

Visibility or Impact? International Efforts to Defend LGBTQI+ Rights in Africa

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Abstract

Most struggles for LGBTQI+ rights play out at the national level. However, the question of sexual and gender minorities' rights periodically appears as a point of friction in international relations as well. This article analyses the question of international efforts to defend LGBTQI+ rights in countries of the Global South, with a particular focus on Western countries' endeavours in Africa. Combining policy analysis, critique and recommendations, it asks how and when international actors should and should not intervene. It recognizes that motives for intervening can be problematic and the means often counterproductive, especially when exhibiting neo-imperialist tendencies and constituting *ad hoc* reactions to events in the media. Countering essentialist arguments about 'authentic' African culture and values, influenced by religious beliefs, is also a significant challenge. I argue that more fruitful efforts should instead be centred on local rights defenders' perspectives and supporting their priorities and initiatives, based on concerted, long-term, principled strategies. International actors, however, are reluctant to adopt such approaches because of a desire for short-term visible action, even if less effective or not effective at all. This conundrum is a fundamental problem in the area of foreign aid writ large, as greater impact often requires less visibility on the part of international actors, but donor countries want domestic and international recognition of their efforts. The article distils key lessons learnt and principles for action that have emerged over the past 15 to 20 years, brought together in one place for the first time. It aims to stimulate discussions among practitioners and academics. It should be of particular interest to human rights practitioners, especially those who are involved or contemplating getting involved in defending the rights of sexual and gender minorities internationally.

Keywords: conditionality; foreign aid; gender identity and expression; North-South relations; sexual orientation

1. Introduction

Most struggles for LGBTQI+ rights play out at the national level.¹ However, the question of sexual and gender minorities' rights periodically appears as a point of friction in international relations as well. The issue intersects with key debates on thorny topics such as cultural traditions, historical authenticity, religious beliefs, prejudice, national sovereignty, personal freedoms, colonialism, imperialism, modernity and globalization. Although sometimes raised in relations within the Global North, for instance between Russia and the West (Edenborg 2018), or between Poland and other European Union member states (Zuk and Zuk 2020), LGBTQI+ rights are often highly contentious in relations between

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1 LGBTQI stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex. The 'plus' symbol recognizes non-exclusivity of that list, the diversity and multiple identities of those individuals, the existence of other relevant but not listed identities and the fact that not all sexual and gender minorities ascribe to a specific, stable identity category at all.

countries of the Global North and the Global South. They are frequently imbricated in the donor-recipient power relations that characterize the foreign aid regime and, as a result, ‘global skirmishes’ (Rao 2020: 9) about LGBTQI+ rights in the Global South become inseparable from the centuries-long histories of domination and resistance.

This article analyses the question of international efforts to defend LGBTQI+ rights in countries in the Global South, with a particular focus on Western countries’ endeavours in Africa.² It asks how and when international actors should and should not intervene. It recognizes that motives for intervening can be problematic and the means often counterproductive, especially when exhibiting neo-imperialist tendencies and constituting *ad hoc* reactions to events in the media. Countering essentialist arguments about ‘authentic’ African culture and values, influenced by religious beliefs, is also a significant challenge. I argue that more fruitful efforts should instead be centred on local rights defenders’ perspectives and supporting their priorities and initiatives, based on concerted, long-term, principled strategies. International actors, however, are reluctant to adopt such approaches because of a desire for short-term visible action, even if less effective or not effective at all. This conundrum is a fundamental problem in the area of foreign aid writ large, as greater impact often requires less visibility on the part of international actors, but donor countries want domestic and international recognition of their efforts (Vollmer 2014).

This article should be of particular interest to human rights practitioners, whether they work for Western governments, regional or international institutions, or civil society organizations (CSOs). It is especially relevant for individuals and organizations that are involved or contemplating getting involved in defending the rights of sexual and gender minorities internationally. It provides policy analysis, critique and recommendations, with the goal of advancing debates about whether and how Western countries should get involved in the defence of LGBTQI+ rights abroad.

Rather than provide radically novel strategies for action or even guidelines, I propose a way forward in light of enduring debates about the legitimacy of international involvement in domestic rights issues and of the more recent experiences in defending LGBTQI+ rights. The article distils key lessons learnt and principles for action that have emerged over the past 15 to 20 years, brought together in one place for the first time.

The article synthesizes insights I have drawn from academic sources and practitioner experiences (some documented in print, others expressed verbally at numerous conferences, workshops and seminars that I have attended in person or virtually), with a deliberate intent to foreground the perspectives of human rights defenders and analysts from the Global South, especially Africa. I hope it will stimulate discussions among practitioners and academics, as well as provide a useful tool for practitioners to reflect on their work and how to improve their efforts, including in their interactions with actors who may oppose LGBTQI+ rights.

The first section of the article assesses the two main challenges to intervention in the domestic politics of African countries: 1) the argument, whether deployed sincerely or instrumentally, that LGBTQI+ identities are Western constructs and un-African, thus contrary to authentic African culture, history and religious beliefs; and 2) that any form of intervention is thus a form of neo-imperialism, seeking to circumvent national sovereignty and impose external values, practices and laws. I parse out the validity of the main critiques, while refuting elements of casuistry, concluding that some forms of intervention are legitimate, even if many actions remain problematic.

