

Algeria: Mass convictions for homosexuality

Arbitrary arrests; police raid alleged 'gay wedding'.

HRW (15.10.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3dMEFpl> – An Algerian court on September 3, 2020 sentenced 2 men to prison terms and 42 others to suspended terms after mass arrests at what the police alleged was a “gay wedding,” Human Rights Watch said today. The authorities should void the charges and release them immediately.

On July 24, 2020, police raided a private residence and arrested the 44 – 9 women and 35 men, most of them university students – in el-Kharoub, a district in Constantine Province, northeastern Algeria, after neighbors complained. An Algerian lawyer involved in the case told Human Rights Watch that the court used police reports describing the decorations, flowers, and sweets indicative of a wedding celebration, and the men’s supposedly gay appearance, as evidence of guilt.

“Algerian authorities’ attack on personal freedoms is nothing new, but arresting dozens of students based on their perceived sexual orientation is a flagrant infringement on their basic rights,” said Rasha Younes, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “They should immediately release from prison the two men who would be free today were it not for Algeria’s regressive anti-homosexuality laws.”

The court convicted the 44 of “same-sex relations,” “public indecency,” and “subjecting others to harm by breaking Covid-19-related quarantine measures.” Two men were sentenced to three years in prison and a fine, and the others to a one-year suspended sentence.

These convictions contradict the right to privacy under international human rights law. This right is also reflected in Algeria’s constitution, which provides for the protection of a person’s “honor” and private life, including the privacy of their home, communication, and correspondence. The convictions of the 44 for “same-sex relations” indicate that Algerian authorities are discriminating against them based on their perceived sexual orientation and gender expression, Human Rights Watch said. The appeal of their convictions has not yet been scheduled.

In Algeria, same-sex relations are punishable under article 338 of the penal code by up to two years in prison. Additionally, article 333 increases the penalty for public indecency to six months to three years in prison and a fine if it involves “acts against nature with a member of the same sex,” whether between men or women.

Arrests for “moral” offenses that involve consensual adult activities in private settings violate international human rights law, including the right to privacy, nondiscrimination, and bodily autonomy protected under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Algeria is a state party. Algeria has ratified the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR), which affirms the rights to nondiscrimination, and has joined the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights. However, Algerian law does not extend

antidiscrimination protections to discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Additionally, Algeria has a law that prohibits the registration of organizations in Algeria whose aims are deemed inconsistent with "public morals," and that imposes criminal penalties for members of unregistered organizations. This law poses risks to those who want to form or become active in LGBT groups, as well as to human rights organizations that otherwise might support such activities. According to a 2019 analysis by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association (ILGA), laws regulating nongovernmental organizations in Algeria make it virtually impossible for organizations working on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity to legally register.

In light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the risk of outbreaks in detention sites, Human Rights Watch recommended that governments refrain from custodial arrests for minor offenses that do not involve the infliction or threat of infliction of serious bodily injury or sexual assault or a known likelihood of physical harm. Officials should also release anyone held pretrial, unless they pose a specific and known risk of harm to others that cannot be managed through measures other than detention.

Since March, Algerian authorities have imposed a ban on all social gatherings to slow the spread of Covid-19. Breaking quarantine and social distancing measures to attend a social gathering does not justify arbitrary arrests and prolonged pretrial detention, Human Rights Watch said.

“While people in Algeria continue to demand their basic rights to protest, the authorities are dedicating their time and resources to crack down on students and stockpile discriminatory charges against them,” Younes said. “Instead of policing its citizens’ private lives, the Algerian government should carry out reforms, including decriminalizing same-sex conduct.”

Photo: An Algerian demonstrator holds the Algerian national flag as he stage a protest against the government in Algiers, Algeria, Friday, Nov.29, 2019. © 2019 AP Photo/Toufik Doudou

Indonesia: Investigate police raid on ‘gay party’

Authorities exploiting pornography law to target LGBT people.

HRW (07.09.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3ih5WBR> – The Indonesian government should urgently investigate a police raid on a private gathering of 56 men in Jakarta that highlights the threat to the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the country, Human Rights Watch said today. On August 29, 2020, police forcibly broke up a party at a hotel, arresting nine men and charging them with the crime of “facilitating obscene acts” and under the pornography law, which discriminates against LGBT people.

The charges violate the rights to privacy, association, and equal protection of the law and should immediately be dropped.

