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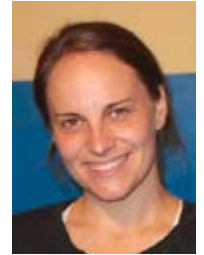
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On conducting sexualities research in Africa

BY TARA MCKAY

Tara McKay is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology. Her areas of specialization include medical sociology, sexualities, organizations, and demography. She received the CSW Elizabeth Blackwell Award in 2012. In the fall, she will be joining the 20th cohort of Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Scholars at UC Berkeley/UCSF.



On conducting sexualities research in Africa

BY TARA MCKAY

OVER THE PAST DECADE, gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM) have become a key concern in the fight against AIDS, not only in high-income Western countries but also in low- and middle-income countries where same-sex sexual transmission of HIV had rarely—if ever—been considered. My work examines how MSM emerged as a global HIV prevention priority at the transnational health policy giant UNAIDS, how this new global priority diffused to national governments around the world and what happens when global prevention priorities targeting MSM collide with local contexts and people.

As I was considering these questions toward the end of 2009, the adoption of MSM as a

national AIDS priority became a hot topic in Malawi, a small country in southern Africa that is heavily dependent on foreign aid, endures a generalized HIV epidemic, and criminalizes same-sex sex. Throughout 2009, MSM and same-sex sexualities were being identified as a vulnerable population that the Malawian government needed to address. Then, in late December, two Malawians, Steven Monjeza and Tiwonge Chimbalanga, were arrested for sodomy, bringing same-sex sexualities even more to the forefront of political debate. At the time, several of Malawi's foreign donors had invoked health and HIV transmission as key concerns in the outcome of the case, emphasizing how damaging the conviction and sentencing of Monjeza

and Chimbalanga could be for AIDS prevention in Malawi. Several of Malawi's European and North American donors threatened to revoke aid to the country if the case proceeded.

This series of events prompted questions of how transnational policy concerns about HIV among MSM were operating on the ground, and how Malawians made sense of external demands that they protect same-sex sexualities in the name of AIDS. To address these questions, I traveled to Malawi in 2010 for several months before, during, and after the sodomy trial to conduct an ethnographic study among Malawi's rural villagers, a group that constitutes roughly 85% of the population. Contrary to concerns that my informants or I might be



Maize and tobacco fields, Henga Valley, Malawi. 2010

attacked, detained, or deported for talking about homosexuality, when I arrived in Malawi in April 2010 I found that homosexuality and the sodomy trial were a lively topic of public conversation in the market, in minibuses, and in tea shops. However, in talking to me and to each other, rural Malawians were often ambivalent on the issue of homosexuality, specifically because of their vulnerable status in the global system. For Malawians living in rural areas, fears that donors might withdraw aid, taking with them opportunities to meet basic needs and find work, were paramount. Additionally, villagers emphasized the ways in which persecution of homosexuals is exemplary of the state's general lack of transparency on civil rights issues. Within the context of Malawi's ongoing struggles to build and maintain democratic institutions, rural Malawians who supported the rights of homosexuals often did so not because they approved of homosexual sex but because they saw themselves as part of a modern democracy that had a responsibility to protect minorities, grant individual rights to privacy, and keep state abuses of power in check. Importantly, in a place where knowing someone with HIV or someone who has died of AIDS is nearly universal (95% of Malawians do, reports one study by Susan Watkins), none of my Malawian informants gave much



credence to arguments that persecuting MSM, a largely invisible population in Malawi, was a problem for HIV prevention.

In May 2012, I returned to Malawi with my colleagues, Ashley Currier (Women's Studies, University of Cincinnati) and Kim Yi Dionne (Political Science, Texas A&M University), in order to find out just how representative these

multiple, often conflicting views of homosexuality were. Pooling our various funds, we were able to hire nine energetic Malawian interviewers and an amazing supervisory staff from a Malawian Research NGO—the Invest in Knowledge Initiative—to conduct a national household survey of more than 1,500 people all across the country in just 26 days.

**Frank Namacha
(left) preparing
dinner for the
team. Rumphi,
Malawi, 2010**



Six days a week, the interviewers and I were in the minibus before dawn, headed out to a new village miles off the main tarmac road and not returning until well after dinnertime. Every few nights, we packed up all of our belongings and survey gear and charted a course to the next location, hours away. Given the content of the survey, every new village we traveled to held the potential for serious threats to the safety and security of the team. Just months before our survey, a different group of interviewers from a Malawian human rights organization had been attacked while fielding a survey on homosexuality. As in 2010, however, the majority of people we encountered were interested in discussing homosexuality, even if they did not support it, and we suffered no major negative events.

In preliminary analyses of these survey data, I find that Malawians are again ambivalent on the issue of homosexuality. For example, while 95% reported that homosexuality is “always wrong” (which is a standard question used by big data sources like the World Values Survey to compare homophobia around the world), 16% of Malawians agreed or strongly agreed that homosexuality is a private matter that should not be regulated by law, and 31% supported the President’s pardon of Monjeza and Chimbalanga. Surprisingly, I find that the

**Supervisor
Augustine
Harawa mapping
selected
villages, Mzuzu,
Malawi, 2012**



most disenfranchised people in Malawian society (the very poor, the less educated, and those living in rural areas) are more likely to oppose the criminalization of same-sex sex, while those who are more educated and well off are more likely to favor the criminalization. This finding runs counter to research in other countries, where the more educated and those living in urban areas are more likely to be accepting of same-sex sexualities and draws attention to the ways in which reliance on foreign donors shapes understandings of homosexuality on the ground.

Among Malawian civil society organizations, donor interests have also played a substantial role in shaping understandings of homosexuality. Since the mid-2000s, Malawian civil society organizations have increasingly advocated for the inclusion of MSM in the country's AIDS programs and policy. In collaboration with international human rights organizations, LGBT social movement organizations, social scientists in the US, and AIDS policymakers, one organization in particular has worked to counter claims that there are no homosexuals in Malawi by conducting research on HIV

infection among gay and bisexual men. Over time, this research has provided same-sex sexualities a certain visibility through numbers, the primary way that AIDS is “seen” by researchers and policy makers in Africa, and created a context in which personal testimonials of gay and lesbian Malawians have become possible and more frequent.

However, gains accomplished through HIV organizing have been largely limited to civil society and government officials who work on HIV/AIDS policies. To date, it remains unclear whether changes in understandings of homosexuality among civil society will spillover to other aspects of Malawian society. Nonetheless, as global HIV prevention priorities concerning same-sex sexualities are increasingly institutionalized at the transnational level, it remains important to examine how same-sex sexualities are understood, mobilized, and contested across contexts and how these understandings shape local policy outcomes.

Photo on page 16: Tara McKay with interviewers, Yusuf Chimesya and Jimmy Lungu (second row), Alinafe Chawanda, Richard Kusseni and Zynab Mpaweni (third row), and Wezi Mzembe and Alfred Mang'anda (back row). Mangochi, Malawi. 2012.