



Safe Homes for African LGBTQ+ Youth: Resilience Personified

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A. SUMMARY

African Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth are disproportionately affected by the issue of homelessness. This disproportionate representation in relation to housing insecurity is rooted in sociocultural practices, the legal status of same sex relationships and identities throughout much of the continent, and the political economies of many African nations which often do not prioritise comprehensive public housing solutions, particularly in the more expensive urban areas. This exacerbation is particularly acute because countries tend to prioritise free market solutions over public goods solutions to housing. There is an overreliance on a commercial real estate market, and various different forms of real estate commodification and speculation are prioritised over investments that emphasise safe and secure housing as a right available to all citizens. Furthermore, social housing schemes often are ill equipped to engage with the numerous vulnerabilities that may be faced by African LGBTQ youth at the nexus of gender, sexuality, and economic insecurity that make them reluctant to engage existent social housing programmes. As a result, the provision of social housing for African LGBTQ youth is often rooted informally in social networks created by the LGBTQ community, or in the few LGBTQ oriented Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that work to provide housing support for LGBTQ Youth.

Socioculturally, there is often a great deal of discrimination against African LGBTQ Youth, even in countries that either do not explicitly criminalise

consensual same-sex relationships or (in the case of South Africa) countries that have legal protections for LGBTQ citizens. Families and local communities are often the site of forms of social exclusion and violence for African LGBTQ Youth. Another site of discrimination can also be the schools, where LGBTQ Youth are often unable to access the same educational opportunities due to social stigma. Lastly, the field of employment and housing provision provide another layer of discrimination, as LGBTQ Youth are often discriminated against when seeking employment or safe and secure housing. Several problems arise from these social forms of exclusion and discrimination. In the case of families, African LGBTQ Youth are disproportionately ostracised from kin support networks, and families which often are the sole provider of safe and secure housing for African LGBTQ Youth. When families withdraw their support due to their gender expression and/or sexuality, African LGBTQ Youth are often left homeless and housing insecure. Schools as an important site of discrimination reveals that African LGBTQ Youth often struggle to gain the necessary qualifications to compete in the local economies of their countries. They are more likely to not complete schooling or have the same educational success because of the institutional discrimination they face. Employers also discriminate against LGBTQ candidates, meaning that many African LGBTQ youth must earn money through informal and at times illicit economies through which they are often criminalised. Finally, landlords are also disproportionately discriminatory; they are less

likely to rent their properties to LGBTQ tenants. Importantly, the sociocultural context in many African nations means that families, school officials, employers, and landlords are all incentivised to either ignore LGBTQ discrimination or actively participate in it. That is families may feel societal pressure to disown and distance themselves from LGBTQ family members, employers may feel that their businesses will suffer if they have visible LGBTQ employees, and landlords may feel that the additional scrutiny that may occur as a result of LGBTQ tenants is simply not worth the trouble.

The legal situation in most African countries exacerbates the exclusions of social norms. There are no penalties in most African countries for discrimination against LGBTQ citizens, and even when such discrimination protections exist, redress through the legal system is often difficult to obtain or incomplete in nature if obtained. Ultimately, given the various different forms of criminalisation against LGBTQ people on the African continent families and institutions are incentivised to discriminate against African LGBTQ youth. Furthermore, social housing policy is often inadequate to address the needs of homeless youth in general and Homeless LGBTQ Youth more specifically.

Lastly, the political economy of most African states worsens the issues of housing insecurity for African LGBTQ Youth. As many studies have shown, youth unemployment/underemployment rates are high throughout the continent. For African LGBTQ Youth, it is suspected that these rates are even higher. This often means that when familial support is withdrawn there is little recourse for African LGBTQ Youth because they are often more likely excluded from the kinds of secure wages that would allow them to compete in a market rate real estate market. Additionally, the kinds of disinvestments in education and social welfare more generally (mostly as a result of neoliberal economic orthodoxy enforced by global institutions and donors) means that governments are often ill equipped to deal with the housing needs of their populations. Ultimately, the systems of

exclusions are reinforcing, discrimination and exclusion in one area is often reinforced with discrimination and exclusion in another.

Given the set of circumstances the work of informal networks of support become crucial to resolving the problem of housing insecurity for African LGBTQ Youth. These informal networks are examples of resilience demonstrated by African Youth. Yet they also provide crucial strategies to help those of us interested in resolving the problems of youth homelessness. By paying crucial attention to resolutions that African LGBTQ Youth create for themselves, we might better be able to serve them. And given the particular vulnerability of African LGBTQ to housing insecurity, strategies that address their exclusions would also be applicable to all African youth struggling with homelessness, and other vulnerable populations managing housing insecurity.