“This latest raid fits into a disturbing pattern of Indonesian authorities using the pornography law as a weapon to target LGBT people,” said Kyle Knight, senior LGBT rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The government has been inciting hostility toward LGBT people for several years, and there is no accountability for abuses such as police raids on private spaces.”

Article 296 of Indonesia’s criminal code makes it a crime for someone to make “an occupation or a habit of intentionally causing or facilitating any obscene act by others.” The maximum penalty is 16 months in prison.

The Jakarta raid is part of a years-long pattern of authorities unlawfully apprehending LGBT people in private spaces. Indonesia’s central government has never criminalized same-sex behavior, but no national laws specifically protect LGBT people against discrimination. An uptick in anti-LGBT rhetoric and attacks since 2016 has resulted in the application of discriminatory clauses in the pornography law to target LGBT people for arrest and prosecution.

Indonesia’s 2008 Law on Pornography prohibits the “creation, dissemination or broadcasting of pornography containing deviant sexual intercourse,” which it defines to include: sex with corpses, sex with animals, oral sex, anal sex, lesbian sex, and male homosexual sex. Article 36 of the Pornography Law, which criminalizes facilitating obscene acts for a commercial purpose, has a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison.

A group of activists, including LGBT organizations, attempted to challenge the law in the Constitutional Court in 2009, but the court declined to review it.

While historically the law was not used to target LGBT people specifically, in recent years police have used it as a pretext for arbitrary raids and arrests, and courts have found gay men in private gatherings guilty under the law.

In September 2017, a court in Surabaya found seven men who had been arrested during a police raid on a gay party in April of that year guilty under the pornography law and sentenced them to between 18 months and 30 months in prison.

In October 2017, Jakarta police raided a club popular with gay men, arresting 58 people. Police released most of them the same day but detained five employees of the club – four men and a woman – and threatened to charge them with violating the pornography law. They were subsequently released without charge.

On December 15, 2017, the North Jakarta District Court sentenced 10 men to between two and three years in prison for violating the pornography law. Police had apprehended the 10, along with 131 others, during a raid on the Atlantis Gym, a sauna frequented by gay men in Jakarta, in May 2017. The 10 were convicted based on allegations that they were naked at the time of the raid, citing the law's prohibition on performances that involve stripping.

In January 2018, police in Cianjur, West Java province, raided a private home where five men had gathered. Citing the pornography law, the police told reporters the men were caught at a “sex party,” using condoms and lubricant as evidence.

In a development similar to the application of the pornography law, in January 2020, the mayor of Depok, a city in West Java, ordered police to raid private residences to look for “immoral acts” and “prevent the spread of LGBT.” The National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) condemned the order, saying such rhetoric from public officials increases the risk of persecution of LGBT people.

According to the police report of the recent Jakarta raid, a 31-officer police unit, under Adjunct Police Commissionaire Jerry Raimond Siagian, had apparently been monitoring the private gathering and organized the raid.

Privacy rights are a fundamental protection that underlie everyone’s physical autonomy and identity and include protections for private adult consensual sexual behavior, Human Rights Watch said. The United Nations Human Rights Committee, the independent body of experts that interprets the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Indonesia is party, has stated, “It is undisputed that adult consensual sexual activity in private is covered by the concept of ‘privacy.’”

Indonesia has been a champion for privacy rights internationally, co-sponsoring a UN Human Rights Council

resolution on the right to privacy. In the report on that resolution, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reminded governments that privacy rights (enshrined in ICCPR article 17) should be upheld jointly with the right to nondiscrimination (ICCPR, article 26).

Indonesian police should halt arbitrary raids on private spaces, investigate those that have taken place, and punish those who took part in the raids and those responsible in their chain of command, Human Rights Watch said. President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, who has voiced support for LGBT Indonesians in the past, should make clear the prohibition against discriminatory behavior by the police.

The Indonesian parliament should also substantially revise the proposed new criminal code to meet international human rights standards. It contains articles that will violate the rights of LGBT people. It has provisions that will punish extramarital sex by up to one year in jail. While this article does not specifically mention same-sex conduct, since same-sex relationships are not legally recognized in Indonesia, this provision effectively criminalizes all same-sex conduct.

