From Offline to Cyberspaces

Digital Threats Faced by Sexual & Gender Diverse Individuals in Uganda Post-Anti Homosexuality Act 2023

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

This research study examined the threats faced by sexual and gender diverse individuals in Uganda, with particular focus on the period from May 2023 when the Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA 2023) was enacted. The study investigated the various offline and online threats targeting the sexual and gender diverse community, the spread of misinformation as well as use of repressive language against the community. Additionally the research sought to understand the sexual and gender diverse individuals organising efforts in the post AHA 2023 period and what coping strategies are employed by community members.

A qualitative approach was employed, utilising a case study methodology. Different qualitative methods were used to collect data. Specifically, case studies conducted as in-depth investigations of a single person and group discussions were used to gather data as they offered the opportunity to explore issues comprehensively and descriptively covering a range of experiences from individuals and sexual and gender diverse led organizations. Information was gathered retrospectively to capture events from the implementation of the AHA 2023. A total of fifty two participants from across five regions of Uganda (Eastern, Western, Central, Southern, and Northern) participated in the interviews. Data was analysed thematically.

Findings revealed that offline and online threats, misinformation, and repressive language have had a significant negative impact on sexual and gender diverse people in the country, including physical violence, closure of sexual and gender diverse CSO's offices, legal persecution, healthcare discrimination, and mental health issues. The findings revealed that community-driven initiatives, such as economic skills development programs, and relocation support, have been crucial in helping individuals cope with the situation. Study participants mentioned the urgent need for mental health care, legal advocacy, and digital security training.

List of Abbreviations

AHA 2023 - Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023

CSOs - Civil Society Organisations

FGD - Focus Group Discussions

HIV/AIDS - Human Immunodeficiency Virus / Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

ICTs - Information and Communication Technologies

IDI - Indepth Interviews

ILGA - International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association.

KII - Key Informant Interviews

KP - Key Population

LGBTQI+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex (and other non-conforming sexualities and gender identities)

NODPSP - National Objectives and Directive Principles of StatePolicy

Introduction

The term LGBT was popularised in 1900, by advocacy groups and activists to represent Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender individuals.[1] This acronym has evolved over time to include broader identities such as Queer and Intersex and is now commonly referred to as LGBTQI+.[2] Sexual and gender diverse identities continued gaining acceptance in regions of Western Europe, Canada, and Australia.[3] In the United States, 7% of the adults were identifying as LGBT in 2021, which was an increase from 4% in 2012, highlighting a notable rise in visibility and self-identification.[4] Between 2019 and 2021, the Afrobarometer conducted a survey in 34 African countries and revealed regional variations in tolerance towards homosexuals. Namibia, with a tolerance level of 64%, ranked the third most tolerant in Africa, following Cabo Verde (82%) and South Africa (71%), and significantly above the continental average of 21%.[5] Other countries that are relatively tolerant include Mauritius (59%), Mozambique (51%), Botswana (50%), and Angola (37%).

Despite the increasing tolerance level, discrimination against sexual and gender diverse individuals has continued to be widespread in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and most parts of Africa. In these regions, homosexuality has been criminalized by 71 countries and 11 imposed the death penalty for same sex activities.[6] In countries such as Mauritania, Somalia, and Nigeria, that are governed by sharia law, the death penalty is enforced, while countries like Sudan, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda impose life imprisonment.[7] Other countries like Malawi, Gambia and Kenya, enforce jail terms of up to 14 years.[8]

Recent legal developments in some African countries, such as Chad's 2017 criminalisation of same-sex acts[9] and Senegal's rejection of a bill to intensify anti-same-sex laws, highlight the ongoing hostility.[10] In Egypt, sexual and gender diverse individuals face arrest under charges of debauchery or blasphemy.[11] In Tanzania, essential health services for sexual and gender diverse individuals have been banned and there has been an increase in forced anal examinations since 2018.[12]

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1 Statista. (2024b, July). Sexual and Gender Diverse worldwide Statistics & Facts. Statista. https://www.statista.com/topics/8579/lgbtq-worldwide/#topicOverview

2 Ibid

3 Jones, J. (2022, February 17). LGBT identification in the U.S. ticks up to 7.1%. Gallup. https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.aspx

4 Ibid

5 Keulder, C., (2023). Public opinion and tolerance of homosexuality. https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/public-opinion-and-tolerance-of-homosexuality/

6 Statista. (2024a, May 24). Number of countries that criminalize homosexuality as of 2024. Statista; Statista Research Department. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1227390/number-of-countries-that-criminalize-homosexuality/

7 Reuters. (2023, May 29). Uganda's anti-gay law: how restricted are LGBTQ rights in Africa? Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/africas-restrictions-lgbtq-rights-2023-05-29/

8 Ibid

9 Bhandari, A. (2023, May 29). Uganda's anti-gay bill is the latest and worst to target LGBTQ Africans. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/graphics/UGANDA-LGBT/movakykrjva/

10 Omilusi, M. (2021). Between Local Acceptability and International Opprobrium: On Nigeria's Anti-Same Sex Marriage Law; Is Western Voice a Human Rights Advocacy or Cultural Imperialism?. Cross-Cultural Communication, 17(3), 47-56.

