

BLACKMAIL AMONG GAY PEOPLE IN MALAWI

Wiseman Chibwezo

Samson used to chat with a man who knew that he was gay.¹ One day, the man called around 8:00 pm asking about his whereabouts. Samson said he was at his office then, still filing away some work, and the man took it upon himself to visit his office that same night. When the man arrived, he asked to use a computer, saying he wanted to check some emails. Samson offered him one. Instead of checking his email, the man logged onto a gay website. He showed the website to Samson and then started touching him. “We started kissing and we made love,” Samson remembered.

After their encounter, Samson dropped this man off at his place. The following morning, the man sent Samson a text message. It read, “Do you know that what you did to me yesterday was wrong?” Samson asked what he meant by that. The man replied that he was not pleased with what had happened the previous night, and that he was considering reporting Samson to the police and to his wife. As Samson recalled, “I pleaded with him not to report to the police. He agreed on condition that I gave him something. Later, he demanded a car.”

The demand was an outrageous one. In Malawi, cars are a luxury and bought at a huge price, often costing what people have saved over a lifetime of work. People save for years – starving themselves in the process – just for the privilege of owning a car someday. Many more people are born and die without ever thinking of being able to afford a car of their own. The man’s demand for a car was a very strange request indeed.

Unable to afford such a huge luxury, Samson reported, “I told him I would not manage a car. He asked for at least an equivalent amount in money. After negotiating, we agreed that I give him MWK 100,000 [about \$660 US] by installments.” Samson gave him this money and his blackmailer left him alone.

Samson’s story briefly illustrates just how easily blackmailers can threaten the welfare of the gay community in Malawi. Malawians are hard-working people, and are usually proud to earn what they possess. It does not really require much work, however, to take advantage of gay people for one’s own benefit. The society and laws that criminalize homosexuality have already done the groundwork, as it were. Those who know a gay person just need to set up a compromising scenario to get their rewards.

1 All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms to protect the identities of those involved.

The victim not only loses their money or their property, but is also subject to a form of entrapment that is psychologically and emotionally taxing.

The Centre for the Development of People (CEDEP) believes it is important to address this and to find out why such blackmail cases are rarely reported to the authorities and how authorities have handled any reported cases. CEDEP conducted a study to identify the extent of blackmail among the gay people in Malawi by exploring and analyzing specific incidences of blackmail and identifying factors that make gay people vulnerable to the practice.²

CEDEP's study, described in this chapter, was conducted with thirty gay and bisexual men of varying ages, occupations, social statuses, and qualifications, and was conducted by random oral interviews using a standardized questionnaire.³ The respondents were requested to briefly narrate at least one blackmail ordeal they had dealt with. Unsurprisingly, all of them had a story to tell about their having being a victim of blackmail simply because of their sexual orientation. Although the study was only conducted with a small but diverse group of gay and bisexual men, it provides a glimpse into the difficulties they face in their everyday lives in Malawi.

STATUS OF GAY PEOPLE IN MALAWI

The limited tolerance that gay people enjoy in Malawi makes them particularly vulnerable to blackmail. Although research and common knowledge suggest that gay people have existed in Malawi in significant numbers since the pre-colonial period, and despite increasing acknowledgment of their existence by political and religious leaders, the gay community continues to face significant challenges. These challenges create an environment in which blackmail of gay people is not only possible, but also quite easy.

First and foremost, same-sex activity is illegal and harshly punished under the laws of Malawi. Malawi inherited its colonial laws against homosexuality from the British, and as such they are similar to others found across Africa. Section 153 of the Penal Code states that anyone who “has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature” is guilty of a felony and faces up to fourteen years in prison with or without corporal

2 This survey was conducted with financial support from the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission.

3 The respondents were all men because there were no women who had identified themselves to the organization – which primarily caters to men who have sex with men (MSM) – at that time. The invited participants were selected randomly from a list of people who had attended earlier activities organized by the CEDEP.

punishment. Section 156 further says that any male who commits or attempts to commit “any act of gross indecency with another male person,” in public or private, is also guilty of a felony and faces up to five years in prison with or without corporal punishment. As a result, two people can be gay, but they still do not have the right to practice their sexuality. It does not matter whether they are consenting adults or not, or whether the act was done privately behind closed doors. Once they are found out or reported to the police, they are finished – facing years in prison and hard labor!

