Prejudice in Sub-Saharan Africa: (Why) Is Homophobia Different?

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Prejudice toward minority groups shapes social exclusion, labor market outcomes, political conflict, and the allocation of public goods (Becker, 1957; Glaeser, 2005). Prejudice, however, is not monolithic. Even within the same societies, hostility can be sharply group-specific. A striking example is prejudice against sexual minorities, which has received far less attention in economics, and for which the empirical evidence that does exist is heavily concentrated in high-income settings where measurement is easier and legal and personal risks are lower (Badgett et al., 2024). Understanding why homophobia departs from other prejudices is important for both positive and normative reasons. In many parts of the world, sexual minorities face severe stigma, exclusion, and in some cases harsh legal sanctions. More broadly, if the correlates of prejudice against sexual minorities differ systematically from the correlates of other outgroup attitudes, then theories and policy lessons drawn from the broader prejudice literature may not transport to this domain.

In this paper, we argue that homophobia is qualitatively different from other forms of prejudice in Sub-Saharan Africa. Specifically, the standard predictors that help explain attitudes toward other marginalized groups do not explain antipathy toward homosexuals. We develop this argument using harmonized public opinion data from Afrobarometer rounds 6-9 (2014-2022) covering thirty-four Sub-Saharan African countries (Afrobarometer, 2025). In these data, respondents rate how they would feel about having various outgroups as neighbors, allowing us to compare attitudes toward homosexuals, different ethnicities, immigrants and foreign workers, and different religions on a common scale. The levels of anti-gay sentiment are distinctive: while respondents on average have slightly to strongly positive views of other outgroups, view of homosexuals are extremely negative.

The first stylized fact we present is that schooling up to the secondary level is strongly associated with more favorable ratings of different ethnicities, immigrants and foreign workers, and different religions, but it is unrelated to attitudes toward homosexuals. This pattern contrasts with the intuition that education should reduce prejudice against all outgroups through greater exposure and critical thinking. Similarly, despite being positively related to attitudes toward other outgroups, the frequency of religious practice is not meaningfully associated with attitudes toward homosexuals. This pattern suggests that in Sub-Saharan Africa, doctrinal imperatives to "love thy neighbor" are applied to the other outgroups but may be offset by other dogma. Third, geographic patterns in anti-gay prejudice are different from those toward other groups: ratings of homosexuals are substantially less negative in the southern part of the continent and become steadily more negative moving north, while gradients run in the opposite direction for the other outgroups.

I. Data

We use public opinion data from Afrobarometer rounds 6 (2014-15), 7 (2016-18), 8 (2019-21), and 9 (2021-22) covering thirty-four Sub-Saharan African countries. We focus on these waves because they contain our outcome of interest, which is a respondent's rating of the prospect of having a neighbor from a given outgroup: homosexuals, people of a different ethnicity, immigrants and foreign workers, and people of a different religion. Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale (strongly dislike, somewhat dislike, not care, somewhat like, or strongly like), which we code as integers ranging from -2 to 2. Thus, negative values indicate antipathy toward the outgroup, zero indifference, and positive values affinity. Two of our explanatory variables are categorical and at

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the individual level. The first is a respondent's level of schooling (none, primary, or secondary) and the other is the frequency of religious practice (atheist, never, monthly, weekly, or daily), the latter observed only in rounds 6 and 8. Our other explanatory variable is the latitude coordinate of a country's centroid, which is a continuous measure.

II. Empirical Strategy

To characterize how attitudes toward outgroups vary with individual characteristics, we estimate

$$y_{i,p,r} = \alpha + \sum_{k \neq 0} \left(\beta_k \cdot \mathbf{1}[\text{Category}_{i,k}] \right) + \Gamma_i + \delta_p + \eta_r + \varepsilon_{i,p,r}, \tag{1}$$

where $y_{i,p,r}$ is the Likert-scale rating of an outgroup by individual i residing in first-level administrative unit (i.e., province) p during survey round r. $\mathbf{1}[\text{Category}_{i,k}]$ indicates i's membership in category k (i.e., level of schooling or religious practice), Γ_i is a vector of individual-level fixed effects (age and sex), δ_p and η_r are fixed effects for the province and round, and $\varepsilon_{i,p,r}$ is the idiosyncratic error term. The omitted category $k = 0$ is always the lowest—i.e., no schooling and atheist. The coefficients β_k summarize average differences in outgroup ratings relative to the omitted category, comparing respondents within the same age, sex, province, and round. We use Afrobarometer multi-country weights and cluster standard errors at the country level.