11 Omilusi, M. (2021). Between Local Acceptability and International Opprobrium: On Nigeria's Anti-Same Sex Marriage Law; Is Western Voice a Human Rights Advocacy or Cultural Imperialism?. Cross-Cultural Communication, 17(3), 47-56.

12 Ibid

In an era defined by unprecedented digital interconnectedness, access to information and digital inclusion are crucial for sexual and gender diverse individuals to connect with their communities, advocate their rights, and fully participate in society.[13] And yet, meaningful connectivity for all sexual and gender diverse individuals and organisations continue to encounter barriers to achieving this status remains far from reach due to the several online threats.[14] Following the enactment of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2023 (AHA, 2023) in Uganda, sexual and gender diverse individuals and groups advocating for their rights have continued to use digital platforms for empowerment, access to information, movement building and networking. However, in this current context, these groups and individuals continue to experience threats, violence and discrimination online.[15]

The Anti Homosexuality Legislation in Uganda

Sexual and gender diverse individuals in Uganda have long faced severe legal and social restrictions since the early 2000s.[16] These include making same-sex relationships illegal, harassment in public, and escalating animosity fuelled by political, cultural, and religious leaders' anti-sexual and gender diverse rhetoric.[17] The 2005 Constitutional Amendment Act, which banned same-sex marriage, and subsequent laws like the Anti-Pornography Act of 2014 as well as the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act, 2022, have limited the freedoms related to expression and private communication of the sexual and gender diverse Individuals in Uganda.[18] The constitutional ban limits conversations or support for sexual and gender diverse rights by portraying their relationships as illegitimate.[19]

Sexual and gender diverse individuals are disproportionately targeted by the Anti Pornography Act, which criminalises love expressions, including private messages and images, and labelling them as having immoral content.[20] The Computer Misuse Act restricts online advocacy and communication by threatening legal action against individuals who share content considered to promote immorality or disclose private information.[21]

13 ILGA World: Johnson, O & Deutch, J. (2024) Accessing Connection: Bridging the Digital Divide for LGBTI Communities Worldwide (Geneva: ILGA World, February) .(The Engine Room); https://ilga.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Accessing_connection_bridging_LGBTI_digital_divide.pdf

14 Unwanted Witness. (2015, April 28). For LGBT Ugandans, physical security threats often translate into digital threats and vice versa : Unwanted Witness. Unwanted Witness. https://www.unwantedwitness.org/for-lgbt-ugandans-physical-security-threats-often-translate-into-digital-threats-and-vice-versa/

15 Amnesty International (2023, October). Uganda: 'Drastic' increase in online attacks against LGBTQ people having 'devastating consequences' - New Report. UK https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/uganda-drastic-increase-online-attacks-against-lgbtq-people-having-devastating

16 Strand, C., & Svensson, J. (2022). Towards a Situated Understanding of Vulnerability – An Analysis of Ugandan LGBT+ Exposure to Hate Crimes in Digital Spaces. Journal of Homosexuality, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2022.2077679

17 Ibid

18 Svensson, J., Edenborg, E., & Strand, C. (2024). We are queer and the struggle is here! Visibility at the intersection of LGBT+ rights, post-coloniality, and development cooperation in Uganda. Sexualities. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607241232556

19 Angaga, A. O., Nyamongo, G., & Baraza, N. (2023). Constitutional protection of the LGBT rights and access to justice: A case analysis of select East African Community (EAC) States. Reviewed Journal of Social Science & Humanities, 4(1), 719-731

20 Messerschmidt, M. (2024). The Anti-Pornography Act and gender relations in Uganda: an analysis of how patriarchy and legislation interact. Critical African Studies, 1-19.

21 Asylum Research Centre, (2023) Uganda: Query response on the situation and treatment of the Sexual and Gender Diverse community.

In 2009, the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was introduced which proposed life imprisonment for same-sex marriages, death penalty for "aggravated" homosexuality, and penalties for failing to report violations of these provisions within 24 hours.[22] The bill was condemned by the international community, including international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, foreign governments such as the United States and the European Union, and advocacy groups such as International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA).[23]

National human rights organisations also voiced concerns about the rising hostility and violence against sexual and gender diverse individuals in Uganda as a result of the discourse around the bill.[24] This contributed to an increase of local sexual and gender diverse organisations, from twenty four in 2012 to over one hundred in 2023, as they mobilised to defend human rights, provide support to affected sexual and gender diverse individuals, and challenge the oppressive policies.[25] However, some politicians, cultural institutions, and religious leaders have continued to advocate for stricter laws, mentioning that they are necessary to protect traditional values and prevent the "promotion" homosexuality.[26]

The Anti Homosexuality Bill was later passed in 2013 as the AHA (2023). However, in 2014, Uganda's constitutional court annulled the Act on procedural grounds, citing a lack of quorum during its passage.[27] There were several attempts made to reintroduce the bill until May 2023 when the Ugandan President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni signed it into the AHA 2023.[28] The signed legislation introduced severe penalties including life imprisonment for engaging in same sex relationships and the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality." The law also criminalised the promotion of homosexuality and imposed mandatory obligations on individuals aware of homosexuality acts.[29]

