

Anna Hörter

Game of Tropes: The Strategic Use of Anti- Gender Narratives in Kenya

Anna Hörter

Former Research Assistant with Megatrends Afrika at SWP

[LinkedIn](#)

Executive Summary

Anti-gender narratives are a key part of the backlash against gender equality. In Kenya's online media, they are used to advocate for traditional values and exploit post-colonial sentiments. This limits women's and LGBTQIA+ people's political involvement and promotes patriarchal and anti-Western views. This policy brief examines how Kenyan politicians use these narratives to further their political interests and consolidate power. They also use them for identity formation and to signal international alignment. Anti-gender narratives link Kenya with like-minded partners, including regional neighbours and a global conservative movement that opposes gender equality and features right-wing parties, religious groups, and states such as Russia. Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy and Feminist Development Policy should craft dedicated strategies that address how the digital world affects the quality of democracy.¹

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Introduction

In 2023, Kenya's Supreme Court allowed the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC) to officially register as a rights organization, sparking widespread public discussion and outrage in the country. It was a significant legislative victory that also marked an increase in hostilities towards the LGBTQIA+ community. This growing contestation hits the country at a decisive moment for gender equality. More and more women have been elected to parliament over the past 20 years. In 2023, the number of female MPs stood at 23.3 per cent, a figure that has stagnated since 2018. Compared to its regional neighbours, Kenya has been considered relatively safe for queer communities. Even though same-sex relationships are criminalized there, many citizens from the surrounding region have fled to Kenya in the hope of a safer future. With a new Family Protection Bill under discussion, these hopes are turning into fear. The bill further criminalizes same-sex acts – up to the death penalty.

Across Kenya, the number of gender-related crimes is rising and activists are reporting an increase in public hostilities and security risks.² The national gender-based violence (GBV) crisis, which former President Uhuru Kenyatta once promised to end by 2026, persists. One in three Kenyan women experience physical violence. Just between January and March 2024, the government recorded 60 femicides, a severe spike that drew public outrage and protests.³

Two worlds are currently colliding in Kenya. The progress on gender equality also drew those to the fore who opposed it: more conservative-leaning actors who want to keep the societal order as it was. Internationally, this is a well-researched phenomenon. Successes of one social movement (pro-gender) leads to the creation and pushback by a counter-movement (anti-gender). The fight over who has the upper hand is amplified online – increasing the overall contestation around these issues in the public discourse.

This makes Kenya an interesting case study for the general rise of anti-gender narratives. These are a form of symbolic violence that not only harm individuals, but also undermine their democratic participation. When public figures use anti-gender narratives strategically, they magnify existing biases towards women and queer individuals. Marginalized groups are made to feel unsafe and their voices are deemed to lack credibility in political discourse. It is a reciprocal relationship that entrenches asymmetric power relations in society and politics by silencing women and queer individuals.

Due to advanced digitalization, the spread of anti-gender narratives is increasing in Kenya. Social media in particular has witnessed a rise in so-called technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), which are violent acts driven by misogyny, hate speech, and sexism that rely on various digital tools.⁴ The normalized abuse online also lowers the barrier for physical abuse and vice versa. Perpetrators threaten rape or share intimate images without consent. The lines between the on- and offline worlds blur. Increasingly,

² Jackson Ambole, “Displaced Twice: Gay Ugandans on the Run Face Upheaval in Kenya”, *Al Jazeera*, 29 March 2023.

³ Mercy Juma and Anthony Irungu, “Kenya Femicide: Hundreds Protest at Violence against Women”, *BBC*, 27 January 2024; Tom Odula, “Kenyan Activists Are on a Mission to End Gender-Based Violence as Attacks on Women Surge”, *AP News*, 9 March 2024; Saskia Brechenmacher and Fancesca Nyakora, “Kenyan Women Are Pushing for Action on Femicide: They Have a Road Map”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (blog), 12 February 2024.

⁴ The Global Partnership, “Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: Preliminary Landscape Analysis”, 2023; Kristina Wilfore, “Security, Misogyny, and Disinformation Undermining Women's Leadership”, in *Gender and Security in Digital Space: Navigating Access, Harassment, and Disinformation*, ed. Gulizar Hacıyakupoglu and Yasmine Wong (London, 2023), 124–142.

TFGBV attacks also involve disinformation. As this policy brief shows, actors link anti-gender narratives to the assertion that queerness and rights are Western constructs and neo-colonial impositions. They reject feminism and queerness in the name of national self-assertion and sovereignty.