The second section of the article analyses what makes intervention effective or not, what a more productive approach would encompass and the obstacles to putting those principles into action. It begins by exploring Western countries’ problematic motives and

2 ‘Western countries’ are a heterogeneous group, and my generalizations do not do justice to the variations within that bloc of countries. I use the problematic expression as a convenient shorthand and for lack of better alternatives.

perspectives. Next, I examine the generally poor effectiveness of previous efforts to defend LGBTQI+ rights, considering the cases of Malawi, Uganda and Tanzania, where Western countries provoked a backlash that actually worsened the situation for sexual and gender minorities. Finally, the article proposes basic principles for a potentially more fruitful approach, while considering impediments to putting them into action.

2. Two major hurdles

The legitimacy of LGBTQI+ rights and of international efforts to defend them face numerous hurdles. In Africa, the main opposition is based on 1) essentialist claims about authentic African culture and history, informed by religious beliefs, and 2) accusations of neo-imperialism in any attempt to impose foreign values and practices. This section explains and assesses those hurdles, as well as what it might take to surmount them and whether international actors are well placed to try to do so.

2.1 Essentialized conceptions of Africanness

Many African political and religious leaders invoke authentic Africanness, arguing for instance that homosexuality (and often other sexual and gender minorities' practices) is alien and even anathema to authentic African culture (Nyanzi 2013; Rao 2020: 10). They maintain that homosexuality and LGBTQI+ identities are imported from and even imposed by the West, corrupting local people into immoral or sinful practices (Seckinelgin 2018). They refer not only to specific anti-LGBTQI+ interpretations of Christianity or Islam as being divinely ordained, but also to the colonial origins of homosexuality and the Western concept of LGBTQI+ rights. Some individuals may truly believe some or all of these arguments, while others might deploy them selectively or instrumentally for their own political reasons, for instance the populist scapegoating of minorities to divert attention from political or economic problems or in an attempt to bolster moral legitimacy. The evidence to support such assertions is, at best, weak (Tamale 2013: 40).

Without seeking to engage in theological debates, there is relatively little that is inherently anti-LGBTQI+ about Christianity and Islam, and there are certainly 'queer-friendly' interpretations of both religions (see, for instance, van Klinken 2017; 2019). More fundamentally, essentialist arguments based on African authenticity actually contradict the religious argument, as they ignore the relatively recent arrival in most instances of those religions in Africa, brought in the case of Christianity—with very few exceptions, such as Egypt and Ethiopia—by European colonization and, even in the case of Islam, brought from outside Africa. If there were to be any 'authentic' African religion, it would be the traditional ones, which characterized Africa for centuries and perhaps millennia, not the more recently arrived monotheistic Abrahamic ones. Still, one should not underestimate the enduring influence of African religious hierarchies in shaping public opinion and government policies on sexual and gender diversity (Kaoma 2018), despite the constitutional separation between church and state in most Sub-Saharan African countries (Arimoro 2021).

Essentialist arguments also ignore the fact that non-cisgender identities and non-heterosexual relations existed widely across Africa, often integrated into 'mainstream' society, as opposed to living at the margins. In some precolonial societies, some men had 'boy-wives', some women had 'female husbands' and what we would now call nonbinary or transgender individuals often played a valued healer role, bridging the material and spiritual worlds (Msibi 2011; Roscoe and Murray 1998). There are also 'queer' figures among African historical leaders. For instance, in the late 19th century, King Mwanga II of the Buganda (in present-day Uganda) openly had young male sexual partners, a practice that British colonial officials and missionaries vehemently condemned (Rao 2020). Although heterosexual relations were valued for their reproductive role, it is ahistorical to portray Africans as being monolithically heterosexual and cisgender prior to colonization

(Epprecht 2013). Colonialism contributed greatly to the erasure of memories of sexual and gender diversity, which were not documented in writing by societies that relied on oral history.

Appeals to authentic African culture are thus deliberately blind to the realities of sexual and gender diversity in African history, while sidestepping the contradiction between African traditions and current religious beliefs, especially Christian ones. Moreover, the most homophobic African churches are often inspired or even directly supported by American Pentecostal organizations or other evangelical churches (Kaoma 2013; Nyanzi 2013), which are even more recent arrivals in Africa than the Catholicism and Anglicanism brought by the colonizers—and therefore could be considered the least ‘authentically’ African. Ironically, most laws that criminalize homosexuality in Africa were actually enacted under British colonial rule, leading some to argue that it is not homosexuality that is un-African but homophobia.³ Decriminalizing homosexuality could therefore be considered an act not of emulating the West, but of decolonization (Lee 2016: 986). Moreover, labelling sexual and gender minorities ‘un-African’ erases the existence and denies the lived experience of African individuals, including many who identify as both LGBTQI+ and African.

Finally, alleged authenticity and tradition are poor arguments in and of themselves. Even when not distorting the historical record, some actors selectively use such justifications to normalize what may be very harmful ‘traditional’ practices, such as female genital mutilation, while discarding others, such as slavery.⁴ Traditions were all, at some point, invented, some more recently than commonly known (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). So-called traditional practices may not have been the object of consensus either, but rather highly contested. Traditions often serve those who interpret and maintain them, veiled under a cloak of authenticity. Likewise, ‘African culture’, even without longstanding historical roots, is a poor justification as it too is contested and not monolithic. Some African people’s current culture or individual beliefs may be ‘cis-het’, but many other Africans embrace or at least are tolerant of sexual and gender diversity—and are not *ipso facto* any less African. As for tradition, the interpreters of ‘African culture’ tend to be self-serving in their essentialist, uniformizing representations and distortions. For instance, Ugandan politicians ‘rewrote’ tradition ‘to serve contemporary political interests – and, in this case, to legitimate persecution’ (Cheney 2012: 81).

