

Profile

There is Hope...We are Not Giving Up

Kasha Jacqueline, Director of Freedom and Roam
Uganda

Beginnings

Freedom and Roam Uganda (FARUG) is the only exclusively lesbian, bisexual and transgender organization in Uganda. It was founded by three lesbian-identified women on July 4, 2003 in a bar, one which the media at the time frequently referred to as a “lesbian bar”. Many Kampala-based lesbians who heard about the possibility of a “lesbian bar” space started coming to hang out and make new friends. It became a second and safe home for many. In April of that year those of us who has started to use this space were approached to “join up with other lesbians”, by a group of men who claimed to be part of a lesbian organization by the name Makerere University Students Lesbians Association (MUSLA). When we asked them where the lesbians were and why it was led by men, they said that the women were “shy.” Later we did some research and learnt that these men were not university students nor did any such organization exist. There was clearly a need for some kind of organizing .

So as three lesbian women sat at the bar one evening, FARUG was founded. Many of us felt that we needed to start an organization to fight back against all the harassment and violence that we were facing every time we left the bar to go back to our homes and yet we knew that it would not be easy to do this given the dangers of the widespread homophobia that prevailed. In our experience, many lesbian women had been beaten, raped and assaulted by men who would wait for us at night on our way home from the bar. Many of these women were homeless, jobless, poor and had dropped out of school. For the majority, the reason for their suffering was simply the fact that they were lesbians.

The first year of FARUG was difficult. There were very few resources, and

those running the organization were working as volunteers. It was hard to prioritize our advocacy and activism issues, because much of the immediate work involved the containment of crises of violence happening to those we knew and there was a pressing need just to collect basic information about the violence against lesbian, gay, and transgendered people from all walks of life in Uganda.

Challenges drive us forward

A year after the founding of FARUG (2004), a lesbian committed suicide at a secondary school in Kampala. She was caned at the school assembly after school officials finding love letters she had written to a fellow student. Later she was suspended from school. FARUG learnt that while at home, her family treated her horribly throughout the suspension period. When the suspension was over, she was returned to the school by her parents who gave permission to the school authorities to flog her before the entire school community. A few days later, she decided to take her life.

Neither the government nor human rights organizations condemned the treatment that she received from the school authorities. It was then that FARUG took up the case and publicly condemned the actions of the school authorities and the silence of government and human rights organizations in the media. That was the beginning of a long struggle. FARUG became known to the public. Some members were not comfortable with this and left for fear of being exposed. Other lesbian identifying women joined the organization. Those who left did so in a bid to protect themselves and their identities. It was and still is very understandable for our members to stay in the closet to the outside world. Many have a lot to lose and not many can sacrifice like a few who have done.

The vision

The vision of FARUG is an organization which strives for the attainment of full equal rights of Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transgender and Intersexual (LBTI) persons, the removal of all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation and the empowerment of LBTI people.

In the past few years many members of FARUG were fearful of calling themselves feminists because of what is said about feminists and feminist thinkers (they are seen as “home breakers”, “hateful women”, “women who have no pride in their cultures”). However, during the FARUG 1st leadership

Institute in June 2010, many members realized that they are actually unapologetic feminists and are now proud to call themselves feminists because the struggle for a world in which gender and sexuality do not lead to systems of oppression is, fundamentally, a feminist one in Africa.

We are now a small, well-known, and growing organization run by relatively inexperienced individuals who use their passion to create awareness, safe spaces for other LBT persons and to create a hospitable and respectful environment for ourselves. Many of us in FARUG administration are taking on posts and roles but have a lot to learn about how they function. FARUG has some resources, but not nearly enough to do the amount of work needed to create safe spaces for all those who need it in Uganda. However, through our biggest strength which has been networking and lobbying, we have managed to gain lots of experience and skills from other progressive social movements like the women's and feminist movements.

We are on the road...

