

**The Issues of Lesbian Gay  
Bisexual Transgender organising  
in Africa.**

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**Unarmed Resistance:  
the transnational factor  
13-17 July 2006**



**Centre For Peace and Reconciliation Studies**

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## The Issues of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender organising in Africa.

This paper centres mainly on issues of LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) organising in Africa. It mainly looks at the inroads that have been made in trying to organise and also the lessons and challenges that we have encountered along the way I will look at the history of organising around LGBT issues on the continent.

On 7 February 2004, 55 participants from 22 LGBTI (I for Intersex) groups representing 17 African countries met in Johannesburg for an eight-day All-Africa Symposium on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights. The major purpose of the meeting was to develop strategies for African LGBT organising in hostile climates at local, sub-regional and regional levels as a coordinated response to HIV and AIDS amongst men who have sex with men (MSM), women who have sex with women (WSW) and bisexual people on the African continent.

It was an important occasion. A number of efforts have been made over the years to encourage African LGBT groups to cooperate, the most significant being those of the International Lesbian and Gay Organisation (ILGA), the largest international membership body of LGBT groups. ILGA's highest decision-making body is the World Conference, which meets, on average, once in every two years. At the 1992 Paris World Conference, ILGA adopted a policy of dividing its membership into regions, of which Africa formed one. Since then, at World Conferences, regions are expected to caucus separately and to bring resolutions to the plenary for adoption. Each region is expected to appoint two representatives to the ILGA Board, one male and one female. But whereas ILGA Europe, America, and to some extent Latin America, have been strikingly successful in their attempts to organise and push the international LGBT agenda, until very recently, the African Region has not managed to put in place any sustainable regional structures to fulfil any major objectives.

Until ten years ago, LGBT issues were not a priority for international funders of human rights organisations and they were still the subject of heated debate for many international human rights watchdogs like Amnesty International. Even the funding agency HIVOS, now a major funder of LGBT programmes in the developing world, went through a great deal of internal soul-searching at local level before it became comfortable with supporting the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ). At the Paris World Conference of ILGA in 1992, Amnesty International was only just beginning to adopt lesbian and gay activists as prisoners of conscience and it was not until 1995, with the London Office's open support for GALZ's struggle against the vitriolic attacks on gays and lesbians by the Zimbabwean President and his government, that Amnesty truly started to mainstream LGBT issues in its work.

There are many reasons why, in the past, African LGBT communities have failed to cooperate, the most obvious being the open hostility to LGBT organising by most African governments and strong social disapproval of homosexuality. At the local level, LGBT organising has often been weak (or simply non-existent) and seriously under-resourced. LGBT communities get no access to what limited state resources are available for social development and, in fact, these are more likely to be committed towards the oppression of LGBT people.

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Clearly, no African LGBT network is possible if groups are struggling at the starting line to gain registration and simply exist and if lesbians and gay men are so terrified of the consequences of admitting to their sexual orientation openly. Even in Southern Africa, where the movement is more open, better structured and reasonably well resourced, major difficulties at local and national levels have understandably overridden concerns for building an African LGBT network, especially on a continent where communication is difficult and where it is easier and cheaper to travel to Europe and the United States than, say, to Rwanda. Southern Africans, who often forget striking differences in culture, economic infrastructure and creed on the continent, have also expected LGBT communities in other parts of Africa to follow their bold example and simply speak out.

Those who are wealthy have generally been able to buy their freedom and the sexual orientation clause simply meant they were able to buy this freedom more easily through appealing to the law. In stark contrast, the poverty-stricken lesbian in a rural area is still unaware of her legal rights and the cost of legal assistance puts the law completely out of her reach. Her lack of financial and social independence makes any attempts on her part to seek legal redress seem rash and irresponsible and likely to turn her into an outcast and deprive her of the social support she so desperately needs.

The brutal killing of the South African lesbian, Zoliswa Nkonya, in Khayelitsha township in Cape Town on February 4<sup>th</sup> 2006, also drives home the fact that liberal constitutions do not help when it comes to facing a mob of angry young men who are offended by your sexuality.

Whilst LGBT activists in the rest of Africa pray for the day when they will be constitutionally protected, the techniques that they have learnt in normalising themselves in hostile environments have been a great deal more useful in strengthening the position of the weak and powerless rather than guaranteeing the rights of the rich and powerful. In this regard, South Africa has much to learn from the methods of countries to the North although, by the same token, South Africa has a lot to offer the rest of Africa in terms of legal strategy and activism. There is also the argument as to whether it is better strategy to go the legal route before raising the temperature through activism and alerting the courts to the fact that sexual orientation is a hot potato.

