

LGBTQ YOUTH LIVING BELOW THE RADAR LEVEL OF PROTECTION AND SOCIAL INTERVENTION IN NAIROBI



YOUNG PEOPLES' AGENCY

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Agency building, and Social development of LGBTQ youth aged 18-24 in Nairobi Grassroots.

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1. Acknowledgement

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Special thanks to Stiftung Umverteilen who have partnered with us to help 120 LGBTQ youth aged 18-24 in Nairobi grassroots realize social development by inspiring agency for protection and self-reliance and, improving social integration and access to key social services. Our organization's experiences during this partnership has taught us vital lessons about LGBTQ youth life in the grassroots and their potentials.

Emmanuel O. Nyambwa,
Youth Coordinator,
YHEPP.

2. Introduction

LGBTQ people still face discrimination and policy barriers despite Kenya's Bill of Rights guaranteeing non-discrimination and inclusion of 'every person' regardless of their sex and gender among other identities. At the heart of this struggle for equal and protected space are young LGBTQ adults. Aged 18-24, they are an easier target. The social pressure to conform is greater on them because they are younger and as such, considered 'community property.' Young lesbian women often experience sexual and other forms of violence just because they are lesbians. Also, it is not any easier for young gay men in their late teenage or early twenties. This is the time when their friends, family, neighborhood and online community expect to see them in a relationship or make steps towards marriage. These expected relationships are never between a young man and a young man. Traditions also require them to listen to the older people and obey.

Failure to obey could lead to punishment on two levels. First, they are the younger ones. They must do as they are told. Secondly, they have sexual orientations and gender identities that are a taboo or, considered a curse or illness. These social expectations may vary based on community beliefs, lifestyle, setup and space occupied by an individual LGBTQ youth in the community. In this case, we will examine specific aspects of lives of LGBTQ youth in grassroot communities of Nairobi. If homophobia relies on biased laws and members of the society who are willing to implement this bias in one way or another, then LGBTQ people in the grassroots experience higher interpersonal discrimination and sustained social stigma. This is because grassroot communities have higher number of people per unit area, compared to higher levels of society.

Having said that, this document, we will speak as a group of 60 LGBTQ youth aged 18-24 who have participated in the first 4 months of the ChangeMakers Workshop series 2018; organized by YHEPP in partnership with Stiftung Umverteilen. We have carried out 8 workshops on Agency and Social Access and we have visited several grassroot locations where some 40 LGBTQ youth live. Some of the areas covered include parts of; Eastleigh, Kayole, Kasarani, Kangemi, Kibera, Umoja, Githurai and Kawangware. During this project, we have learnt from one another, exchanged stories and experiences and, interpreted them into gaps and potentials that remain beyond our reach. We will share selected aspects of our life in the grassroots and how living at this level of society presents us with a unique set of challenges. However, we strongly believe that we can beat social alienation and realize some level of protection from discrimination.

We will share about the level of our social struggle; raise awareness and a voice. All these will be to help social movements develop new perspectives for effective grassroot action; both locally and beyond.

3. Our Unemployment

The United Nations Human Development report -2017 said that youth unemployment in Kenya had risen to 22.2 percent, significantly higher than all neighboring countries. In fact, the report analysis shows that the said unemployment rate is equal to those of Ethiopia and Rwanda in the same year combined. While it is unclear exactly how many of us are unemployed in Nairobi, it could get even harder, considering issues of corruption, high population growth rate and limited employment opportunities for the youth. Employment opportunities are open mostly to those who are already in employment and, their close networks. For us in the grassroots, we can often get lucky to be employed part-time or fulltime by civil society organizations, who are fair and inclusive. Other most likely employers include organizations involved in charity work or environmental and cultural conservation work. This is because compared to public employers, they reach out to us in the grassroots more often, and as a result we become oriented towards them and their courses. In addition, they mainly look at our experience, our will or passion. However, they are few and cannot offer employment to all of us.