Uganda's legal and policy landscape for the sexual and gender diverse communities thus remains dissonant. The legislative and public discourse has continued to foster discrimination, supported by a coalition of conservative religious and political leaders. This research study aimed to examine the threats faced by sexual and gender diverse individuals in Uganda, with particular focus on the consequences of the Anti-Homosexuality Act enacted in 2023. Specifically, the research study investigated the various offline and online threats targeting the sexual and gender diverse individuals, the spread of misinformation, as well as use of repressive language against them. In addition, the research sought to explore the coping mechanisms sexual and gender diverse individuals employ.

22 Amnesty International. (2010). Uganda: Anti-homosexuality bill is inherently discriminatory and threatens broader human rights. (Report AFR 59/003/2010). Amnesty International Publications. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201101/20110124_409aiantihomo_en.pdf
23 Refworld - UNHCR's Global Law and Policy Database. (2024, October 23). Uganda: The Anti-Homosexuality Bill Violates the human rights of Ugandans. Refworld. https://www.refworld.org/policy/declas/amnesty/2014/en/96493
24 Strand, C. (2024). Understanding Chilling Effects in Digital Spaces – A Study of Ugandan LGBT+ Advocacy in the Wake of the Draconian 2023 Anti-homosexuality Act. IFIP Advances in Information and Communication Technology, 167–180. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66982-8_12
25 Ibid
26 Ibid
27 Petrova, D. (2014). Uganda's anti-homosexuality law and our cultural wars | OHRH. https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/ugandas-anti-homosexuality-law-and-our-cultural-wars/#:~:text=It%20was%20an%20interim%20victory,quorum%20rules%20during%20its%20passage.
28 Reuters. (2023, May 29). Uganda's anti-gay law: how restricted are LGBTQ rights in Africa? Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/africas-restrictions-lgbtq-rights-2023-05-29/
29 Human Rights Watch (2024, April 5). Uganda: Court upholds Anti-Homosexuality Act. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/04/uganda-court-upholds-anti-homosexuality-act

Methodology

The study employed a case study research design utilizing a range of qualitative methods to gather in-depth information from diverse sources, including documents, focus group discussions, individual interviews, key informant interviews and archival records. A total of 52 sexual and gender diverse individuals from various regions of the country were interviewed sharing their experiences spanning from May 2023 when the Anti-Homosexuality Act was passed to August 2024 when this research was commissioned. Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout the research process, ensuring participant anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent.

Study Limitations

The study relied on retrospective accounts covering events from May 2023 to August 2024. Recalling past incidents, particularly traumatic experiences, may have led to memory biases or inconsistencies in participant narratives. In addition, the hostile legal and social environment following the enactment of the AHA 2023 restricted physical data collection which may have led to the underrepresentation of some regions and a limited reflection of the diversity of experiences across the country.

Findings

While digital platforms have offered an efficient and accessible way to appeal to public opinion and expose rights violations, enabling sexual and gender diverse individuals to express themselves and amplify their voices, they have also become tools for repression. The aim of this research was to map both online and offline threats the sexual and gender diverse community has experienced since the signing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023 on the 26th of May 2023 as well as establish the impact of these threats on their safety online and how they are coping in digital and online spaces. Online threats are presented in this section as experienced on different digital platforms that study participants reported including Facebook, instagram, TikTok, X formerly Twitter, WhatsApp and dating apps. Threats experienced in offline/physical spaces are also presented in this section.

Digital Threats

Sexual and gender diverse individuals in Uganda rely on social media platforms as vital tools for communication allowing them to connect with friends and family, advocate for human rights as well as share and seek for social support networks.[30] However, the findings revealed that they face significant digital threats on social media following the passing of the AHA of 2023. These threats were commonly reported on dating apps, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok and X. The most frequently mentioned threats experienced by participants include black mail and extortion, cyberbullying, doxing online sexual harassment, hacking and trolling. The table below summarizes the frequency of these digital threats as reported by participants for each social media platform studied.

Number of times Digital threats were mentioned for each social media platform	Facebook	TikTok	Instagram	X	WhatsApp	Dating apps
Blackmail and extortion	1	0	0	0	2	13
Cyber bullying	8	2	3	3	8	4
Doxxing	6	7	0	0	1	0
Trolling	0	2	0	0	1	0
Online sexual harassment	1	2	0	0	1	0
Hacking	4	0	1	1	0	0

Table 1: Showing the distribution of digital threats experienced by participants by social media platform

Blackmail and Extortion

Dating apps such as Grindr, Tinder, Badoo and Mamba are now more commonly used by the sexual and gender diverse individuals to maintain networks and relationships within the sexual and gender diverse community.[31] This shift is largely due to the lack of public, safe areas in Uganda available for socializing, building networks and relationships following the enactment of the AHA 2023.[32] Blackmailers on dating apps have become more prevalent as a result of the nation's legal changes, according to focus group discussions. Blackmailers are using the AHA 2023 as an opportunity to take advantage of vulnerabilities faced by the sexual and gender diverse individuals as they entrap them using these messaging and dating apps.[33]

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30 Amnesty International (2024). Uganda: Criminalization shrinks online civic space for LGBTQ people – report. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/uganda-criminalization-shrinks-online-civic-space-for-lgbtq-people-report/

31 Miles, S. (2021). Let's (not) go outside: Grindr, hybrid space, and digital queer neighborhoods. The life and afterlife of gay neighborhoods: Renaissance and resurgence, 203-220.

