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Kenyan Religious Leaders' Views on Same-Sex Sexuality and Gender Nonconformity: Religious Freedom versus Constitutional Rights

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Abstract

Religion plays an important role in framing the public discourse on sexuality, especially in countries where religion fully permeates social life. We explored the perspectives of Kenyan religious leaders on sexual and gender diversity in their country's specific context. Two hundred and twelve Catholic, Islam and Protestant leaders from urban centers and rural townships completed a self-administered questionnaire, specifically developed for this study. The leaders' perspectives were predominantly negative. Limited acceptance was conditional on sexual minorities not engaging in same-sex practices or seeing such practices as sinful. A substantial minority (37%) endorsed the use of violence for maintaining social values, especially regarding homosexuality and gender nonconformity. The majority of religious leaders agreed on the difference between civil law and religious doctrine. Human rights principles enshrined in the Kenya Constitution were seen as also applicable to sexual and gender minorities. Decriminalization of same-sex sexuality was seen as against one's religion. Perspectives were less negative if leaders were familiar with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons. Interventions that promote intergroup contact could be effective in changing religious leaders' mindsets and advancing human rights and health for sexual and gender minorities.

Keywords

Religion; Same-sex Sexuality; Gender nonconformity; Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Religion as a social institution plays a critical role in framing the public discourse on sexuality in general and on same-sex sexuality in particular (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Jäckle & Wenzelburger, 2015). The way religious leaders portray

same-sex practicing persons will affect how these persons are treated in society. Most religions have formal doctrines that reflect a negative perspective on same-sex sexuality. Yet religious leaders' views do not always coincide with the formal doctrines and religious leaders can also be instrumental in promoting social acceptance of same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity (Cadge & Wildeman, 2008). For this reason, it is critical to understand the perspectives of religious leaders on sexual diversity and gender nonconformity.

The importance of religion in the societal discourse on sexuality will vary by country and will especially be strong in countries where religion fully permeates social life, as is the case in many African countries. Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's founding president, said "The Africanness which has its roots in the soil of our continent ... is basically a religious phenomenon; we are who we are because of our attitude to the mysterious depth of life, symbolized by birth and death, harvest and famine, ancestors and the unborn" (cited by Makumba, 2007, p. 166). Mbiti (2015), a leading African theologian, stated that Africans are notoriously religious and that in each African society religion is so pervasive in the way of life that it is actually embedded in the local language.

These opinions are supported by empirical evidence. While religious value systems have been shown to influence political choices (Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006), attitude towards public policy (Baumgartner, Francia, & Morris, 2008), world views (Kelley & DeGraaf, 1997) and even cultural lifestyle choices such as dressing (O'Neill, Gidengil, Cote, & Young, 2015) in various parts of the world, African countries stand out in terms of the endorsement of the importance of religion and attendance of religious services, and the number of religious organizations (Gilani, Shahid, & Zuettel, 2012; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Kelley & DeGraaf, 1997).

Our study aimed to describe the perspectives on same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity of religious leaders in Kenya. Some qualitative information suggests that there is extreme anti-LGBT prejudice among religious leaders in Kenya (e.g., Finerty, 2012). There are, however, no quantitative data that substantiate this claim, nor are there for any other African country. Our aim was to understand religious leaders' perspectives in their specific context of the formal religious doctrines regarding same-sex sexuality and gender diversity, and in relation to the Kenyan Penal Code and Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Given the pervasiveness of religion in Kenya, it is unlikely that improving the lives of LGBT persons is possible without engaging religious leaders. For that reason, it is important to understand their perspectives.

Main Religions of Kenya

The main religions in Kenya are Christianity (Protestantism and Catholicism) and Islam. According to the latest census data available, about 48% of Kenyans have a Protestant affiliation, 24% reported a Catholic affiliation, and about 11% reported to be Muslim (Kenya OpenData, 2009). In addition to these religions, about 12% have a Christian affiliation other than Protestant or Catholic. Smaller groups are Hindu or Traditionalist; and only 2% of the Kenyan population reported to have no religion (Kenya OpenData, 2009). While Christianity

and Islam are the main religions, Kenya has over 8,000 registered churches, and almost a similar number are still waiting to be registered (Cole, 2007).

Formal Religious Doctrines

Although religions' formal positions on same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity are not necessarily static and continue to be debated and discussed, they serve as critical anchor points for religious leaders. Officially, the Catholic Church is opposed to any sexual relationships outside the context of marriage, defined as between one woman and one man. Moreover, the Catholic Church is also opposed to any form of social acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex relationships [Constitution (1992), see sections 2357, 2358 and 2359; Persona Humana – Declaration on certain questions concerning sexual ethics, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, n.d.]. Although the Church teaches that persons with a homosexual orientation should be treated with respect, justice and pastoral care (American Catholic, 2014), she also advocates for chastity for same-sex attracted people (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.d.). The formal position of Islam on same-sex sexuality is more outspoken. The Hadiths (reports describing the words, actions, or habits of the Islamic prophet Muhammad) call for execution of persons who engage in same-sex sexuality by way of stoning (e.g., as Abu Dawud 38:4448, Al-Muwatta 41 41.111 and Tirmidhi 1:152) although some of the Hadiths seem to be calling for a lenient admonition on believers to “turn [such people] out of your houses” (e.g., Sahih Bukhari 7:72:774 and 8:82:820). Although based on the Holy Bible as Catholicism is, Protestantism, with a more decentralized governance system, holds divergent views on same-sex sexuality. For some, the worldviews of Evangelical Christians and the gay and lesbian community are irreconcilable (e.g., Hodge, 2005), whereas some denominations, such as Episcopalians, hold that “gay and lesbian persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church” (General Convention, 2007).

