South African contributions to LGBTI education issues

Tiffany Jones

To cite this article: Tiffany Jones (2019) South African contributions to LGBTI education issues, Sex Education, 19:4, 455-471, DOI: 10.1080/14681811.2018.1535969

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1535969

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 17 Oct 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1140

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
South African contributions to LGBTI education issues

Tiffany Jones
Department of Educational Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT
South Africa stands out in the African region for its protection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights. This article examines South Africa’s contributions to local policy for LGBTIs and to work on LGBTI issues in education policy and education rights progress internationally. It also considers broader South African contributions to the theorisation of gender and sexuality. Data derive from an analysis of 102 interviews with key informants participating in high-level global networking for LGBTI students’ rights, and documentary analysis showing how stakeholders characterise South African contributions to transnational LGBTI education work. Informants identified how such contributions have a strong human rights emphasis, furthering post-colonial resistance to simplistic gender and sexuality classification schema imposed via imperial colonising dynamics. While South African work in this area has also promoted and facilitated research, it has at times been limited by ambivalence from its leadership. The nation’s early adoption of constitutional rights, relationship rights and educational equity provisions as acts of decolonisation contribute valuable African LGBTI work examples to the region. Their success encourages further funding for South-South transnational LGBTI education work.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 June 2018
Accepted 10 October 2018

KEYWORDS
South Africa; transnational; gender; sexuality; education; progress achievements

Introduction
Same-sex acts remain illegal in more than two-thirds of African countries and evidence suggests that African people are among the least accepting of homosexuality in the world (Oberth and Mondry 2014; Wike et al. 2013). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people, their sexual relations or sexuality education have been criminalised or portrayed as psycho-medical aberrations in several African nations including Nigeria and Uganda (UNESCO 2016). South Africa stands alone in the African region in protecting LGBTI peoples’ rights to non-discrimination (Oberth and Mondry 2014; UNESCO 2016). It has been both the focal point of several transnational intervention efforts on LGBTI education issues, and base for UNESCO’s related regional African work (Jones 2016). It has thus had a unique role to play in global and regional LGBTI education work, not yet explored in scholarly writing. This article examines South Africa’s transnational contributions to LGBTI education concerns. It provides a brief overview of the national policy context before describing milestone contributions to global
South African contributions to local policy on LGBTIs concerns

South Africa is a leading country for its early policy protection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people. Same-sex sexual acts are legal and discrimination based on sexual orientation, sex and gender was outlawed in the Constitution after the dismantling of apartheid under the Nelson Mandela Administration’s multicultural democracy (1997). This made South Africa the first nation in the world to frame homophobic discrimination as unconstitutional and tied its policy framing of sexual orientation and gender to human rights. A 2005 parliamentary order recognised relationship law discrimination as unconstitutional – leading to marriage equality and cohabitation protections for same sex couples in 2006 (Smith and Robinson 2008; Jones 2009). Updates to the anti-discrimination law have also included various sex and gender provisions; the 2003+ Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act and Promotion of Equality Act allowed transgender and intersex people to alter their sex status in the population registry (updating documents and passports) if they had undergone medical (hormonal or surgical) treatment (South African Litigation Centre 2017).

Despite these advances, South Africans who do not fit into normative roles of identity and sexuality are often invisible in the rollout plans of heath policies (Livermon 2013; Oberth and Mondry 2014) and there remain significant gaps in health protections for intersex youth (i.e. those born with congenital variations in their sex characteristics) against non-consensual cosmetic medical intervention (Henningham and Jones 2017). Due to the social upheaval and hostilities still experienced post-apartheid, violence is a regular threat for South Africans broadly; particularly women and LGBTI people (Bhana 2014). Up to one in three lesbians report having been raped, and forced sexual experiences are a significant risk factor for HIV infection among South African lesbians and bisexual women (Sandfort et al. 2013). Despite South Africa’s notable LGBTI films (e.g. INXEBA, Simon and I) and spectacular pride events; many LGBTI people feel unable to live openly in their cultural or family contexts (Oberth and Mondry 2014).

South African contributions to international policy on LGBTI issues in education

South Africa introduced the 2011 resolution to the UN Human Rights Council calling for international legislation on non-discrimination (including in education) on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (Vance 2011). The South African Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) organisation received significant funding that same year from the Norwegian Students and Academics International Assistance Fund and began research to identify and promote local and regional LGBTI African youth stories (Bhana 2014). UN representatives in South Africa subsequently met with over 200 delegates to promote awareness of the provisions in the UN’s Born Free and Equal policy (2012). Representatives from the South African government, education and non-governmental organisations – including GALA – have attended UNESCO’s international ongoing policy
consultations on homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools since 2011, to develop inclusive education policy guidelines (UNESCO 2016). In 2012, GALA and the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation hosted the First Colloquium on Challenging Homophobia and Transphobia in South African Schools and in 2013 GALA hosted a follow-up event expanded to include African and global partners. Since the 2012 events, the South African Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) and the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE)’s (CJCP & DBE, 2012) training courses have taught education officials, administrators and educators that ‘young people who are or are perceived to be homosexual’ face high victimisation risks. Simultaneously, the USA has played a role in both transnational legislative attacks and the promotion of protections for LGBTI students’ sexuality education rights in African nations (Jones 2017). US officials sought to promote LGBTI students’ inclusion through diplomatic pressure, boycotts and aid-restrictions in African nations – especially in Uganda and Kenya from 2014; while at the same time US evangelical organisations and churches had systematically funded and contributed to demands to prohibit for LGBTIs inclusion.