Even if popular acceptance of sexual and gender diversity varies quite widely across the region (Boryczka 2020; Dionne and Dulani 2020; Flores 2019), the religious and cultural arguments are powerful ones in most if not all African countries. Demonstrating precolonial sexual and gender diversity, for instance, even if recognized by those who were previously unaware of it, may destabilize the historical authenticity argument. However, it is unlikely to have a profound impact on what is viewed as national or ‘African’ culture today. Still, culture is always in flux, rather than unchanging. Although there is no easy solution, efforts to defend LGBTQI+ rights are more likely to succeed when they respectfully engage with religious and cultural perspectives and concerned actors, rather than dismissing them. Ultimately, though, arguments about authentic Africanness will only be successful when the counterarguments come from African actors themselves.

There are signs of a shift towards more tolerant attitudes regarding sexual and gender diversity in many African countries, especially among women, frequent internet users and city dwellers (Dionne and Dulani 2020). International actors, as outsiders, can only play at most a supporting role in challenging and redefining what is ‘African’. As the next section demonstrates, international involvement comes with a lot of historical baggage.

3 Although there is some validity to that argument and important links between homophobia and empire (Durban 2021), calling homophobia un-African reifies a monolithic African culture and erases African agency, including decades of postcolonial social history and politics.

4 For a similar argument regarding LGBTQI+ rights and ‘traditional Asian values’, see Altman (2000).

2.2 Neo-imperialist postures

Criticisms of international intervention based on imperialism and neocolonialism are more convincing than ones based on essentialized views of African culture and religious beliefs. Indeed, Western countries have a long history of imposing social, political and economic policies on African societies and countries, dating back to early colonization, while in recent times using foreign aid as leverage. Regardless of the time period, these imposed policies were often very harmful to the fabric of African societies, as was the case of structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 1990s. Not all development policies are externally imposed, and many have yielded positive results. However, even for external policies that could be considered positive, the fact that they were imposed by external actors can have a delegitimizing effect, undermining local ‘ownership’ of the policies, and, moreover, local authority and governance more generally (Hope 1997; Reinsberg et al. 2019).

Starting around 2009, as an urgent response to the deteriorating situation of LGBTQI+ people in Malawi and Uganda, a number of Western aid donors, notably the UK, announced that aid levels to African countries would take into account the treatment of sexual and gender minorities, although actual cases of aid reduction or suspension have been very rare (Yang 2020: 4). Interventions often took the form of ‘bullhorn diplomacy’ (for example, high-profile statements in the media), which was condescending to African partners, rather than meaningful and respectful dialogue. It has not been very effective either, as discussed further below, often provoking a backlash.

The means used to pressure African countries to improve their treatment of their LGBTQI+ citizens have been flawed. However, that does not mean that trying to protect LGBTQI+ rights is illegitimate per se. If it were, the only acceptable course of action would be to do nothing, to respect national sovereignty, no matter how great the abuses. Remaining silent on LGBTQI+ rights and by extension other human rights, while continuing to provide financial assistance (and perhaps political and military as well) is also a form of external intervention—in support of an abusive government. It constitutes not just a tacit endorsement of its objectionable policies, but an intervention that provides material and nonmaterial support to the state. Doing nothing may be a policy choice, but it can be an unethical rather than a principled one. To take the argument to its logical extension, not acting in cases of genocide should not be justified as respecting national sovereignty or eschewing imperialism and neocolonialism. It does not mean that any form of intervention is necessarily a good thing or effective, but it does imply that intervention can be justified.

Finally, there is an argument against defending international LGBTQI+ rights that combines the anti-imperialist and culturalist arguments. One strand, found in particular among some conservative politicians in the Global North, opposes such efforts as being an imposition of ‘our values’ (recognizing LGBTQI+ rights in our home country, even if somewhat reluctantly) on societies whose cultures are different. It too relies on essentialist views of ‘their culture’ critiqued above (and of ‘ours’ as well) but is an interesting right-wing instrumentalization of seemingly anti-imperialist perspectives. I interpret this framing as part of a wider trend of conservative actors exporting certain battles in their domestic ‘culture wars’, such as on women’s rights, especially abortion, and LGBTQI+ rights, to the Global South (for instance Hankinson 2022). Such arguments ignore the role of Western-based church actors, in particular US ones, in promoting homophobic, transphobic and anti-feminist ‘values’ in the Global South.

A more sophisticated strand of the anti-cultural imperialism argument, however, is not necessarily rooted in homophobia and transphobia, and is in fact inspired by Queer Theory. It is best represented by Joseph Massad (2002), who argues that Western-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that seek to promote LGBT rights abroad, which he terms ‘the Gay International’, are spreading historically and Western-specific LGBT identities in regions—in the case of his study, the Arab world—where they did not previously exist, replacing more culturally specific and less monolithic vernacular understandings of gender

and sexuality. The process of creating people who identify as LGBT, he argues, increases their visibility and thereby exposes them to greater danger of marginalization and violence (Massad 2002). Although there is much truth to his critiques, his account fails to explain the multifaceted dynamics of state-led homophobia in different countries, including ‘the variety of local and global factors that move state actors from indifference to repression’ (Bosia and Weiss 2013: 10). Massad also overstates the influence of NGOs and, more fundamentally, minimizes the agency of non-Western people in shaping their own identities, including the possibility of developing hybrid identities, rather than adopting wholesale Western ones (Rao 2010). Moreover, he adopts a very static and essentialist view of local identities. Under the current international system, with financial and trade relations, global interdependence, foreign aid flows, security assistance and the circulation of ideas, it is impossible to conceive of countries as hermetically sealed from foreign influences—even though a few countries such as North Korea and Eritrea may come close. No local identities are frozen in time, assuming they ever have been. The spread of identities is not inherently negative and can bring their new adherents benefits from the personal to the political levels.

