

The Johannesburg Statement on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Human Rights

A meeting of African lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender organizations, with fifty-five participants from twenty-two groups representing sixteen countries across the continent, adopted the following statement in Johannesburg, South Africa, on February 13, 2004.

To African member governments of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and of the United Nations:

We write to you as a coalition of African lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender organizations. If we do not sign the names of our organizations to this document, it is because of the climate of repression and fear that we face every day. We represent sixteen countries across the whole continent of Africa. We speak to you as fellow Africans, concerned that our continent develop and realize its full potential, steady in hope for African democracy, aware that repression and fear are inconsistent with peace and freedom, conscious that democracy and development can only be attained by mobilizing the energies of all Africa's peoples.

We say to you: We, African lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people, do exist--despite your attempts to deny our existence. We are part of your countries and constituencies. We are watching your deliberations from our home communities, which are also your home communities. We demand that our voices be heard.

We ask you to support a resolution before the Commission on sexual orientation, gender identity, and human rights.

Across Africa, we face human rights abuses which threaten our safety, our livelihoods, and our lives. That we are targets of such abuse proves that we exist—states do not persecute phantoms or ghosts. It also proves the necessity for action to safeguard our real situations and our basic rights.

African lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people confront harassment from police; abuse by our neighbors and our families; and violence and brutality—sometimes punitive rape—on the streets. We are discriminated against in the workplace. Some of our families force us into marriages against our will, in the hope of changing our inmost selves. Some of us, among them the very young, are evicted from our homes because of prejudice and fear.

Our intimate and private lives are made criminal. Laws punishing “unnatural acts” or “sodomy” are enforced against us. Political leaders say these laws defend African “cultural traditions”—even though, without a single exception, these laws are foreign imports, brought by the injustice of colonialism.

We are denied access to health care and basic health information targeted to our lives and needs. We are blamed, unjustly, for the spread of HIV/AIDS (known by experts to be, in Africa, primarily transmitted by heterosexual sex); at the same time, we are omitted from HIV prevention programs. The brave contributions we have made to HIV prevention and treatment—doing outreach to our own communities and educating them in the face of state neglect or persecution—are ignored or actively harassed.

Schools teach intolerance, contributing to a harassment that denies young people whose sexualities or gender identities do not “conform” the basic right to an education. We are targets of media propaganda campaigns that call us “foreign,” “diseased,” “evil,” or “sick.” Political leaders

promote hatred against us to solidify their own political situations. We are kept in silence and denied the right of reply.

At the same time, we have and have always had a place in Africa. Despite the pressure of prejudice that politicians and self-styled popular leaders promote, many of our families do not succumb; many of our neighbors, co-workers, and friends continue to love and to support us. Many of our communities continue to affirm that we are an integral part of their web of relationships. Many traditional cultures still are governed by those principles of welcoming and belonging that have always been central to African life; they do not allow themselves to be distorted by the politics of exclusion, and preserve our rightful place in the gathering. Many African religious leaders from many denominations speak to us of love and inclusion, not hatred and revenge. And, on our continent, South Africa, at the end of its long liberation struggle, became the first country in the world to include, in its post-apartheid constitution, “sexual orientation” as a status protected from discrimination.

In supporting the resolution on sexual orientation, gender identity, and human rights, you will be true to the real African tradition—which, in culture after culture, before colonialism cast its stultifying shadow, recognized the interrelationship and interdependency of us all.

We urge you to support this resolution.

Signed by representatives from:

Botswana
Burundi
Ethiopia
Ghana
Kenya
Namibia
Nigeria
Rwanda
Senegal
Sierra Leone
Somalia
South Africa
Swaziland
Tanzania
Uganda
Zimbabwe