All in all, this is a challenge for President William Ruto, who has to satisfy both the gender advocates and the conservatives – as well as his international partners. Upon taking office, his government was initially expected to take a tough stance on gender and queer rights – a position supported by many of the country’s Christian and Muslim constituencies. Major events such as the NGLHRC decision and the Family Protection Bill have since showcased how the country’s government and important public figures are navigating this contested issue. This analysis shows that Kenyan politicians are using anti-gender narratives strategically to further their political interests and consolidate power: They deflect public pressure and criticism by strengthening public support and identity formation, bolstering domestic opposition to gender equality, while signalling alignment with like-minded international partners.

This research investigates the role of anti-gender narratives in Kenya’s online media discourses, including social media. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the author conducted a qualitative content analysis of 15 studies on online disinformation campaigns and TFGBV from 2017 to 2024 as well as a series of journal articles and online news coverage around key events and actors (see [Annex](#)). Findings were corroborated through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including policymakers, local activists, and media experts.

Anti-Gender Narratives in the Kenyan Media

Although weaponizing gender for political gain is not a new tactic, digital platforms have made it far more effective. With their propensity to push polarizing and sensationalist content, algorithms tend to amplify anti-gender messaging – and more and more Kenyans are reading them on their news feeds: In 2022, 51 per cent said that they consumed news online, even though radio and television remain popular. After traditional media lost public trust with its pre-approved coverage during the 2007 post-election violence, blogs and social media platforms became central to Kenya’s public discourse.⁵ Social media today is integral to political participation, with 23.5 per cent of the population regularly using these platforms.⁶

Anti-gender narratives build on social prejudices, cultural and religious beliefs, or conspiracy theories, and they create familiar and recurring storylines that reinforce a belief in the patriarchal order. It is a technique that makes it more likely that individuals will share them with others. The narratives have a longer lifespan, thereby potentially shaping public opinion.

In this digital landscape, women and queer individuals frequently encounter hostility and harassment. Popular Kenyan influencers such as Andrew Kibe and Eric Amunga promote misogynistic and derogatory rhetoric and perpetuate hate speech, identity-based attacks, and disinformation. They exert great influence within the “manosphere” – a loose network of online users and online culture figures who rally around anti-queer and anti-feminist views.

The consequences are severe. Data from the Gender Violence Recovery Centre reveals that 39–47 per cent of Kenyan female internet users have experienced TFGBV, including cyberstalking, doxing,⁷ revenge porn,⁸ and hate speech.⁹ In 2024, UNFPA Kenya found that 90 per cent of university students witnessed such violence, and 39 per cent experience it personally. Biased reporting and victim-shaming compound these digital assaults, while survivors are blamed and perpetrators are glorified.¹⁰

Since the 2017 elections, reports of false and misleading information online have increased significantly. Over the years, the country has developed a sophisticated disinformation marketplace with influencers for hire. Politicians – and sometimes foreign NGOs¹¹ – enlist their services regularly for elections and key events. The “keyboard warriors” craft disinformation campaigns out of specific narratives to simulate grassroots support, discredit opposing views, and/or spread hate speech. Given the high youth unemployment rates and widespread internet access, such employment presents a lucrative opportunity

⁵ Nanjala Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era Is Transforming Politics in Kenya*, African Arguments (London: Zed, 2018); Grace Brenda W. Okoth, “How Kenyans on Twitter Use Visuals as a Form of Political Protest”, *Kommunikation.Medien*, no. 12 (2020).

⁶ Simon Kemp, “Digital 2024: Kenya”, *DataReportal – Global Digital Insights*, 23 February 2024.

⁷ Doxing describes the non-consensual public sharing of personal information to intimidate and/or harass an individual.

⁸ Revenge porn describes the distribution of (artificial) intimate or sexually explicit imagery of an individual without their consent and with harmful intent.

⁹ Cecilia Maundu, “Addressing Online Violence Is Key to Bridging the Digital Divide in Kenya”, *Nation*, 7 March 2023.

¹⁰ UNFPA Kenya, “Rapid Study on Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) in Kenya’s Higher Learning Institutions”, (Nairobi: UNFPA Kenya, 3 April 2024).