The victimisation of Africa has also played its role in preventing African LGBT from moving towards coordinated action. With communication easier with the West and the vision of international human rights groups as merciful saviours, many LGBT groups expend most of their energies on wooing international funders and seeking assistance from organisations like Amnesty International, ILGA and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), instead of looking to like-minded groups on the continent for mutual support. Many international human rights organisations, like ILGA, are confused with funders and it is common for African LGBT organisations to join ILGA as an automatic gesture accompanied by the belief that the international body has the power and resources to deliver them from evil.

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Although many closeted groups conduct important work quietly, some have emerged for the singular purpose of tapping into foreign funding and attending foreign conferences: for them there is no genuine commitment to fighting for change and they remain quite comfortable with playing the victim. At times, this has extended to explicit acts of fraud whereby individuals, under the guise of spurious organisations, have claimed acts of oppression in order to access funds for personal gain. This has led to division and suspicion where established LGBT groups in Africa have sometimes voiced scepticism about the emergence of new LGBT organisations, to the extent that some organisations are seen as groups of heterosexuals jumping on the LGBT bandwagon to access foreign cash.

The increasing spate of those seeking asylum in the West on grounds of persecution related to their sexual orientation has not only drained the continent of leaders with experience, disrupted activities and wasted scarce resources, but has given the general impression, in some quarters, that LGBT organising is largely geared towards opening up escape routes from the continent. Understandably, the claims made by asylum seekers are often exaggerated, once again feeding the myth that it is impossible to be gay or lesbian and live in Africa.

Much of the African LGBT discourse is centred on the hopeless situation facing LGBT rather than highlighting any achievements or progress. To a large extent, African LGBT have fed the international press, international human rights organisations and funders with what they think they want to hear since it is tales of tragedy and disaster that seem to attract international attention and accompanying resources. This dependency on the West has seriously discouraged self-motivation and self-reliance and detracted from the ability of groups to recognise the value of cooperation with other LGBT groupings on the continent. Some have decided that such cooperation is a potentially expensive and pointless exercise.

The first real opportunity for African LGBT cooperation presented itself at the 1999 ILGA World Conference in South Africa, which was organised by the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE). The Coalition (now The Lesbian and Gay Equality Project) had been instrumental in ensuring the inclusion of sexual orientation as a specific ground for non-discrimination in the constitution for the New South Africa. For the first time, the African region was exceptionally well represented: Zimbabwe sent fifteen delegates and many South African groups were also present. In addition, there were delegations from numerous other African countries. A prominent South African LGBT activist, Phumi Mtetwa, was elected co-Secretary General. ILGA agreed to sponsor a desk at the NCGLE to handle matters relating to building up the African region. But, within months, the promise of a strong African region came to grief and the office closed. Phumi Mtetwa left South Africa to take up employment in Latin America. At the 2000 ILGA conference in Italy, Africa was again seriously underrepresented.

In 2000, HIVOS approached GALZ to assist with the training of LGBT organisations it was supporting in East Africa - namely Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. HIVOS felt that GALZ and The Rainbow Project (TRP) in Namibia represented useful examples of how LGBT organising is possible in hostile climates. GALZ subsequently hosted a

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seven-day training course in October of that year, labelled The Africa Exchange Programme (AEP), for five East African groups and TRP. Much of the discussion centred on what LGBT groups should organise around, and more specifically, on whether they should present themselves openly as LGBT or disguise themselves under the banner of HIV and AIDS. As was pointed out in one of the sessions, the gay rights movement in the United States came out of the civil rights movement at the end of the 1960s at a different point in time and in a different historical context. Gay and lesbian activists in the 1970s concentrated on civil liberties such as the right to privacy, freedom of expression and the repealing of homophobic laws, generally referred to as ‘first generation rights’.

Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a long way from the United States of the late 1960s. Primary concerns for contemporary Africa are poverty, HIV/AIDS and the like – in short the basic day-to-day struggles to exist. Gay and Lesbian emancipation in the West was also linked strongly with radical feminism, which has been glaringly absent from most African LGBT discourse outside South Africa and Namibia, making most LGBT organising in Africa heavily male-dominated.

Many of the groups at the AEP meeting had managed to register with government under the guise that they were AIDS service organisations and much of their work focused on safer sex for MSM or general HIV/AIDS interventions for men and women. What are generally called ‘second generation rights’, relating to issues of poverty alleviation and resource mobilisation, loomed large and took priority over fighting for basic civil liberties.

