

Developing Rectal Microbicides (RM) in Africa - the advocacy needed to make it happen

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Introduction

Recently, the CAPRISA 004 study and the Global iPrEX Study, demonstrated that the use of anti-retroviral medication can reduce the risk of HIV acquisition. International Rectal Microbicide Advocates (IRMA) has been advocating for the development of a RM package in Africa. Two safety trials on RMs have been completed and one is underway. Additionally, a Phase II trial that will likely include Cape Town is in the protocol development stage. Advocacy for RM is **critical** in the African context and beyond, as it is necessary to develop new prevention options for people who experience barriers in using or accessing standard HIV prevention tools, such as condoms and lubrication.

IRMA

- Created in 2005, IRMA is comprised of over 1,000 advocates, policymakers and leading scientists.
- IRMA members advocate for a robust RM research and development agenda.
- IRMA works to confront the institutional, socio-cultural, and political stigma around the public health need for rectal microbicide research, and to increase funding and commitment within this field of inquiry.
- Key IRMA activities include the development and dissemination of educational materials in both print and electronic formats as well as global mobilization efforts.

Way Forward

Project ARM activities will continue to advocate for RM awareness and studies in Africa. Further goals include recruiting researchers and advocates, addressing the burden of HIV among MSM, promoting anal health and recognizing anal sex as an important driver in the HIV epidemic.

Advocacy for RM development in Africa

Project ARM (Africa for Rectal Microbicides), an IRMA initiative, aims to develop community awareness around anal sex, anal health and RMs in Africa in order to ensure broad participation in research activities and well informed community input. An African-focused meeting on anal sex and rectal microbicides is being planned in conjunction with the 2011 ICASA Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. An **advocacy and educational video on anal sex and RMs in the African context is in development and will be screened at the Project ARM meeting.**

The **meeting will** bring together African scientists, community advocates, prevention experts, members of the LGBT and human rights organizations and commercial sex workers to advocate around, and develop strategies for RM development in Africa. **The RM advocacy video** will provide education on anal intercourse and create awareness around RM development in African. The target audience consists of community members and prevention advocates in Africa. Video screening is aimed for the ICASA meeting, and will be used to lay the foundation for further advocacy work around RMs in Africa.

