

Research Note: Attitudes toward homosexuality in sub-Saharan Africa, 1982-2012

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Abstract:

Despite the adoption of liberal constitutions that provide for extensive bills of rights, there has been strong resistance among African countries to extend these rights to include minority groups, particularly the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. To date, same-sex acts remain outlawed in more than two-thirds of African countries. Although several African leaders have spoken out against homosexuality in very strong terms, describing it as ‘un-African,’ most laws criminalizing same-sex acts were inherited from the colonial era, enacted without the input of the people that currently enforce them. In this research note we examine the opinions of ordinary Africans. We analyze cross-national public opinion data from 15 countries on attitudes toward homosexuality in Africa, where the topic has been a subject of major debate in recent years. We study whether ordinary citizens think homosexuality is ever justifiable and whether they are willing to accept homosexuals living among them. We complement the cross-national analysis with analysis of new data from Malawi, a southern African country in which same-sex rights were central to a recent popular debate. The results indicate that Africans hold strong negative attitudes toward homosexuality, with some variation by age, gender, religion, locality or education. Though we find greater support for same-sex rights among educated, urban, and less religious Africans, this support remains limited.

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1 Introduction

The common view is that African countries are some of the most homophobic in the world (Reddy 2001, 2002; Potgieter 2006; Canavera 2010). Although data on attitudes towards homosexuality in Africa are scarce, evidence suggests that African citizens are among the least accepting of homosexuality in the world (Pew Research Center 2013). In this research note, we offer the first cross-national analysis of individual attitudes toward homosexuality focused on Africa. We draw on cross-national public opinion data collected between 1982 and 2007. We also examine data collected in 2012 in Malawi, a southern African country where same-sex issues are in the national spotlight.

Recent scholarship studying public attitudes on same-sex relations has focused on acceptance of pro-gay policies in industrialized nations (Loftus 2001; Brace et al. 2002; Brewer and Wilcox 2005; Ellis et al. 2008; Lax and Phillips 2009), a sharp distinction from the African context, where most proposed policies are anti-gay. Whereas research in Western contexts has sufficient data to explore determinants of attitudes toward homosexuality, limited data from Africa only cover a handful of the continent's 54 countries.

The existing, western-centric literature identifies multiple demographic correlates with attitudes toward homosexuality. Studying U.S. opinion, Herek (2002) found women held more favorable attitudes toward homosexuals than men. Survey data from 23 countries in the Americas show greater tolerance of homosexuals among women, more educated respondents, younger people,¹ and urban residents (Seligson and Moreno-Morales 2010). In cross-national analysis, personal religiosity is associated with

¹ There was a correlation between tolerance and youth in South America, but not in Central America.

disapproving attitudes toward homosexuality, but only in economically and politically stable contexts (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009) . This is consistent with a recent global survey showing a strong correlation between a country’s religiosity and opinions about homosexuality (Pew Research Center 2013). Baunach (2012) found religiosity strongly influences same-sex marriage attitudes in the US, as did Evangelical Protestantism, when compared against other religions,² and Adamczyk and Pitt (2009) found Muslims were less likely to approve of homosexuality than respondents of most other religions.³

The few in-depth studies documenting Africans’ attitudes toward homosexuality draw primarily from South Africa, where the post-apartheid constitution explicitly bars discrimination on sexual orientation.⁴ Nearly two decades after the adoption of South Africa’s new constitution, support is not evenly distributed throughout the population; gay rights supporters are more likely to be white, literate, from urban areas, Catholic, Hindu, or Protestant, and younger (Massoud 2003: 304).

Our analysis considers the possibility that attitudes toward homosexuality in Africa have no relationship to demographic measures shown to matter elsewhere. People in most African countries have a “survival orientation,” and Adamczyk and Pitt (2009) thus argue they will be more likely to have disapproving attitudes toward homosexuality. Additionally, though analysis of American attitudes identified specific subgroups opposed to same-sex marriage, these patterns were only evident after a liberalization in same-sex marriage attitudes (Baunach 2012). It is possible that the time and place we are examining – contemporary African countries – will not offer sufficient variation by

² Baunach (2012) also found men, older adults, the less educated, residents of more rural areas, southerners, African Americans, and married people were less approving of same-sex marriage, but that these influences were dependent on the period of study.

