Speech by Levis Maina Nderitu, student ISS, founder of Sullivan Reed

Student in the spotlight

Opening of the Academic Year 2018-2019, 3 September 2018

Thank you. Thank you very much for that warm introduction. President Kristel Baele, Rector Magnificus Professor Engels, Trustees of the Executive board, faculty of Erasmus University, staff, distinguished guests, my fellow students, ladies and gentlemen. Good afternoon.

It gives me great pleasure and honor to be here today. As a little boy growing up in rural Kenya, I would never, in my wildest dreams, have imagined this day possible.

You see, I was the first person in my extended family to ever step into a University. Let alone, a top university abroad. In Africa, this is a big deal.

My mother worked as a kitchen cleaner at my high school, cleaning students cups and plates. My now physically disabled dad worked as a police constable, the lowest rank in the police force. The possibilities of ever getting out of poverty were pretty unlikely. My parents taught me, that the only way out was to get a decent education, be top of my class and a job will come beckoning.

But the one thing my parents never prepared me for was the reality of being different in an indifferent world. They never prepared me for the bullying, the name calling and the rejection.

I remember, a few years ago, while interviewing for a Graduate Trainee position at a large manufacturing company, one of the managers said to me: ‘with your high voice, I don’t think you will be able to work here’. I was shocked at his prejudice. Granted, I never got the job. I was 24. Young, Ambitious and Silenced. Years later, when I finally got a job at an advertising agency, I was fired after six weeks.

It was in that moment that I promised myself that no young person should ever have to go through this. Nobody should ever be denied employment or opportunities at life just because of their real or perceived sexual orientation.

This marked the beginning of Sullivan Reed, a non-profit I founded to amplify the voices of LGBT people at the workplace. Studies have shown that 62% of LGBT university graduates go back to the closet at their first job. This number could be as high as 99% in a country where your love is illegal, society rejects you and religion condemns you, more often than not due to basic lack of knowledge or awareness about being LGBT.

Data has shown that when you bring your full self to work, you’re more productive, you are more innovative and happier at work. Still, most companies in Kenya—large & small
- struggle to embrace these benefits of diversity and inclusion. That’s where we come in.
For the last 3 years we have worked with Hivos Foundation, Workplace Pride & the Dutch Embassy in Nairobi, to host the first ever LGBT workplace diversity conference in Africa. We have conducted research, trained 200 staff, lobbied for better workplace policies & even partnered with the United Nations office of Human Rights.

For the future, we hope to double the number of multinationals we work with from the current 15 to 30 in the next year. We also want to link these companies with LGBT talent & provide cutting edge research on the business and social-cultural case for diversity & inclusion.

Friends, I have realized that being true to yourself, owning your voice and your story is a form of power that is being silenced by society. Why? To keep us exactly where we are.

To all of you who have felt silenced in one way or the other, I’m here to tell you today that it is time for you to be heard, to be seen and to be visible.

Because your voice matters.

Thank you.