For geographic gradients, we collapse the data into country-age-sex-round cells using the multi-country weights and estimate

$$y_{c,a,s,r} = \alpha + \beta \text{Latitude}_c + \theta \text{Longitude}_c + \gamma_a + \gamma_s + \eta_r + \varepsilon_{c,a,s,r}, \tag{2}$$

where Latitude_c and Longitude_c are the coordinates of country c's centroid, γ_a and γ_s are age and sex fixed effects, and all other variables as as above. We weight each cell by the number of observations it contains and again cluster standard errors by country. The coefficient of interest is β, which summarizes the change in outgroup ratings when moving north by an additional degree of latitude (approximately 111 km at the equator), conditional on east-west position and the fixed effects.

III. Results

A. *Schooling*

Figure 1 shows how outgroup ratings vary with schooling. In Western Europe, quasi-experimental evidence links additional schooling to less anti-immigrant sentiment and homophobia (Cavaille and Marshall, 2019; Yang, 2022). However, top left panel of Figure 1 shows that in Sub-Saharan Africa, attitudes toward homosexuals do not improve as education increases from none to primary to secondary—and they actually worsen slightly in the first stage of this transition. This null relationship is particularly striking given the very low baseline rating among respondents with no formal schooling (-1.62) and the fact that 86% of respondents have at most a secondary education, meaning that members of this outgroup face very strong prejudice from an overwhelming majority of their neighbors.[1] In contrast, schooling is strongly associated with more favorable views of different ethnicities, immigrants and foreign workers, and different religions in the other panels of Figure 1. These patterns are also notable because those with no formal schooling have positive views of these three groups (0.68-1.00), so the schooling gradients reflect increases in affinity rather than reductions in animus.

B. *Religious Practice*

Figure 2 shows how ratings of outgroups vary with the frequency of religious practice. The top left panel shows that there are essentially no differences in attitudes toward homosexuals between atheists

[1] We exclude post-secondary education because only 14% of respondents have this level of schooling.

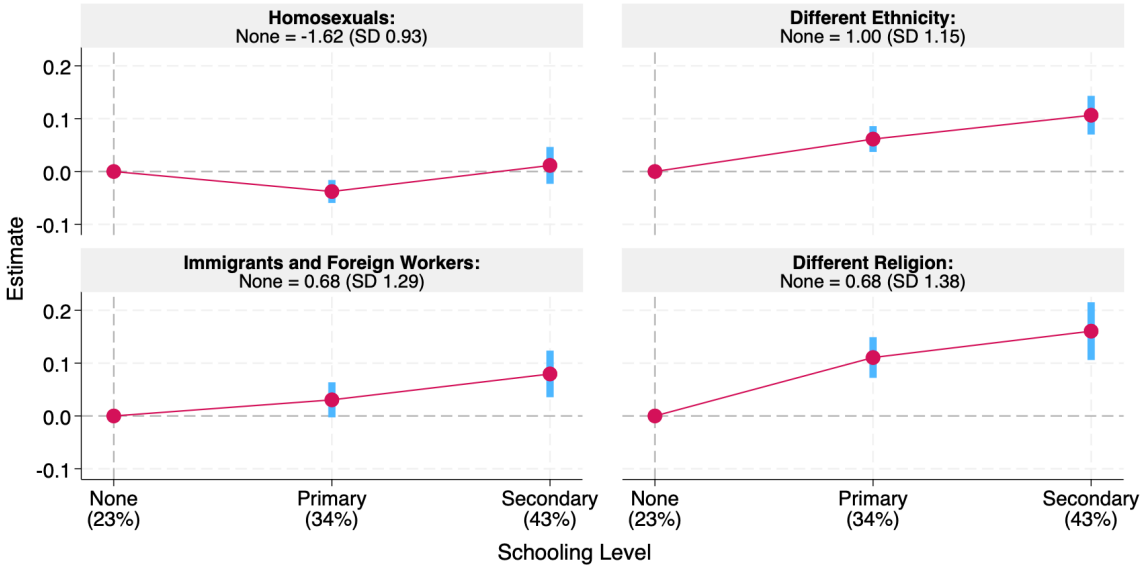

FIGURE 1. EDUCATION AND ATTITUDES TOWARD OUTGROUPS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Note: The figure plots coefficient estimates and 95% confidence intervals from regressions of outgroup ratings on education categories (relative to no formal schooling) on Likert scale ratings of an outgroup in Afrobarometer rounds 6-9. Regressions use around 160,000 observations and control for age, sex, province, and survey round fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered by the 34 countries in the sample.