³ However, this finding on Muslims’ attitudes was not significantly different from Protestants.

⁴ Section 9 of South Africa’s 1996 Constitution.

demographics in attitudes toward homosexuality. This study serves as an important baseline benchmark to gauge trends of attitudes toward homosexuality among ordinary Africans.

2 Methods

2.1 Setting

Attitudes on homosexuality in Africa are often inferred from widespread legislation criminalizing same-sex acts and the rhetoric of some African political leaders. Of the 76 countries globally that criminalize homosexuality, just under half (36) are African (Paoli Itaborahy and Zhu 2013: 22).⁵ One outspoken critic, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, has described gay people as "worse than dogs and pigs [and] worse than organized drug addicts, or even those given to bestiality" (Wetherell 1996; Skoch 2012). Likewise, Gambian President Yaya Jammeh told the 2013 United Nations General Assembly homosexuality is "very evil, anti-human as well as anti-Allah" and "those who promote homosexuality want to put an end to human existence" (Nichols 2013).

Homosexuality in Africa received international attention following introduction of anti-homosexual legislation in several African countries. Most prominent was a 2009 bill in Uganda proposing the death penalty for acts of "aggravated homosexuality."⁶ In May

⁵ The 36 African countries criminalizing same sex acts include: Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Comoros, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

⁶ According to Section 3 of the proposed act, one commits the offense of aggravated homosexuality by "indulging in homosexual acts with persons below the age of 18; the offender is a person living with HIV/AIDS; the offender is a parent or guardian of the person against whom the offense has been committed; the 'victim' of the offense is a person with a disability or the offender is a serial offender." The new bill was described as strengthening the country's "capacity to deal with emerging internal and external

2013, the Nigerian House of representatives passed legislation banning same-sex marriage and the formation of gay groups or organizations (BBC News 2013). Multiple African countries have recently introduced, passed, or amended laws criminalizing same-sex acts (Paoli Itaborahy and Zhu 2013: 43-62; Grossman 2013).

Malawi is not atypical with respect to same-sex politics in Africa, though recent events have catapulted same-sex issues into the spotlight. Malawi's Penal Code, inherited at independence in 1964 from the British colonial administration, makes homosexuality illegal under "offences against morality."⁷ In May 2010, a court found Steven Monjeza and Tiwonge Chimbalanga guilty of sodomy and sentenced both to fourteen years in prison. Eleven days later during a visit from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, President Bingu wa Mutharika pardoned Chimbalanga and Monjeza, ordering their release (Bearak 2010; Tenthani 2010). Civil society organizations used the Monjeza-Chimbalanga case to lobby for repeal of anti-homosexual laws, arguing such laws contravene anti-discrimination provisions in Malawi's constitution.⁸ Debates on homosexuality in Malawi draw from philosophical, moral, and religious arguments, without discussion of the opinions of ordinary Malawians. Existing studies on Malawian attitudes towards homosexuality rely on ad-hoc surveys unrepresentative of the national population (Chunga, Dionne, and Dulani 2014).

2.2 Data

We draw on data from two cross-national surveys: the Pew Global Attitudes Project (Pew GAP), and the World Values Survey (WVS). The Pew GAP was fielded in

threats to the traditional heterosexual family [and to] protect the cherished culture of the people of Uganda" (Parliament of Uganda, 2009).

⁷ Chapter XV of the Malawi Penal Code.

⁸ See section 20, Malawi Constitution, 1995.

2002 and 2007 across 10 African countries. The data we analyze from WVS comes from 10 African countries, with data collection occurring between 1982 and 2007. We also examine data from the Afrobarometer, collected in Malawi in 2012.

Pew Global Attitudes Project

The Pew GAP conducts surveys in 60 countries on people's views about important issues. We analyze two waves of Pew GAP. In 2002, Pew GAP conducted surveys in Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda. Samples in Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Senegal were urban only, but other country samples were nationally representative of the adult population. In 2007, Pew GAP collected data in Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda. Samples in Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa in 2007 were urban only, but data from the other 2007 field sites were nationally representative of the adult population. Pew GAP used a probability sample and reported margins of error between three and four percent in each country studied across both waves. All Pew GAP survey interviews in Africa in 2002 and 2007 were conducted face-to-face.

