

## **New Blow for Gay Rights in Zimbabwe**

**Author:** IWPR

Activists struggle on as legal clampdown on same-sex relationships comes into force.

When Tracy Mhara, a 32-year-old lesbian from Harare, travels the 150 kilometres to visit her family's rural home she goes accompanied by a married male friend whom she introduces as her husband-to-be.

When they ask why he has not paid the customary lobola, a set amount paid by a prospective husband to the bride's family, of a dozen or more cows, he smiles and pleads poverty.

Constantly urged by her grandparents to start a family, Mhara is now seeking a friend who is willing to father a baby so that she can fulfil a revered custom of the Shona people that the first-born in any family produces a child.

"My grandparents have been pestering me for a grandchild," said Mhara, whose round face and broad smile give her a deceptively cheerful appearance. "I will do it just to hush them up and cover my tracks."

Paul, a 34-year-old Bulawayo teacher, has married twice and has a six-year-old daughter. Paul said he was forced to marry by his parents, and that both his wives left after discovering that their marriages were just fronts. He attends church regularly "to pray for his sin" but is unable to abandon his lifestyle. He said he was "born gay" and feels "insulted by people who think this is a prank".

Being openly homosexual in this southern African country is considered such a disgrace that coming out entails maintaining a delicate balancing act between modern freedoms and the age-old traditions of the majority Shona-speaking people.

Gays in Harare's closely-knit community who spoke to IWPR said they preferred to stay underground because of growing official hostility and ordinary people's intolerance towards them.

Chesterfield Samba, 33, told IWPR he has been in love with another man for ten years. "What I want to say is that it is possible to be black, gay and Zimbabwean," he said. "People should stop equating us with Satanists. We are discriminated against and live in fear of being victimised."

President Robert Mugabe has described homosexuals as "worse than dogs and pigs". That statement, reported around the world, was made a decade ago but it still reverberates in the country.

Mugabe charges that homosexuality is unnatural and "un-African", saying it is an alien culture practised only by "a few whites" in his country. When he wants to attack his favourite foreign political target, British prime minister Tony Blair, he refers to "Blair's gay cabinet".

Until recently, homosexuality was not illegal in Zimbabwe, although the statutes outlawed sodomy. However, a new law that came into force in August makes "physical contact between males that would be regarded by a reasonable person as an indecent act" a criminal offence.

In a terse response to the new law, Keith Goddard, programme manager for the group Gays and Lesbians in Zimbabwe, GALZ, said, "Lesbians and gays are there and have a right to their sexual preference. Sexual preference is a human right."

Geoff Feltoe, a professor of law at the University of Zimbabwe, said the amendments represented a hardening of attitudes towards same sex-relationships. "A seemingly intimate embrace or hug between two men would presumably be construed as a crime now," said Feltoe. "It would seem the impetus for such legal transformation was the sensational sodomy trial of the late Banana."

Zimbabwe's first post-independence president, the Reverend Canaan Sodindo Banana, died a publicly disgraced figure after a high-profile sodomy conviction. Testimonies during his 17-day trial revealed him as a closet homosexual who abused male subordinates while in State House. Banana, a Methodist minister and a father of four, denied the charges. But a string of state witnesses testified that he used everything from drugged soft drinks to the chance of career advancement to secure sexual favours.

He was jailed and died in November 2003.

So angry was Mugabe with Banana's homosexual trysts that he did not forgive him even in death, refusing permission for his body to be interred at the national shrine where Zimbabwe's "national heroes" are laid to rest.

Even with the satisfaction that comes with standing up to Mugabe, being openly ngochani (gay) in conservative Zimbabwe means being increasingly lonely, ashamed and riddled with self-doubt.

"Mugabe has successfully created the impression that gays are enemies of society," said Reverend Levee Kadenge, a school chaplain who preaches tolerance toward homosexuals. "I am not saying that homosexuality is acceptable in Shona culture, but there have been ways of accommodating it. In our culture, when people do something that isn't the norm, we say the spirits are making them do that, and we accept there must be a purpose."

In some communities, said Kadenge, there is even a belief that having sex with another man, particularly a young one, can bring good fortune to the older of the two.

"By doing such an extraordinary thing, you get power from it," said Kadenge. "But the power remains only if you keep it under seal. If you talk about it or show other people, the strength goes. That is our tradition."

Mugabe agrees that homosexuality is best dealt with quietly, but he rejects any suggestion that it is homegrown, insisting that gays and lesbians are remnants of colonialism.

His crusade, capped by the latest legislation, has generated a climate of fear in which gays feel more threatened than ever.

The country's small number of outspoken gays and lesbians - there are fewer than 200 fee-paying members of GALZ in a country of 11.5 million people - say the new law will harden public attitudes and

make homosexuals' lives "hellish". A recent fundraising event for GALZ was cancelled after an organiser was beaten up at a nightclub where it was to be held. Tim Francis, not his real name, who was there when his colleague was attacked, said police refused even to take a statement once they realised the victim was gay.

"Something that would have happened 30 or 35 years ago in America is happening now in Zimbabwe," said Francis, 32, who aspires to eventually be Zimbabwe's first openly gay member of parliament. "We are very much in the Dark Ages here."

Except in neighbouring South Africa, where homosexuals of every creed and colour are visible, well-organised and entitled to equal rights under the liberal state constitution, there is little precedent in Africa for those trying to promote gay activism in Zimbabwe. In 1999 when the government attempted to write a new constitution, GALZ pushed for the inclusion of a sexual orientation clause, which was refused. The draft constitution was itself rejected in a referendum, albeit for a host of different reasons than that of homosexual rights.

Goddard told IWPR that since the Nineties, GALZ's priority has been preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS amongst gays - this despite fears that a close association with AIDS awareness efforts would cause the disease to be perceived as a "gay plague". The group stepped into the fray because it was concerned that information about preventing HIV transmission appeared to be aimed at heterosexuals in a country where a quarter of the population is infected with HIV.

"The gay and lesbian issue is completely ignored," said Goddard. However, he said the association was pleasantly surprised when it received a small sum of taxpayers' money from the government-run National Aids Council recently. "An audit found that we were one of the organisations which put the money to good use," said Goddard.

At present, GALZ is one of the few lobby groups in Zimbabwe that has a treatment plan up and running for people with full-blown AIDS. "Our members can die in traffic accidents or from any other cause, but we don't want them to die of AIDS," said GALZ health manager Martha Thodlanah.

Before the end of the year, the association intends to have all its registered members taking an HIV test. It will also distribute posters warning people about the ways in which gays are vulnerable to AIDS.

Taking its agenda a step further, GALZ has also applied to present a paper at the national AIDS conference later this year.

Police harassment has driven one of GALZ's founders, Kudah Samuriwo, out of the country. He has become a drag performer on the London theatre circuit with his show "The Queen of Africa". One of his favourite jokes goes, "I don't know what Mugabe has against pigs and dogs. He must have had the worst sex ever with them."

In a recent BBC interview, Kudah said his uncle, a soldier, raped him in the early Seventies at the age of 14 the night after his relative had returned from Mugabe's military crackdown on the minority Ndebele people of western and southern Zimbabwe. His show charts his personal story, including Mugabe's oppression of the gay community, with homosexuals repeatedly bribed, detained, beaten and sometimes raped by the authorities.

Kudah intends to take his show back home to Zimbabwe one day as part of a new liberation struggle. "After all, a Queen must protect her subjects, even if the president refuses to do so," he said.

Joseph Mandigo is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe.

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