

# Uganda a continental extreme in rejection of people in same-sex relationships

---

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 639 | Makanga Ronald Kakumba**

## Summary

The Ugandan Parliament's recent passage of an "anti-homosexuality bill" has drawn vehement condemnation from leaders and activists around the globe, who say that its draconian provisions violate the human rights of the country's sexual minorities (Independent, 2023; Guardian, 2023; Atuhaire, 2023; Tharoor, 2023).

Threatening Ugandans with prison for same-sex activity and for "promoting" homosexuality, and with the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality," the bill would greatly expand the country's existing prohibition against same-sex conduct. President Yoweri Museveni sent the original bill back to Parliament, which removed proposed criminal penalties for merely identifying as gay and for failing to report suspected homosexual activity to the police, but he has continued to endorse its main provisions and to dismiss international calls for a veto (RFI, 2023; Muhumuza, 2023).

Proposed anti-gay legislation has also made recent headlines in Ghana. But President Nana Akufo-Addo distanced himself from the bill, saying it is "not an official legislation of the government," during the visit of U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, who said support for LGBTQ rights is "a human rights issue" (Princewill, 2023; Ghanaweb, 2023).

Uganda and Ghana are among 64 countries in the world where same-sex conduct is illegal (BBC, 2023). In Africa, where more than half of all countries have such laws, proponents of criminalising homosexuality often argue that it goes against African culture or tradition.

But scholars and rights activists disagree, noting that many anti-gay laws – including Uganda's existing law – are a legacy of colonial-era legal codes (Ibrahim, 2015; Mulga, 2019; Arimoro, 2021) and that recent calls for harsh legislation against homosexuality may reflect the influence of fundamentalist Christian missionaries (Tharoor, 2023).

They also point out that intolerance for sexual differences is neither universal across the continent nor immutable, as the number of countries that have decriminalised same-sex relationships continues to grow, including South Africa (in 1998), Cabo Verde (2004), Lesotho (2012), São Tomé and Príncipe (2012), Mozambique (2015), the Seychelles (2016), Botswana (2019), and Angola (2019) (Rahketsi, 2021; Gomes da Costa Santos, 2013; Parliamentarians for Global Action, 2019; Alo, 2020).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that Ugandan adults of all ages and education levels overwhelmingly continue to express intolerance for same-sex relationships, think they should be illegal, and are willing to report their own family member or close friend to the police if they engage in homosexual activity. Their level of intolerance for sexual difference is the highest among 37 African countries surveyed in 2021/2022.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed 2,400 adult Ugandans between 7 and 25 January 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 12<sup>th</sup> Afrobarometer survey in Uganda since 1999.

## Key findings

- Large majorities of Ugandan citizens express tolerant attitudes toward people of different religions (93%), people from different ethnic groups (85%), supporters of different political parties (80%), and immigrants/foreign workers (74%).
  - But more than nine out of 10 (94%) say they would “somewhat dislike” or “strongly dislike” having a homosexual neighbour. These views have not changed significantly over the past seven years.
- In Afrobarometer's 2015 survey, the vast majority (96%-97%) of citizens expressed discomfort with the idea of having a co-worker, a supervisor, or a member of their religious community who was in a same-sex relationship.
  - The same proportion (97%) said homosexuality was incompatible with their culture and religious norms and should remain illegal.
  - And 94%-95% said they would report a family member, close friend, or co-worker to the police if they were involved in a same-sex relationship.
- Among 37 African countries surveyed in 2021/2022, Uganda ranks last in tolerance for people in same-sex relationships. In five of the surveyed countries, majorities say they would like or not mind having homosexual neighbours: Cabo Verde, South Africa, the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Mozambique.
  - Between 2014/2015 and 2021/2022, nine surveyed countries registered increases of more than 5 percentage points in tolerance for homosexual persons.