B. THE PROBLEM

The primary problem facing many African urban dwellers is a lack of safe and affordable housing. It is estimated that in sub-Saharan Africa 4.5 million people per year are added to the numbers of residents living in informal housing. Despite the notions of housing as a human right, and a number of UN Policy Directives aimed at addressing the projecting increases in housing insecurity due to increasing urban populations, there are still a number of barriers to providing sufficient enough housing for those who are poor. While traditional development goals emphasise market-based solutions for dealing with housing insecurity, several scholars have discussed the negative impacts of relying solely on market-based forces to create sufficient urban housing stock. This particular brief mirrors those concerns with an understanding that markets by their very nature have limits to the extent that profit motives constrain housing choices for the poorest and least economically resourced. In the case of South Africa, much of government housing has been privatised with uneven and mixed results.

On top of the general situation of a housing market skewed for the middle and upper classes, African youth face a particularly challenging housing market due to higher rates of unemployment and the fact that lacking seniority, they are often at the beginning of their careers and less economically resourced even when they are able to find steady employment. In the case of South Africa, unemployment remains high (about 36.3%) and it is understood that those numbers are skewed by race, class, gender, and age. Recent research has revealed that gender expression (particularly gender non-conforming expressions) and sexuality are also factors that skew job market participation. So severe is the problem of youth unemployment in South Africa that the government has created an acronym NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) to describe youth from 14 to 35 who are basically “idle” and non-participatory in formal economies and schooling. By the South African government's own estimates 31% of young people fall in this category and it is estimated that across the African continent numbers remain similar.

The true scope of housing insecurity for African LGBTQ Youth is unknown. Throughout much of the continent, collecting this data is extremely challenging due to a legal and social climate that at best permits discrimination against the community, and at its worst disenfranchises the community from the rights of citizenship. Even in countries that do not permit legal discrimination, data regarding Youth LGBTQ homelessness is difficult to assess due to social mores and attitudes. For example, in South Africa data regarding LGBTQ youth are limited. The few studies that exist regarding young LGBTQ communities in South Africa reveal the increased vulnerability of African LGBTQ youth to multiple forms of societal and state oppression and violence. A 2007 study by the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) showed that lesbian women faced twice the rate of violence compared to heterosexual women, 41% of Black lesbian women had experienced rape (an additional 9% had experienced attempted rape), 37% had been physically assaulted, and 17% had been verbally abused (Nel and Judge, 2008). Another Study by OUT South Africa (an LGBTQ Community

Organisation) which focused on the LGB population found 37% of respondents reporting verbal abuse with an additional 16% reporting physical abuse, and an additional 8% reporting sexual abuse.

Importantly, the home was identified as the fourth most common site of abuse and hence we can understand that many family homes are not sites of safety or security for young African LGBTQ populations. According to a 2016 survey by The Other Foundation 51% of South Africans believe that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, And Transgender (LGBT) South Africans should have the same rights as all South Africans. By a similar margin (52%) of South Africans agree that LGBT South Africans should be included in their cultures or traditions and 55% of South Africans would “accept” a gay or lesbian family member. While these rather progressive attitudes are to be lauded, it is clear that nearly half of South Africans retain attitudes and values that might make home life particularly challenging for a young LGBTQ person. Importantly, the same survey revealed that 72% of South Africans believe that same sex sexuality is wrong. These figures reveal that while societal attitudes toward the South African LGBT population are shifting, there is still a great deal of discriminatory attitudes that make this particular population vulnerable. Compounded with lack of educational opportunities and limited job prospects the precarity of African queer youth, particularly African queer youth of the lower classes, often means that these communities must create alternative familial structures of support and build new notions of home. One final problem, as I have alluded to throughout this brief is the paucity of research that specifically targets the issue of homelessness for African LGBTQ Youth. While homeless youth are more studied and LGBTQ Youth are also studied little research brings these two populations together.

C. RESEARCH FOCUS

In this brief, I examine LGBTQ community led practices of safe home provision. What I am interested in is that given the barriers to housing

security that exist, what solutions have people in the community created to address the problem? How might these solutions be expanded so that they are not ephemeral and piecemeal but instead can become more systemic and long lasting? Typically, safe homes are provided by more resourced members of the community who have the ability to host more precarious members for relatively short durations of time. Although it is important to note that some of these safe homes do at times become permanent homes, in general the spaces tend to be more transitional.

