

The “politics” of sexual identities in Zimbabwe: A Social Work perspective?

Vincent Mabvurira

Department of Social Sciences
Bindura University of Science Education
Private Bag 1020, Bindura
Zimbabwe

Petronila Dadirai Motsi

School of Social Work
University of Zimbabwe
Private Box MP 167
Mount Pleasant , Harare
Zimbabwe

Tawanda Masuka

Department of Social Sciences
Bindura University of Science Education
Private Bag 1020, Bindura
Zimbabwe

Etiya Edith Chigondo

Department of Social Sciences
Bindura University of Science Education
Private Bag 1020, Bindura
Zimbabwe

Abstract

Any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality is treated with scorn in most African societies. This paper focus on homosexuality as a sexual minority problem in Zimbabwe. Homosexuals live secluded lives due to prejudice and discrimination. The paper also argues that despite disapproval that homosexuality in un-African, it is as African as the baobab tree and as Zimbabwean as the Great Zimbabwe Ruins. It traces the incidence of same sex relations in pre-colonial and post colonial Zimbabwe. It also argues that based on their professional values, social workers in Zimbabwe should promote social justice through assisting the gay community.

Key words. Homosexuality, social work, Zimbabwe

The issue of homosexuality is very sensitive in most African societies and as a result it carries ruinous stigma. The challenges presented by homosexuality in different cultures of the world assume various degrees but generally speaking, so far, the phenomenon has raised issues that have proved to be a thorn in the flesh in many scholarly debates as well as in other aspects of life (Mudavanhu, 2010). Talking anything positive about gays might stand as justification that you are one of them; as a result most helping professionals in developing countries have neglected the gay community for fear of losing credibility in society. It takes gallantry to take a pen and paper and start writing without prejudice about homosexuality especially in Zimbabwe. Due to stigma, prejudice and discrimination justified by religious and cultural beliefs, most helping professionals in Zimbabwe are not in any position to help gay people. There is acute debate among social work educators in Zimbabwe whether homosexuality is African or European. Social differences and social diversity are yet to be fully acknowledged. There is an sharp gap in the knowledge base of most academics in Zimbabwe on the subject of same sex relations.

The major reason being that scholars in Zimbabwe have been seriously affected by myths and taboos around the subject. Few historians and gays themselves have devoted their energy to researching in this area. It is not uncommon to find that some helping professionals like social workers are neck deep in homophobic thoughts and feelings that they cannot help their gay clients. When most people in Zimbabwe think of homosexuality, they think of sex. Homosexuality involves more than only sexual contact with persons of the same sex. A homosexual person can also be seen as an individual whose primary erotic psychological and social interests are in a member of the same sex though the interest may not be explicitly expressed. Passionate feelings, emotional attraction, fantasies and definition of self are also involved.

According to Jacques (2000) over the past millennium, homosexuality has been variously defined as a sexual preference, a gift from the gods bestowing wisdom and powers of healing on the recipients, a mortal sin, and a natural sexual human variation. Homosexual relationships have been admired and condemned throughout recorded history depending on the form they took and the culture in which they occurred. Current literature suggests that one's sexual orientation is not a matter of choice that is individuals do not choose to be homosexual or heterosexual. It is thus very sad to note that most Africans regard homosexuality as a Western phenomenon that did not exist in Africa during the pre-colonial period.