Despite these destabilising influences, South African government and non-governmental representatives have continued to engage with UN agencies and in 2014 formed the Transformation in Education Network – a South Africa led group of individuals and organisations promoting research on African LGBTI education issues (Bhana 2014). Working with local academics, the South African DBE has distributed 60,000 copies of Safer Schools for All: Challenging Homophobic Bullying to schools; providing anti-homophobic-bullying information to teachers, students and administrators (Reygan 2016). The resource has sought to promote the well-being and academic potential of LGBTI students in safe and inclusive schools while framing homophobic bullying within the context of gender-based violence, and reflecting African linguistic, religious and cultural diversity (Reygan 2016). The CJCP and DBE have published a National School Safety Framework (NSSF) (CJCP & DBE, 2015) to guide national and provincial education departments in making schools safer and developing anti-violence structures and policies against homophobic bullying. The CJCP Reporting Protocol (2015a) requires the reporting of information concerning homophobic bullying by school safety coordinators to district education offices and the national DBE Safety in Education Directorate, while sexual and physical violence cases should be reported to the police. The CJCP Training Manual (2015b) used with provincial safety coordinators and district education department personnel – and intended to cascade down to school level – defines homophobia as ‘an irrational fear, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or learners who are perceived as homosexuals’ (p.21), and includes activities to teach trainees about it. The DBE recommended that homophobic bullying be addressed in school-level codes of conduct and the Life Orientation curriculum (UNESCO 2016). The DBE had developed a model anti-homophobic-bullying school charter – which has been shared at regional and global UNESCO networking events – outlining the need to ensure equal rights; offer counselling and support around identity issues; distribute LGBTI resources; and respond to bullying (UNESCO 2016; Reygan 2016).

South African contributions to theorising sexuality, gender and ‘lgb’

LGBTI sociological perspectives are often grounded in theory and practices grounded in the North – in contexts demonstrating political autonomy/imperialism and relative
economic sufficiency including the UK and USA. As a result, they tend to overlook experiences, insights and contributions from the South – contexts demonstrating coloniality/postcoloniality and insufficient resources for the majority, including in South Africa. However, Connell’s (2014) Southern Theory argues there are no clearly demarcated boundaries between Northern and Southern perspectives; Northern and Southern perspectives can and do influence one another. Norths exist within Souths in particular regions of the world, and the reverse also occurs – with LGBTI communities providing vibrant examples of the impact of activism and research in the South within the North, and vice versa (Connell 2014). Southern Theory foregrounds the importance of African thinking on LGBTI education issues; however some African writers argue that too great a focus on the colonising spectre of religiosity in school-based sexuality education, alongside struggles against genital mutilation and the fight against HIV obscures the broader positive sexuality education contributions made by African cultures (Kagure Mugo 2017). Though HIV is highly relevant to South Africa’s LGBTI communities due to increased risk, particularly for men who have sex with men and lesbians and bisexual women who experience sexual abuse, HIV education efforts are often best viewed as an unsubtle form of Northern donor ‘queer imperialism’ when inadvertently or otherwise they erase other sexuality and gender considerations (Oberth and Mondry 2014).

The work of South African NGOs has had a considerable impact on how LGBTI education issues are conceptualised. The Other Foundation (2016) found that six times the number of South Africans with an LGBTI identity present (dress and act) in public in gender non-conforming ways than members of the general South African population, and that their acceptance was most likely to come from human rights perspective rather than family inclusion. This is particularly important as a recent South African OUT LGBT Wellbeing study (2016) found that over half of all LGBT students reported having experienced discrimination in schools. Iranti (2018) has used anecdotal reports on the mistreatment of intersex students to push for future educational campaigns about bodily diversity, whilst the Coalition of African Lesbians has argued for an intersectional approach to sexuality education which engages with reproductive health issues for queer and genderqueer students (CAL 2016). South African higher education researchers have also offered practical ideas. Hames (2007), for example, has described how the rollout of South African LGBTI supportive policy on university campuses should include the provision of unisex toilets; gender reconstructive surgery leave; equitable access for same-sex couples in student housing; the placement of specific LGBTI non-discriminatory clauses in recruitment advertisements and policies for the pursuit of recourse; and the provision of safe spaces for LGBTI socialisation. Ngidi and Diamani (2017) have shown the value of using film and transformative pedagogy to address homophobia and destabilising heteronormativity at a KwaZulu-Natal vocational college. Msibi (2018) has shown how Black male teachers construct sexual and professional identities to both accommodate the structural dictates of educational settings, and simultaneously resist them in ways that are supportive of LGBTI students.

