



A DISCOURSE ON ALTERNATIVE SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN SCHOOLS
AND HOMES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to present the current problems confronting gays and lesbians in Nigeria in view of the new legislation forbidding homosexuality in the country. The paper attempts to advocate the alternative approaches in dealing with homosexuals that will not blatantly impinge on their rights. Many African countries are not favourably disposed to alternative sexual orientation. Nigeria has taken concrete steps in criminalizing same sex marriage and all such relationships. While Christians abhor it the "offence" can attract as much as a death penalty among the Muslim faithful. Thus politically, religiously and culturally Nigeria is highly homophobic. But globally there is an upsurge in the recognition of the increasing number of persons outside mainstream sexual orientation. As part of the global village, Nigeria obviously has persons with these tendencies whose number also may be on the increase, particularly among the more adventurous group –the youths. Yet, not even as a starting point is sexuality education taught either in school or at home to enable this group to handle their sexuality. The paper concludes that human rights should not be diminished by national legislation.

Keywords: Lesbians, Gay, Transgender, Bi-Sexual, Sexual Orientation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual orientation is an enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction that one feels towards women, towards men, towards both or towards oneself. When a person does not experience sexual attraction to another person, such a one is referred to as asexual. When they are attracted to people of the opposite sex they are called heterosexuals, and homosexuals, if they are attracted to people of the same sex. Men who are attracted to men are referred to as gay and lesbians are women who are attracted to women. When a person is attracted to both men and women, such person is bisexual. The dominant view in society has been that all sexuality is heterosexual while homosexuality has been pretty much ignored (Department of Education Pretoria, 2002). However, homosexual relationships and acts have been admired by a few as well as condemned by the majority throughout recorded history.

The enormity of the challenges homosexuals face drives them into the "closet". The greatest challenge being societal attitude which has had a decisive effect on the extent to which individuals have hidden or declared their sexual orientation. The incessant killing of homosexual even in countries such as South Africa, which has official liberal disposition towards alternative sexual orientation, makes international headline news. For example South

Africa maintains that discrimination against people on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (the gender that a person sees themselves as, which may include refusing to label oneself with a gender), is no more acceptable than doing so on the basis of race, religion, nationality or any other groups. Officially South Africa maintains that no one should be excluded from the protection of international human rights law. This position is affirmed in South African Constitution and its Bill of Rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996) yet no fewer than 6 gay persons were murdered in that country in the month of July 2012 (Pink Tongue, 2012).

Such killings often go unreported because the relations of victims fear embarrassment or further victimization, so there is no accurate statistical information as to the scale and nature of crimes against homosexual persons. This dichotomy between the constitutional recognition of homosexual persons and their rights and the violation of such constitutional provisions cuts across the globe in varying degrees. These hate crimes notwithstanding, since the end of the nineteenth century, global movements towards increased visibility, recognition and legal rights including the right to marriage and civil unions, adoption and parenting have dominated public discourse. As the world shrinks into one global village in which any information can be gotten at the tap of a button, nations need to understand the issues in alternative sexual orientation and be willing to reconcile universal standards of human rights with local ideas of culture and religion. A miscarriage of justice may occur where people who have not been previously provided with programmes and interventions designed to help address their sexuality are judged and condemned. This paper therefore will attempt to present some ways of dealing with alternative sexual orientations without violating the rights of persons with these tendencies.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A good understanding of the evolution of gay disposition/life style will prevent dangerous curative measures and attacks. Are they born or made? Research has shown that diversity in sexual orientation may be caused by a combination or one of the following: genetic, hormonal and environmental influences. No findings have emerged to conclusively determine the influence of any particular factor or factors except that nature and nurture may independently or together play a complex role (John, 2003).

In recent decades biologically based theories have been favoured by experts who advance the idea that sexual orientations are innate characteristics like race, colour of eyes and other physical features. While this paper will not and indeed cannot undertake the analysis of the scientific evidence in support of this assertion, more so as Cameron (1977) observed that many of these findings are inconclusive and not replicable, here are some comments from highly renounced world figures in support of biological based theories.