Whereas the Catholic Church and Protestantism do not have an official position on gender nonconformity, Islam seems to be relatively tolerant of transgender individuals. The Hadith actually employs the term “mukhannathun” to describe gender-variant people, usually male-to-female transsexuals (Roscoe & Murray, 1997). Theologically, the acceptance of transgender persons must be understood on the basis that they are not explicitly condemned by the Qur'an (von Oldershausen, 2014). This tolerance is illustrated by a fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini that made sex change in Iran permissible for “diagnosed transsexuals” (Hoder, 2008). Consequently, sex change operations are supported by the government. It is not clear whether this fatwa specifically applies to persons who desire sex adjustment or whether surgery is also forced upon gender nonconforming persons who do not experience gender dysphoria, and consequently only serves to confirm and preserve the gender binary.

Formal Religious Positions in Kenya

The formal viewpoints of Kenyan religious leaders on sexuality and gender nonconformity vary. Yet, as several press sources indicate, these viewpoints are predominately negative. Churches with historical or administrative links with churches in the Global North are more likely than indigenous ones to have thought through this topic.

Rev. David Gathanju, the presiding moderator of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, has been widely reported saying: “We [PCEA] denounce all forms of sins which include, but not limited to homosexuality and lesbianism and devil worship” (Eastafrican Standard, 2014). With regards to the Seventh Day Adventists, the Executive director for the Coastal region Zachariah Marwa has been reported as saying that “gayism and lesbianism should not be endorsed by anyone” (Lorna, 2013). The Anglican Arch-bishop for Mombasa Diocese preaches that homosexual people are more dangerous than terrorists (Beja, 2012). When the U.S. president Obama, while visiting Senegal in June 2013, called for equal treatment before the law, regardless of sexual orientation, Cardinal John Njue of the Nairobi Catholic Archdiocese responded: “Let him [Obama] forget, forget and forget. I don't think God was making a mistake when he created Adam and Eve and told them what to do” (Mutambo, 2013).

The Kenyan Penal Code, the Constitution, and Human Rights

The unfavorable attitudes of churches towards same-sex sexuality are in line with the current Kenyan Penal Code. Sections 162, 163 and 165 in the Penal Code criminalize “carnal knowledge against the order of nature” with imprisonment of 5 to 21 years. The Penal Code conflates same-sex sexuality with pedophilia and bestiality. In practice, it is less frequently applied to consensual same-sex sexuality than to people who engage in sex with children and with animals (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

Even though same-sex sexuality is criminalized, the Constitution of Kenya, which took effect 27 August 2010, offers broad protection of civil and human rights. Even though lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons are not explicitly mentioned, it has been argued that Kenya's statutes discriminating against LGBT persons are unconstitutional (Finerty, 2012). Article 10, for instance, provides that, “The national values and principles of governance include ... human dignity, equity, social justice, inclusiveness, equality, human rights, non-discrimination and protection of the marginalized....” (Const. of Kenya, Chapt. 2, L, art. 10 § 2). Furthermore, article 19, paragraph 2, states that the purpose of recognizing and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms is to preserve the dignity of individuals and communities and to promote social justice and the realization of the potential of all human beings.

Gay and Lesbian Movement

Religions’ attitudes and the criminalization of same-sex sexuality reinforce pervasive stigma and discrimination of LGBT persons in Kenya, including violence, blackmail and extortion (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2012; Thoreson & Cook, 2011). This negative climate has, however, not hindered LGBT groups from organizing. Although primarily in major urban areas, there are vibrant groups to be found in every part of the country, with the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya (GALCK) being the main umbrella body that brings the groups together to form a national agenda. Community mobilization was accelerated in 2009 when the critical role of male-to-male sexual transmission in Kenya’s HIV epidemic was first acknowledged by the government of Kenya in a Modes of Transmission study (Gelmon, 2009). This discovery influenced the HIV/AIDS response in the country and highlighted the importance for the government to work with

civil society agencies. Even though homosexuality remained criminalized, the government and gay community groups have been working together to address the epidemic by providing HIV prevention and treatment services for men who have sex with men (National AIDS Control Council, n.d.; National AIDS and STI Control Program, 2015).