Getting jobs within the neighborhoods is not easy. Not entirely because we do not qualify, but also because they avoid giving us job opportunities since they perceive our identities and expressions as a potential threat to their business or offices in the locality. As a result, we look for jobs away from our neighborhoods- within the city center and other areas far away from home. And even when some of us are called for interviews, our appearance is always different in an observable way. The other applicants always look more prepared, more elegant and are more eloquent. This is because our lifestyle in the grassroots is different. We don't express ourselves like youth from higher levels of life in our society, and our exposure to professional communication is limited.



Youth livelihood projects. Source: The Guardian

To achieve self-reliance, the county government of Nairobi and other members of civil society in Nairobi have encouraged us to form youth groups and start income-generating projects. It is not easy for a group of gay and transgender friends to form groups with other youth in the neighborhood because they do not want to associate with us. Occasionally, we try to form our own informal youth groups comprising gays, bisexuals and one or two transgender youth. Even though our bisexual friends are sometimes able to mingle with neighboring groups, they still can't convince them to work with us in the same groups. So, in the end our groups are marked by names and identities of one or more of our members, and then isolated by local authorities at group level.

This stigmatizes us at group level and prevents us from marketing our groups and their objectives. Sometimes, we have issues within our groups because we do not know how to handle group dynamics and manage our own goals. So even though we end up together, our aims achieve little or no progress.

At the same time, we see other youth go to work and others manage their youth projects well. We see parents and neighbors embrace other youth who are not employed, but not us. So, we always know we are different and less important. After facing all these challenges, we often turn to sex work as a livelihood option. Sometimes we exchange intimate services for money, but sometimes for smartphones, clothes, shoes and other material gains depending on a client's background and interests. During our search for means of survival, we face blackmail and involuntary exposure. After which our family members kick us out of homes or force us to go back to the village to avoid social embarrassment. Sex work has also led some of us to suffer from sexually transmitted infections and a few of our friends have been diagnosed with anal fistula- a health issue we still find difficult to address. But we must do something. We must keep going. We must do what we must do to get our daily milk and bread.

4. Our fear of Learning Centers

We understand very well that to get a job, respect and an audience in our communities, we need to go to school, graduate and get a job. Fellow youth in similar age groups who live in higher levels of society go to school too. They form the majority there. It is a little different from our experience. Being isolated by community and being an embarrassment to parents and relatives who could sponsor us, we have no option but to find our own means to pay for our college education. Some of us get lucky to find sponsors like *Break Margins* among others. However, most of us fail many of the application processes. Not only because we do not have satisfactory skills required to write, but also because there are limited scholarships around.

Thinking about it critically, a year's college fees at the University of Nairobi for a degree course in business, environment or social science equals two years of house rent in Kasarani and many other grassroots areas. This leads us to believe that we better pay our rents and skip school to avoid being homeless while in school. The fear of whether we will be able to sustain 4 years of college fees also makes us fear making this step. In addition to opting to secure shelter in place of education, our life outside the academic community makes us lose interest in job searching because of the general default belief that we will not qualify. Most of us give up on pursuing education and focus on just living and making sure we are safe and alive. Besides, there are so many organizations reaching out to people in the grassroots. This makes us largely rely on aid and capacity building from them, and this makes us realize some level of satisfaction even though our lives do not change much.



Youth during capacity building.

However, some of us manage to attend college. And during their time at college, they tell us about their experiences owing from their diverse identities. The jokes and comments made by some lecturers and students are stigmatizing. There are also websites and blogs that make biased reports about gay students in schools like the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University. One blog said that gay students are marketing sex work in campus and that the gay students are recruiting others so that they can realize financial benefits. The fact that gay students can be outed online against their will makes us feel that college is also another very unsafe place for us. We imagine being outed before 5,000 students and then prefer to stay home and engage in sex work; which is more private.

Even within the college itself, there are LGBT youth from all levels of society. But those of us from the grassroots do express ourselves differently. In the view of the other LGBTQ youth from higher levels of society, we are not eloquent, not elegant and cannot present ourselves in a way that makes them accept us. As a result, we end up being treated as members of the outgroup, and risk being outed especially after they know about our identities and means of survival.