1. Nigeria

In September of 2020 *Dazed* magazine published a series of photographs of a Lagos queer safe house (House of Allure) taken by noted South African photographer Sabelo Mlangeni. Mlangeni detailed how he came to know about the safe house, how he gained trust with the community and how that trust led to the collaborative art project. What I would like to highlight here is the nature of risk and security that was omnipresent for the members of the house. Mlangeni details how the House of Allure offers the LGBTQ community a sober space, a space where they could be themselves without worrying about the outside world. The sense of freedom is palpable in these safe homes where the occupants describe that they do not have to hide themselves out of fear of public danger. Even still, there is danger in appearing in these public forums as openly LGBTQ. One of the house members asked about whether safe haven would be provided by South Africa if they were “kicked out” of the country because of the publicity created by the *Dazed* magazine appearance. Here, the emphasis is both the lack of safety and security that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) folks have to navigate in Nigeria as well as the constant sense that citizenship and the right to exist in Nigeria is precarious, it can always be taken away.

2. South Africa

In South Africa, there has also been some growth in the last 5 years to both informal safe houses (such as

the one discussed above in Nigeria) and more formalised forms of emergency housing provided by LGBT or other community service focused NGOs. Themba Lam', located in Manenberg, one of Cape Town's townships was an example of such a hybrid informal/NGO space that was started by a community member before ultimately being affiliated with a religious (ostensibly LGBTQ affirming) organisation. Here I highlight Themba Lam' because its existence reveals the forms of precarity that less resourced LGBTI South Africans (who are overwhelmingly Black) must navigate. As many commentators of LGBT life have noted, African LGBTQ life is often made worse by lack of income or access to resources. If an LGBTQ community member is affluent and gets kicked out of the house they would have access to resources, family, or friends that might keep them safe. But for the majority of African LGBTQ people this kind of financial security does not exist. Members of the safe house recount stories of being subjected to physical bodily harm as well as homelessness due to their sexuality or gender identity. They also describe the relief of being able to get a peaceful night of sleep or feel safe from bullying and intimidation for a change. The occupation of the high-end vacation rental by #WeSeeYou that I describe below should be read alongside the various different ways that members of Africa's queer communities have sought to care for each other in the midst of state and societal abandonment and persecution.

D. ADAPTATION SOLUTIONS

For the purposes of brevity as well as the fact that more research has been conducted on South Africa this brief will focus its solutions on South African case. In September of 2020, at the height of a number of vulnerabilities and displacements faced by African Queer youth in Cape Town #WeSeeYou, an activist (activist artist) collective of LGBTQ people of colour rented a high-end AirBnB in Cape Town's upscale Camp's Bay. Their intention was to overstay their original booking and illegally occupy the holiday accommodation to highlight the lack of safe

spaces, particularly stable accommodation for queer (particularly trans and gender non-conforming) youth of colour. Their refusal to leave was a protest, an act of defiance, and we could also argue a demonstration of resilience by African queer youth.

1. Gathering information

In the midst of an ongoing set of crises, a collective of African queer artists, mostly women and people of colour gathered together to think about the continuous problem of homelessness for African queer youth in Cape Town. It is important to note that the violence (both state and non-state) experienced by African queer youth is exacerbated by gender and gender non-conformity. Hence, within the LGBTQ community those who identify as women, gender-non-conforming, and trans bear a disproportionate amount of the experiences of exclusion. The collective went about their choice to occupy the home systemically, it took three or four months of research, organising and culture-building before the group booked the house through Airbnb with the intention of remaining and occupying it once the three-night stay they paid for was over. The group was also clear about the fact that they were responding to a long-term crisis of homelessness and precarity among African LGBTI youth but that COVID-19 and its economic shocks had crystallised the forms of inequality and created renewed crisis for the community.

Two of the leaders of the #WeSeeYou collective had offered their own rented home as a safe house for queer and trans youth in the Cape Town area, yet ultimately, they felt that they needed to offer a more engaged and spectacular critique of the continued negative conditions for African queer youth. Considering the spatial inequality of the city, the group members pointed out the hypocrisy of the fact that many homes on the same street that they booked the AirBnB sat empty. Their research revealed that while a crisis of homelessness exists, for most of the year these homes had nobody living in them. What they were asking of the state was what did it mean for it to be unfathomable to use existing infrastructure to accommodate and provide safe spaces for poor black

people, for women, for queers, for people who “do not belong” and have been seemingly abandoned by the state. Here the collective highlights the fact often discussed by homeless advocates that empty properties outnumber the number of houseless people. What did it mean for homes in white wealthy enclaves in Cape Town to sit empty while Black, poor, and queer youth lived itinerantly, 'couch surfing' from one location to another, sometimes sleeping in the streets?

