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## EVERY VOICE MATTERS

Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera

- *Interview with Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera, the most prominent lesbian activist in Uganda.*

In a country where homosexuals often have to hide to stay alive, it takes a lot of courage for an LGBTI activist to take the nickname “Bombastic.” In Uganda, the heartland of activist Kasha Nabagesera Jacqueline, just loving someone can get you killed. However, the rape, persecution, imprisonment and death of countless Ugandan homosexuals have not prevented the embattled activist from founding – and naming after herself - the first magazine that is written by and tells the story of her fellow LGBTI community.

*Bombastic Magazine*, as well as referring to Kasha’s nickname, is also a reference to the popular song in Uganda, *Mr. Lover Lover, Mr Bombastic!* by the Jamaican-American singer Shaggy. Its title reveals how communication and popular culture have been fundamental in fighting hatred and prejudice in Uganda. Kasha founded and was president of FARUG (Freedom and Roam Uganda) for ten years, the foremost LGBTI rights organisation in Uganda. Since then she has combined a legal and political struggle with a cultural struggle for the right of the LGBTI community to exist, and to express themselves publically. The 35 year old, who was born in Kampala, has described how “changing the law in Uganda would be a big step but more important is changing the mindset of people.”

Since her school days, when some of her friends committed suicide as result of bullying, she has continued to fight for LGBTI rights in parliament, the UN, the European Union and the African Commission. She has pursued a mixture of actively challenging the law as well as popular culture to change both formal structures and the everyday behaviour of people towards homosexuals in Uganda. Whether she is debating in high-level forums or founding the first LGBTI bar in the country, Kasha knows that it takes more than mere political lobbying to change the reality on the ground.

The LGBTI bar was eventually closed. However, even more worryingly, further defeats could also happen in the legal arena. The Constitutional Court finally overturned an anti-homosexuality bill that was approved in 2014 and which imposed life sentences for the “offence of homosexuality.” However, the ruling was not based on merit but on procedural grounds; judges found that a lack of quorum in parliament determined it invalid. Text of a new draft bill, not yet formally tabled, was leaked to the media in December 2014. It is considered even more far reaching than its predecessor since it also includes legislation against transsexual persons.

These setbacks have not deterred Kasha. In an exclusive interview with Sur 21, she spoke about the Bombastic Magazine, the bar, the laws, the Gay Parade and the broader LGBTI fight in Uganda.

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**Conectas Human Rights** • Kasha, the first question is about your beginnings. Can you tell us what has driven you to be one of the most outspoken LGBTI activists in Uganda, and, indeed, the world?

**Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera** • That's a kind question and introduction. When I started the movement in Uganda I was really young but because I had really suffered a lot in school. I was already openly gay back then. So when I found that it was illegal to be openly gay in our common law I decided that I needed to make a change. And most of my gay friends were expelled from school, others had been disowned by their families. So I saw an opportunity to speak out for those who could not because I had nothing to lose.

**Conectas** • You said once that changing the law in Uganda would be a big step but more important is changing the mindset of people. Why do you think this is the case?

**K.J.N.** • Changing the law is a big step in regulating people's behaviour but it will not change the minds of everyone, those who beat us, who rebuke us, who rape us, who threaten to burn our houses. Even if the law is changed, these people may still take the law into their own hands. But if we change the mindset of the people, in terms of how they regard homosexuality, so they stop thinking, for example, that homosexuals are there to get their children and that homosexuals are going to infect them with diseases. If we can get people out of that thinking and to see LGBTI people as humans, as their brothers, as their sisters, then this will be a very big step.

**Conectas** • What have been the greatest challenges you have faced in promoting mindset and cultural change in Uganda over the last few years?

**K.J.N.** • The biggest challenge that we have is that we do not have the platforms to create awareness. The media is censored from reporting LGBTI issues in a positive or unbiased manner. Reporting is very biased and is one of the biggest inciters of hatred in the community. Without these platforms it is difficult to send our message to the people that we live with, to offer health information to people and to let the government know that even we need to be included in national policies. Even people who want to give us platforms are often scared that they will be regarded as promoters of homosexuality. So it is really a big challenge.

**Conectas** • And regarding your greatest achievements as an activist, what are you most proud of?

**K.J.N.** • I must say that I am proud of building the movement because at least now there are more people willing to speak out, willing to share their stories, and not everything is falling onto a few people like in the past. So the movement is stronger. I look forward to welcoming new challenges but the mere fact that many people are willing to represent and speak out, for me I think that is my biggest achievement, building a movement and seeing that even if I am not here today other people can continue the movement.

**Conectas** • If you had the opportunity to explain to someone with no background or understanding about LGBTI rights in Uganda, how would you explain to them the situation today?