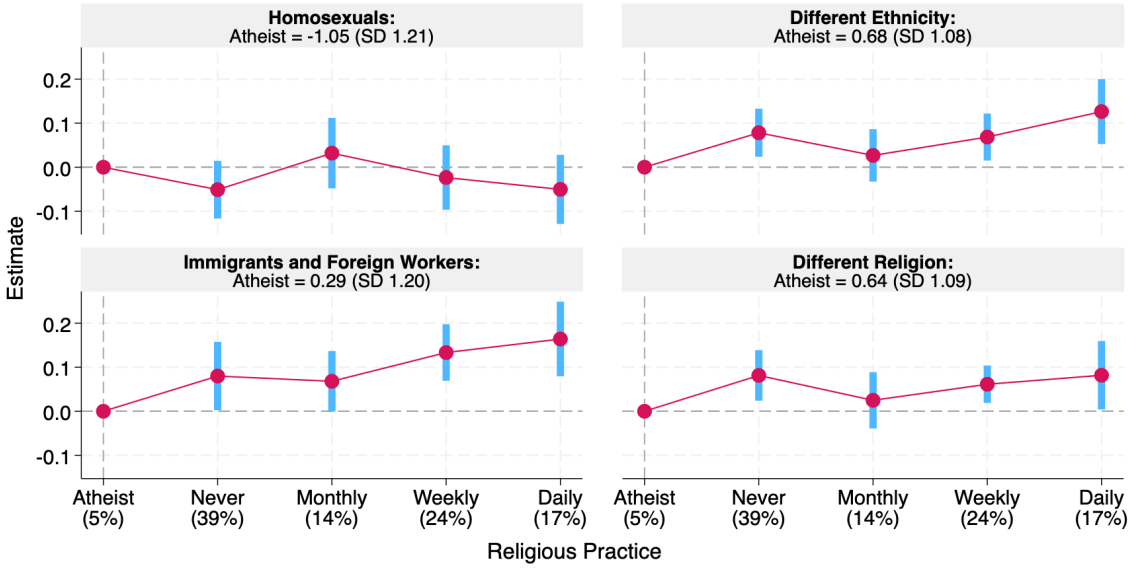

FIGURE 2. RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND ATTITUDES TOWARD OUTGROUPS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Note: The figure plots coefficient estimates and 95% confidence intervals from regressions of outgroup ratings on a given level of religious practice (relative to atheists) using Afrobarometer rounds 6 and 8. Regressions use around 80,000 observations and control for age, sex, province, and survey round fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered by the 32 countries in the sample.