Secondly, members of the gay community face adverse social marginalization once they are known or believed to be gay. Friends walk out on them and despise them; family may disown them; and people on the streets start calling them by all sorts of inexplicable names. This is not just psychologically or emotionally harmful, but also affects the physical well-being of gay persons.

Hostility makes access to sexual health care a problem, especially when seeking care could lead to the revelation of one’s sexual behavior or identity. A study conducted by CEDEP within the gay community revealed that people find it difficult to disclose their sexual orientation even to medical professionals because they fear hostile or unfriendly remarks.⁴ Unfortunately, there are no specifically gay-friendly health facilities where the gay community can freely access reproductive or sexual-health services, leaving them with few alternatives.

The lack of HIV-prevention programmes directed toward gay people has resulted in this group desperately lacking appropriate knowledge about HIV transmission. A contributing factor to this problematic state of affairs is that, as a presumptively “illegal” class of people, gay people are even sidelined by the country’s HIV/AIDS body, the National AIDS Commission (NAC), in its sensitization campaigns. This is particularly problematic given the fact that surveys conducted by CEDEP have confirmed a UNAIDS description that men who have sex with men (MSM) are a “bridge population” – that is, one which transmits HIV between heterosexual and homosexual populations – in large part, because this group desperately lacks appropriate knowledge about transmission of the virus. While NAC’s policy indicates that they would otherwise feel obliged to reach out to MSM,⁵ this apparent willingness

4 CEDEP, *Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices Study (KAP) of People in Same Sex Relationships in Malawi*, January 2007.

5 Office of the President and the Cabinet, National AIDS Commission (NAC), Malawi HIV and AIDS Extended National Action Framework (NAF), 2010-2012, April 2009, at http://www.unaidsrsta.org/sites/default/files/countryprofiles/usefullinks/malawi/National_Action_Framework_Malawi_2010-2012.pdf, accessed 9 September 2010.

to engage with MSM communities is eclipsed in practice by the legal prohibition of homosexuality in Malawi.

Despite all of these challenges, the gay community in Malawi keeps on growing as more and more people come out of their small closets to interact with others. Unfortunately, this growing community must often stay in a bigger, collective closet to avoid backlash from the wider society. Those who come out into the gay community find that, instead of simply being discreet about their own behaviors and identity, they have to be careful to safeguard the behaviors and identities of others in the gay community as well. As it grows, however, the community has started mobilizing itself in a bid to offer support to its members in whatever way necessary.

The mobilization of gay people and efforts to improve their status accelerated with the help of CEDEP, a non-governmental organization working to promote and uplift the lives of minority groups in Malawi by advocating for human rights and tackling HIV/AIDS. The organization provides a safe space for the gay community where they can interact and discuss topical issues affecting them, but also engages in advocacy on inclusiveness and human rights, offers HIV/AIDS prevention services, and provides referrals for AIDS treatment.

Meeting the needs of the gay community and people in same-sex relationships is rather like walking a tightrope in the country. While they are often at risk and badly in need of support, gay people are looked upon unfavourably and are regarded as insane, shameful and not worth associating with. In fact, a religious group once described CEDEP as “messengers of the devil” for its efforts in addressing the plight of gay people. The anger towards those who are championing the rights of minority groups such as gay people is further fuelled by the fear and misunderstanding surrounding HIV/AIDS in the gay community. It takes a great deal of courage to openly and visibly work on behalf of the gay community, as this is often seen as an indication that a person condones same-sex activity or is gay him or herself.

It is in the context of these many challenges of illegality, stigma, and vulnerability to AIDS – which in themselves seem like more than enough for one population to suffer – that CEDEP has found that gay people are often also victims of blackmail. Although blackmail is otherwise rare in the open Malawian society, blackmailers track down gay people even when they are hiding in the closet, torture them, and leave them vulnerable and uncared for. Blackmail is a widespread problem that almost every gay person has

encountered, but very few, if any, have ever successfully reported it. As a result, the culprits have almost always gotten away with it. The larger society does not know about the problem because these are cases that gay people themselves can hardly report for redress. If they did report them, who would care? In this study, we ask what makes gay people so vulnerable to blackmail – and what might be done to bring justice to the gay community in the future.