World Values Survey

The WVS has measured attitudes of ordinary people since 1981; its archive includes surveys from 80 countries, including several in Africa. We analyze WVS data from Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Rwanda, and Zambia in 2007; South Africa in 2006; South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe in 2001; Nigeria in 2000; South Africa in 1996; Nigeria in 1995; Nigeria and South Africa in 1990; and South Africa in 1982. All WVS interviews are conducted face-to-face and in local languages.

Afrobarometer

Afrobarometer-Malawi collected data between June 4 and July 1, 2012 as part of the Afrobarometer's multi-country study of attitudes toward democracy and governance in Africa.⁹ Citizens age 18 and older were included, except institutionalized populations. The Afrobarometer was a nationally representative, random, clustered, stratified, multistage area probability sample, stratified by region and urban-rural location. Random sampling is conducted with probability proportionate to population size. The response rate was 97% and the resulting sample size was 2407 respondents, with a margin of error of 2% (Afrobarometer 2012).

2.3 Measures

We analyze the one question on Pew GAP surveys that measures acceptability of homosexuality. Pew GAP asked in 2002 and 2007: "And which one of these comes closer to your opinion, number 1 or number 2? Number 1 – Homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society. Number 2 – Homosexuality is a way of life that should not be accepted by society." Missing and "don't know" responses are dropped from analysis.

We analyze responses to three WVS questions. One question asked, "On this list are various groups of people. Could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbors?" The list included drug addicts, people of a different race/ethnicity, people who have AIDS, immigrants/foreign workers, homosexuals, people of a different religion, heavy drinkers, unmarried couples living together, and people who speak a different language. Another question asked, "Please tell me for each of the following

⁹ The Afrobarometer (AB) is a comparative series of public opinion surveys that measure public attitudes toward democracy, governance, the economy, leadership, identity, and other related issues. Though the most recent Afrobarometer wave included 35 countries, the question measuring attitudes toward homosexuality was only fielded in Malawi.

statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between, using this card;” the prompt was followed with “homosexuality.” Another question from the third wave of WVS asked, “I’d like to ask you some groups that some people feel are threatening to the social political order in this society. Would you please select from the following list the one group or organization that you like least?” Response options included: capitalists, Stalinists/hardline Communists, immigrants, homosexuals, criminals, neo-Nazis/right extremists, Christian Organization Council, socialists, human rights activists, Muslim Organization Council, and “none”.

Afrobarometer-Malawi asked only one question explicitly measuring attitudes toward homosexuality: “Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: People practising same-sex marriage or relationships have the right to do so, after all issues of sexual relationships are private?” Responses included strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. To measure salience of same-sex issues, we also explore an open-ended question asked by Afrobarometer: “In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing Malawi that government should address?” Respondents could offer three problems and we read the open-ended responses to identify all responses mentioning same-sex issues.

2.4 Analysis

We report descriptive statistics for each measure of attitudes toward homosexuality. When possible, we also examine correlations with standard demographic characteristics that earlier scholarship has demonstrated shape attitudes.

3 Results

3.1 Cross-National

The Pew GAP data paint a generally negative view of attitudes toward homosexuality across the African countries surveyed. In the pooled responses in 2002, 88% were not accepting of homosexuality, and this proportion was higher (94%) in 2007 (see Figure 1). South Africa had the most accepting population, but still a majority (62% in 2002; 69% in 2007) were not accepting of homosexuality. Angola in 2002 was the second most accepting population (34%). It should be recalled, however, that the 2002 Angola and the 2007 South Africa samples were both limited to urban populations.

Table 1 reports correlation coefficients with gender, age, education, urban/rural residence, and a few religion variables. In the pooled 2002 Pew GAP data, all variables except gender are correlated with acceptance of homosexuality at standard levels of significance. Acceptance of homosexuality was positively correlated with higher education, urban residence, and reporting no religious affiliation; age, religiosity, and Muslim identification were negatively correlated with acceptance of homosexuality. The results are similar in 2007, however, male gender is marginally significant (and positively correlated with acceptance of homosexuality) and age is no longer correlated at conventional levels of significance.

WVS data are similar in illustrating generally negative views of homosexuality in African countries, which were primarily surveyed in 2001 and 2007, though earlier waves of relevant data were collected in Nigeria and South Africa. Most WVS respondents (56%) were unwilling to have homosexuals as neighbors, though willingness varied by country and year (see Table 2). The 1995 Nigeria survey had the highest proportion of respondents (89%) mentioning homosexuals as a group they would not like to have as neighbors, whereas South Africa in 2006 had the lowest proportion of respondents (42%)

mentioning the same. A median country-year had about three-quarters of respondents name homosexuals as a group they would not want as neighbors.