¹¹ Odanga Madung, “Exporting Disinformation: How Foreign Groups Peddle Influence in Kenya through Twitter” (Mozilla Foundation, 2021).

for young influencers.¹² They earn their livelihoods by operating various accounts simultaneously and coordinate through platforms such as WhatsApp, where they synchronize and time their messages with the goal of tampering with the country's news cycle by manipulating what goes viral.¹³

Online media outlets also spread anti-gender narratives. The Media Council of Kenya, an independent oversight body, called out biased reporting of GBV, saying the coverage remained "insensitive, lacking in depth and seems not prioritized by mainstream media as it is with digital platforms".¹⁴ GBV reporting frequently used inappropriate language and often failed to follow up on reported cases, thereby inadequately addressing the true scale of the issue. The Council notes its surveys showed that the public reaction to GBV reporting during the pandemic had become increasingly mixed, with many respondents indicating less support for victims. Covering the spike of femicides in 2023 and 2024, some media outlets were accused of publishing inaccurate, insensitive, and sensationalist content.¹⁵

¹² KICTANet and CIPESA, "Disinformation in Kenya's Political Sphere: Actors, Pathways and Effects", June 2022; Odanga Madung and Brian Obilo, "Inside the Shadowy World of Disinformation for Hire in Kenya" (Mozilla Foundation, 2 September 2021).

¹³ Madung and Obilo, "Inside the Shadowy World of Disinformation for Hire in Kenya".

¹⁴ Media Council of Kenya, "Media Coverage of Gender-Based Violence during the Covid-19 Period", V, accessed 24 June 2024.

¹⁵ Ibid.; Media Council of Kenya, "An Analytical Overview of Femicide Reporting in Kenya. January 1st to January 31st, 2024", 2024.

The Game of Tropes in Kenyan Politics

Gender-based attacks in Kenya hinge on the non-conformity of women and LGBTQIA+ people with so-called traditional values, and perpetrators criticize anyone who moves outside these normative margins: women running for office, media professionals, content creators, activists.¹⁶ The very act of being in the public eye contradicts the expectation that women should stay in the background while men take the limelight – and thus, high visibility often provokes attacks. The same happens when crimes against women and queer individuals gain widespread public attention, such as the murder of gay activist Edwin Chiloba and the series of femicides in 2023 and 2024. Such events are tipping points that expose deeply held beliefs about gender identities and roles in society.

Indeed, many view leadership and having a public presence as male domains, reinforcing the barriers to women and other marginalized genders who wish to participate politically. Women, they believe, are inherently unfit for political roles. Attackers often shift the focus from women's professional abilities to their personal lives, subjecting them to personal and image-based attacks, particularly those that sexualize or criticize their physical appearance. Common attacks include warnings that entering politics will lead to prostitution. Others seek to undermine a woman's credibility and dignity by focussing on her marital status, accusing her of infidelity, and questioning her femininity and morality.

In some cases, perpetrators accuse women of being trans to explain away or delegitimize their presence in traditionally male-dominated spaces. Women with leadership roles and skills, it is suggested, must be men in disguise. In 2018, when a tweet by Senator Susan Kihika calling for more active engagement in civil society drew public criticism, Kenyans on Twitter/X asked her to prove that she was not a man by publishing nude photos.¹⁷

Queer communities face similar narratives that seek to justify the discrimination, political homophobia, and violence directed towards them. In 2023, the former governor of Nairobi, Mike Sonko, offered money to journalists for videos in which they would attack queer individuals¹⁸ – an example of TFGBV inciting offline violence. Queerness is portrayed as immoral, unnatural, and being in opposition to religious beliefs. A tweet cited in Kaigwa et al. (2024), for example, shows the extent of this sentiment: “gay people in Kenya should be made to feel like they do not belong [...] they should be made to feel less human.”¹⁹ Other attacks use the accusation of being queer to discredit someone or to out them involuntarily.

At the same time, these narratives communicate a substantial amount of disinformation. Identity-based attacks target female politicians and gender-progressive activists alleging corruption, infidelity, and also provide false information regarding their sexual identities. Health disinformation is another significant component, with campaigns spreading false claims about sexual and reproductive health. When bills on surrogacy and abortion were

¹⁶ The present findings are the product of a qualitative content analysis that the author conducted relying on Atlas.ti. A list of the analysed documents, a corpus totalling 67 reports, studies, and media articles, is enclosed in the Annex. The author developed a multi-level system of categories, both deductive analytic codes (i.e. “TFGBV”, “Actor” or “Event”) and inductive thematic codes (such as “Narrative: Queerness is immoral”). The coding process relied on an interpretative act on behalf of the author relating text segments to these categories.

¹⁷ Arthur Kakande et al., “Byte Bullies: A Report on Online Violence Against Women in the 2022 Kenya General Election” (Pollicy, 2023).

¹⁸ Jeffrey Walimbwa et al., “Political Homophobia and the Effect on GBMSM Programmes in Kenya: The Significance of a Community-Led Rapid Agency Assessment”, *Global Public Health* 18, no. 1 (2023): 1–4.