BLACKMAIL AFFECTS VICTIMS ACROSS THE SOCIAL SPECTRUM

The survey suggested that it is one's sexual orientation, not simply one's social status, that attracts blackmailers. The majority of those surveyed – 77% – were employed and had professional jobs. These people are often thought to have money, which most blackmailers demand, and also presumed to have a lot to lose if their sexual identity were disclosed to others. However, the study suggested that same-sex practicing people can be susceptible to blackmail regardless of age, education or social status.

Of those surveyed, 94% of respondents were indigenous Malawians while the rest were of Asian origin. However, ethnicity does not appear to have itself been a major factor in susceptibility to blackmail. The age of respondents varied – 82% were aged between 16 and 40 while 18% were over 40 years old. Many of the respondents identified as gay (41%). A majority of the respondents identified themselves as being bisexual (59%) and a large majority identified themselves as being married (77%). Being married and having the need for secrecy and non-disclosure appears to put people at greater risk for blackmail. People who are married who engage in same-sex activity are probably targeted for blackmail because their partners may not know about their homosexual behaviour and the relationship would be greatly affected if that behaviour were disclosed. The victims in this group were thus mostly threatened with having their identity disclosed to their wives, girlfriends or fiancées, or more widely disclosed to the community at large.

WHAT MAKES THE GAY COMMUNITY VULNERABLE?

The results of the study suggest that many gay people fall victim to blackmail because they are still in the closet and want to keep their sexual orientation a secret. In fact, fear of disclosure of sexual orientation was at the heart of most of the blackmail cases in the survey group, with 58% of the victims being threatened with public disclosure and 52% being threatened with a report about their homosexuality to the police. If their sexual orientation was disclosed, respondents said they feared public ridicule

and great discrimination, which they felt would affect their lives far more adversely than having to pay some money or give up a valuable item. The fact that homosexuality is regarded as immoral and unacceptable prompts many gay people to stay closeted, and this could explain why 58% of respondents said they would rather give in to the blackmailer's demand than face disclosure. 35% of respondents said they would negotiate for a better deal when blackmailed again, and 2% claimed they would wait and see the outcome. Only 5% said they would report any future blackmail to the police.

A majority of the respondents identified themselves as being bisexual. Most of them are conceivably involved in heterosexual relationships, either as a way of concealing their homosexual relationships or because of genuine attraction to their partner. Either way, it is most unlikely that they would disclose their homosexual identity to their opposite-sex partners, and many indicated that they would do anything possible to remain undercover – even if it meant being blackmailed countless times. To them, giving in to blackmail would deprive them of money or property but have no effect on the relationship, while disclosure would almost certainly end the relationship on bad terms.

A majority of the respondents indicated they would allow themselves to be blackmailed or at least negotiate for a better demand in order to prevent disclosure of their sexual orientation. The act of staying in the closet could therefore be one of the major contributing factors to promoting and condoning blackmail. It could therefore be argued that if one discloses his sexual orientation (or “comes out”) to either family or friends, he might be in a better position to confront the blackmailer, particularly if he was supported by the family and friends to whom he had come out and been accepted. Compared to other groups of people, the family is especially influential in a person's life in Malawi, and few people would want to disappoint their family by being forcibly outed by a blackmailer. A person who is out to family and close friends and has been accepted by them would have less reason to fear disclosure than someone whose family and friends do not know or approve of his sexual orientation. With their knowledge and support, the threat of disclosure would probably not have as much effect on him.

It was also deduced from the CEDEP study, however, that most gay people in Malawi do not have adequate knowledge about the crime of blackmail, and are vulnerable because they do not know what recourse, if any, they have. The laws of Malawi criminalize both homosexuality and blackmail. The maximum sentence for both crimes is fourteen years imprisonment. The law on blackmail states that the act of blackmail is always

a crime, regardless of whether the information on which the blackmail is based is factually true or not.

Nonetheless, the survey participants did not know that blackmail is a serious offence on its own, and that the courts do not consider whether what they are being accused of is true or not. Many people knew that they had been taken advantage of, but it became obvious in the course of the survey that they did not always know that they were being or had been blackmailed. The lack of knowledge about blackmail and its illegality is probably because the act of blackmail in general is rarely reported on or talked about in Malawi. This is in contrast to homosexuality, which tends to generate a lot of interest in the press and among the general public. The crime of homosexuality is therefore seen as more grave, and is so stigmatized in law and society that nobody seems to be bold enough to be associated with such a case – especially when we found that gay and bisexual people did not know what to expect if they took a blackmail case to court.