## Social tolerance in Uganda

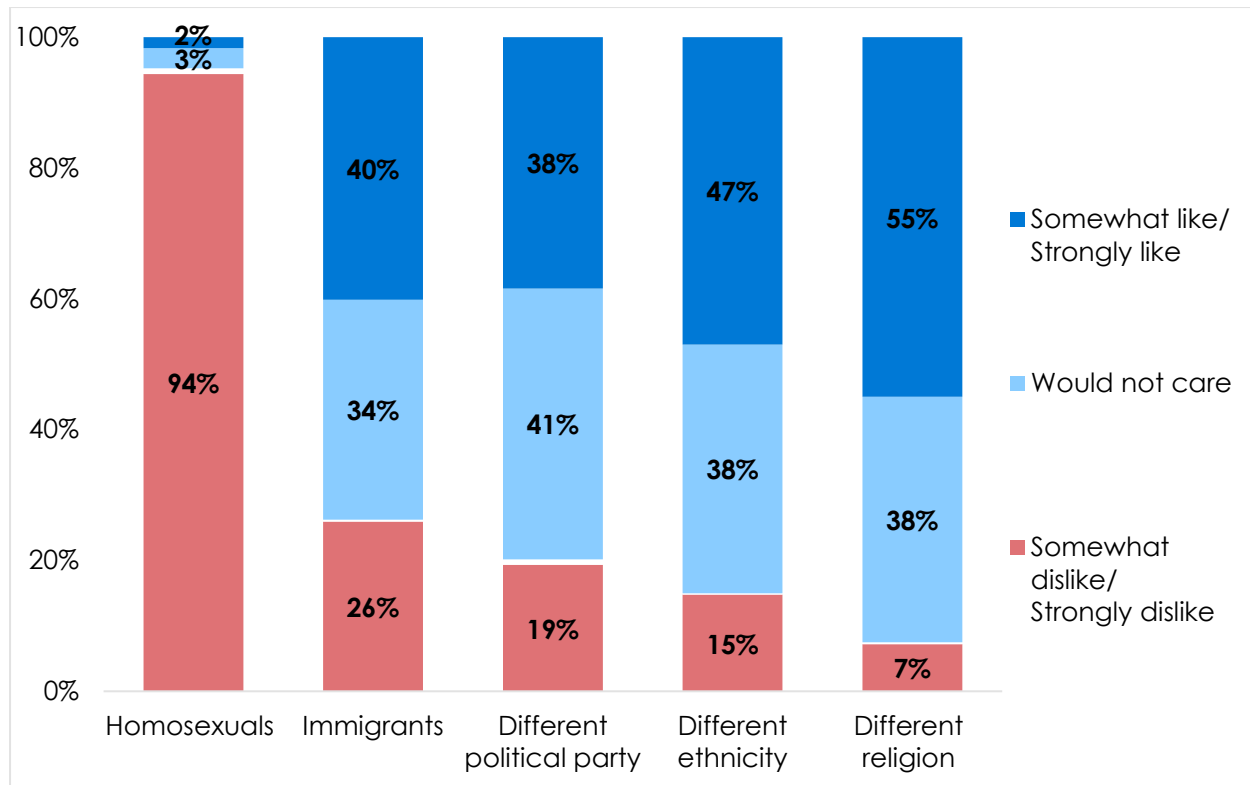
Tolerance can be defined as the ability or willingness to accept the existence of opinions, beliefs, or behaviours that one dislikes or disagrees with. Uganda's rich diversity of ethnic, religious, national, political, and social backgrounds makes tolerance an important issue for national and social cohesion.

Afrobarometer assesses citizens' levels of tolerance by asking them whether they would like it, dislike it, or not care if they had people from various groups as neighbours.

The most recent Afrobarometer survey in Uganda shows that large majorities of citizens say they would “strongly like,” “somewhat like,” or “not care” if they lived next to people of different religions (93%), members of different ethnic groups (85%), supporters of different

political parties (80%), and immigrants/foreign workers (74%).<sup>1</sup> But an overwhelmingly majority (94%) say they would “somewhat dislike” or “strongly dislike” having homosexual people as neighbours (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Social tolerance | Uganda | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care.