32 Kahyana, D., (2023). Controlling Dissent, Controlling Sexuality in Uganda: Terrorizing Citizens through Draconian Legislation. The Transition.

33 Guilherme, F. (2018). The impacts of corruption on Sexual and Gender Diverse rights. Risks and opportunities in addressing discriminatory corruption against Sexual and Gender Diverse individuals

The study findings revealed that perpetrators create anonymous accounts on the dating apps pretending to be sexual and gender diverse community members and lure unsuspecting victims to meet them and end up being harassed, beaten or tortured. Victims are also coerced to pay certain amounts of money or else be outed or exposed to the public. Study participants also noted that some blackmailers are known to their victims and work in collusion with the police to arrest and extort money from them. One participant shared that some individuals use dating apps to pose as sexual and gender diverse individuals, luring others into meeting them and later attacking or blackmailing them.This is particularly common among gay men and transwomen who are targeted on platforms like Tinder. After arranging a meeting online and inviting the person in their home, the perpetrator threatens saying:

> *"If you don't want me to call the police or expose you, give me your phone, laptop or they sometimes demand for a certain amount of money" - IDI Participant*

These dating apps have been instrumental to sexual and gender diverse individuals by providing safe platforms for discreet connections and relationships.[34] Refraining from utilising the online dating apps as a result of blackmail and extortion, they risk losing an essential platform for building relationships and be disconnected from the broader sexual and gender diverse community particularly in conservative environments where meeting physically is risky. Losing these platforms could also limit their social opportunities.[35]

Doxxing

Sexual and gender diverse individuals especially in regions with hostile social and legal environments are often times faced with doxxing, which involves public disclosure of their private information.[36] Participants mentioned that perpetrators often disclose personal information including images or contact details, without their consent especially on TikTok, Facebook and X in the wake of the AHA 2023. In other cases, perpetrators edit photos of sexual and gender diverse individuals and merge them with pornographic content thereafter post online labbelling them as promoters of homosexuality.[37] A participant mentioned that;

> *"There have been cases on X where photos and contact details of some sexual and gender diverse individuals were posted several times with accompanying threats like 'We should find you and kill you'." - IDI Participant*

Another participant shared their experience;

> *"There was a photo I took with one of the influential sexual and gender diverse activists in Uganda sometime back and then someone picked it from his X page, and it began circulating around X with my name on it at the time the AHA 2023 was enacted. The same photo was shared on Tiktok. I felt threatened, seeing my face on these platforms with people saying really nasty things." - IDI Participant.*

This has led some victims to limit their engagement on social media platforms which has affected their ability to connect with their friends and families. Knowing that personal information is exposed can lead to constant fear for one's safety. Additionally, once personal details are exposed, they can be used to impersonate the victim online leading to further damage.[38]

34 Queiroz, A. A. F. L. N., de Sousa, Á. F. L., & de Sousa, A. R. (2023). Sexuality 'in apps'? Older men who have sex with men and their use of dating apps in Brazil. In Ageing, Men and Social Relations (pp. 69-87). Policy Press.
35 Ibid
36 Lee, C. (2022). Doxxing is a discursive action in a social movement. Critical Discourse Studies, 19(3), 326-344.
37 II2_Eastern_2024
38 Ketchum, A. (2020). Report on the state of resources provided to support scholars against harassment, trolling,

Cyberbullying

Social media platforms have also been weaponised as a tool for cyberbullying against sexual and gender diverse individuals especially after the enactment of the AHA 2023 in Uganda.[39] Findings from the individual interviews revealed that perpetrators deliberately send, post, or share negative harmful, false or mean content about someone else. This also includes causing embarrassment or humiliation as the participants shared;

"Around the time when the AHA 2023 was signed and passed, that's when I used to get lots of comments on my posts, someone posted my picture on his Facebook page and he wrote that 'These homosexuals deserve death. We should burn them to ash.' Another person commented that 'I know where this guy comes from. I know his family. I know what he does, like I can get him for you, and we punish him" - IDI Participant

And another participant shared their experience on TikTok

"I am a TikToker, and many people are suspicious about my gender orientation due to the content I create. I frequently get negative comments and sometime back when I posted a photo, putting on shorts, someone commented on it that "Ah, you dress like a gay and you turned into illuminati." - IDI Participant.

Cyberbullying has caused sexual and gender diverse people to limit their online activity and participation in online forums and debates, which they did prior to the passage of the AHA 2023.[40] Combating cyberbullying is essential to establishing safer online spaces that support the prosperity and well-being of all sexual and gender diverse people.