As a result, 94% of the respondents did not report their blackmail incident. All of these respondents said they did not report because they feared either self-exposure or arrest. Twenty-four percent of them added that they either did not know how to express it to the authorities or did not see the need or importance of reporting. Those who did not see the importance of reporting either did not view it as an offence or simply doubted that the police would help them.

Many also voiced the justifiable fear that the police might become more interested in the accusation of homosexuality than the blackmail itself. Only 6% of the blackmail cases were reported to the police, and in these cases, the police concentrated on whether the person who reported the blackmail was actually homosexual rather than whether that allegation was being used to illegally target them. Ultimately, these cases against the gay men who reported their blackmailer failed to proceed, as no witnesses were forthcoming.

In one such case, Jeffrey had his cell phone taken by someone he had been having sex with for some time. The partner threatened to disclose Jeffrey's homosexuality if he dared to tell anyone about the theft of the cell phone. Jeffrey was bold enough to report the theft to the police, who apprehended the blackmailer – but later, the blackmailer told the police that he had taken the phone to teach Jeffrey a lesson because Jeffrey was having sex with him. Surprisingly, the police let the blackmailer go, and instead charged Jeffrey with homosexuality, with his blackmailer as a witness. Luckily, the blackmailer refused to testify in court and the case was withdrawn.

The gay community's lack of knowledge about blackmail and the way that rare cases have been extrajudicially treated by the police does little to encourage the gay community to tackle the problem, either legally or otherwise. As a result, the extent of the problem is difficult to gauge, as many gay people who are being blackmailed occasionally are not likely to realize it or opt to deal with the blackmailer themselves to avoid going to the police.

WHO ARE THE BLACKMAILERS?

Perpetrators of blackmail in the survey group appear to come from all walks of life. Some of the perpetrators were employed (34%), while others were students (18%) or unemployed (48%). The ages of blackmailers varied, although all of them were blackmailed by perpetrators between the ages of 15 and 35. The perpetrators of blackmail against gay people did not solely belong to any particular occupation or social group.

What did seem apparent was that blackmail typically occurred between people who were known to each other. Ninety-five percent of the victims knew their blackmailers before the blackmail began. Of these blackmailers, 65% were either acquaintances or workmates of the victim, 24% were gay friends or partners, and 6% were family members. It is obvious that the perpetrators typically had some prior knowledge of the victims' sexuality and used this as a weapon in their blackmail. Peter, for example, was in a college club when a young man called him outside and told him that he knew that Peter was gay. The stranger then demanded money from Peter for him not to start telling everyone on campus and in the wider community. Peter gave in. The following day, they met again, and the young man apologized for getting involved into Peter's private life, claiming he was under the influence of alcohol – a dubious claim, especially since the young man did not return the money he took.

Since identifying other gay people in Malawi is difficult, gay people tend to make advances to straight friends who may then later take advantage of the situation. James, for instance, was attracted to one of his straight friends. One day, he invited the friend home and told him everything, revealing that he was attracted to him. The friend had no problem with it and the two began to have sex. In the middle of it all, the friend hesitated and started demanding money, threatening that he would disclose James's sexuality to the community if he did not comply. He then took James's clothes as evidence. James had no option but to do as the friend demanded and pay him money for his non-disclosure.

The study suggested that gay people can easily find themselves facing blackmail, regardless of whether the blackmailer is a good friend, another gay person, a wife or a family member, or a work colleague. Blackmail could be visited upon gay people in Malawi by anyone – but the survey suggested it is almost always committed by those who know the victim well.

WHEN BLACKMAILED BY FAMILY

It is particularly disturbing that for many gay people in Malawi the family – which is supposed to be the place where one runs for shelter – is not a safe place. For those who are victims of blackmail, the family often becomes the enemy. Six percent of the respondents to the survey were blackmailed by a family member, including spouses as well as blood relatives.

Samson, who was blackmailed by the man with whom he had sex at his office, said:

My wife later came to know about my affair with other men. I believe some one must have told her, because she one day searched through my office drawers where I kept love letters from my boyfriend and pictures of him and I. She threatened to report me to police and our marriage counselors, including our relatives and everyone who knew me. I was so devastated and felt hopeless. After pleading with her, we agreed to separate, but she demanded that I should be giving her half my salary every month. She still keeps the photos and the letters and uses them to demand anything she needs from me, threatening to show them to people.