Table 3 reports correlation coefficients of mentioning not wanting homosexuals as neighbors with gender, age, education, and a couple of religion variables.¹⁰ There are few significant correlations in earlier waves of the WVS (1990-2000). In more recent waves (2001 and 2007), most demographic variables correlate as expected: greater education is negatively correlated with mentioning homosexuals as a group not wanted as neighbors, but being Muslim and reporting religion as important in daily life is positively correlated with mentioning homosexuals as a group not wanted as neighbors. In 2001, being male is positively correlated with mentioning homosexuals as a group not wanted as neighbors, but in 2007, the correlation does not reach conventional levels of significance.

Inconsistent with earlier scholarship, older age is negatively correlated with mentioning homosexuals as a group not wanted as neighbors.

Differences in responses about homosexuals as neighbors are small across levels of religiosity when examining data by country-year (see Figure 2). For example, in Zimbabwe in 2001 and South Africa in 2006, there is no discernable difference by religiosity in the proportion of respondents not wanting homosexuals as neighbors. The small populations of respondents professing religion had little importance in their lives in Nigeria in 1995 and 2000, and in Rwanda in 2007, always mentioned homosexuals as a group they would not want as neighbors. Similar country-year effects appear in examining attitudes by education level.

¹⁰ The WVS data does not include urban/rural measures for all of its country-years (only two country-years in the Africa subset), limiting our ability to examine the correlation with urban residence and attitudes toward homosexuality.

Most Africans surveyed by WVS said homosexuality was never justified, with majority proportions in all country-years except South Africa in 2001 and 2006 (see Table 4). In no country-year did more than 8% of a study population say homosexuality was always justified; the median country-year had 1.5% of the study population say homosexuality was always justifiable.

The question asking respondents to identify the “least liked group in society” was asked only in the third WVS wave (1995-1998), and thus there is only data from Nigeria (1995) and South Africa (1996). The least liked group in both societies was “criminals”; homosexuals ranked second in Nigeria and fifth in South Africa, with 11.6% and 6.7% of the populations, respectively, naming them as the least liked group. More people in South Africa mentioned “none” than mentioned homosexuals.

3.2 Malawi

Although Afrobarometer-Malawi used different question wording, attitudes toward homosexuality mirrors findings from Pew GAP and WVS. More than nine in ten Malawians (94%) disagreed that people practicing same-sex relationships should have the right to do so. The overwhelming opposition to same-sex relationships in Malawi showed no correlation with factors that elsewhere have been associated with attitudes toward homosexuality,¹¹ except religiosity: higher religiosity was correlated with disagreeing with the statement that people have the right to practice same-sex relationships.

Most striking in the Malawi data, however, was the salience of same-sex issues. Though attitudes were uniformly negative toward same-sex relationships, fewer than one percent of the Afrobarometer Malawi participants identified same-sex issues when asked

¹¹ More specifically, gender, age, education, rural residence, and religious affiliation held no statistically significant correlation with acceptance or rejection of same-sex rights (results not shown).

about the most important problems facing Malawi that government should address. The most frequent responses were food shortage, management of the economy, and water supply. Considering the negative attitudes toward same-sex relationships together with the primarily economic responses to the question gauging salient issues in Malawi suggests further consideration of Adamczyk and Pitt's (2009) "survival orientation" argument that individuals in poor countries will be more likely to have disapproving attitudes toward homosexuality.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

In sum, our analysis of attitudes toward homosexuality in sub-Saharan Africa suggests many Africans are not accepting of same-sex relations. These attitudes often correlate with demographic characteristics like religion, age,¹² gender, and levels of education. In the few countries with multiple survey rounds, the population accepting of homosexuality is decreasing, unlike in Western contexts, where acceptance of homosexuality has been increasing (Baunach 2012; Brewer and Wilcox 2005; Loftus 2001).

