we organized a huge conference with a ministry group in South Africa that is openly gay, clergy who are Christian and homosexual but have been removed from their church and then decided to form their own group with their own mission. But we were able to involve also other pastors from different countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya, Uganda, also including other liberal minded pastors and priests. It was an amazing time being with them. The challenge was to understand and analyze the biblical approach. Of course they cannot join the political side of our mission, or go public, but it is a good dialogue that we are starting with them.

When you say liberal pastors, do you mean Catholic priests too?

Yes, I mean of course both protestant and catholic priests. When they come in their private capacity, not as pastor or bishop of Cape Town or Lusaka, as they won't come as pastors and priests but as single persons. That is the entry point we use to dialogue and talk with bishops or Archbishops and pastors.

Have you found any African governments that are sensitive to your issue?

Wow, that is the hardest part! Just to make you understand, in Uganda the Ministry of Justice informally said that he feels the bill is really bad and that it could not pass the test of matching up to constitutional standards, but he comes from a political party with a common position on the topic so he is torn between his personal belief and the electorate that is likely to see him voting for such a bill on gay people. He has to think, do I go with the minority or do I go with the majority? And that has happened with other political people too. Some of them have gay or lesbian children and they know the impact that the bill will have on their children's life, but they are ready to sacrifice it for the vote. If they go against parliament or against the president, they are finished.

You were talking about South Africa as an open country. Would you say that it is an example to tend towards?

Well, South Africa's history is unique. It had opportunities when negotiating the new constitution after the first democratic elections in 1994. This constitution was

made by academics, constitutional experts and the law that ended up was very good, but after that the general public that was presumed to consume and use this constitution was, let's say, left behind. Now we are seeing a lot of crimes directed particularly against black lesbian and gay people because of this view of homosexuality as a Western thing. Unfortunately there is no link between good documents and the community's attitude. It is a shame, because all over the world people consider the South African constitution as really good, but people on the ground don't feel it. I too do not feel safe at night in Cape Town, I don't want to be left all alone because I know people know that I am lesbian and I am a black woman. And this is not only about myself, this is for everybody in townships, if they identify you it is hard: they prefer to kill you instead of violating you so that you cannot go to the court and denounce them. I feel better working in the Kampala streets. Because as much as the law is bad and they want to pass it, I'll be more scared of the police than working at night in the village, where people respect me for who I am.

By *Chiara Caprio* – Afronline