2. Occupation of housing

Ultimately after receiving a great deal of media attention (much of it negative) the collective was faced with orders of eviction. Rather than face a 50,000 Rand fine and the possibility of criminal charges, the group left the home about three weeks after occupying it. Importantly, the group linked their fight for safe spaces (or safe homes) to other landless people's movements in South Africa that they stood in solidarity with. Hence, they made a connection between the struggle of queer youth and the larger struggles of the poor and working class in South Africa to remake an inequitable system inherited from colonialism and apartheid. As activists, it might also be useful to view their protest as a form of performance art. One that in the tradition of performance art uses public performance to stage interventive political conversations. Here, the #WeSeeYou collective were also hoping to rescript the language of occupation moving away from painting occupiers of land and housing advocates as dangerous and malicious, instead of simply being in need.

Certainly, part of the ethos of the group was invested in moving away from state reliance and demonstrating creative community-based solutions. Their protest was a clever way to normalise occupying and becoming less reliant on a state that was seeking to bide their time, that is captured by elite interests and thus is invested in keeping the wealthy comfortable and untouchable. For the collective, their protest was a way to destabilise that notion of untouchability, they dared

to “touch” the elite in a way that contravenes their sense of being above and beyond the everyday problems of the masses. There is a marriage of socioeconomic and sociocultural at play in their protest. The collective speaks not only about how the state does not serve the interests of the dispossessed but also how their queerness requires them to create alternative family structures of support. Here we can celebrate the resilience of queer community that provides for itself in the face of state and societal disinvestment. But we may also think about the protest and the creation of safe spaces as a form of resistance. For the group members, it was always about choosing which violence they were going to endure. They hoped that their protest sparked a conversation about what kind of country South Africa wanted to be, to mobilise communities for change. The point is that the contemporary political economy creates classes of people who are always unsafe while guaranteeing the safety of the elite. For them, this system does not work and must be dismantled while creating a vision of what a more equitable South African society might look like. In imagining this alternative political economy for South Africa, the collective is also pointing to a register of meaning beyond resilience, beyond response to crisis and instead imagining an alternative future that we might dub resistance.

3. Refusal of inadequate government support

Ultimately the city of Cape Town government did offer members of the collective an opportunity to engage in the bureaucratic process of applying for emergency housing as well as offering #WeSeeYou members land on city owned property in the Cape Flats (the peripheral township areas of Cape Town) and potential support with acquiring building materials for construction. The group rejected the ethos of this offer stating that the support offered by the City of Cape Town was space on a vacant piece of city owned property located in Phillipi. The government also offered support in the form of materials that may be used to erect a structure on this property. The group members rejected this offer because the Cape Flats and the areas on the periphery are spaces that have

been created by a violent and exclusionary system. They are not safe, nor dignified for anyone. The collective rejects the City of Cape Town offer, and in doing so they critique the system of apartheid spatiality that has continued unabated since 1994, particularly the current government's choice to not significantly alter the apartheid geography. Furthermore, the group insists that these spaces are in fact not safe for anyone, the particularity of their positionality notwithstanding.

E. FUTURE INVESTMENTS AND RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The policy recommendations and areas for additional research that come out of this brief for thinking through this issue are numerous and are delineated below.

First, as a precondition there needs to be across the African continent a decriminalisation of LGBTQ communities. It would also seem to follow that in particular countries, according to local human rights and LGBTQ rights groups it might also be helpful not only to decriminalise LGBTQ people but also to consider that they are a protected class that might be subject to expanded non-discrimination laws. The South African case reveals that such twin manoeuvres of decriminalisation and protection are not a panacea, but these changes to legal climate seem to empower communities to demand their full citizenship rights and in the process offer an opportunity for influencing exclusionary cultural norms that are as harmful to LGBTQ communities as politicised homophobia that often gets more media attention.

Secondly, there needs to be more research that specifically addresses African LGBTQ Youth and homelessness. There are obvious barriers to conducting this research, but it is difficult to address a problem when so little research exists that would allow for the problem to be addressed.

Third, communities often know how to address their own needs. Instead of top-down imposed solutions,

the research suggests more support for already existent community initiatives. For example, many of the informal houses highlighted here could be models for thinking through housing provision for vulnerable populations. Money given to administer complicated emergency housing schemes might better be dispersed to members of the community engaging in various different forms of mutual aid and support. At the very least the solutions developed from community should be central in whatever solutions government comes up with.

Fourth, there needs to be a recognition that youth homelessness might be compounded by issues of gender identity and/or sexuality. Hence, these aspects of lived experience need to be taken into account in any plan for government supported housing

programmes. Taking these issues into account would likely benefit not only the LGBTQ community but also women across the continent.

Fifth, this brief suggests that the problems of housing insecurity are not resolved by incentivising African housing markets to look more like those in the west (which is famous for its own housing affordability crises and homelessness) but rather through deliberate government policy that invests in affordable housing dispersed throughout the urban area. Public housing schemes should be connected to the resources that residents need to survive the city rather than placed in areas with few amenities, little access to public transportation, and remote to job and educational opportunities.

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