

# POLITICIZED HOMOPHOBIA, HEALTH AND RIGHTS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

**Nicole Angotti**

angotti@american.edu  
Department of Sociology  
American University

**Tara McKay**

tara.mckay@vanderbilt.edu  
Center for Medicine, Health & Society  
Vanderbilt University

**Rachel Sullivan Robinson**

robinson@american.edu  
School of International Service  
American University

## Where, When and Why Does Politicized Homophobia Emerge?

Since the late 1990s political leaders in a number of African countries have pursued legislation to expand criminal penalties for same-sex sex and repeatedly targeted sexual and gender minority individuals and organizations. We contend that such antihomosexual actions, policies, and statements by political elites do not necessarily emerge from personal antihomosexual sentiments. Instead, they emerge at very particular moments in time in response to political, economic, and social circumstances. For example, state actors have deliberately used politicized homophobia — “the public denigration of same-sex sexualities, LGBT activism, nonheterosexual persons, and gender and sexual variance” (Currier 2012, 175) — to deflect attention away from undemocratic activities or to promote national identity formation and social cohesion, especially when national borders are contested.

In our research, we seek to better understand the rise of politicized homophobia in specific sub-Saharan African countries. This work is given particular urgency by the recent increase in criminal penalties for same-sex sex in several African countries, and the scant scholarly attention to how, why, and under what conditions such punitive measures arise.

## Data and Methods

Our research draws on fieldwork in

## AT A GLANCE

- HIV interventions increase visibility of LGBT populations and organizations.
- LGBT organizations’ ties to Western governments are a double-edged sword.
- Health as a human right language is productive but has consequences, and could be broadened to better serve the needs of local LGBT organizations.

Malawi, Nigeria, and Senegal; interviews with LGBT and HIV/health organizations, and government officials from Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal, and Uganda; reports by governmental and nongovernmental organizations; secondary academic literature; and local newspaper articles on antihomosexual statements, legislation, and incidents in each country.

## HIV Interventions and LGBT Visibility

Starting in the early 2000s, global and local HIV programs and policy began to create a space for gay men and men who have sex with men (MSM) in African countries to organize and target issues like access to HIV prevention and treatment (McKay 2016). However, change in local understandings of homosexuality have been largely limited to civil society organizations and a small segment of the political elite (Currier and McKay 2017; McKay and Angotti 2016).

In countries like Malawi, where same-sex sex is criminalized and efforts to incorporate gay men and other MSM into national HIV policy have been limited, local links to transnational HIV prevention policy

and research networks have explicitly promoted the visibility of same-sex sexualities. This visibility has helped establish much needed financial and social support for African LGBT movement efforts but has not come without consequences.

## Western Ties as a Double-edged Sword

Civil society groups’ ties to international organizations and Western government, however, can often be a double-edged sword. They gain funding and much needed political support from their international allies but, as a result, are easily attacked in national and local debates as stand-ins for Western governments.

## Health as a Human Right

Sexual rights advocates often use the risk of HIV faced by MSM as a means to further their advocacy and gain funding. Doing so depoliticizes the issue of homosexuality and provides an avenue around repressive laws. However, this framing reduces health to being just about HIV as well as creates divisions among HIV and LGBT organizations who may see their obligations to LGBT people and issues quite differently.