¹⁹ Maik Kaigwa et al., “Dada Disinfo: A Report on Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Kenya”, p. 45 (Nendo and Pollicy, 2024).

under discussion in 2020 and 2021, a campaign alleged that children born via surrogacy have behavioural problems or that surrogacy equates to child trafficking.²⁰

This growing contestation and hostility towards non-conforming citizens not only affect individual lives, but also provide the basis for an increasingly strategic use of anti-gender narratives in Kenyan politics. These narratives serve three functions: (1) leveraging social debates to maintain the status quo and strategically divert attention from political failures; (2) contributing to identity formation using an “us versus them” framing; (3) signalling international alignment with anti-gender partners.

Strategic Use 1: Steering Public Attention to Secure Power

Firstly, fabricating public support has a long history in Kenya. Previously, politicians paid citizens to show support at their rallies, a practice that is now extended online. Although several measures to combat Kenya’s information disorder were put in place,²¹ politicians themselves frequently use disinformation campaigns to manipulating the political discourse. It is an essential part of a political campaign to recruit influencers, content creators, and group administrators on WhatsApp and Facebook to amplify their own messages and even spread disinformation. In this, political campaigns are known to use hate speech, incendiary rhetoric, and character assassination as tactics. This is especially worrying as a regional study has found that male parliamentarians, particularly from opposing parties, are the main perpetrators of (TF)GBV against female parliamentarians. In 2022, an election observation mission reported that female candidates faced harassment online and on the campaign trail. Opponents and their supporters often subjected them to verbal abuse and acts of physical violence.²²

Since COVID-19, there has also been a notable increase in political homophobia, with the government using anti-homosexual rhetoric. President Ruto has criticized queer rights and the NGLHRC decision and promoted traditional values with the support of religious leaders. Political homophobia is bipartisan, with prominent figures such as former Second Lady Pastor Dorcas Gachagua, opposition politician Peter Kaluma, and former Nairobi Governor Sonko vocally opposing LGBTQIA+ rights. Sonko, for example, is a controversial figure in Kenyan politics who had long eyed a political comeback after his impeachment in 2020. Known for his populist rhetoric, which sought to distract from his legal troubles regarding drug trafficking and corruption, he gained support from young and low-income voters.²³

What is more, religious actors, both Christian and Muslim, are also prominent voices against queer rights and progressive gender policies. As a predominantly Christian country, evangelical Christianity and Pentecostalism hold substantial sway. Pastors have significant influence over their congregations, and televangelism, faith-based radio, and TV stations

²⁰ Madung, “Exporting Disinformation”.

²¹ The Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act of 2018 criminalizes the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading data. The Kenya Information and Communications Act of 2013 and the National Cohesion and Integration Act of 2008 tackle disinformation and hate speech. The Data Protection Act of 2019 regulates personal data processing and prohibits non-consensual sharing of personal information, addressing cases such as revenge porn.

²² IRI and NDI, “Preliminary Statement of Initial Findings and Recommendations of the IRI/NDI International Election Observer Mission to Kenya’s August 9, 2022 General Elections”, 11 August 2022.

²³ Sonko sought to appeal his impeachment, but Kenya’s Supreme Court upheld the decision in 2024 rendering him ineligible to run for office again. See Nancy Gitonga, “Supreme Court Drives Last Nail in Sonko’s Political Career after Appeal Flops”, *The Standard*, 4 August 2024; Michael Oduor, “Flamboyant Nairobi Governor Mike Sonko Officially Impeached by Senators”, *Africanews*, 18 December 2020; United States Department of State, “Designation of Former Nairobi Governor Sonko for Involvement in Significant Corruption”, 8 March 2022.

are common means of communication, with some churches also utilizing YouTube. Religion ranks among the top three content types on radio stations and social media.²⁴

Clerics communicate anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric strategically and mobilize supporters around the issue. In this, they rely on arguments around traditional gender roles laid out in Christian and Muslim faiths to define what “traditional values” are. Following the NGLHRC decision, prominent religious clerics led public protests condemning same-sex marriages as incompatible with Kenyan religious values. Parliamentarians, too, urged the president to speak out against the ruling to prove his Christian values.²⁵ Ruto ultimately came out stating “our culture and religion does not allow same-sex marriages” before promising his government would seek a review of the decision.²⁶ He also asked religious leaders to strengthen their education on traditional values in the country.²⁷

Their close relationships with their congregations, paired with the sophisticated broadcast channels, render them particularly interesting figures for politicians who are looking for more efficient ways to get their messages across. The intersection of anti-gender narratives and religious arguments may provide an entry point here, as it falls on fertile ground with constituents. In fact, politicians use congregational worship services to announce their election bids – an act that is usually followed by large donations and mid-service speeches from the pulpit. Anglican, Catholic, and Presbyterian churches publicly opposed this practice in 2021 and called for an end to it, whereas evangelical churches did not have similar reservations.