Questions of sexual identities were also explored. African homosexuals have uncritically adopted Western labels of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and have also adopted the rhetoric that surrounds them such as the slogan ‘gay and lesbian rights are human rights’. Words for same-sex sexual relationships do exist in many African languages, but owing to the offensive nature of most of them and their general obscurity in international circles, they have never become labels that people can formally adopt and organise around. This has led to a threefold problem: ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ continue to be interpreted by African governments as foreign political labels; many who engage in same-sex sexual activity do not identify as gay or lesbian; and many who adopt the labels are, in sexual behaviour, bisexual and even, in a small number of cases, exclusively heterosexual.

Whereas gay-identified men can often hide their sexual relations with women, lesbian women may fall pregnant which has led to accusations of some women being ‘false lesbians’, traitors to the cause or women cashing in. Lesbian women with children, in particular, are often turned into apologists and have been known to describe their sexual encounters with men as rape or ‘a kind of rape’, implying that there was at least some element of consent. Discussions around sexual rights relating to the right to bodily integrity, the right to choose one’s sexual identity, the right to all safe and consensual sexual activity with other adults (even if this seemingly conflicts with one’s sexual identity) and the right to bear children are still very much in their infancy within the African LGBT discourse.

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Because of gross generalisations within the HIV and AIDS movement relating to lesbian sexual behaviours, African lesbians are placed on the lowest rung when it comes to risks associated with acquiring or transmitting the HIV virus. For lesbian women who are exclusively WSW, this is undoubtedly true, but most women in Africa do not enjoy that luxury of choice and certainly most do not have access to expensive technologies for artificial insemination. Although great strides have been made by international HIV and AIDS service organisations through the adoption of the apolitical term MSM, so as to include non-gay-identified men, it is positively dangerous for these same organisations to continue to refuse acknowledgement of lesbian women as a vulnerable group when it comes to HIV.

At the end of the AEP training, the organisations present formed a loose coalition called African Solidarity through Sexual Rights Task Force (ASSERT) and made plans to continue training and discussion in Namibia. However, as with many international projects of this nature, the main organisers became distracted by more immediate national concerns and the programme went into mothballs.

Strong African representation at the 1999 ILGA conference in South Africa had had much to do with the proximity of the venue to other African countries. For the Oakland conference in 2001, attempts were made to ensure that sponsorship was found for African groups to attend, in particular those who were present at the All-Africa Programme training. As usual, the African region was expected to vote in two ILGA representatives for Africa and to present resolutions to the plenary. In the end, Africa was represented by three countries only, namely South Africa Uganda and Zimbabwe. A delegate from Kenya arrived but never appeared at the conference and the Tanzanian delegation was conspicuously missing. It was decided that those present could not speak with any legitimacy for the whole of Africa and so no resolutions were presented for adoption at the plenary. The two African representatives voted on to the ILGA board sought asylum in the United States, one immediately after the conference, the other a year later. At this point, even those most dedicated to the vision of an All-Africa LGBT movement were becoming seriously discouraged.

The All-Africa programme, which led to the 2004 All-Africa conference, came together as a result of a number of welcome opportunities and a crisis in Egypt. A senior advisor to the World Bank, Hans Binswanger, openly gay and openly HIV positive, had been lobbying within the World Bank and UNAIDS for support for MSM programmes in the developing world. He and others shared the belief that World Bank and UNAIDS grants to governments did not filter down to MSM because of homophobic attitudes, in particular the refusal by African governments to admit to the existence of LGBT communities in their countries. His efforts led to the World Bank committing financial support for LGBT groups organising around their sexuality using the platform of HIV and AIDS. This concept dovetailed well with the policy of HIVOS, which remained committed to providing additional support to the building of infrastructures in LGBT groups as a strategy especially for combating HIV amongst MSM and bisexual women. With such powerful allies on board, who not only recognized the existence of homosexuals in Africa but also realized the importance of underpinning their efforts to organise at local, sub-regional and

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regional levels, any efforts by African groups to collaborate were now likely to be properly resourced and professionally executed and managed.

The relevant structures and political will to carry out the project still existed in Africa. Inspired by strategies of self-reliance implemented by the South India AIDS Programme (SIAP) in Chennai, GALZ launched a national Affinity Group programme, in 2001, designed to assist LGBT communities outside Harare to organise around their sexuality using the platform of HIV and AIDS, and to be self-reliant. The experience made the organisation well suited to applying these strategies to other parts of Africa.

