



**POSITION PAPER ON THE
RELEVANCE OF
THE DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE ACT,
2010 TO LGBT
PERSONS AND
SEX WORKERS
IN UGANDA**

MARCH 2021







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Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF)

HRAPF House,
Plot 1 Nsubuga Road,
Off Ntinda-Kiwatule Road, Ntinda, Kampala
P.O. Box 25603, Kampala - Uganda
Tel: +256-414-530683, +256-312-530683
0800130683 (Toll Free)
Email: info@hrapf.org
Website: www.hrapf.org

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1. Acknowledgments

This position paper has been developed by HRAPF under the 'Zero Violence - Building and strengthening sustainable legal capacity to address and reduce violence and discrimination against women and girls (WAG) and LGBT people across the Commonwealth' Programme which is supported by Frontline AIDS. The background analysis for the position paper was done by Ms. Fionah Komusana. The position paper was developed by Albert Muhumuza and Flavia Zalwango and edited by Justine Balya and Dr. Adrian Jjuuko.

2. Introduction

This position paper presents HRAPF's position on the protections that the Domestic Violence Act, 2010 provides against domestic violence for LGBT persons and sex workers. It is intended to stimulate conversation around the need to specifically include the peculiar challenges of LGBT persons and sex workers as regards domestic violence within the discussions around the Domestic Violence Act, 2010.

3. Background

The Domestic Violence Act, 2010 (hereinafter referred to as "the Act") was signed into law by the President of the Republic of Uganda on 17th March 2010 and came into force on 29th April 2011.¹ According to its long title, the Act is intended to provide for the protection and relief of victims of domestic violence; the punishment of perpetrators of domestic violence; the procedure and guidelines to be followed by the court in relation to the protection and compensation of victims of domestic violence; the jurisdiction of court; the enforcement of orders made by the court; and to empower the Family and Children Court to handle cases of domestic violence and [to provide] for related matters.²

The Act was received as a victory by women's rights activists who had for long advocated for

¹ The Domestic Violence Act, 2010 (Commencement) Instrument, No. 48 of 2011.

² The Domestic Violence Act, 2010, Long title.

such a law.³ The Act is largely progressive, making domestic violence an offence punishable by up to two years imprisonment and/or a fine not exceeding nine hundred and sixty thousand Uganda Shillings (960,000/-). It also provides a wide definition of domestic violence which encompasses various forms of abuse, including economic, physical, sexual, and emotional violence.⁴ Domestic relations are also defined widely to include family relationships by consanguinity, affinity or kinship; marriage; shared residence between the victim and the perpetrator; employment status such as domestic workers, as well as any other relationship which is declared by the court to be a domestic relationship.⁵

However, when applied to LGBT persons and sex workers, the first glaring gap is that there is no express inclusion of LGBT persons or sex workers within the text of the Act. The language that the Act uses is cis-normative (he/ she), and thus does not pay any specific consideration to non-binary persons. Whereas, strictly speaking, the wide scope of domestic relationships described would include live-in partners in same sex relationships, it is also trite that, considering the criminalisation of same sex relations and sex work in Uganda, anything short of express inclusion can easily be interpreted as exclusion.⁶

The law criminalises both consensual same-sex relations and sex work under sections 145 of the Penal Code (carnal knowledge against the order

³ J Ahikire and AA Mwiine 'The politics of promoting gender equity in contemporary Uganda: Cases of the Domestic Violence Law and the policy on Universal Primary Education' ESID Working Paper No. 55, 12-14.

⁴ Above.

⁵ The Domestic Violence Act, section 3.

⁶ On the treatment of LGBT persons in Uganda due to criminalization, see generally Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Constitutional Law (CSCHRCL) and Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) 'Protecting 'morals' by dehumanising LGBTI persons? A critique of the enforcement of the laws criminalizing same-sex conduct in Uganda October 2013 <https://hrapf.org/index.php/resources/research-reports/47-section-145-research-report-full-version/file> (accessed 29 March 2021). For how this applies to sex workers, see Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) 'Legal Regulation of Sex Work in Uganda: Exploring the current trends and their impact on the human rights of sex workers' <https://hrapf.org/index.php/resources/research-reports/35-161228legalregulationofsexworkersinugandastudy-updated-1/file> (accessed 29 March 2021)

of nature, punishable with up to life imprisonment) and sections 138 and 139 of the Penal Code Act (prostitution, living on the earnings of prostitution and operating a brothel) respectively.⁷ Other offences greatly affecting LGBT persons and sex workers are indecent practices (section 148); common nuisance (160); being idle and disorderly (section 167); and being rogue and vagabond (section 168).⁸