An international gay rights campaign which was launched in the United Kingdom was endorsed by singer Elton John and actor John Barrowman. The kaleidoscope Trust's campaign, entitled "imagine if it were illegal for you to be you" was created to gain support for the human rights of homosexual people wherever it is a crime to be gay. Singer Elton John said: "Just imagine what it would be like if it were illegal to have blue eyes or be under five feet ten inches tall". "Just imagine if something you could do nothing about meant you could go to prison or face attack or even death" Touchwood actor John Barrowman on his part asked," what if it was illegal for me to want to sing, or to have an American accent?"

Scientific research has concluded that homosexuality is neither a disorder nor a disease but a normal variant of human sexual orientation. Advocates of this position resist any attempt to "medicalise" or pathologise homosexuality. In support of this claim the psychological and psychiatric experts agreed since 1975 that homosexuality is neither a form of mental illness nor a symptom of mental illness (Conger, 1975). Also, the renowned American Psychological

Association (APA) urges all mental health professionals to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with gay people. To buttress their position, they maintain that the majority of gay and lesbian individuals lead happy, healthy, well adjusted and productive lives. It is further argued that a person's sexual orientation says nothing about that person's suitability to be a parent. They do not differ from heterosexuals in parenting and their children do not show any deficit compared to children raised by heterosexual parents.

If the contribution of nature is upheld, then the gay question cannot be legislated upon. At best (like some have muted) scientific efforts should aim at minimizing the incidence to conform to widely accepted norm -heterosexuality. Some exponents of environmental influence on the other hand affirm that the environment is responsible for a person's sexual preference or orientation. In analyzing three large empirical studies conducted by Kinsey in the 1940's and 1970's and another conducted by the Family Research Institute (FRI), Cameron (1997) confirmed that homosexuals overwhelmingly believed their feelings and behaviour were the result of social or environmental influence. No one environmental factor is acceptable to all researchers in the field as solely responsible. But Cameron (1997) categorized the factors into the following subheadings.

- a) Homosexual experience: His analysis of several researches on this matter indicates that childhood sexual experiences predicted adult behaviour. Consequently homosexual experience was a strong predictor of adult homosexual behaviour, particularly if it was one's first sexual experience. Moreover if the homosexual contact was with an adult particularly with a relative or authority figure such as an uncle or a teacher the effect would be more lasting.
- b) Family abnormality: The following are family characteristics which according to Cameron (1997) can engender homosexuality:
 - Poor relationship with mother or father
 - A dominant, possessive, or rejecting mother
 - An absent, distant or rejecting father
 - A parent in homosexual proclivities, particularly one who molests a child of the same sex
 - A sibling with homosexual tendencies, particularly one who molests a brother or sister
 - The lack of a religious home environment
 - Parents who model unconventional sex roles
 - Condoning homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle – welcoming homosexuals (e.g.: Co-workers, friends) into the family circle.
- c) Cultural Influences: Sexual conduct is influenced by cultural factors – especially religious convictions. Cameron (1997) quotes Kinsey as having reported less homosexual activity among devout religious groups regardless of their denomination. Were homosexuality inherited, the differences along religious lines would not be there. Again a culture that approves homosexuality or allows curiosity and encourages exploration will breed more homosexuals than one which does not openly acknowledge homosexual authority figures.

There are yet other points that buttress the environment influence position. It is also understood that city of origin or residence show positive correlation to homosexuality. Large urban cities may provide a congenial environment for the development and expression of same sex interest (Laumann, Micheal, & Kolata 1995). Others have noted that when a taboo is lifted or diminished, individuals gain spaces to explore and express their sexual orientation. More and more people, particularly women will develop an attraction for their kind.

The role of the internet in cultural diffusion can be applicable here too. Today many young people recognize their sexuality earlier than in the past due to technological advancement which enables them to imbibe foreign cultures as they interact with people of diverse cultures. What this means is that homosexual lifestyle can be taught and learnt. A strong point for this argument is the fact that many homosexual adults have reported having had relationships and sexual activities with persons of the opposite sex as adolescents and many adults who identified themselves as heterosexuals had sex with persons of the same sex during adolescence. Besides this category, there are ex-homosexuals who have chosen to change their habits as well as the object of their desire. This “cure” is akin to those of drugs or alcoholic addicts and the method they claim can be psychotherapy or spiritual/religious. As adolescents question their sexual feelings, they will be prone to accept what the environment offers so it is not surprising that sexual orientation can shift over the course of a person’s life. From this stand point therefore gay lifestyle is not fixed at birth. Having learnt it, it can be un-learnt.