African theorists have also argued for the need to characterise gender and sexual identities in Africa within anti-colonial liberationist power-based analyses of dissidence, rebellion and resistance (Epprecht 2013; Murray and Roscoe 1998; Posel 2011). African nations have rich histories in which woman-husbands and boy-wives were accepted, in which female and male same sex practices or gender-diverse
dressing were performed as part of healing-divination work, and in which Indigenous languages recognised alternative sexual and gender identities – e.g. *hungochani* in chiShona and *ubunktshani/iNkotshani* in siNdebele (Murray and Roscoe 1998; Epprecht 2013). In South Africa, scholars of sexuality have supported reclaiming these histories and current language use of terms such as ‘moffie’ (effeminate boy) and ‘istabane’ (masculine girl) in a positive resistant light as part of nation-building post-apartheid sex education (Matebeni and Msibi 2015; Posel 2011). They argue for acknowledging the selective integration of Northern ideas into South African sex education; documenting, for example, how sex educators have actively worked with (‘mis’)pronunciation of the LGBTI acronym as a single identity noun ‘ligbit’ – thereby (re)interpreting the Northern acronym to *broadly* discuss or claim non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities (as ‘ligbit’) without relying on Northern meanings (Matebeni and Msibi 2015; Posel 2011).

Other writers argue that the sexuality education methods prevalent in Southern African multi-cultural townships should be reflected in formal education to challenge the colonial repression of African eroticism (Kagure Mugo 2017; Nzegwu 2011; Murray and Roscoe 1998). Teaching *osunality* (African erotics) can offer a progressive feminist privileging of pleasure in contrast to Northern patriarchal sex education’s obsession with reproductive (Nzegwu 2011; Posel 2011). ‘Aunties’ or ssengas – wise older women and relatives (particularly for South Africans from Uganda, Kenya or Nairobi) – can provide sex education advice on bodily pleasures or processes including female ejaculation (Kagure Mugo 2017). Dances with drumming can impart sexual knowledge, movements and stories (Kagure Mugo 2017). There is progressive potential in merging new South African LGBTI/Ligbit thinking with these older feminist African sex education methods (Kagure Mugo 2017) – emphasising the value of non-reproductive sex and African communication styles. However, in Ligbit work it is important to avoid a Northern over-simplification of South African meanings and identities. Colonising narratives sometimes ‘misread’ the practices of Zulu *sangoma* or Xhosa *amagqhirha* divination-based healers, who may allow their bodies to be used in same-sex sexual acts by male and female spirits, as experiencing discrimination against ‘gay’, ‘third sex’ or ‘transgender’ identities they *may or may not claim* – for example whilst one female sangoma may consider herself lesbian for having sex with women within the context of her healing work, another may see herself as heterosexual allowing heterosexual male ancestors to heal women using her body (Stobie 2011; Murray and Roscoe 1998; Nkabinde 2009). Instead, a Ligbit perspective foregrounds culturally-specific experiences of discrimination relevant to African gender and sexuality variations.

**Local experiences, perspectives and accounts**

**The study**

As part of an ongoing review of transnational policy and advocacy on LGBTI education issues, key informant perspectives on South African contributions to LGBTI education concerns were elicited from both Southern and Northern individuals involved in global networking on the topic. One hundred and two semi-structured interviews were conducted around global networking events held in Dublin, Stockholm, New York, Paris,
Informants were selected through their participation in UN system activities and global networks on LGBTI issues. All were over 18 years of age and received no payment for their participation. They included education ministers and ministry officials, government members, civil society leaders, the directors and employees of non-government organisations (NGOs) and academics. Together, they represented a diverse range of regions, socio-cultural contexts, professional perspectives and gender identities (Table 1).

Recognising that participants in any context, but particularly in African nations, may encounter risks in highlighting the negative aspects of the transnational aspects of their work or by discussing the promotion of LGBTI issues in education, individuals were interviewed individually and with a level of confidentiality that they themselves chose. Data collection acknowledged nuances relating to different LGBTI/Ligbit identities in international settings, respectful of a decolonising approach.

One hour recorded interviews took place in pre-booked rooms or participant-selected spaces, or via telephone or email. Interview questions explored South African contributions to regional and global work of relevance to LGBTI education issues, amongst other topics. Ethical approval for the study was received from various ethics committees including the University of New England’s Human Research Ethics Committee in 2014 (HE14-005) and La Trobe University’s Human Research Ethics Committee in 2016–2017 (HEC16-021). Interviewees’ details as reported below (including name, pronoun, role and organisation) were determined by the individual participants themselves.

