

Self-portrait

Victor Juliet Mukasa

My name is Victor Juliet Mukasa, 32, a transgender lesbian from Uganda. I am a human rights defender and a banker by profession. I am currently working with the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission as research and policy associate for East, Central and Horn of Africa.

At the age of eleven, I started having love feelings for a good friend of mine in primary school. I started treating her in a very tender, caring and loving way. It was strange to both of us. She got so uncomfortable about it. I got confused too but could not stop those deep feelings. I got so uneasy and not at peace with the way I felt. It was because I knew it was bad according to the books that my mother bought me and the lessons from my biology teacher about adolescent girls.

At that stage, I was supposed to be getting these feelings for a boy. It was not right. I then decided to tell my mother about it. She was my friend and I told her anything. I told her about my feelings for my girlfriend and how I felt that it was wrong. My mother was calm about it but agreed with me that it was not okay but that it was a phase and that my feelings would change. Being from a dedicated catholic family, we solved a lot of problems through prayer. This was another problem and indeed we prayed about it over a period of time. I just kept missing this girl who was, by now, no longer my friend.

In 1989, I joined secondary school. In the first year at this school, I fell in love with another girl. We kissed whenever we got a chance and not more than that. However, other students soon found out and reported to the headmistress that my girlfriend and I were lesbians. This was the first time I heard the word 'lesbian'. To me she was my deep friend and lover. A name was finally attached to how I felt. It was in this school that I met other girls that felt the way I felt for my friend at the age of eleven.

My mother, who was my only support, passed away in 1990. Soon reports from school reached my family. My brothers and sisters started treating me like I was rubbish. They did not care about me anymore. Many stopped talking to me and chased me out of their homes. I moved from family to family for years. Suffered seriously but nothing could change about the way I felt. I went from church to church seeking healing. I only got emotionally, psychologically, physically and sexually abused by the men and women of god in the name of making me 'straight'.

After passing with flying colours at school, I was denied jobs that I qualified for. For those that I got, my workmates soon found out about my sexual orientation and gender identity and I was often fired. I became very poor and homeless, often begging, walking long distances because I could not afford bus fares, going without food for days and always sick.

In 2002, I got fed up of my situation. By this time I had identified other lesbians, gay men and transgender persons in the area where I lived and had made friends with many. I looked

around me and realised that all my suffering was a result of my sexual orientation and gender identity. I had never been in the closet about who I am from the start. Everywhere I went, somehow people found out about me. I was fed up of all the abuse and suffering and was ready to die for the truth. I decided that year that I was going to fight to change the situation for me and for all those that were like me. It was in this year that I started my political activism for LGBTI rights in Uganda. I was ready to die liberating myself and I preferred that to living a distressing life of being different. If my sexual orientation and gender identity were a choice, I would have chosen differently long ago but I could not.

It was in 2002 that I co-founded Freedom and Roam Uganda, an LGBTI women's organization. My political activism started here. Lobbying policy makers directly, creating awareness on LGBTI rights through the media and mobilizing other homosexuals and transgender people to join the struggle.

In 2004, I also co-founded Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), the coalition of several LGBTI organizations, where I was chairperson up to October 2007. During my time at SMUG, I actively directed the movement, engaged in direct lobbying of policy makers and building alliances for the movement. A lot of things changed during this time. There was continuous public discourse in the media on LGBTI issues, improved perceptions about these issues, more coming out of LGBTI individuals and in general, growth of the movement. LGBTI people have expressed more determination and togetherness in their liberation process and in 2007 this has been exhibited in the August LET US LIVE IN PEACE media campaign and the ongoing LGBTI court case in which I and a Kenyan transgender took the government of Uganda to court for violation of our rights based on our sexual orientation and gender identity. (1)

It is very difficult for activists in Uganda to work towards change. In the areas where change has occurred so far, people have had to sacrifice their lives as they work in a hostile environment. Apart from the law that criminalizes homosexuality and homophobic government officials, religion and culture have played a huge role in frustrating the lives of LGBTI people. Culturally, there is no acceptance, with claims that homosexuality is un-African and a vice from the West. Religious leaders have waged war against homosexuality. Many LGBTI people have been abused in churches and excommunicated. A group of influential church leaders recently formed a network to fight homosexuality in society, the Interfaith Rainbow Coalition Against Homosexuality. This has increased rejection of homosexuals.

