

With blackmail list, gay men in Ghana fight conmen posing as lovers

Ghana Gay Blackmail List receives three or four reports of robbery and blackmail each week.

By Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu

Thomson Reuters Foundation (09.06.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2YDIl5E> – As Benson walked across the street towards his date in Ghana's capital, Accra, he saw something was wrong – it was not the man he had been messaging on the popular gay dating app Grindr.

Sensing danger, Benson tried to get away but two other men grabbed him from behind, started beating him and ordered him to hand over his bag and mobile phone. When they threatened him with a knife, he also gave them the passcode to his phone.

“I gave them everything because life is more important,” the 27-year-old, who declined to give his full name, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

“After beating me up and pushing me in the gutter, they left ... I went home with a broken jaw.”

Benson's ordeal is increasingly common in countries where homosexuality is illegal. While the internet has made it easier for LGBT+ communities to find and build relationships online, it has also exposed them to new risks.

In Egypt, Morocco and Nigeria, gay men are often blackmailed and outed by fake dates who trick them into sharing intimate photos which they post online. The police also use social media to lure them to false meetings and make arrests.

Ghana is one of more than 30 African countries that outlaw same-sex relations, according to the LGBT+ rights group ILGA.

While prosecutions are rare, homophobia is widespread and those who are outed often have their lives upended as they are ostracised by friends and family and can lose their jobs.

Alex Kofi Donkor, head of local activist group LGBT+ Rights Ghana, decided to fight back last year on Twitter and Facebook with the Ghana Gay Blackmail List, which exposes "notorious persons who steal, abuse & blackmail gay men".

The group, which has 1,800 followers, has named and shamed about two dozen men by publishing their photos along with the apps they use, the places they frequent and a warning: "Share widely, be alert and don't be the next victim".

"We are in a country where our lives are clearly in danger as a result of people's hatred and their disgust towards the

community,” Donkor said.

“A lot of times, we are unable to achieve justice for the crimes that have been committed so the best we can also do is to protect ourselves.”

Blackmail

A link on the Ghana Gay Blackmail List page allows members of the public to report cases, which are investigated within closed gay and bisexual social media groups for additional crowdsourced testimonies before publication, Donkor said.

“Once we have posted, there are retweets and so a lot of people are warned as a result and if they are chatting with them, they (stop talking to) them,” said Donkor, who gets three or four reports of robbery, blackmail and abuse each week.

Nana Kwame, a bisexual man, was robbed and threatened with blackmail after meeting up with a man he’d been messaging on Grindr in a house in Accra.

His date went to use the bathroom and returned with two other men who asked Nana Kwame what he was doing there.

“Before I could answer, I was hit in the face,” said the 24-

year-old who declined to give his full name.

One man rushed to lock the door of the room and then they forced Nana Kwame to unlock his phone and erased all of its contents.

“One of the guys brought the Bible and made me swear that if I leave the place I will change,” Nana Kwame said. “I was outnumbered, it was three against one, so I had to submit.”

One of the men said he knew Nana Kwame’s brother and threatened to out him to his family unless he phoned someone to send 500 cedi (\$88) to his mobile wallet.

Nana Kwame stayed silent. They gave up and let him go.

Homophobia

As men who have sex with men can face up to three years in jail in Ghana, they are usually too scared to report these robberies to the police as this could lead to them being outed, which carries a far greater personal cost, said Donkor.

“One of the quick actions families take is to sack the person from the home. Once you are outed, that also means that your source of livelihood is also threatened,” he said.

Donkor encourages gay men who have been robbed and blackmailed to report the incidents to the police, telling them “meeting a new friend is not a crime”. But only about 30% are willing to take that first step, he said.

Benson and Nana Kwame said they reported their cases to the police but no arrests were made.

“There is a level of impunity when it comes to the abuse of LGBT+ persons,” said Donkor.

“You sense that kind of laid back attitude from the police ... there is a certain level of homophobia.”

Ghana Police Service said that any cases of police misconduct should be reported to more senior officers.

“Persons who have cases to report to the police should not be worried about their sexual orientation,” a spokeswoman said.

“All complainants are treated equally.”

Unable to rely on the police to keep them safe, LGBT+ communities in many countries are searching for their own solutions.

LGBT+ Nigerians also have a blackmail list, called #KitoAlert, although the system's administrator has complained online that it is ineffective because people do not use it before meeting strangers.

Grindr, which is used by more than 4 million people a day globally, has introduced numerous safety measures to protect users, including unsending messages, blocking screenshots and disguising the app's icon on their phones.

Donkor believes more can be done. He would like gay dating apps to provide legal support to men who fall victim to criminals when using their apps.

"There should be a mechanism in place to support local organisations to challenge some of the abuses that happen as a result of using the app," he said.

"It will serve as a warning to others who (plan) to use the app to abuse and blackmail users."

Benson has found a foolproof solution – he no longer uses dating apps.

"There are a lot of fraudsters on Grindr," he said. "Anything can just happen to you."