The challenge for international intervention is to adopt means that minimize the North-South relations of dominance, the sense (or reality) that Northern actors—be they states or NGOs—are trying to force Southern actors to adopt policies against their own will. Almost universally erased from all of the arguments above are the voices and perspectives of local sexual and gender minorities. Only Massad (2002) seems to recognize them as legitimate actors, although he is dismissive of those who have adopted what he considers ‘Western’ LGBTQI+ identities, an allegedly tiny minority.

These various critical arguments all share a civilizational approach to LGBTQI+ rights—that, if appropriate at all, LGBTQI+ rights should be limited to the Western world and that international efforts to defend them outside the West are illegitimate, constituting a form of cultural imperialism. They all conveniently ignore the fact that sexual and gender minorities are citizens of countries in Africa and the broader Global South, that many do identify at least to some degree as LGBTQI+ and, even if they do not, that defending their human rights and fighting against discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) is a legitimate area for international involvement, regardless of dominant domestic cultural or religious beliefs. The key is thus for international actors to play a supporting role to domestic LGBTQI+ rights defenders, but mindful of the fact that their support is a double-edged sword: Western countries can help local organizations carry out their work, but this assistance can also be used to delegitimize those same organizations, which national governments may attempt to paint as foreign agents (Gloppen et al. 2022: 10).

Not all forms of intervention are automatically legitimate or effective. The next section of this article therefore examines pitfalls of intervention and outlines principles for more effective action.

3. How (not) to intervene

This section considers some of the pitfalls in intervention, including misguided motivations and lack of effectiveness. It then provides guidance for a more fruitful approach, recognizing the political challenges to implementing it.

3.1 Questionable intentions and motives

At one level, there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of international support—in general, numerous international actors do believe in the importance of LGBTQI+ rights around the world, including in Africa. However, their motives and actions can be problematic and indirectly undermine their efforts in at least three ways: through neocolonial attitudes, by acting unstrategically and through the instrumentalization of LGBTQI+ rights.

First, the framing of the intervention matters, not least for the beneficiaries. Like foreign aid more broadly, defending international LGBTQI+ rights can be characterized by and even explicitly framed as an imperative for more advanced countries to help the less fortunate in (perhaps implicitly) more ‘backward’ countries. This motive can overlap with the concept of the ‘white saviour complex’, which also reinforces the idea of more advanced races (or cultural groups) and regions of the world that must rescue the less fortunate abroad (Weerawardhana 2018: 123). Such understandings, reminiscent of Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis, places individual countries and regions on a rather reductionist linear scale from good to bad, sometimes based on indices that provide numerical scores.⁵ Although those tools can be of use, such approaches can stigmatize the ‘non-West’ and ignore the ‘clash *within* civilizations’ whereby laws and norms are actively contested within countries on both sides of the pro- and anti-LGBTQI+ divide and, moreover, laws may not actually reflect variations in practices and attitudes.

The discursive separation of the modern pro-LGBTQI+ ‘us’ and the regressive anti-LGBTQI+ ‘them’, or what Yang (2020) labels ‘LGBT-inclusive’ and ‘LGBT-phobic’, promotes historical amnesia regarding the recognition of LGBTQI+ rights in the West. It also deflects attention from ongoing work that still needs to be done to end discrimination at home in the West, especially with regard to trans and intersex rights. Western countries display remarkable hypocrisy when defending LGBTQI+ rights abroad. In particular, they frequently remain silent on their own history of anti-LGBTQI+ legislation, in many cases quite recent or even being currently introduced. For instance, Great Britain barred local authorities from undertaking activities that upheld the acceptability of homosexuality from 1988 to 2000 in Scotland and until 2003 in England and Wales (Kollman and Waites 2011: 189). In 2003, 14 American states had sodomy laws on the books, similar to those in many African countries, that were invalidated by the US Supreme Court. Most of those laws actually remain in place, even though they are no longer legally enforceable (Mendos 2019: 186). In 2019, the US reinstated its ban on transgender people serving in the military (Pepin-Neff and Cohen 2021). Many US states, such as Florida and Texas, are currently legally restricting the rights of LGBTQI+ youth.

The exclusive focus on sexual and gender minorities also occludes the lack of respect of other human rights in the West, including some that may be better respected in Africa. For instance, when US President Barack Obama raised the issue of LGBTQI+ rights with his Senegalese counterpart Macky Sall in 2013, the latter invoked different sociocultural norms, pointing out that capital punishment was outlawed in Senegal (Nossiter 2013). In addition, speaking out in favour of LGBTQI+ rights around the world allows Western countries to present to their domestic constituency and international peers an image of themselves as a virtuous defender of sexual and gender minorities worldwide, a practice sometimes referred to as *homointernationalism*. This type of approach falls into the trap of neocolonial approaches to LGBTQI+ rights (Waites 2017: 656), which facilitates resistance to Western norm entrepreneurship.