Despite all the above, the struggle continues. Ugandan homosexuals and transgender people have guts and this has played a big role in the struggle. They say, 'Enough is enough' and I add, 'No guts, no victory!!' ALLUTA CONTINUA!

The Law in Uganda

In 2008 the Ugandan government has announced a major offensive against gays and lesbians in the African country, saying it will prosecute anyone who comes out. Sex between two people of the same sex is a criminal offense - punishable by life imprisonment according to Cap. 106, Section 140 of the Penal Code - but Ethics and Integrity Minister, James Nsaba Buro, said the government is concerned about the number of gays and lesbians in the country.

124 Under the legislation being planned it would be illegal just to be gay. 'We want it to become law in that if someone is a homosexual or confesses to being a gay or lesbian, then he is a criminal,' Buturo has said. Anti-gay attacks are commonplace in Uganda but have increased since LGBT rights groups openly demand basic civil rights.

On October 14, 2009, a member of parliament tabled a private members bill before the Ugandan parliament titled the 'Anti-Homosexuality Bill'. The Bill is aimed at increasing, and expanding penalties for 'homosexual acts' and for all institutions (including NGOs, donors and private companies) who defend the rights of consenting adults who engage in sexual relations with people of the same sex. The Bill calls for Uganda to withdraw from all international treaties and conventions which support the rights of lesbians, gays and bisexuals. It introduces extradition arrangements for Ugandan citizens who perform 'homosexual acts' abroad, and includes legal penalties for people who fail to report alleged homosexual acts or individuals and institutions that promote homosexuality or same-sex marriage to the authorities. Any person alleged to be a homosexual is at risk of life imprisonment and, in some circumstances, the death penalty. The Bill whilst targeting the LGBT community, puts at risk the wider community of parents, teachers, landlords, medical doctors, civil society leaders, human rights activists, media houses, internet café's etc. who do not denounce or report on suspected 'homosexual acts'. In short, this bill targets everybody, and involves everybody: it can not be implemented without making every citizen spy on his or her neighbours. It asserts Extra Territorial jurisdiction. It would imply Uganda to withdraw from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

In response to the tabling of this Bill, a civil society coalition on human rights and constitutional law has been formed to fight the enactment of the Bill based on the need to uphold Uganda's constitution and the fundamental rights of all.

This strategy of targeted repression by ruling parties / governments of the LGBT community is not unique for Uganda. Once more it is being used to divert attention from ongoing social problems and intensify repression in the run-up to the forthcoming elections.

Victor Juliet Mukasa is a prominent LGBTI Human Rights Defender. He is a TransLesbian working with the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) as Research and Policy Associate for East, Central and Horn of Africa. Victor is a founding member of Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), served as SMUG's Chairperson from March 2004 to October 2007 and is now serving on the organizations Advisory Board. He was member of the board of pan-African and international LGBTI groups, which are supported by Hivos, for example, Behind the Mask, Coalition of African Lesbians and the International Lesbian and Gay Association.

- (1) This case was the first time LGBT's - Yvonne Oyoo and Victor Juliet Mukasa - took the police to court in Uganda. In an interview with the *New Internationalist* in 2007, Victor Mukasa said he decided to sue the government because he was tired of the harassment: 'I am suing because of the constant human rights violations that are committed against LGBT people by the government and the public of Uganda without anyone raising a hand,' he said. A day before Christmas 2008 a Ugandan judge has awarded the two LGBT's \$ 7,000, saying their rights were infringed when they were arrested on suspicion of being lesbians in 2005. Justice Stella Arach-Amoko awarded \$ 5,000 to Yvonne Oyoo, who had been a guest in Victor Mukasa's house when it was raided by the police. The payout was for 'arbitrary torture', as Yvonne Oyoo had been man-handled and sexually assaulted. About \$ 2,000 was awarded to Victor Mukasa, a leading Ugandan human rights activist, for damage to his house during the raid.