

"QUEER PEOPLE ARE AFRAID TO GO TO THE DOCTOR"

Interview with Edward Mutebi, Lets walk Uganda, about the impact on health of the draconian anti-LGBTIQ*-law in Uganda

By Axel Schock

Due to the new "Anti-Homosexuality Act", LGBTIQ in Uganda live in permanent danger of death. But also the health system suffers enormously from the intensified criminalization of LGBTIQ*. It is feared that similar laws will be implemented in surrounding countries with significant implications for the human right to health and for Global Fund and PEPFAR programs.*



Edward Mutebi, Photo Credit @Konrad Hirsch

It is considered one of the most queer-hostile laws in the world. For example, "homosexual acts" are punishable by many years in prison, and in certain cases even the death penalty. Anyone who has knowledge of queer fellow human beings is now forced to denounce them,

otherwise these neighbors, landlords, workers and other close people can be sentenced to prison. The result: LGBTIQ* not only lose social ties, but also their homes and jobs - and are afraid to go to doctors' offices or hospitals. A conversation with the co-founder of the LGBTIQ* human rights organization "[Let's Walk Uganda](#)", Edward Mutebi.

The new law not only criminalizes homosexuality as such, but also individuals and groups who advocate for queer people can be punished with up to 20 years in prison. How does this affect health care?

The law thus also criminalizes people or initiatives that support LGBTIQ* in the country. This ultimately affects all health organizations that offer their services specifically to LGBTIQ* people, such as [The AIDS Support Organization Uganda \(TASO Uganda\)](#) or the [Most At Risk Population Initiative \(M.A.R.P.I.\)](#). Their work is now blatantly restricted, because doctors and staff are now legally obliged to report their clients to the authorities if they know that they are homosexual or transgender. People are therefore afraid to go to the doctor or hospital.

Even before the law was passed, LGBTIQ* had limited access to health care. That is why the community has formed alliances with open-minded organizations - on a private, public and political level. This included medical practices and hospitals. Due to the law, these important partners of the LGBTIQ* community are now forced to terminate their association and thus also their support, as they must respect and comply with the law. Because the mere suspicion that they are associated with the LGBTIQ* community can have dire consequences for them - up to and including prison sentences.

How do people from the community react to this radical change and threat?

There is uncertainty and above all fear, and it is justified. Transgender people no longer even dare to leave the house to seek medical help. There has already been a case of a trans* person in Kampala being beaten up in hospital, reported to the police by doctors and arrested. This person then had to endure humiliating photos of the genital area being taken by the police. It has always been difficult for LGBTIQ* to get HIV protection such as condoms and lubricants, but the law now makes it almost impossible. This also applies to drug prevention through pre-exposure prophylaxis as well as post-exposure prophylaxis. It is therefore very likely that we will soon have to expect a significant increase in new HIV infections, especially in the LGBTIQ* community.

Is there any awareness of these consequences in the health sector? Are these effects of the law discussed in public?

Yes, it is indeed an issue. But mainly because the law does not only restrict the LGBTIQ* community - it has an impact on the whole population. And it is to be expected that the HIV rate will not only increase among gay men.



Edward Mutebi, Photo Credit @Konrad Hirsch

How can this be explained?

In the fight against HIV, Uganda is dependent on foreign aid, especially from the USA and its PEPFAR program, which enables the purchase of HIV medication, among other things. This benefits not only the LGBTIQ* community, but also the entire population. Immediately after the Anti-Homosexuality Act was passed, US President Biden ordered his security forces to

review the impact of the law and to review all aid to Uganda, including PEPFAR. That is why it is widely discussed. Because people know: When Western states and organizations stop their support, not only the health sector, such as HIV treatment, is affected, but also other funded projects, for example in the education sector.

So if the general public has to suffer from the consequences of the law and is also aware of it, does that reflect on those responsible in politics?

The Ugandan government does not care. Western governments and aid organizations had already announced this before the law was passed. President Yoweri Museveni reacted by claiming that the West was blackmailing the country to be able to introduce homosexuality in Uganda. If funding for the health system was cut, it would mean death for two million people in the country. However he came to this figure: he knew that the law would cause enormous damage to health care in the country and that it would be the most vulnerable, poorest people who would suffer. Those who have benefited most from these foreign-funded medicines.

Do people know who is responsible for these consequences?

They know that the government is responsible. They also know that the passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act is a political move. It has long dawned on the population that the LGBTIQ* community is nothing more than a government scapegoat to divert attention from much more important, mainly socio-economic problems such as poverty or corruption. But the government has no answer to this.

So is there any hope that the government will revoke the law again when resentment among the population grows?

That cannot be predicted at all. The entire political system, as well as the judiciary, serves one person, and that is the President of Uganda. He will only take it back if he wakes up one day and realizes that the law was a mistake. The country has already received enormous pressure and backlash from the international community. The law is currently under review due to a lawsuit. But if the president wants the lawsuit to be thrown out and the law to remain in force, that is what will happen.

Will other East African states feel emboldened by the law to tighten their own homophobic jurisdictions?

This is already happening. In our neighboring country Kenya, the so-called "Family Protection Act" is currently being discussed in parliament, which is recognizably based on the law in Uganda. This is disastrous for LGBTIQ* people in Uganda because Kenya has been a safe haven for many in the community. There, people who fled because of their sexual identity could find protection. However, LGBTIQ* refugees in Kenyan reception centers, for example in Kakuma, are already reporting that they are increasingly exposed to violence, including sexual violence. Amnesty International has already documented this development in detail. However, it is indeed to be feared that even more African states will tighten their legislation. Such a development is already emerging in Ghana as well.

Interview: Axel Schock

Photo credit: (c) Konrad Hirsch

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