The criminalisation of both homosexuality and sex work subjects LGBT persons and sex workers to double persecution and stigmatisation. Being LGBT or a sex worker significantly increases the type and magnitude of violence risks – at the hands of clients, police, strangers, intimate partners, etc. Furthermore, being LGBT or a sex worker makes it even harder to report incidents of violence, since there is always a distinct possibility that the victim will be arrested for being LGBT and/ or for doing sex work.⁹

Domestic violence – mainly intimate partner violence – is as common among LGBT persons as it is among heterosexual and cisgender persons.¹⁰ A study by FEM Alliance Uganda reported high incidence of intimate partner violence among LGBT persons in the districts studied – Kampala, Mbale, Malaba, Lira, Mbarara and Kasese.¹¹ Sex workers on the other hand face violence mainly from intimate partners and clients.¹² For both groups, reporting incidents of domestic violence is complicated by criminalisation, and as such many

such incidents go unreported and without redress. For example, in the FEM Alliance study, none of the respondents interviewed in Kampala mentioned the Police as an option that they would use for redress.¹³ Therefore, being LGBT or a sex worker makes it harder to report incidents of violence, largely due to a well-founded fear of arrest for being LGBT or for engaging in sex work.¹⁴

This position paper therefore explores the adequacy of the Domestic Violence Act from the perspective of the lived realities of LGBT persons and sex workers.

4. The Domestic Violence Act, 2010 and its relevance to LGBT persons and sex workers

4.1. No express inclusion of LGBT persons and sex workers within its scope

On the face of it, the Act includes all persons who may be victims of domestic violence. Section 2 defines a victim to mean a person in a domestic relationship who directly or indirectly suffers threatened or actual domestic violence, implying that any person in a domestic relationship can be a victim. Sex workers and LGBT persons also form domestic relationships and as such they are included. However, in defining domestic relationships, the Act does include specific categories of persons who are said to be in domestic relationships, including relationships due to marriage – which strictly refers to married couples.¹⁵ In Uganda, Article 31(2a) of the Constitution specifically prohibits marriages between persons of the same sex. According to Mujuzi, this amendment was introduced to stop LGBT persons from demanding

⁷ Section 138 defines, a “prostitute” and Section 139 provides that, any individual engaged in selling sex can be imprisoned for up to seven years. Third parties, like brothel owners, also face up to seven years imprisonment for “living wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution.”

⁸ See Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum A guide to the normative legal framework on the human rights of LGBTI persons in Uganda (2015).

⁹ Women’s Refugee Commission ‘Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response: Key risks facing urban refugees in Kampala’ December 2015.

¹⁰ JB Rohrbaugh (2006), Domestic violence in same-gender relationships Family Court Review, 44: 287-299. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2006.00086.x>

¹¹ FEM Alliance ‘Prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) among LBTQ/WSW persons’ https://www.kuchutimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/18-12-19-Final-FEMA-Prevalence-IPV-among-LBT_WSW.pdf. (accessed 29 March 2021).

¹² See A Schwitters, et al ‘Prevalence of rape and client-initiated gender-based violence among female sex workers: Kampala, Uganda, 2012’ AIDS and behavior vol. 19 Suppl 1,0 1 (2015): S68-76. doi: 10.1007/s10461-014-0957-y

¹³ n 11 above, 14.

¹⁴ Women’s Refugee Commission and Refugee Law Project ‘Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response: Key Risks Facing Urban Refugees in Kampala: Summary Report’ December 2015, 5-8. <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/56d68ea84.pdf> (accessed 29 March 2021).