Suitably, relying on the country’s evangelical networks developed into a go-to tactic for the Ruto camp during the last elections. Bishop Margaret Wanjiru, for example, who was running to be a senator of Nairobi County herself, openly called upon her congregation to vote for Ruto’s Kenya Kwanza coalition.²⁸ Ruto ultimately received public endorsements from 2,000 pastors across the Rift Valley and began each public speaking engagement with sermons that were widely broadcasted on television and congregational YouTube channels. First Lady Rachel Ruto has since invited key religious actors repeatedly to the State House in Nairobi and also advised Kenyans to pray in order to protect against the spread of LGBTQIA+ habits.²⁹ Kenya Kwanza reportedly signed an agreement with the Association of Pentecostal and Evangelical Clergy of Kenya, promising to promote the church’s interests at the state level, upholding their self-regulation, and allowing the appointment of clergymen to government positions. These developments have sparked a broader debate about the future of secularism in Kenya’s political order and they help to strengthen the linkages between anti-gender narratives and religious arguments at the government level.

Secondly, disinformation is generally used strategically to distract and deflect from failures and shortcomings, as well as to maintain control amid political crises. This manipulation of the public discourse especially draws on anti-colonial sentiments to frame external powers (i.e. former colonial powers) as the culprits for political failures or misfortunes. In 2024, President Ruto, for example, has been under considerable political pressure as a result of anti-government protesters who have been violently voicing their opposition to his policies on the International Monetary Fund. He has used disinformation to shift blame and distract from the country’s economic crisis and rising cost of living, which had led many to oppose his fiscal policies in the first place. Relying on anti-Western tropes, Ruto first spoke

²⁴ Media Council of Kenya, “State of the Media: Survey Report 2022”, 2022.

²⁵ James Mbaka, “Prove Your Christianity on LGBTQ Issue, MP Mboko Tells Ruto”, *The Star*, 1 March 2023.

²⁶ Evelyn Musambi, “Kenya’s President Criticizes Court Ruling on LGBTQ Group”, *AP News*, 2 March 2023.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Africa Intelligence, “KENYA: Shillings, Prayers and Votes: Democracy in a Very Religious Country – 20/06/2022”, *Africa Intelligence*, 10 November 2024.

²⁹ Winnie Onyando, “Rachel Ruto Asks Kenyans to Pray against Spread of LGBTQ”, *Nairobi News*, 7 March 2023.

of “foreign elements” and later specifically accused the US-based Ford Foundation of funding protests against his government.³⁰

It is not a new tactic for the Ruto camp to prey on anti-colonial sentiments when using disinformation. During his 2013 campaign, he co-led a push with Uhuru Kenyatta that accused the International Criminal Court of being a neo-colonial entity interfering in Kenyan affairs. During that time, both politicians faced charges in The Hague for their roles in the 2007 post-election violence.

The analysed data shows that this blaming technique is now also used to justify repressive gender policies such as the Family Protection Bill. Some politicians, government institutions, and clerics have also included disinforming elements of Western imposition in their public statements, thereby combining anti-gender with the established technique of anti-colonial messaging. Each narrative can lend credibility to the other and strengthen its sway with the target audience.

While deflecting from the current pressing economic issues and domestic criticism of government policies, this rhetoric strengthens political support for repressive gender policies by resonating with conservative and religious groups. The country’s economic hardships, such as high youth unemployment, facilitate the promotion of these divisive narratives. Many young men, raised with the expectation of being providers, struggle with feelings of inadequacy because they cannot fulfil this role.

Strategic Use 2: Identity Formation

Politicians and religious actors also use anti-gender narratives strategically to shape presumable “African” identities. They use an “us versus them” framing as a tactic in their strategic communication and disinformation campaigns and often incorporate arguments about identity and ethnicity.

LGBTQIA+ people, for example, are seen as a threat to social morality and national identity because they are “un-African”. President Ruto emphasized this by stating: “It is not possible for our country, Kenya, to allow same-sex marriages. [...] It will happen in other countries but not in Kenya.”³¹ This sentiment was echoed by the Ministry of Education, which pushed back against the alleged “infiltration” of LGBTQIA+ people into schools across the country.³²

LGBTQIA+ identities are seen as Western constructs imposed on African societies. Accordingly, anti-colonial rhetoric is used to frame gender rights and activism as neo-colonialism and a threat to traditional African values and identity. Muslim protesters in Nairobi, for example, accused the judges who ruled in favour of the NGLHRC of being “neo-colonialists”.³³ Muslim cleric Abdullatif Essajee was quoted saying: “There is an increasing push by western countries and organisations to promote LGBTQ in Kenya. We call on President Ruto to do what Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni and Tanzania’s Samia Suluhu did by taking a stand on homosexuality.”³⁴ MP Kaluma, too, echoed that sentiment, stating

³⁰ Urooba Jamal, “Why Is Kenya’s Ruto Accusing the Ford Foundation of Stoking Protests?”, *Al Jazeera*, 18 July 2024.