The Current Study

The current study sought to describe the perspectives of religious leaders in Kenya on same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity in the context of their religion and their understanding of Kenya's legal system. In trying to understand the leaders' perspectives, we systematically explored whether there are differences between leaders from the three main denominations. Before discussing the attitudes and beliefs of religious leaders regarding same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity, we described to what extent leaders were informed about formal positions of their denomination. We explored whether religious leaders' perspectives were associated with their understanding of the origin of homosexuality; studies have shown that persons who think of same-sex sexuality as something that people are born with have more favorable attitudes than persons who think that homosexuality is a result of upbringing or a personal choice (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008; Sakalli, 2002). From a societal perspective, we explored the religious leaders' view on the role of violence in maintaining social values. We furthermore assessed the leaders' ideas about same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity from the perspective of the law and human rights, also in the context of the protection of religious freedom, offered by the Kenyan Constitution. To deepen our understanding of religious leaders' perspectives, we explored whether differences in opinions are related to age and sex; these factors have often been associated with perspectives on same-sex sexuality, with women and younger persons usually being more accepting of same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity, compared to men and older persons (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Guittar & Pals, 2014; Hicks & Lee, 2006; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Petersen & Hyde, 2011; West & Cowell, 2015). Finally, we explored whether there were differences between religious leaders' perspectives based on the familiarity with same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity. People who knew gay and lesbian persons have generally been found to have less negative attitudes towards same-sex sexuality (e.g., Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2012; Graham, Frame, & Kenworthy, 2014; Patrick et al., 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study were religious leaders from registered churches and mosques in Kenya. In approaching potential participants, we aimed to have the broadest representation both geographically and by religious identity, reflecting the national structure of religious affiliations, as perceived from the 2009 Census data. First, we selected major urban centers in Kenya (Nairobi, Kisumu and Mombasa) and also rural townships (Naivasha, Nakuru and Lodwar in the Rift Valley region). We then mapped the existing Churches in these areas to help identify those church facilities that had pastors'/priests' offices and residences. We trained six research assistants to reach out to religious leaders in the church centers or facilities where they either resided or had an office. Upon self-identification, research

assistants approached potential participants in person and invited them to participate in the study, either by completing a hard-copy questionnaire or online version of the same questionnaire on SurveyMonkey; the online tool specifically targeted those religious leaders with internet access. Interested persons were told that participation in the study was completely confidential and that nobody would know the identities of those who participated in the study or how they answered the questions.

We did not systematically collect nonresponse data and reasons for refusal to participate. We estimated, though, that about 25% of the leaders we approached were not willing to complete a hard copy questionnaire. For the electronic version of the questionnaire, it cannot be determined how many potential participants were reached. Many religious leaders who we approached declined to participate in a study on “homosexuality.” For every Christian or Muslim leader who declined, there were always others willing to take part. This was not the case with Hindu religious leaders; attempts to reach out to leaders at four Hindu temples in Nairobi were futile because they all refused participation (in the Kenyan Census of 2009, 0.14% reported to be Hindus; Kelley & DeGraaf, 1997). One religious leader in Nairobi for instance told a research assistant: “This subject is very sinful. I am sorry I cannot even touch your questionnaire. Please kneel down so that I can pray for you. You need to repent and be saved for engaging in this kind of research.” In Nakuru, another research assistant was chased away from the church compound after explaining to the pastor the nature of the study: “This is not a gay church and we do not have gay people in our church. Never come back here unless you are willing to repent and change your ways from engaging in such a work. Which organization sent you here?” Implications of the nonresponse are addressed in the Discussion section.

Procedure

The questionnaire was self-administered. Whereas many religious leaders favored research assistants to drop the questionnaires and pick them at an agreed later date, there were others who asked for them to wait as they completed the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires in Nairobi were generally returned to the researchers daily; in other towns, research assistants collected them for the duration of data collection and later discreetly mailed them to the researcher in Nairobi through registered courier services. Seven percent of all questionnaires were completed online.

Study Sample

The sample consisted of 212 religious leaders [11.8% female; 5 participants (2.4%) did not report their gender], between 24 and 64 years of age [24 to 29: 14.8%; 30 to 39: 38.3%; 40 to 49: 34.9%; 50 to 64: 12.1%; 63 persons (29.7%) did not provide their age]. Most religious leaders reported to be Protestant ($n = 125$; 59.0%); sizable proportions were Muslim ($n = 47$; 22.2%) or Catholic ($n = 40$; 18.9%). Age and gender were not related to religious affiliation.

Among participants with a Catholic affiliation, most said they were a priest (62.5%) or bishop (10.0%). Most Muslim participants were either sheikh (72.3%) or imam (17.0%). Most participants with a protestant affiliation reported to be pastors (77.6%). Religious affiliation was also associated with the size of the participants’ congregations; the size of the

congregations was small (up to 150; reported by 33.2% of the participants); middle (150 to 399; 31.6%); or large (400 to 10,000; 35.2%). Muslim participants were more likely to be part of a small congregation (66.7% compared to 30.4% and 2.8% of Protestant and Catholic participants, respectively), while Catholic participants were more likely to be part of a large congregation (63.9% compared to 33.9% and 14.3% of Protestant and Muslim participants, respectively; $\chi^2 = 40.90$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$).

Geographically, participants came from 11 of the 47 formal counties in Kenya; most participants came from Mombasa (35.6%); others were established in Nairobi (13.2%), Kisumu (12.3%), Nakuru (11.3%), and Turkana (10.4%); the remaining participants came from other counties (17.2%). Reflecting the distribution of religious affiliations in Kenya, the affiliation of the participants was associated with the county of residence, e.g., Muslim leaders were most likely to live in Mombasa (63.8% of all Muslim participants).

Measures

A questionnaire with closed-ended questions was specifically developed for this study and aimed to cover the range of topics discussed in the Introduction (see online supplement). Participants' knowledge of their religion's teachings on sexuality was assessed with seven knowledge questions; participants had to indicate whether specific statements were correct or incorrect, or whether they did not know this (e.g., "According to my religion/church, only sex between a man and a woman who are married is allowed"). Religious leaders' own attitudes and beliefs were assessed with six items. Three of these items were in Likert format (e.g., "Would you say your overall opinion of lesbian women is favorable or unfavorable?" 1 = very favorable; 4 = very unfavorable; 5 = I do not know). Some questions e.g., about the perceived origin of homosexuality, asked participants to select the answer that according to them was most appropriate. We also asked whether participants personally knew anyone who was gay or lesbian. A parallel set of questions was used to assess the leaders' attitudes and beliefs on gender nonconformity.