¹⁵ Domestic Violence Act, section 3(1)(a).

for same-sex marriages.¹⁶ As such, without express recognition of same-sex marriages, LGBT persons cannot be said to be included within this bracket. The other relationships recognised are: those due to consanguinity, affinity and kinship, which all relate to blood relationships;¹⁷ shared residences;¹⁸ domestic worker relationships whether the victim resides with the perpetrator or not;¹⁹ employer-employee relationships where the employer is the victim;²⁰ or where the court declares the relationship to be a domestic relationship.²¹ None of these relationships include LGBT persons, except perhaps two- people who share or have shared residences, or a domestic relationship declared by a court. However, in determining whether a relationship is a domestic relationship, the court considers the following: the legal nature of the relationship; the amount of time the persons spend together; the place where the time is ordinarily spent; the manner in which that time is spent and the duration of the relationship.²² The reference to “the legal nature of the relationship” may prove problematic for a same-sex relationship as admission of the existence of such a relationship opens one up to possible prosecution for engaging in carnal knowledge against the order of nature. It should also be noted that many cases of domestic violence may never reach the courts as they are resolved through police processes or mediations. In that case, LGBT persons may be disqualified before the court has the chance to consider the nature of the relationship.

For sex workers, cases of violence involving clients and lodge managers may not be properly handled by the authorities as cases of domestic violence since sex work is illegal. At the same time, sex workers cannot be protected under labour laws because sex work is not recognised as a lawful trade or business, and thus reporting violence against sex workers is not only complicated but also fraught with risk as the possibility of the victim instead being arrested for prostitution if facts pointing to this are disclosed

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¹⁶ See JD Mujuzi ‘The absolute prohibition of same-sex marriages in Uganda’ (2009) 23 International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family 278, 282-283

¹⁷ Domestic Violence Act, section 3(1)(b).

¹⁸ Above, section 3(1)(c).

¹⁹ Above, section 3(1)(d).

²⁰ Above, section 3(1)(e).

²¹ Above, section 3(1)(f).

²² Above, section 3(2).

in the course of reporting violence does in fact exist. This is why sex work should be decriminalised so that sex workers can have the protection of the law.

Therefore, although in general terms the Domestic Violence Act does appear to have broad protections for all victims of domestic violence, it does not provide a protection regime for people in same-sex relationships, and neither does it cover relationships between sex workers and their clients and/or lodge managers within the purview of relationships that are recognised as domestic relationships under the Act.

4.2. Narrow definition of emotional, verbal and psychological abuse which require repeated acts of violence

Whereas the Act includes emotional, verbal and psychological abuse among those that constitute domestic violence in section 2, it is specifically defined as requiring repeated actions: that is-repeated insults, ridicule or name-calling, repeated threats to cause emotional pain, repeated exhibition of possessiveness or jealousy which is such as to constitute a serious invasion of the victim’s privacy, liberty, integrity or security, etc. For LGBT persons and sex workers, family members and/or clients for the case of sex workers can commit a single act of violence which has a significant emotional and psychological effect, depending on the relationship with the person doing the act or omission or making the statement. For LGBT persons, for instance, being called a curse by a family member, or for sex workers being described as worthy of rape by a one-time client is a more likely occurrence than a “pattern of behaviour”, yet it bears significant psychological impact. Requiring repeated behavior is thus too narrow to capture such abuses and violations and seems by its very definition to exclude short-term relationships and one-off encounters with intimate partners (such as sex workers usually have).

4.3. The nature of punishments for domestic violence discourages reporting

Section 4(1) criminalises domestic violence, while section 4(2) provides for the punishment for domestic violence as a fine not exceeding Uganda shillings 960,000 or imprisonment for two years or both. These punishments are maximum punishments, meaning that the chances are high that a perpetrator

may get a much lesser punishment. Considering the broad nature of what constitutes domestic violence and the magnitude of the impact that domestic violence has on the victims, the punishments are too lenient as they apply to all forms of domestic violence-including the more extreme ones. The impact of this is that victims may feel discouraged from reporting at all as the perpetrators will barely be punished. If one weighs the risks inherent in reporting such cases as a sex worker or LGBT person, including the likelihood of being arrested, one may decide not to take the chance at all – after all the eventual punishment even when the perpetrator is convicted will neither be deterrent nor satisfactory to the victim.