Jacques (2000) is of the view that homosexuality has existed throughout history among all people and in all societies and has survived reactions ranging from indifference, through qualified approval to the most vicious persecution. Weeks (1977) pointed out that what has varied considerably is the manner in which different societies have regarded homosexuality, the causative and meaningful factors attached to it and the ways in which those who are involved in it viewed themselves. Osei-Hwedie (2000) writing on social diversity argued that some sexual practices are more acceptable than others because they are seen as morally better, more satisfying, or healthier hence natural. It is based on this perception that for example heterosexuality becomes acceptable at the expense of homosexuality, which is "*constructed*" as a deviant behavior. Determining the exact number of purely homosexual people in developing countries especially African countries is almost impossible. This is mainly because few such people come to the open due to fear of prosecution and most cultures do not sanction homosexual relationships. In Zimbabwe, no any known has been sanctioned to determine the number of homosexuals. This is mainly because homosexuality is a criminal offense and generally, people have negative attitude towards it (Goddard, 2004). However according to National Aids Council and United Nations Fund Population Activities (2006) there are more that 100 000 male homosexuals in Zimbabwe.

One of the foundational fears underlying homophobia is that homosexuality is contagious and therefore threatening to the majority of the population. The very first enquiry into "*unnatural crime*" in Southern Africa on the Witwatersrand was predicted on the assumption behind this fear (Epprecht, 2004). The contagious hypothesis gained popularity during the early colonial times when male-male sex was discovered in the mining compounds in South Africa. It was thought that the Africans were aping Portuguese traders. Gays and lesbians have dismissed the contagion metaphor arguing that homosexual orientation is something that a person is born with or "*bestowed by God or the ancestors*", it can therefore not be transmitted against the will or instincts of the majority (Epprecht, 2004). The contagious hypothesis can be evidenced by the words of Zimbabwe's former parliamentarian and historian Anias Chigwedere when he said that homosexuals are a festering finger that can endanger the whole body (GALZ, 2004).

Incidence of homosexuality in Zimbabwe

There are so many misconceptions, fears and prejudices around homosexuality in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean gays and lesbians who choose to publicly admit their sexual orientation are often perceived as a threat to the morals of black African society, aping *Western* pervasion (GALZ, 2004). One of the greatest strengths of anti-gay lobby in Africa has been the absence of proper historical record of same-sex sexual activity prior to the coming of the whites (Goddard, 2004). Anthropological records of homosexuality prior to the coming of the whites are unclear and flawed by the moral prejudices of the past but the fact remains that homosexuality occurred in Africa before the whites came (Epprecht, 1999). GALZ (2008) posited that the first people to claim that same sex sexual relations were un-African were not African themselves but early white settlers.

Pre-colonial and colonial era

Africans knew, practiced and in some cases even honored sexual relations between members of the same sex (Garlake, 1995).

Epprecht (2004) noted that it can be deduced from Khoisan (Bushmen) rock paintings in Zimbabwe that homosexuality existed in pre-colonial Africa. The Bushmen were the original inhabitants of Zimbabwe and they are similar to those found anywhere in the continent today. A rich legacy of the paintings upon walls of caves they sometimes occupied attests to their way of life and spiritual beliefs (Garlake, 1995). Archaeology of their modern day descendants also suggest a strong continuity with the past and allow anthropologists to summarize some of their sexuality.

Later the Bantu people migrated southwards and occupied the present day Zimbabwe. These had different lifestyles from the Bushmen but still evidence of homosexual acts was prevalent among their ways of life (Epprecht, 2004). Homosexual experimentation among adolescents took place as a normal part of the boys' learning process (Epprecht, 1999). Out in the bush herding cattle, homosexual play with each other was actually expected at the age of puberty. However adult men who were seen engaging in same-sex acts were seen as having been bewitched or being witches themselves. Goddard (2004) posited that traditional institutions in Zimbabwe where a spirit medium may sometimes be possessed by a spirit of the opposite sex has given rise to theories that this was one way in which homosexuals were able to fit in the society and gain acceptance. Oral testimony suggests that ritual male-male sexual acts continued to be practiced by ambitious individuals long after the disappearance of Zimbabwe's large medieval states (Epprecht, 2004). Male sexual acts are still practiced and are seen as cure of impotence. However homosexual activity may not have been socially sanctioned but early court records suggest that under customary law it was considered a lesser offence than adultery. For example Epprecht (1999) noted that early court records at Bindura Magistrate Court show that homosexuality attracted a fine of one piece of cattle while adultery attracted six pieces of cattle. However in the case of consensual same sex acts it was difficult for the chief to decide who should be paid the damages (Goddard, 2004).