In the end, we accept our status as the second or third class of LGBTQ youth in college. And we from the grassroots make sure we stick to our level and networks within our level so that we do not rock the boat. So even when it comes to student power and decision-making in college meetings, we have lower bargaining power. However, those of us who manage to go through college must please their external environment for inclusion, protection and support.

5. Our Protection Issues

The Bill of Rights in Chapter 4 (Four) of Kenya Constitution 2010 provides for protection and inclusion of every person regardless. However, this provision has been violated by many government authorities such as the police. Too often, the police would not record statements as narrated by us. And they do not allow us to view the report and to verify it. Only last year, YHEPP's leader had insecurity issues because of his defense of LGBTQ rights. He reported the matter, but the police did not do any follow up about it. They kept asking him to come back after every 3 days. Whenever he would report as told by police, the officer in charge of his case was always absent. When our leader is treated this way, we lose hope in possibility of protection by the police service. However, we see them quick to move to the neighborhoods and arrest suspects named in other cases not related to sexual and gender identities. Not only do they avoid protecting us because of our identities, they also intimidate us. Some of them know about us. And whenever they meet us outside clubs and on the streets, they arrest us and keep us behind bars with no charges. They only let us go after paying an informal bail.

Most Local authorities like chiefs also ignore our calls and cases. They ask us to either go to church and seek prayer to change us or change our expression. Most of them operating at the grassroot level base their leadership on traditional authority. One of them from Kayole told two of us that the community there did not accept lesbianism and so, they either needed to get married to men or join a church to be safe.

We sometimes approach established security organizations. But, they are mostly inaccessible. Sometimes we do not have fare to go their offices located in the city suburbs and too often, it is not easy to travel to these locations with trauma, anxiety or fresh wounds from attacks. Some of them do not believe our reports about threats and attacks. Just recently, one of us was asked why he met random people from the internet. This is even though sex work is his only reliable means of survival to date.



Police responding during a domestic violence report

For us in the grassroots, there are a lot of threats, intimidation and attacks that happen. But larger security groups do not know this because they do not have an understanding of our level of life. There are also very limited security outreaches in the grassroots. Most of them are carried out in the city away from the most insecure areas where we live in. Also, we who live down here do not know the human rights language so well. We find it difficult to engage the police or established security agencies in a way that maintains respect and cooperation. Their language and case interviews make most of us feel like we are the one who did something wrong. As a result, we avoid these places and console ourselves in the grassroots.

Despite having many groups who advocate for our security, we have never heard of any successful prosecution. Early this year, a group of men who blackmail gay men were arrested in Nairobi's Umoja. But they were later freed without involving input of any of the same protection agencies we look up to. This leaves us with the feeling that we are always on our own, and that those threatening us or violating our rights are more powerful.

For those of us engaged in online activities such as sex work and pride among others, it is shocking how many blogs and websites dehumanize LGBTQ people. This biased online reporting makes us feel isolated and insecure online. They seem to have an organized cooperation where; websites and blogs can send antigay discriminatory or offensive messages in a coordinated fashion. Even though we try to use our Facebook accounts to counter some of these, our posts are mostly

uncoordinated and do not reach as many and as diverse people as their websites and blogs. This loss of the struggle online makes us feel insecure, especially after defending our sexual orientation and gender identity online.

6. Our Social Alienation

Our identities have made our communities to avoid us and ignore our presence and efforts. This also makes our own communities leave us out of community events and activities. For instance, in Umoja, there are community events like dancing, drama and painting. However, they ignore our dance group who live in the area even if they apply to be included in such social activities. This social exclusion makes us retreat and isolate ourselves from community and community events. Even though our own communities socially isolate us, community members who own shops, groceries and other service businesses do not send us away whenever we go for any kind of goods and services. This means, that the only relationship we have with our communities is a consumer-based relationship. They do not want to be seen engaging us in any kind of conversation and they mark us and our friends. As a result, we end up living in an environment where we are detached from people around us. This social alienation makes us feel few and vulnerable.