4.4. The unsuitability of the available avenues for redress to the lived realities of LGBT persons and sex workers

The inherent discrimination and homophobia that permeate all aspects of private and public life in Uganda also colours the public response to domestic violence faced by LGBTI persons and sex workers.²³ The avenues available for redress of domestic violence under the Act are: local council courts, the police and the courts of law. For the local councils, section 6 provides the local council where someone resides as a place where a complaint can be filed. Section 6(3) requires the local council court to take down details, including the capacity in which the complaint is made, which would technically include the relationship of the victim to the alleged perpetrator, a detail that would instantly put the victim in a same-sex relationship at risk of further victimisation.

Local council authorities are also known violators of the rights of LGBT persons and sex workers. For the first half of 2020 (January to June), HRAPF documented violations of the rights of key populations, and local council authorities emerged as the biggest violators of the rights of Key Populations – including LGBT persons and sex workers.²⁴ Many LGBT persons and sex workers will be very hesitant to report cases

of violence to the local council where they reside because of the fear of ridicule and violence after their sexual orientation/gender identity or work is known by their fellow residents. Many would therefore shun such an avenue and rather do nothing or take the matter in their own hands.

Another avenue to which one can report a case is the police. Under section 7(1), a case of domestic violence can be reported to a police officer. Section 7(2) provides for the immediate responsibilities of a police officer to whom a complaint is made- including assisting the victim to obtain shelter, medical treatment, and advice on how to obtain relief under the Act.²⁵ This certainly requires a lot of information to be shared with the police officer, and this would lead to LGBT persons or sex workers revealing details about their sexuality and/ or gender identity, which would put them in trouble with the police. The Uganda Police has consistently been documented by HRAPF as the leading violator of the rights of LGBT persons, the latest being the 2019 violations report – which indicates that the police accounted for 234 out of 236 (99.15%) violations of human rights based on sexual orientation or gender identity documented in that year.²⁶ HRAPF has also documented the police force as the leading violator of the rights of sex workers. In 2019, for instance, the Police were also the biggest single violator of the human rights of sex workers as they were responsible for 119 out of the 120 human rights violations documented (99.1%).²⁷ This would explain why this avenue would not be one that is favoured by LGBT persons and sex workers to report cases of domestic violence due to the well-founded fear of further violence from the would-be protection agency.

Finally, under section 9, every magistrates' court is given powers to hear cases on domestic violence and to issue protection orders. The courts apply the procedure provided for under the Family and

²³ NE Murphy 'Queer justice: Equal Protection for victims of same-sex domestic violence' 30 Val. U. L. Rev. 335 (1995) <https://scholar.valpo.edu/vulr/vol30/iss1/7>. Accessed 23rd March, 2021.

²⁴ Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) 'Report of human rights violations against key Populations in Uganda' January – June 2020' <https://www.hrapf.org/index.php/resources/violation-reports> (accessed 29th March 2021), 35.

²⁵ Domestic Violence Act, section 7(2).

²⁶ Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) "The Uganda report of human rights violations on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, 2019" <https://www.hrapf.org/index.php/resources/violation-reports/172-sogi-violations-report-2019/file> (accessed 29 March 2021).

²⁷ Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) '2019 Report on the protection and violation of the human rights of sex workers in Uganda' <https://www.hrapf.org/index.php/resources/violation-reports/169-sex-workers-violations-report-2019/file> (accessed 29th March 2021).

Children’s Court Rules.²⁸ These rules still require the same procedure for filing civil cases as provided for under the Civil Procedure Rules, with all their attendant formalities and procedural difficulties.²⁹ These procedures are complicated and require lawyers to file, something that many LGBT persons and sex workers may not be able to afford. The procedures also require one to state, on oath, all facts relating to the matter (“the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”), which also presents additional hurdles to LGBTI persons and sex workers who have to reveal their relationships with the perpetrator thus opening themselves up to prosecution on the basis of their own complaints, made on oath. Court personnel may lack training and act on implicit bias to mistreat LGBTI persons and sex workers, making it harder for an already marginalised group to navigate the system, especially where the victims cannot obtain expert representation (or any representation), which is usually the case.

