Faith, HIV and the Criminalisation of Homosexuality
Background Paper for the UK Consortium AGM

Introduction

This background paper incorporates initial research carried out on the issue of faith, HIV and the
criminalisation of homosexuality and has been prepared in anticipation of a Round Table discussion to be held
at the 2012 UK Consortium AGM. The paper is not a comprehensive review. Nonetheless, it is hoped that it will
stimulate debate at the AGM, and beyond, and assist in gathering further information and evidence on the
issue in order to help shape the future direction in which the UK Consortium takes its work on criminalisation
of homosexuality.

The UK Consortium is dedicated to an HIV response that fully acknowledges and promotes the human rights of
people affected by HIV. It is committed to focusing on the issue of criminalisation due to concern raised by its
members (particularly by Faith and Prevention Working Group members) about the potential impact of the
enhanced criminalisation of homosexuality in Uganda, and elsewhere, on the human rights of people living
with and affected by HIV, as well as the practical effects such legislation could have on HIV programmes in
country. The UK Consortium understands that the response to criminalisation is complex, but that there is
much to be learnt from the approach its faith-based members are taking in practical communication with their
partners.

This background paper, UK Consortium e-survey (results of which are included in this paper) and further
evidence gathered during and after the AGM, will filter into a larger policy paper that will be drafted in the
coming months. This policy paper will share experiences and best practice from across the UK Consortium
membership and make recommendations on how members, whether they be faith or secular-minded, can
learn from each other. To take part and contribute, please contact Deborah Laycock at
Deborah@aidsconsortium.org.uk.

This paper looks at the role of faith and the current movement to criminalise homosexual behaviour and its
implications for the HIV response. Its focus is on the current situation in sub-Saharan African countries, and
Uganda in particular, but we fully realise that criminalisation is an issue affecting countries as far a field as
Ukraine and Indonesia. Religion plays an undeniable role in this public debate. Some religious leaders, both
regional and from overseas (particularly the United States) have played a key role in inciting or promoting
efforts to criminalise sex between consenting adults of the same gender or to enhance criminal penalties
against it.

It is well documented that marginalised communities, including men who have sex with men (MSM),
experience higher prevalence rates of HIV compared with the general population.1 2 3 Programmatic efforts to
reach these communities with effective HIV prevention and treatment initiatives are already burdened by
social obstacles. The additional restriction of proposed regressive legislation that imposes harsh criminal
penalties (including, initially in Uganda, the death penalty) on homosexual behaviour will severely restrict
efforts to provide HIV services to these communities.

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Homosexuality in Africa

Opposition to MSM (and, more broadly, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender - LGBT) rights in most countries in Africa (including Uganda) is centred on the idea that homosexuality is culturally alien to the continent and was introduced by European colonists. However, late 19th-century records on Africa and African oral history show that consensual sex between men existed in pre-colonial Africa. Further evidence for the existence of pre-colonial homosexuality is that some African ethnic groups ascribed tribal classifications to homosexual males. While some of these categorisations had negative associations, many had neutral connotations. Certain tribes in pre-colonial Burkina Faso and South Africa regarded homosexual women as astrologers and traditional healers. A number of tribal groups in Cameroon and Gabon believed homosexuality had a medicinal effect. In pre-colonial Benin, MSM behaviour was viewed as a boyhood phase that males passed through and eventually "grew out of". In fact, European contact altered some pre-colonial African attitudes towards homosexuality considerably. For instance, early colonial Portuguese penal codes criminalised homosexuality in Angola. Prior to Portuguese control, homosexual men called *chibados* had been free to exercise their sexuality. It would seem that European colonial laws often either gave rise to or intensified homophobia in some parts of Africa. Thus, it is homophobia that is arguably a European colonial import to Africa and not the phenomenon of homosexuality itself.