Ted had a boyfriend who lived in another town. Once in a while, Ted would visit him together with his cousin. One day, Ted's cousin visited Ted's boyfriend alone and the two had sex. Later, the cousin told Ted that he had found proof of what happened between Ted and his boyfriend, and that he would tell their relatives, friends and even their church. "If you want me to keep my mouth shut, then be giving me your car and some money every weekend," the cousin demanded. "Otherwise, you and your friend are in hot soup." Ted's boyfriend was a respectable public figure, and Ted did not want to put him in disrepute. He gave in to his cousin's demands.

Mark experienced being blackmailed by his nephew, whom he was taking care of and who knew Mark was gay and also knew some of his gay friends. The nephew had become arrogant and alcoholic, and announced

that he wanted to enroll at an expensive school that Mark said he was unable to afford. Mark's nephew threatened to report him and his friends to the police if Mark refused to pay his fees. Mark did not give in, but stood his ground. One day, Mark received a call from a friend from an NGO that handles child-abuse issues. He was told that a young man had complained to them that Mark and his friends had been having sex with him and that he has a list of all the people Mark sleeps with which he intended to hand over to the police. The two were advised to report to the NGO office the next day. That evening, the nephew said he would withdraw the allegations, but only if his demands were met. Mark had no choice but to give in to his nephew.

WHEN BLACKMAILED BY THOSE WHO ARE MEANT TO UPHOLD THE LAW

Like Jeffrey, who reported his blackmailer to the police and found himself on trial for homosexuality, gay and bisexual men may find that police and the judiciary are complicit in their suffering. Police, advocates, and lawyers are supposed to uphold the law fairly and impartially – but they may fail to do so when they are unaware of what the law on blackmail says, or when they are motivated by their own prejudice or greed. A number of participants in the study described incidents where those who were supposed to uphold the law took advantage of those who sought their help.

One day, Nelson found his “lost” cell phone in the possession of one of his friends. The friend refused to give back the gadget, challenging Nelson to do anything he wished to try to force him to return it. Nelson reported him to the police, who later apprehended him and kept him in the police cell for a night. The next day, Nelson was given an option of either having his friend prosecuted in court or taking back his phone immediately and withdrawing the case. Nelson chose the latter, not wanting to put his friend through a longer ordeal and being glad to have his phone back in his possession.

The next day, a police officer came to Nelson's office. “I recognized him as the one who handled my phone case,” Nelson said. “I thought he had come for the same issue, but I was shocked to learn that my same friend had lodged a complaint that I had been forcing him into having sex with me and that was why he took my cell phone.” The police then opened a case against Nelson. The police officer reminded Nelson of how serious a crime homosexuality is, and assured him that he would never win the case in court – especially since he was not yet married, despite being of age. The officer then made a proposition.

“However,” the police officer offered, “I can help you if you co-operate.” He claimed he could persuade Nelson’s friend to drop the case, and he could then get rid of the file if Nelson were to pay about MWK 150,000 (\$1000 US) for the officer and Nelson’s friend to share between them. Nelson paid, and the friend never came to the house again.

After a couple of weeks, the friend appeared and apologized for what had happened, but defended his actions by saying that he was bitter with Nelson for reporting him to the police. The friend then claimed that the police officer was demanding more money, threatening to have both of them prosecuted if the demands were not met. He advised Nelson to give the officer the money, and Nelson did.

After several months, the police officer called Nelson from an international line. He is believed to have been in South Africa, and told Nelson that he had resigned from the Police Service and was now doing business. However, the Officer-in-Charge at the station in Malawi had come across the file and was eager to follow it up. The former police officer told Nelson, “I have negotiated with the Officer-in-Charge not to go ahead with the investigations and have agreed on a certain amount to give him. I am coming to Malawi tomorrow – please be ready with the money, otherwise things will not be fine.”