Analysis

Connell’s (2014) ‘Dirty Theory’ approach to thematic analysis recognises the difficulty of achieving equality in contexts where colonial and funding-related power dynamics affect conversation (ordering who can speak, for how long, on what topic and with what level of risk). It (1) seeks to generalise in a thematic manner while

Table 1. Key Informant characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Africa</th>
<th>Asia-Pacific</th>
<th>Americas</th>
<th>Middle-East</th>
<th>Europe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Global South</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global North</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Civil society leadership/staff</th>
<th>Government members/staff</th>
<th>Education ministers/leaders/teachers/counsellors</th>
<th>NGO directors/staff</th>
<th>Academics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-identified sex/gender</th>
<th>Male/masculine identifying</th>
<th>Female/feminine identifying</th>
<th>Non-binary/genderqueer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender or gender diverse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declared intersex variation/s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not declare any intersex variation/s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
acknowledging contextual specificity; (2) avoids privileging dominant constructions of practices (e.g. mainstream Northern perspectives on LGBTI education contributions); and (3) aims to report on practice-related concerns (with respect to South African international work on LGBTI education issues). In the account below, Southern and African concerns are privileged, grouped loosely together in a grounded thematic analysis.

**Findings**

**Human rights emphasis**

Of 102 key informants, most (82) described the strong contribution South Africa has made to international LGBTI education networking through its rights-based recognition framework, its post-apartheid rights policy examples, and anti-apartheid activists’ support for rights movements both internal and external to South Africa.

A South African NGO worker commented on how anti-apartheid intersex activists like Sally Gross (1953–2014), a member of the African National Congress (ANC) during the apartheid era and founder of the organisation the Intersex Society of South Africa, were ‘crucial in the development of anti-discrimination provisions in SA for intersex people and in convincing the SA Human Rights Commission of their “right to rights”’. They how explained how LGBTI activism and post-apartheid rights were mutually reliant:

Sally was exiled from South Africa under Apartheid and being misclassified as male due to being intersex, could not return until her gender identity was recognised. This encouraged all-in human rights thinking – LGBTIs, refugees, everyone needed rights. Sally contributed to anti-discrimination sex and gender law provisions in ways making it impossible to separate LGBTI rights from Post-Apartheid rights frames. These were never separate.

Sally Gross had personally mentored a range of activists locally, regionally and internationally during her exile and upon returning to SA:

She taught human rights as a communal, intergenerational and transnational project – not limited by time or place, non-gender, non-personage or non-statehood. No one education system or government could be trusted to ensure these rights alone.

Post-apartheid South Africa has contributed substantially to the inclusion of LGBTI rights as part of human rights discourse both domestically and abroad. However, participants acknowledged that recognition of LGBTI rights was less evidenced in the family life of South Africans. A South African Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) employee said that ‘In research on over 3000 South Africans aged 16yrs+, most believed same sex acts are wrong and disgusting, largely due to religion and gender-based bias’. The same informant said two thirds of South Africans do not consider homosexuality acceptable and ‘over half would not accept gay or lesbian family or consider them culturally traditional’. However, South Africans ‘were proud of their constitution: most understood that sexual orientation was protected by it; only a fifth wanted it removed. The statistics show South Africans best support LGBTIs within a human rights frame – not [a] familial, cultural or religious frame’. South African human rights discourse promotes the need to respect all humans in public spaces *despite* one’s personal biases:
South Africans have contact with people who have same sex relationships or diverse gender identities in their public education and professional lives and most say they will never avoid, shout at or tease, or physically harm them.

On balance, South Africans show mixed support for LGBTI rights in education, a South African NGO worker said human rights education was ‘the framework South Africans most strongly accept for LGBTI education issues and best promote internationally at the UN, UNESCO and regional convening’. South Africans may be viewed as politically progressive but morally conservative, with human rights discourse allowing many South African leaders to advocate for LGBTI issues publicly while retaining personal discomfort with the topic.

A government staff informant commented that in South Africa and African nations ‘We say umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’; meaning ‘we are people through other people’’. He explained that this Zulu phrase was a directive to human rights discourse which informed all his human rights work; ‘all humans right of humanity is only recognised among other humans. It is a Zulu phrase, but it is South African, African and human to have human rights including for LGBTI [people]’. He explained that South African contributions to LGBTI rights internationally included:

… both our example of Post-Apartheid rights recognition, including legal recognition of same sex couples’ right to marry and every child’s right to attend school without homophobia, and our example of the horrors of rights abuses (under Apartheid).

One informant from a Limpopo NGO said:

South Africa must not forget how President Nelson Mandela would speak to other countries, would call on places like Australia, to help their oppressed people. He remembered the Aboriginal peoples, the LGBTI, all the peoples’ rights.