**K.J.N.** • Firstly, I would tell them that there really are LGBTI people in Uganda. Many Ugandans think that there are no gay people here. In the past our leaders used to deny the existence of homosexuals. We were not persecuted until the British colonials arrived in 1886 and made it illegal. Because of that, homosexuals continue to be persecuted and humiliated. Now new colonials from America have arrived - American Evangelicals. They have been coming to Uganda since the early 2000s and have exported all their homophobia into Ugandan politicians and religion. Now, nearly all our leaders attack the LGBTI community with impunity. In addition, because this is the generation of technology there is a lot of false information that is being spread by social media to the community in Uganda. If we try to send a message it is deemed to be pornographic or promoting homosexuality. In contrast, and by way of example, extreme sadomasochist pornography was shown in a church yet no repercussions were taken against those who organised it.

**Conectas** • How were you able to found, build and grow Freedom and Roam Uganda (FARUG) in a climate of such hostility, taking into account difficulties of funding, for example?

**K.J.N.** • When I was starting my organisation with two of my friends I was suspended in the first two weeks of forming it because I was very outspoken and very radical, I did not want the organisation to just be a social group. This caused a lot of challenges in the very initial stages of the organisation because people were scared that they were going to be exposed and outed. But I convinced them that my family was there to help us. My mum was very supportive. I told them that I would not expose anyone, I just needed them to give me their support. We also had challenges of communicating our message to the outside world. The Internet had just been introduced in Uganda, so it was quite expensive. When we introduced ourselves to human rights organisations here in Uganda many of them rejected us because they did not feel that the rights of LGBTI people were human rights. We also lost people - we lost people to rape, we lost people to suicide after being exposed in front of their school. The media itself outed and put spies into our organisation and exposed everything to the media. In addition, not being a registered organisation has also hindered us from accessing larger funders. Those are the challenges that we have been faced with.

**Conectas** • Now can you tell us please about your involvement with establishing the first gay bar in Uganda? It had a lot to do with the changing mindset you mentioned, right?

**K.J.N.** • Oh yes, Sappho Islands bar. Yes, the thing is, we like to party. We go out to very many bars but we end up being beaten, not being allowed to use the washrooms because the owners feel that your gender or your way of dressing does not conform to the bathroom [which you are using]. It had become a routine that every Monday I would receive a lot of emails from people who had been beaten during the weekend for simply dancing together or holding hands in public bars. So I decided to open up a bar, not to make profit, because I did not make any profit, but to make a bar that is openly gay, and whoever comes into the bar and doesn't like what they see, it is their time to leave. The [LGBTI] community welcomed it. We had so many parties there, engagement parties, weddings. Unfortunately, it closed down after just a year because the neighbours complained that the people who were coming to the bar were weird, that they had seen me so much on TV and they wanted to burn the place down, so we had to close it. But I am going to open up another one. I am not giving up.

**Conectas** • Can you tell us a little bit about the Gay Pride march and the role it played in the fight against LGBTI discrimination in Uganda?

**K.J.N.** • Yes, when I introduced Pride to Uganda it was in 2012. I realised that I had attended so many Pride parades around the world but had never attended one on the [African] continent. And so I thought that maybe we could have a Pride! We do not have to have a traditional Pride of going on the street - they would definitely kill us, so I said we can organise Pride in different ways. I introduced it to the community to see how they would feel and of course there were mixed feelings. Some were calling me crazy asking "how can I be in Pride when I am in court suing the government." Others were excited because they had never heard of Pride, they did not even know what Pride meant. Others were curious. And so we began having fundraising parties every month when I would show people what Pride means, how people dress for Pride, what happens at Pride, what we can do at Pride to free ourselves. So we decided to have our first Pride - a week full of activities, parties and a film festival. Eventually, when we had finished marching and were getting ready for entertainment, the police came and arrested us.

**Conectas** • Now we would like to talk a little bit about Bombastic Magazine. Could you tell us how it started?

**K.J.N.** • I started Bombastic Magazine because my nickname is "Bombastic." Also, Ugandans love an American musician called "Shaggy" who sang the song "Mr Lover Lover, Mr Bombastic!" He comes to Uganda every year, and I wanted to use something that is catchy but that could also resonate with many Ugandans - people were fighting for the magazine simply because they saw the word "bombastic." The real idea was that because we have no platform to raise awareness, to change the mindsets of the people, why do not we come up with our own, unbiased magazine, share our stories, and give it out, free of charge, and review the reaction?

I wrote on my Facebook and introduced it to the community and told people to send in their stories. It was amazing. We received over 500 articles even before I put the team together to work with me. I was so overwhelmed. I began talking to people about it and everyone said that's a good idea. But of course, some people were so scared asking "how are we going to distribute it?"