Subsequently, participants' perspectives on violence and its use to protect cultural values was assessed with four statements; for each statement participants had to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (1 = strongly agree – 4 = strongly disagree; 5 = I do not know). These questions were included in response to the religiously-related violence against men who have sex with men that had taken place in Mombasa in 2010 (Bocha, 2010). We specifically wanted to explore to what extent violence was condoned by the various religious groups.

The next sections of the questionnaire included eleven statements assessing the participants' perspective on Kenya's Penal Code and Constitution, and human rights. Various question formats and response scales were used (see online supplement); for instance, questions about the Penal Code assessed whether the leaders knew that practicing same-sex sexuality was illegal ("According to you, is the following statement correct or incorrect: According to the Kenyan law, sex between two persons of the same sex is illegal." The response options were: "Correct," "Incorrect," and "I do not know"). Another question assessed whether it would be against their religion if the State would decriminalize same-sex sexuality.

In a closing section, participants were asked about personal background information, including the kind of role they fulfilled in their religion, the size of their congregation (assessed with an open question), the county in which their ministry was located, and their gender and age.

Analysis

As indicated in the text, we combined certain answer categories to facilitate interpretation of the findings (e.g., all participants who strongly agreed or just agreed with a specific statement) in the description of basic frequency distributions. We used Chi square tests on the original scores to test differences in participants' responses in relation to the following variables: religious denomination (Catholic, Muslim, and Protestant); age (24 to 29, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, and 50 to 64 years); and gender. Using Chi square tests, we also explored whether the attitudes of religious leaders were related to their perception of the origin of homosexuality. We used Chi square tests because we did not want to exclude participants who answered "Don't know" to some of the questions, especially because these proportions were rarely negligible. We had deliberately included the "Don't know" category because we felt that it would not be justified to force people to select an answer if they did not have an opinion in answer to a particular question. Proportions of persons who selected a don't know-response are in and of itself informative. To explore whether familiarity with same-sex sexuality or sexual diversity mattered, we used the same approach to test differences in participants' responses in relation to (1) knowing a gay or lesbian person (no, yes); and (2) having heard about transgender persons (no, yes). Differences in variables with more than two categories were interpreted using standardized adjusted residuals, with values greater than |1.96| indicating that a proportion deviated significantly ($p < .05$) from what would be expected based on the marginal totals; we systematically highlighted these proportions in describing our findings. All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS version 22.

RESULTS

Institutional Perspectives

Religious leaders were asked about their religious institutions' views on sexuality, and same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity in particular. The majority of the participants said that their religion or church had official teaching on human sexuality (83.5%; 5.7% did not know), and that these teachings were described in Holy Scriptures (97.3%). Almost all participants (98.9%) agreed with the statement "According to my religion/church, only sex between a man and a woman who are married is allowed." The same unanimity was found regarding statements about same-sex sexuality: 94.7% of the participants said that the statement "My religion/church considers sexuality between persons of the same sex a grave sin" was correct. The majority of the participants (93.6%) said that the statement "My religion/church allows sexuality between persons of the same sex" was incorrect and 96.3% of all participants said that their religion/church did not allow persons of the same sex to get married.

Despite this unanimity, 15.5% of the participants said that the statement "According to my religion/church, persons who are sexually attracted to someone of the same sex are accepted,

as long as they don't engage in actual sex" was correct; compared to Muslim participants, Catholics participants were more likely to say that this statement was correct (26.5% versus 6.7%; $\chi^2 = 9.97$, $df = 4$, $p = .041$; 15.7% of the Protestant participants said this statement was incorrect). More participants (31.6%) said that the statement "My religion/church is open to every sinner, including persons who have sex with someone of the same sex" was correct. Again, Muslim participants were the least likely to say this was correct (11.1% versus 40.7% of the Protestant participants; $\chi^2 = 19.10$, $df = 4$, $p = .001$; 29.4% of the Catholic participants said that this was correct).

Religious Leaders' Attitudes and Beliefs

Religious leaders' own attitudes and beliefs seemed somewhat less negative toward same-sex sexuality than the official doctrine (Table 1). In response to the question "Would you say your overall opinion of gay men is favorable or unfavorable," 47.1% of the participants stated they felt very or mostly favorable. For lesbian women this percentage was 48.6%. The majority of the participants, however, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "The only sex allowed is between a man and a woman who are married" (91.4%). Asked whether they felt that engaging in homosexual behavior was a sin or not, the majority (90.0%) stated that it was a sin (4.8% did not know).

The most common conception of same-sex sexuality among the participants was that it was a choice persons make. Forty-two percent of all participants chose the option "Being gay or lesbian is just the way that some people choose." A somewhat smaller group chose the option "Being gay or lesbian is a result of a person's upbringing." Fewer participants thought that people are born as gay or lesbian (11.4%). There were a few participants (6.2%) who did not know how to conceive same-sex sexuality; five participants endorsed the "other" option: four participants called same-sex sexuality "demonic," "evil," or "a curse," while one participant saw same-sex sexuality as a consequence of Western influence.

