

LGBTIQ+ activism and *Solidarity in Action*.

Interview with Human Rights Defender and Activist Njeri Gateru by Mariel Reiss

In this interview with human rights defender and activist Njeri Gateru, the concept of solidarity is explored by understanding it as solidarity in action. Recent developments in Kenya are highlighted relating to the so-called Family Protection Bill that severely endangers LGBTIQ+ lives. The way solidarity and activism are intertwined is also discussed.

Introduction¹

We are recording this interview about two weeks after a landmark ruling by the Supreme Court of Kenya on the registration of NGLHRC², the organization Njeri is the executive director of³. A years-long struggle finally led to official registration in 2019 – only to be contested again in 2023. This is not happening in isolation, it is part of a tug of war involving the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and ‘other’ non-hetero/non-cis-gendered persons in Kenya. Demonstrations against the basic human rights and existence of LGBTIQ+/non-hetero/non-cis-gendered persons are carried out in the streets of Mombasa by an unholy alliance of politicians and church leaders coming from different religious backgrounds. These demonstrations take place in response to the impending introduction of the ‘Family Protection Bill’ in the Kenyan Parliament. This bill, which has so far not been tabled in Parliament, would considerably impact the LGBTIQ+ community and exacerbate the already harsh colonial legacy laws which criminalize same sex sexual conduct between consenting adults⁴. So, any discussion about solidarity has to unequivocally address these implications for lived realities and should not remain in the realm of a theoretical and academic setting. Can an academic setting, such as the *Freiburger Zeitschrift für GeschlechterStudien*, provide an adequate space for reflection? We believe it can. Thus, this interview sheds light on these dynamics and contestations in an explicitly academic setting – with many brilliant theoretical (and empirical) contributions and we are very thankful to the editors and publishers for providing the space to do so. This interview is part of a longer on-going conversation between the two of us around creating spaces for exchanges between academics and activists, which involves issues such as research praxis, intersectional and international solidarity, and collaborative efforts.

Interview with Njeri Gateru

Mariel Reiss: What does solidarity mean to you personally and in your work with the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission?

Njeri Gateru: I am not sure if I have adequate words to explain explicitly what solidarity means. I would rather speak about it as solidarity in action. In my view, solidarity manifests itself deliberately. That means deliberate support for a cause or for specific issues, I guess even persons who one is not necessarily affected by. The distinction between solidarity and showing up in activism, if you like, is that in the latter case one belongs to a group and is directly affected by a specific issue. But solidarity relates to an issue that you are not necessarily affected by, but is necessary for your own worldview or your own understanding of where issues need to be placed.

Mariel Reiss: And what is at stake exactly when you talk about solidarity in action and activism. Who does this involve? Who are the people, the communities, the organizations that you are thinking about?

Njeri Gateru: The disclaimer at that point is that I'm an activist, a human rights defender more specifically. I may have a very specific way of looking at things when I think about solidarity. In my perspective, there is a primary line and there is a kind of rudimentary organization concerning what the basic issues are and what the basic reactions to them may be. I don't think of solidarity as being, if I might use the word, the first line of defense. Rather, I think of solidarity specifically as support that comes after or alongside efforts around a specific issue.

Mariel Reiss: Do you mean a certain underlying logic that is woven into cooperation or interactions? I do not want to sound too formal, but perhaps a kind of interaction rather than, as you mentioned, a sort of formal line of response.

Njeri Gateru: I'm not quite sure. When I picture solidarity, I picture a situation where people or institutions who are seen as acting in solidarity are obviously not the primary people engaged in an issue or a situation, but are secondarily involved. And I think what makes it (count as) solidarity is that intention to align oneself, to be adjacent to an issue, to a cause or to a specific kind of remedy or a specific way of pushing back. That is what is really the key thing. Within the ways that we think about solidarity, there are a number of missing pieces. When I think about solidarity, usually, I think about it as rather passive and not necessarily involving engagement in action that could easily be attributed to a certain thing. Let me give you an example: a Kenyan person's solidarity with the Ukraine. Generally, the war with Russia is very distant for someone living in Kenya. Right? Particularly not just for anyone in Kenya, but for a queer activist in Kenya. It seems to be very remote. Nonetheless, solidarity in my view means, first, learning about what is happening and what is at stake. Secondly, it includes wanting to find out

how useful I could be in a specific situation. Altruistic. This may be the word that I need to use. Solidarity has presented itself to me as being very altruistic in that there is not necessarily a direct benefit to me, but this is the thing that matters and therefore this is the thing that I will engage in.

Mariel Reiss: So this includes a sense of empathy, doesn't it? You need to have empathy first to some extent, before you can learn about the other person's situation in order to show solidarity. And that might include action. Nevertheless, solidarity also might manifest itself in thoughts only, right? It would not necessarily always entail action. What's your view on this?

Njeri Gateru: I completely agree. It is empathy that is the key ingredient. There are so many things that are happening in the world. And I think there is a need for us to have that connection. In my view, empathy is that connector. If there is a certain identification with an issue or I feel a specific way about an issue, the action comes from there.

Mariel Reiss: And how does intersectional solidarity relate to all of that? Solidarity also regarding the sexual orientation or gender identity of a person, for example. Specifically, in the case of people who are not in the community, to bridge this gap and have a role in allyship. This is what I understood from what you have said earlier in cases when it is not the person's lived reality. In your view and in your work, what is the specific aspect in the solidarity with the queer, with the LGBTIQ+ community?