The second way that Western countries undermine their own efforts is by adopting modalities that do not appear to be strategic, but rather quite short-term and reactive. Their main visible efforts are usually a quick response to a specific incident in a given country, such as the proposal of a new bill that prescribes draconian penalties for homosexuality (for example Uganda), a threatening statement by a prominent official (for example Tanzania) or a court judgement that includes extremely severe sentencing (for example Malawi). However, as argued below, their public condemnations and punitive approaches (including threatened or actual aid suspensions) do little or nothing to protect LGBTQI+ people

5 For instance, the International LGBT Association publishes a map of ‘Sexual Orientation Laws in the World’, updated annually, while researchers at Franklin and Marshall College have compiled a Global Barometer of Gay Rights and a Global Barometer of Transgender Rights. The United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank are currently designing a LGBTI Inclusion Index.

or defend their rights, and often even lead to a backlash, placing LGBTQI+ people in a more precarious position as a result of Western intervention. All too often, some Western countries are under domestic pressure from the media, politicians or CSOs to ‘do something’ or they want to demonstrate international leadership in the area. As a result, they sometimes take the easiest and most immediate action—public condemnation, potentially accompanied by punitive measures—regardless of what the outcome is for LGBTQI+ people on the ground, for their main immediate concern can be to do something (or to be seen to be doing something) rather than identifying ways to achieve lasting, concrete, positive results. Western countries’ foreign aid and broader foreign policy might follow a strategy, but LGBTQI+ rights are usually subordinated to other policy goals and therefore not themselves pursued strategically.

The third problematic element is that Western countries are selective about where they defend LGBTQI+ rights and who they denounce for not respecting them. For instance, the US and some of its Western allies have condemned Iran for its corporal and capital punishment of men who engage in sexual relations with other men, but unsurprisingly to no effect. They remained silent, however, about Saudi Arabia, their ally, which subjects gay and bisexual men to similar penalties (Kirby 2019; Sato and Alexander 2021), despite it being a country where they could potentially have more influence than ‘enemy’ regimes. Similarly, since Abdel Fattah el-Sisi became president in 2013, Egypt has suffered no public reprimands for crackdowns on gay men and trans women (Youssef and Stack 2017). Such double standards have been noted in African countries on the receiving end of Western condemnation, for instance in the Tanzanian press (Mhango 2018). Western countries appear to be most keen to take a public stand in the absence of competing interests or when it supports geopolitical ones, rather than based on principles, and to lack a focus on the impact of their actions. These patterns discredit the interventions that do take place.

Together, these motives and modalities reveal a lack of commitment to achieving results as the main objective of Western intervention. Instead, they reinforce neocolonial attitudes and actions and expose Western countries’ hypocrisy regarding the depth and breadth of their commitment to LGBTQI+ rights, feeding resistance. The next section considers the extent to which recent interventions have been effective.

3.2 Dubious effectiveness

This section examines the effectiveness of the three most prominent international efforts to defend LGBTQI+ rights in Africa over the past dozen years: in Malawi, Uganda and Tanzania. It argues that any positive effects were at best tenuous and short-lived.

The most effective instance of international pressure in defence of LGBTQI+ rights in Africa is probably the case of Steven Monjeza Soko and Tiwonge Chimbalanga Kachepa, respectively a cisgender man and a transgender woman (widely reported erroneously as two gay men), who were sentenced in Malawi to 14 years’ hard labour for gross indecency after holding a traditional engagement ceremony in 2009. In response to the international outcry against the severity of the sentencing, including threats to reduce future levels of foreign aid, Malawian President Bingu wa Mutharika issued a pardon to the couple in 2010, while UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was visiting the country. However, the following year, Malawi reinforced its anti-LGBTQI+ legislation by outlawing previously unmentioned sexual acts between women, explicitly banning same-sex marriage and defining sex as determined at birth (Angotti et al. 2019; Demone 2016; McKay and Angotti 2016; Msosa 2018). In the end, international intervention did help one LGBTQI+ couple, but in so doing sparked a backlash that led to the extending and tightening of laws that criminalize sexual and gender minorities.

Uganda presents a rare instance where international intervention apparently played a role in having extremely anti-LGBTQI+ legislation struck down, in tandem with local civil society actors. Western countries had very prominently condemned the draconian

Anti-Homosexuality Act, nicknamed the ‘Kill the Gays Bill’. They also threatened to reduce foreign aid in response, which some donors temporarily did, but that did not prevent the Ugandan government from adopting the bill. Nonetheless, the Ugandan Supreme Court subsequently used a technicality to invalidate the legislation in 2014, presumably responding to President Yoweri Museveni’s desire to discreetly comply with international pressure (Dasandi 2022; Nyanzi and Karamagi 2015: 31). The broader sense of a positive outcome, however, was short-lived. In 2021, parliament passed a Sexual Offences Act that reinstated some of the provisions of the previous law, including harsher penalties for private consensual sexual acts between members of the same sex, which were already illegal under existing laws (Human Rights Watch 2021).

Tanzania offers another case of prominent international response to anti-LGBTQI+ policies, in this case a public statement by Paul Makonda, the Regional Governor of Dar es Salaam, the country’s largest city. In 2018, he announced a crackdown on homosexuality, including the creation of a task force to track down and round up LGBTQI+ people and their supporters. Officials from donor countries, the European Union, the World Bank and the United Nations quickly condemned the planned witch hunt, in some cases suspending aid, but not for very long. International actors signalled their homointernationalist credentials, while Tanzanian officials responded by ramping up their anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-colonial rhetoric. In the end, it is not clear that anything concrete was achieved on behalf of LGBTQI+ Tanzanians, and the conflict exacerbated the frictions between the donors and the Tanzanian government (Brown 2023).