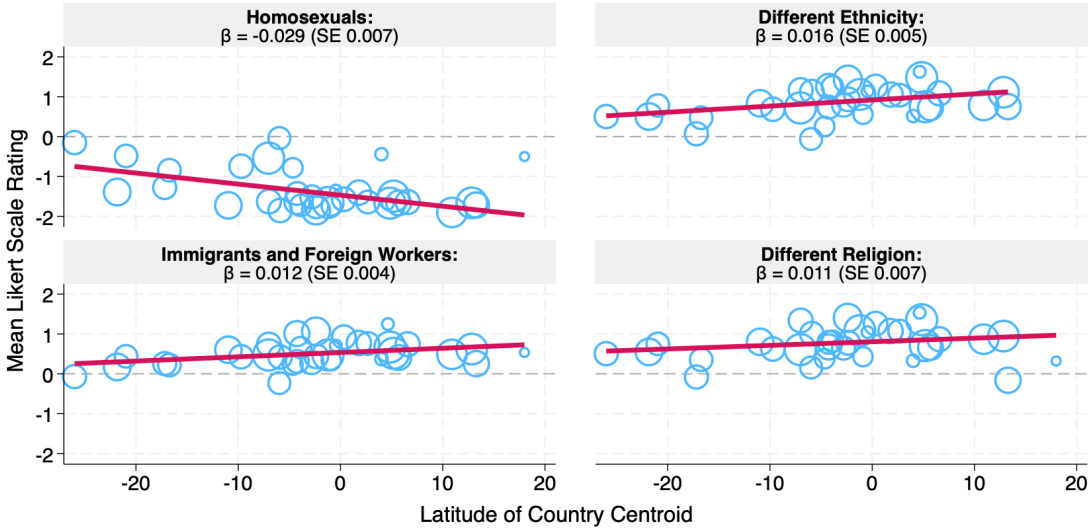

FIGURE 3. NORTH-SOUTH GRADIENTS IN ATTITUDES TOWARD OUTGROUPS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Note: The figure shows partial regression plots for the association between country centroid latitude and Likert scale outgroup ratings in Afrobarometer rounds 6-9. Regressions use around 11,500 country-age-sex-round observations and control for country centroid longitude coordinates and fixed effects for age, sex, and survey round. Standard errors are clustered by the 34 countries in the sample, and mean ratings and latitudes (both net of the controls) are collapsed to the country level.

and those of any religious practice category. In contrast, more frequent religious practice is associated with more favorable views of other outgroups than atheists have, though not always monotonically. These patterns suggest that religiosity in Sub-Saharan Africa may raise affinity for the other groups through exposure or prosocial teachings, but for homosexuals, they may be outweighted by religious particularism or notions of sin (Scheepers, Gijsberts and Hello, 2002).

C. North-South Gradient

Lastly, we study geographic patterns in prejudice. We focus on a north-south gradient because we find in a companion paper that attitudes towards homosexuals are substantially less negative in the former Portuguese colonies in Southern Africa and some neighboring countries that inherited British sodomy laws (Denton-Schneider and Garg, 2025). Additionally, the Islamic share of Sub-Saharan Africa's population is higher at more northerly latitudes, and anti-gay attitudes can be strong among Muslims (van Klinken and Chitando, 2016). Figure 3 presents partial regression plots relating country centroid latitude to outgroup ratings after controlling for longitude and fixed effects for age, sex, and round. The top left panel shows that attitudes toward homosexuals decline sharply when moving north. Specifically, ratings fall by 0.029 Likert scale points with each additional degree of latitude; in standardized terms, a 1-SD movement north in country centroid latitude is associated with a 0.72-SD decrease in ratings of homosexuals, which is an extremely large effect. Interestingly, the associations with ratings of other outgroups have the opposite sign and are at most about half the size in absolute terms (0.016 Likert scale points or less), though standardized coefficients are not quite so small in comparison (0.29-0.46 SD) because there is less variation in these outcomes. Nonetheless, it is once again clear that homophobia is distinct from other forms of prejudice in the region.

IV. Conclusion

Economists have made substantial progress in understanding the causes and consequences of prejudice, but negative attitudes toward sexual minorities remains comparatively understudied. We demon-

strate that homophobia in Sub-Saharan Africa is very different in both its severity and its predictors (or lack thereof), suggesting that anti-gay attitudes in the region are not simply an outgrowth of a generalized intolerance. A natural implication is that mechanisms specific to the moralization of sexuality and gender norms and the institutions that enforce them may be key to explaining homophobia.

Our results motivate an urgently needed research agenda with several open questions. First, why does schooling fail to improve attitudes toward homosexuals in the region? One possibility is that religious schooling may be common, so anti-gay dogma could offset the otherwise prosocial effects of education. Additionally, if the Muslim share of the population contributes to the north-south gradient in homophobia, how should it be interpreted given weak individual-level associations with religious practice? And what else might explain why attitudes toward homosexuals are substantially less negative in Southern Africa? One hypothesis is that long-run exposure generated by male-only circular labor migration and mining systems—which historical accounts link to same-sex practices in male compounds—may have shaped norms differently over generations (Epprecht, 2001; Brodeur and Haddad, 2021). Answering these questions likely requires disentangling individual factors from contextual features such as religious composition, institutional authority, and the political economy of moral regulation. Lastly, beyond cross-sectional stylized facts, future work should test whether these patterns arise within countries using quasi-experimental variation (e.g., exploiting policy reforms, different schooling or religious institutions, or subnational shocks to contact and migration) to identify the causal channels that make homophobia so unusual and extreme relative to other forms of prejudice in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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