A Mozambique government worker said that South Africa was exceptional on the continent in its progressive constitution and broad range of advocacy groups, ‘seeing that had some role to play in decriminalisation of homosexuality in Mozambique’. A Russian social researcher said South Africa was held up by many as an example of how human rights approaches can lift countries into modernisation:

The human rights approach IS contemporary South Africa; the free country today. Without these rights it is an autocracy – back to the Apartheid days and the restrictions in Russia. South Africa’s work on LGBTI rights shows it is necessary to democratic education.

Post-colonial resistance

Most (69) key informants noted how South Africa’s contribution to global LGBTI education networking encouraged a resistance to colonising dynamics (primarily construed in terms of the processes of ‘classification’ and subsequent criminalisation and medicalisation of LGBTI persons) and the foregrounding of Southern diversity (primarily construed in terms of the range of identities that do not fit traditional English or Judeo-Christian notions of sex male-female binaries and heterosexualities). One transgender African participant in the GALA colloquia noted:
They included Gender DynamiX, the Kaleidoscope LGBTIAQ Youth Network, the African Centre for Migration and Society – these were not whites-only ivory tower events. LGBTI education was explored in post-colonial African approaches.

A West African lesbian participant in the GALA colloquia said the LGBTI sexuality education approach was particularly African, and included dances about violence against lesbian youth in the townships:

The Themba Interactive Theatre Company narrated the root causes of violence toward young South African black lesbians through dance; an intervention for adolescents in the Johannesburg region which uses local traditions of movement and voice not colonial lesson structures. They foregrounded regional methods and local resistance to colonisation of gender and sexuality diversities.

The notion of a SA fighting the ‘colonial approach to LGBTIs’ through anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia work was seen as being intentionally used to compete with other regional and local discourses on homosexuality, which suggest it is not traditionally African. A Bantu-speaking South African informant said:

In our townships we knew ‘he sleeps with men’, ‘she has a wife’ – there were gay kings and homosexual acts in medicine – it was not called an ‘orientation’, the North’s ‘LGBTI’, and it was not vilified. There were different expressions of gender.

A Cape Town teacher said the South African approach of portraying anti-homophobic work as resistance to the effects of colonisation helped reconnect local South African students of all kinds with ‘diverse traditional African identities more complicated than the binaries of black and white, male or female, or straight or gay, master or slave labels in apartheid thinking …conformity is an English idea’.

One Xhosa gender diverse informant explained that historically AmaXhosa children who had an ukuthwasa (a spiritual ancestral journal) initiation experienced discrimination:

The igqirha birth rite manifests the biological ancestors to build the child’s spirituality. Their social gender identity is influenced by the gender of the sacrificial animal (a male or female sheep) in the rites. The child has faceted identities, enriched by ritual.

The same participant explained that the spiritual journey allowed men to experience traditionally ‘female characteristics: gentleness and softness’ when standing in female positions and the reverse was true for women standing in male positions or identities not usually afforded to them. They commented ‘Christian educated white people may misunderstand and degrade it [the spiritual journey] as they degrade African polyamory’ and ‘taunt the child about their identity or reduce their opportunities’. Another Xhosa informant commented that Northern notions of homophobia and transphobia do not wholly explain the racially-driven components of discrimination against African gender minorities:

Discrimination against these AmaXhosa children is not ‘driven’ by ‘transphobia’. It is driven by cultural imperialism… fear of black gender identity formation beyond English or Afrikaanser models, already ambiguous and deviant in imperialist views.

It was thus useful, the participant argued, to ‘talk to African peoples of the problem of discrimination as not simply transphobia but as a response to how Black cultures disrupt
imperialist binary sex models’. Another aspect of African sexuality erased in Northern rule was polyamory for example, and this erasure is more widely resisted by Africans especially where it is common for men to take multiple wives or girlfriends. Rather than clinging to past patriarchal orders, the Xhosa should ‘see this disruption to gender orders in ourselves and embrace its power against imperialism for black people, women and LGBTIs’.

Informants discussed the need for legal, financial and capacity-building aid which allowed for a post-colonial or even anti-colonial approach; Southern participants wanted Northern governments to give financial and legal support to local grass roots organisations. A female South African NGO worker on transgender issues called for funding for South-South capacity-building. A UNESCO official explained how recognition of translation difficulties had informed UNESCO’s use of ‘the right to education’ and ‘the rights of the child’ (to non-violence and so on) for policy development across South Africa and later Africa more generally, rather than just ‘LGBTI rights’. The informant explained that LGBTI identities needed to be discussed in terms of ‘people who were different in their gender’ to allow for the range of issues to be engaged with in ways which did not oversimplify discrimination against African-specific gender diversity. The directors of Sweden’s RFSL and Ireland’s Belongto both emphasised that capacity building efforts in African contexts benefitted from prioritising postcolonial resistance dynamics.

