**////Title: Improving Religious Leaders’ Attitudes Towards LGBTQAI+ People in Kenya**

**////Standfirst:**

In many African countries, attitudes towards gender and sexual minorities are overwhelmingly negative. This could be partly due to religious norms and beliefs. However, empirical studies examining how religious leaders in Africa view such minority groups are still scarce. David Kuria Mbote of the Kuria Foundation for Social Enterprise and researchers from Saint Paul’s University in Kenya and institutes in the U.S. have been conducting research aimed at better understanding the attitudes of religious leaders in Kenya towards gay men, lesbian women, transgender people, and other marginalised groups.

**////Main text:**

Most African countries, including Kenya, are known to be far less accepting of LGBTQAI+ people than other nations. In many of these countries, religion is very pervasive, which could partly explain the widespread negative attitudes towards gender and sexual minorities.

Deeply rooted and rigid religious views are often associated with negative attitudes towards members of the LGBTQAI+ community. Moreover, past studies have consistently confirmed the huge role that religion plays in African societies, affecting almost every aspect of people’s lives.

So far, very few studies have specifically focused on the relationship between religious fundamentalism and attitudes of religious leaders in Africa towards LGBTQAI+ individuals. Mbote and his colleagues decided to fill this gap in our knowledge by investigating how religious leaders in Kenya perceive sexual and gender minorities.

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In one of his studies, published last year in the *Pastoral Psychology* journal, Mbote and his colleagues asked 113 religious leaders in Kenya to complete written questionnaires exploring their attitudes towards LGBTQAI+ people, who are marginalised in the country.

Participants for the training program were recruited from different bible schools, seminaries, and faculties of theology across Kenya, including from a list of theology graduates of St. Paul’s University. The questionnaire included questions that have already been used in many other past studies worldwide to explore attitudes towards gender variance, opinions about sexual minorities and the strength of religious beliefs.

The first set of questions was from the Intertextual Fundamentalism Scale – a survey developed in 2010 that measures religious fundamentalism. Another set of questions was from the Attitudes Towards Gender Variance Scale – a questionnaire that assesses how individuals feel about people with gender characteristics that do not fit heteronormative expectations.

The researchers also included some questions from the Sexual Minorities Scale, which is specifically used to assess attitudes towards gay men and lesbian women. Finally, they included some questions from the Bogardus Social Distance Scale, which assesses whether individuals distance themselves from specific minority groups, including gay men, lesbian women, and transgender persons.

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Upon analysing the data, Mbote and his colleagues found that male participants scored significantly higher in the religious fundamentalism scale than female religious leaders. In addition, they found that religious leaders who had completed a theological training program were more fundamentalist than those who did not, while married participants had stronger religious beliefs than unmarried ones.

Mbote and his team also found several correlations between their participants’ religious fundamentalism and their attitudes towards LGBTQAI+ people, as well as their need to place a social distance between themselves and such individuals. Overall, the researchers observed that the leaders’ acceptance of lesbian women, gay men, and gender diversity was low.

The participants said that they did not want to be in the proximity of any of the marginalised groups that the study focused on. They seemed to be most uncomfortable with gay men and least with transgender people.

Interestingly, the researchers observed that the higher the religious leaders scored in the questions that tested their religious fundamentalism, the more they seemed to be uncomfortable with gay men and lesbian women, and the more they socially distanced themselves from these two groups. In other words, their findings confirmed that religious fundamentalism significantly affected religious leaders’ attitudes towards differences in sexual orientation.

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In a paper published soon after, Mbote and other researchers at Saint Paul’s University and other institutes in the US reported the effects of a four-day training intervention on the attitudes of religious leaders towards gender and sexual minorities. The study participants were the same as those recruited for the previous study focusing on religious fundamentalism.

The religious leaders were asked to complete the same questionnaire used for the other study before they started the four-day training program, straight after they had finished the program, and again about four months later. In questionnaires completed after the training, participants were asked to share their opinions about the training sessions, while also answering the same questions they had previously answered about gender and sexual minority groups.

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The four-day intervention was designed to improve the religious leaders’ understanding of gender and sexual differences, thus reducing their tendency to distance themselves from lesbian women, gay men, transgender people, and other marginalised groups.

Remarkably, after they had taken part in the training course, many participants were significantly more open to gender and sexual differences, even several months after the program’s completion. Their acceptance of lesbian women and gay men had increased, while their attitudes towards gender and sexual differences were more positive.

In addition, Mbote and his colleagues found that men had changed their attitudes significantly more than women, especially if they had scored higher on the religious fundamentalism scale.

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These two studies shed some new light on the links between strong religious beliefs and attitudes towards gender and sexual differences. In addition, they suggest that religious leaders in Kenya and other African countries might be far less accepting of gender and sexual minorities than their counterparts in other countries due to a lack of exposure to these groups and a lack of opportunities to learn about them.

Mbote and his colleagues showed that a simple training intervention could lead to significantly positive changes in the ways that religious leaders perceived gay men, lesbian women, transgender people, and other marginalised groups, regardless of how strong their religious beliefs were. In the future, these findings could inspire the development of new programs aimed at educating religious leaders about the LGBTQAI+ community.

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This SciPod is a summary of the papers ‘Religious Fundamentalism and Attitudes towards Sexual and Gender Minorities and Other Marginalized Groups among Religious Leaders in Kenya’, in Pastoral Psychology, 2021, and ‘Facing Our Fears: The Impact of a 4-Day Training Intervention to Reduce Negative Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Minorities among Religious Leaders in Kenya’, in the *Journal of Sex Research*, 2021.

For further information, you can connect with David Kuria Mbote at [atiriri@gmail.com](mailto:atiriri@gmail.com)