3. DISCUSSIONS

3.1 *Homosexual Trend In Nigeria*

In the past, Nigerians were highly discrete about their sexual business. They were not issues that were brought to the public domain be it gay or straight but more so for the gay persons. But today homosexuals are becoming so visible that there are gay designated clubs and even a boldly acclaimed gay church (Rainbow Metropolitan Community Church, Ikeja Lagos). Ojeme, Obasola and Adedokun (2008) pointed out that a new business appears to be booming among male students in many Nigerian universities across the country. In the past prostitution was associated with female university students but presently their male counterparts are joining to make money. While females make their money dating rich men, more male students appear to be getting more and more involved in a same sex relationship. According to the researchers, male prostitution, especially same sex prostitutes are not as common as female “straight” prostitutes so they are in high demand. Their investigations reveal that these students who are often driven by austerity measures make good money “servicing” the rich outside the campus. The male students, undergraduates and graduates alike, also encourage fellow students to engage in the act. Cases of the experienced recruiting and initiating the innocent are frequently reported.

These initiates may be compelled by the exigencies of the time which could be resolved by making money and getting connected to persons who may appear to be a launching pad for a bright future. They often hope to give up this lifestyle after school and as their economy and social status improve. Many heterosexual men complain that they can no longer give up their gay lifestyle which they acquired as students. In fact they do not enjoy sex with their wives as much as they enjoy it with their gay partners. This is a typical case of how culture can consign people to perpetual bondage as one is forced to marry from the opposite sex, not out of love but to satisfy cultural demands.

Unlike many in developed countries who claim not to have chosen to be gay but are involved because they are created that way, many boys in Nigerian universities are being enticed with monetary gifts and those who are fortunate to meet wealthy partners have become “big boys” overnight.

Generally women do not pay for such services, maybe that is the reason there are more documentation of rich men recruiting the services of young men for the gratification of their sex need. If same sex inclinations were biologically determined, one would expect to see more women of influence also using financial inducement to entice young girls. While rich women may not flagrantly go after young girls like the males do with young men. However,

there are few reports of a rare system that employs female sex workers to satisfy the sexual need of women who do not get sexual attention from their husbands. This is comparatively low as against men who indulge in gay life style. But why would these women get involved with the same sex? Some say they indulge in it to spite their husbands, for others the fear of pregnancy compel them to stay away from men.

3.2 Official Position of Nigeria and Same Sex Relationship

Gay persons in Nigeria face very serious legal and social challenges because gay activities are illegal in Nigeria. For this reason, many cannot publicly declare their orientation. If violence is meted out to gay persons in countries that officially are favourably disposed to alternative sexual orientation, then one would expect it to be very high here. According to Pew Global Attitudes Project (2007), 97 percent of Nigerian residents condemned homosexuality as a way of life that must not be tolerated by society. In fact of the 45 countries surveyed, Nigeria came second on the list of homophobic nations. In states (Nigeria comprises thirty-six states) where Sharia law operates, the "offence" can attract as much as a death penalty.

On 29 November, 2011, the Nigerian Senate (Upper Legislative House) passed the "Same-sex, Marriage (Prohibition) Bill 2011" and on May 31, 2013 the House of Representatives (Lower Legislative House) approved the bill which was immediately sent to the Head of State, President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan for him to sign into law. Whether he will approve it in spite of the outpouring of condemnation from various parts of the globe remains unclear. For instance the United States of America and the United Kingdom have raised concern over withdrawing foreign funding for AIDS and HIV. Also, some European Union countries have offered asylum based on gender identity to homosexual individuals. Nigeria does not appear to be moved by these threats. The bill which is now passed into law:

- Makes a marriage contract or civil union entered into between persons of the same sex "invalid and illegal and ... Not recognized as entitled to the benefits of a valid marriage"
- Make void and unenforceable in Nigeria a marriage contract or civil union entered into between persons of the same sex by virtue of a certificate issued by a foreign country
- Prohibit the solemnization of any marriage or civil union entered into between persons of the same sex "in any place of worship either the Church or Mosque or any other place or whatsoever called in Nigeria"
- Prohibit the registration of "gay clubs, societies and organisations, their sustenance, processions and meetings"
- Prohibit the "public show of same sex amorous relationship directly or indirectly"
- Make a person who enters into a same sex marriage contract or civil union liable for 14 years' imprisonment
- Make a person who "registers, operates or participates in gay clubs, societies and organisation, or directly or indirectly make public show of same sex amorous relationship in Nigeria" liable for 10 years' imprisonment
- Make a person or group of persons that "witness, abet and aids the solemnization of a same sex marriage or civil union, or supports the registration, operation and sustenance of gay clubs, societies, organizations, processions or meetings in Nigeria" liable for 10 years' imprisonment
- Define "civil union" for purposes of this law to mean "any arrangement between persons of the same sex to live together as sex partners, and ... include such descriptions as adult independent relationships, caring partnerships, civil partnerships, civil solidarity pacts, domestic partnerships, reciprocal beneficiary relationships, registered partnerships, significant relationships, stable unions, etc."

3.3 Despossession of The Human Rights of Homosexual People

Nigeria does not provide for homosexual rights in her constitution but there are various provisions guaranteeing all citizens equal rights (Section 17(2) (a). As a signatory to international laws and treaties that are against the violation of both the right to privacy and right to equality before the law without any discrimination, Nigeria does not seem to be upholding these tenets as they affect the homosexual people. United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) confirmed that laws criminalizing consensual same sex activity violate these rights. The council affirms this position by urging countries to repeal laws that criminalise consensual same sex activity. Harassment and murder of homosexuals are by definition violation of their rights. Nigeria's position therefore is in defiance of established international human rights law.

One of the five main national goals of Nigeria which was endorsed as a necessary foundation for the National Policy on the education FPN (2004) is: "a just and egalitarian society". It therefore means that Nigeria accepts that all humans are equal in fundamental worth or social status so all people should have the same political, economic, social and civil rights. No one will be treated differently based on certain criteria such as gender, race or even sexual orientation. Freedom is the condition of being able to act and think however one wants (within the limits of reason and morality) without being controlled or limited. It is closely connected with equality. But the relationship between the two begins by obtaining freedom without which one does not have the ability to be equal to others as he cannot do what he wants. Whether any of these ideas have been sufficiently implemented in practice remains a controversial question globally. But discrimination against homosexual persons clearly shows that egalitarianism is not an achievable goal, at least not in Nigeria. At best it is an ideal and not a fact. Lack of freedom and equality therefore serves to frustrate the basic human need for dignity resulting in despair and hopelessness among victims and ultimately the whole nation is affected. Undermining the importance of freedom and equality can be a potent source of social disruption.

4. CONCLUSION

Some believe sexual orientation is innate and fixed, others understand environment to be responsible for it. No one knows for certain what causes it, what we do know is that people with alternate sexual orientation even among hypocritical high and mighty lawmakers are everywhere except that they are not always visible.

Generally homosexuality presents daunting/challenges to the development and maintenance of a positive self image. A responsive government should find ways of ameliorating the plight of this highly stigmatized group. As a starting point, Nigerian Psychological associations can cooperate with other multinational psychological researchers and practitioners who are concerned about the mental health and well-being of homosexual populations. Such collaboration will increase knowledge about homosexual people without which Nigeria cannot effectively handle them. Nigeria cannot afford to allow a segment of the nation continue to suffer loneliness, guilt, shame, fear, loss of self esteem, suicidal tendencies and other mental health conditions, associated with homosexuality and to crown it all the use of force cannot be the solution. Legal framework for accepting homosexual persons has not saved them from the harmful impart of prejudice and stigmatization prevalent in South African society.

5. THE WAY FORWARD

Nigeria has always preached the message of unity in diversity and one issue that will continue to generate diverse views is the rights of homosexual people. This paper asserts that the focus should not be whether there should be alternative sexual disposition or not. It is possible that humans are biologically predisposed to be heterosexual, homosexual, asexual or bisexual, but their learning experiences ultimately determine whether their predisposition is expressed (Mcanulty & Burnett, 2001). Therefore rather than castigate one group or the other, both gay and straight members of the community can work out a system of mutual tolerance. How can reason prevail over force? The following suggestions are put forth.