Hacking

Hacking incidents against sexual and gender diverse individuals are often motivated by malicious intent to intimidate, harass or expose private information,[41] and can take various forms such as social media account takeovers among others.[42] The enactment of the AHA 2023 in Uganda created an environment that heightened the risk of hacking attacks against sexual and gender diverse individuals.[43] Perpetrators exploited victims by stealing their online identities to spread false information or solicit money from their followers.[44]

Study participants revealed a lack of digital security knowledge such as Two-Factor Authentication and proper password management which increased their vulnerability. One of the participants shared her experience that;

and doxxing while doing public media work.
39 Strand, C., & Svensson, J. (2023). Towards a situated understanding of vulnerability—An analysis of Ugandan LGBT+ exposure to hate crimes in digital spaces. Journal of Homosexuality, 70(12), 2806-2827.
40 Asylum Research Centre (2023). Uganda: Query response on the situation and treatment of the Sexual and Gender Diverse community https://asylumresearchcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ARC-Query-response_LGBTQI-Uganda_August-2023.pdf
41 Ibid
42 Maimon, D., Fukuda, A., Hinton, S., Babko-Malaya, O., & Cathey, R. (2017, December). On the relevance of social media platforms in predicting the volume and patterns of web defacement attacks. In 2017 IEEE international conference on big data (Big Data) (pp. 4668-4673). IEEE.
43 La Jiwe, J. (2024, November 15). Ugandan LGBTQ people face increased abuse online: Report. Erasing 76 Crimes. https://76crimes.com/2024/11/14/online-attacks-worsen-lgbtqi-uganda/
44 Le, C., Nassiri, R., Jebessa, E., Cathcart, J., & Khan Mohd, T. (2023, February). Social Media Account Hacking Using Kali Linux-Based Tool BeEF. In the International Conference on Intelligent Sustainable Systems (pp. 713-724). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

"I mostly use Facebook and Instagram. My phone was hacked once by someone who knew me. They hacked and gained access to my Facebook account and started sending messages to my friends. Afterwards, I started receiving angry calls from people, asking me questions I didn't understand. They claimed they were receiving messages from me. I had to keep denying until I realised that I was hacked" - IDI Participant

Hacking incidents have resulted in sexual and gender diverse individuals losing their personal information including exposure of their sexual orientation and gender identity. This has led to increased emotional distress and a deepened sense and feelings of vulnerability, knowing that their private lives have been compromised.

Trolling and Online Sexual Harassement

The enactment of the AHA 2023 has resulted in a rise in trolling and online sexual harassment on social media.[45] Study participants shared that when they post on platforms like TikTok or WhatsApp, they frequently receive comments targeting their sexuality in an attempt to humiliate them. One of the participants mentioned that

"Many sexual and gender diverse individuals have been exposed to unsolicited sexual advances, or degrading comments regarding their gender identity or sexual orientation" - IDI Participant

Focus group discussion participants reported that it is particularly challenging to deal with online harassment and cyberbullying because perpetrators use anonymous or multiple social media accounts to harass the victims. Consequently, this has restrained sexual and gender diverse individuals from engaging too often with online content owing to the risk of being attacked. Reduced online activity can negatively impact connections with communities and networks many sexual and gender diverse individuals rely on for solidarity and empowerment further marginalizing them from public and digital discourse.[46]

Offline Threats

Physical Assault, Intimidation and Use of Repressive Language

The AHA 2023 has created a climate of impunity for physical attacks and threats against sexual and gender diverse individuals forcing both individuals and organisations to significantly alter how they present themselves and engage in the community. This research highlights how stigma, violence and discrimination faced by sexual and gender diverse individuals in online spaces has been mirrored and amplified in offline spaces since the implementation of the AHA 2023. The study found a significant increase in physical assaults and threats leaving sexual and gender diverse individuals more vulnerable than ever.

Participants reported experienceing various forms of offline violence including physical assault, torture, arbitrary arrests and extortion, intimidation, and use of repressive language.[47] Many participants noted that these attacks occurred repeatedly and often in public spaces such as streets, car or boda boda parks, public transport, restaurants, pubs or clubs.[48]

45 Demirci, I., Perras, C., Scheyer, V., & Wisotzki, S. (2023). Backlash against and resistance to feminist peacebuilding (Vol. 6, p. 38). DEU.

