

# Hegemonic African Masculinities and Men's Heterosexual Lives: Some Uses for Homophobia

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**Abstract:** Based on two relatively well-reported cases of homophobia in Malawi and South Africa, this article aims to show some of the ways in which hegemonic African men and masculinities are unsettled by, but also find ideological use for, the existence of homosexuality and nonheteronormative sexualities. Deploying the notion of psychopolitics, the article traces the interpenetrating psychosocial and sociopolitical aspects of homophobia. The argument is that analyses of issues of lesbian, gay, and “othered” sexualities are vital for a fuller understanding of the production of hegemonic forms of gender and masculinity in Africa. The article suggests that the threat posed by homosexuality is used as a distraction for some of the socioeconomic development-related failures of Africa's ruling men but also, more significantly, for the impossibility of hegemonic African masculinity itself.

**Résumé:** En s'appuyant sur deux cas relativement bien médiatisés d'homophobie au Malawi et en Afrique du Sud, cet article vise à montrer quelques-unes des façons dont les hommes hégémoniques et les masculinités africains sont bouleversés, mais aussi à trouver une utilisation idéologique pour l'existence de l'homosexualité et des sexualités non hétéro-normatives. En exposant la notion de psychopolitique, l'article retrace les aspects psychosociaux et sociopolitiques entrelacés de l'homophobie. Une hypothèse de l'exposé est que les analyses des problèmes des lesbiennes, gays, et des sexualités de l'“altérité” sont essentiels pour une

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compréhension plus complète de la production des formes hégémoniques de genre et de la masculinité en Afrique. L'article suggère que la menace posée par l'homosexualité est utilisée par dirigeants africains comme une distraction de leurs propres échecs socio-économiques liés au développement et aussi, de façon plus significative, de l'impossibilité même de la masculinité hégémonique africaine.

**Key Words:** Homophobia; homosexuality; heteronormative; heterosexual; masculinities

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## Introduction

In his well-anthologized article on (white American) masculinity and homophobia, Michael Kimmel (1994:133) contends that “the fear of being perceived as gay, as not a real man, keeps men exaggerating all the traditional rules of masculinity.” Kimmel traces the history of dominant forms of masculinity in the United States in order to show that masculinity is not a trait that male children come into the world with. As a pattern of practice that men (and women in their capacities as mothers, for instance) construct as a group and in their subjective lives, masculinity is a historically located cultural project in which sexuality figures centrally.

Kimmel's work emphasizes the complex (sexual) fears that males live with, including the fears of heterosexual males that they do not measure up to the standards of hegemonic masculinity. This article focuses similarly on the ways in which fear of homosexuality, including the fear of being perceived as homosexual, troubles hegemonic African men and masculinities. It argues that homosexuality and non-heteronormative sexualities, along with homophobia and homophobic acts, play a significant role in the practices, identities, constructions, and social reproduction of hegemonic African masculinity. This is a subject that has been largely neglected in the literature on homophobia in Africa. Reports of homophobia—such as those from Human Rights Watch and other multinational nongovernmental organizations—tend to neglect the fact that gay, lesbian, trans, and other forms of nonconforming sexualities are fundamental in the configuration of hegemonic men's gender practices. The argument here, therefore, is that issues of lesbian, gay and “othered” sexualities are vital for a more complex understanding of the working-out, construction, and reproduction of ruling forms of masculinity and gender in Africa. The article suggests that the well-publicized turmoil over homosexuality in Africa is in fact a poorly choreographed distraction from the tenuousness of hegemonic African masculinity and is also imbricated with the socioeconomic development-related failures of Africa's ruling men. Without denying the influence of factors such as religious-based discourses in the construction of African homophobia, it argues that the antihomosexuality furor instantiates the psychosocial and sociopolitical displacement of an unworkable configuration of hegemonic African masculinity and men's gender practice.