Challenges for RM advocacy in Africa

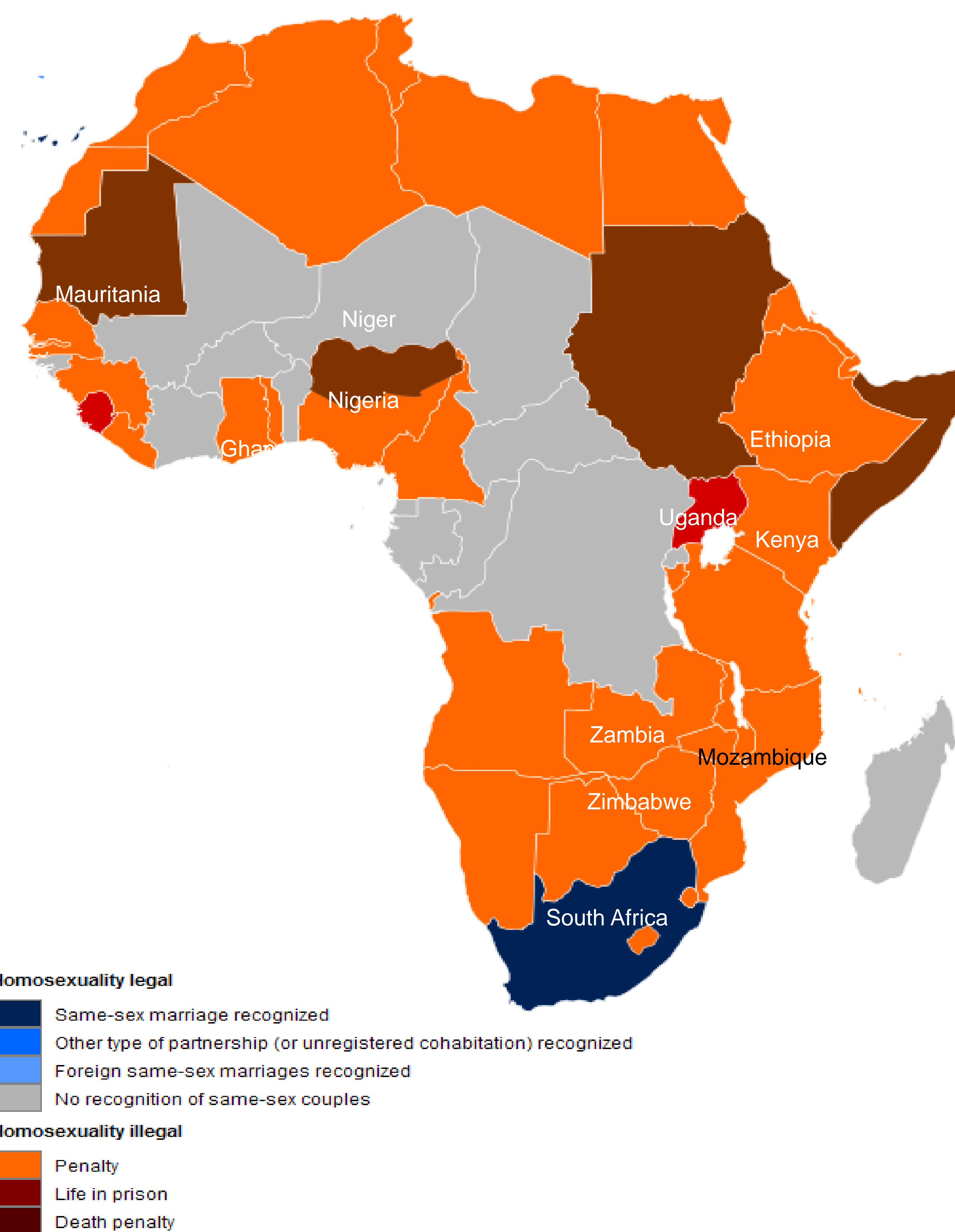


Figure 1. Map of Africa outlining current homosexual legal framework and Project Arm Members.¹

One of the biggest challenges in advocating for RMs in Africa is the criminalization of gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM).

Homosexuality is outlawed in 38 African countries.

In just 13 nations, homosexuality is either legal or there are no laws pertaining to it.

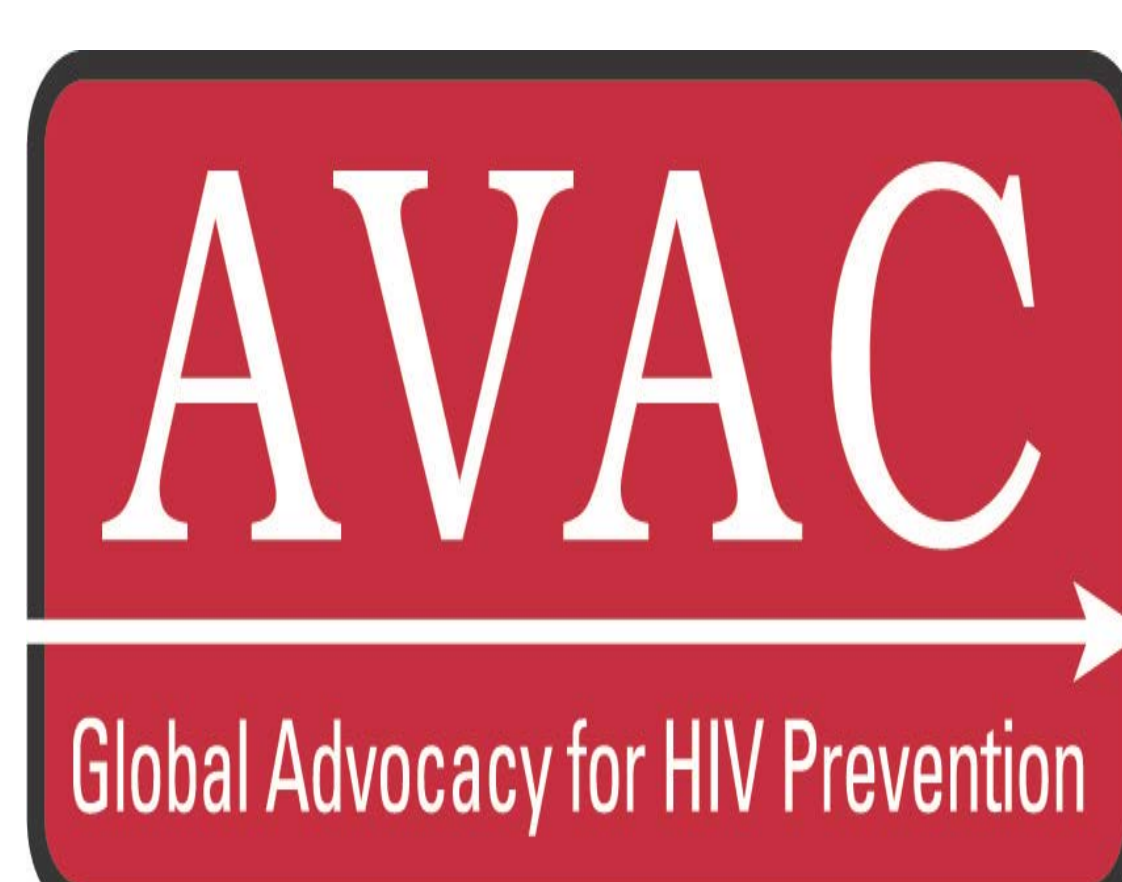
Providing MSM focused services, or enrolling MSM into research studies in countries where they face criminalization and significant societal stigma and discrimination is very difficult.

Anal intercourse, a behavior practiced by gay men, other MSM, women, and transgender individuals, is denied, stigmatized, and in many instances criminalized as well.

Only recently have researchers and advocates in Africa begun to publicly acknowledge and recognize anal intercourse as an important driver in the heterosexual epidemic.

References:

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_by_country_or_territory Wikipedia



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