The last seven years have not been easy but we knew from the start that it was never going to be easy to run an LBTI organization in a country like Uganda. That recognition has given us more and more strength to continue the struggle. At particular moments, some of us have not been able to cope with the growing amounts of public hostility and have decided to move back into "invisibility" and give support from underground. This is something the rest of us understand completely, given our context, and we are not judgmental about others' decisions. We believe this organization will be around long enough for them to rejoin it.

Over the years, we have become "professional in our unprofessionalism" as many members term it in the organization. We have pulled together the few skills we all have and managed to run successful projects and activities. Our first Awareness Campaign in 2007 was such a huge success that many gay men in the country started to apply to become members our lesbian organization. Issues of separatism were raised and gay men started asking why we were a lesbian-only group and why we were demanding a safe space for lesbians without including the issues faced by gay and transgendered people.

Members of FARUG gave many of reasons for our decision (I guess my reason at the time was one of the "dimnest".....*because we are lesbians so we don't need men in our space...*) and now I really do know why we are a

lesbian-only group. It's straightforward: FARUG members didn't want men, regardless of their sexual orientation or background, to come and impose their authority over us as they have done in all other spheres of life.

Over the years, however, gay men continue to come to FARUG for help and support and we have rendered it to them even if we are not a mixed group. We believe that even if we are a lesbian-only group, we are seen as "sexual minorities" just like our gay brothers are, and we have to support each other in whichever way possible. This, however, does not mean that we have to deny our commitment to lesbian principles and identities, which are at the heart of our organization.

Over the years our name "Freedom and Roam" has really impacted on us. We want to be free and to be able to roam everywhere and that is exactly what we are doing. Many members of FARUG in the past years have been appointed to positions in regional and international organizations, Boards of other LGBTI-focused organizations, and called upon to speak and advise at national, regional and international fora.

Through support from International foundations and agencies we have managed to maintain a resource center which also operates as our office since 2007. We have managed to carry out activities, projects and campaigns which was very hard to do in the past. We have also managed to meet regularly and share experiences, meet new people and learn from each other. We call our resource centre "a home away from home". We watch movies every Friday afternoon; movies we cannot watch in our actual homes. We read books, magazines and also hold workshops that impact on our lives. Without this space, we would not have been able to talk openly about sex, pleasure, or safer sex. Sometimes we invite our men friends over for social interactions or for workshops that reflect on the gay movement in general. (We don't HATE men as many say we do!). In fact many of us have men as best friends, but we also have to remember that we are women who love women in many diverse ways and that at some times we need an exclusive space to interact.

Successes!

Among our success we would count:

- a two year project on "Unveiling the myths about homosexuality", Awareness Campaign 2007 which saw our very first publications produced, which included a newsletter with real life-stories from our members, FARUG profiles (both in English and Luganda), and

domestic violence, HIV/AIDS and health brochures. Lovely T-shirts were printed. “Yesterday I saw a camera man at a wedding reception wearing a FARUG T-shirt. I wonder whether he really knows or he is just wearing it because it’s a beautiful T-shirt!” said a member in 2007 during the Awareness campaign.

- a training on Human Rights and LGBTI issues funded by the Swedish International development Agency, and participation in exchange programmes between our members and members of The Swedish Federation on Lesbian, Gay and Transgender organization (RFSL).
- a hate crime campaign themed HATE NO MORE which is currently what we are working on
- we hope that our current shadow CEDAW report will make an impact at the UN CEDAW committee in Geneva this year and hope our recommendations will be put into practice.

We also work very closely with other LGBTI organizations in the country, region and internationally. Because of our core values which are selflessness, teamwork, accountability, transparency, respect and discipline, we are the local hosts of the Uganda LGBTI PAL project which is a three year project for the entire community in partnership with RFSL. This is a big achievement for us bearing in mind that there are over six LGBTI organizations in Uganda.

In conclusion

Overall, we are proud Lesbians and not ashamed of who we are. The future as it stands now is very frightening especially with the parliamentary proposals of a tougher law against us and our activities. But that doesn’t mean that we are giving up. We have lined up a number of projects and activities for the coming years and we are very hopeful there will be some changes in many aspects of our lives.

For now the struggle continues.