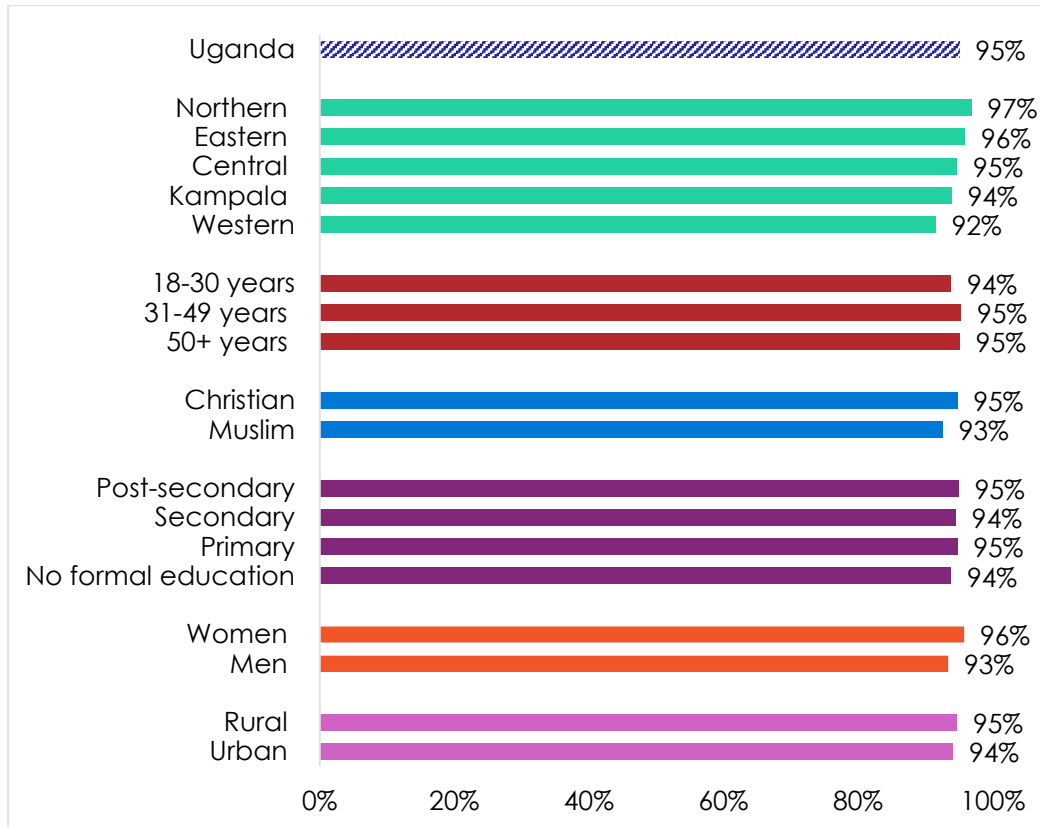
Unlike their counterparts in some other African countries (Dionne & Dulani, 2020), Ugandans who are young, are well educated, and/or live in urban areas express the same levels of intolerance for sexual difference as older, less educated, and rural citizens (Figure 2). Residents in the Western region (92%) are slightly less intolerant than those living in other regions.

Ugandans' level of tolerance for people in same-sex relationships has not changed significantly over the past seven years (Figure 3).

Tolerance for people of different religious backgrounds has remained consistently high, while there has been a noticeable downward trend in tolerance for members of different ethnic groups (from 93% in 2015 to 85%) and for immigrants or foreign workers (from 78% to 74%).

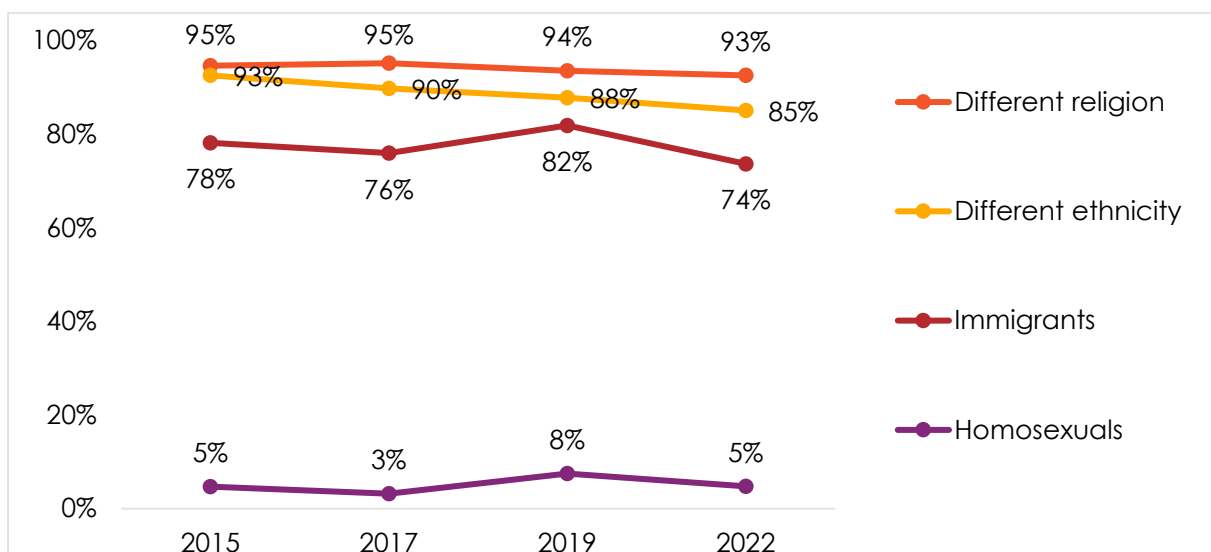
<sup>1</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 38% “somewhat like/strongly like” plus 41% “would not care” sum to 80% tolerant).