Walking in Kayole, Nairobi

This is true even when we are visited by our friends. Our doors must remain open to convince neighbors that we are not engaging in same-sex conduct or any other activities that could put us in danger. We fear our communities so much, we must give up our privacy to be left alone. There are also more people per unit area in the grassroots than in higher levels of society, hence the pressure to conform is greater. And since we have no intentions to please society at the expense of our comfort and satisfaction in life, this observable gap between us and society is torturous and damaging psychologically. Some of us wish to leave, but we cannot maintain a new life after moving out. Our communities observe our behavior and lifestyle owing to social alienation and label us as a spoilt generation or a cursed one.

Traditionally speaking, LGBTQ identity and expression is prohibited. Those of us living in traditional communities cannot identify or express themselves within those communities without bad consequences. However, some LGBTQ youth are involved during traditional rituals like initiation, spiritual thanksgiving after harvest and collective effervescence to appease gods. The gay boys and girls can only cross-dress and express themselves in diverse ways at this time. So, in one way the community needs us to participate during such events and activities, but they seek to control our express afterwards. As a result, there is little trust between us and our communities. And we mostly choose to socially isolate ourselves and depend on peer support.

Most of us experience self-estrangement and work hard to manage the balance between our happiness and that of the society. This is a difficult balance. And most of us use and/or abuse drugs. If our communities find out about this, a new reason for social exclusion in addition to identities emerge. Those of us engaged in sex work must also deal with social exclusion and self-isolation because of their identities in addition to sex work. When seeking social time with peers in organizations and other youth centers, we sometimes end up feeling stigmatized because of our expression and presentation; which is not always appealing to youth from higher levels of social life.

In the long term we end up with; no social bonds with our environments, resultant mental issues and a difficult autonomous interest to overcome social alienation.

7. Conclusion

It is true that stigma and discrimination exists around LGBTQ youth and that some of them are widespread all over the country. Some of them could be experienced by LGBTQ youth around the world. It is agreeable that employers who still fear and/or hate LGBTQ people cannot easily offer employment to LGBTQ youth. And being LGBTQ in college also has its own set of challenges- especially if they experience violence or social stigma because of their identities and, read online reports about gay youth being hunted in campus.

Social stigma relies on social numbers to put the right amount of pressure. And LGBTQ youth living in densely populated areas like grassroots face a greater challenge to overcome the same. We also have less viable vertical and horizontal networks because of lifestyle differences and lack of intellect to engage vertical networks. Too often, this leads to challenges with experience, inter-organizational cooperation and capacity. In the long term, arrangements and agreements on security, employment and social development are crippled.

Grassroots are a unique setting for protection of LGBTQ people and social intervention. Traditional values and beliefs thrive more in the grassroots than in higher levels of life in our society. Yet, this is one level of society with the least outreaches and sensitization on acceptance and human diversity as far as protection of LGBTQ people are concerned.

Living in a densely populated community with no social bond is not easy. You are always marked and treated as a member of the outgroup. Social pressure to conform is generally greater and it is true there is less sensitization and respect for diversity. With respect to that, privacy and freedom of association is threatened, especially when one is visited by friends. Lifestyle differences play a role in challenges of LGBTQ youth from the grassroots. The differences range from self-presentation, to expression and behavior. It is true that these are some of the basis upon which people separate themselves from others. And, to escape isolation and discrimination, we turn to LGBTQ-friendly youth centers. However, it is not socially therapeutic to go to Kenyatta Hospital instead of Uhuru park. We need an independent youth center.

Online engagements about sexual and gender identities also play a role in stigma and fear. With few and uncoordinated online counternarratives, those seeking to squeeze our space and make us feel unworthy always look rightful before the larger social media community. So we have to either close our accounts or feel exposed.

Apart from the need to observe, respect and protect Kenya's Bill of Rights, it would be impossible for Kenya to achieve the sustainable developments goals on the fronts of Education, Employment, Safety and Inclusion if LGBTQ youth are left behind.