In 1998, a website called Behind the Mask (BTM) was set up to gather and disseminate information about LGBT issues in Africa and facilitate communication between activists. It quickly gathered the names of groups and individuals in 36 countries and started to publish stories relating to LGBT activities in these countries.

A crisis arose in Egypt in 2001 when the Egyptian government began a massive crackdown on MSMs, starting with the arrest of 50 people attending a disco on a boat on the Nile. This was backed by a vilification campaign against homosexuals in the state media. In every city, networks of anti-gay informants were set up to access the Internet and trap men using the 'personals' sites to send incriminating messages to each other. To date, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has recorded the names of 179 men who have been arrested. In almost all cases, these men have been tortured severely through beating, electric shocks and burning with cigarettes.

The interventions of HRW and Amnesty International were vital in highlighting the plight of the Egyptian men internationally and ensuring their relative safety but it was a sad indictment on Africa that no African LGBT organisation offered any response. In December 2001, a workshop hosted by BTM in South Africa for African LGBT groups put together a statement to be forwarded to Egyptian embassies in Africa. Only South Africans, Namibians and Zimbabweans agreed to put their names to the document. The initiative was abandoned as it would again have fed into the myth that homosexuality exists a long way from Egypt.

The Egyptian crisis highlighted the urgent and important need for African LGBT groups to consolidate their efforts at a continental level. Clearly a coordinated campaign by African LGBT groups would have gone a long way towards dispelling the myth that homosexuality is foreign to the African continent, even if this campaign had not achieved the objective of halting the MSM witch hunt. In addition, despite successes in getting the men released or retried by more sympathetic courts, American interventions still fuelled the stereotypical image of homosexuality as a foreign perversion imported from the West.

As a first step to setting up the All-Africa Programme, the GALZ leadership met in Kadoma, Zimbabwe, in August 2003, to design two LGBT training manuals for Africa, one on mobilising in a hostile climate, the other on organisational development. The contributors drew mostly on GALZ's experiences over the past ten years and on strategies related to the setting up of the Affinity Group programme, in

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particular that groups should be encouraged to organise around their sexuality using the platform of HIV and AIDS.

Soon after the Kadoma meeting, it was decided that the first of a series of pan-African LGBT conferences should be held in Tanzania to which groups from Anglophone Africa would be invited to discuss strategies for the deliverance of training to newly-formed or struggling LGBT groups. The two recently completed manuals would also be used as a basis for discussion leading to their revision. Ronald Lwabaayi, a Ugandan LGBT activist with Right Companion and with a sound knowledge of East African groups, was appointed as coordinator for the event.

In June 2003, shortly before the Kadoma meeting, The 4<sup>th</sup> Conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (IASSCS) took place at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and was entitled *Sex and Secrecy*. There was good African LGBT representation including Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia and Tanzania. At this conference, African lesbian activists decided to form an African Lesbian Association (later to become the Coalition of African Lesbians [CAL]) in order to ensure the visibility of lesbian and bisexual women within the LGBT movement in Africa.

Doubts arose about the suitability of Tanzania as a venue for the All-Africa conference. A story had appeared in the Tanzanian press that a group of gay tourists were to visit Tanzania on a safari. Although the story turned out to be fabricated and was seemingly an attempt to whip up anti-gay sentiment, it was felt that the risk of the conference being disrupted and delegates being refused entry to Tanzania were too great to be ignored. The primary objective was to ensure that LGBT groups could meet safely and conduct their business undisturbed. The conference was moved to South Africa.

Behind the Mask offered to act as host. Their knowledge and experience of LGBT groups in Africa put them in the perfect position to contact groups and make all the arrangements. Ronald Lwabaayi went to Johannesburg in January 2004 to assist and the conference finally took place from 8-17 February 2004 at the Helderfontein Centre outside Johannesburg.

The event was a major success. Participants were divided into three regions, Southern, East and West (subsequently referred to as the Southern African, East African and West African Alliances) and each drew up detailed work plans for the next year. The plenary elected a steering committee of six people (one man and one woman appointed by each of the three regions present) and gave the committee a detailed agenda to complete within two years, the major tasks being the drawing up of a constitution and making arrangements for a second conference in West Africa to gather input from Francophone and Lusophone countries.

The conference decided to rename the All-Africa Programme The All-Africa Rights Initiative (AARI), a suitably neutral label that would not attract unwanted attention from governments or suspicious immigration authorities and which indicated that LGBTI groups in Africa would now be highly active in supporting the efforts of other

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human rights groups. The CAL, at this stage, agreed to become the women's secretariat for AARI.

