

Ghana: Campaigners demand decriminalisation of homosexuality after spike in anti-LGBT violence

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'The Ghanaian government should work to address the stigma that subjects people to violence in their own homes, the place where they should feel safest'

Human rights campaigners are calling for the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Ghana after a new report found violence towards LGBT people by mobs and family members is on the increase.

The report, *No Choice but to Deny Who I Am: Violence and Discrimination Against LGBT People in Ghana*, has revealed the retention of a colonial-era provision in the country's Criminal Offences Act prohibiting and punishing "unnatural carnal knowledge", coupled with a failure to actively address violence and discrimination, is relegating LGBT Ghanaians to "effective second-class citizenship".

The Human Rights Watch, which published the 72-page report, has also said LGBT people are continuing to be attacked by mobs or even by their own family members.

For example, in August 2015, in Nima, a town in the Accra region, members of a vigilante group known as Safety Empire brutally assaulted a young man they suspected was gay. And in May 2017, in a village outside Kumasi in the Ashanti region, the mother of a young woman organised a mob to beat up her daughter and another woman because she suspected they were lesbians in a same-sex relationship.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 114 LGBT people for the report, as well as representatives for human rights organisations based in Ghana, a Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) complaints officer, the assistant police commissioner and three diplomats.

Although LGBT people are rarely, if ever, prosecuted under the country's anti-gay laws, Wendy Isaack, LGBT rights researcher for the Human Rights Watch, said it directly contributes to the climate in which violence against LGBT people is common.

"Homophobic statements by local and national government officials, traditional elders, and senior religious leaders foment discrimination and in some case incite violence," she added.

"LGBT Ghanaians should have the same protection from the government as everyone else.

"And the government should work to address the stigma that subjects people to violence in their own homes, the place where they should feel safest."

Lesbians, bisexual women and transgender men are frequently victims of family violence, the Human Rights Watch found, with many being beaten, threatened and driven out of their homes.

LGBT people in Ghana say that the violence against them has been getting steadily worse since President Nana Akufo-Addo said in an interview for *Al Jazeera* that the law criminalising homosexuality in Ghana remained because he did not believe there was a “sufficiently strong coalition” across public opinion calling for a change.

Leading Ghanaian activist LGBT Mac-Darling Cobbinah told *The Independent* the community would “remain resolute” and continue to “sensitise people to understand” LGBT issues.

“I think we need to employ a lot more allies who will speak on the issues and not hide behind screens as existing currently,” he said.

“Speaking out will help people know and better understand that humans rights of sexual minorities is not based on the type of sex people prefer but it’s instead about humanity and dignity for all persons.

“I support any move to create a rainbow nation for all persons than to throw the few minorities out of their country of birth because of their orientation.”

And one gay man from Ghana - who asked us to keep his identity anonymous out of fear for his own safety - told *The Independent* the key to surviving in Ghana when you identify as LGBT is by “staying strong”.

“Daily life for the perceived and known LGBT community in Ghana is characterised with a number of negative experiences which come from all corners,” he said.

“We continue to face a high level of stigma and discrimination from health facilities, family, communities, with pockets of people facing daily physical, verbal and emotional abuses - including injustice, extortion, blackmail and rejection.

“There is a fair number who also experience dismissal from work as a result of their sexuality, legal injustice, healthcare inequalities, maltreatment and neglect.

“Countless people have considered suicide, seeking asylum or total isolation as a possible solution to help them deal with their sexuality.

“As Ghanaians we need to start rigorous discussion around promotion of human rights [for LGBT people], redefining legal terms and, if possible, repealing laws that criminalise homosexuality.

“Whether we are lawmakers or ordinary citizens we need to come to terms and accept the undeniable fact that LGBT people are human being who belong to families. They are our sons, our daughters, our teachers and our pastors. They are human just like any other person hence they deserve to be accorded dignity, respect and love.”

And one lesbian who also asked to remain anonymous said that the government needed to stop treating LGBT people as “outcasts in our own society”.

“We want to be free so we can stand tall in public and not deal with obstacles and harassment daily - this will make it easier for us to get an education, learn a trade, get jobs and be useful and productive Ghanaians,” she said.

Homophobic sentiment is rife throughout the Ghanaian government, however. In February 2017, Speaker of the Parliament of Ghana, Mike Ocquaye, referred to homosexuality as an “abomination” and equated it with bestiality, calling for stricter laws against same-sex conduct.

This is in spite of the fact the anti-gay law is inconsistent with basic tents of the Ghanaian Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law, respect for human dignity and the right to privacy.

It also violates several human rights treaties that Ghana has ratified, including the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, which adopted a groundbreaking resolution in April 2014 calling on African governments to prevent and punish all forms of violence targeting people on the basis of their real and imputed sexual orientation or gender identity.

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<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/ghana-homosexuality-laws-lgbt-violence-decriminalisation-campaign-calls-a8148696.html>