

PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN NIGERIA

Informal presentation at "Obstacles to Organizing for Sexual Rights" panel at the
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The culture of silence on issues of sexuality cuts across all cultures in Nigeria, even in places where cultural practices are perceived by others to be liberal. A majority of Nigerians are still uncomfortable hearing about or discussing issues of sexuality, resulting in a poor or abject lack of information on sexual rights and health.

Sexuality in Nigeria is still built on rumors and myths, resulting in the violation of the human rights and sexual rights of a majority of the people, including women who are heterosexual, as well as homosexuals and bisexuals. It was only recently that sexuality became an "outdoor" topic at workshops, rallies, campaigns, etc., thanks to a movement spearheaded by NGOs.

It is in line with current trends in reproductive health and sexual rights advocacy that I was motivated to conduct this preliminary study to enable me to plan a bigger study on sexual orientation and safer sex practices in Nigeria.

It was quite an experience! To start with, the colleagues I work with, who are involved with reproductive health and sexual rights projects, were not willing to be associated with the research. One of them asked, "What will you do with the findings of the study? Will you not use it to promote homosexuality?" Some of my colleagues expressed reservations about the study and stood by their positions, while others were convinced of the study's value after lengthy debates and agreed to help me do the interviews.

The attitude of these colleagues and some of the respondents is a cause for concern for human rights activists in Nigeria, and presents a challenge that needs to be taken up immediately.

FINDINGS:

1. Every interviewee knew what the term homosexuality meant or at least had some idea. They tended to think the term referred to male-to-male sexual relationships, while lesbianism referred to same-sex sexual relationships among females. This indicates that knowledge of the practice is widespread and that people talk about it among groups of friends, in whispers.

Some people -- including some government officials -- argue that homosexuality was brought into Nigeria through colonialism. But this idea is easily challenged. As one of my respondents said, the fact that there is a name for it in various languages in Nigeria indicates that the practice existed well before colonialism.

2. Some respondents recalled a lot of rumors during one of the military regimes in Nigeria that some key policymakers were having homosexual relationships.
3. Respondents all agreed that homosexuality is practiced in Nigeria among both sexes.
4. Respondents cited locations that I would categorize as red-light districts, where one is likely to find gay and lesbian prostitutes. They also cited prisons and boarding schools, including institutions of higher learning, as places where homosexuality is practiced.
5. The environment is very homophobic or at least appears to be. There is an outward expression of homophobia in the dominant culture, although among the general population, there is greater tolerance and understanding that the practices exist. It is difficult for gays and lesbians to come out and admit to others that they are gay or lesbian or bisexual. They are therefore forced into heterosexual relationships. They marry to give a semblance of belonging to the widely accepted sexual orientation -- heterosexuality -- while they continue to meet their same-sex partners secretly.

Two hundred and eighty people were interviewed in the study. Below are some of the questions I asked and responses I received. Nothing has been added or subtracted from the responses.

QUESTIONS:

What is your understanding of the term homosexuality?

- Is it practiced by both men and women?
- Is it practiced in Nigeria?
- In what setting is the practice prevalent?
- Is the practice accepted from a religious, cultural, and policy point of view?
- Do homosexuals have any reproductive health problems?
- Are there specialized services for them?
- Do you agree they are being discriminated against?
- Do you know of any organization or association of homosexuals?
- Where are they situated?
- Are you aware that Nigeria is a signatory to an international document that confers on individuals the right to a sexual orientation of their choice, including homosexuality?¹
- Are these rights being enjoyed in Nigeria and by whom?
- Have you been in a homosexual relationship before?
- If you had an offer for one, would you accept?

RESPONDENT 1: Female, 36, social worker

I knew of the practice personally when I was about 12 years of age. We were residing in an all girls boarding school, and girls talked about it. Some of them had partners referred to as "darling." Some were just platonic while some were having sexual activities.

¹ Editors' note: Articles 2 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which address the right to equality and the right to be free from discrimination, have been interpreted by the UN Human Rights Committee to include "sexual orientation" under the protected category of "sex." Nigeria is a signatory to the ICCPR.

When I went to school, a coeducational school, the practice was not visible. People had boyfriends, and that was all they talked about. I had a chat on homosexuality in our school with a former teacher in the school who was on the school's disciplinary committee. He said there were two cases [regarding accusations of homosexuality] the disciplinary committee handled, but he refused to mention names.

When I met my husband, while sharing our past, he told me that masturbation and homosexuality were commonly practiced in his school in the sixties. It was a famous boys only school. He also told me a story of a friend of his who jilted his girlfriend because she was caught in her school having sexual activity with another girl. He said other boys jeered at him, saying he could not satisfy a woman and that is why she was having it with a woman like herself.

RESPONDENT 2: Male, 28, single, Graduate

Policy can't permit it! Only individuals can choose to be homosexual. Homosexuality is like a secret cult. It is hidden. It can't be permitted by national policy. I have not seen the document to which Nigeria is signatory that gives individuals the right to practice homosexuality. Nigerian government should make it available. They may be aware of the complications of signing the document, and that is why they have not made it public.²

I do not think anybody is enjoying the right. If it is a right, government should make it open, have an organization for it. They should finance it, create a center for it. Homosexuals do have reproductive health problems. They can easily contract AIDS. They need a specialized hospital to restructure their being.