There was widespread agreement at the conference about the general problems facing LGBT communities throughout Africa and a session was devoted to exploring possibilities of approaching the African Commission as a united front of LGBT groups throughout Africa. It was understood that a combined effort of this nature would be likely to have much greater impact on the African Union than isolated complaints from countries in Southern Africa and would make it difficult for the Commission to ignore what is evidently a critical mass of oppressed people.

As far back as 1994, an American, William Courson, intended to file a complaint to the African Commission about Zimbabwe's discrimination against homosexuals. After some deliberation, GALZ asked Courson to withdraw the complaint since, at that stage, GALZ felt that it had not explored all local remedies, a pre-requisite before any complaint can be accepted. In addition, GALZ was fearful that, should the judgment be unfavourable, this would set an unfortunate precedent for future applications (*see [www.galz.co.zw/campaigns/courson\\_complaint](http://www.galz.co.zw/campaigns/courson_complaint)*)

E-mail and the Internet have, nevertheless, been vital tools for LGBT activism in Africa since the early 1990s, especially in countries where homosexuals are denied access to state media and where the independent media is weak or equally prejudiced. The digital divide may still be wide between North and South but the steady increase in access by Africans in Africa means that many LGBT communities on the continent are now easily reachable. The fact that, for the All-Africa conference, Behind the Mask was able to issue virtually all invitations and make most necessary arrangements via e-mail is a clear indication that African LGBT communities are now far better networked electronically than they were, say, five years ago.

The major question mark surrounding the All-Africa conference was "Why should it work this time round?" The reasons seemed clear. The initiative was largely driven by Africans, with promises of strong financial backing from international bodies like the World Bank and HIVOS and encouragement from UNAIDS. The conference delegates also provided a united front: all groups present agreed that the principle strategy should be for LGBT to organise around their sexuality using the platform of HIV and AIDS, and that ongoing training was of paramount importance. CAL was also strongly committed to ensuring the visibility of lesbian and bisexual women in the coalition and all regions pledged to support their efforts. Those on the committee were elected for their high level of expertise in fields such as HIV and AIDS, the media, organisational development, finance and activism. All groups present were legitimate and many were engaged in intensive LGBT activism in their home countries.

In short, the time was ripe for LGBT groups in Africa to meet and put in place structures for mutual collaboration that will strengthen the movement towards LGBT emancipation on the African continent. Sessions on the Brazilian Resolution, the African Commission and the Egyptian Crisis made clear the potential value of unified collaboration and response.

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A question was raised on the first day as to whether an 'I' should be added to the acronym LGBT to make visible the interests of intersex people. Nobody identified him or herself as intersex and no decision was made about the inclusion. As a result, LGBT and LGBTI were often used loosely and interchangeably. But, as someone pointed out later in the corridor: "Nobody else had better fall out of the closet or we'll end up with the whole alphabet from GAY to ZED!"

With little organisational structure in place, HIVOS decided to suspend funding to AARI until the coalition could prove that it had the capacity to fulfil its mandate. Nevertheless, the thrust of activity did not diminish. TRP and HIVOS began work with trying to resolve conflicts in East Africa and, later in 2005, Tor-Hugne Olsen of the International Liaison Officer of the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum proposed that, as Zimbabwe had offered to host the 38<sup>th</sup> Session of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights in October of that year, a strong LGBT presence made up of representatives from AARI and CAL would help activists to learn about the Commission and begin to engage with NGO representatives, Commissioners, Special Rapporteurs and others. Zimbabwe later withdrew its offer and the session reverted to Banjul in The Gambia but IGLHRC then managed to secure funding both for a preparatory meeting in Johannesburg to explore possibilities of accessing the Commission and for a larger gathering of 20 sexual rights activists, most of them African LGBT leaders, in Banjul in May 2006.

The principal objectives of the visit were to receive training from experts on the mechanisms of the ACHPR as provided for in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights; to decide which mechanisms might be useful for LGBT people to access; to participate in the Human Rights Forum which precedes each meeting of the African Commission; and to observe the Commission at work in the open sessions. Perhaps most important, however, was the intention to test how NGO representatives from other parts of Africa, Commissioners and Special Rapporteurs would react to the presence of LGBT Human Rights Defenders at the Commission.

It is with the above that we still remain confident that there is still a lot of ground to be covered as far as LGBT human rights organising in Africa is concerned and that too much has been in identifying our current strengths and weaknesses.