

HOW JOURNALISTS CAN NAVIGATE PROTECTING THEIR SOURCES AND THEMSELVES WHILE REPORTING ABOUT LGBTQIA+ IN RESTRICTIVE CIRCUMSTANCES

Covering LGBTQIA+ rights in regions where same-sex relationships or gender diversity are criminalised places journalists in uncomfortable and often dangerous circumstances. While freedom of expression is the key to journalism, it is reduced when powerful institutions such as the law, culture, and tradition are openly against LGBTQIA+ identities. Across many African circumstances, the risks extend beyond legal repercussions to include social hostility; journalists often face harassment, surveillance, and even physical violence. This essay examines how reporters can navigate such environments by adopting safer practices, revising their ethical approaches to storytelling, and drawing insights from the lived experiences of African people who identify as part of the LGBTQIA.

In more than 30 countries, same-sex relationships remain criminalised, furthering hostile conditions for LGBTQIA+ communities and the journalists who cover their struggles. Even in South Africa, where the constitution protects LGBTQIA+ rights, reporters still face community pushback. As a result, it becomes challenging to access willing participants to be sources and threats when investigating hate crimes such as corrective rape. In African countries such as Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, etc, it shows that the disdain against the LGBTQIA is not only embedded in laws but also comes from communities, social, and cultural attitudes.

The Risks Journalists Face

When covering LGBTQIA+ issues in restrictive environments, journalists face multiple risks. These include arrest under “promotion of homosexuality” laws, police intimidation, loss of employment, online harassment, and targeted violence by extremist groups or mobs. In some cases, simply interviewing an LGBTQIA+ person can be interpreted as promoting same sex relationships. These risks affect not only the journalist but also their sources, making ethical decision-making central to every stage of the reporting process.

Examples of LGBTQIA+ Reporting in Africa:

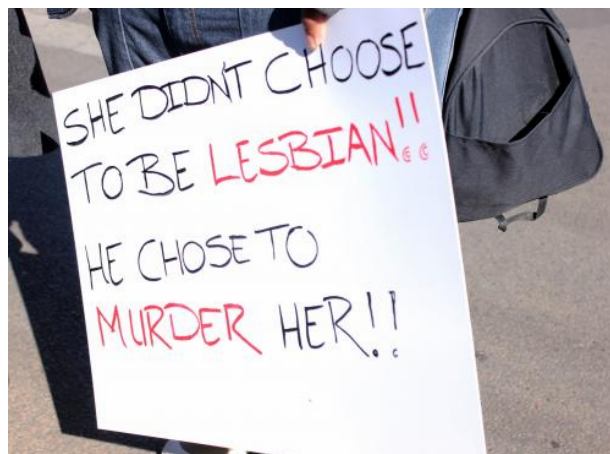
- **Uganda’s “Rolling Stone” Case (2010):**
A Ugandan tabloid published names and photographs of LGBTQIA+ individuals under the headline “*Hang Them.*” And “homos exposed” Journalists who investigated the consequences of the article faced police intimidation and threats from anti-gay groups. One contributing reporter had to go into hiding for safety. This case demonstrates how media exposure can endanger LGBTQIA+ individuals and journalists.



Opposite page: David Kano, who was bludgeoned to death by an intruder for being gay; below, the Rolling Stone newspaper has run lurid anti-gay stories

- **South African Coverage of Hate Crimes:**

Although South Africa has progressive laws, journalists reporting on attacks against lesbian women in townships often hide survivors' identities, use pseudonyms, and work with LGBTQ+ organisations to safeguard participants. This demonstrates how ethical storytelling and anonymity can enhance the effectiveness and safety of sensitive reporting. The murder of Sizakhele and Salome in Meadowlands, Johannesburg, shows how being part of the LGBTQIA community can be dangerous in South Africa. The journalist working on this particular case had to be careful when reporting on the case by protecting the witnesses.



- **Malawi's Reporting on the 2009 Tiwonge Chimalanga Case:**

Following the arrest of Tiwonge Chimalanga and Steven Monjeza after their traditional engagement ceremony, Malawian journalists were forced to deal with state hostility and accusations of endorsing homosexuality. To lessen these risks, many turned to international media platforms to share sensitive information, demonstrating how cross-border collaboration can serve as a strategy to avoid censorship and ensure visibility of LGBTQIA+ issues.



These examples show that meaningful reporting is possible, but it needs intentional and risk-aware care.

Strategies Journalists Can Use to Stay Safe and Ethical

Choose a broad human rights lens:

Instead of directly advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights, journalists can frame their reporting around universal issues such as violence, access to healthcare, police misconduct, or the right to live free from discrimination. This approach emphasises systemic injustices while limiting the risk of being perceived as an activist who promotes homosexuality.

Protect identities and sources:

Reporters should protect vulnerable individuals by using pseudonyms, concealing identifiable details, avoiding the publication of faces, and relying on encrypted communication tools during interviews, such as voice changers or face blurring software. These measures help minimize the risk of retaliation against those who share their stories.

Work with trusted organisations:

Journalists should collaborate with human rights NGOs, such as Amnesty International, LGBTQ+ advocacy groups like the ACLU, and legal experts to ensure accuracy, protect at-risk individuals, and allow access to safer connections for gathering and spreading information.

Use global platforms:

In cases of severe repression, journalists may choose to publish sensitive material through international outlets under pseudonyms. This strategy enables them to maintain their voice while minimizing exposure to threats and censorship.

Carry out risk assessments:

Before publication, journalists should carefully weigh the potential consequences for both themselves and their sources. This ensures that reporting contributes positively to public awareness and justice without inadvertently causing harm to any of the people involved.

Ethical Storytelling as a Tool for Protection

Ethical journalism also strengthens the reliability of the story, allowing it to convey strong messages even in restrictive circumstances, as ethical storytelling is not only about accuracy; it is also about ensuring that the voices of the marginalized are heard without worsening the circumstances for the parties involved by avoiding sensationalism, verifying facts through trustworthy human rights organisations, and prioritising dignity over sensationalism to ensure that responsible journalism takes place without endangering anyone in the process.

Conclusion

For journalists working in repressive African environments, covering LGBTQIA+ rights is not just a professional challenge; it is a profoundly personal risk. Laws, social hostility, and the threat of violence weigh heavily on those who try to tell these stories. It gives voice to marginalised communities who are too often silenced and keeps the principle that everyone deserves dignity and to be seen. By employing careful strategies, fostering trust with supportive networks, and narrating stories through universal human rights perspectives, journalists can continue to shine a light, even in hostile circumstances. Each report becomes more than just news; it is an act of courage, a refusal to let silence enhance injustice, and a reminder that storytelling itself can protect human dignity.