"The combination of exploiting the discriminatory pornography law and a lack of accountability for police misconduct has proved to be both dangerous and durable," Knight said. "So long as the government permits police raids on private gatherings under a discriminatory law, it will fail to curb anti-LGBT harassment and intimidation."

Dozens of gay men are outed in Morocco as photos are spread online

The idea was to show the hypocrisy of Moroccan society by showing how many gay men are living quietly in straight society. It backfired badly.

By Aida Alami

The New York Times (26.04.2020) – <https://nyti.ms/3aLsKVr> – At least 50 to 100 gay men were outed in Morocco over the last two weeks, rights activists say, after the men were identified on location-based meeting apps while sheltering at home amid a coronavirus lockdown.

In at least three cases, men were kicked out of their houses, L.G.B.T.Q. activists said. In interviews, many others in the country said they had been blackmailed and threatened, and thousands fear that their photos will be spread on social media.

“Here I am just waiting for my death sentence,” said a young man whose photos were leaked online and who spoke anonymously for fear of being attacked. “I’m frustrated and scared.”

In Morocco, a North African kingdom where homosexuality and sex outside marriage are crimes, gay people are painfully accustomed to the feelings of peril and rejection, and many keep their sexual identities under wraps.

Now, their cover has been blown in a way that would be criminal in most Western societies, rights advocates say. Yet they have no legal recourse.

“Forcibly outing people is not just an obvious violation of their right to privacy,” said Ahmed Benchemsi, the communications director for the Middle East and North Africa division of Human Rights Watch. “When wrapped in incitement to hate and calls to violence based on sexual orientation, it’s also a crime.”

“A legal system respectful of universal rights would empower victims to press charges,” he said. “But in Morocco, same-sex behavior is also criminalized, so victims could find themselves trapped in a tragic catch-22 situation.”

What makes this episode particularly painful, gay leaders say, is that it was ignited by someone who had also been singled out.

On April 13, a Moroccan transgender Instagram personality based in Istanbul, Naoufal Moussa or Sofia Talouni, was insulted about her sexual orientation. In a rage, she released

a profanity-laced video encouraging women to download the location-based meeting apps, like Grindr and Planet Romeo, which are usually used by gay men.

In subsequent videos, she said her aim was to reveal the hypocrisy of Moroccan society by showing her attackers how many gay men were living in their vicinity, perhaps even in their own homes.

Many people followed Ms. Moussa's lead and created fake accounts on the apps to gather photos of gay men, which they then posted on private and public Facebook pages, setting off the homophobic attacks.

The attacks ignited a firestorm of criticism, both of Ms. Moussa and of Morocco's discriminatory laws.

Adam Eli, the founder of the New York-based activist group Voices4, worked in coordination with Moroccan L.G.B.T.Q. rights activists to get Ms. Moussa's Instagram account deleted.

"For now the account has been suspended, and already a new one has popped up," he said. "We did not solve the issue of queer-phobia in Morocco. However, we showed a bunch of young queer people, who are scared and in quarantine, that they are not alone, that they have the force of the international queer community behind them."

A spokesperson for Facebook, which owns Instagram, confirmed that Ms. Moussa's account had been suspended. "We don't allow people to out members of the L.G.B.T.Q.+ community because it puts them at risk," the spokesperson wrote in an email. "We've disabled Naoufal Moussa's Facebook and Instagram accounts, and we're taking proactive steps to find and remove other content like this."

What seems to have set Ms. Moussa off was a late-night conversation with a little-known Instagram user, who in an interview asked to be identified only as Yassine, for fear for his safety.

Ms. Moussa has attained a measure of fame in recent months, using her platform to talk crudely about sex and to entertain her followers in an insolent and confrontational manner in vulgar Moroccan Arabic. That has made her an object of fascination and horror to her more than half-million followers.

And she is known to despise L.G.B.T.Q. people who do not make their sexual orientation known.

Yassine, a 22-year-old, said he was initially delighted to be picked to go live on Instagram with Ms. Moussa. But what felt like an honor rapidly turned into embarrassment and shock as Ms. Moussa compelled him to acknowledge that he was gay, threatening to post revealing photos showing him with another gay man. It is unclear how she obtained the photos.

“I was shocked and then very scared,” Yassine said. “She destroyed my life.”

He has since been forced to move out of the house of a family member and to use his savings to rent a small apartment in Tangier.