**Figure 2: Intolerance for people in same-sex relationships | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Homosexuals? (% who say "somewhat dislike" or "strongly dislike")

**Figure 3: Social tolerance | Uganda | 2015-2022**



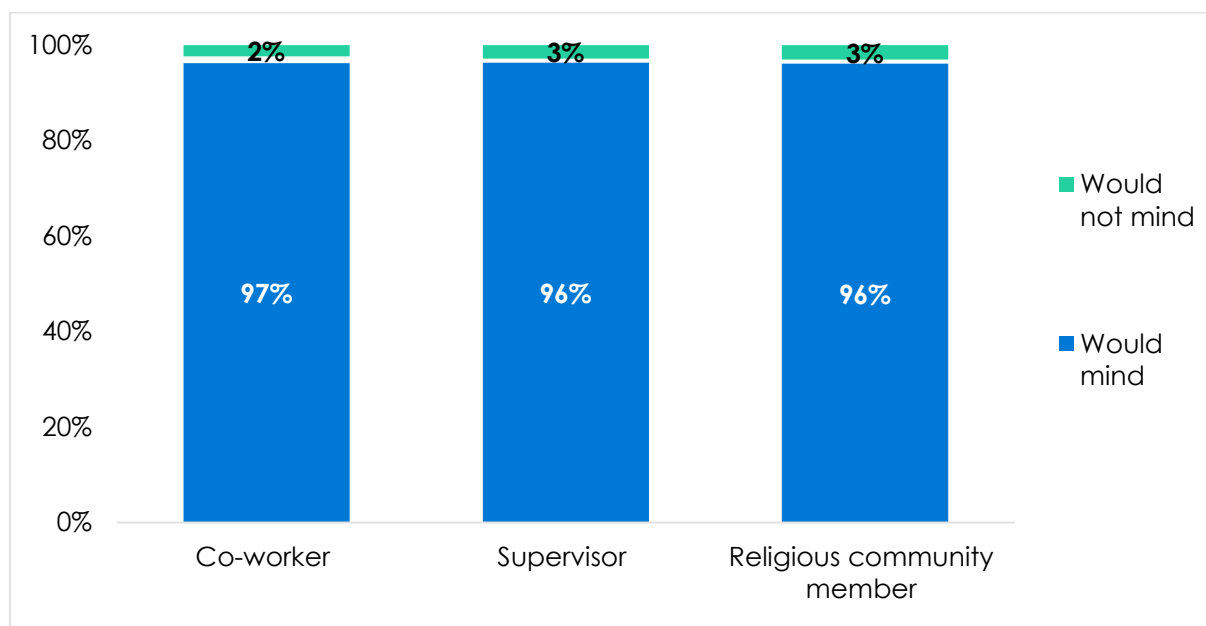
**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care. (% who say "strongly like," "somewhat like," or "would not care")

## Ugandans' views on same-sex relationships

Questions asked in Afrobarometer's 2015 survey round provide some insights into Ugandans' attitudes toward homosexuality. Here, too, responses reflect overwhelming levels of intolerance.

More than nine in 10 respondents indicated they would not be comfortable having someone in a same-sex relationship as a co-worker (97%), as a supervisor (96%), or as a member of their religious community (96%) (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Tolerance for people in same-sex relationships | Uganda | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the statements below, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

*I would not mind having someone in a same-sex relationship as a co-worker in my workplace.*

*I would not mind having someone in a same-sex relationship as my supervisor in my workplace.*

*I would not mind having someone in a same-sex relationship as a member in my religious community.*

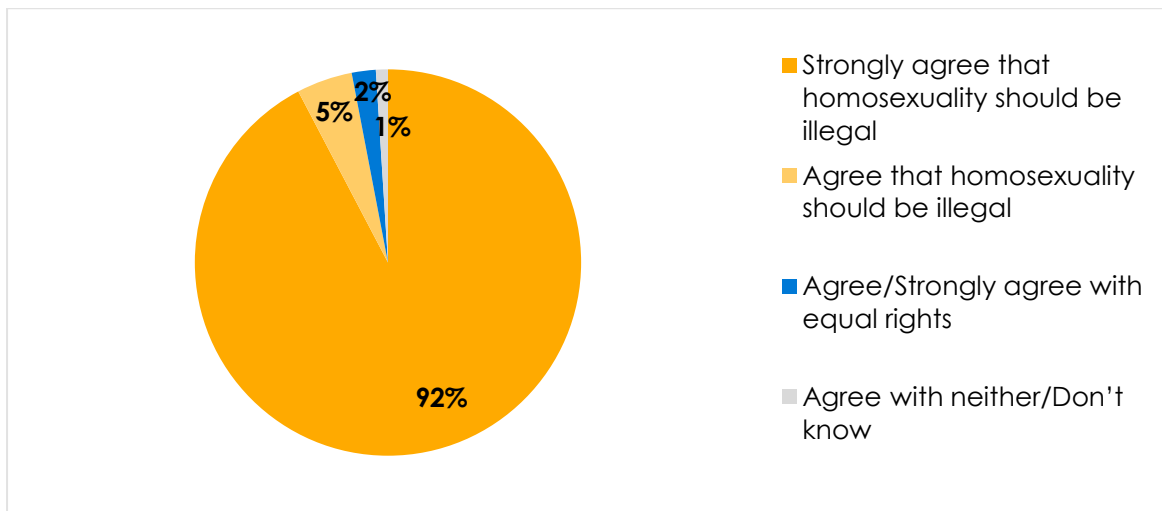
(% who agree/strongly agree and disagree/strongly disagree with each statement)