4.5. Duties upon health practitioners may lead to more discrimination against LGBT persons and sex workers

Section 8 requires health practitioners who suspect that a person under their care has been a victim of domestic violence to offer the requisite medical assistance to the victim; accurately document the visit of the victim; inform the victim of options available within the judicial system; and make themselves available to testify in court regarding the case where necessary. The part on accurate documentation requires that the health official obtains all relevant information, including the relationship of the victim to the abuser, which in most cases would include the sexual orientation/gender identity of the person reporting or their status as a sex worker. Unfortunately, health workers have been documented to be hostile towards LGBT persons and sex workers, including denying them services or otherwise stigmatising them.³⁰ This means that many victims would probably lie to the health practitioners in order to obtain treatment for fear of being labeled

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²⁸ The Children (Family and Children Court) Rules, SI 59-2.

²⁹ Above, Rule 9 and 10.

³⁰ Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum ‘How laws that promote human rights impact on access to HIV and TB services for key populations in Uganda’ <https://www.hrapf.org/index.php/resources/legal-policy-analyses/175-how-laws-that-promote-human-rights-impact-on-access-to-hiv-tb-services-for-key-populations-in-uganda/file> (accessed 29th March 2021).

or discriminated. A victim of domestic violence may also decline to seek medical treatment because their sexual orientation would then become part of a permanent medical record, which a lot of LGBT people or sex workers fear may be availed to the law enforcement authorities or parts of the public.

5. Comparison of the Domestic Violence Act 2010, with the Domestic Violence Act of South Africa

In 1998, the South African legislature enacted the Domestic Violence Act, 116 of 1998. The Act in section 1(vii)(b) of defines a domestic relationship to include a same-sex relationship in which the parties live in a way that is akin to marriage, and therefore covers domestic violence in such relationships. It applies to survivors of abusive “domestic relationships . . . whether they are of the same or the opposite sex.” The statute explicitly states that domestic violence remedies, such as protection orders and “emergency monetary relief,” are available to both same-sex and opposite-sex survivors. The Act represents a legislative model for other states seeking to offer equal protection to LGBT survivors of domestic violence.³¹

6. HRAFP’s position as regards the application of the Domestic Violence Act to LGBT persons and sex workers

After consideration of the normative and procedural components of the Domestic Violence Act, 2010, HRAFP is of the position that the Act as it is does not adequately provide protections for LGBT persons and

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³¹ NE Serra ‘Queering international human rights: LGBT Access to Domestic Violence Remedies’ *American University Journal of Gender Social Policy and Law* 21, no. 3 (2013): 583-607.

sex workers. Although it provides a comprehensive definition of domestic violence, and on the face of it does not discriminate against any category of persons, the persons to whom it applies and the relationships to which it relates implicitly exclude same-sex relationships and sex work transactions. This implies that intimate partner violence, which is common among LGBT persons, as well as violence by clients and by lodge managers of sex workers are not adequately covered as domestic relationships in which domestic violence can occur. The Act needs to be revised to expressly provide protections for LGBT persons and sex workers, including a wider definition of domestic violence that covers unique situations of different groups, streamline punishments for different domestic violence acts and omissions, provide procedural protections for marginalised populations to access justice in a more dignified way, and to provide for the training of local council authorities, police officers, health workers and judicial officers and staff on the unique challenges faced by LGBT persons and sex workers as regards domestic violence.³²

7. Conclusion

Although the Domestic Violence Act, 2010 is a progressive piece of legislation and one that puts into consideration the needs of victims and seeks to provide remedies, it still needs to be revised if it is to enhance protections for LGBT persons and sex workers. The law does not provide for victims of domestic violence who are LGBT persons with express legal protection, thus raising significant “equal protection before the law” concerns. A uniform application of the law is required to show a commitment to the criminalisation of domestic violence regardless of sexual orientation or choice of work. It is important to afford LGBT persons protection from abuse under the Act because it provides more comprehensive legal protection and social services to victims than general criminal laws. It is therefore essential that LGBT and sex worker victims of domestic violence have access to the full range of protections and services provided to other victims of domestic violence.

³² Pan American Health Organization 'Key components of laws and policies on domestic violence' <https://www.paho.org/hq/dmdocuments/2009/englishfactsheet2.pdf>. Accessed 25th March 2021.

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Email: info@hrapf.org

Website: www.hrapf.org