Our analysis of correlations between demographic characteristics and attitudes toward same-sex relations are limited by little variation in the data. The few measures available from Africa of attitudes toward same-sex relations show overwhelming majorities have negative attitudes. Likewise, measures of religiosity are also heavily skewed, with African respondents predominantly professing religion is very important in their daily lives. For example, almost every Malawian in the 2012 Afrobarometer professed a religious identity (98%) and an equally high number (94%) reported religion

¹² However, unlike the trends seen in Western societies, the youth are not necessarily more accepting of homosexuality.

was important in their lives. Picking up any correlation between such invariant measures relies heavily on a small proportion of survey responses.

Because existing data are collected to compare attitudes around the world, the question wording may mask relevant nuances of attitudes in Africa. Binary responses on whether homosexuality is acceptable paint a rather negative, even homophobic picture of ordinary Africans, which may be unfair. Though ordinary Malawians are strongly against same-sex marriage, they are not so exercised about same-sex issues that they see them as one of the top problems government should address. Thus, salience of same-sex issues in Africa is an important direction for future research.

Figure 1: Percentage of Pew GAP Respondents Not Accepting of Homosexuality, by Country Year

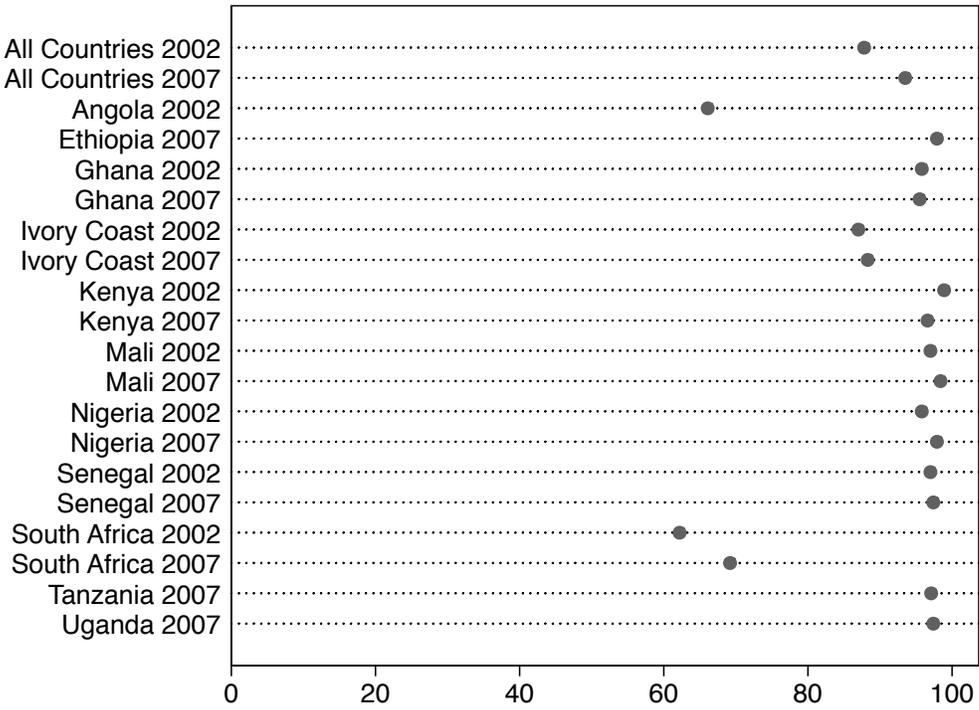
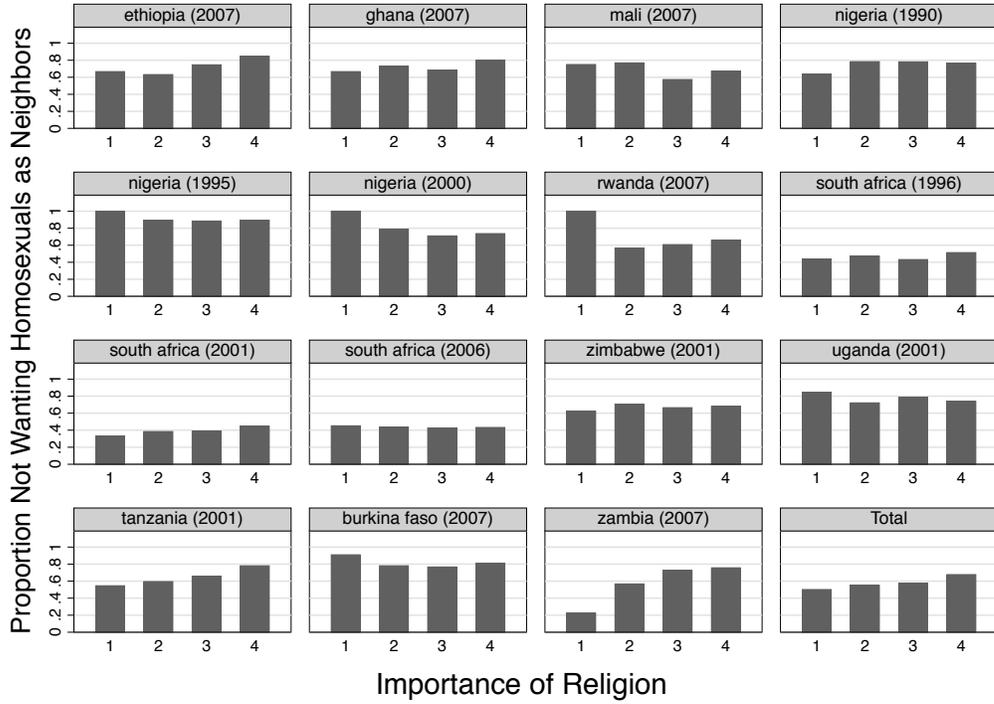