The conceptions of religious leaders of same-sex sexuality were associated with their evaluation. Of the participants who thought that being gay or lesbian was a result of upbringing or that being gay was just the way some people choose, the majority agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the only sex allowed was between a man and a woman who were married (92.4% and 95.5%, respectively); among participants who conceived same-sex sexuality as something that people were born with, 66.7% agreed with this statement ($\chi^2 = 49.71$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$). The majority of the participants who thought that same-sex sexuality resulted from upbringing or that it was a choice felt that engaging in homosexual behavior was a sin (94.9% and 96.6%, respectively); among participants who conceived same-sex sexuality as something that people were born with, only 43.5% thought that it is a sin ($\chi^2 = 82.52$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$).

Regarding gender nonconformity, a little over half of the participants (51.5%) stated that they had very or mostly favorable attitudes towards transgender persons. Asked whether it was morally wrong for a man to present himself in public as a woman and for a woman to present herself in public as a man, opinions were less favorable, though; 78.1% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that this behavior was morally wrong for men, while 77.1% of the participants thought that it was morally wrong for women. Compared to

Catholic participants, more Muslim participants and less Protestant participants felt that it was morally wrong for a man to present himself in public as a woman and for a woman to present herself in public as a man (see Table 1).

Social Values and Violence

Major differences based on religious affiliation were related to the role of violence in the preservation of social values. Overall, less than half of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that violence can be justified if it helps to preserve social values (37.4%). Over half of all participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that violence against people is always wrong (58.6%). Muslim participants were more likely than Protestant and Catholic participants to agree with the first statement and to disagree with the second statement. Similar differences were evident in relation to violence in the context of homosexuality and gender nonconformity. Overall, less than one third of the participants (31.7%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “In the case of homosexuality, violence helps to protect our cultural values.” In the case of transgender persons, 27.4% agreed or strongly agreed that violence helps to protect cultural values. Again, Muslim participants were substantially more likely to agree with both statements.

The Law, the Constitution, and Human Rights

Almost all participants (87.5 %) were aware of the fact that sex between two persons of the same sex was criminal in Kenya (3.8% of the participants said that they did not know). To explore whether participants distinguished between the country’s laws and their religious beliefs, they were asked whether according to their religious views sex between persons of the same sex should be illegal, or that what the law says was a completely separate issue. Almost one third of the participants (31.3%) said that their religious views and the law were separate issues (4.3% said that they did not know). Nevertheless, the majority of the participants (87.0%) stated that it would be against their religion if the State would decriminalize same-sex sexuality (4.8% said that they did not know).

To explore whether same-sex sexuality is a “sexual sin” like others, such as fornication and infidelity in marriage, that are, however, not criminalized, participants were asked to indicate whether homosexuality should be treated differently or in the same way as other sexual sins. While 4.9% of the participants said that they did not know, almost half of the participants (49.0%) said that homosexuality should be treated the same way; 46.1% said it should be treated differently. Muslim participants were more likely to say that homosexuality should be treated differently, while Protestant participants were most likely to say that homosexuality should be treated the same.

Almost all participants (97.6%) were aware that the Constitution of Kenya supports freedom of religion; and the majority (strongly) agreed that their religious beliefs are in agreement with the Constitution (77.9%). Surprisingly, 21.1% of the participants said that they (strongly) disagreed with the statement “My religious beliefs are in agreement with the Constitution of Kenya on this issue [that the Constitution supports freedom of religion]” (1.0% said that they did not know). About one third of the participants were of the opinion that the Constitution of Kenya did not apply to gay and lesbian persons or transgender

persons: 37.0% of the participants (strongly) disagreed with the statement “The Constitution of Kenya applies to gay and lesbian persons” (9.1% said that they did not know); 35.5% (strongly) disagreed with the statement “The Constitution of Kenya applies to transgender persons” (15.4% said that they did not know).

To explore participants’ perceptions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they were asked: “According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all people are equal in dignity and rights, and this is the basis for equality and nondiscrimination. Do these values correspond with your religious beliefs or do they contradict them?” Half of the participants (50.7%) said that these values contradicted their religious beliefs (1.9% said that they did not know). In addition, participants were asked whether they thought that the values of equality and dignity, as expressed in this Universal Declaration, applied to gay and lesbian persons, and to transgender persons. Overall, 52.2% of the participants said that these values do apply to gay and lesbian persons (14.5% said that they did not know); 50.2% of the participants stated that these values also apply to transgender persons (19.5% said that they did not know).

Age and Gender

Surprisingly, and despite the variance in age among the participants, age was not related to any of the surveyed beliefs and attitudes. The only difference in terms of age was related to the statement “Violence against people is always wrong.” Participants in the age category 50 – 64 years were relatively more likely than others to agree with this statement, while participants in the age category of 30 – 39 years were relatively more likely than others to disagree with the statement ($\chi^2 = 22.29$, $df = 12$, $p = .034$).

Similarly, there were very few gender differences. Surprisingly, men were more favorable towards transgender persons than women (55.5% of the men compared to 24.0% of the women were very or mostly favorable; $\chi^2 = 12.72$, $df = 4$, $p = .013$). Men were however more likely to agree with the statement that it is morally wrong for a woman to present herself in public as a man (60.4% of the men strongly agreed with the statement compared to 36.0% of the women; $\chi^2 = 9.59$, $df = 4$, $p = .048$). Compared to men, more women agreed strongly with the statement that the Constitution of Kenya applies to transgender persons (7.1% versus 24.0%; $\chi^2 = 10.70$, $df = 4$, $p = .030$). However, women were somewhat more likely than men to think that homosexuality should be treated like other “sexual sins” (70.8% versus 48.5%; $\chi^2 = 4.18$, $df = 1$, $p = .041$).

