News
LGBTQ refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp, located in Kenya's northwestern region, hold thei

LGBTQ refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp, located in Kenya's northwestern region, hold their rainbow flags as they pose for a photo on Feb. 18. (NCR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



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Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya — August 9, 2023
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Lying on a dirty, torn mattress with a broken leg in a plaster cast in his small tent in this dusty, sprawling United Nations camp, Nardi Niyongabo recalls how he almost lost his life early this year after a group of young refugees attacked him for being gay during one of the evening prayers at a Catholic church in the camp.

Niyongabo, 29, a Burundian refugee, said most churches in the camp do not allow lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people to attend church services because of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

"I remember that day I went for evening prayers. The catechist preached against homosexuality and how demonic it is," he recalled, saying the catechist incited congregants to attack and beat anyone promoting homosexuality in the church. "So, when people saw me, they began attacking me for being in church, and when I tried defending myself, they beat me until I lost consciousness. I found myself in the hospital with a broken leg after I recovered."

Niyongabo fled Burundi to Uganda in 2013 to seek safety after his family and neighbors attacked him after he was caught having intimate relations with his partner. However, in 2017 he fled from Uganda to the camp after the Ugandan government threatened to arrest and jail anyone practicing or promoting homosexuality.

In May, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni signed into law one of the world's strictest anti-gay laws, including the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality," drawing Western condemnation but widely supported by many in Africa.

"I thought here would be my safest place, but those hopes have been dashed after I was recently attacked in a church by Christians," Niyongabo lamented. "LGBTQ refugees are living in constant fear of being attacked or even killed. Many people call us names; they mock us and say a demon and evil spirit of homosexuality possess us."



The LGBTQ refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp share food on February 18. The LGBTQ refugees said that sometimes they are denied the normal food ratio that all the refugees get because of their sexual orientation and identity. (NCR

photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

"We are afraid of going to church or meeting some religious leaders here since most encourage people to attack us. They say we are not living the normal way God made us; what we are is a sin," he said.

Niyongabo is among hundreds of LGBTQ asylum-seekers and refugees facing discrimination from religious leaders and their followers in the camp, which hosts more than 200,000 refugees from Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Ethiopia.

The LGBTQ people here say religious leaders always incite their followers against them, resulting in physical attacks that sometimes may lead to deaths, rape, stigmatization, arbitrary arrest by police, and denial of essential services, including food, health care, education, and security.

"We fear going to places of worship because of the attacks from church leaders and their followers," said Allan Muwanguzi, one of the representatives of the LGBTQ refugees in the camp located in the northwestern region of Kenya. "People are very hostile everywhere we go, including churches where we should feel safe. On several occasions, most of us have been attacked by people who call themselves Christians for attending prayers and Masses."

Muwanguzi said most of the LGBTQ refugees in the camp are Catholics, and they sometimes conduct private prayers to communicate with God and encourage each other amid their ordeal.

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The majority of countries in Africa have some of the harshest anti-LGBTQ laws, with 32 of 54 nations criminalizing homosexuality. Among those nations, others have imposed the death penalty and long-term jail sentences for sexual relations between people of the same sex.

In East Africa, LGBTQ people have nowhere to hide, and some prefer to seek safety in refugee camps across the region. In Kenya, for example, the law states that anyone found practicing or promoting homosexuality could face a jail term of five to

14 years. In Burundi, anyone found engaging or having sexual relations with a person of the same sex is eligible for a two-year jail term.

Uganda, Somalia, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and South Sudan have some of the toughest and most discriminatory LGBTQ laws that allow those found practicing or promoting homosexuality to face the death penalty, life imprisonment, or long jail terms.



A signpost marks the Kakuma Refugee Camp, located in Kenya's northwestern region. The camp is home to more than 200,000 refugees, mainly from South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Ethiopia, and Uganda. Among them, there are over 600 self-identified LGBTQ members. (NCR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

"Our life as LGBTQ people in this camp has always been difficult and full of challenges," grieved one of the lesbian refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, requesting anonymity so that her family residing in the camp would not know about her sexual orientation. "We face more problems than other refugees. We

are discriminated against and even denied food sometimes. We are constantly attacked, and if we report to the police or UNHCR officials, we are ignored. Some lesbians have been raped, but when they reported it, the police told them to go and look for the perpetrators themselves."

One of the catechists ministering in the camp told NCR that homosexuality and same-sex marriage are evil and ungodly, and there's no way they would allow people who practice or promote it to attend Mass or prayers unless "they repent and turn to God so that their sins can be forgiven."

"These people are agents of Satan because of their weird behaviors," he said, requesting anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter. "I can't imagine how a normal man can marry his fellow man, or a woman marry her fellow woman. These are acts of satanic. God had a reason for creating a man and a woman to multiply and fill the world."

Early this year, during an interview with The Associated Press, "Pope Francis criticized laws that criminalize homosexuality as 'unjust,' saying God loves all his children just as they are and called on Catholic bishops who support the laws to welcome LGBTQ people into the church," according to AP.



The LGBTQ refugees pose for a group photo at the Kakuma Refugee Camp on February 18. The LGBTQ refugees said they face homophobic attacks from everyone, including religious leaders and their followers. (NCR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

"Being homosexual is not a crime," Francis told the news organization, just days before his trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan from Jan. 31-Feb. 5.

Fr. Jose Padinjareparampil, director of Don Bosco Kakuma, said that although some religious leaders and their followers are too homophobic towards LGBTQ people, he was welcoming everyone in the church, including the LGBTQ community, because "everyone belongs to God" and "God loves all his children."

"We welcome everyone to church no matter how they identify themselves," he said, noting that denying other people an opportunity to attend Mass or prayers was selfish and not biblical. "I am talking to other leaders to ensure they don't

discriminate against LGBTQ people. We always encourage everyone to embrace each other and live in unity because the church is the unity in the body of Christ."

Meanwhile, Niyongabo and other LGBTQ asylum-seekers and refugees believe that the only way to avoid stigmatization and abuse is to be relocated to other European countries that can understand their situation.

"I want to be relocated to Europe as soon as possible because I don't feel safe here anymore," said Niyongabo. "I am already injured, and my leg is paining. Every day here is a risk to my life and other LGBTQ people. We are always under the scrutiny of others and susceptible to constant attack."

Related: In Kakuma Refugee Camp, sisters foster peace between warring South Sudanese tribes

A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 18-31, 2023** print issue under the headline: A life of ‘constant fear’: The plight of African LGBTQ refugees.