The term “homophobia,” as introduced by George Weinberg (1972), refers to an irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals: the “dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals—and in the case of homosexuals themselves, self-loathing” (quoted in Herek 2004:8). In this sense, the word refers to psychological processes, although the phenomena that are elucidated by the term are relevant to more than just the affective or cognitive aspects of individual lives. Laws criminalizing or banning homosexuality are entangled with the prevalent psychologies of sexuality, and the concept of homophobia, therefore, also elucidates ways in which heteronormativity informs social systems, laws, and policies. Thus, in considering homophobia there is a need to account both for its psychosocial and sociopolitical inventories and effects. And in examining antihomosexual practices, it is necessary to understand how politics affect the individual psyche. Even where legal battles against antihomosexual laws have been won, scholars and activists need to continue to do work that focuses on, as it were, the hearts and minds of individuals, or else the psychic impingements of homophobia will undermine sociopolitical gains at the level of social identity and relations.

The article thus traces the interwoven psychosocial and sociopolitical aspects characterizing the fear of homosexuality, deploying in particular the concept of “psychopolitics” as defined by Derek Hook (2004). Building on Fanonian analytics, Hook’s conceptualization of psychopolitics refers to analytical positions that “take into account both [psychological and political factors] and their reciprocal and combined effects . . . [:] how politics impacts upon the psychological [and] . . . how personal psychology may repeat, internalize and further entrench such political effects at the level of personal identity” (2004:90). An interesting elaboration of the concept of psychopolitics is Prilleltensky and Fox’s (2007) notion of “psychopolitical literacy,” which “refers to people’s ability to understand the relationship between political and psychological factors that enhance or diminish wellness and justice” (2007:799). For the purposes of this article, their general concept of “wellness” can be thought of in terms of sexual well-being in particular. In this way, the lens of psychopolitics enables us to view the homosexual as a phobogenic object saturated with politics, and conversely, to view the politics of homosexuality as replete with psychosocial dynamics.

## Challenges of Hegemonic African Masculinity

In the field of gender studies, the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” is defined as

the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allow . . . men’s dominance over women to continue. Hegemonic masculinity [is] distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity [is] not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it.

But it [is] certainly normative. It embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men. (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:832)

According to Segal (1993:635), hegemonic masculinity is a form of masculinity that “gains its symbolic force and familiar status . . . from a series of hierarchical relations to what it can subordinate.”<sup>1</sup> In this sense, however, *African* hegemonic masculinity is something of an impossibility. Even though, generally speaking, African men do dominate women, and some men dominate other men, studies of African men suggest that when countries undergo rapid change in the political and economic realm, accompanied by a reconfiguration of social relations, significant groups of men increasingly find it harder to achieve what historically might have been seen as successful masculinity (see, e.g., Silberschmidt 2001). Such struggles to attain adequate personal and social status are entangled with the socioeconomic development-related failures of Africa’s ruling men and their failures as political leaders, as measured by the lack of basic services, poverty, unemployment, inequality, and levels of violence in their countries.

In an even larger sense, the very idea of hegemonic African masculinity is problematic and perhaps untenable “within the context of hegemonic capitalist patriarchal whiteness” (Ratele 2013:252). African masculinities, in other words, are hegemonic and subordinate at the same time, a logical contradiction that is difficult to resolve. And it is particularly stark as it applies to black youth, who must seek to advance themselves within a global network of violent, capitalist, racist, patriarchal, homophobic ideological structures which, on the one hand, they are urged to support but which also, on the other hand, are the source of their own subjugation (see Ratele 2012). It is in this context that homophobia, as well as gender-based violence, has it “uses” in Africa, as a kind of explanation (or better still, displacement) of the impossibility of attaining and maintaining traditionally hegemonic African masculinity. The “homosexual,” then, is what a real African man is *not*, and a defining characteristic of the dominant male position is violence. Zackie Achmat, interviewed by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) provides a particularly salient summary of the situation.

