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Spotlight

"Against all odds – making gains for LGBTI communities across Africa"

Organizations across Africa are working under difficult circumstances to improve human rights for LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) people and to help them gain equality, dignity and justice. Often, it is an uphill battle. But there have been some encouraging wins.

A mixed bag – hope and progress ...

“The situation in the Southern African region varies greatly from country to country, and so do the challenges we face,” says Neville Gabriel, Chief Executive Officer of the Other Foundation, which is based in Johannesburg and works across Southern Africa.

“In South Africa, for example, there have been constitutional protections since 1998 that explicitly recognize and defend LGBTI relationships and families. In Mozambique, the penal code was reformed in 2015 and same-sex sexual activity is no longer illegal. In Malawi, the current president [Peter Mutharika, elected May 2014] is much more open to discussing LGBTI rights than any other past presidents.”

... but also horrific examples of violence and oppression

But despite these gains, Gabriel says, there are many instances across Southern Africa where LGBTI people face extreme abuse and exclusion.

Many countries do not allow LGBTI organizations to register as legal entities, which inhibits their ability to bring about change. During election cycles, political parties often promote anti-LGBTI ideals as part of their campaigns. This sparks outbreaks of violence towards the community. In extreme cases of discrimination, people have been murdered because of their sexuality.

“On one hand, there is hope and progress, and on the other hand, there are horrific examples of violence and oppression. It’s a mixed bag,” Gabriel explains.

Battling abuse and exclusion

“One of the challenges LGBTI people face daily across East Africa is actual physical security,” says Mukami Marete, Deputy Executive Director of the UHAI-East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative (UHAI-EASHRI, based in Nairobi).

“Politicians and religious fundamentalists make reckless statements about LGBTI people and sex workers, saying they promote immorality and should ‘not be allowed to be here’. These wrong-minded sentiments result in our people being attacked.”

She adds that access to public services, such as health and education, is another problem for LGBTI people. People are often dismissed from school and chased out of their homes because of their sexual orientation, leaving them uneducated, poor and without support.

Changing social attitudes

The Other Foundation is an LGBTI community foundation for Southern Africa. Its core mission is to raise funds to defend and advance equality and social inclusion of LGBTI people in the region. Since it became operational in 2013, the Foundation has allocated 88 grants to support individual change makers and organizations, for a total amount of about US\$700,000.

Gabriel says the greatest challenge organisations across Africa are working under difficult circumstances to improve human rights for LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) people and to help them gain equality, dignity and justice. Often, it is an uphill battle. But there have been some encouraging wins.

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Gabriel says the greatest challenge in many countries is trying to change social attitudes.

“The truth is we really don’t know what attitudes are in the region, because the research hasn’t been done,” he says. “So part of our work is to develop new polling techniques to find out what the public’s perception is with regards to the LGBTI community.”

Walking the journey

UHAI – the Swahili word for ‘life’ – is Africa’s first indigenous, activist-led fund supporting sexual and gender minorities and sex workers in their efforts to achieve equality, dignity and justice.

“Since 2009, we have made about US\$4 million in grants throughout East Africa,” says Mukami. “We walk the journey with our grantee partners – we provide them with flexible financial support, but also help them develop sustainable organizations through capacity building and enhanced leadership skills.”

Big and small wins bring hope

UHAI EASHRI has supported some substantial wins for the rights of LGBTI people and sex workers in East Africa. It is helping Kenya’s National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission in an appeal filed by the Government against a positive court ruling that ordered the Kenyan government to grant it legal recognition. In Uganda, UHAI EASHRI supported the Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum to get the Constitutional Court to overturn Uganda’s draconian Anti-Homosexuality Act. It also funds Kenya’s Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme (BHESP) to help it gather evidence, secure and protect witnesses, and litigate against violence towards sex workers.

Reaching out to friends in the United States

In January 2016, UHAI EASHRI opened the ‘UHAI EASHRI US Fund’ at KBFUS. “KBFUS offers a very flexible partnership,” says Mukami. “The management fees are extremely reasonable, which is very important for us. It’s easy to communicate with KBFUS and their response time is fast. It’s an easy partnership for us to have.”

Gabriel has had a similar experience with KBFUS since the American Friends of the Other Foundation was set up in May 2015.

“We needed to find a way to receive funding from donors in the United States who could contribute in a tax-deductible way,” he says. “I approached KBFUS and found it to be one of the quickest and most efficient avenues to do this. It’s one of the least complicated things we’ve done in a long time.”

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