It is undeniable that religion itself has played a major role in the condemnation of sex between persons of the same gender. In pre-colonial Africa, the introduced monotheistic faiths of Islam (widespread in Africa since the seventh century CE) and Christianity (largely limited to the northeast of the continent, especially Ethiopia, until the missionary era of the 19th century) both traditionally condemned homosexuality with varying degrees of sanction. However, it is noteworthy that consensual sex between persons of the same gender is legal in the predominantly Muslim countries of Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Niger. It is also legal in the religiously diverse central African countries of the Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Rwanda. There have also been recent proposals to legalise sex between men in Sao Tome and Principe and, most recently, Malawi. Thus, even with an overlay of pre- and post-colonial religious disapproval, there is still a significant minority of countries in Africa which do not criminalise the practice of consensual sex between persons of the same gender.

South Africa is unique in Africa in that it became the first nation in the world to constitutionally prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in 1996. In 1998, the Constitutional Court of South Africa ruled that laws against homosexuality were unconstitutional. On 1 December 2006, South Africa became the fifth country in the world, and the first in Africa, to legalise same-sex marriage.

In Focus: criminalisation in Uganda

In Uganda, same-sex relations have been illegal since the time of the British protectorate in 1894. Additionally, the 2009 Anti-Homosexuality Bill, a piece of legislation put before the Ugandan Parliament by David Bahati MP in October 2009, enhances existing legislation that criminalises same-sex relations in Uganda to include a new offense of ‘aggravated homosexuality’. Current Ugandan legislation, based on British colonial law, makes homosexual practice punishable with up to 14 years imprisonment. The new Bill proposes to extend this punishment to life imprisonment in some instances, and (at least initially) proposed the death penalty for ‘aggravated homosexuality’. Anyone found guilty of aggravated homosexuality will be forced to undergo a medical examination to ascertain his or her HIV status. It also allows for the extradition of Ugandan citizens who have been charged with committing homosexual acts or aggravated homosexuality abroad.

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8 Ibid, Clause 3
9 Ibid Clauses 15-17
To date, this Bill has been stalled in committee and has not yet been promulgated into law. However, the majority of members of the Ugandan Parliament and most governmental officials have publicly supported this legislation.

Some tie the development of this Bill in Uganda to the influence of American evangelical leaders, and in particular Scott Lively. Lively is currently being sued in United States Federal Court by the Centre for Constitutional Rights on behalf of the Ugandan LGBT rights group SMUG (Sexual Minorities Uganda) for being the cause of an increase in discrimination and attacks on the LGBT community in Uganda (including the murder of one of the group’s employees, David Kato in 2011). Lively claims he was only preaching the gospel and has criticised the proposed Ugandan legislation and its severe penalties. However, Lively is head of the anti-gay Abiding Truth Ministries in Massachusetts and author of *The Pink Swastika*, which implicates homosexuals in the creation of Nazism and also implies that they were instrumental in the Holocaust. Lively began his anti-gay campaigning in the early 1990s as communications director of the Oregon Citizens Alliance (OCA), which sponsored a spate of ballot initiatives to deny civil rights and state benefits to LGBT people. The OCA warned of the “alleged homosexual threat” to children. Ballot Measure 9, which failed in 1992, would have added the following text to the state’s constitution: “All governments in Oregon may not use their monies or properties to promote, encourage or facilitate homosexuality, paedophilia, sadism or masochism. All levels of government, including public education systems, must assist in setting a standard for Oregon’s youth which recognises that these behaviours are abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse and they are to be discouraged and avoided.”

One provision of the current Ugandan Bill is the duty for all citizens, and especially those in positions of authority (including health professionals, community workers, teachers and clergy) to report any person who may be guilty of aggravated homosexuality (by definition any person living with HIV who is in a same-sex sexual relationship). Anyone being aware of such a situation and not reporting it to the police becomes themselves guilty of an offence, which carries a fine or prison sentence of up to three years. One immediate implication is that anyone caring for or treating a patient with HIV who admits to being or is known to be gay, is caught between duty of care and patient confidentiality on one hand and the risk of breaking the law and being sent to prison for several years on the other. For patients this means that they potentially would no longer be able to trust their doctors or nurses, and going to a clinic appointment could put oneself at risk of life imprisonment.

