

Unshakable in Uganda: A lesbian activist navigates church and politics

The pastor urged the congregation to sign an antigay petition. Clare Byarugaba knew she wasn't the only gay person there.

by [Jeff Chu](#) in the [August 31, 2016](#) issue



OUT IN UGANDA: Clare Byarugaba works for LGBTQ civil rights. Photo by Timothy Meinch.

Clare Byarugaba was in church on a Sunday in 2009 when her pastor urged his congregation to sign a petition backing antigay legislation being considered in Uganda’s parliament. She surveyed the massive sanctuary of her evangelical megachurch in Kampala, Uganda’s capital. “How many gay people,” she wondered, “are in this place?”

Most of those gathered for worship that day, like an overwhelming majority of Ugandans, agreed with their pastor that homosexuality is sinful and unacceptable—so much so that, as the proposed bill specified, the death penalty should apply in some cases of same-sex activity. But Byarugaba knew that she wasn’t the only LGBTQ person in church.

“It was so, so painful,” she recalls, “because homophobia had found us in church. The people who were supposed to bring you closer to God were calling for your death.” She said a prayer for those unknown others. Then she made a decision: “That was the last time I went to church.”

In 2005, Uganda became the first nation in Africa and the second in the world (Honduras was first) to adopt an explicit ban against same-sex marriage. That no country had done so before reflects how inconceivable same-sex marriage has been in most of the world. In the decade since, Uganda, which is 80 percent Christian and 15 percent Muslim, has repeatedly considered other laws against homosexuality, which was first criminalized there by the British colonial authorities in the 19th century.

In 2013, parliament passed legislation that included the possibility of life imprisonment, but not the death penalty, for some same-sex activity. President Yoweri Museveni signed it into law in 2014. Soon afterward, though, the nation's highest court nullified the legislation, immediately igniting calls for new parliamentary proposals.

The global press covered this legal wrangling extensively. Much less has been written about how the political and social climate has affected the spiritual lives of LGBTQ Ugandans like Byarugaba, 29, one of the country's most prominent LGBTQ activists. She works for Chapter Four, a nonprofit advocacy group for civil rights. Like most Ugandans—and like most of Uganda's LGBTQ population—she is deeply spiritual. But maintaining her faith has not been easy.

Byarugaba was reared Anglican. Her father, who farmed and also ran a small hotel, played the organ at All Saints Church in the town of Kabale, in Uganda's verdant southwest. Her childhood was happy, and she adored church. "I never really questioned my faith or the Bible. I was in a certain place with God, and it was good," she says. When she reminisces about youth choir, her face glows: "I loved it. We had a live band. And I loved how excited it made my mum. It was good. It was all good."

It was in choir that Byarugaba first noticed her same-sex attraction. "I'd be checking out girls," she says, "but in a holy way, like, 'I appreciate you, girl!'"

She cajoled her girlfriends to attend church with her—her way of reconciling the great loves of her life: God and women. "I used to call myself a non-practicing, God-fearing lesbian," she says, laughing. "I knew my identity was not going anywhere, but I said, 'God will deal with it.'"

Her family proved more challenging. As antigay legislation was debated, newspapers published pictures of members of the LGBTQ community, and Byarugaba appeared on the front page of the popular tabloid *Red Pepper*. "That brought insecurity to

myself, shame to my family,” she says. Her father suggested that she leave the country. Her mother said, “All my friends’ daughters are getting married. You are going to bring me so much shame.”

She has repeatedly apologized to her mother. “I’m the only girl,” she explains, her shoulders slumping. “My mum gave birth to seven boys looking for me. She did want a daughter very badly, and I did everything right growing up.” She lowers her voice nearly to a whisper: “This is the one thing I couldn’t change. And the worst thing that could happen to a parent is the thing I burdened my mother with.”

Last year, Byarugaba finally told her mother that she would never marry a man and confessed that she had a girlfriend. Her mother said, “You have the devil in you!” Byarugaba smiles weakly. “By my mom’s standards, that was a good reaction. I expected violence. I expected the threats she had given to me before. She has said, ‘I will take you to the police myself.’ . . . She has told me, ‘I’d rather have a drunkard child or a drug addict than a lesbian daughter.’”