According to Section 145 of the Ugandan Penal Code, same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Uganda (Uganda Legal Information Institute, 2014), though the recently proposed "anti-homosexuality" goes much further in defining and penalizing such activity.

Survey responses from 2015 show that an overwhelmingly majority (97%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that homosexuality is inconsistent with Ugandan culture and religious norms and should continue to be illegal in this country. Merely 2% of respondents supported equal rights for people in same-sex relationships (Figure 5).

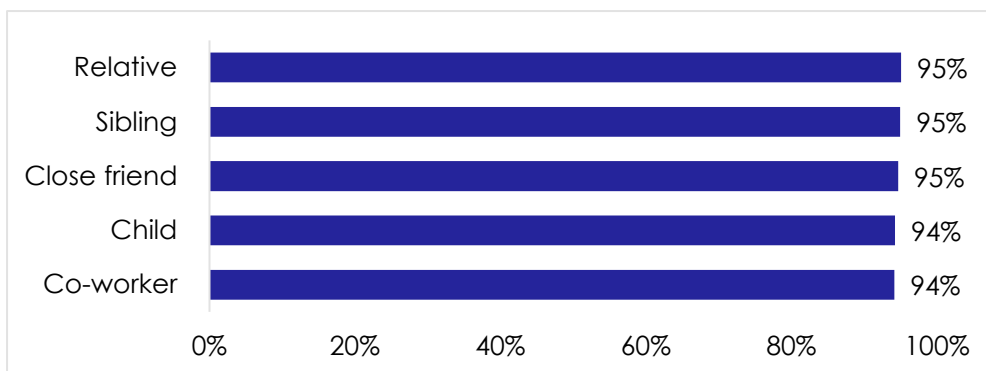
Indeed, more than nine out of 10 respondents (94%-95%) said they would report relatives – including their siblings and children – as well as close friends and co-workers to the police if they discovered that they were in same-sex relationships (Figure 6).

**Figure 5: Should homosexuality be illegal? | Uganda | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** Now I would like to get your views about the rights and liberties of people involved in same-sex relationships. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Homosexuality is inconsistent with Ugandan culture and religious norms and should therefore continue to be illegal in this country.  
 Statement 2: Persons who practice homosexuality should enjoy the same legal and constitutional rights as all other Ugandan citizens.

**Figure 6: Would report friends/family members involved in same-sex relationships | Uganda | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** Would you report to the police or any official if you discover that the following individual is in a same-sex relationship: Your son or daughter? Your brother or sister? Another relative? A close friend? A co-worker?