“Everybody is sending the video and saying bad things about me,” he said. “My mom, also, she’s very sad. She’s not talking to me anymore. My friends at the gym, friends I went to school with – they all blocked me.”

Many who saw the outing of Yassine were outraged and attacked Ms. Moussa, flagging her account to Instagram. That’s when she got angry and suggested downloading gay meeting apps, which led to the outburst of anti-gay violence.

“My dating life in Morocco was somehow OK as long as my partner and I were being super discreet and cautious,” said one gay man who asked to be identified only by his initials, N.A., and says his family hasn’t seen the photos. He has been staying with his grandmother and waiting in fear for something bad to happen.

Abdellah Taia, a prominent gay author and one of few to publicly declare his sexual orientation in Morocco, says that the state keeps people in a gray area, making them vulnerable to abuse and discrimination and forcing many into hiding.

“This is a great and bitter Moroccan comedy,” he said, adding of the pandemic that is exacerbating the situation: “Corona reveals every day a little more how the weakest on this Earth are even weaker and more ostracized than we thought. It’s sad. It’s tragic. It’s revolting.”

Morocco’s Interior Ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

The outing episode is seen by many as destroying a fragile balance that the country’s underground gay culture has built laboriously over the years, made even worse in a time of uncertainty and economic hardship. But they do have some support at home.

Nadia Bezaoui, the president of the Pan-African Organization for the Fight Against AIDS, said that while Morocco’s laws were unlikely to change, its health ministry encourages associations like hers to help vulnerable populations, including gay people.

“They can come to us without any danger or apprehension,” she said. “The reality is that they are tolerated but expected to remain invisible.”

Singapore gay sex ban: Court rejects appeals to overturn law

A bid to overturn a law that criminalises gay sex in Singapore has been dismissed by a court, dealing a blow to the city state's LGBT movement.

BBC News (30.03.2020) – <https://bbc.in/3bzqf9y> – The high court rejected appeals by three gay men who had argued the colonial-era law was unconstitutional.

The presiding judge said the law was “important in reflecting public sentiment and beliefs” in Singapore.

Under Section 377A, men found guilty of homosexual acts in public or private can be jailed for up to two years.

Speaking outside court, a lawyer for one of the complainants, M Ravi, said he was “very disappointed” by the ruling.

“It’s shocking to the conscience and it is so arbitrary,” he said.

The legal challenges were the latest attempts to repeal Section 377A, after an effort by a gay couple in 2014 was

rejected by the Court of Appeal.

But the LGBT rights movement in Singapore regained momentum after India's decision to scrap similar legislation in 2018 renewed hopes for reform.

Singapore's authorities rarely enforce Section 377A, first introduced in 1938 by British colonial rulers.

But Singapore's leaders, including its current prime minister, have refused to remove it, saying it reflects the conservative mores of the city state's society.

In Monday's judgement, the court echoed that sentiment, saying non-enforcement of the law against consensual gay sex in private did not render it redundant.

The court concluded the law was constitutional because it did not violate articles regarding equality and freedom of speech.

The latest attempt to overturn the law was spearheaded by three people: a retired doctor, a DJ and an LGBT rights advocate.

One of the men told Reuters news agency he was disappointed by the ruling, adding "my eyes are firmly on the road ahead".

Currently 70 countries criminalise same-sex relations.

A police raid, viral videos and the broken lives of Nigerian gay law suspects

Among 47 Nigerian men on trial for same-sex affection are people who have been made homeless and lost their jobs by the publicity.

By Alexis Akwagyiram

Openly (24.02.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2x1PNx7> – The 57 men stumbled out of the back of a dark police truck into the glare of a sunny courtyard and a phalanx of cameras. Some clutched another's hand, as if for comfort. They lined up on wooden benches in the dirt, almost all of them trying to hide their faces, and not succeeding.

Standing behind a bank of microphones, the Lagos state police commissioner, Imohimi Edgal, told the gathered journalists that he personally had ordered the raid that swept up the men after the authorities received a tipoff that young men were being initiated into a "homosexual club."

Edgal declared that homosexuality ran contrary to the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act. That law, which drew international condemnation when it came into force in 2014, targets not only same-sex unions but homosexual relations in general with prison terms of up to 14 years.

"It is the duty of everybody, not only the police, to ensure that such antisocial behaviour, such social vices, such

crimes, are checked so that we can create communities that protect our children from such deviant behaviour," he said.