Contemporary oral evidence supports the early 20th century view that homosexual relationships were common in Zimbabwe. Informants in a research conducted by Epprecht (1999) estimated that 70 to 80 % of men at the mines took male sexual partners. Garlake (1995) also noted that homosexual activity in Southern African has always been common in prisons and among migrant mine workers. On the same note, the most effective Ndebele healers and diviners were men with the most exaggerated feminine behavior and dress (Goddard, 2004). Also battle preparations among African warriors entailed male sex. This was prevalent among the Ndebele warriors of Zimbabwe, Azande warriors of Sudan/DRC, Nupe warriors of Nigeria and the Tutsi warriors of Rwanda and Burundi. The warriors were supposed to stay eight or more miles from their families ahead of wars (Epprecht, 1999, Garlake, 1995).

During the early colonial period in Zimbabwe, homosexuality was viewed as a criminal facet of the primitive sexual savage that Victorians strongly disapproved of and did everything to stamp out (Goddard, 2002). According to Epprecht (1999) it was through the mining compounds that the word *ngochani* (homosexual) derived from other Bantu languages first appeared in the *Shona* language of Zimbabwe. There were temporary mine marriages between men in mining compounds. At times some mine workers would take teenage boys called *umfaan* to use as wives for a prolonged period.

In the early colonial years, the British South African Company imported workers from neighboring countries to Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). It was in the 1914 Immigration Act that specific mention of homosexuality first appeared in its administration. Persons convicted of sodomy and other unnatural offenses were declared prohibited immigrants (Goddard, 2004). This was expanded in 1954 to prohibit anyone practicing homosexuality from entering Zimbabwe (Goddard, 2004). This clause resurfaced in the Immigration Act of 1966, 1979 and 1996. The Censorship Act of 1967 does not mention homosexuality but carried a highly moralistic tone (Goddard, 2002). With the isolation of Rhodesia in the 1960s after the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), cultural influence from outside remained minimal, nevertheless there was a thriving underground gay scene among middle class whites and coloreds. (Goddard, 2002).

Post independence era

The first lesbian groups that were the Monday Night and the Women's Cultural Club (WCC) collapsed and the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) was formed in 1988. Membership of blacks increased sharply and gay media started emerging. Since then, gays have been campaigning for their rights. The most significant event in the history of homosexuality in Zimbabwe was the Book Fair Crisis of 1995. GALZ applied for a stand at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair mainly because the theme was on human rights.

It was at this event that the guest of honor, His Excellence President Robert Gabriel Mugabe of Zimbabwe publicly scorned homosexuality in his speech calling then “*worse than dogs and pigs*”. Thus it was the 1995 Book Fair that revealed to the state the expansion of gay movement in Zimbabwe. After the events of the 1995 Book Fair homosexuality was placed on national agenda and attacks from the state intensified (Clark, 2005), however before then there was no overt state campaign against homosexuality (Goddard, 2004).

Since 1995 gays have been attacked on several occasions. In September 1995, the parliament of Zimbabwe fully endorsed an antigay campaign (Goddard, 2004). Another landmark event in Zimbabwe was the imprisonment of a former Prime Minister Canaan Sodindo Banana on charges of sodomy in 1997. In 2010 in preparation for the constitution making process the media embarked on negative publicity of homosexuality as shown by the following headlines in Zimbabwe’s Newspapers:

- HOMOSEXUALITY DESTROYS, CURSES A NATION (The Sunday Mail, 21-27 February 2010)
- CHIEFS SAY GAYS HAVE NO PLACE IN THE NEW CONSTITUTION OF ZIMBABWE (The Sunday News, 7-13 February 2010)
- GAY RIGHTS FURORE: Zanu-Pf, MDC-T on collision course (The Sunday Mail, 14-21 March 2010)
- NO GAY RIGHTS IN CONSTITUTION (The Sunday Mail, 18-24 July 2010)
- SODOMY A DISGRACE TO ZIM SOCIETY (The Sunday Mail, 28 March-3 April 2010)
- SHUN HOMOSEXUALITY: PRESIDENT (The Sunday Mail, 11-17 April 2010)
- NO ROOM FOR GAYS IN ZIM (The Sunday Mail, 18-25 April 2010)
- GALZ EMPLOYEES CLAIM TORTURE BY POLICE (The Zimbabwean, 30 May 2010)
- NO ROOM FOR GAY RIGHTS IN THE NEW CONSTITUTION –MUTASA (News Days, 22 June 2010)
- AFM LASHES OUT ON HOMOSEXUALITY (The Herald, 3 September 2010)
- PARENTS DISOWN GAY SON (The Sunday Mail, 12-18 September 2010)
- DIVISIONS ROCK COPAC : GUARD AGAINST GAY RIGHTS, ZANU-PF SUPPORTERS URGED (The Herald, 15 September 2010)
- OUTLAW HOMOSEXUALITY, ZIMBABWEANS TELL COPAC. (The Herald 22 November 2011)
- GAYS WILL BE SEVERELY PUNISHED SAYS PRESIDENT.(The Herald 24 November 2011)
- GAY RIGHTS OUT OF CONSTITUTION.(The Sunday Mail 26 February 2012)
- MUGABE ATTACKS GAYS YET HIS JOURNALIST IS ONE. (The Zimbabwean Mail, 24 November 2011)
- SCOTTISH CATHOLIC LEADER CONDEMNS HOMOSEXUALITY. (The Herald, 6 March 2012)
- NEW CONSTITUTION’S STANCE ON GAYS MIRRORS A MORALLY UPRIGHT ZIMBABWE.(The Sunday News 5 March 2012)
- HOMOSEXUALS HAVE NO PLACE IN AFRICA. (allAfrica.com. 2 March 2012)
- NO GAY RIGHTS IN THE NEW CHARTER. (Newsday 11 January 2012)
- MUGABE UPS WARS AGAINST GAYS.(Newsday 19 December 2011)
- DEVOTION: HOMOSEXUALITY HAS NO PLACE IN AFRICA. (Newsday 17 February 2012)
- WE DON’T SUPPORT GAYS RIGHTS:CHAMISA. (The Zimbabwe Mail 4 March 2012)
- MUGABE SLAMS HOMOSEXUALITY AGAIN. (Daily News. 17 February 2012)

Homosexuality has been politicized and has received criticism right from the senior politicians and prominent religious leaders. Consequently, there are no state services available specifically for LGBT people in Zimbabwe. There are few organizations that help LGBT people in Zimbabwe. The police have disrupted the activities of the organization and LGBT people rarely seek its services for fear of prosecution (GALZ, 2004).

Clark (2005) noted that LGBT people in Zimbabwe do not receive mail from GALZ or they do so under pseudonyms, they fear that the discovery of their homosexuality may jeopardize their jobs or subject them to arrest. Currently the GALZ has been shut out of state controlled media completely. Clark (2005) also noted that few homosexuals are open about their sexual orientation with their employers. It also offer counseling services and runs two magazines the *Galzette* and *Whazzup* for its members.

The experiences of homosexuals are complicated by the context of heterosexuals and homophobic society that creates barriers of subjugation, dehumanization and discrimination. Homosexuals live as a defined oppressed group in a heterosexual society. Ingrained heterosexism and homophobia affects the lives of homosexuals in countless ways. There is serious negative publicity on homosexuality in Zimbabwe especially from state controlled print and electronic. This negative publicity fuels the society’s antigay stance hence LGBTs in Zimbabwe suffer more.

