

Homosexuality in Nigeria: Young LGBT Nigerians speak out about living in a homophobic society

By Ida Akerstedt, 29 May 2016

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On the Gulf of Guinea lies a country rich with oil, known for its incredible landscapes. Waterfalls, rainforests, savannahs and rare animals make the country a safari destination and a beautiful holiday spot for travellers. Yet few people visit, and governments around the world advise tourists not to go. Whereas a violent Islamist militant group is roaming and killing in the north, undated attitudes, corruption and poverty are prominent in the rest of the country. And while a global trend towards acceptance and equal rights concerning the LGBT community is on the rise, Nigeria is determined to head in the opposite direction. The rainbow flag is not waving in the wind.

Two years after the implementation of the same-sex marriage prohibition act was signed into law, LGBT people in Nigeria continue to live a life in fear, where they are hunted like animals and treated like criminals. Even holding hands with their same-sex partner in public can put Nigerians behind bars.

Nigerian laws criminalise homosexual acts involving either men or women. In 2014, former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan ratified the same-sex marriage prohibition bill, which made life even harder for the LGBT community in the country. The law criminalises same-sex marriage and anyone who co-habits with their same-sex partners. Furthermore, the law contradicts the countries constitutions, as well as its obligations under regional and international human rights treaties.

In the law, same-sex marriage means "the coming together of persons of the same sex with the purpose of living together as husband or wife or for other purposes of sexual relationship." The punishment for breaking the law can lead to up to 14 years of

imprisonment, and in 12 northern states in Nigeria, sharia law applies. In the states where sharia law is enforced, punishments for homosexual acts include caning, imprisonment or death by stoning.

The law also criminalises any form of public display of affection between same-sex couples and anyone who is participating in organisations advocating for the rights of LGBT groups. Meaning that even remotely being a part of the LGBT community or showing support for them are near-like impossible.

Richard Moore is a graphic designer living in Lagos, the biggest city in Nigeria and the largest city on the African continent. He found out that he was not attracted to girls from an early age. “At the age of 5, I found myself crushing on a couple of boys in my class,” says Richard. “At that point in my life, I didn’t know there was a word for that.”

“As I grew, these feelings grew with me. When I got into university, I tried locking it all away but I couldn’t. That was when I realised that I was gay,” he says.

African countries and predominantly Muslim countries remain amongst the least accepting of homosexuality. And homophobia is common in Nigeria. A poll from 2015, conducted by NOIPolls, Nigeria’s largest polling company, in partnership with The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs), an organisation working to protect and promote the human rights of sexual minorities in Nigeria, found that 87 per cent of Nigerians are supportive of the same-sex marriage prohibition act. The LGBT community commonly refers to the act as the “jail the gays” law.

Richard realised that coming out was not an option from early on. “I was too scared at first to let anyone find out because as a teenager I was made to believe that being gay was a curse and it was the worst crime ever,” he says.

When he was in secondary school, Richard was fooling around with another classmate. He was living in a dormitory at the time, and some of the seniors discovered what he was doing.

“I was beaten up publicly,” says Richard. “They all said it would have been better if I had sex with women. I was constantly being taunted till I graduated.”

Hate and anger towards the LGBT community have been influenced by the legitimisation of hate by state and religion. Nigeria is divided into a predominantly Muslim north and a predominantly Christian south. When the same-sex marriage prohibition act became law, religious leaders were quick on their feet to applaud former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan.

Around the same time that Richard was beaten up in his secondary school dormitory, his grandmother and one of his aunts found gay porn on his phone. “They prayed the ‘evil habit’ called homosexuality was out of my life,” says Richard. “When I came to the realisation that I was gay, I felt it was better I kept it away from the family.”

In 2014, the Solidarity Alliance, a coalition of LGBT community organisations in Nigeria, released a report on abuse of LGBT people in the country. It found that 45 cases of abuse against the LGBT people were recorded in 2014 alone. And what is worse, the report showed 73 per cent of the attacks were carried out by family members, friends, and neighbours of the victims.

Ayo Sogunro, a Nigerian writer, lawyer and human rights activist who works for TIERS, says that most Nigerians are ignorant of the scope of the same sex ban, but that they have the understanding that it is to “stop gays”. “The law has encouraged a number of ordinary citizens to act on their intolerance in the guise of obeying the law,” says Ayo. “It provides unscrupulous officials with additional leverage for their profiling and extortion rackets”.