46 Robert C and Talmudllan, January (2015), To Know that You Are Not Alone: The Effect of Internet Usage on LGBT Youth's Social Capital,

47 Younes, R. (2023). "All this terror because of a photo." In Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/02/21/all-terror-because-photo/digital-targeting-and-its-offline-consequences-lgbt

48 Focus Group Discussion 2

One participant shared about a physical assault they experienced in a public place:

"Out of nowhere, two men came up to me and said, "We hear you are the president of the homosexuals in Northern Uganda, and you are their lawyer." I asked them where they heard that from, and they said they already knew me. One of the men slapped me when I was in the bar and shouted, 'We don't want this kind of nonsense. We can even kill you. This is just a warning for you to stop this homosexual behaviour'." - FGD Participant

Other participants described being targeted in public spaces for their appearance such as wearing rainbow bracelets, earrings, tight or short clothes, or for their mannerisms including how they talk or walk. One participant shared their experience:

"When it comes to public transport services, when you get into a taxi or you're moving in a taxi park, dressed in shorts, or wearing a rainbow bracelet or someone shouts at you calling you a homosexual and all kinds of insults and threats of beating you. This happened to me one time when I was walking with a friend in the taxi park and shopping arcades downtown. Kampala" - IDI Participant

Political and religious leaders use repressive language and publicly denounce sexual and gender diverse people painting them as sinful, immoral, outcasts and abnormal.[49] Study findings revealed that these repressive words, rooted in condemnation and dehumanization, have increasingly manifested after the enactment of the AHA 2023. This includes denigrating labels, such as cursed people, burden, illuminati, disgrace, stupid, children of satan, agents of darkness, all of which marginalise sexual and gender diverse people. One of the participants said that;

"I have heard people talk about us and say we are satanic, others say we came from Illuminati, and we are abnormal. They say that we are agents of darkness that came from under the sea, Other people see us as a devil" - IDI Participant

Such narratives create hostile environments where violations against sexual and gender diverse individuals are both normalized and go unchallenged, forcing sexual and gender diverse individuals to conceal their identities.[50] This leads to lasting emotional harm, psychological distress, and isolation, depriving them of the right to live freely and safely.

Organisation Break-ins, office raids and Arbitrary Arrests

Since the enactment of the AHA 2023, Ugandan authorities intensified their crackdown on sexual and gender diverse individuals and their organisations imposing discriminatory restrictions that have severely hindered their operation.[51] These actions have amounted to a targeted witch-hunt against those perceived as **"promoting homosexuality"**, creating a chilling effect on the rights to freedom of expression and association.[52] Sexual and gender diverse persons living under Uganda's AHA 2023 are now victims of arbitrary arrests, police abuse and extortion on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity

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49 Westwood, S. (2022). Religious-based negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people among healthcare, social care and social work students and professionals: A review of the international literature. Health & Social Care in the Community, 30(5), e1449-e1470.

50 Focus Group Discussion 4

51 https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/uganda-criminalization-shrinks-online-civic-space-for-lgbtq-people-report/

52 Ibid

or expression.[53] Study findings revealed that the police, local authorities and security agencies have conducted raids on sexual and gender diverse civic organisations as well as housing shelters arresting the occupants. Participants in this study recounted incidents where police raided their offices, seized devices such as laptops, phones, cameras and searched for information related to sexual and gender diverse activities.

In one of the focus group discussions, participants shared that;

> *"It was at the end of last year after the AHA 2023 had been passed. We were at our Drop in Center and had a dialogue meeting with transgender people. Then all of a sudden, we saw the police storm our office and they took our items like the computers, laptops, and anything that they would use as exhibits. Most of us ran and left, but my colleagues who stayed were arrested and taken to police custody. They were even taken to court and told to pay money."*
> *- FGD Participant*

Additionally, security operatives have exploited social media platforms to connect with sexual and gender diverse individuals later using the information gathered to target them with physical violence, arrests and blackmail.[54]

Other offline threats

The enactment of the AHA 2023 intensified hate crime in form of **"corrective"** rape 'corrective' applied in an attempt to convert the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer community into heterosexuality and is motivated by prejudice on the basis of sexual orientation.[55] It is an attempt to **"cure"** the victims of being gay and is applied in the world as a punishment for the sexual and gender diverse for instance who are usually women that are lesbian, transgender or do not fit traditional gender roles.[56] One of the transgender men who was a study participant described how he was threatened by corrective rape.

> *"One time, somebody told me that it would be better if I were gang-raped, perhaps as a way to 'correct' me and bring me back to my senses to be a woman and this was at the time the AHA 2023 was eneacted"* *- IDI Participant*

Ugandan communities just like the rest of Africa are rich in culture but also strengthened by religious beliefs that both play a key role in moral guidance for citizens.

Scholars such as Barnade argue that heterosexist culture also plays an enormous role in the perpetration of hate crimes and is for most part derived from religion as they invoke the Bible, Koran to show us that non-heterosexual behaviour is abominable and should be corrected.[57]

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55 Byarugaba C., (2024, October 29). "When you love something, you fight for it": Sexual and Gender Diverse rights advocacy in Uganda - Human Rights First. https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/when-you-love-something-you-fight-for-it-lgbtiq-rights-advocacy-in-uganda/

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Misinformation and Myths

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other sexual and gender diverse individuals often face negative stereotyping often rooted in cultural biases.[58] Social media platforms, traditional media and public figures perpetuate these stereotypes often fueled by misinformation and myths.[59] According to findings from the study, the enactment of the AHA 2023 has further intensified the spread of conspiracies and myths about the sexual and gender diverse community. These include unfounded claims that sexual and gender diverse individuals are foreign-influenced and highly paid.[60]