The general failure of these efforts in the past may explain why international actors have not made prominent statements or otherwise taken any public action against the anti-LGBTQI+ legislation introduced before the Ghanaian parliament in 2021, which is particularly extreme—especially in the context of a country that has a relatively strong record of human rights and is one of Africa’s most robust democracies (Ako and Odoi 2022). Nor did they protest prominently against the reintroduced Ugandan legislation in 2021. Assessing such efforts presents methodological challenges, as the actions are by definition hidden and, as a result, even harder to document, let alone ascribe causality to. It could be that Western countries have become less interested in human rights, focusing instead on commercial and geopolitical priorities, including their rivalry with China in particular. Alternatively, they might have learnt from their past errors and have recognized that acting behind the scenes can be more effective or they might place more value on maintaining cordial relations with partner governments in order to achieve other foreign policy objectives. The next section outlines some basic elements that would constitute a more effective approach.

3.3 Towards a more fruitful approach?

The first step to improving the odds for international involvement to have a positive impact on the rights of LGBTQI+ Africans is to recognize the limits of public condemnations and punitive measures, which local activists often oppose (Dasandi 2022; Seckinelgin 2018), as tempting as it can be to express strong disapproval and look for quick wins, especially in the face of egregious abuses. Paradoxically, even if they succeed, ‘continuous rescues from the West feed directly into the hands of those who see same-sex relations as a Western imposition on Africa’ (Msibi 2011: 72). Instead, Western countries should design development assistance programmes with medium and long time horizons. Some concern should be expressed, but not necessarily publicly, and concrete steps should be strategic in terms of achieving outcomes and not focused on visibility or limited to signalling.

Moreover, if Western countries are truly committed, they need to stop defending LGBTQI+ rights selectively and instrumentally, and instead defend them universally, albeit not in a one-size-fits-all fashion. The most important starting point in the decision of if and how to intervene is to consult and work with local defenders of the rights of LGBTQI+ people (Awondo et al. 2012: 161; Velasco 2020), including via regional networks. Domestic actors are best

placed for analysing the sources of homophobia and opposition to the rights of LGBTQI+ people and thus most likely to design effective strategies that are tailored to local circumstances, and least likely to put their lives and the situation of the people they represent in jeopardy. Fletcher notes more generally that ‘traditional international human rights practices embed tendencies to supplant local knowledge and priorities, and in this sense serve as another form of western domination’, and argues in a similar vein that they need to ‘defer to the local groups’ in order to decolonize their work (Fletcher 2022: 750, 765).

Some of this work will probably be at the cultural and societal level, fighting the notion that homosexuality is un-African or a European imposition, which, as explored above, is a major barrier to recognizing LGBTQI+ rights. Deeply held socially conservative views on homosexuality, however, are difficult to influence, including by other African actors, and efforts must be sustained if they are to have a chance of changing attitudes (Lyon 2023). If such efforts are successful, greater societal recognition of the rights of sexual and gender minorities would make governments less likely to abuse those rights and less suspicious of international support for them (Dasandi 2022). It is particularly important to engage in dialogue and work with faith leaders and potentially the police and journalists as well, to fight intolerance and physical violence.

Examples of progress in LGBTQI+ rights in recent years in Africa, such as the decriminalization of homosexuality in Botswana, as well as Angola, Mozambique and other Lusophone countries, were all locally driven, rather than the result of international pressure (Jjuuko et al. 2022). Western countries’ top priority should be supporting local organizations, who are the actors whose struggle it is. In most cases, the support is best provided discreetly, to help avoid them being portrayed as agents of imperialism, despite the allure of photo ops and other branding exercises that help publicize the Western countries’ work in this area to their domestic and international audiences. ‘Secret’ support, however, could be used to further feed conspiracy theories about international agendas dictating local actors’ subversive work (Gloppen et al. 2022: 10). While some due diligence is necessary regarding the worthiness of recipient organizations, the aid should be minimally bureaucratic and ideally provide core funding, allowing the local organizations to be as nimble as possible, rather than locked into specific activities, while basic expenses (such as renting an office) go unfunded.⁶ Ideally, international donors should help such organizations become more independent, enhancing their ‘ability to generate resources and building mechanisms to support accountability to the populations they serve’, which would also help “‘Africanize homosexuality” to increase social acceptance and alter widespread perceptions that they are inauthentic, out of touch, or in the pockets of donors’ (Angotti et al. 2019: 85). Such efforts would help local organizations avoid dependency on international donors, which leaves them vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities. In parallel, donor agencies should reduce or refuse funding to organizations that discriminate or advocate discrimination against sexual and gender minorities, just as they should be averse to funding organizations that discriminate or oppose human rights more broadly (Downie 2014; Epprecht and Brown 2017).

