Why Killing Gay People Is Bad For Public Health [VIDEO]

May 16, 2011 By Regan Hofmann

In October of 2009, David Bahati, a member of Uganda's parliament, proposed an "Anti-Homosexuality Bill" (a.k.a. the "kill the gays bill"). It was an attempt to legalize a phenomenon that is unfortunately spreading around the world: hate crimes against gay people.

The bill proposed that people in or from Uganda who have same-sex sex be subject to life in prison--or, in the case of "aggravated homosexuality," the death penalty. There are also provisions in the bill to allow people living with HIV/AIDS to be killed. According to those who support the bill, it is supposed to protect "public health" by preventing gay people from recruiting straight people to be gay (because the people who wrote the bill do not think it's "healthy" to be gay).

In fact, the opposite is true. Far from serving to protect people, this bill undermines public health by driving gay people underground and forcing them into living situations that can lead to greater personal and public health risks. And the bill serves as a deterrent to people getting tested and treated for HIV which further endangers personal and public health. Especially in nations like Uganda where the HIV prevalence rate is so high.

Think of it this way: who in their right mind would want to get tested or treated for HIV/AIDS if doing so could get you imprisoned or killed? Since HIV is erroneously considered a "gay disease," those who seek information about or get tested or treated for HIV are at risk for being outed as gay (if they are gay), labeled as gay (if they aren't gay) and, in either case, potentially locked up or killed. Talk about a way to ensure that HIV will be spread: make it impossible for people to seek prevention information, testing or care! By creating a barrier to health, this inhumane bill proves far more dangerous than any gay person could ever be. Thankfully, this past Friday, the Ugandan parliament announced that it will shelve the "kill the gays" bill--for now. Today, the Ugandan parliament officially adjourned without voting on the pending bill. But there is still the possibility that the bill could be presented again in a subsequent session of the Ugandan parliament (the next session opens May 18). So we must keep vigilant about this hateful piece of legislation and others like it. An organization called All Out is one of many that lobbied heavily against the bill. All Out secured half a million supporters (including me!) against the bill and, in doing so, added significantly to the global public outcry that pressured the Uganda parliament to not pass the bill. Be sure to watch the amazing video about the right to sexual freedom on All Out's site.

The global outcry in response to this bill has been inspiring. And the power of social and

conventional media in moments like these is exciting. As a journalist, it's essential to know that day lighting injustices can solicit such a tremendous response and that that response can be powerful enough to give people pause and to turn the tide of events. Advocacy works if enough people do it loudly and publicly enough.

I did my own bit by speaking out against the bill on Voice of America. Please check out the broadcast here.

MSNBC's amazing Rachel Maddow had one of the most compelling pieces of media coverage on the issue. Maddow invited Bahati onto her show and asked him to explain, exactly, how gay people tried to make other people gay. He alleged that people are paid to go into same sex schools and recruit people to be gay. Yet, no evidence of such behavior has ever surfaced.

Despite the dearth of evidence that gay people are attempting to persuade others to be gay, it is illegal to be gay in more than 75 nations; in 10 nations, being gay can result in capital punishment.

We explained how threatening the lives of gay people results in poor public health, particularly tied to the issue of HIV/AIDS, in the recent POZ cover story about Kenyan LGBT activist David Kuria.

David is a remarkable young man who I had the privilege of meeting at an event for the Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR) at amfAR founder Dr. Matilde Krim's apartment in New York. AmfAR has launched a global MSM initiative to protect the lives of gay people; David is one of many grassroots activists amfAR supports around the world. (POZ founder Sean Strub helped with the awesome film in the aforementioned link. It's really worth a look!) For purposes of disclosure, I will mention I am on amfAR's board of trustees.

Though amfAR's work is focused primarily on funding AIDS research (particularly research for an AIDS cure) and promoting sound HIV policy on Capitol Hill, the issues of protecting the health and human rights of MSM globally have become part of the organization's agenda. It makes sense. What is the point of developing life saving treatment and ensuring appropriate funding levels and laws to enable us to deliver care if thuggish dictators and politicians around the world are going to make it unsafe, even deadly, for people who most need care to seek it out?

When I first saw David, he stood in a dark suit and tie before a group of amfAR supporters, explaining why criminalizing and executing gay people ultimately backfires as a "protective measure" for society. He spoke of how such acts make it impossible for both gay and straight people to seek information, prevention methods and health care, especially for HIV.

As he spoke, he kept glancing over his shoulder, looking through the glass windows over the lights of Manhattan into the dark winter night. I wondered if the act was the automatic, nervous tick of a man whose life is in danger every day because he has chosen to save the lives of others.

At one point, he paused in his speech and said, "I'm sorry. It's just...it's just..."

And I waited for him to acknowledge that he always has to watch his back.

But he said, “It’s just…that I’ve never seen snow before!”

And as the group before him laughed, I wondered what makes a person like David so brave. I thought about whether I’d have the courage to speak about being gay if I knew it could land me in jail or get me killed. David is not only speaking about being gay; he is running for the Kenyan Senate.

David knew another great gay activist--the late David Kato--the Ugandan protector of LGBT rights who was murdered several months ago. When I asked David Kuria about whether Kato’s death frightened him, he said, “Even though David’s murder does scare us--knowing as we do that our own murderer could be lurking behind some corner--we feel we owe it to David to be even more vocal and energized in our work. We cannot give up. If we did, David’s death would be in vain.”

It is this simple: people will die fighting for what is right. Because in order to change societal injustices, people will have to stand up to those who threaten them and some will go down. But if the rest of us are frightened by these deaths and give up, we dishonor those who died. So we can’t give up. We must continue to fight to see the day when gay people have access to the same human and health rights as all people.

David and I had breakfast in DC shortly after meeting in NYC. I wish I had a video of the older woman with a perfectly coiffed Washingtonian helmet of hair who was sitting beside us, eavesdropping on our conversation as she sipped her Earl Grey tea. She looked stricken as David discussed how he feared being killed every day but how he wasn’t going to give up.

When he left, she leaned over and asked me, "Why would anyone want to kill such a lovely, articulate, *polite* young man?’

And I told her it made no sense to me either. But that because of courageous men like David, perhaps we’d one day see the day when gay hate crimes were illegal--all over the world. A day when people like David would not have to chose between being who he is and spending his life in prison or being killed.

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