Many African politicians want to blame the West for everything, homosexuality included. And they are right, the West is responsible for their rhetoric, but in a different way than they say. The West, the IMF, the World Bank, push structural adjustment plans on these countries. And they are starved and devastated by it. Food is unaffordable, health care unavailable; educations, opportunities, pensions are all gone. And the populations are enraged, rightly. . . . And so these governments are precarious and terrified. The people are roused up against them, and there is no one to support them. Their only real hope is that people die of AIDS or hunger before they are angry enough to rebel. And what do [the governments]

find? They say “homosexual” and two sorts come running to them: the Christian churches and the African traditionalists, two groups who usually won’t even speak to one another, come flocking behind the government’s banner. Suddenly they have support. It’s a magic word. (HRW & IGLHRC 2003: 46–47)

The incantatory power of the homosexual figure for a certain prevalent kind of muscular African political, religious, and cultural leadership and its failures is therefore important to consider in furthering thought on the uses of homophobia (and associated violence) for heterosexual masculinity in Africa. Events in the last few years in Cameroon, Malawi, Senegal, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and elsewhere suggest the utility of the homosexual bogeyman as figure of displacement or a scapegoat for failed leadership (see, e.g., BBC 2009; Epprecht 1998; HRW 2004, 2010a, 2010 b; Mutua 2011). People’s sexual desires, relationships, and identities quite often are put to use toward sociopolitical and economic objectives by governments and societal leaders when they cannot live up to their promises to their people or own up to their failures. As elaborated in regard to one of the cases below, the contestations around sexual orientation and same-sex relationship are also connected to the agendas of the West and Western-dominated multilateral organizations keen on pursuing their own economic, political, cultural, or health programs in African countries. Pursued under the umbrella of economic development, security, good governance, human rights, or some other framing, the interests of Western countries or organizations have an indirect or direct bearing on the opening up or closing down of the space of sexuality—such as prohibitive or facilitative laws or projects around sexual and reproductive health and rights, sexuality education, or HIV/AIDs treatment.

The argument in this article is grounded in reports emanating from two southern African countries, Malawi and South Africa. It is vital to observe that not all of the conclusions drawn from these countries can be generalized to the continent as a whole, and while the colonial context shaped sexuality and culture in both countries, their different histories and contemporary social, political, and economic developments deserve much closer attention than can be adequately provided by this article. And yet, dissimilar histories and contexts notwithstanding, the cases point to different facets that require consideration in projects focused on homosexuality and masculinities.

The first case, from Malawi, demonstrates what might be referred to as “vertical homophobia,” that is, heterosexist discourses emanating from sociopolitical structures and institutions, including but not limited to constitutions, penal codes, laws, and government policies. This is distinguishable from “horizontal homophobia,” as reflected in the case from South Africa, which refers to the penetration of everyday, interpersonal, and psychological life by antihomosexual discourse. This heuristic distinction is doubtless imperfect as a theoretical tool. It is useful, however, as an initial

way of distinguishing between different cases of homophobia and its psychopolitical facets.

It is important also to note that while the argument in this article is grounded in two well-known cases from the two countries, the data sources are themselves open to critical examination. Sources are never untouched by power. Questions of whose voices and perspectives are privileged, what might be omitted from the data, and what interests are being foregrounded ought to be kept in mind in considering the cases.

### Vertical Homophobia in Malawi

In 2009, Steven Monjeza Soko (referred to as Monjeza) and Tiwonge Chimbalanga Kachepa (Chimbalanga), a Malawian gay/trans couple, were arrested for performing *chinkhoswe*, a traditional engagement ceremony which is recognized as a civil marriage in Malawi when it involves a heterosexual couple (BBC 2010a; IPS 2010). In performing *chinkhoswe*, Monjeza and Chimbalanga were obviously transgressing the Malawian Penal Code. Both the public as a whole and the officials of the state regarded their act as an unspeakable affront to traditions and sexual norms governing Malawian society. The men were taunted and jeered by the public whenever they appeared in court, and the media reported that they were subjected to forcible anal medical examinations to justify the charge of sodomy as well as psychiatric examinations to test for mental instability (Afroline 2010). Human rights organizations pointed out that such tests could be characterized as cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment and amounted to torture (Amnesty International 2010). The couple were eventually sentenced to fourteen years in hard labor, the maximum sentence in accordance with the colonial-era Penal Code of 1930. Section 153 of the Penal Code states that “any person who (a) has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature; or (b) has carnal knowledge of an animal; or (c) permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature, shall be guilty of a felony and shall be liable to imprisonment for fourteen years, with or without corporal punishment. Also pertinent is section 156, which refers to “indecent practices between males.”