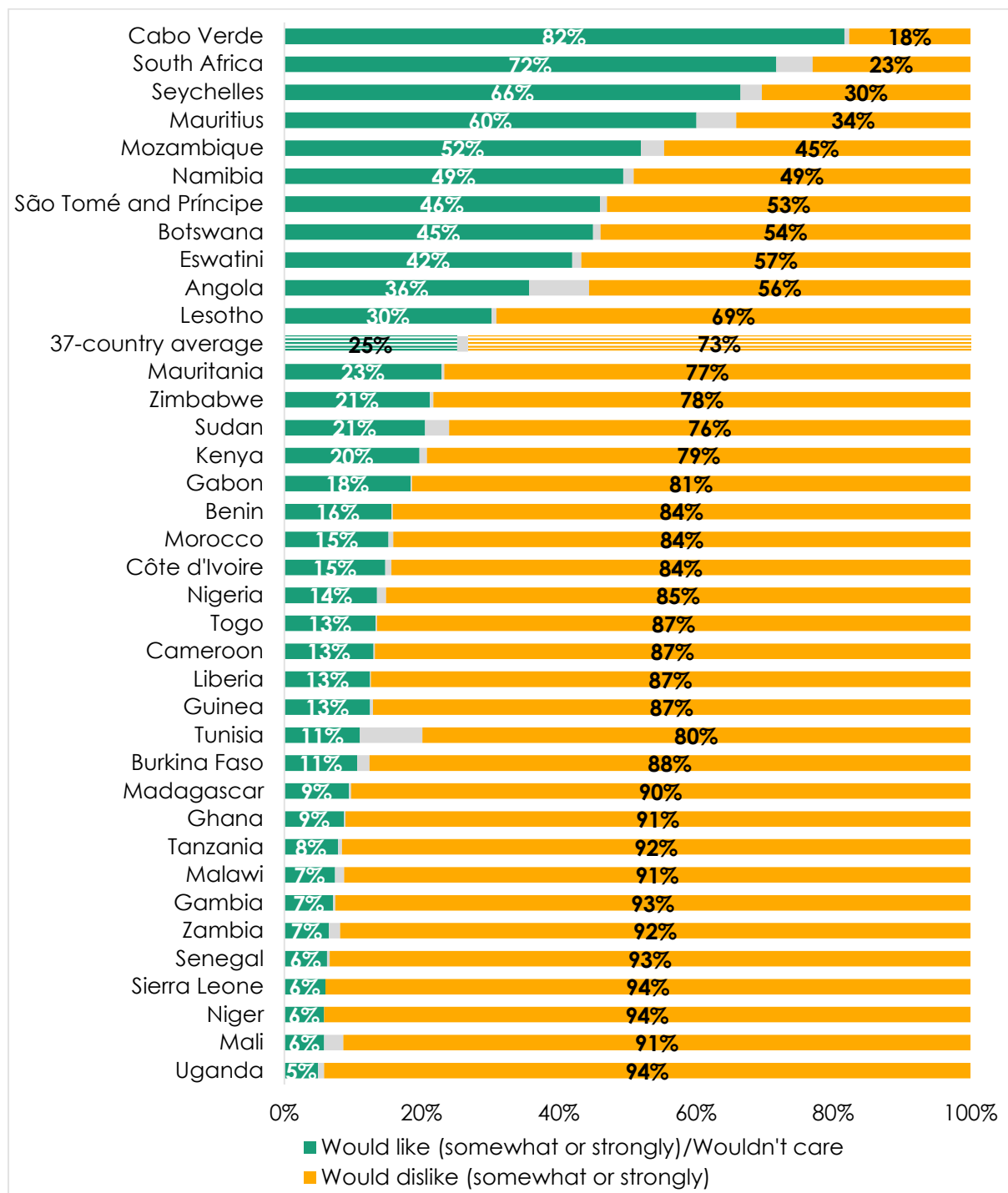
### Tolerance for LGBTQ persons in Africa

Ugandans' attitudes toward same-sex relationships are extreme even for the African continent, where such intolerance is widespread: Among 37 African countries surveyed in 2021/2022, Uganda ranks dead last in acceptance of sexual difference (Figure 7).

On average, 25% of respondents say they would welcome or would not care about a neighbour's homosexuality, while 73% say they would "dislike" or "strongly dislike" it. Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone, and Senegal join Uganda at the bottom, each with 6% expressing tolerance. But in five countries, majorities offer affirming views: Cabo Verde (82%), South Africa (72%), Seychelles (66%), Mauritius (60%), and Mozambique (52%). Four of these countries have decriminalised homosexuality in their national constitutions.

In Namibia, half (49%) of citizens express tolerance toward LGBTQ persons; São Tomé and Príncipe and Botswana follow with 46% and 45%, respectively. In recent years, São Tomé and Príncipe and Botswana also struck down laws criminalising homosexuality (Parliamentarians for Global Action, 2019).