Although financially supporting domestic groups that defend LGBTQI+ rights is important, and special funding mechanisms will help donor organizations do so, it is not sufficient. Just as dedicated projects for women are important for promoting gender equality, niche programming can support LGBTQI+ rights. Still, development actors have agreed that gender mainstreaming—the inclusion of gender equality considerations in all or at least almost all development programmes—is essential to achieve equality (Tiessen 2007). Similarly, the particular needs of sexual and gender minorities should be considered in the design and implementation of a range of development programmes, starting in the area of human rights, but spanning the gamut from humanitarian assistance to the education and healthcare sectors, notably sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as in

6 For detailed suggestions of concrete ways to support such organizations, see Rainer et al. (2021: 21–22).

poverty reduction and private sector initiatives (Aylward and Brown 2020; Crehan et al. 2020; Jolly 2022; Rainer et al. 2021). Integrating LGBTQI+ concerns into ‘mainstream’ development projects, rather than setting up side projects, will also help defend against potentially damaging accusations that development funds are being ‘wasted’ on sexual and gender minorities (especially if their conduct is criminalized), or that the latter are receiving ‘special’ support, at the expense of the majority.

Policy dialogue remains an important means of defending LGBTQI+ rights. In designing their strategies and in their interactions with recipient country officials, Western countries need to be sensitive to the history of North–South relations and, in particular, of the North lecturing Southern countries and not just telling them what to do but trying to impose policies. For decades, aid donors have enacted various forms of conditionality, some of which are generally recognized in retrospect as ill-advised. Appearing arrogant and condescending tends to be counterproductive. Under certain circumstances, quiet diplomacy is more likely to be effective, notably when a country’s general population actually supports rights violations, as is often the case when a government targets LGBTQI+ people (Dasandi 2022).

Ideally, such efforts should be multilateral. In some places, they can usefully be embedded in UN and international human rights instruments (Rainer et al. 2021). LGBTQI+ rights are not explicitly mentioned in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights or other documents that constitute international law, but they have been legally ‘read into’ them (Ibhawoh 2014). Article 1 of the Universal Declaration, for instance, states that ‘All human beings are born free and *equal in dignity and rights*’, while Article 2 asserts that

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or *other status* (UN n.d., emphasis added).

Furthermore, the rights of sexual and gender minorities have been asserted in countless resolutions and other documents of multiple United Nations bodies, and the UN appoints an Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (Janoff 2022). SOGIESC concerns are thus an integral part of international human rights bodies and therefore a legitimate area of intervention.

The UN system, however, is not capable on its own of conferring legitimacy on LGBTQI+ rights, an area in which it has only relatively recently begun to work. Member states, as much in the Global North as the Global South, pick and choose the rights they want to prioritize and how to interpret them. Moreover, almost all African countries only gained independence after the establishment of the UN and the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As such, they were to a large extent integrated into a pre-existing system, rather than contributing to its design, making them rule-takers rather than part of the rule-makers. As a result, the international system and the international human rights movement may be seen as a tool of the Global North that seeks to impose its values and priorities on the South (Fletcher 2022). The UN thus has a role to play in defending LGBTQI+ rights, but without assuming that its involvement is considered automatically legitimate, requiring other forms of validation as well, including in hard or soft international and domestic law. Moreover, even the concept of ‘human rights’ can lack legitimacy in some contexts, complicated by the lack of an equivalent term in local languages. In such instances, it could be helpful also to draw on shared understandings of concepts such as justice rather than relying on a rights discourse (Msosa 2018). The right to dignity may also be a basis for which to argue for the decriminalization of sexual and gender minorities (Braun 2021).

African regional organizations, such as the African Union and various subregional groupings, and indeed national constitutions and legislation have clauses that, like the UN, uphold human dignity, prohibit discrimination on social grounds and recognize a right

to privacy. Several provide concrete legal and policy instruments that can be mobilized to uphold LGBTQI+ rights, even if they do not explicitly mention sexual orientation or gender identity and expression (Izugbara et al. 2020). The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, for instance, enshrines fundamental principles of non-discrimination and the right to privacy (Akanji and Epprecht 2013). Domestic legal and constitutional challenges, especially in countries with democratic governance and the rule of law, can be used to decriminalize homosexuality and otherwise defend LGBTQI+ rights (Jjuuko 2020). For instance, in 2019 and confirmed on appeal in 2021, Botswanan human rights defenders (with some financial support from international actors) succeeded in having their country's courts invalidate colonial-era sodomy provisions, on the grounds that the law violated some constitutionally guaranteed rights and freedoms, including dignity, equality and non-discrimination (Dinokopila 2022; Tabengwa and Oluoch 2022).

Those legal instruments are all bases for the recognition of LGBTQI+ rights, even if those rights are not explicitly mentioned, and thus justifications for international support to those whose rights are violated—especially if states are unwilling or unable to provide protection or indeed are responsible for the violations. Working with allies in the Global South, such as South Africa and Brazil (though not under President Jair Bolsonaro, in office 2019–22) and respected individuals such as the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and former Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano (Downie 2014), helps avoid accusations of neo-imperialism, potentially supplemented by Africans living in the diaspora. In recent years, Rwanda has also become more supportive of LGBTQI+ rights at the United Nations (Paszat 2022). Moreover, rights for LGBTQI+ people are more likely to be recognized, as they were in South Africa, when embedded in broader principles of non-discrimination and human rights, and not as 'special rights' for sexual and gender minorities (Downie 2014). Angola, for instance, reformed its criminal code in 2021 and, as part of that process, simply dropped the provisions that criminalized homosexuality. In fact, the new code went further and prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Jjuuko 2022).

Beyond legal rights and national and international obligations to uphold them, to increase effectiveness, Western countries should do more to understand the political roots of state homophobia, including how anti-LGBTQI+ campaigns are situated in local political dynamics and competition, rather than treat it as a form of cultural backwardness. Domestic organizations can help Western officials understand the politics of vocal opposition to LGBTQI+ rights, facilitating the identification of allies and of strategies that seem most promising.