Some church leaders preach negatively on homosexuality and prominent leader taking an antigay position are the likes of Professor Ezekiel Guti, founder of Forward in Faith Church and Bishop Nolbert Kunonga, founder of the Anglican Diocese of Zimbabwe. It is alleged that the diocese of Zimbabwe branched from the Anglican Diocese of the Church of Central Africa due to disagreements over the subject of homosexuality. This is despite the fact that other church leaders like Desmond Tutu of South Africa fight for the recognition of the rights of gay people. Church leaders use the bible to castigate homosexuality, making reference of stories like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah during the days of Lot because of sexual immorality. Politicization of homosexuality is one major problem in Zimbabwe. Homosexuality is placed at the agenda in political speeches as if gays are causing all the problems affecting the nation. Gays are criticized for acting against culture and nature. Most legislators have criticized the inclusion of gay rights in Zimbabwe's constitution arguing that it is unnatural. All this points to the fact that chances of recognizing gay rights in Zimbabwe are still bleak.

Social work and homosexuality

Social work core values related to service, social justice, respect for the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence are universally either implicitly or explicitly adopted as guidelines for social work conduct. From the ecosystem perspective, social work addresses the interaction between the person and the environment. Social workers seek to enhance and restore the psychosocial functioning of people. Social workers need to change the oppressive and destructive social conditions affecting the lives of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people.

Osei-Hwedie (2000) argued that social workers should embrace social diversity and should not discriminate people based on sexual orientation. According to Jacques (2000), social workers require preparation for practicing in the field of homosexuality, which demand a pragmatic curricula and experiential opportunities that capture theoretical and practice knowledge. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2004) discovered that many social workers in the USA have negative views about homosexuality. As a first step in working with gays and lesbians, it is crucial for social workers to confront their homophobia. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2004) also noted that, one of the worst things a practitioner can do is negatively label a gay or lesbian client and criticize that client for his/her sexual orientation. This contradicts the basic social work value of the client's self-determination. A negatively biased practitioner can unknowingly work against a client's development and maintenance of a positive self image.

In Africa where adequate services for gay man and lesbians do not exist or are inaccessible, practitioners need to assume an advocacy role. As such, they are concerned with making social systems more responsive to individual clients, groups by playing the role of supporter, advisor, champion, and representative in dealings with the courts, police, and other organizations that affect the wellbeing of gays. Gramick (1983) is of the view that the first step in fighting homophobia starts with the social workers who must examine their attitudes towards homosexuality. Social workers must educate themselves by attending workshops, seminars and reading professional literature. Group work is a useful medium for practitioners working with homosexual clients. Psychosocial assessment to identify situational concerns in each case will produce information concerning the client's strengths, abilities, and limitations. Swank & Raiz (2007) posited that practice with LGBT clients must go further than simply avoiding the most destructive and blatant forms of homophobia. Instead, better modalities ought to be grounded in strength perspectives that recognize, avow, and support the identities, experiences, and rights of LGBT clients. The ways homophobia may undermine practice are multifaceted and complicated. Crawford et al (1999) noted that biases may begin at intake because helping professionals with homophobic leanings are less likely to accept gay or lesbian clients into their caseload.

Conclusion and recommendations

Literature points to the fact that homosexuality existed and still exists in Zimbabwe despite allegation that those practicing it are aping the West. Social workers in Zimbabwe are better placed than most professionals to deal with the challenges faced by homosexuals that range from discrimination, health issue, internalized homophobia, fear, stress and isolation among other things. Zimbabwe has made strides in Social Work education, now that the number of social work training institutions increasing compared to the period before 2010 where there was only one training institution. The increase in the number of social workers can make them be heard given that social work as a profession condemns discrimination based on sexual orientation. For social workers to partake of their roles effectively in fighting discrimination based on sexual orientation, they must first fight their own homophobia. The topic of homosexuality should be included in social work education.