Familiarity with Same-sex Sexuality and Gender Nonconformity

Table 1 shows that participants who said that they personally knew a gay or lesbian person or who had heard about transgender persons had somewhat more accepting beliefs and attitudes compared to participants who said that they did not know a gay or lesbian person or who had not heard about transgender persons. Of all participants, 68.9% said that they personally knew a gay or lesbian person and 65.6% had heard about transgender persons. These variables were associated: of all participants who said that they knew a gay or lesbian person, 74.0% said that they had heard about transgender persons versus 48.4% of all participants who said that they did not know a gay or lesbian person ($\chi^2 = 12.96$, $df = 1$, p

< .001). Persons who said that they did not know a gay or lesbian person or who had heard about transgender persons also reported being more knowledgeable about same-sex sexuality ($\chi^2 = 7.27$, $df = 2$, $p = .026$, and $\chi^2 = 10.15$, $df = 2$, $p = .006$, respectively).

Participants who said they personally knew a gay or lesbian person had somewhat less unfavorable attitudes towards gay men and lesbian women, as well as towards transgender persons (see Table 1). They were also somewhat less likely to think the only sex allowed was between a man and a woman who were married and that engaging in homosexual behavior was a sin. Participants who said that they personally knew a gay or lesbian person or who had heard about transgender persons were less likely to agree with the statement that it was morally wrong for a man to present himself in public as a woman, as well as for a woman to present herself as a man. They were also less likely to say that being gay was just the way some people choose to live and more likely to say that people were born as gay or lesbian.

Knowing a gay or lesbian person and having heard about transgender persons was also associated with participants' perspectives on violence and the preservation of social values (see Table 1). Participants who said that they personally knew a gay or lesbian person or who had heard about transgender persons were less likely to agree with the statement that in the case of homosexuality or transgender persons violence helps to protect the cultural values. Participants who had heard about transgender persons were less likely to agree with the statement that violence can be justified if it helps to preserve social values, and they were more likely to agree with the statement that violence against people is always wrong.

Participants who said they personally knew a gay or lesbian person or who had heard about transgender persons were more likely to feel that homosexuality among consenting adults should be treated like other "sexual sins" that are not criminalized by the government but that the churches hold as sexual sins (e.g., fornication, infidelity in marriages; see Table 1).

Participants who had heard about transgender persons were more likely to agree with the statement that their religious beliefs were in agreement with the Constitution of Kenya which supports the freedom of religion (see Table 1). Surprisingly, these participants were somewhat less likely to agree with the statements that the Constitution of Kenya applies to gay and lesbian persons and transgender persons. However, participants who had heard about transgender persons were more likely to feel that their religious beliefs corresponded with the values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which express that all people are equal in dignity and rights, and that this is the basis for equality and nondiscrimination. Participants who said they personally knew a gay or lesbian person were more likely to agree that these values of equality and dignity applied to lesbian and gay persons and to transgender persons.

DISCUSSION

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study that systematically described the perspectives of African religious leaders on same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity. Religious leaders in Kenya seemed well aware of the negative perspectives on same-sex sexuality of the institutions they represent. In line with these formal doctrines, the majority

of these leaders agreed that same-sex sexuality is sinful and that presenting oneself as a gender different from one's biological sex is morally wrong; as such, our findings confirm what has been suggested by qualitative information (e.g., Finerty, 2012). Although seemingly in contradiction, there was a little latitude in the sense that a substantial minority of the religious leaders reported favorable attitudes towards LGBT persons. This acceptance seemed to be conditional and applied to the persons and not their behavior: for some, lesbian and gay persons were welcome if they did not engage in same-sex sexuality, or they were welcome as sinners, to whom the respective religions or churches claimed to be open. To the extent that any such flexibility exists, it seemed to be more present in Catholic and Protestant religious leaders than in Muslim religious leaders. The most striking finding was the endorsement by a substantial minority of religious leaders, predominantly Muslim religious leaders, of violence for the maintenance of social values, especially in the case of homosexuality and gender nonconformity.

Almost all religious leaders were aware that homosexuality is criminalized in Kenya and hold the view that decriminalization would be against their religion. A substantial minority, especially among Muslim religious leaders, agreed that what the law says about homosexuality is a completely separate issue from what their religion/church says. Still, the majority was of the opinion that decriminalizing same-sex sexuality would go against their religion.

Awareness of the relatively new constitution in Kenya seemed high among the religious leaders. Almost all leaders knew that the Constitution protects freedom of religion and a minority, about one in five, did not feel that their religious beliefs were in agreement with the Constitution. Surprisingly, almost half of all religious leaders felt that Kenya's Constitution applies to gay and lesbian persons and transgender persons. Compared to the Constitution, the endorsement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was more ambivalent.

The answer patterns showed some similarity with trends observed in other studies that assessed beliefs and attitudes towards same-sex sexuality. As in other studies (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008; Sakalli, 2002), we found that religious leaders who thought of same-sex sexuality as something that people are born with had more favorable attitudes than leaders who thought that it was a result of upbringing or a personal choice. Other studies have demonstrated that women and younger generations had more positive attitudes towards same-sex sexuality compared to men and older generations, respectively (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Guittar & Pals, 2014; Hicks & Lee, 2006; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Petersen & Hyde, 2011; West & Cowell, 2015); we did not find such differences. It could be that religion trumps the effects of age and gender; given the limited variance, it is also possible that our measures were not sensitive enough to capture differences related to age and gender. As in other studies (e.g., Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2012; Graham, Frame, & Kenworthy, 2014; Patrick et al., 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), we confirmed the importance of interpersonal contact: religious leaders who knew gay and lesbian persons or who had heard about transgender persons generally had less negative attitudes.