Such stories often get recounted in Western reports of Ugandan homophobia. But Byarugaba detests oversimplified depictions that perpetuate stereotypes of a backward Uganda and a progressive West. “The biggest misunderstanding is that people are savage here just because they are homophobic,” she said. “I don’t see it that way. There are not people with machetes outside waiting to kill me. There is good in all people, but they have been taught to hate and they have been taught to fear.”

She also urges a more sophisticated understanding of the challenges facing Uganda’s LGBTQ community. “Violence is not only when you are beaten in the streets,” she says. “Violence is if you cannot live without fear. Violence is the fear that something could happen.” She believes that, alongside discrimination, poverty deserves more attention. A fifth of the population still survives on less than \$1 a day, and the effects of poverty are particularly acute at the grass roots, which is why Byarugaba hires members of the LGBTQ community to do odd jobs that she could do herself. She also takes gay homeless youth into her home, appointing herself their surrogate elder sister.

Corruption is a major problem. In some sense, it offers an opportunity to the handful of wealthier LGBTQ people, who can buy some protection from the authorities. But there’s also a myth in Uganda that most LGBTQ people are rich, so they’ve become

targets for bribery and extortion. If you're arrested for sexuality-related reasons in Uganda, your case probably won't go to trial. "Most of the cases are never prosecuted, for lack of evidence," Byarugaba says. "But police see it as an opportunity. You bribe them."

According to Stella Nyanzi, a prominent social scientist who has researched Uganda's LGBTQ community extensively, corruption is rampant in the LGBTQ activist community as it is throughout Ugandan society. Though nobody will name names on the record, several prominent activists are widely said to have siphoned Western funding for personal use. "Clare is one of the few activists," Nyanzi says, "who says, 'We shall not cheat. We will not steal that money.'"

None of this is to underestimate the tremendous sociopolitical challenges. In early August, police raided a Pride event, arresting Byarugaba and other activists. Though she was released without charge, the rest of the Pride event—which she was helping to organize—was postponed after Simon Lokodo, the state minister of ethics and integrity, allegedly threatened to mobilize opponents to disrupt it.

Byarugaba knows that change will come painstakingly. She's now raising funds to develop programs that help parents understand their LGBTQ children. "Because homophobia is learned, it can be unlearned," she said. "Even if [parents] want to accept their children, they don't know how," she said. "There is so much shame." Discussing religion will be necessary. She cited the story of a lesbian teenager whose parents sought an exorcism because they didn't like her friends or how she dressed. Byarugaba has considered support groups, but doubts anyone would attend; the initial work will have to be one-on-one. "I wish I could advertise on the radio: 'Parents of homos! Come and partake of understanding your children better!' But I can't. It will be a very incremental, slow process," she said. "They also have to go through their own coming-out process."

Byarugaba occasionally refers to her "lost" Christianity. This is hyperbole. One Sunday, she texted to tell me that she was ready to return to her church in Kampala for the first time since 2009. When I found her outside the building, she was wearing a black T-shirt with a portrait of Jesus in sunglasses and the caption "I'll be back." "Are you ready?" I asked. "Let's go," she said.

By the time we found seats in the auditorium's balcony, the opening praise medley had already begun. At first, Byarugaba just stared at the lyrics on the big screen as

worshippers sang and danced around us. But when the praise team launched into “Unshakable,” a rollicking song from the Australian Pentecostal church Citipointe that paraphrases Isaiah 61, Byarugaba started to sing: “You make beauty from ashes / Turn sorrow into dancing.”

Isaiah 61 seems apt for Byarugaba and her work. “The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me,” it says, “because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives.”

In that work, Byarugaba has found some healing for herself too. Several months after we went to church together, she took her girlfriend home to Kabale to meet her family. They attended Sunday worship at Byarugaba’s childhood church. Her girlfriend “had always wanted to see me relating to God in one way or another. That’s a side of me that she doesn’t really see.”

During worship, Byarugaba began to daydream about getting married in that church—“the church I grew up in, where I was baptized, where I went to Sunday school,” she says. “I know in my lifetime that it might not happen.” But the dream itself was important. “I felt safe enough to imagine it.” She smiles at the memory and all it represents: that unexpected feeling of reassurance, that surprising sense of home, as she sat in church with the woman she loves beside her.