Study findings revealed that some politicians and religious fundamentalists believe and argue that homosexuality is an **"immoral"** western behavior being propagated and spread by foreign gay activists and their funders. These allegations, following the passing of the AHA 2023, were intensified. One of the the focus group discussion participants mentioned that;

> *"People think we have organisations, for example, international organisations from Europe and any other part of the world, that are sponsoring us money specifically for us to practice homosexuality and also to recruit other people into it" - FGD Participant*

> *"There is the misconception that we recruit the younger generation into homosexuality, which is not true. That's why at our office, we do not engage with individuals under 18 years of age in any of our implementation activities. This misleading information is harmful." - IDI Participant*

Another participant shared that;

> *"There is a narrative within the country that some gay people are going around schools and churches recruiting children into homosexuality, which is false. I have also worked with members of this community as a service provider for many years and I have not heard anything about recruitment, it is far-fetched. So I don't buy into that false narrative of recruitment." - KII Participant*

Such myths and misinformation have significantly contributed to the stigma and discrimination faced by sexual and gender diverse individuals. This environment of prejudice has not only deepened societal marginalization but also caused heightened anxiety and stress for those within these communities.

Response Mechanisms

The sexual and gender diverse community has responded to the threats both online and offline as well as misinformation and repressive language against them in various ways particularly in the aftermath of AHA 2023.

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58 *Clark, (2024). Misconceptions and Myths About the LGBTQ+ Community. https://www.bestcolleges.com/resources/lgbtq-community-myths-misconceptions/*
59 *Ibid*
60 *Clark, (2024). Misconceptions and Myths About the LGBTQ+ Community. https://www.bestcolleges.com/resources/lgbtq-community-myths-misconceptions/*

Online Response Mechanisms

Study findings show that sexual and gender diverse individuals have adapted to online threats by leveraging digital tools and security practices. Many use blocking and filtering features on social media platforms, secure communication channels, and participating in digital security training.

One participants shared;

"For social media platforms that I use, I use the filter feature on TikTok. I filter words. I look at the most used words that they use to insult and harass us, and I filter those. If anyone comments on my posts, it doesn't appear on my page. I also block the accounts that harass me online. So that's how; I've tried to mitigate some of them." - IDI Participant

Filtering and blocking have helped to create safer online environments by preventing harmful comments from appearing. Others have transitioned to secure communication tools like Signal, using strong passwords, and two-factor authentication to protect their privacy online.

A participant noted that;

"Whenever I'm communicating or doing work for the queer community, I only use online digital apps that are secure. For example, I installed Signal, which I learnt about during a digital training where the facilitator explained that Signal is a much more secure communication platform. So when I want to communicate securely with my fellow queer people, I use Signal." - KII Participant

Another participant also mentioned that they have to be cautious of who they are communicating with on any social media platform;

"These days, you have to be really careful about who you're calling and messaging on WhatsApp. You never know if it'll end up all over social media. So it's important to use all the safety measures you can, like face passwords, strong passwords, passcodes and two-factor authentication." - FGD Participant

Digital security training programs and toolkits created by other CSOs in the tech space have also been effective in equipping sexual and gender diverse individuals with skills to address both online and offline security challenges. Knowledge gained including the use of VPNs on public WI-FI, password management have been used by sexual and gender diverse individuals to address offline and online challenges.

One participant highlighted:

"The digital training we attended taught us about digital safety and security best practices, including password management, and two-factor authentication. Some organisations have developed digital safety and security toolkits that are utilised by the sexual and gender diverse community to improve our digital security." - IDI Participant

These initiatives have fostered a culture of digital security awareness empowering sexual and gender diverse individuals to protect them against threats.

Offline Response Mechanisms

In response to offline threats sexual and gender diverse individuals have adopted various coping mechanisms.

Participants emphasized the importance of engaging in community activities so as to build trust and foster a positive relationship with neighbours.

> *"It is important for us to participate in activities organised in our general communities. For me I always attend football tournaments, community cleaning events and dialogues. These have helped me establish friendly relationships with my local community members" said one of the focus group discussion participants.*

Organisations and human rights groups have also stepped in to provide relocation support and mental health assistance for LGBTQI individuals facing threats, evictions and violence. A participant shared her experience;

> *"I received relocation support from one organisation when my room was burnt to ashes. The supervisor of the organisation came on ground to assess the threat I was facing and then I was given some money that I really used to relocate." - IDI Participant.*

While relocation offers immediate safety, participants noted that it often lacks long term sustainability.

Mental health programs have also become prominent with organisations providing counselling and support to individuals experiencing trauma, depression or anxiety.

This support has been crucial in promoting well being and resilience for those facing crises.

Addressing Misinformation and Repressive Language

Misinformation and repressive language continue to fuel stigma and conspiracy theories against sexual and gender diverse individuals. In response, the community has engaged in advocacy and awareness campaigns to counter negative narratives and promote accurate information.

One participant described these efforts:

> *"We are doing a lot of advocacy as individuals and organisations, to combat misinformation and repressive language through online campaigns and designing some posters that talk about sexual and gender diverse sexuality and our rights. We also debunk some of the false stories we come across." - IDI Participant*

These initiatives aim to challenge negative stereotypes, shift public perceptions and affirm human rights of the sexual and gender diverse individuals amidst the hostile legal environment in Uganda.