It is not clear to what extent our findings generalize to other parts of Africa, although given the central role of religion, it is likely that a similar pattern of responses would be found in other African countries. Compared to other African countries, the general acceptance of homosexuality is somewhat higher in Kenya, with the exception of South Africa (Kohut, 2013). A study conducted by the Pew Research Center showed that 8% of the Kenyans surveyed had the opinion that society should accept homosexuality, compared to 1% to 4% in Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Uganda (in South Africa 32% felt that way; Kohut, 2013). The same study showed that across the world, there was a strong relationship between the level of religiosity in a country and the acceptance of homosexuality. It is likely that in less accepting African countries, the views of religious leaders are even more negative than what we observed among religious leaders in Kenya.

The strengths of this study should be considered in the context of some limitations. A critical limitation was our sample. It was practically impossible to recruit a sample that was representative of all religious leaders in Kenya. Furthermore, although we did not systematically collect reasons for non-participation, nonresponse seemed to have been selective, with many religious leaders refusing to participate because of the study topic. The likely implication of this limitation is that our results present a more positive picture than we would have had with a more representative sample.

Other limitations are related to the content of the questionnaire. To strengthen response and prevent drop out, we had decided to keep the questionnaire as short as possible. As a consequence, we assessed critical variables with single items. Using reliable and validated scales, consisting of multiple items, would have been a stronger approach. However, it would have prevented us from covering the diversity of topics, relevant to understand religious leaders' opinions in the broader context. Furthermore, we focused on opinions and attitudes; it is not clear how these translate in actual behavior in relevant situations. Related to this, we did not assess religious fundamentalism, defined as there being only one interpretation of the Bible or the Quran that every Christian or Muslim, respectively, should endorse (cf. Koopmans, 2015). Understanding the extent of fundamentalism could indicate how deep-rooted or open to change these beliefs and attitudes are. It is important to note that religiosity as such is not necessarily associated with negative perspectives on same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity and that there is diversity among individuals within the same denomination. A final limitation is social desirability bias, which, as was the case in Kelly, Soler-Hampejsek, Mensch, & Hewett (2013), might partly explain the discrepancy between the participants' descriptions of the religious teachings and their own, somewhat more favorable, personal beliefs about sexuality and gender.

Given how strongly religion permeates social life, it seems critical to work with religious leaders in order to improve the lives of sexual and gender minorities in Kenya and other African countries. Despite the overall denouncement of same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity, the findings suggest some openings for such engagement. The religious leaders' opinions and beliefs were not unequivocally negative. There even seemed to be some internally contradictory perspectives that suggest that opinions and beliefs were not completely developed and crystallized, leaving space for intervention. A major inconsistency in the leaders' perspectives had to do with the Constitution. It is encouraging to see the

religious leaders' awareness of the fact that the Kenyan Constitution supports freedom of religion and also that the majority agreed that the Constitution is in agreement with their religious beliefs. However, freedom of religion implies that the Constitution also assures space for religions and churches that embrace LGBT persons or even those that would bring them together and unite them. Freedom of religion further implies that religious prescriptions about how life should be lived cannot be imposed on persons that don't adhere to that specific religion. Scripture cannot be the rule of law in a society with a constitution that protects freedom of religion. These implications do not seem to be reflected in the religious leaders' beliefs. The clearest example of that is the endorsement of violence in preserving social values by a minority, but not an insignificant proportion, of religious leaders. Another example is that a substantial group of religious leaders did not think that the Kenyan Constitution also applied to LGBT persons. This indicates the need for education about the Constitution, especially directed at people, such as religious leaders, who are influential in shaping the social climate in society. This seems to be a critical responsibility for the Kenyan government and civil society.

Another indication of the potential for change is that about half of the religious leaders seemed to perceive LGBT persons favorably and were of the opinion that the Kenyan Constitution also applies to them. It is also encouraging that a majority of the religious leaders were of the opinion that values of equality and dignity, as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, also applied to LGBT persons.

There are several ways in which religious leaders in Kenya can be addressed. Findings from a meta-analytic study reviewing interventions to reduce sexual prejudice suggest the importance of education, contact with LGBT people, and affecting social norms as part of theoretically informed and evidence-based interventions (Barto , Berger, & Hegarty, 2014). As Barto , Berger, and Hegarty (2014) noticed, it is not clear whether these interventions work with groups with higher level of sexual prejudice than the populations that usually participate in this kind of research (American students). However, our findings suggest the potential impact of interpersonal contact with LGBT individuals in promoting a more accepting climate. This strategy has lately been adapted by LGBT organizations in Kenya, such as PEMA (Persons Marginalized and Aggrieved) Kenya, while addressing knowledge gaps on same-sex sexuality with religious leaders (Kushner, 2015). A systematic evaluation of these interventions, that assesses the impact on attitudes and beliefs as well as behaviors vis-à-vis LGBT persons, would expand our understanding of how sexual prejudice can be diminished.