“The only tyrant I will accept in this world is the ‘still small’ voice within me. And even though I have to face the prospect of being a minority of one, I humbly believe I have the courage to be in such a hopeless minority.” -Mahatma Gandhi.

8. Our Potentials in the grassroots

- a) Youth from the grassroots are often pointed out for taking part in political rallies and demonstrations. However, the society (and parts of civil society) ignores the fact behind their activity. Most of them are from the grassroots. And Kenyan grassroots have the highest number of outreaches of NGOs and other civil societies. This means that grassroots youth understand the language of 'change' better. LGBTQ youth from the grassroots are not any different as far as youth action for change is concerned.
- b) We can engage with one another at a horizontal level and expose 'hidden' forms of discrimination and human rights violation that occur below the radar level of established protection and social intervention agencies.
- c) We can manage small scale projects that aim at making fundamental changes that larger changemakers would appreciate because of their distance and challenges with synchronizing with grassroots communities.
- d) Living in the first level of society from below, we are the perfect implementors of any first phase of a bottom-up strategy, whether online or at eye-level. Other campaigners with interest such as political communities have identified and explored this power within the grassroots. Grassroot action could be a perfect model to campaign for social services and intervention methods that face challenges with consumption at higher levels of society.

9. Our suggestions for Change

a) *Campaign for Education of LGBTQ youth*

LGBTQ youth need to attend school to reduce dependency and, realize some social power to protect themselves whilst policies and laws are being shaped to protect them. Also, LGBTQ people need inclusive people in strategic positions of authority and influence.

b) *Emphasize Livelihood options and Training*

Trainings should be programmatic and include a basic needs assessment working together with a community-based selection criterion. If there is something that can make measurable and verifiable fundamental change and, protect LGBTQ people by changing perceptions and facilitating social inclusion, Livelihood projects would be one of them.

c) *Reform LGBTQ Protection*

These changes should include effective and accessible systems, non-discrimination, and community-led protection strategies. Education on security and civil education should also be carried in parts of the grassroots. This will narrow the gap between LGBTQ youth in the grassroots and established protection agencies. This can also improve protection agencies' understanding of grassroots communities and social life. As opposed to reactive strategies, LGBTQ protection in the grassroots ought to be proactive.

d) *Extend Social Intervention*

Service providers should plan to reach out to the grassroots and recruit grassroots volunteers. LGBTQ youth centers should also be separated from clinics to help the youth realize the true psychosocial purpose of 'social wellbeing.' Social services centers should have non-discrimination policies and educate members on the same.

e) *Encourage Community Participation*

Discrimination and Social stigma can be reduced if communities appreciate us. And so, we should not only work together with communities in common courses, but also get them to work with us in prisons, schools, environment, civic action among others. Also, livelihood options encourage community participation by allowing involved LGBTQ youth to contribute to community economy. LGBTQ-led (and sponsored) projects supporting fights against community issues of interest like malaria, child mortality and domestic violence would make communities really appreciate us.

10.Key notes

- a) Kenya Youth Unemployment report 2017: <https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/economy/Youth-unemployment-threatens-Kenya-role-as-regional-powerhouse/3946234-4090902-14p3ugmz/index.html>
- b) 12 most dangerous places in Nairobi (Grassroots): <https://omgvoice.com/news/nairobi-rape-spots/>
- c) Populist report on gay recruitments: https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/11/30/cartels-behind-rising-cases-of-gay-sex-among-youth_c1463914
- d) Notes on Grassroots: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grassroots>
- e) Notes on Social Alienation: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_alienation
- f) Notes on Communities: <https://www.jstor.org/topic/communities/?refreqid=excelsior%3A4d7b053dcb03721b2637a37df205553b>
- g)
- h) Grassroots Activism: <http://activismsinafrica.cei.iscte-iul.pt/en/south-north-partnerships-revisited-the-potentials-of-partnerships-between-grassroot-activists-in-the-case-of-transnational-lgbtqi-activism-between-kenya-and-germany/>

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