

## **Sexual Rights by Covert Means: Advancing the Right to Sexual Orientation in Africa through Public Health Narratives**

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Same-sex sexuality is criminalized to various degrees in 39 countries in Africa south of the Sahara, often with laws inherited from the colonial era. South Africa alone has enshrined the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in its constitution, and from there has moved (fitfully) to bring its laws – and national HIV/AIDS prevention education – in line with global best practices. Elsewhere, however, sexual rights activists still risk their jobs, family, and even lives to speak publicly and explicitly in favour of such rights. A strategy has consequently emerged whereby sexual rights are promoted under cover of euphemism or implicit language within sexual health campaigns that are ostensibly aimed at the heterosexual majority (or at-risk minorities therein such as truck-drivers or fishermen). Can such a secretive or covert strategy succeed in a project which, seemingly by definition, must demand an end to stigmatization inherent in the prevalent homophobic “closeting” culture? The question challenges assumptions about identity, the politics of knowledge production, and constructions of ‘the West’ (“gay international”) and ‘Africa’ that are commonly imputed in analysis of sexuality and gender in Africa. In this paper I reflect on some of the tensions and dilemmas of the public health approach to sexual rights, with particular reference to new research being done by young African scholars.