There are also parallels with the growing number of Bills in many countries that criminalise HIV transmission – making effective screening, treatment and prevention difficult and placing doctors and other health professionals at risk of prosecution for not reporting patients. Like those laws, the Ugandan Bill also seems to be encouraging legislators and governments in other African nations (in particular, according to anecdotal reports, Zambia and Nigeria) to bring similar Bills before their parliaments.

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In the 2009 Bill, aggravated homosexuality occurs where:

- The person against whom the offence is committed is below the age of 18 years
- The offender is a person living with HIV
- The offender is a parent or guardian of the person against whom the offence is committed
- The offender is a person in authority over the person against whom the offence is committed
- The victim of the offence is a person with a disability
- The offender is a serial offender
- The offender applies, administers or causes to be used by any man or woman any drug, matter or thing with intent to stupefy or overpower him or her so as to thereby enable any person to have unlawful carnal connection with any person of the same sex

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National and International Response

Within Uganda, LGBT and human rights advocates were alarmed by the proposed legislation. Before the introduction of the Bill, there was a perception that Ugandan authorities were gradually easing the enforcement of the existing law that forbids same-sex relations. However, Amnesty International has consistently reported that LGBT persons are subject to arbitrary arrest and have been subjected to abuse and torture by state authorities. The introduction of the anti-homosexuality Bill in 2009 attempts to portray homosexuals as a threat to “the traditional African family” and has greatly increased the sense of vulnerability in the LGBT community. Apart from the legislation to punish same-sex relations, Amnesty International has also noted threats to freedom of expression and association, and the use of torture by law enforcement, among their major concerns in their 2009 report.\(^{13}\)

On 26 January 2011, Uganda’s most prominent LGBT activist, David Kato, was found bludgeoned to death in what authorities in Uganda are characterising as a robbery. His photograph had been published in Kampala-based tabloid Rolling Stone. Rolling Stone was a weekly tabloid newspaper that operated for only four months. It ceased publication in November 2011, after the High Court ruled that it had violated the fundamental rights of LGBT Ugandans by attempting to ‘out’ them and calling for their deaths.\(^{14}\)

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, has urged Uganda to shelve the Bill and decriminalise homosexuality. Human Rights Watch have condemned the Bill, calling it a product of a campaign by evangelical churches and anti-gay groups that has led to death threats and physical assaults against Ugandans suspected of being gay. The Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria has stated that excluding marginalised groups would compromise efforts to stop the spread of HIV in Uganda where 5.4 per cent of the adult population are living with HIV. Elizabeth Mataka, the UN Special Envoy on AIDS in Africa, expressed her concern with the Bill as it will dissuade people from getting tested for HIV if they will subsequently be punished with severe criminal sanctions.\(^{15}\) The HIV Clinicians Society of Southern Africa sent a letter to the Ugandan President stating, “Encouraging openness and combating stigma are widely recognised as key components of Uganda’s successful campaign to reduce HIV infection” and the Bill threatens to enact a “profoundly negative impact on Uganda’s efforts to combat HIV”.\(^{16}\)

Several leaders from other nations have expressed their concerns.\(^{17}\) On 27 November 2009, during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Gordon Brown, the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, expressed his opposition to the Bill to the Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni.\(^{18}\) Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper also expressed opposition privately to President Museveni during the Commonwealth Heads Meeting.\(^{19}\) The Canadian Transport Minister John Baird stated to The Globe and Mail, “The current legislation before Parliament in Uganda is vile, it’s abhorrent. It’s offensive. It offends Canadian values. It offends decency.” The French Government has also criticised the Ugandan Bill, citing a “deep concern”.\(^{20}\)