Urgent Areas of Support Needed for the sexual and gender diverse Community

Study participants identified several urgent areas requiring immediate attention to improve support for Uganda's sexual and gender diverse community.

Strategic Litigation.

The sexual and gender diverse community in Uganda continues to pursue strategic litigation, to secure legal recognition of their rights. This approach has opened new avenues for affirming their humanity, citizenship and agency. Individual interview findings emphasized the urgent need to intensify strategic litigation efforts to enforce sexual and gender diverse rights and advocate for the repeal of the AHA 2023.

One participant stated:

"Let us do whatever we can to promote strategic litigation for sexual and gender diverse people's rights and to request the Supreme Court to nullify the AHA 2023. Some of our lives are reaching a breaking point because of the threats that we continue to face. We request that all organisations, international, regional, local, and all other stakeholders support us in changing the legal environment in Uganda to be more accommodating to the sexual and gender diverse community." - IDI Participant.

Strategic litigation should be complemented by other advocacy efforts, including engaging duty bearers, conducting research and documentation, and providing support services. It must be viewed as part of a broad strategy that combines multiple approaches to address the challenges faced by the sexual and gender diverse community.

Uganda's National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy (NODPSP), particularly Objective I, emphasizes the need for inclusivity and tolerance. It calls on all citizens, organisations and policy makers to recognise and respect differences within the population. However, sexual and gender diverse individuals frequently face human rights violations due to societal perceptions of their lifestyles as unacceptable.

Awareness and Sensitization

Participants stressed the urgent need to raise awareness and sensitise key stakeholders such as health workers, police officers, and government officials on sexual and gender diverse human rights. This would help foster understanding, reduce discrimination, and ensure fair treatment under the law.

One participant shared:

"I would request, if possible, that there should be more awareness and sensitization of various stakeholders about sexual and gender diverse human rights. Health workers, police officers, and those in authority need to be sensitized about our human rights and existence so they can treat us equally as their implement the law, despite the AHA 2023, which has increased our vulnerability," - KII Participant

Sensitization initiatives can help ensure that laws, including the AHA 2023, are implemented in ways that acknowledge and respect diversity, promoting inclusivity, national unity and stability.

Digital skills Training

In response to the risks introduced by the AHA 2023, participants highlighted the critical need for ongoing digital skills training to empower sexual and gender diverse individuals and enhance their online safety.

One participant explained:

> *"We urgently need to keep teaching our community about digital security. It should be an ongoing process. Community members need to know how to protect their digital gadgets, manage their online presence, safeguard personal information and privacy, and adopt best practices for online communication. They should also understand the online security risks and how to navigate them. This will enable sexual and gender diverse individuals to better handle the online threats we face as a result of the AHA 2023." - FGD Participant*

Strengthening sexual and gender diverse individuals with digital security skills is crucial for mitigating the harmful effects of the AHA 2023. These skills can strengthen digital resilience and empower individuals to protect themselves against online threats, surveillance and harassment.

Urgent support in strategic litigation, awareness and sensitization, and digital skills trainings is essential to safeguard the rights and well being of sexual and gender diverse individuals in Uganda. These efforts, when combined, can enhance resilience, promote inclusivity, and create a more equitable environment for all citizens post the AHA 2023.

Discussion and Conclusion

Sexual and gender diverse individuals in Uganda continue to face online threats on various social media platforms such as Facebook, X, TikTok and WhatsApp, where they are frequently subjected to cyberbullying, blackmail, and harassment in discriminatory environments.[61] Changes in the legal landscape in Uganda, particularly the enactment of the AHA 2023, have further endangered the safety of sexual and gender diverse individuals both online and offline.[62] This law intensified the attacks especially by political and religious leaders by use of repressive languages to demonize them coupled with misinformation and disinformation.[63]

Regardless of the fact that digital platforms provide a medium for for self-expression, communication and networking,[64] sexual and gender diverse individuals in Uganda are retreating from these spaces due to fear of harassment and exposure.[65] To ensure their safety in oppressive settings, some sexual and gender diverse individuals have deleted their social media accounts completely, self censored, or reduced their online presence.[66] The sexual and gender diverse community has responded to their threats by implementing coping mechanisms such as blocking features,[67] engaging in digital security training, and utilising secure online communication channels.[68] More legal representation, campaigning about LGBTQ+ rights and appreciating multi stakeholder engagement is required in order to ensure the safety and well being of sexual and gender diverse individuals.

To address these urgent needs, it is crucial to provide mental health care, legal advocacy and digital security training. Additionally, community led initiatives like economic skills development and relocation support can enable the victims to cope with these threats. More than just short term fixes, there is a need for long term solutions that tackle the root causes of these challenges. Addressing systemic discriminationand promoting sexual and gender diverse human rights awareness and fostering inclusion are critical steps towards ensuring the safety, dignity, and well being of sexual and gender diverse individuals in Uganda.

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