“I did not know what to do,” Nelson recounted, “I felt the world crumbling down on me. I however decided to tell one of my friends, who suggested that we meet the police officer together.” When the two met the police officer, he repeated what he had told Nelson and added that the Officer-in-Charge had given them a deadline of the next day. He described how he got into trouble for not following up on the allegations a long time ago. Nelson agreed to pay, but demanded that they do so in the presence of the Officer-in-Charge and the friend who was present. The police officer tried to explain how impossible this would be, but the two still insisted. The police officer then suggested that he would consult the Officer-in-Charge first and that he would come back to them later. He left, and that was the last Nelson saw or heard of him. Nelson later found out that there was never such a file opened against him.

The police are often the point of first contact for those who find themselves being blackmailed, but others in the justice system may also abuse the law and their position to victimize gay and bisexual men. For George, the blackmailer was a court clerk, who was not very closely known to George. George recalled, “He came to me claiming that a man I had slept with had lodged a complaint with the court about what we had done

and wanted me to be prosecuted.” The clerk demanded some money from George in order to remove the file in court. George paid him, but the clerk came again demanding more money. George realised now that this man was not going to get off his back.

George found himself in a difficult position. “Should I report to any one for help to get rid of this man?” he asked himself. He decided to take the risk in the hope that this would allow a lasting riddance of this unwelcome visitor in his life. “I sought advice from my boss and close friends,” George said. “They told me to inform the police first and then tell him to come into my office to get the money. He must have sensed something, because he refused to get into my office. He went away, never showed up again, and the case never arose in court.” It took courage and understanding from the people that George had asked for help to get his blackmailer to leave him alone. Not everyone has that kind of support from their employer and close friends – and when gay and bisexual men are blackmailed by those who are supposed to keep them safe, it is often difficult to know where else to turn. In spite of their victimization, they cannot seek any protection because they know it is very unlikely that the protection will come.

WHEN BLACKMAILED BY YOUR OWN KIND

What happens when a gay person blackmails another gay person? Is it any easier to detect or deal with a blackmail incident when it involves another gay person? There is a relatively low rate of blackmail occurring between two gay people in Malawi, especially when they are both known to each other – they may see each other as being equal or having the same interests, may share the same social circles, or may be conscious that allegations of homosexuality could backfire and put the blackmailer himself at risk. Nevertheless, 24% of the victims surveyed were blackmailed by another gay person. These cases seem to have been motivated by jealousy or because the perpetrators did not want to directly ask for the money they needed for fear of being seen as a gold digger or a sex worker. Usually, the victims in such cases were older and appeared to have money. The perpetrators were usually younger and either unemployed or students, and usually demanded money from their victims.

Derek is one of the men blackmailed by another gay person. He arranged a date that eventually ended up at his office, where the two of them had sex. “Immediately after, he demanded for some money or else he would alert the security personnel and allege that I raped him,” Derek recalled. “I gave him a little but he demanded for more. I gave [it to] him and he left. I felt relieved,

but later felt cheated after hearing that he had held a party with the money.”

Vuto had a friend with whom he became intimate. The friend later introduced Vuto to one of his other friends, Mike. Vuto and Mike never used to meet or talk alone. One night, Mike called Vuto claiming that he needed a place to spend the night, since he was returning from somewhere and could not manage to make it home. Vuto took him in and the two of them shared a bed. Later, Mike started touching and caressing Vuto, and the two became intimate. “In the morning, he demanded that I give him cash or something of value – and if not, he will report to my family and work place,” Vuto said. “After some negotiations, I gave him what he wanted to seal his mouth.”

Thomas is 35 years old. He is fairly well-educated to the tertiary level and has a good job. One night, he made an advance to another gay man, Joe, at a drinking joint in Malawi’s commercial nerve of Blantyre. The two sought shelter within the place and, in seclusion, expressed their sexual feelings for each other through caressing. It was a brief encounter. Thomas suggested a lasting relationship, but Joe refused to go any further than that. They parted, only to bump into each other again in another town after about four months. Joe referred Thomas to another person, who was also gay, and the two of them had sex. Later, Joe and his friend confronted Thomas for taking advantage of them. They demanded money from him, saying that if he refused they would “report you to your church elders, parents or police.” They also threatened to beat Thomas up if he did not honour the demand.

Thomas was cornered. He could not contemplate being reported to his church. What would his church say about him? He also could not imagine his parents being told that their son was gay. In Malawi, these are not the kind of things you tell your parents. He also felt he couldn’t accept having his name reported to the police, and face being arrested and jailed for fourteen years. Thomas buckled and gave the two men the money they demanded.