**Conectas** • And how was it distributed? Can you tell us about the audience of Bombastic?

**K.J.N.** • Yes, we printed the magazine and went to different parts of the country, giving it out. We focused on four main groups. One was to just give it randomly to people on the street because these are the people who just go with the flow – if they hear there is someone being beaten they will join the fight.

Then we distributed it to policy makers. Actually, the reason we launched it when we did [December 2014] was because the parliament was very angry because of the ruling [which declared the Anti-Homosexuality Act unconstitutional on procedural grounds in August 2014] so they were promising to bring a new bill as a "Christmas present." And so we said "okay then let's also give them a Christmas present."

It was really interesting because I personally went to the police, I had dialogues with ministers, I went to the President's office, I even went to the Minister of Ethics. He has wanted to arrest me for many years and he was also threatening me at this time, making false allegations in the media that I am promoting homosexuality and pornography, but he could not do anything because there was no legal basis. So he ordered the police to burn all the copies they find on the street, but people really liked the magazine, it was beautiful, no one left it on the street. Everyone took it - we even ran out of copies! It was a really very exciting and emotional experience for me.

Then there was the young generation, the students in the higher institutions of learning. These are the future leaders and these are the people who are going to rallies against homosexuals. We do not want them to get corrupted because they are still young. We need them to stop bullying their own colleagues, to stop exposing them on social media - which is happening a lot.

The fourth group was our own community – not the community that we know but more the people that we do not know. We know that there are people out there who are being told that they have demons - I was told that I had demons when I was young. There are people who are committing suicide because they think that they are alone. We want to reach these people because we do not know them and we hope that when they read the magazine they will know that they are not alone and they can call on us.

**Conectas** • Can you explain to our readers a little more about the financing of the magazine and how you hope to continue to fundraise?

**K.J.N.** • In terms of financing the idea, I decided on crowdfunding because I approached many funders and many investors here. They were all reluctant. Everyone thought it was a good idea but they were all afraid for their security. It was the time the bill had been signed, so there was a lot of reluctance from so many people to fund us. I told them we have to just continue to create ways of how we can reach the people who are always attacking us. However, after the first edition in 2014, I said "we cannot continue with the magazine because it is not sustainable, we cannot continue printing copies. I am stopping it, primarily because the security of the volunteers in the field." So we created a website, TV and radio station so that we can continue to put Bombastic out there while ensuring that we keep safe. However, not everyone can afford Internet. So we are really stuck, overwhelmed, but at the same time, excited because people are still willing to be involved. If we ever manage to raise more funds we shall make another issue, there is no doubt about that.

**Conectas** • Great, and how did you choose the stories published in the first edition? Will the content be the same in any future editions?

**K.J.N.** • I chose these stories because some of them I have known for a long time and I have never published them. Others I republished because they never got the audience they were supposed to. I published stories on HIV because few people really come out about their status, so if we have these stories we hope that more people speak out and get treatment instead of feeling stigmatised and discriminated. Some stories I could not keep because they were not aligned with the objective of the magazine, for example, outing government officials. I also gave people who were already out an opportunity as people want to know why they are out - here there is a notion that they are gay because they are being paid. Therefore, we used these stories, of people who were known gays, so people can really know their stories instead of judging them. And lastly I gave a platform to those who had never had the opportunity to speak out because they are in closet. These are the people that the world needs to hear from. It becomes so monotonous when it is always the same voices. More voices need to be heard and so I gave them the opportunity.

**Conectas** • What have been the responses from within Uganda following the publication of Bombastic?

**K.J.N.** • People's responses have been really touching. People have called saying "this is the first time I am hearing from you, all the time I have been hearing from anti-gay pastors or ministers, but here I am reading stories of real life, I am sorry." Others have said "I am part of the community, I do not know where to find you" or "my daughter is gay," "my son is gay," "now I know why my daughter likes to dress like this" or "Now I know why my son is behaving like a woman." So it was really, really overwhelming.

Some government agencies have requested more copies, including the police, the Minister of Public Service and the Minister of Health. This shows the positive impact of the magazine when even these organisations are reaching out and saying "we need more copies because we want to send them to different departments and give ones away." So it is really positive.

Of course, we also got very hateful responses; people saying they want to cut off my head when they meet me or that they are going to shoot me. Others though said "we have a friend who wants to really talk to you and understand." For me that is exactly what we are driving, to change the attitudes of people, the mindsets, because, at the moment, people are only getting one side of the story. The threats from the head of a diocese in Runkugiri were hilarious. He threatened to sue me for trespassing because he wondered how the magazines had reached the church premises. He said he needed to call me on 31 December because he did not want to enter the New Year with a curse because of something he had read on a particular page in the magazine. Bearing in mind that I had edited the magazine, I did not even know what was on that particular page - but he knew! So in my heart I thought, "cool, then you read the magazine." I laughed and he got so angry he hang up on me. It really was hilarious.