Any male person who, whether in public or private, commits any act of gross indecency with another male person, or procures another male person to commit any act of gross indecency with him, or attempts to procure the commission of any such act by any male person with himself or with another male person, whether in public or private, shall be guilty of a felony and shall be liable to imprisonment for five years, with or without corporal punishment.

Nyadani (2009:138) points out that “these prohibitions are completely at odds with the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi.” Referencing Section 20 (1) of the Constitution, which guarantees “equal and effective protection

against discrimination” on the basis of race, sex, social origin, and other status, he notes that “for some reason, however, sexual orientation is not considered to be included in the ‘other status.’”

Newspapers reported that at the sentencing of the couple “the courtroom was packed, and hundreds of people gathered outside the building. Some shouted abuse as the couple were taken back to jail. There were shouts of ‘You got what you deserve!’ and ‘Fourteen years is not enough, they should get 50!’” (BBC 2010a). Imposing the maximum sentence, the presiding magistrate, Nyakwawa Usiwa-Usiwa, argued that

we are sitting in place of the Malawi society. Which I do not believe is ready at this point in time to see its sons getting married to other sons, or cohabiting or conducting engagement ceremonies. I do not believe Malawi is ready to smile at her daughters marrying each other. *Let posterity judge this judgment.* So this case being ‘*the first of its kind*’, to me, that becomes ‘*the worst of its kind*’. I cannot imagine more aggravated sodomy than where the perpetrators go on to seek heroism, without any remorse, in public, and think of corrupting the mind of a whole nation with a *chinkhoswe* ceremony. For that, I shall pass a *scaring* sentence so that ‘*the public must also be protected from others who may be tempted to emulate their [horrendous] example*’ (emphasis in original). (Usiwa-Usiwa 2010: 23)

Monjeza and Chimbalanga’s case attracted considerable interest within Malawi and around the world, in particular from the country’s donors, including the African Development Bank, the European Union, the U.N., the World Bank, and the governments of Germany, Norway, the U.S., and the U.K. (see, e.g., BBC 2010a; U.S. Department of State 2010, 2011). A BBC news report reminded its readers that “some 40% of the development budget in Malawi is from donors” (Tenthani 2010). The U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2010) urged “the Government of Malawi to review its laws to ensure the defence of human rights for all, without discrimination on any grounds.” The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, said that she was shocked and dismayed by the “blatantly discriminatory” sentence and called “for the repeal of their convictions and for penal codes criminalizing homosexuality to be reformed” (U.N. 2010). President Bingu wa Mutharika was reported as having dismissed homosexuality as alien to Malawi and indicating that he would not change his mind in spite of the outcry around the world (Tenthani 2010).

Eventually Mutharika, after meeting with U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, gave in to political-economic pressures and pardoned Monjeza and Chimbalanga, stating that he was doing so “on humanitarian grounds,” although he also repeated his conviction that “in all aspects of human understanding, these two gay boys were . . . totally wrong” (BBC 2010b). Ban called the decision “courageous” and urged the reformation of the “outdated penal code” (BBC 2010b; CNN Wire Staff 2010). Britain and the U.S., among others, expressed their approval with the pardon. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2010) applauded Mutharika “for his wise

and courageous decision” and said that he “provided an example for nations across Africa and the world as they debate laws that criminalize sexual orientation.”