Njeri Gateru: I think there are a number of aspects. Particularly with regard to direct solidarity: that one does not need to be individually affected by a situation to lend one's voice or to be intentional about helping with a specific issue. In fact, from what I've seen and what has been my experience, the voices that are most listened to are precisely the voices that are not necessarily directly affected by the issue. In my country Kenya, for example, people will possibly listen to straight people, straight people of age, straight people who have standing in their community. That means that they are probably married and have kids and so on and so forth. Hence, we are not connecting because our situations are comparable. No, I think the connection for me needs to be that we understand. And one does not need to understand all of it. You just need to understand what the key issue is. From that, we can build the connection in ways that you can digest, in ways that make sense for that person. That is how I have seen it work in my country. Moreover, I do not think that, because we suffer for the same reason, we are automatically in solidarity. People need to be very conscious about recognizing that solidarity requires a specific point of cohesion. Solidarity requires a specific gathering point, if you will. But that does not do away with who we as individuals are and all other underlying factors. Take the example of how Kenya is now battling with a potential anti-homosexuality bill. People would imagine that everyone who might be affected by an anti-homosexuality bill would be anyone who is LGBTIQ themselves or anyone who loves anyone who is LGBTIQ. All of those things would necessitate us to gather

and figure out a way forward. But the truth is, that the central aspect of the pain caused by, in this example, the anti-homosexuality bill, will not affect us equally. The person who acts from a position of power and privilege would probably be able to survive its effects and does not need to concern themselves too much about a bill like this. In turn, activists like us who live this in our lives are utterly scared and are trying to do our best and trying to push back in all possible ways that we can. Furthermore, the situation might be different for another person who can get away from a situation – although I hesitate using the word ‘get away’. Put differently: for a person who can perform a life, even though that life is a queer life, so long as it is perceived differently. For example, a person who is bisexual, but fits into the mold of what the societal expectations are, would understand what this bill would mean for them. They might also be very aware that the bill might not be helpful, but, most importantly, it might not deeply affect them, given that they are in a space where they are performing an acceptable being. So, as an activist, this is a really jumbled and weird place to be in.

Mariei Reiss: Thanks for sharing that. Allow me one last question. You just shed some light on the current situation in Kenya. It seems that there is a push and pull in both directions. On the one hand, your organization enjoyed a big win recently [The NGLHR’s right to association was upheld by Kenya’s Supreme Court, see intro]. On the other hand, there is the anti-homosexuality bill that is currently being debated. With regards to this difficult and contested space, what does international solidarity mean for the community and for organizing? In other words: What role does international solidarity, transnational continental solidarity mean for activism?

Njeri Gateru: I like that question, although it is quite difficult and complex to answer. Let me try to put it like this: I’m a big proponent of people trying to understand what the issue is and trying to imagine possible ways of how they could be useful. Once that has been imagined, they can reach out to the activist community to create a link. Let’s say, for example, I have a link to this person who is head of policy at the World Bank. And if you think they might be useful in a specific case, it is valuable to try to create a link to the activist community by offering an introduction or a certain engagement in a matter. That’s one of the things that would be my ideal situation. If we stay in spaces in which I do not know your entire circle of influence, I cannot comprehensively imagine the most useful ways that you could participate in a situation. That makes it a bit more challenging to me. Generally, I think it is important to stay vigilant about what the issue precisely is. This might be difficult, as issues fall and issues might morph. Take, for example, the emerging anti-homosexuality movement in Mombasa. Suddenly, there is not only this movement, but also a public debate about a bill to be tabled in Parliament. So, I think it is important to stay consistently vigilant about what the issues would be and how they might evolve.

Secondly, in my view, it is paramount to stay firmly connected to the ground and to the activists in order to ensure that our actions are bounced back to the people who are most affected. Therefore, the action that we take or the action that we plan to take

must always be informed by the needs on the ground, enjoying the buy-in of the community that we are seeking to protect.

Finally, there is the issue of connection. I feel like we often forget the roles that we play as human beings and our positioning as human beings. Therefore, the role or connector is often forgotten. Let's take an example; there is a colleague who is constantly reaching out to us and saying "oh, how can I help?". And this colleague does not even know that their best friend is a Tech Guru and thus would actually be the best person to help. I think that we need to really take seriously our roles as connectors. And I say that as a person who has worked in activism for the last thirteen years. The formal bits of activism are grand and they are wonderful but I think some of the most impactful work that I've been able to do has been leveraged on social capital and social connections. "I have seen you struggle with this, and I know someone who might help." That someone ends up being someone who has a specific idea and another person who has a friend who might possibly have a link to fund that idea. Do you know what I mean? I do not want us to deny our energy and potential around some things that we already possess.

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Anmerkungen

- 1 Transcription and Editing: Golschied Rahmani.
- 2 Njeri Gateru is a founding member and the Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission in Kenya (NGLHRC), an organization that provides legal aid and engages in strategic litigation for equal rights and protection of LGBTIQ+ persons.
- 3 <https://www.galck.org/statements/press-statement-on-the-supreme-court-judgment-on-the-freedom-of-association-of-lgbtq+/83>
- 4 Orango, Nicholas Wasonga, Siri Gloppen, and Matthew Gichohi. 2022. 'Queer Lawfare in Kenya: Shifting Opportunities for Rights Realisation'. In *Queer Lawfare in Africa: Legal Strategies in Contexts of LGBTIQ+ Criminalisation*, edited by Adrian Jjuuko, Siri Gloppen, Alan Msosa, and Frans Viljoen, 107–43. Pretoria: Pretoria University Law Press.