Figure 2. Percentage of Respondents Not Wanting Homosexuals as Neighbors, World Values Survey

Panel A. By Religiosity



Panel B. By Education

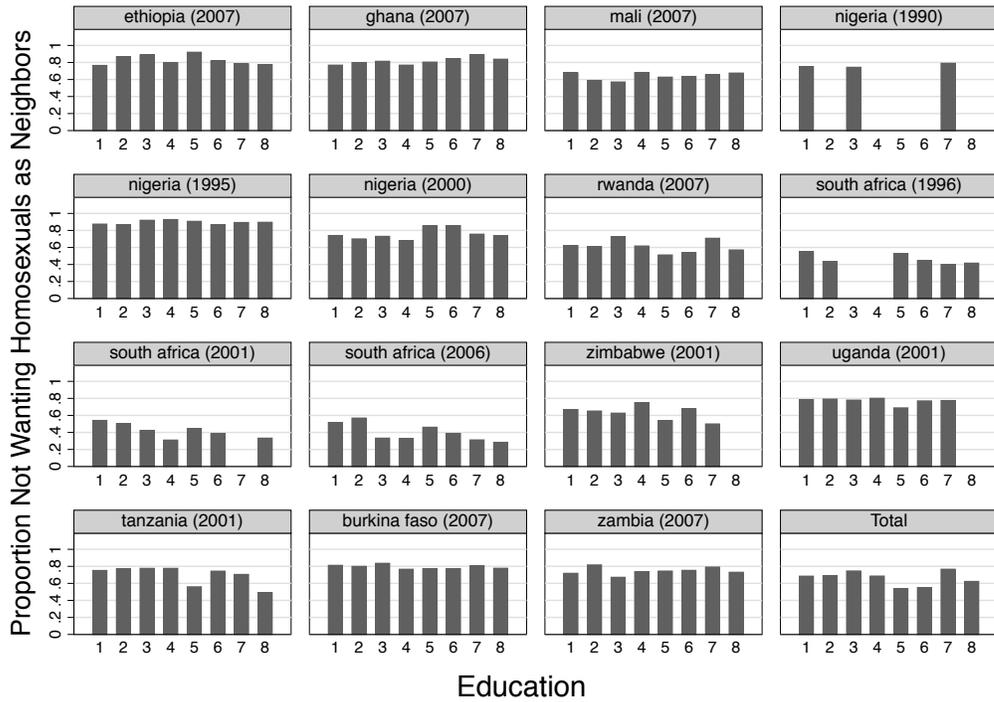


Table 1. Pearson Correlations for Acceptance of Homosexuality and Key Demographic Variables, Pew GAP 2002 and 2007

	2002	2007
Male	NS	0.022*
Age	-0.044***	NS
Education	0.033**	0.130***
Urban	0.053***	0.147***
Religiosity	-0.067***	-0.087***
Muslim	-0.180***	-0.109***
No Religion	0.1477***	0.087***

NS: correlation is not statistically significant

*** significant at the 0.001 level

** significant at the 0.01 level

* significant at the 0.05 level

Notes: Correlations as measured with accepting homosexuality responses to the Pew GAP question that asked, "And which one of these comes closer to your opinion, number 1 or number 2? Number 1 – Homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society. Number 2 – Homosexuality is a way of life that should not be accepted by society."