Ayo explains that former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan neither sponsored nor pushed for the law, but mostly lacked the political will to resist it: “Legislators from the then opposition party, the APC, sponsored the bill and Jonathan signed it. Not that APC is in power, it has demonstrated even less tolerance for human rights issues,” says Ayo.

The current president, however, President Buhari, has been vocal in condemning the LGBT community with statements such as “there is no room for gay rights in Nigeria” during a meeting with President Obama in 2015.

Homophobic attitudes are rooted in political and religious colonisations, Ayo explains: “Most Nigerians alive today have been socialised with the wrong type of ideas,” he says. “Since the 1980s, there has been a rapid increase in fundamentalist religions.”

“These have exerted influence on social attitudes and even government policies. Others are influenced by a misguided sense of resisting neo-colonisation – on the mistaken grounds that LGBTI orientation or identity is a Western concept.”

Nigeria is not a poor country per say as it is rich with oil. But, according to the World Bank, 66 per cent of Nigerians live in absolute poverty, in other words, less than a dollar a day. It is difficult for the ordinary citizen “to grasp the concept of rights for disabled persons or sexual minorities,” says Ayo.

For Richard, the law has put him and other gay people in the spotlight: “The moment the ban was publicly declared alongside the 14-year jail sentence, a lot of people were suddenly on the manhunt for anyone that could possibly be gay”.

Since the law, abuse and extortion have become common amongst state-sponsored vigilantes, police, and public mobs.

“I remember being stopped on the road by policemen. They asked to search my phone which sounded very ridiculous to me,” says Richard. “After a bit of resistance, I let them search my phone. The minute they saw a sex chat I was having with one-time boyfriend of mine, they got me in handcuffs and shoved me into their van.”

Richard was then dragged down to the station, where the police demanded an amount of money for his release. “It was either that or they were going to inform my family,” he says. “I was terrified.”

He later found out that the same things had happened to so many other LGBT people in Nigeria. “That’s just one out of so many ways that gay people have been attacked. Just recently, we had to deal with the case of a young man who was publicly beaten up and killed simply because he was gay,” says Richard.

“I’ve only come out – by the very definition of that phrase – to two of my friends back in school,” he says. “I ended up dating one of them for a couple of months.”

But regardless of the current situation in the country, several Nigerians have come out publicly before. Bisi Alimi, for example, was the first Nigerian to come out of the closet on television, a stunt that drew international attention. Bisi, a Nigerian gay rights activist, public speaker, blog writer and LGBT advocate, was forced to flee Nigeria. He was granted refugee status in the UK in 2008, where he currently lives.

Bisi is fighting for the LGBT community through the Bisi Alimi Foundation, which conducts research to try and influence policy change. In an interview with the Guardian, Bisi says: “Nigeria plays a huge role in terms of population, economy and politics. That’s why I still encourage the global community to look at the vital role Nigeria has to play in decriminalising sexual orientation and gender identity.”

“I think we need to ask: how do we make religion more loving, more accepting and more accommodating?” asks Bisi. “I hope we can get to a position where religion is not the decider of political agenda on the continent of Africa.”

Bisi is not the only openly gay person to flee Nigeria. Nigerian-born Aderonke Apata, a LGBT rights activist, was forced to flee the country in 2004 due to her sexual orientation. Furthermore, Davis Mac-Iyalla, another LGBT rights activist, was in 2003 fired from his job as the principal of a local Anglican children’s school due to, in his belief, the fact that he was gay. David was granted refugee status in the UK, where he now resides with his partner.

Because of harassment, beatings, publicly shaming, anti-gay laws and the knowledge of these openly gay people who were forced to flee the country, most Nigerians choose to hide their sexuality.

Richard does not ever plan on telling his family that he is gay, but his male cousin and his sister managed to figure it out. They went to speak to him about it a few months ago. “They told me that they know I’m gay and they also said that it won’t make them love me any less,” says Richard.

Younger people might be more open-minded than the elders. Ichie, a 19-year-old student in Lagos, thinks that the older generations feel threatened by the LGBT community. He believes that being a lesbian is difficult.

“A lot of Nigerian men believe that feminism is a hate of men. Many, my father included, believe that women who try to act out of roles traditionally believed to be women’s roles, such as cooking and cleaning, are trying to overturn the purpose of family,” he says. “Strong women who do not depend on men and that do not hate on other women are perceived to be lesbians.”

But Ichie believes that being a gay man is much worse, as society tends to be “generally harder on men”.

