

Brief supporting Evidence Report 131

# SEXUALITY, POVERTY AND POLITICS IN RWANDA

Sexuality, Poverty and Law

Polly Haste and Thierry Kevin Gatete

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The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Sexuality, Poverty and Law theme.

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## Background

Recent legislative developments in Africa have focused international attention on the legal status of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the continent. Attempts by various African governments to revise or introduce new legislation on same-sex sexual conduct and marriage, and the response of the international community, has sparked extensive coverage of the associated political, social and cultural controversies.

Away from the headlines are several African countries that have never criminalised same-sex sexual conduct and that are outliers to the apparent 'trend' of homophobia and of discriminatory legislation in the continent.<sup>1</sup> One of these is Rwanda. Compared with the situation in neighbouring countries, state-sponsored homophobia appears negligible in Rwanda, and violent attacks are minimal. Despite negative reports of Rwanda's human rights record in areas such as civil and political rights, when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity, human rights observers consistently report that there is no need for concern.<sup>2</sup> In the international arena, Rwanda has emerged as an unlikely champion for LGBT rights, and domestically has designated sexual orientation as a 'private matter'.

This study explores Rwanda's *relatively* progressive position on LGBT-related issues and its implications for Rwandan civil society. It examines the strategies employed by national as well as international actors to advance LGBT rights and to address social and economic marginalisation. By selecting a country that is not known as one of the 'worst offenders' when it comes to LGBT rights, this study also seeks to challenge assumptions about the uniformity of the 'African experience' and to enhance understanding of the nuance and diversity that exists both within and between countries on the continent.

## Rationale and focus

This study is part of a series of country case studies looking at the linkages between sexuality and poverty. Rwanda was selected for this study because of its regional distinctiveness in three key ways: the absence of discriminatory laws and policies on same-sex sexual conduct; its achievements in poverty reduction and economic growth; and its emphasis on national unity and inclusivity.

The study addresses the following three themes:

1. how stigma related to sexual orientation and gender identity contributes to the social and economic marginalisation of LGBT people in Rwanda;
2. the strategies employed by civil society organisations to address this kind of social and economic marginalisation;
3. the scope for joint working between civil society, development agencies and the Government of Rwanda to address such marginalisation.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/02/140228-uganda-anti-gay-law-smug-homophobia-africa-world/> and Downie (2014).

<sup>2</sup> The Department for International Development's (DFID's) human rights assessment in *Rwanda Operational Plan* (2013 update) and the US State Department's *Rwanda 2013 Human Rights Report* both report significant concern around civil and political rights but not in relation to LGBT rights. An EU 'non-paper' reported that LGBT organisations 'do not have any complaints'.

## Methodology

This case study is a product of collaboration between IDS and the Centre for Human Rights Rwanda. The study was conducted in Rwanda during May and June 2014 in the capital city Kigali and the eastern border town of Rubavu. A multi-method approach was employed, combining informal consultations and semi-structured interviews with participant observation. In addition, data are drawn from a two-day capacity-building workshop that the authors designed and facilitated in consultation with local partners.

## Findings

This study emphasises how efforts by actors working to advance LGBT rights are shaped not only by intense social stigma but also by the 'unique' political space created by the post-genocide environment and by the incentives and priorities of the ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, under the leadership of President Paul Kagame. It demonstrates that, although still nascent, civil society activism in this area has nonetheless made a number of significant advances and that these have been achieved through 'insider' knowledge of the opportunities and format of political and community-level engagement.

## Recommendations

The study recommends that civil society organisations continue to expand their platform by engaging stakeholders working on politically 'approved' agendas and argues that international actors can play a key role in supporting these efforts if they are prepared to recognise the value of 'insider' knowledge and forgo their own visibility.

1. Recommendations for international allies in Rwanda
  - Consider framing LGBT issues in terms of inclusion and non-discrimination rather than individualised human rights and freedoms.
  - Recognise that the pace of change in relation to LGBT rights in Rwanda is likely to be slow and that change will be incremental.
  - Create opportunities to include marginalised voices within existing forums and policy spaces.
  - Develop capacity within donor organisations to recognise and address LGBT-related issues in priority areas such as health, education and social protection.
  - Coordinate efforts with other development partners and local allies.
2. Recommendations for Rwandan LGBT civil society groups
  - Prioritise basic data collection, analysis and dissemination: the paucity of data on LGBT populations in Rwanda is hampering local efforts to address discrimination and economic and social marginalisation.
  - Focus efforts on building the capacity of the Isange coalition to act as a national platform for coordinating advocacy efforts.
  - Develop an approach that emphasises the strengths of community-level organising, not the weaknesses.
  - Continue to expand networks to include women's forums and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on men and masculinities and on sexual and reproductive health and rights.
  - Be clear about the priorities and agenda so that you can start to set the agenda rather than simply seeking funding.
  - Move from individualised activism to establishing organisational structures.
  - Avoid duplication of action by using the Isange coalition as a platform for division of labour and information-sharing.