

PRESS STATEMENT

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GROUNDBREAKING STUDY OF UGANDAN PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS LGBTI FAMILY MEMBERS SHOWS ANGER, DENIAL, DISBELIEF, STIGMA—AND ALSO, A DESIRE TO LEARN

(Kampala, Uganda) Chapter Four Uganda, an organization working for the promotion of civil and political rights for marginalized populations today released findings of a baseline study of the perceptions and experiences of parents, families and their lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender or intersex (LGBTI) children (aged 21 to 50 years) in Uganda. The “My Child is Different” study, conducted by co-authors Clare Byarugaba and Ashanut Okille is the first of its kind in Uganda, a country where LGBTI people are criminalized and frequently experience stigma, discrimination, and physical and psychological violence.

The baseline study findings serve as a backdrop to the Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbian and Gays in Uganda (PFLAG-Uganda project)- a social intervention project that seeks to provide Chapter Four’s clients with post legal justice support.

The main finding of the groundbreaking study was that, while a majority of parents react with anger, denial and disbelief when their children come out, or are ‘outed’ as LGBTI, parents and other family members also expressed love and concern for their children and a need to learn more about what their LGBTI children. The study reached a total of 80 participants.

Estrangement by parents, guardians and families of LGBTI Ugandans has largely been attributed to homophobia in the nuclear and extended family structures. “My Child is Different” explores the complex causes of a phenomenon that has plagued families that have children with a different sexual orientation and gender identity

“While coming out or being “outed” as LGBT in Uganda can be one of the most confusing and scary periods for us, these survey results reveal that our parents and families also go through a coming out process. We must understand this and guide them—so they know how to support us,” said Chapter Four’s Clare Byarugaba.

The study found that actions taken by parents vary from family to family. 26% of parents interviewed subjected their children to spiritual intervention to try and change them, while others sent their children away from home. Others did nothing and were able to tolerate or accept their children, although this acceptance was often tied to the hopes that the child would change sexual orientation—assuming this was a ‘phase’ in a child’s life

“My desire is to have a normal [sic] child, I don’t think it can get out of my heart. It cannot. It cannot just be automatic like that, it will take some good time, many, many years though now I’ve tried to see that I have accepted everything,” said one survey respondent, a father of a gay man.

The study found that there are parents who fight to protect their children, even with consequences such as broken homes and separation from a spouse. The study further revealed that the brunt of the shame and judgment from society is often borne by mothers-- while fathers are more likely to blame a mother for a child being LGBTI.

“I believe it’s not my fault that [Anonymous] turned out like that. When people ask me, I say I carried the womb like other women, I produced like any other woman and this is the child I never raised outside the home, he was there, we brought him up when you are seeing but if he turned to be like that it was not my fault at all. It wasn’t my fault,” said a mother of gay man and survey respondent.

The study also suggests that the negative reactions and actions by parents and families towards their children are often caused by the lack of credible information about concepts related to sexual orientation and gender identity. All the parents interviewed in the study confessed to having no knowledge of where to find other parents whom they could talk to share experiences and learn.

Parents and families reported no places where they could receive unbiased, accurate affordable and tailored counselling support. The abundance of information available to them was in form of unsolicited and demeaning information from neighbors and community members about their children.

Parents and families interviewed during the study also described different challenges that come with having an LGBTI child in Uganda. These include ridicule and changed perceptions of them as parents of an LGBTI child, psychological torture caused by judgments and negative perceptions from their communities, apprehension and concern for their children’s health and wellbeing and increased tensions that occur in family relations as a result of their child revealing her gender identity.

All the LGBTI individuals that responded to this study however confessed that they expect nothing less than acceptance from their parents and families. They confessed to having been hurt the most by their parents’ words of ridicule and mistreatment to withholding of financial and moral support. Most of them emphasised that home should be a safe haven for them, not a source of additional intolerance and prosecution for being ‘different.’

One lesbian respondent who was almost killed when she was outed, remarked: “Our parents don’t need an education to know how to love and support their children. My parents are well educated and yet they almost killed me for being a lesbian. I would propose legal ramification for parents who mistreat and abandon their LGBTI children. We need to be protected by the law.”

Overall, while this study found that parents and families still carry negative perceptions about LGBTI people, and struggle to accept their LGBTI children. Many also express a willingness to learn more about how to meaningfully support their children within a volatile environment for LGBTI rights like Uganda.

The study respondents made the following recommendations to address the challenges and gaps extrapolated by the study:

To PFLAG-Uganda and other human rights organisations that would like to support LGBTI individuals, and their parents/families:

- (i) Facilitate the establishment of support groups for parents/families of LGBTI children. These support groups should be a space for the parents/families to meet regularly, share experiences, and obtain both peer support and professional support.
- (ii) Provide regular and consistent access to credible information to parents that will facilitate greater understanding, acceptance and support of LGBTI children by their families. This information should include materials related to the lived realities of LGBTI persons and the consequences of the negative actions of their parents and families.
- (iii) Provide information and training on LGBTI rights and issues to counsellors and NGO staff who would like to offer support to LGBTI individuals but do not have sufficient information and/or skills to enable them to do this effectively.
- (iv) Develop activities that are guided by the needs of parents, families, and their LGBTI children
- (v) Provide opportunities for members of the LGBTI community to undertake professional studies that respond to the needs of the community (e.g. counselling, therapy, and psychosocial and clinical support). This will enable LGBTI individuals to provide these services to their community directly, thereby eliminating the issue of biased service providers.

To the Government (through Parliament):

- (vi) Formulate policies within public health institutions that make it mandatory for service providers to provide unbiased and non-discriminatory services to LGBTI individuals, their parents, and family members. These policies should provide a grievance response mechanism for individuals that experience discrimination or verbal assault within these institutions.
- (vii) Strengthen/enhance legal protection against the abandonment of LGBTI children by their parents and create specific legal consequences for abandoning and assaulting children.

To counsellors and other service providers:

- (viii) Professional clinical psychologists and psychotherapists should increase provision of non-discriminatory, non-judgmental, cost friendly, sociable, and tailored services to the LGBT community and their parents and families and create an environment where their services can be accessed safely.

To donors and human rights organizations that would like to support LGBTI individuals and their parents:

- (ix) Provide funding opportunities for members of the LGBTI community to undertake professional studies that respond to the needs of the community (e.g. counselling, therapy, and psychosocial and clinical support). This will enable LGBTI individuals to provide these services to their community directly, thereby eliminating the issue of biased service providers.
- (x) Widen the existing funding models to benefit organisations, movements or groups that aim to provide services to the LGBTI community through social intervention projects whose impact can only be measured in the long term