“Participating in any form of public display of affection with your partner is just asking for trouble,” he says. “And you will be told very often by the religious and the traditionalists how your attraction is unnatural and against good wills. You will be asked a lot of ignorant questions about your sex life.”

“The police blackmail, extort, and sometimes you will hear of gay people being beaten or burnt or jailed,” says Ichie.

‘John’ is a closeted gay man living in Imo state, southeast in Nigeria. He has only told his cousin who is studying in the US about his sexual orientation. ‘John’ says his cousin “was cool about it”, but he has no plans of coming out to the rest of my family, and then especially not his male relatives.

“My family is homophobic,” says ‘John’. “My older brother is homophobic. So is my dad. So is my uncle. My dad told me that if he finds out I’m gay, he would disown me. It’s not easy to just come out.”

‘John’ keeps quite of the company he keeps, and his lifestyle is very different to the one he tells his family about. Yet, he has the impression that his mum knows more than she lets on.

“My mum is mild,” he says. “I think she suspects that I’m bisexual as she’s always advising me on how to be careful in my association with both males and females.”

“I might be able to tell my mum later in life. But I don’t think I can ever tell my dad.”

And despite gay people in Nigeria living in fear, several online communities have emerged. The website Kito Diaries for example, with the sub-headline “We’re here. We’re queer. We’re fabulous”, allow ordinary citizens to submit content and articles about their lives, to share their experiences. Anonymously of course.

An article, titled ‘A letter to the youth’, states: “You have been born into a world that is filled with people who will tell you that you are an abomination and that something is wrong with you. We understand what the weight of their loathing and condemnation feels like because we have been there.”

Both ‘John’ and Richard write for the website. ‘John’, who usually meets new people through social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, says he “mainly has gay friends” and often visits and contributes to the website.

Under the name KingBey, ‘John’ has submitted several stories of past relationships to the website. In his series, titled ‘Kiss and Tell’, ‘John’ writes about sexual encounters and love. “I love to pen down my experiences and happenings,” he says. “Even though we just anonymous names.”

‘John’ writes about how he meets other gay men and describes how he, in vivid detail, has sex with these men. His stories offer a strain of hope for young gay Nigerians

wondering how it will be possible to have any sort of romantic connections in the conservative country.

He started writing for the website about two years ago when it was launched. “The blog owner is a friend of mine so he told me about it,” he says. In one of the earlier articles, ‘John’ reminisces of the trouble he went to for a hook-up back in the days.

He writes: “This was in 2009, the year of my late blooming into all the sex there was to be had in the gaybourhood. I was largely naïve in those days and partook in some silly things I remember these days and shake my head over. Things like traveling from Nasarawa State, where I was serving, to Lagos just for a sex hookup. O chim! Imagine me that finds it hard nowadays to even leave Surulere to Ikeja to see someone. I can’t be bothered, seriously.”

Though he had not had any sexcapades lately, ‘John’ is waiting to publish a story about his current relationship. He met his partner of four months over Instagram last January. He does not want to write a story until him and his partner get to their first six months together. “That should be in July this year,” he says.

The couple has yet to introduce each other to their families, but ‘John’ says he will introduce him as a friend. “I will introduce him to my cousin in the future as a partner, as he already knows of my sexual orientation,” he says. “Then I will introduce him to my parents as my best friend. That way, he won’t be a stranger to the family”.

Richard, on the other hand, was not a contributor to the Kito Diaries from the start. “I saw Kito Diaries filled with stories of gay people and their crazy experiences and right then I was quite convinced that I wasn’t alone,” he says. “I felt this need to share my thoughts and experiences as well.”

When the administrator published an email address for submissions of stories and poems, Richard did not hesitate to submit some work of his own. “That was how I got my chance,” he says. “I started off with a poem about coming out and the fears you have to deal with at the thought of that.”

Richard is currently working on a series titled 'Unknown to ME' based on his experiences living as a gay man in Nigeria. He is also seeing someone, "an amazing someone," he says.

"We've had talks about what a future together would mean for the both of us," Richard says. He explains that he probably will not be able to introduce him to his family. "Right now, he could only get to meet my sister and my cousin and the few friends who know about my sexuality and happens to be supportive," he says. "With the kind of family I grew up in, I may not get to introduce him to everybody, though I wish I could."

Gay people in Nigeria face endless struggles, with their families, with the community, with themselves. But as hard as it is to be gay in the country, Richards does not have a negative outlook on life.

"I can't say much about the future of the Nigerian LGBT community, but who knows," says Richard. "Life is filled with surprises."