In South Africa and some other African nations, major effort has been expended to counter imperialist outside attempts to incite local anti-LGBTI violence. Two South African informants described the negative effects of US pastor Steven Anderson’s ministry in promoting conversion therapy, laws and violence. A South African civil society worker and others argued that US LGBT groups did not contribute ‘enough to combat the negative US influences internationally, perhaps because there is no funding in that area’. Hence, ‘combatting US influence was left to foreigners’, and for some African nations, ‘this is too much of a burden when dealing with poverty, corruption and other education barriers’. However the same informant explained that South Africa’s unique constitutional protections for LGBTI people made it a regional centre of resistance against US incursions of this kind, as the nation had the provision to remove people who harmed locals. In 2016, Steven Anderson was declared an ‘undesirable’ in South Africa due to his use of homophobic and transphobic hate speech to seek to influence South African policy. The informant said,

Decreasing the negative US interference was urgent, especially now with Trump, Pence and DeVos. In September 2016, our government banned US pastor Steven Anderson and his companions from entering South Africa, making them undesirables. This placed South African LGBT above US extremism, colonising power and money.

A South African civil society worker claimed this move was understood in resistance thinking as the ‘correct interpretation of the SA National School Safety Framework [which] include[s] protecting trans students. Policy is interpretation; we need SA’s interpretation, not Trump’s’. A Ugandan educator described how these efforts, first at dismantling apartheid and now more modern discriminatory international influences, had inspired both the collection of evidential research by organisations like Sexual Minorities Uganda and their use in similar legal actions: ‘Ugandan activists [with] legal support [had also] sued an American religious extremist for his
malicious international interference in our LGBT rights issues’. A Kenyan informant said ‘Working with South African activists helps us to find strategies to consider our local Kisii and their history of female marriage, and to promote that reproductive views of sex is a Northern restricted view’. An Indian NGO worker described how South African ‘anti-colonial resistance’ contributed to the approach adopted by India Supreme Court efforts since 2014 to ‘undo the legacies of British legislation and American religious fervour, which attacked our native hijra’. A Nigerian researcher explained that, ‘further emphasising the post-colonial framework behind protecting LGBTI people in South African education settings – that it was part of undoing past English colonising restrictions on African gender and sexual diversities as well as current US incursions’ would be particularly relevant to African nations, since ‘much of Africa including even Ethiopia and Liberia have at some point been at least briefly colonised by Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Portugal and/or Italy’. He explained that ‘it is not homosexuality that is the foreign influence, it is homophobia and restrictions on topics of education; African nations were historically far more open in their informal sex education than [the] colonising powers allowed’.

**Research facilitation and support**

Around half of the key informants (53) noted South Africa’s contribution to the generation of research data in support of global LGBTI education networking. Most of these informants emphasised how post-apartheid South Africa had seen an increase in sexual and gender diversity education research conducted locally by researchers such as Dennis Francis and others. This work emphasised the presence of gender and sexuality binaries in the South African school curriculum, pedagogy and culture that assumed that all learners were heterosexual, cisgender and had normative sex characteristic alignments. Some informants described how travelling to South Africa for periods of time had facilitated their own research on LGBTI issues. People from Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda, in particular, described travelling to SA to receive training support or the opportunity to study LGBTI issues in education and sex education. Several informants discussed how South African collaborations had helped generate research in other countries including both regionally and internationally. An NGO worker from Uganda explained that South African scholars’ collaborative work with local scholars had had useful results for Ugandan activism:

South African researchers worked with researchers from Uganda to create research showing that homosexuals are not more likely to engage in paedophilia than heterosexuals. It showed that homosexuality is a normal sexual orientation.

A US researcher said that South African NGOs were ‘consistently generous in promoting global sex education studies taking account of diversity issues to their networks’. An informant from Lesotho explained the impact of the work of South Africa’s GALA, South African researchers, UNESCO and Hivos in facilitating the first large-scale study across five Southern African nations (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland) addressing violence related to sexual and gender diversity (UNESCO 2016). The same informant commented:
This research included a policy review, surveys of 2,523 Grade 11 students and teachers from 37 schools, 68 in-depth interviews and 67 focus group discussions with teachers, students, out-of-school youth, parents and guardians, school management teams, government educational officials, civil society. Only South Africa had laws which did not criminalise male same-sex activities and education policy or curriculum addressing LGBTIs.

However, the work did not stop at ‘what was and what was not’; the point was to look at the policy documents and discuss them.

It was helpful to not be held back by the idea that African nations cannot do this work; to consider where anti-homophobia work may have a life in Lesotho and discuss child protection and sexual violence provisions.