For instance, discussions can be held on the importance of non-discrimination, the right to privacy and the right to healthcare, even for those whose behaviours might be objectionable to some for religious or moral reasons. It is also consistent with the overarching message of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015: 'leave no one behind'. The latter by definition includes LGBTQI+ people. Sexual and gender minorities are in many places among the most marginalized members of society and thus should be priority populations for actions in solidarity with the oppressed. Individual or collective objections to the practices or existence of sexual and gender minorities cannot override principles of universality, even where such practices are illegal or widely condemned. In practice, though, the explicit inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in SDG policies proves to be a challenging endeavour (Izugbara et al. 2022).

Using inclusive and sometimes creative language will be important in contexts where many members of sexual and gender minorities do not see themselves as such, and even less as L, G, B, T, Q or I individuals, creating a fundamental disconnection between high-level discussions on rights and the lived experiences of local people (Seckinelgin 2018). Some African languages lack equivalent terms for such identities and homosexuality in particular is sometimes conflated with paedophilia, causing great consternation when proposals to decriminalize same-sex behaviour are interpreted as a desire to legalize the sexual abuse of

children (Msosa 2018). As a result, public education and carefully crafted messages will be important to counter misunderstandings and misinformation.

Finally, in this work, international actors should strive to ‘do no harm, but do something’ (Rainer et al. 2021: 9). Given that international intervention, regardless of motives, can create a backlash and endanger individuals, Western countries should assess the impact of their actions in collaboration with domestic LGBTQI+ rights groups and seek quickly to mitigate any damage they directly or indirectly cause.⁷ Such measures should include facilitating the granting of refugee status to those negatively affected or put at greater risk because of their work defending the rights of sexual and gender minorities.

4. Conclusion

This article has examined Western countries’ efforts to defend LGBTQI+ rights in Africa. It identified the two principal obstacles to the legitimacy of these efforts, namely essentialist claims about ‘authentic Africanness’ and accusations of neo-imperialism. It found that domestic actors would be more effective at countering the former, while international actors have important steps to take to respond to the latter, predicated on accepting the lead role of domestic actors. After highlighting the main critiques regarding the motives, means and effectiveness of international interventions, including an examination of the cases of Uganda, Malawi and Tanzania, I proposed what I believe to be a more fruitful way forward. In essence, Western countries need to abandon their desire for visibility (playing to their home and international constituencies), and focus instead on the needs, priorities and strategies identified by local rights defenders. In doing so, the West must eschew short-term, reactive approaches, which can provoke a counterproductive backlash, and be more strategic and long-term in their thinking, working in conjunction with, and providing support to, local actors. Given Western countries’ entrenched attachment to the visibility of their assistance, Northern and Southern CSOs have a key role to play in convincing them that focusing primarily on effectiveness is a worthwhile trade-off. In particular, if domestic actors believe it would be productive and consider it a priority, the legal case for LGBTQI+ rights could be embedded in international and especially regional rights frameworks and draw on national constitutions and legal codes, emphasizing a range of rights and widely accepted principles, such as dignity, privacy and freedom from discrimination. Work at the societal level will be an important complement to work at the political and legal levels, especially if the majority of the population is hostile to sexual and gender minorities.

The article provides a synthesis of debates that undermine international efforts to defend the rights of sexual and gender minorities, identifying a way forward. Its arguments and the principles that it proposes for improving effectiveness should be of particular interest to practitioners, including by bridging the worlds of academe and practice. The principles, in particular, should help such actors design more effective programmes and projects, and avoid backlashes and other negative outcomes, independently of how well-intentioned their actions may be. Although the article focuses on Western countries’ interventions in Africa, its findings and recommendations are also relevant to international organizations and CSOs, and in other regions of the world as well.⁸

Effectiveness is, of course, not guaranteed, and should be seen as a long-term goal. Moreover, given the frequent diversity of local groups’ perspectives and priorities, deciding which ones to listen to and fund will raise new challenges. Also, actual impact will

⁷ For example, an embassy in Côte d’Ivoire posted pictures on its website of Ivoirian LGBTI rights defenders attending an embassy-sponsored event without the concerned individuals’ consent. As a result, some of them were physically assaulted and forced to leave their homes (Rainer et al. 2021: 9).

⁸ For instance, LGBTQI+ rights defenders in the Middle East were concerned about the backlash that could follow the well-intentioned but ultimately ineffective and performative protests against the host country’s position on LGBTQI+ rights at the World Cup held in Qatar in November and December 2022 (Damien 2022; El Massassi 2022).

be difficult to measure and attribute. Inasmuch as some Western countries have begun to provide some support along the lines recommended above, future qualitative work could analyse its positive and negative experiences on the ground in various countries, including the impact of international support on the local actors and movements themselves, and then help revise or further refine the recommendations. Moreover, comparisons with international efforts to defend the rights of other marginalized groups—those of women, youth and disabled people, for instance—could also yield important empirical and theoretical insights.

Acknowledgements

The author greatly appreciates the many helpful suggestions he received, especially from Susan Erikson and Emma Mawdsley, as well as Morgane Rosier who also provided research assistance. For hosting him during his work on this article, he is grateful to the University of Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies, the Centre for Research on the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, and Clare Hall (Cambridge, UK) and the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, University of Bayreuth (Germany). He also thanks the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Leverhulme Trust for financial support.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Funding

This work was supported by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (430-2018-00147) and the Leverhulme Trust (VP1-2019-020).

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