This has been seen to reduce the level of homophobia and field visits can also be made to gay rights organizations. All this helps to demystify some misconceptions disconcerting most helping professionals in Zimbabwe. It is quite pathetic to find some helping professionals in the forefront of name calling minority groups like homosexuals. Homosexuality has been castigated in Zimbabwe for a very long time and social work interventions can take the form of conscientization and education to fight the myths surrounding it. Social workers should fight for the inclusion of topics of homosexuality in university wide courses in most Zimbabwean colleges and universities. A lecture on homosexuality is crucial in that it can help demystify the concept of homosexuality which is very cloudy to most Zimbabweans. Social workers should fight for health programs that are meant for the gay population. Such programs can include health education, providing safe toys for lesbians, distributing condoms and toys in Zimbabwean prisons where homosexual behavior is very rife. Social work educators must also ensure that they equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge about homosexuality. This is so because it is very difficult for the social workers to fight homophobia when they are homophobic themselves.

In short, social workers in Zimbabwe can assume the following roles

Advocacy-Advocating for the inclusion of gay rights in the Zimbabwean constitution assuming that gay rights are human rights.

Counseling- providing counseling services to LGBTs and their facility members. This involves individual and group counseling.

Education –the society in general needs to be sensitized on the subject of homosexuality especially the fact that homosexuality poses a threat to the social functioning of the society. People generally need to be aware of the causes of homosexuality as this might reduce homophobia.

Link with resource systems- social workers must refer LGBTs to organizations that assist them given that some LGBTs in need don't know where to access assistance.

Lobbying – social workers should lobby relevant authorities for the inclusion of condoms in prisons, for positive publicity on homosexuality and criminalization of discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Promotion- social workers should assist gay rights organizations in publicizing themselves and extending their services to all parts of the country. Most needy people cannot access the services since they are urban biased.

References

- Clark B (2005) *Homosexuality in Zimbabwe*, in Rosenbloom R (ed), National Gay Human Rights Commission, USA
- Cramer, E. (1995) *Effects of a Short-term Educational Unit about Lesbian Identity Development and Self-disclosure in a Social Work Methods Course*, unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of South Carolina.
- Crawford, I. A., McCleod, B., Zamboni, L., & Jordon, M. (1999). *Psychologists' attitudes toward gay and lesbian parenting*. *Professional Psychology*, 30, 394-401.
- Davis, J. A., & Smith, T. W. (1984). *General social survey: 1972- 1984: Cumulative codebook*. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center.
- Epprecht M (1999) *The Gay Oral History Project, Black empowerment, Human Rights and the Research Process*.
- Epprecht M (2004) Hungochani, *A History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*. McGill-Queen's University Press London
- GALZ (2008) *Unspoken facts, a history of homosexuality in Africa*, GALZ Harare
- Garlake P (1995) *The Hunter's Vision.*, London, British Museum
- Goddard K (2004) *Fair Representation, GALZ and the History of Gay Movement in Zimbabwe* in Wehbi S (ed) Harrington Park Press, London.
- Gramick, J. (1983). *Homophobia: A new challenge*. *Social Work*, 28, 137-141.
- Jacques G (2000). *The Love that dare not Speak its name: Social work and homosexuality*, In *African Journal of Social Work* Vol 2, No 1 (2000)
- Mudavanhu J (2010) *The attitude of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe to homosexuality: Towards a socio-sexological theological investigation*. PhD Thesis. College of Arts and Law. The University of Birmingham.
- Osei-Hwedie K (2000) *Diversity: Capturing differences in Social Work education*. In *African Journal of Social Work* Vol 2, No 1 (2000)
- Swank E & Raiz (2007) *Explaining comfort with homosexuality among social work students: the impact of demographic, contextual, and attitudinal factors*
- Zastrow C and Kirst-Ashman K.K (2004) *Understanding human behavior and the social environment*. Pacific Grove, Brooke/Cole