The same informant noted that even South Africans participating in the study indicated that teachers were rarely informed, familiar with, or confident enough to discuss sexual and gender diversity. As a result, they seldom addressed it in class blaming weak support or the absence of clear guidance in ground-level school resources. A European informant commented on the important statistics the study uncovered:

Significant portions of students and teachers said violence occurred because victims were perceived as different in gender or sexual orientation in the other nations (ranging up to 26%); this was the most common reason in Lesotho and Swaziland, and second most common in Namibia. The violence was mostly verbal (up to 91%); physical (up to 89%); and sexual (up to 38%).

However they noted that there were also important findings from South Africa, highlighting areas to address, and bringing the sense the South-South collaboration work was needed for the whole region rather than any one country alone:

In South Africa homophobic jokes were the most common violence reported by over two thirds of same sex attracted people. Students perpetrated two thirds of the violence, educators and principals around one third. African and Southern countries all learn from each-other in these collaborations – no nations were unaffected.

Finally, a Vietnamese researcher explained, ‘South Africa research collaborations with UNESCO were influential and encouraging. This provided examples of ways of working with other countries for research to understand and combat violence, which we adapted’.

**Ambivalent leadership**

Twenty participants commented on South African leadership’s ambivalence on LGBTI issues in education to varying degrees. These informants all pointed to how South African politicians, UN representatives and NGO leaders were often political progressives who engaged in advocacy for change. But on other occasions they expressed conservative views or promoted LGBTI work less following public disapproval from religious organisations, neighbouring countries or local groups. One European UN representative commented:

South Africa led the world in LGBTI education issues through its own provisions and general calls, yet avoids pushing specific countries. It stopped pushing for UN reporting requirements on rights violations tied to its 2011 resolution – when this could have made a
difference – because of regional backlash from Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria. South African UN representatives wavered back and forth.

Although South Africa ultimately pushed for its resolution to go through, this inconsistency in South Africa’s international engagement has also featured in its national and provincial leadership of LGBTI education work. Several African informants noted that South African LGBTI education work was impacted by how Jacob Zuma had called same-sex marriage ‘a disgrace to the nation and to God’ prior to his presidency and other South African politicians made similarly shocking statements. One South African informant said:

When homophobic laws were passed in Uganda in 2014 there was outrage from local community activists. The ANC blocked motions to condemn the bill. [Home Affairs Minister] Naledi Pandor argued there was no special need to comment on President Yoweri Museveni’s decision to introduce harsh penalties for homosexual sex in the SA Parliament, since the constitution articulated our position… sending conflicting messages.

A South African government staff informant said the wavering in South African diplomacy did not indicate an apathy on LGBTI education rights, but the co-existence of warring desires and disinclinations for activism. The difference in position depended on the balance of internal and external powers and relationships for the political leaders involved:

Our social norms lag behind our laws. So the pendulum swings between politicians fearing election or regional relationships losses if they support LGBTI students, and feeling pride in global recognition for our anti-homophobia work.

Another South African government staff informant said:

Under the Mandela Administration, South Africa had an incredible standing in the world on human rights, it gave South Africa a powerful identity locally and internationally! Our leaders want to be Mandela… but lack his popularity and naivety.

A female African government worker explained Mandela showed ‘extreme bravery in commenting on foreign affairs’, but recalled how this had led to tensions with other African nations:


Several other African Ministers and government workers affirmed South Africa’s role in negotiating LGBTI education issues within the region through collaborative bilateral and multi-lateral efforts that encouraged local ideas, rather than through preaching or demanding specific top-down actions in a pressurised manner. A Congo government worker commented ‘South Africa’s ongoing collaborative work of sharing its examples of policies and research at international events, and having these events tied to funding for local ideas for change, is more effective across Africa than using shaming or foreign models’.

Comments, mainly from Southern participants, emphasised the lack of employment opportunities and funding for research and activism and how working from US allies
meant that ‘across Africa certain rights champions get trained in foreign ways, celebrated for that and then [they] get all the funds,’ A South Africa informant reflected, ‘This takes funding from the grass roots groups, and means that [that] individual leaves their old grass roots thinking and contacts – so especially essential to work for Black transgender young people’. A South Africa NGO worker explained that apparent ambivalence towards promoting LGBTI education rights across Africa and elsewhere was due to a lack of funding continuity. The NGO worker reported that whilst some South African intersex activists had links to domestic and international groups, others ‘remain isolated from these connections’ and the small LGBTI funding opportunities available. They emphasised the difficulty of losing key intersex activists due to poverty, discrimination or death; and the fact that active involvement in intersex activism could decrease one’s life opportunities. They argued the work should be supported by salaried positions ‘tied to larger organisations’ focussed on intersex goals for South African and other African countries:

We need support and aid from allies who are not intersex or African, supporting our work developing bans for non-consensual genital surgery on youth. NGO work is not enough without diplomacy, legal aid, and funding.

