

Popular Outrage and State Action: Grasping the Growing Intolerance of Alternative Sexualities among Young Men in Nairobi Ghettos

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In more affluent areas of Nairobi gay spaces are slowly opening up and in the past five years organizations advocating for gay rights have become more prominent in public debate, albeit under constant threat of violence and persecution. Dominant discourse on alternative sexualities, at the same time, increasingly condemns same-sex practices and identities, characterizing them as 'criminal', 'un-Christian/un-Muslim', 'un-African' and even 'inhuman'. Kenya's Prime Minister, Raila Odinga, markedly illustrated the tendency of this discourse when he recently stated that he wanted a 'clean Kenya' and that 'all gays and lesbians should be arrested'. He was addressing a crowd of mainly young men in Kibera, a ghetto in Nairobi.

In my paper I propose that to understand the growing condemnation of alternative sexualities in dominant discourse and related state action in Kenya we need to take a closer look at the intensification of homophobia among specific social groups. Raila's proclamations were aimed at gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the young men before him by distancing himself from the Human Rights debate on gay rights that surrounds the new constitution.

My paper, therefore, focuses on the attitudes of young men in Nairobi ghettos towards same-sex practices and identities, in particular among women. The main question I aim to explore is: why and in which social contexts do these young men overtly display intolerance towards lesbian practice and identity? Incidents of 'corrective rape' have not yet been officially reported in the Nairobi ghettos but sexual violence against women here is rampant. The aggressive and suspicious attitude of young men in the ghettos towards lesbians is thus reason for grave concern. I am interested in why these men particularly focus on same-sex practices between women and why they are largely silent about men. How does this tie in with their construction of gendered senses of selves and to questions of belonging? In addition, how does class and locality intersect with gender in their construction of selves and how is this related to the 'othering' of lesbian practice and identity?