³¹ Musambi, “Kenya’s President Criticizes Court Ruling on LGBTQ Group”.

³² David Muchunguh, “We Will Stop LGBTQ from Infiltrating Schools – Education CS Machogu”, *Nation*, 9 March 2023.

³³ Evelyne Musambi and Brian Inganga, “Muslims in Kenya Protest at Supreme Court over Its Endorsement of LGBTQ Right to Associate”, *AP News*, 6 October 2023.

³⁴ Cecil Odongo, “Muslim Clerics Slam Supreme Court over LGBTQ Ruling | Nation”, *Nation*, 22 September 2023.

that the “LGBTQ agenda” was a “big industry, especially in the West” when explaining his reasons for introducing the Family Protection Bill in parliament.³⁵

Historically, identity politics in Kenya have been deeply influenced by colonial rule, which exacerbated ethnic divisions. These divisions were further entrenched by multi-party elections post-1992, leading to ethnic-based political coalitions and violence, notably during the 2007 and 2013 elections. The rise of social media has amplified inter-ethnic polarization and added gender backlash to the mix. As the Institute for Strategic Dialogue reports, both tactics may intersect as well, particularly during elections. Kikuyu women have been targeted by both hyper-sexualization and ethnic stereotyping – another example where two narratives are used to reinforce each other.³⁶ In this, feminist values become a threat to cultural purity and national sovereignty. This perception legitimizes the discrimination of women under the guise of protecting national identity.

Furthermore, the intertwining of anti-gender arguments with anti-colonial narratives frames these attacks through a specific lens. It signals sovereignty and resistance to contest cultural imperialism and neo-colonial influences that are being imposed under the guise of gender rights.³⁷ This illustrates how actors create discourse coalitions to unite and mobilize diverse groups under a shared narrative opposed to feminism and queer rights.³⁸

A key strategy is discourse capture, whereby progressive rhetoric such as post-colonialism is appropriated and twisted.³⁹ By framing feminism and queer rights as threats to national identity, for example, these campaigns cultivate exclusionary politics of belonging, delineating who is considered part of the in-group and who is not.⁴⁰ Pro-gender movements and values become the “other”, perceived as distinct from the nation or a certain social group, and thus as forms of external influence. Gender issues, in this context, become performative acts that ground and self-assure the society of a set of values, hierarchical order, and expectations.⁴¹ This process of “othering” reinforces in-group solidarity while marginalizing those advocating for gender equality and queer rights, supporting findings that out-group animosity can be strategically fostered to reinforce in-group cohesion.⁴²

Strategic Use 3: Going with the International Flow?

The intersection of anti-gender and anti-colonial narratives also serves a purpose in international politics, where the gender backlash is already a regional and global phenomenon.

³⁵ Catherine Byaruhanga, “LGBT Rights in Africa: Will Kenya Be the Latest to Pass Anti-Gay Law?”, *BBC News*, 18 July 2023.

³⁶ Anisa Harrasy and Zahed Amanullah, “Between Two Extremes: Responding to Islamist and Tribalist Messaging Online in Kenya during the 2017 Elections” (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2018); Strong Cities Network, “Polarising Content and Hate Speech ahead of Kenya’s 2022 Elections: Challenges and Ways Forward”, (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021).

³⁷ Jenny Andrine Madsen Evang, “Is ‘Gender Ideology’ Western Colonialism?”, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1 August 2022): 365–386; Haley McEwen, “The (Geo)Politics of Gender and Sexuality Diversity in a Multipolar World: Reading African Anti-Genderisms beyond the Transatlantic”, *Politique Africaine* 4, no. 168 (2023): 95–113; Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy, “The International Anti-Gender Movement: Understanding the Rise of Anti-Gender Discourses in the Context of Development, Human Rights and Social Protection” (UNRISD Working Paper, 2023).

³⁸ Emil Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values’”, *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 2 (2023): 175–184.

³⁹ Tessa Lewin, “Nothing Is as It Seems: ‘Discourse Capture’ and Backlash Politics”, *Gender & Development* 29, no. 2–3 (2021): 253–268.