Homosexuals are discriminated against. That is why their mode of practice is more hidden than prostitution. Society doesn't give them the right to practice. God forbid. It is a sin. I have never been a homosexual. I won't take an offer to be a homosexual. No. At this stage? When I am not foolish. What will I derive from a fellow man? The homosexual may feel it is natural, but I think it is a psychological problem.

RESPONDENT 3: Female, 42, Married, Graduate

We learnt this in secondary school. A senior girl picks on a new arrival, makes her pet girl and they sleep together. I got mine and we got along well. Flirting was not allowed among couples, but in a few cases girls quarreled and broke up and had to write love letters to other girls. The senior who was my "supe" is married too. We are both married because that is what the society expects of us. I will tell you honestly that the only time I enjoy sex is when I am with a female partner. I don't see my partner anymore, but she has a partner. They are family friends. They travel together once in a while for family functions, holiday, etc, for some privacy, some time together, you know what I mean. Their husbands don't know. If my husband ever finds out, he will divorce me, and I don't want that to happen. I will keep quiet and do it in secret to keep my family. If a law is made allowing lesbians to be free to have relationships, I don't think I will come out. The society is not yet ready for it.

RESPONDENT 4: Male, 25, Single, Diploma

I attended a boys only secondary school. Though I have heard about it, I have never met anyone who is a homosexual. I am told it is practiced widely in the southern part of the

² Editors' note: See footnote 1 for clarification regarding "documents" and sexual orientation.

country. God forbid, no one has ever approached me. If anyone tries it, I will kill the person. I do not know anything about it, and I do not wish to continue the discussion.

RESPONDENT 5: Male, 28, Single, Secondary School

I did a boys only secondary school. It is a well-known practice. The rumor around is that it is practiced in the north widely. I used to. I had a partner, but when we finished school, everybody went their different ways. Because of social expectations, I am obliged to date girls. It is impossible to walk [up] to another man in our community, where people can be hostile about it, and ask a man out. If I had the chance, I will have a boyfriend.

RESPONDENT 6: Male, 78, Married, Psychiatrist.

The world has changed a great deal. I feel like I do not belong here any more. Imagine the extent of permissiveness of the society, to the point of making homosexuality a sexual right. I heard of two women who are living together. And the other day, I heard that three boys in Noble College held a boy down for another boy to rape.

RESPONDENT 7: Female, 38, Nurse.

My friend was compelled to withdraw her son from school a couple of years ago. He came home with his anus all bruised and inflamed so badly that he could not use the toilet. He had been raped repeatedly by senior boys in his school. They took him to the hospital. The parents are very scared, they are afraid he may not recover from the experience. They are afraid he may become gay. They are helpless, they do not know where to take him for counseling.

RESPONDENT 8: Male, 40, Social Worker.

Homosexuality was rampant in my university. We had a friend who was always making inviting gestures, holding, hugging, rubbing like a woman would. I remember I used to be uncomfortable about it, because boys did not go holding and hugging in that manner. I understand that some boys set him up, kind of made him have the impression that one of them was interested in dating him. That way they confirmed that he was a homosexual. They then lured him to the bush outside the campus and beat him to unconsciousness.

LESSONS

1. There is very little correct information on issues of sexuality in the country.
2. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are far from enjoying their sexual rights in Nigeria. The responses were hostile in some cases. This hostility is not strange to homosexuals in Nigeria. This is why they will not come out. I still have no information about or contact with any lesbian, gay, or bisexual group in Nigeria.
3. Homosexuality is practiced among all categories of people in Nigeria, irrespective of whether they are elites, students, or urban or rural dwellers.
4. Many people mistakenly believe that homosexuals by definition engage in violent sexual behavior, when, in fact, homosexuality and violent behavior have nothing to do with each other.
5. Issues of reproductive health and sexual rights have not gained the full attention of the people. People are still struggling to survive; it is a state of keeping body and soul

together. Issues of sheer survival still preoccupy people, as one of the respondents stated. Sexuality is still seen as separate from, or less important than, other human rights struggles.

There is no political will among policymakers to guarantee the sexual rights of Nigerians, despite the fact that Nigeria is either a signatory to or a party to international conventions and other UN conference documents and declarations that have been interpreted to include provisions for sexual rights.³

But whether people are living in a war situation, in refugee camps, or in drought they are sexual beings and they continue to express their sexuality. It is therefore paramount to put policies in place that will ensure, promote, and enhance the reproductive health and sexual rights of individuals and couples. This is the only guarantee to safer sex practices. It is when people feel safe to discuss issues of sexuality, have a sexual orientation of their choice, and have access to quality and safe services without bias or discrimination that they can enjoy their sexuality.

It is therefore in order to continue the pursuit for reproductive and sexual rights in the context of established UN conventions, declarations and consensus documents (such as the International Conference on Population and Development's [ICPD] Program of Action [POA] and the Five-Year Review of Implementation of the POA). In addition, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and other intergovernmental bodies should be encouraged to further integrate reproductive and sexual rights into their investigations and reports.

I wish to continue promoting the sexual rights of women in heterosexual relationships, along with those of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. I look forward to moving from research to intervention projects in this area.

³ Editors' note: In addition to the ICCPR interpretation noted above in footnote 1, Paragraph 96 of the Beijing Platform for Action cites that "The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality ... free of coercion, discrimination and violence." This notion was reaffirmed in paragraph 72k at the Five-Year Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing Plus Five), and in paragraph 59 in the 2001 Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS. Nigeria is a party to both of these consensus documents.