Table 2. Groups Not Wanted as Neighbors: Homosexuals, WVS 1990-2007

Country-Year	Homosexuals		Missing	Observations
	Not Mentioned	Homosexuals Mentioned		
Burkina Faso 2007	19.5%	80.5%	0%	1,534
Ethiopia 2007	17.8%	82.2%	0%	1,500
Ghana 2007	21.0%	79.0%	0%	1,534
Mali 2007	33.8%	66.2%	0%	1,534
Nigeria 1990	23.6%	76.4%	0%	1,001
Nigeria 1995	10.7%	89.3%	0%	1,996
Nigeria 2000	26.4%	73.6%	0%	2,022
Rwanda 2007	37.4%	62.6%	0%	1,507
South Africa 1996	50.8%	49.2%	0%	2,935
South Africa 2001	57.3%	42.7%	0%	3,000
South Africa 2006	55.3%	42.0%	2.7%	2,988
Tanzania 2001	25.9%	74.1%	0%	1,171
Uganda 2001	25.0%	75.0%	0%	1,002
Zambia 2007	26.7%	73.3%	0%	1,500
Zimbabwe 2001	32.2%	67.8%	0%	1,002

Notes: The World Values Survey question asked, "On this list are various groups of people. Could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbors?"

Table 3. Pearson Correlations for Mentioning Homosexuals as a Group Not Wanted as Neighbors and Key Demographic Variables, World Values Survey

	1990	1995	1996	2000	2001	2007
Male	NS	0.047*	0.049**	NS	0.034**	NS
Age	NS	NS	NS	NS	-0.043***	-0.038***
Education	NS	NS	-0.067***	NS	-0.124***	-0.108***
Religiosity	NS	NS	0.053**	NS	0.0651***	0.092***
Muslim	0.137***	NS	NS	0.079***	0.0859***	0.072***
N	1001	1996	2935	2002	6175	12015
Countries	Nigeria	Nigeria	S Africa	Nigeria	South Africa Tanzania Uganda Zimbabwe	Burkina Faso Ethiopia Ghana Mali Rwanda S Africa Zambia

NS: correlation is not statistically significant

*** significant at the 0.001 level

** significant at the 0.01 level

* significant at the 0.05 level

Notes: The World Values Survey question asked, "On this list are various groups of people. Could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbors?" Urban and rural location was only available in two country-years and is omitted from the table.

Table 4. Homosexuality is Justified, WVS 1990-2007

Country-Year	Never Justifiable	Scored Between Never and Always (2-9)	Always Justifiable	Missing	N
Burkina Faso 2007	73.5%	16.5%	2.8%	7.3%	1534
Ethiopia 2007	75.0%	22.8%	1.5%	0.8%	1500
Ghana 2007	71.3%	24.9%	1.0%	2.7%	1534
Mali 2007	54.2%	23.7%	8.0%	14.0%	1534
Nigeria 1990	71.4%	26.4%	1.4%	0.8%	1001
Nigeria 1995	79.3%	18.5%	1.5%	0.9%	1996
Nigeria 2000	77.6%	21.9%	0.4%	0.0%	2022
Rwanda 2007	75.3%	23.3%	0.4%	1.0%	1507
South Africa 1982	61.7%	29.0%	1.8%	7.5%	1596
South Africa 1990	66.8%	22.6%	4.5%	6.2%	2736
South Africa 1996	57.7%	33.4%	3.5%	5.3%	2935
South Africa 2001	48.6%	45.7%	3.0%	2.7%	3000
South Africa 2006	45.9%	47.5%	3.5%	3.1%	2988
Tanzania 2001	93.5%	5.3%	0.2%	0.9%	1171
Uganda 2001	88.9%	10.4%	0.5%	0.2%	1002
Zambia 2007	56.6%	35.5%	4.5%	3.3%	1500
Zimbabwe 2001	94.7%	4.2%	0.1%	1.0%	1002

Notes: The World Values Survey question asked, "Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between, using this card. Homosexuality."

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