Despite this conclusion, what remains implicit in the case is the heteronormative ideology of the state of Malawi—including the executive, the justice system, and the police—whose masculine ideology is in part constituted by its antagonism to sexualities that are considered “unAfrican” and “unmanly.” In many ways Monjeza and Chimbalanga functioned as distractions from the development-related failures of the ruling group, although one can hope that as a result of this event, the couple managed to present themselves to Malawians as human beings with rights and as genuine “sons of Malawi.”

### Horizontal Homophobia in South Africa

In February 2006, a group of about twenty young men between the ages of seventeen and twenty fatally clubbed, kicked, and beat nineteen-year-old Zoliswa Nkonyana outside a shebeen—an unlicensed drinking establishment—in Khayelitsha, a township outside Cape Town, South Africa (Thamm 2006). Nkonyana, a self-identified lesbian, had gone to the shebeen with a friend and soccer teammate, and the two had been mocked by a group of girls on the street. Reports indicate that “an argument broke out between Nkonyana and a female patron at the tavern who was with a party of nine men . . . centred on the lesbians’ use of the ladies’ toilets” (De Waal 2011). The confrontation turned uglier when one of the women reported the encounter to her male friends. The young men chased Nkonyana, pelted her with bricks, and finally beat her to death with a golf club a few meters from her home.

The murder of Zoliswa Nkonyana says a great deal about the ideology and psychology of masculinity in South African society, as well as their overlap with both homophobia and the high levels of gendered and sexual violence against women. As opposed to the “vertical” homophobia evidence by the Malawian example, this could be considered an example of “horizontal” homophobia—the kind of antihomosexual bias that poisons everyday interpersonal relations.

Nine men were initially indicted for the murder (Nombembe 2011). After a trial that dragged on for six years and included fifty postponements, four of the accused were eventually sentenced to eighteen years in prison in early 2012, thanks largely to the doggedness of the lesbian activist community (South African Broadcasting Corporation 2012; South African Press Association 2012). A number of organizations, including government bureaus, applauded the sentence (see, e.g. Commission for Gender Equality 2012; see also Hess 2012). Arguing that the murder “was [fueled] by hatred,” the magistrate, Raadiyah Wathen, in her sentencing of the men, pointed out that the small-framed Nkonyana “had posed no threat to the four accused” (Nombembe 2012). She was referring, of course, to the absence of any physical threat from the victim. And yet it is possible that Nkonyana posed

a different kind of threat to the girls who taunted her and men who murdered her: a psychosocial threat to their gender and sexual identities, including a form of hegemonic masculinity that is threatened by female homosexuality.

It is important also to situate this event and other murders and rapes of black lesbians in South Africa in a wider context. In contrast to the Penal Code of Malawi, the South African Constitution explicitly outlaws discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation in Chapter 2, the Bill of Rights. Section 9, subsection 3, states that both the state and the individual are prohibited from “unfairly discriminat[ing] directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.” The Constitution also called for the enactment of national legislation “to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination.” A number of court judgments have gone further and enhanced protections on the basis of sexual orientation. For example, the ruling in the case of *National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality and Another vs The Minister of Justice and Others* declared “the common law offence of sodomy . . . to be inconsistent with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 and invalid” (Constitutional Court of South Africa 1998:76). Legislation passed in compliance with the constitutional mandate includes the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair and Discrimination Act of 2000 and the Civil Union Act of 2006.

