



ACACIA-LGBTQI+ and Street-level bureaucrats: Assessing Motives, Violence and Possibilities for Collective Advocacy in East Africa

Principal Investigator:

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International partners:

The Voice (an NGO in Malawi), The Queer Security Network (Emil Edinborg, Stockholm University).

National laws in Sub-Saharan Africa do not tell us what is happening on the ground. In most Sub-Saharan African countries, formal laws threaten long prison terms for LGBTQI+ persons, but in practice this rarely happens. How local authorities make informal decisions is a major factor in the well-being of stigmatized groups around the world. Surprisingly, little is known about how and why these actors interact at the street level.

ACACIA examines the everyday interactions between LGBTQI+ persons and local authorities in three urban and peri-urban areas in Africa (Lilongwe, Malawi; Cape Coast Region, Ghana, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania). We ask: 1) How, when and why do local-level authorities diverge from formal rules when dealing with gender and sexually diverse (GSD) persons, and what are the motives and logics behind these practices (including violence and predation)? Using David Graeber's (2012) theory that bureaucrats use violence

to avoid having to interpret those demanding alternate conceptual schemas, we ask: 2) what are the reasons why local bureaucrats are not willing to undertake interpretation of GSD persons? Is violence part of the interpretation and if so, how to theorize this violence? 3) In what ways do the practices of local authorities impact NCGSs' capacities for self-advocacy?

To answer these questions we draw on our data: roughly 350 qualitative interviews with GSD persons, NGO staff members, police and local authorities. This project contributes to the existing research knowledge on this topic by refining the theoretical concepts of violence (Stark 2025), 'knowability' (Stark et. al. 2026), and visibility management (Stark et. al., submitted for review).

Our international partners are the NGO *The Voice* (in Malawi), and the *Queer (In)Security Network* (Emil Edinborg, Stockholm University). The leader of the *The Voice* (formerly co-founder of the NGO LITE) has much experience in advocating for LGBTQI+ rights. We have invited him to talk at our project conference in June 2026. With these partners, we will map out how to go forward with this topic after the project has ended.

The project will give clear policy recommendations.

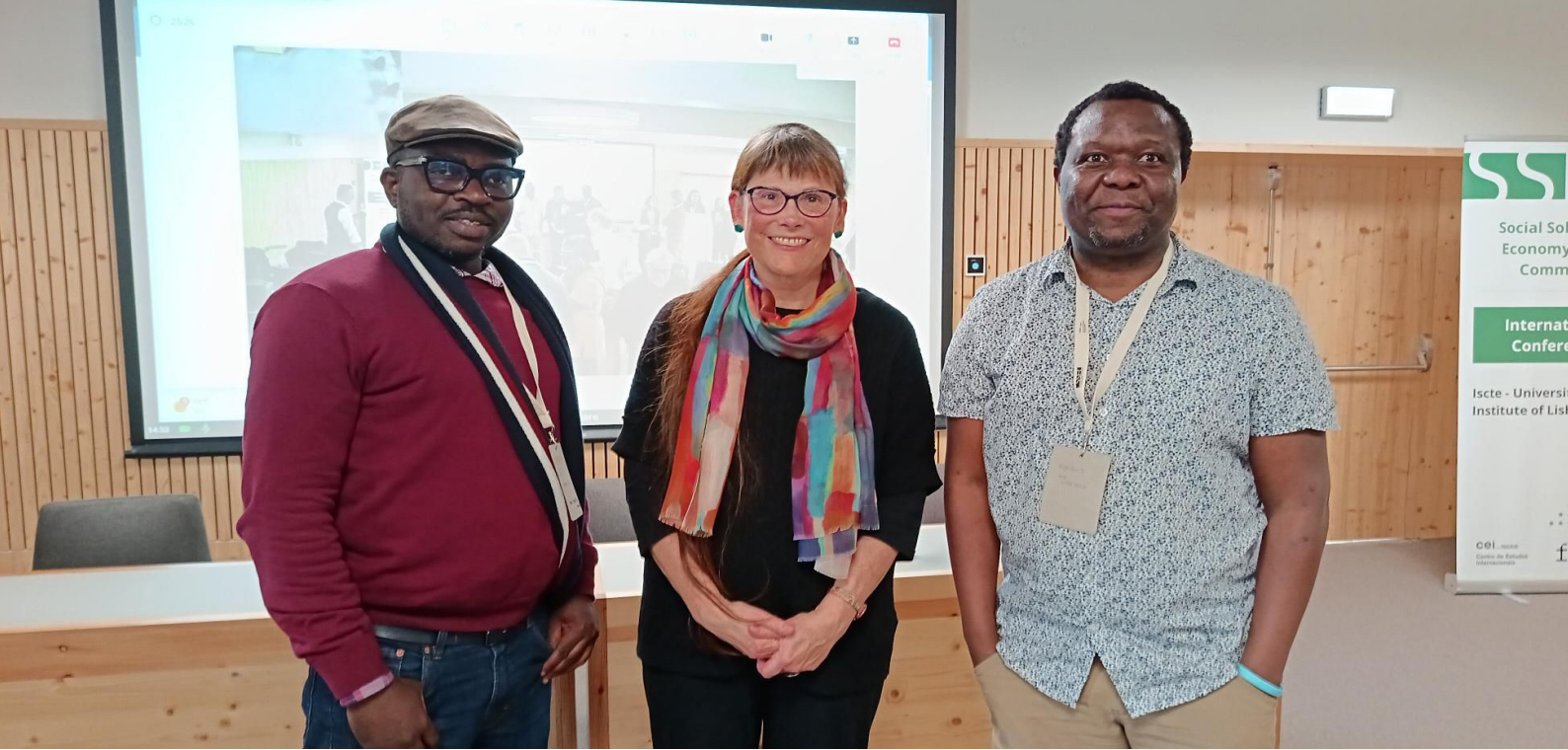


Photo of project team at conference Social Solidarity Economy & The Commons, Lisbon, 2025

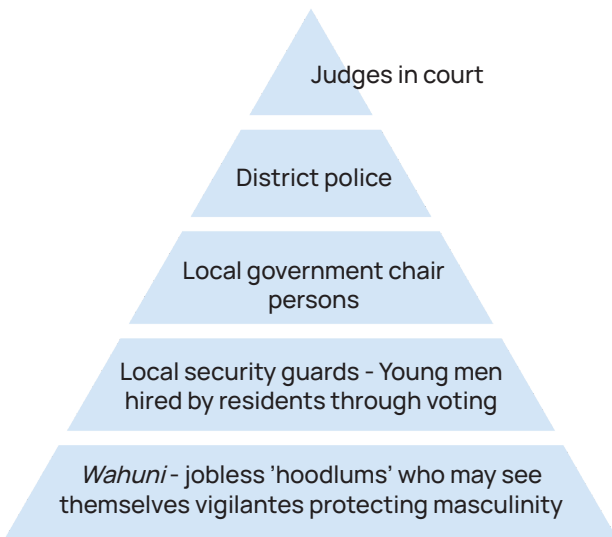


Figure 1. Security actors in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania who deal with non-conforming genders and genders and sexual ranked by authority and social status.

References

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