**Conectas** • As an activist in promoting LGBTI rights in Uganda, how important, and in what way, is social media such as Twitter and Facebook for you?

**K.J.N.** • For me, social media is my office. It is my office because that is where I manage to get in touch with so many people from the community. We have secret groups where we strategise as a community. We have public pages for our organisations where we also interact with the whole world, where we get friends from around the world who give us solidarity messages. It has been really helpful in our struggle. But it has also had its downfalls because social media has resulted in the exposure of so many people in the media here. However, it has helped us build a very strong movement. For people in the closet, they are able to talk freely on social media. We have seen many people coming out because they have seen there is a vibrant group on social media so they also finally feel comfortable about who they are.

**Conectas** • In other interviews you have referred to how we operate in a global village and how the anti-homosexuality bill was probably delayed at least in part because of various countries expressed their condemnation of the bill. How important do you think international pressure from other governments and NGOs is in fighting LGBTI discrimination in Uganda?

**K.J.N.** • It is, and it is not. It has limits because the signing of the bill still happened, despite pressure, yet eventually the bill was also stalled at least in part because of international pressure. However, it is also important for those on the ground to make noise and put lots of pressure on because we know the situation best. This international pressure can often be a very silent diplomacy and sometimes we feel we want the whole world to go up in arms against the bill. So it helps, but only in consultation with us. Different situations call for different actions – that is why it is always important to consult those on the ground first.

**Conectas** • Conectas – Is international pressure more relevant when it comes from Global South countries like Brazil?

**K.J.N.** • Every country, every voice matters. It does not matter which country the voice is coming from, every voice matters.

**Conectas** • Can you tell us a little bit about your engagement with international organisations, especially in light of the Coalition of African Lesbians recently achieving observer status at the African Commission?

**K.J.N.** • It is important for us to engage with the African Commission, and other international bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union. Even if we get something to the United Nations and it is rejected at the African Commission, it will not really make a big difference. So it is very important to be engaged with all of them. Also, we cannot only deal with local remedies because our countries are not pariah states. We are in a global village - what happens in Uganda affects those in Kenya, which affects those in Egypt, which affects those in Gambia.

Achieving observer status at the African Commission for the Coalition of African Lesbians recently [on 25th April 2015] was a big milestone for us. Now the dialogue is starting, now the doors are being opened and soon they will start realising that these are our own children, our own brothers and sisters that we are killing, that we are putting in jail. In particular, it is very symbolic because if you read the denial of the application for observer status at the African Commission in 2010 it was just a paragraph, very vague that we did not even understand. It shows that there is a change in attitudes, a change in the mindsets of the people at the Commission. It sends a message that we deserve to be there just like any other NGO. Of course, there is going to be a backlash, but we are ready for it because that is our life, we just have to strategise safely. At the next commission we are going to be there, ready to engage and ready to take our stories to share with the governments of African countries. I am so excited!

**Conectas** • What did you take away from your visit to Brazil regarding LGBTI life here?

**K.J.N.** • Yes, when I was in Brazil, first of all I liked the people, they were really warm. But also the stories I heard when I was there were not really nice. There was a lot of homophobia, but also racism. When I went to Rio there was a big protest and they killed two black boys who were on the street next to where I was staying with my friend. I could not go out on my own to just walk around and enjoy the air. Here [in Uganda] I rarely walk on the street and normally I enjoy when I am out of Uganda to walk freely on the street because I am not known. But there [in Brazil] it was scary because while my sexuality is not on my face, my skin colour was, so it was really scary for me.

**Conectas** • Finally, how can our readers best support efforts to combat LGBTI discrimination in Uganda?

**K.J.N.** • When we send out calls for support respond to our calls, read our news so that you can know what is really happening, give us kind donations to help us achieve our objectives to do this work - our Paypal goes straight to us. Use social media, come and say Kasha "I send you peace, I send you love," that will put a smile on our face when we go out to work to know that at least we have friends who care about us, even if they are far away. It gives us the morale to continue what we are doing because we know we are not alone in this.



*Interview conducted in April 2015 by Laura Daudén and Thiago Amparo (Conectas Human Rights). Oliver Hudson and Josefina Cicconetti, also from Conectas, assisted with background research.*



**KASHA NABAGESERA JACQUELINE - Uganda**

Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera is Uganda's leading lesbian activist. Most recently she founded the LGBTI magazine Bombasitc. Prior to this she led Freedom and Roam Uganda (FARUG) for ten years, Uganda's foremost LGBTI rights organisation, which she established in 2003.

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