Given the protection offered by the law, Nkonyana’s murder shows that homophobia can come from “below,” from other persons, just as it can descend from state structures; it did not come down from the laws of the country (as in the case of Monjeza and Chimbalanga), but surged up from everyday life. Zethu Matebeni (2011:148) argues that “experiences of violence, torture and murder suggest that there is a strong disconnect between the ‘promise’ of a postapartheid South African Constitution (with all its rights and protections) and the experiences of black lesbians ‘supposedly’ protected by the same Constitution.” Violence against lesbians or women who are perceived as lesbians, along with violence against gay men and “sexual others,” is thus entangled with sexualized gender prejudice and hegemonic masculinity, fueled in part by cultural, religious, and social conservatism in regard to homosexuality and sexuality generally (see Reddy, Sandfort, & Rispel 2009). In many ways violence leveled at lesbians is similar to violence against heterosexual women (Matebeni 2011), as well as the sexual bullying, harassment, and unwanted advances that have reported in Nairobi, Malawi, Swaziland, South Africa, and elsewhere (see, e.g., Machera 2004; Haffajee 2012; Tenthani 2012; Timberg 2004). Homophobia, in conjunction with sexist gender power, is underpinned by direct and indirect violence as a central practice that girds ruling ideologies of manhood. Homophobia does not only imply heterosexism; homophobia and sexism, including violent sexism, are mutually constitutive.

Nkonyana's murder and the case in Khayelitsha attest to the need everywhere for an inclusive, human rights-affirming constitution and supporting laws against sexual and gender-based violence. Rarely do we hear about concerted efforts on the part of governments, political authorities, religious leaders, or culturally influential figures to protect women from harassment and danger. However, the criminal-judicial system on its own will not necessarily guarantee freedom and equality on the basis of gender or sexual orientation, just as legal remedies alone have not been able to provide perfect freedom to other historically excluded subjects such as children and the disabled. Additionally, no law can change the subjective feelings of oppression experienced by those regarded as inferior and "lesser than" others. Certainly, a change in law is necessary, but work is also required for individuals to be able to experience themselves as free and equal human beings. Programs against gender and sexual violence, while needing to recognize such violence as fundamentally a sociopolitical tactic for asserting and legitimating men's sexual and gender power, cannot fully overcome it on the basis of constitutional and legal change alone. They must also address the need for social-psychological transformation (see, e.g., Ratele, Shefer, & Botha 2011; Harrison 2009; Huisman 2006; IRIN 2006; Martin et al. 2009). Legal reform is necessary but not sufficient. Equally important is community education and mobilization around issues of sexuality and gender that will work to undo the discourse of homosexuality as an unAfrican, white, middle-class, and foreign importation.

### **Discoursing Natural African Heterosexuality**

Studies suggest that wherever females are perceived in law or according to custom as possessing lesser rights and freedoms than males, including sexual freedom, high levels of sexual objectification, sexual and gender violence, and HIV/AIDS are a likely result (Dunkle et al. 2004; Langen 2005). While the threat of rape and other forms of sexual and gender violence extend to all girls and women, it is often leveled specifically at lesbians, transgender women, and other queer subjects who "threaten" hegemonic masculinity.

It has been suggested that hegemonic African masculinity discourses may be implicated in antihomosexuality sentiments and the suppression of "unruly" women's and men's desires. One possible reason is that African hegemonic masculinity is always in a state of inherent uncertainty: that African men, especially young men, are always in a tenuous state of subjective subordination. Hegemonic African masculinity discourses are at once a comment about the sociopolitical powers of male heterosexual desire and the aspirations of hetero-masculine power. As a consequence, a "real" African man is heterosexual, and a "real" African woman is one who is sexually available to men. In this scheme, Nkonyana was not a "real" African woman, and Monjeza and Chimbalanga were the worst kind of Malawian sons, to paraphrase Magistrate Usiwa-Usiwa.

The discursive compulsion for African men (and women) to be heterosexual suggests that an element of anxiety underlies the discourse—an “unnaturalness” to the heterosexual identity itself, a lack of fixity, and a need to keep working at manhood and womanhood. If it has to be constantly defended, heterosexuality is not the natural order of things, and therefore is as much “unAfrican” as homosexuality is. This discourse of Africans as naturally *not* homosexual, as born heterosexuals, is then as fantastically strange as it is compelling, for it traces perceptions that turn around to shape reality. Homosexuality and non-heteronormative desires, practices, and relationships are relatively invisible in some parts of Africa not because these human inclinations are unAfrican, but because they are prohibited by society and legally criminalized.