The cameras panned over the faces of the men, capturing expressions of shame, fear and anger. Most of them remained quiet, but others answered journalists' questions.

"What is the definition of a gay? It is when you are caught having sex, intercourse, with a guy. They didn't caught me," shouted James Brown, a wiry young man who said he had been hired to dance at a birthday party and had done nothing wrong.

The phrase "they didn't caught me" quickly went viral. Video footage of the August 2018 news conference has since been viewed more than half a million times. Friends, colleagues and strangers all learned of the allegations from the videos that circulated online.

Last November, after more than a year of court hearings, Brown was among 47 men who pleaded not guilty to a charge of public displays of affection by people of the same sex. Arrest warrants were issued for the 10 other men who failed to appear in court. In a landmark case that may reach its resolution this month, the men face 10 years in prison if found guilty under the 2014 law, which has never been used to secure a conviction.

But prison time or no, the men have already been punished. In this resolutely Christian and Muslim country, homosexuality is broadly rejected across society, as casual as a snub on the street and as serious as Sharia law that threatens death by stoning.

One of the men is a married father of four who says he had driven people to the party to earn extra money. For a time, he went without electricity because he couldn't pay the bills after being fired; even in the darkness of his house, the strain between him and his wife was visible to a visiting Reuters journalist. Another man slept in a church outhouse

after his family threw him out, until he was finally cast out of that safe harbour, too. A third man lives in fear of the street toughs who have beaten him up three times after recognizing him from the viral videos of the perp walk. And the man who was celebrating his birthday avoided arrest but is now overwhelmed by guilt, seeing blame even in his friends' eyes.

These are the stories of lives broken by a birthday party late one night in Lagos – and by a culture that cast the men adrift.

The family man

Around 2 on a Sunday morning, they streamed out of the building, running in every direction. Within seconds, the birthday party at a Lagos hotel turned into a stampede as people fled armed policemen who had burst into the compound.

“I couldn't understand what was happening,” said Onyeka Oguaghamba, a trade union officer who used a borrowed car as a taxi at weekends. “Was it armed robbers or a fire?”

Oguaghamba had been dozing in the car park of the Kelly Ann Hotel. After a long journey driving three customers to the hotel in the Egbeda suburb, he said, he had decided to sleep in the car rather than risk a perilous journey home on potholed roads where he could encounter armed robbers.

Assuming the dozens of people who raced past him were fleeing danger, Oguaghamba said, he got out of the car and ran. Before he could reach the hotel compound's gates, however, he was pulled to the ground and struck repeatedly on his head. Seconds later, he said, he realised he was being held by a policeman using a gun as a bludgeon. Lagos state police spokesman Bala Elkana declined to comment on the beating claim on the grounds that the raid predated him. He rejected emailed and text message requests to speak to police officers who participated in the raid.

The impact on Oguaghamba's life was swift. After two weeks in police detention, he was fired as a bookkeeper with the Nigeria Union Of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers, a job he had held for eight years. His employers had seen the videos on social media and didn't believe his explanation, he said. His former manager declined to respond to text messages and phone calls from a journalist.

The 42-year-old, who insists he is not gay, was unable to find work for a year after his arrest. Finally, in December, he was hired as a driver for a transport company.

Even his four boys – aged 6, 7 and two 10-year-olds – weren't immune from the innuendo that swirled around their father. While he was in police detention, they were told their father had been on television.

"I felt so bad, although they didn't understand what gay means," he said. "They asked me why police arrested me and they were showing me on television. I explained to them that the police can arrest anybody at any time."

Walking past locals in his Lagos neighbourhood, Oguaghamba greeted people with "good morning," as is customary across Nigeria. Most returned the greeting, but some, particularly men, seemed reluctant to acknowledge him, barely nodding in response and looking away.

There was tension at home too.

"When I came back from that Ikoyi prison, people talked a lot to my wife. They tell her a lot of things," he said, referring to those who questioned his motives for being at the hotel that night.

Wedding photos of Oguaghamba, known to most people by his Christian name Miracle, and his wife, Juliette, take pride of place on the living room walls. But as the couple discussed the case with a visiting journalist recently, they rarely made

eye contact; he looked at the floor, and she fixed her gaze straight ahead.

While he was being detained, Juliette sent protection money to an inmate so he would be spared the beatings that he says many of the others he was arrested with were subjected to.