⁴⁰ Nira Yuval-Davis, “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging”, *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (July 2006): 197–214.

⁴¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge Classics, 2015).

⁴² Marilyn B. Brewer, “The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love and Outgroup Hate?”, *Journal of Social Issues* 55, no. 3 (1999): 429–444.

Firstly, Kenya forms part of a regional trend that reflects similar events in Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Ghana.⁴³ This regional backlash often manifests itself in spill-over effects and the imitation of policies and rhetoric, such as those seen under Uganda's President Museveni. Various African actors have similarly framed feminism and queer rights as Western impositions that threaten traditional values and sovereignty. Kenya's Family Protection Bill also bears resemblance to the legislation introduced in Uganda, raising fears that Nairobi could follow its neighbour down the anti-gender path.

At the same time, this is a trend that is somewhat unusual for Kenya. Internationally, it is viewed as relatively progressive, with stable democratic structures, especially compared to its regional neighbours. International partners, including the United States and European countries such as Germany, are courting the Ruto government as their key partner in Eastern Africa.

Yet, Ruto's anti-colonial narratives project an emancipatory image to fellow African leaders, distancing him from US and European influences. During his visit to Berlin in 2023, he voiced support for Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill and said "no country should impose the idea of LGBTQ on his country", adding that "[w]e cannot dictate to Germans, Americans, French or Ugandans on what they want to do. That is theirs to choose. As a country, we have taken a position informed by our culture, our tradition, our constitution, and laws."⁴⁴ This stance signals autonomy and resistance to Western political interests, a position favoured by leaders who seek a balanced, non-aligned approach to global politics.⁴⁵

At the same time, the strategic use of these narratives not only influences regional politics, but also echoes on the global stage, aligning with the anti-gender messaging that has been coming out of Russia, Eastern European states, and the Vatican for years. Bodies such as the United Nations face increasing pushback and alliance formations against progressive gender initiatives from conservative coalitions that say they want to uphold traditional values.⁴⁶ These coalitions, the so-called anti-gender movement, consist of governments, NGOs, and religious leaders that form a transnational network which utilizes misogynistic, xenophobic, and nationalist rhetoric to reshape global narratives on gender issues, leveraging digital platforms to amplify their messages and influence public opinion. In recent years, the movement has found powerful allies in an increasing number of right-wing governments across Europe and beyond.⁴⁷

Interestingly, the movement oftentimes relies on similar intersecting narratives that position queerness and feminism as being national security threats as well as Western impositions. Accordingly, this compounded messaging not only reflects local socio-political currents, but also contributes to a significant global ideological conflict that seeks to entrench patriarchal and autocratic structures. As McEwen writes, the strategic use of such narratives sets geopolitical boundaries and signals room for alliance-formation.⁴⁸

⁴³ Amnesty International, "LGBTI Persons in Africa Face Discrimination Due to Their Identity", *Amnesty International* (blog), 9 January 2024; Mzizi Dawa, "Tanzania's Crackdown on LGBTQ+ Rights: 'The Government Is Making [Us] Hide'", *Minority Africa*, 2 August 2023; Favour Nunoo and Thomas Naadi, "Ghana's LGBT Terror: 'We Live in Fear of Snitches'", *BBC*, 7 March 2024.

⁴⁴ Onyango K'onyango and Pauline Kairu, "From Climate Change to LGBTQ, Ruto Tests His Balancing Act", *The East African*, 4 April 2023.

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Foreign involvement further complicates the issue. The exploitation of Kenya's information ecosystem by groups such as CitizenGo, which hired Kenyan influencers to campaign against surrogacy and family planning bills in 2020 and 2021, highlights how external forces may deploy a large sounding board for their messaging and provide the necessary funds to spread their message. The coalition brings together conservative Christians, right-wing political strategists, and international backers – including US evangelical groups and influential figures from Spain and Russia – to, again, promote traditional values. As this example shows, anti-gender narratives provide ample room for external involvement when they align with their broader geopolitical interests. These narratives – be they strictly anti-gender or combined with the anti-colonial narrative – are remarkably consistent and coherent across countries, rendering them easily applicable to various local contexts.

Interestingly, US evangelical groups have actively collaborated with political elites in various African countries to shape anti-gender and anti-Western narratives around homosexuality and influence legislation. Family Watch International has been instrumental in organizing conferences to train African politicians on anti-queer legislative measures. The draft Family Protection Bill was reportedly influenced by MP Kaluma's participation in such a conference.⁴⁹

Russian state media, in turn, praised Uganda's "Anti-Homosexuality Bill" as a significant step against the "Western homosexual agenda", and Moscow has reportedly strengthened its ties to Kenya's media sector.⁵⁰ Their influence campaigns have historically exploited societal divisions to further geopolitical aims. Moscow has a habit of paying influencers via WhatsApp, a practice that easily aligns with Kenya's flourishing influencer industry.