Thomas still meets his “persecutors,” but now they have relented. In fact, they chat amicably when they meet. Thomas, however, remains constantly afraid that these friends of his will pounce on him again, demanding anything they might want from him, whenever they choose to do so. He is constantly worried about what they might do, especially since he cannot get rid of them for fear of upsetting them and getting himself into deeper trouble.

Another victim is Symon. He is happily married, has children, and he is gay. “There is this other gay young man who wants a relationship with me, [but] I don’t want him for some reasons,” said Symon. “However, this guy threatens that he will tell my wife and family about me if I do

not accept him or else be giving him some money. I give him the money whenever he demands it. I feel trapped in a cage,” Symon lamented.

Blackmail does not necessarily end when a relationship ends. One person was blackmailed by another gay person who was his former lover. The two had parted ways after a lengthy relationship, but the blackmailer started demanding money, and threatened that he would tell people – including the victim’s fiancée – that the two were once lovers. While some of these incidents seem to have been planned in advance, others appear to be the result of relationships that have become unsatisfactory to one of the partners, who then use the intimacy of their former relationships to their advantage.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

The bottom line is that gay people in Malawi have very little room to maneuver when they are confronted with threats of disclosure. If you are gay and live in a country that criminalizes homosexuality and in a community that regards homosexuality as immoral and unacceptable, you remain in the closet, afraid of reprisals from the law that criminalizes your sexual orientation. Yet people have the audacity to come and take advantage of you while in your closet. They know that you cannot report them anywhere. Even if you do, the authorities you speak to may not listen because you are classified as illegal – or worse, the authorities may themselves take advantage of you while you are seeking their help. When you are hunted by those who are angry, greedy, puritanical, or anti-gay, you are also unable to call upon your friends, family, or the police for assistance. The lack of options for gay Malawians means you suffer twice – or many times more.

What do the victims think should be done? 65% of the victims who participated in the survey suggested sensitizing the gay community on the issue of blackmail so that they should be better equipped to fight it off. They felt they needed to be able to detect a likely blackmailer well in advance, and before it becomes too late. A small number of participants called upon the gay community itself to be more open with each other so that sexual advances are made among people who really feel they are gay or bisexual, and not toward those who might abuse those advances to victimize their partner.

The law was a constant theme in cases of blackmail, which allowed false accusations, corrupt police officers, and abuses of the justice system to run rampant. Eighteen percent thought that decriminalizing same-sex activity would help, since the illegality of homosexuality in Malawi provides virtually unlimited cover for blackmail against gays in the country.

“I therefore think that the solution lies in repealing the penal code that criminalises homosexuality,” said one participant. It is far easier to fight off injustices in a society where everyone is accorded their full human rights and access to the law. Unless homosexuality is legalized in Malawi, gays will remain subjects of torture whether in or out of the closet.

There are others however, who have completely lost hope such that they do not think anything can be done. Twelve percent pointed out that it would probably be a waste of time trying to tackle the issue because they just do not see anything that can be done about it. To them, being gay will always make a person vulnerable to the abuses of others.

As an organization, CEDEP agrees with the idea of sensitizing the gay community on blackmail. It has become obvious from the study that the community knows very little about blackmail. The organization feels the community should be equipped with skills on how to detect and deal with a case of blackmail, and know what to do when they are being blackmailed. CEDEP also sees a need to build confidence in the gay community, which is part of the work it does.

Outside the gay community, CEDEP also feels there is a need to sensitize the police, who should be able to quickly and effectively provide recourse when someone has been wronged. The organization says it is necessary that the police should know the extent to which blackmail is happening among the gays in the country, and be reminded that it is their duty to serve all citizens, regardless of who or what they are. There is also a need to sensitize law enforcement personnel on the laws on blackmail and how they should be fairly applied. According to CEDEP, “Blackmail, no matter who suffers it, is a crime in the country. There is no law in this country that says that when a gay is victimized through extortion, he must not be helped because of his criminalized sexual orientation. If homosexuality is illegal, it does not mean that it is legal for anyone to victimize homosexuals.” Other NGOs should also speak out against victimization of gay people as most of the NGOs in Malawi tend to remain silent on such issues. By breaking the silence and raising awareness about blackmail in the gay community, these efforts can make it easier for victims to deal with blackmail and bring their blackmailers to justice.