The European Parliament on 16 December 2009 passed a resolution against the Bill, which threatens to cut financial aid to Uganda.\(^{21}\) The Swedish Government stated that it would revoke its $50 million (£31 million) in development aid to Uganda if the Bill passes, calling it “appalling”. Sweden’s Development Assistance Minister Gunilla Carlsson stated that she “thought and hoped we had started to share common values and
understanding [with the Government of Uganda].”22 Dirk Niebel, the Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development in Germany, told Deutsche Presse-Agentur that financial aid to Uganda will be cut and that a stepwise plan for this has already been made.23

The White House released a statement stating that United States President Barack Obama “strongly opposes efforts, such as the draft law pending in Uganda that would criminalise homosexuality and move against the tide of history”.24 US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has expressed her opposition of the Bill as have members of the US Congress.25 On 8 October 2011, Andrew Mitchell, then UK Secretary of State for International Development, announced that African countries that persecute homosexuals will face cuts in financial aid from the British government. Mitchell specifically warned President Museveni that his country faced reductions in aid unless it abandons the Bill.26

Response from the Faith Community

There has been public opposition of the Ugandan Bill from several Christian denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church and member churches of the Anglican Communion. The ex-gay ministry Exodus International, based in the United States, sent a letter to President Museveni stating that “[t]he Christian church ... must be permitted to extend the love and compassion of Christ to all. We believe that this legislation would make this mission a difficult if not impossible task to carry out”. In Uganda, Gideon Byamugisha, an Anglican priest openly living with HIV, said that the proposed Bill “would become state-legislated genocide”.27

The Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams has said in a public interview that he did not see how any Anglican could support the Ugandan Bill, “Overall, the proposed legislation is of shocking severity and I can’t see how it could be supported by any Anglican who is committed to what the Communion has said in recent decades. Apart from invoking the death penalty, it makes pastoral care impossible – it seeks to turn pastors into informers”.28

While the Anglican Church in Uganda opposes the death penalty, its archbishop, Henry Luke Orombi, has not taken a position on the Bill. Some individuals within the Anglican Church, such as retired bishop Christopher Senyonjo, have been vocally opposed to the Bill and supportive of LGBT rights in Uganda. In 2010, Bishop Senyonjo toured the United States to draw attention to the Bill.29

Uganda’s Catholic Archbishop of Kampala Cyprian Lwanga stated in December 2009 that the Bill was unnecessary and “at odds with the core values” of Christianity, expressing particular concerns at the death penalty provisions.30 Pope Benedict XVI received the Ugandan Ambassador in December 2009 and commended the climate of freedom and respect in the country towards the Catholic Church. During this meeting, there was no mention of the anti-homosexuality Bill. However, three days earlier the Vatican legal attaché to the United Nations stated that “Pope Benedict is opposed to unjust discrimination against gay men and lesbians”.31

Speaking against the Bill in Uganda is going to be difficult for both expatriate and local aid workers and for NGOs and FBOs. Ugandan churches are either openly supporting the Bill or remaining silent for fear of being seen as ‘pro-gay’. Furthermore the legislation has, in part, been proposed based on the idea that homosexuality is an un-African import from the ‘decadent and sinful West’. As a consequence, to speak out as

26 Walters, Simon, 2011. We'll cut your aid if you persecute gays, Britain warns African nations. Daily Mail [Online].
a Westerner is to play into this perception and to distance oneself from the national church, and indeed some churches in donor countries.

Response from Consortium Members

In August 2012, the UK Consortium surveyed its members with the aim of exploring the opinions and positions of its members on the issue of criminalisation.

There was a strong response – twenty out of eighty members (25 per cent), 10 of whom (50 per cent of responding organisations) identified themselves as faith based organisations (FBOs). Both faith based and secular members saw criminalisation as a serious issue.

Current activities of respondents on criminalisation are mainly advocacy and awareness raising focused - within UK Parliament, the faith community and international development sector. In addition, a small number of frontline health programmes are reaching out to, and supporting, LGBT communities but these are currently limited in scope and geographical focus.