Thus Nkonyana functioned as a displacement object for the untenability of the ruling discourse of gender, specifically men’s gender, in South Africa. In trying to understand her case, as well as the Malawian one, we are thus obliged to turn a light on heterosexual dominance and its reproduction. In spite of the South African Constitution’s affirmation of the right to one’s chosen sexual orientation, her freedom disturbed the prevailing sexual gender order. As Matebeni states, “lesbians are considered to be transgressing gender and sex norms, by presenting as butch or masculine . . . and [they disrupt] the sex/gender order by presenting a sexuality independent of men. Butch lesbians in particular are targeted because their visible masculinity disrupts the gender hierarchy by symbolically claiming male privilege” (2011:149). The young men and the women who argued with Nkonyana were not really arguing with her about which restroom she was supposed to use; they were conducting an internal argument about what it means to be masculine or feminine. And it is particularly young poor black men who are the most likely to resort to physical violence in an attempt to assert their gendered sexual power, in this case over the butch lesbian, but symbolically over all women. This argument in no way blames young men as the source of violence in South African society or suggests that they have an inborn propensity to violence. On the contrary, it points to the untenability of a hegemonic African masculinity. The levels of poverty and income inequality that exist in places like Malawi and South Africa (see Statistics South Africa 2008; UDESA 2009) mean that despite the cultural discourse of patriarchy, many men, specifically young men, are excluded. It is certainly relevant that compared to wealthier men, young black men from low-income neighborhoods in South Africa are at a much greater risk of dying from interpersonal violence (Ratele et al. 2011).

Although the notion of a national psychology should be deployed cautiously, it is certainly evident that Monjeza and Chimbalanga troubled Malawian society’s psychology—and not just its politics. It was their prohibited sexual desires that turned them into a spectacle and rendered them as “not men” and “not African,” although paradoxically this discursive expulsion was not only a condemnation but also an acknowledgment of their different masculinities. Even as they found themselves used as a distraction

from the failures of ruling men and ideologies of gender, their notoriety also confirmed their existence. The antipathy they experienced after the publication of their story became part of the public discourse that *produces* the homosexual as a problem for Malawi and perhaps for other parts of Africa as well.

The negative emotional reactions expressed about the couple are of course echoed in other homophobic narratives in other parts of Africa, often accompanied by overt aggression, which portray homosexuality not only as deviant, pathological, and sinful, but also as unAfrican, an alien practice, not part of Africa's cultures, and a Western phenomenon exported to the continent (see HRW 2004a; Machera 2004; Pattman & Chege 2003). Unless Africans are somehow a separate species, all permutations of male and female sexual practices that are found around the world should also exist in Africa. The meanings attached to sexual phenomena are likely to be different in different parts of the world and in different contexts. The crucial factor is that while different historical, political, and legal conditions and the resulting "vertical" or "horizontal" homophobic discourses bar certain forms of sexual and gender practices from showing themselves, there can be no firm grounds to claim or believe that some sexual and gender orientations that are expressible elsewhere are not naturally African.

## Conclusion

This article sought to show that attempts to apprehend homophobia in African countries are deepened if one understands its uses in defending the dominant form of heterosexual manhood in Africa. It suggests that persecution of, and violence against, gay and lesbians in Malawi and South Africa, as well as in other parts of Africa that have witnessed public acts of homophobia, can be seen as resulting from the untenability of the hegemonic discourses of Africanness and African masculinity. They also are entangled with failures of the ruling elite to fulfill the promises of socioeconomic development. Yet it must be acknowledged, for the well-being of the citizenry as well as the state, that multiple sexual and gender identities exist as much in Africa as they do elsewhere, and that homophobic discourses can no longer serve as a diversion from the failures of socioeconomic development.

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## Note

1. Some scholars (e.g., Donaldson 1993) argue that we should refer instead to "hegemonic masculinities" in acknowledgment of the fact that enactments of masculinity are too various and differentiated to be expressed in the singular.