



Malawian LGBTI+ Organisation Wins 2019 Front Line Defenders Award

The LGBTI+ led membership organisation [Nyasa Rainbow Alliance \(NRA\)](#) is among five LGBTI+ winners of the 2019 Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders At Risk. Since 2014, NRA has pushed for greater rights, freedoms and access to health care for the LGBTI+ community, responding directly to rights violations and gaps in services identified by the community.

LGBTI+ human rights defenders from Tunisia, the Dominican Republic, Russia, Indonesia and Malawi were awarded the prize in recognition of their powerful struggles for LGBTI+ rights in their countries, and to demand an end to the violence, intimidation, arrests and harassment they endure while defending their communities. The Award ceremony was held today in Ireland, 17 May, to coincide with the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT).

In December 2015, [Eric Sambisa](#), one of the founders and now director of NRA, made the brave decision to be the first Malawian to openly come out as gay on national television.

“Being gay in Malawi is always associated with negatives. I wanted to show the Malawian nation that we are human beings... like every other citizen in the country” he said. The move sparked a new wave of LGBTI+ activism in the country, but as a result of his visible activism Eric was physically attack, threatened, and forced into temporary hiding. Despite the violent consequences he has faced for defending LGBTI+ communities’ rights,, he remains adamant about the mission of NRA: “It’s important to be visible. It’s important to love yourself. So that is what we are also doing. We’re encouraging people to be visible, to love themselves, to eliminate the spirit of self-hate.”

Front Line Defenders dedicated the 2019 Award to visibilising LGBTI+ activism this year in honour of the 50th anniversary of the seminal Stonewall uprising – led by queer, transgender, and sex worker activists of colour – which helped spark the movement for LGBTI+ rights in the US and expressed solidarity with queer-identifying activists globally. Front Line Defenders Executive Director Andrew Anderson said today that the organisation recognises in particular the work of transgender human rights defenders, “in light of the targeted violence and backlash they face.”

“Today we’re honouring the work of LGBTI+ defenders and the incredible communities of resistance they cultivate every day,” said Andrew Anderson at the Award ceremony. “The work of queer-identifying activists and collectives continues to shape and reshape how we understand personal, political and contested struggles for freedom. There is no human rights fight that has not been strengthened by the intersectional analyses brought to the front lines by queer defenders. We hope this award can be small acknowledgement of the immense, often incomprehensible bravery required to visibilize oneself as both an activist and LGBTI+ person in places that demean and criminalize each of these identities.”

The 2019 Laureates for the Middle East & North Africa, Europe & Central Asia, Asia, the Americas, and Africa, respectively, are:

Badr Baabou, *DAMJ*, Tunisia

Badr Baabou is co-founder and Chairman of DAMJ (meaning ‘inclusion’), an organisation working for equality and justice for the LGBTI+ community. He is also co-chair of M-Coalition, the first

regional network on MSM and HIV-related rights in the MENA region, which advocates for improved access to HIV services in member countries. He previously worked for ATL, a national Tunisian organisation working to reduce rates and transmission of STIs and HIV among MSM communities.

Veronika Lapina, *Russian LGBT Network*, Russia

Veronika Lapina is an academic and activist with the Russian LGBT Network. After reports of a crackdown on the LGBTI+ community in Chechnya surfaced, Veronika joined the Network to help find safety and security for targeted members of the community. She risked her life and freedom traveling into Chechnya, at times alone, to bring individuals to safety in Russia. As a direct result of her work, more than 100 gay, lesbian and bisexual people have been evacuated from Chechnya in order to avoid the imminent danger they were facing there. She receives threats in connection to her human rights work and her membership of the LGBTI+ community on a regular basis.

Shinta Ratri, *Pondok Pesantren Waria al-Fatah*, Indonesia

Shinta Ratri is a transgender woman who co-founded Pondok Pesantren Waria al-Fatah, an Islamic boarding school for transgender people. She opened the school in 2008 in Yogyakarta, aiming to serve older transgender women who had been cut off from family and prevented from practicing their faith in most Islamic centres in the country. In 2016, an Islamist political group attacked the school during a wave of violence against the LGBTI+ community in Indonesia, perpetrated by both political groups and the police. After closing for a short period, Shinta reopened the school and continues to create space in Yogyakarta for trans people to build community, practice their faith and support one another.

Rosanna Marzán, *Diversidad Dominicana*, Dominican Republic

As Executive Director of [Diversidad Dominicana](#), Rosanna Marzán is leading a new wave of LGBTI+ awareness in the Dominican Republic. While pursuing an education in law, Rosanna has proudly represented the LGBTI+ community of the D.R. in a long list of local and international policy meetings. Rosanna, who considers herself a “social educator,” works with fellow activists to raise awareness of the need for SOGIESC inclusion. She has acted as a spokesperson to the LGBTI Caravan of Pride in the D.R., attended assembly at the Organization of American States, and was among activists at the first LGBTI+ themed meeting of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. While pushing for the equal rights of all LGBTI+ people in the D.R., and working to visibilize the particular issues faced by lesbian women, Rosanna also works to support migrants, refugees and domestic abuse survivors.

Nyasa Rainbow Alliance, Malawi

In December 2015, Eric Sambisa became the first person in Malawi to come out as gay on national television. The following year, he and other LGBTI+ community members established the Nyasa Rainbow Alliance in Blantyre, to provide support services and openly advocate for rights of the community. The organisation provides a safe space for the LGBTI+ community to discuss health concerns, receive medical support, practice their faith, network, peer educate and collaboratively develop research projects. In 2018, the organization attempted to officially register, only to have the regular bureaucratic procedure blocked by the Minister of Justice – a decision now being challenged in the country’s High Court on the basis that it is unconstitutional as it violates the provision of freedom of association.

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Editor's note:

Front Line Defenders is the international foundation for the protection of human rights defenders, founded in Dublin in 2001 by Irish human rights activist Mary Lawlor. In addition to emergency grants, protection trainings, digital security support, campaigns, research, and advocacy, Front Line Defenders also hosts an [annual award](#) ceremony in Dublin, recognising international human rights defenders who protect the rights of their communities despite extreme personal risk.