With regards to a policy position on criminalisation, all respondents backed equal human rights/non-discrimination on the grounds of sexuality and opposed any form of criminalisation of homosexuality. Respondents saw the impact of criminalisation on HIV as denying a group which is at higher risk from contracting HIV from accessing services – denying them their human rights. Criminalisation would also enhance stigma around HIV and LGBT communities - “doubly stigmatised” - and potentially push individuals further underground – making them even harder to reach for health and wellbeing services. Criminalisation was seen as a disincentive for LGBT communities to go for HIV testing or treatment.

Only one respondent was unaware of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill currently before the Ugandan Parliament. Most respondents said that the Bill would have an impact on the work that they do, making it more difficult to discuss homosexuality across Africa (not just in Uganda) and promote sexual rights and services. Most were concerned that it would mean partners in country will be fearful about working with sexual minority populations due to the possibility of incarceration if they do. As a result, partners may cease doing advocacy work around LGBT issues. Respondents noted that the Bill will affect the human rights of beneficiaries and will likely cause significant stress in relationships between NGOs and some African church leaders.

Respondents from FBOs expressed opposition to the Bill from human rights and theological positions, as well as from practical concerns about health and community impact.

Opinions on the drivers of criminalisation of homosexuality included homophobia, fear, lack of education/information, ignorance, evangelical preachers (different interpretations of religious doctrines), opportunism on the part of politicians who see this as a populist issue, archaic laws in place since colonial times, anti-colonialism and taboos around sexuality.

When asked about how UK civil society should respond, responses emphasised the need to be sensitive and cautious, and not wanting to be seen to be promoting imperialism/neo-colonialism. It was agreed that UK civil society needs to support and take the lead from national LGBT activists and networks, and to lobby UK parliamentarians, civil society and church leaders to raise awareness of the issue. Respondents also supported doing more research that provides evidence on the potential or actual harm of criminalisation.

On the question of how UK faith communities should respond, the emphasis of respondents was on research that provides evidence of harm and on the need to mobilise key faith leaders to speak out publicly and advocate against criminalisation through denominational links and networks. Also, respondents encouraged the use of these networks to counter the misinformation and poor theology that is fuelling homophobia, by carrying out training and disseminating scriptural resources.

Respondents felt that UK parliamentarians and the UK Government could respond to criminalisation by primarily listening to the advice of LGBT activists in country, continuing with quiet diplomacy at all levels, and by lobbying progressive African parliamentarians and church leaders to speak out on the issue. While
threatening to withdraw aid was seen as contentious (possibly playing into the neo-colonialist issue), some organisations felt that this, or sanctions of some kind, was still a legitimate last line of action. In addition, funding and supporting LGBT activists and civil society groups in-country was seen by many as an important part of the UK Government's response. Offering asylum to those fleeing homophobia-driven persecution was also suggested as a positive step the UK could undertake.

Conclusion

The current movement towards criminalisation of same-sex relations, including in Uganda, is a cause for concern for a number of reasons. Firstly, it feeds on a growing sentiment of homophobia in many African (and other) nations, some of it fuelled by foreign religious groups (especially, though not exclusively, in some sectors of United States evangelicalism). Secondly, the increase in homophobia is making attacks on sexual minority communities more commonplace, driving these communities further underground and marginalising the groups advocating for their human rights. A third concern is that criminalising sexual minorities (in particular MSM) fuels the HIV epidemic by making prevention, treatment, care and support more difficult.

There is a considerable degree of concern amongst Consortium members about criminalisation and its impact on human rights. The Consortium is committed to continuing its focus on criminalisation, working with its members, the faith community and the UK Government to highlight good practice and a practical response to the issue within Uganda and beyond. It is hoped that the Round Table discussion at the AGM will be a catalyst toward an enhanced focus on this issue.

This background paper was written by James Matarazzo with additional support from Steve Fouch, Maria Phelan, Claudia Stoicescu, Gavin Stedman-Bryce, Debbie Laycock, IjeAjibade, and Ben Simms.

October 2012