Another activist commented, ‘We need the government to ensure its diplomats have mandates to support our diplomacy on these issues, to staff these efforts with administrators and research offices. A little infrastructure makes a big impact’. The ambivalence in South African leadership was not always an object of critique however, particularly when informants came from nations where the embrace of LGBTI rights in schools was a complex task. A Japanese Ministry informant commented, ‘South African and Irish policy examples at global convenings showed much can be achieved even with constraints and leaders of different cultural and religious backgrounds’. A Pakistani NGO worker said ‘We see democratic education rights are afforded for LGBTI students, even in morally [religious] conservative settings, from South African and Indonesian cases’. They went on to explain that such work had inspired school provision for transgender students in Lahore,2 because efforts achieved under often ‘imperfect leadership and conditions’ reveal ‘we can still work against school violence for LGBTIs, where religions are strong or leaders [are] absent’. A Belarus NGO worker explained South Africa’s ambivalence on LGBTI issues in education as in part due to unanswered question of how closed or open its borders would become:

Like Belarus, South Africa struggles with being open to positive outside influences such as the UN and the business opportunities of China, the USA, even Russia due to past difficulties under colonial rule… rights require opening borders however carefully.

Several informants noted how accepting foreign funding could limit South African independence. A South African NGO worker believed that South African political parties were in receipt of election campaign funding from the Communist Party of China (and also India, Libya and Guinea) – ‘just as the US received it from Russia to damaging effect on its LGBTI education work’. He commented, ‘It is building anti-Western feelings and using the Chinese Communist Party as a model for maintaining control and excising American and European influence, and trying to cast LGBTI education work as European’. A South African government worker said,
South Africa has significantly more protections for LGBTIs (constitutional, legal, relationship rights, freedom of speech and funding for gatherings and online activism) and need not be influenced by China or Europe on this matter; this view is incorrect.

A Fijian informant said that in South Africa, like in Fiji, Chinese companies are investing billions of dollars in companies and loans (in mining, automotive industries, and white goods), employing only a few South Africans and sometimes luring South Africa (like Fiji and other Southern nations) to borrow money towards processes of development in ways that benefit China only.

Our governments look to China for finance, political training and policy influence. China’s Foreign NGO Management and Domestic Charity laws restrict acceptance of (non-Chinese) funding. Chinese organisations accepting overseas funding for that work are harassed by Chinese authorities, so accepting Chinese influence risks stifling gender and sexuality education work funded by other bodies.

A Russian social researcher drew parallels between some African and Soviet regions to explain how ambivalence on LGBTI education issues can be used by nations to assert their sovereign strength:

Russia, Chechnya, Nigeria, Kenya, North Korea ...all felt [themselves] at the bottom of globalist hierarchies. Periodically resisting UN, EU and other globalist cultures or stances, most visibly LGBTI education activism, defies their ordered lower status.

As China and Russia’s global influence grows, informants talked about how these nations’ antipathy to LGBTI education work (as a power play in international relations) posed a future threat to the LGBTI education work in Southern countries, alongside the evangelical influence associated with the USA’s Trump Administration. A Chinese informant said:

LGBTI education work will be expanded or restricted to perform power, by those in power – restrictions on LGBTI education work will come through bans on accepting competing funders. Southern nations should heed South Africa’s experience and beware friendly tigers offering [you] a ride on their back. You can’t [easily] dismount [from] a tiger.

**Conclusion**

In the fieldwork associated with this study, informants overwhelmingly supported the human rights frame underpinning South Africa’s politically progressive policy on LGBTI rights. They highlighted how it challenged moral conservatism in local and transnational LGBTI education policies, events, research and resources.

Key difficulties, however, included South Africa’s inconsistent approach to LGBTI education issues in the face of regional opposition and lack of funding and resources. The available data suggests that South African diplomats, politicians and NGOs could do more to promote the story of South African LGBTI education rights, so as to preserve South Africa’s reputation as an African state advancing its own position on African sexual and gender diversity as part of a transnational act of *decolonisation*. Such a strategy is important given that much of Africa has experienced (and still does experience) colonialist efforts to deny and restrict African gender and sexual diversity.
New regional projects emphasising South Africa’s early adoption of constitutional and relationship rights and promoting greater recognition of pre-colonial sexual and gender diversity and African ways of doing things (e.g. through dance, narrative and policy practices) are to be encouraged. International agencies may find that regional networking, advocacy and support for LGBTI education is more effective when undertaken by South Africa bodies experienced in pan-African collaboration and the use of African sexuality education approaches, than when it is led by others. Southern nations should be wary of any restrictive policies tied to outside funding sources.

Notes

2. The Gender Guardian School in Lahore Pakistan, funded by the Exploring Future Foundation, provides free education and vocational training for transgender students. See https://www.facebook.com/thegenderguardian/.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This study was funded by a 2016-2019 Australian Research Council DECRA Award (DE160101047). The views expressed are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or Australian Research Council.

ORCID

Tiffany Jones http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2930-7017

References