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Table 1

Religious Leaders' Beliefs and Attitudes about Same-sex Sexuality and Gender Nonconformity by Religion, Personally Knowing a Gay or Lesbian Person, and Ever Heard about Transgender Persons

	Catholic (n=40)	Muslim (n=47)	Protestant (n=125)	Knows gay or lesbian person		Heard about transgender persons	
				No (n=64)	Yes (n=146)	No (n=71)	Yes (n=139)
General beliefs and attitudes towards same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity							
Overall opinion of gay men (% very/mostly favorable)	57.5	63.8	37.4	43.8	48.6	59.2	41.0
Overall opinion of lesbian women (% very/mostly favorable)	55.0	63.8	40.7	39.1	52.7	57.7	43.9
The only sex allowed is between a man and a woman who are married (% agree/strongly agree)	92.5	91.5	91.1	98.4	88.4	93.0	90.6
It is a sin to engage in homosexual behavior (% agree)	87.5	89.4	91.0	98.4	86.2	94.4	97.7
Thinking about people who are gay or lesbian, which statement comes closer to your view? ^d							
- People are born as gay or lesbian	21.6	8.9	10.9	1.8 ^c	17.0 ^c	0.0 ^c	19.0 ^c
- Being gay or lesbian is a result of upbringing	32.4	33.3	47.3	40.4	41.5	45.5	38.9
- Being gay is just the way some people choose	45.9	57.8	41.8	57.9 ^c	41.5 ^c	54.5	42.1
It is morally wrong for a man to present himself in public as a woman (% agree/strongly agree)	77.5	87.2 ^c	74.8 ^c	82.8	76.0	87.3	73.4
It is morally wrong for a woman to present herself in public as a man (% agree/strongly agree)	80.0	87.2 ^c	72.4 ^c	81.3	75.3	85.9	72.7
Overall opinion of transgender persons (% very/mostly favorable)	55.0	61.7	46.3	39.1	56.8	62.0	46.0
Violence in the preservation of social values							
Violence can be justified if it helps to preserve social values (% agree/strongly agree)	27.5	80.9 ^c	25.6 ^c	43.8	36.1	47.9	33.6
Violence against people is always wrong (% agree/strongly agree)	70.0	42.6 ^c	61.2	59.4	58.3	38.0	69.3
In the case of homosexuality violence helps to protect our cultural values (% agree/strongly agree)	27.5	74.5 ^c	16.5 ^c	50.0	23.6	49.3	22.6
In the case of transgender persons violence helps to protect our cultural values (% agree/strongly agree)	22.5	68.1 ^c	13.2 ^c	35.9	23.6	40.8	20.4
The law, religion, and rights							
According to the Kenyan law, sex between two persons of the	91.9	93.5	89.7	90.5	91.2	94.2	89.3

	Knows gay or lesbian person				Heard about transgender persons					
	Catholic (n=40)	Muslim (n=47)	Protestant (n=125)	Chi ² ^b	No (n=64)	Yes (n=146)	Chi ² ^b	No (n=71)	Yes (n=139)	Chi ² ^b
same sex is illegal (% correct) ^a										
According to my religious views ^a				7.11 [*]			ns			ns
- sex between persons of the same sex should be illegal	65.8	52.2 ^c	73.9 ^c		62.3	69.6		59.4	71.5	
- what the law says is a completely separate issue	34.2	47.8	26.1		37.7	30.4		40.6	28.5	
Decriminalization of same-sex sexuality would be against my religion (% agree) ^a	91.9	93.5	90.4	ns	91.9	91.1	ns	94.1	89.9	ns
Many things churches hold as sexual sins (e.g., fornication, infidelity in marriages) are not criminalized, yet homosexuality among consenting adults is. Homosexuality should be treated ^a				16.31 ^{***}			9.35 ^{**}			11.09 ^{***}
- the same way as other sexual sins	55.3	25.0 ^c	60.5 ^c		35.5	59.0		34.8	60.0	
- differently	44.7	75.0	39.5		64.5	31.0		65.2	40.0	
The Constitution of Kenya supports freedom of religion (% agree/strongly agree)	100.0	100.0	95.9	ns	98.4	97.2	ns	95.8	98.5	ns
My religious beliefs are in agreement with the Constitution of Kenya on this issue (% agree/strongly agree)	80.0	80.9	76.0	ns	87.5	73.6	ns	85.9	73.7	23.50 ^{***}
The Constitution of Kenya applies to gay and lesbian persons (% agree/strongly agree)	45.0	55.3	56.2	ns	45.3	57.6	ns	66.2	47.4	13.34 ^{**}
The Constitution of Kenya applies to transgender persons (% agree/strongly agree)	45.0	42.6	52.9	ns	40.6	52.8	ns	59.2	43.8	12.54 [*]
According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all people are equal in dignity and rights, and this is the basis for equality and nondiscrimination. ^a These values:				ns			ns			22.19 ^{***}
- correspond with my religious beliefs (%)	60.0	34.8	49.6		41.0	51.4		25.0	60.0	
- contradict them (%)	40.0	65.2	50.4		59.0	48.6		75.0	40.0	
Values of equality and dignity, as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:										
- apply to lesbian and gay persons (% agree) ^a	73.5	34.1 ^c	67.6 ^c	16.57 ^{***}	37.5	69.8	15.31 ^{***}	59.6	61.7	ns
- apply to transgender persons (% agree) ^a	76.5	36.8	67.7 ^c	14.58 ^{***}	39.1	71.4	14.75 ^{***}	61.1	63.1	ns

* *p* .05;** *p* .01;

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Persons who answered "don't know," were excluded; proportions of persons responding with "don't know," ranged from 1.9% to 19.5%.

Calculated on the original frequencies.

Proportion that is significantly higher or lower than to be expected based on margin totals (in case variables are not dichotomous).