Both US evangelicals as well as Russian forces are known to assert influence through their strong ties with religious actors. Moscow has been receiving local priests for training and is recruiting an increasing number of Kenyan priests to switch to the Russian Orthodox Church. However, despite the high number of Kenyan converts, the endeavour has been poorly financed and governed, yielding mixed results at best.⁵¹

Although these instances illustrate significant risks, more research is needed to systematically investigate the role of gender in foreign influence operations, particularly within the African context. Existing studies often focus on the promotion of traditional values by states such as Russia,⁵² but comprehensive and cross-case analyses of the role of gendered disinformation and TFGBV remain sparse.⁵³

⁴⁹ Byaruhanga, "LGBT Rights in Africa".

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Recommendations and Outlook

On gender, Kenya is not Germany's typical like-minded partner (*"Wertepartner"*). Although Nairobi remains an anchor for many important policy initiatives, the partnership is likely to face conflicts of interest and contestation in the future. The European Union and its member states often struggle to uphold standards of equal partnership, facing accusations of neo-colonial and Eurocentric undertones – and this provides fertile ground for anti-Western criticism. This complicates the implementation of Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) and Feminist Development Policy (FDP) and makes communication around it a sensitive topic.

In this situation, credible voices in the public discourse (domestic and international) can easily exploit anti-gender narratives for political gain, that is, to undermine public confidence in gender equality initiatives and to mobilize opposition against them. Framing such projects as part of a neo-colonial agenda exploits Kenyan's cultural and historical anxieties about colonialism and develops it into a credible and coherent storyline.

It should be noted that this narrative – feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights are Western constructs and impositions – perpetuates a broad falsehood that negates the history, current activism, and scholarly contributions of Black and African feminists,⁵⁴ as well as the longstanding presence of queer identities on the continent. This disinformation undermines the existence and legitimacy of Indigenous feminist and queer movements and instead promotes religious and heteronormative frameworks that align with the dominant societal and political order of today. Some actors claim to protect national identity and sovereignty, but quite arguably they first and foremost uphold patriarchal structures that benefit themselves.

Through this, gender has effectively become a bargaining chip. As the authoritarian and anti-gender wave also rises in Europe, it will be interesting to see how it affects European external policymaking. The same can be said about Kenya, where the Ruto government continues to be under significant domestic pressure. The president now has to unite the country while keeping international partners, including Western states, close.

International donors might achieve the most impact by focussing less on labels and more on real, locally driven efforts that improve lives and empower women and queer people, both online and offline. This means considering how colonial history has influenced the current contestation of gender rights, as well as reflecting on the ways donors' actions, priorities, or historical legacies may impact local perceptions and dynamics in this context. To strengthen the effectiveness and acceptance of policy tools, it is important to address both local and international dynamics and adapt the approach to the grassroots level.

Another key element is co-creation with local partners, finally involving them fully in designing and implementing projects. Local feminist and queer activism hold a wealth of knowledge and experience that can greatly benefit development projects, and more localized agenda-setting also reduces concerns about foreign influence.

Security and trust are essential when working with the grassroots level. Sometimes this means donors need to step back if their presence might increase risks for recipients. Alt-

⁵⁴ See also: Minna Salami, "Always Consult African Feminists, Academics, Grassroots Movements: There Are Many Across The Continent", interview by Anna Hörter, *Megatrends Afrika*, 6 December 2023.

though donor visibility can add credibility to gender rights projects, it can also undermine local efforts by making them seem externally driven.

Investing in research to identify respected local leaders who can promote gender-supportive messages, as well as tracking anti-gender funding, is essential for building a solid strategy to tackle these issues. Future research should focus on collecting first-hand data to understand how technology-facilitated, gender-based violence intersects with offline violence and the roles of both local and foreign actors.

The implementation of Germany's FFP and FDP, along with updates to the Africa Policy Guidelines, provides a key opportunity for German policymakers to better address gender issues in Kenya and on the African continent in general. To truly support its FFP and FDP, Germany must consider how the digital world affects gender equality and democracy, including reviewing financial flows to ensure they do not unintentionally support anti-LGBTQIA+ groups. Germany could bolster local initiatives by supporting organizations that focus on digital skills and security. Working with Kenyan partners should prioritize digital safety, media diversity, and the interconnected nature of these issues.

Annex: List of Analysed Documents

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www.megatrends-afrika.de

megatrends-afrika@swp-berlin.org

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