“She suffered a lot to bail me out,” Oguaghamba said. Aside from the money, there was the indignity of a policewoman at the station accusing Juliette of having a gay husband. “When I got back, we started having issues.”

Finally, relations improved after a family meeting was convened at which her elder sister acted as a mediator between the couple.

“Because of the incident, it was very difficult for us,” Juliette said. “There is no evidence. You can’t just barge into a hotel and pick people,” she said, her voice growing louder.

“I know my husband very well. He doesn’t play such games. This is 11 years of marriage,” she said. “It makes me cry. It makes me angry because he lost a lot.”

The house was dark at the time because the electricity had been turned off weeks after the annual rent was due in October. Oguaghamba said he was able to pay some, but not all, of the money. The landlord has threatened to evict the family if it can’t pay the outstanding sum.

Oguaghamba said he was angry at the way his life had been upended.

“I’m angry because what they are saying is not fact,” he said. “They shared my pictures and video on social media. It’s a very shameful thing.”

The police

The Lagos police force has yet to disclose what its officers saw during the raid that led to the charge of public displays of same-sex affection against Oguaghamba and the other men.

Since the November arraignment, the judge has adjourned the case three times because prosecution lawyers were unable to produce their witnesses. The judge threatened to throw out the case if the prosecution didn't produce its key witness at the next hearing in March.

Police officials rejected a Reuters request for the police commissioner to provide details of the evidence that prompted the mass arrest and charges. Spokesman Elkana said the current commissioner wasn't in the job at the time and therefore couldn't comment.

Edgal, the commissioner who said he personally ordered the raid, left office early last year for a commissioner position in southern Nigeria. He didn't respond to requests for comment on the raid.

But in a wide-ranging media briefing with journalists in January, the current Lagos commissioner, Hakeem Odumosu, spoke broadly about the application of the same-sex law.

"As police officers, we are to enforce the laws," he said. "So on the same-sex marriage now, we stand by the position of the law."

Nigeria hasn't disclosed how many people have been detained under the law. But based on reports of mass police raids, Reuters estimates that the number is likely to run into the hundreds each year. Information is also scarce on the number of prosecutions, but activist groups say they know of none.

Xeenarh Mohammed, executive director of Nigerian rights group the Initiative for Equal Rights, which has been providing legal and counselling support for the men arrested in the raid, said the law prohibiting same-sex unions "has simply

been used again and again and again to harass people, to pick people for perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.”

The accusation of extortion and police harassment also has been levelled by international rights campaigners. In a 2016 report, Human Rights Watch cited a number of alleged victims of police officers who had used the threat of a prison sentence to extort money from them.

In interviews with Reuters, five people who acknowledged having same-sex relationships said that police in Lagos use that fear and the threat of the law to extort money from men. Nigerian police have repeatedly denied the claim. Nigeria’s attorney-general and a spokesman for the Justice Ministry didn’t respond to text messages and phone calls seeking comment on the accusations.

In addition to the national same-sex law, 12 of Nigeria’s 36 states apply Sharia law. In those states, in the predominantly Muslim north of the country, same-sex acts carry maximum penalties of death for men and whipping and/or imprisonment for women. Cases are infrequent, however, which means the punishment is rarely carried out.

Gay people in Lagos say they live in fear of their sexuality becoming publicly known. Members of the gay community said they arrange discreet private gatherings such as house parties in the homes of friends. Many also turn to dating apps and social media to set up romantic liaisons. But criminals sometimes use these secret rendezvous to carry out attacks known locally as “kito,” in which a gay person arrives to meet a person for the first time only to be kidnapped, beaten and sometimes raped, said rights campaigners and two people who told Reuters they had been victims of such attacks.

The man who brought shame

When he was a child, Chris Agiriga said, his aunt gave him a home after his mother left Lagos to pursue a new life. Some 20

years later, his aunt told him to leave after he appeared on TV in the police line-up.

“Everyone in the area knew about it,” said the 23-year-old from Egbeda, the same district as the hotel. “I brought shame upon the whole family.”

Agiriga’s aunt took him to her church and arranged for her pastor to house him on the premises. Agiriga slept on the floor of an outhouse that he shared with another homeless man who had been taken in by the church.