5.1 Parental Role Model

The role of parents as a child's first teacher and the home as the primary institution of socialization cannot be overemphasized. Therefore at every stage in the development of the child, positive behaviours which are based on accepted social norms should be displayed by parents because children learn fast during their formative age. While there is no sufficient research evidence as to the particular parental traits that affect a child's preferred sexual disposition, poor relationship with father, over possessive mother, weak or absent father, a parent with homosexual proclivities, particularly one who molests a child of same sex are among the parental characteristics that promote homosexuality.

5.2 Improvement of Economic Status

Economic status affects how people negotiate sexuality norms and can restrain sexual expression. Poverty is one of the structures which regulate people's sexual practices, setting constraints on space, social status, sex to be had, confidence and self-esteem. Studies have also linked poverty to the sexual orientation of people (Sida, 2010) and other unsafe sexual behaviour. Reducing poverty and strengthening the Technical, Vocational and Educational Training (TVET) system could help deal with the nurtured alternative sexual orientation by improving self-esteem and sexual negotiation skills of poor and vulnerable individuals.

Most policy makers, educational administrators and politicians agree that TVET plays a crucial role in the social and economic development of a nation. The main purpose of TVET is to provide skilled manpower in applied science, engineering technology and commerce to operate, maintain and sustain the nation's economic activities for rapid socio-economic development. In Nigeria there is an annual large turnout of graduates but most of them are unemployable as they lack the basic skills and knowledge required in the labour market making them economically excluded.

5.3 Family Life and Sexuality Education

Introduction of family life and sexuality education early in the life of the child is needed to prevent some of these predispositions that society frowns at. One of the purposes of sexuality education during childhood is to help the child understand himself/herself physically and psychologically and to apply this knowledge so that the child may achieve socially acceptable sexual behaviour (Achal, 2002)

On the other hand, it is the right of mature individuals to be able to choose their partners and the kind of sexual expression they prefer. However if there has to be a change in their choice, such change should come through education and counselling not by legal prohibition. Punishing and ostracizing individuals who engage in these socially disapproved forms of sexual

orientation will only exacerbate the problem. Formal Sexuality education curriculum based programme both in and out of school is a key strategy for the promotion of safer sexual behaviours and improved outcomes for adolescent, youths and adults (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

5.4 Social Inclusion

Social inclusion has strong connotation and linkages with human development. Achieving high level of human development is not possible if a segment of the population remains excluded with limited opportunity to participate in economic, social, political and cultural life. Exclusion hampers human fulfillment. It creates apathy and perpetuates popular misconception about policies that are dictated from above. Therefore enacting laws prohibiting alternative sexual orientation needs the collective participation of all stakeholders including those who will be directly affected if the law is made. The process must include public hearing and debates at different fora. Until a collective consensus is achieved, enforcing the law could result in escalating the problem and violating the sexual and reproductive health rights of individuals who had chosen a particular sexual orientation including their fundamental human rights such as freedom of association.

5.5 Faith Based Approach

Nigerians are highly religious. The two major religions, Christianity and Islam have no room whatsoever for the homosexual lifestyle. But instead of preaching hell and brimstone, a more humane or understanding approach may yield better results. The gospel of condemnation may drive homosexuals further into their closet. Rather than explicitly saying that members should be excommunicated, teaching should inculcate realities of life supported with biblical or Islamic truths. Some innovative churches these days plan various activities and invite experts to talk about adolescent sexuality, making responsible decisions, various communications on sexuality issues, positive self esteem, sexually transmitted disease etc. The realization that somebody is genuinely interested in their well being may hold more attraction and where homosexuality is learned/nurtured, this approach can ultimately lead one to conform with societal expectations.

5.6 Co-Education School

It is normal to have sexual feelings and as people pass through childhood to adulthood; their sexual feelings develop and change. During the puberty stage, sexual feelings are “riotous” because of hormonal changes. This period is also characterized with role conflict. It takes a lot for adolescents to understand themselves including their sexual orientation.

In Nigeria, there are many same sex secondary schools. This school period coincides with the role conflict and sexual awakening of young people. Inevitably they begin to experiment and express their sexual feelings with the available same sex. School is an important environment where children spend most of their time so teachers must understand sexual diversity and be able to collaborate with the school psychologist or social worker to effectively counsel students who may have become gay or lesbians or are confused about their sexual orientation. During pubertal stage co-educational schools should be encouraged in order to build the kind of responsible relationship that society supports.

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