**Figure 7: Tolerance for people in same-sex relationships | 37 countries | 2021/2022**

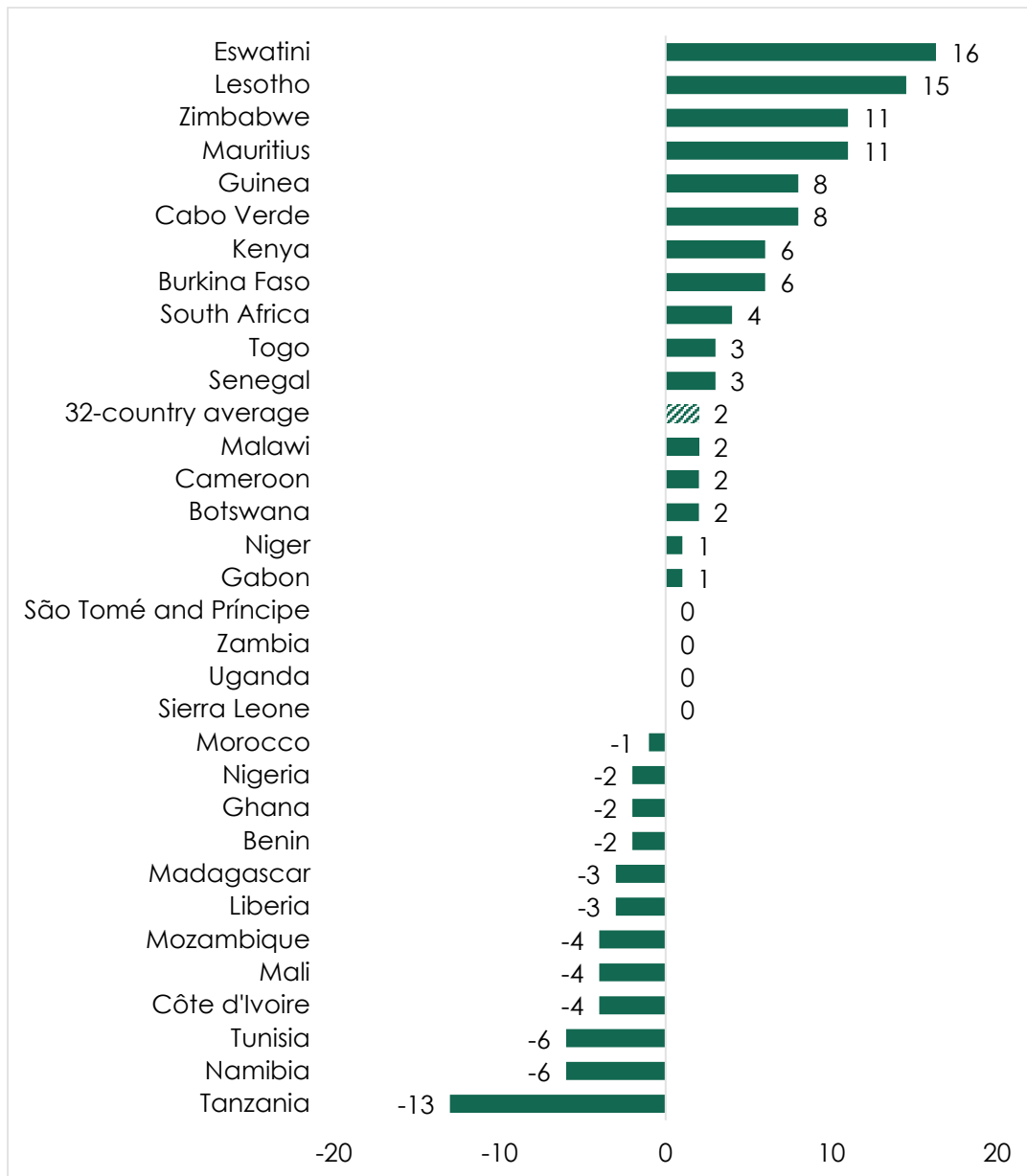


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Homosexuals (% who say "strongly like", "somewhat like," or "would not care")

Our findings also show that tolerance across the continent is not static. Between 2014/2015 and 2021/2022, average tolerance across 32 countries with data for both survey rounds has increased by just 2 percentage points. But four countries have recorded double-digit increases: Eswatini (+16 percentage points), Lesotho (+15), Zimbabwe (+11), and Mauritius (+11). Four others show increases of 6-8 percentage points (Figure 8).

In contrast, six countries have recorded declines in tolerance of more than 3 percentage points, most markedly Tanzania (-13 points).

**Figure 8: Changes in tolerance for people in same-sex relationships (percentage points) | 32 countries | 2014-2022**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Homosexuals? (Figure shows the change, in percentage points, between 2014/2015 and 2021/2022 in the percentage of respondents saying they "would strongly like," "would somewhat like," or "would not care")



## Conclusion

If democracy demands respect for differences and protection for the rights of minorities (Dionne & Dulani, 2020), Afrobarometer survey findings suggest that Uganda's democratic challenges extend to all levels and sectors of society. While its political leaders have faced international condemnation for their proposed "anti-homosexuality" bill, citizens from all walks of life – including young adults, the educated, and urban residents – join them in expressing overwhelming intolerance for sexual differences.

In its profile of intolerance, Uganda is not typical of the African continent. Among 37 countries surveyed in 2021/2022, Uganda ranks lowest in tolerance for people in same-sex relationships, far below the – admittedly intolerant – average. At the other end of the spectrum are countries where majorities – as large as 82% in Cabo Verde and 72% in South Africa – have no problem with homosexual neighbours. And eight surveyed countries show significant increases in tolerance since 2014/2015.