The church pastor told Reuters that Agiriga was a vulnerable young man who had been taken advantage of. He wanted to help. But the arrangement ended after five months during which Agiriga clashed with his roommate. Agiriga said the roommate sent threatening text messages about turning him in to the police for “his lifestyle.” When asked for his version of events, the roommate declined to offer an explanation and told a Reuters journalist to leave the church premises.

Agiriga now lives in a safe house for men in Lagos.

He says he lost his job as a community outreach worker with an HIV charity after his arrest. In Nigeria, unlike in other parts of the world, the condition is not primarily associated with gay communities but with unprotected sex in general.

“I called my director. He saw what happened on TV. He said he couldn’t employ me because it brings shame,” Agiriga said.

Olubiyi Oludipe, executive director of the Improved Sexual Health & Rights Advocacy Initiative, said Agiriga had already been “disengaged” when the raid happened but was unable to specify when. He said Agiriga’s performance hadn’t been satisfactory but declined to elaborate further.

“We have never laid off any of our project volunteers because of police arrest or based on sexual orientation and gender

identity," he said in an emailed statement. "We always treat everyone as equal."

Before the raid, Agiriga wanted to pursue a career as a fashion designer. But he dropped out of his fashion course after losing the job that funded his studies. Agiriga now works as an HIV counsellor for a nonprofit group.

Agiriga didn't even know the birthday celebrant. A friend invited him, he said, and he was reluctant but was persuaded to go.

Police raided the venue around 30 minutes after he arrived.

"I regret going to the party," he said. "I lost my job, I lost my family, I lost a lot my friends – all because of this."

The target

For one of the other suspects, the dominant emotion since the arrest has been fear.

Smart Joel said he has been beaten up three times by gangs of men known in Lagos as "area boys" who said they recognised him from the video. People still point and stare as he walks by, he said, although it was worse in the first few months following the video.

"I'm always scared," the diminutive 25-year-old said, recounting an attack that took place last year in which a group of men called him out as the "gay guy who was arrested" and stole his phone, money and wristwatch.

Before the arrest, he said, it was the police who made him fearful. "Police officers will stop you and then get you arrested. Extort money from you and begin to call you names," Joel said. "That is not what the law talks about. They tend to harass."

Joel's livelihood has also suffered. He runs a laundry and

dry-cleaning business from the room he shares with his mother and five younger siblings.

An iron and a chair draped with pressed clothes take up the tiny part of the floor not covered by the double bed shared by Joel's mother and his four sisters. But many customers have deserted him. "The ones that saw the video stopped coming to me. My income became unstable," he said. The family has struggled to pay bills and buy food since then.

"It has not been easy," he said. "At some point I had to move on, not minding the stigma, the discrimination and the dirty language."

The host

Most of those arrested in August 2018 had gathered to celebrate James Burutu's 24th birthday, a party that promised to last from "10 pm till mama calls."

The sense of guilt he has lived with since then has been made worse by the fact that he wasn't among those seized by police, he said.

He was still preparing for the party in a hotel room with friends when the raid took place; parties in Lagos often spill over well into the early hours of the day.

But even though he wasn't arrested, the raid also changed his life. He says he has been ostracised by relatives. "So many of my family members don't want to see me because of this issue," he said.

His elder sister asked him to leave the house she and her husband had shared with him. Three days of homelessness followed, during which he slept underneath a bridge, before he sought shelter with friends.

And, as with a number of those who were arrested, he says he was fired. "My company said they didn't want to hear about a

gay issue, and that if I continue working with them it would be a threat to the company," he said.

Eleganza, a Lagos-based company that produces plastic furniture, didn't immediately respond to emails seeking comment on Burutu's claims. A staff member, in a phone call, said he couldn't comment.

Many of Burutu's friends, some of whom wondered aloud how he managed to evade arrest, now refuse to speak to him.

"My life has been shattered," he said.

Justice

For the family man, Oguaghamba, his options look limited. If he is evicted, he might have to uproot his children from the only home they've ever known and return to his home state of Imo, in southeast Nigeria. He hasn't lived there in more than 20 years.

"I am not happy at all," he said, perched on a threadbare armchair in his living room.

Despite the setbacks, however, he remains optimistic about the future.

He maintains he is innocent and believes he finally has a chance to defend himself after seeing his image tarnished on social media.

"All my joy is that we are in the federal high court and that this matter will come to an end," he said. "I believe that victory will be mine."