Interestingly, four of five countries with tolerant majorities have decriminalised homosexuality, as have two countries – São Tomé and Príncipe and Botswana – where almost half of citizens express tolerant attitudes. This may reflect policy and legislative reform responding to public opinion (Hester & Gibson, 2007) or the opposite, public opinion evolving under the influence of progressive laws and policies (Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013; Bishin & Smith, 2013), or both. In the recent case of Botswana, the 2019 High Court ruling decriminalising same-sex relations cited public-attitude data from Afrobarometer as evidence of Botswana's "readiness to embrace and tolerate homosexuality" (High Court of Botswana, 2019, p. 19).

In Uganda, neither lawmakers nor the general public seem likely to provide impetus for protecting LGBTQ rights anytime soon, and human-rights activists may have to look elsewhere – the courts, the media, courageous individuals – for support.

---

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question,  
for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at  
[www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

---

## References

- Alo, O. (2020). Homosexuality decriminalization and LGBT rights in Africa. BBC. 1 July.
- Arimoro, A. E. (2021). Interrogating the criminalisation of same-sex sexual activity: A study of Commonwealth Africa. *Liverpool Law Review*, 42, 379-399.
- Atuhaire, P. (2023). Uganda anti-homosexuality bill: Life in prison for saying you're gay. BBC. 23 April.
- BBC. (2023). Homosexuality: The countries where it is illegal to be gay. Reality Check. 31 March.
- Bishin, B. G., & Smith, C. A. (2013). When do legislators defy popular sovereignty? Testing theories of minority representation using DOMA. *Political Research Quarterly*, 66(4), 794-803.
- Dionne, K. Y., & Dulani, B. (2020). African attitudes toward same-sex relationships, 1982-2018. *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- GhanaWeb. (2023). Anti-gay bill not an official government legislation – Akufo-Addo tells US vice president. 29 March.
- Gomes da Costa Santos, G. (2013). Decriminalising homosexuality in Africa: Lessons from the South African experience. In *Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the Commonwealth: Struggles for Decriminalisation and Change* (pp. 313-337). Institute of Commonwealth Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London.
- Guardian. (2023). Ugandan MPs pass bill imposing death penalty for homosexuality. 21 March.
- Hester, J. B., & Gibson, R. H. (2007). The agenda-setting function of national versus local media: A time-series analysis for the issue of same-sex marriage. *Mass Communication and Society*, 10(3), 299-317.
- High Court of Botswana. (2019). In the high court of Botswana held at Gaborone: Mahgb-000591 16: Judgment.
- Hooghe, M., & Meeusen, C. (2013). Is same-sex marriage legislation related to attitudes toward homosexuality? Trends in tolerance of homosexuality in European countries between 2002 and 2010. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 10(4), 258-268.
- Ibrahim, A. (2015). LGBT rights in Africa and the discursive role of international human rights law. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 15, 263-281.
- Independent. (2023). Anti-homosexuality bill: US says Uganda could face sanctions. 23 March.
- Muhumuza, R. (2023). Ugandan president refuses to sign LGBTQ bill, seeks changes. Associated Press. 20 April.
- Mulga, K. (2019). African homophobia and the colonial roots of African conservatism. Africa is a Country. 20 June.
- Parliamentarians for Global Action. (2019). Angola becomes the latest country to decriminalize same-sex conduct. 26 January.
- Princewill, N. (2023). Ghana's president softens country's stance on draconian anti-LGBTQ bill as Kamala Harris visits. CNN. 29 March.
- Rahketsi, A. (2021). Five countries that have legalized same-sex relationships in the past 10 years. Global Citizen. 25 February.
- RFI. (2023). Uganda lawmakers pass new draft of harsh anti-gay bill. 3 May.
- Tharoor, I. (2023). The U.S. connection to Uganda's 'kill the gays' bill. Washington Post. 24 March.
- Uganda Legal Information Institute. (2014). Penal code act (chapter 120).

**Makanga Ronald Kakumba** is a senior data manager for the MRC/UVRI and LSHTM Uganda Research Unit in Entebbe, Uganda. Email: [makanga.ronnie@gmail.com](mailto:makanga.ronnie@gmail.com).

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the European Union, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Mastercard Foundation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the University of California San Diego, the Global Centre for Pluralism, the World Bank Group, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, and GIZ.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)) or contact Felix Biga ([felixbiga@afrobarometer.org](mailto:felixbiga@afrobarometer.org)) or Runyararo Munetsi ([runyararo@afrobarometer.org](mailto:runyararo@afrobarometer.org)) to discuss institutional funding.

For more information, please visit [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 639 | 11 May 2023**