

Anti-gay laws: Prejudice based on what we fear or do not understand

Professor Shima Gyoh delivers some reasoned thinking to the debate. The medical profession must apply its knowledge and wisdom to raise the factual context of the arguments.



I was surprised to read in the *Premium Times* online of 18 January that Nigerian professors in diaspora in the UK and US wanted Nigeria punished for passing anti-gay legislation.

'Advocating strong diplomatic isolation against Nigeria, the group wanted the United States and the United Kingdom to impose diplomatic sanctions like denial of visas on state functionaries, including journalists, the clergy, and policymakers who they charge as accomplices associated with the passing of the law.'

If true, it sounds to me like uninformed reaction against an uninformed law. It would be shocking from any educated person, let alone from tertiary level teachers. This law has been in the making for quite some time, and concerned medical workers and human rights activists should have taken pre-emptive action to stop it and intensified efforts to make the Nigerian public understand that homosexuality is neither a crime nor can people voluntarily change their sexual orientation. I for one sent several articles to numerous Nigerian papers and magazines, explaining that sexual orientation was a naturally occurring variation of the maturation of the brain, drawing analogies from variations affecting physical and mental development. While *Africa Health* carried one of the messages 2 years ago¹ none of the popular press published any of the articles! I pointed out that homosexuality is not even a matter of all or none. Scientific studies have shown that sexual orientation ranges along a continuum, from exclusive attraction to the opposite sex to exclusive attraction to the same sex, with bisexuals in the middle. Modern medicine no longer considers it a disorder. However, society's hostility causes a lot of suppression and denial. Sometimes the hiding homosexual makes the loudest condemnation as an effective smokescreen! To draw attention away from their real activity, they may marry and have just one child, then subject their partners to miserable lives. The type of anti-gay laws we are seeing in the developing world today, including capital punishment, existed in the advanced countries, causing discrimination, blackmail, and public shame, driving many affected people to suicide. These laws have been abandoned as knowledge of human nature deepened and spread among the enlightened.

That is not to say that homophobia has been eliminated in advanced countries, far from it. Even in the

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USA, it is only recently that President Obama has been removing discrimination against homosexuals in the armed forces, and not without significant objections. I would be surprised if a proper scientific investigation found less than 50% of the population of any country homophobic. Like the case of capital punishment for murder, good leaders are needed to pass laws that are humane but go against the basic instincts of human nature. This is the field where it is proper for an enlightened leader to guide and lead rather than follow the crowd.

Our countries are merely going through the stages that developed countries went through and even they have not yet got 100% of their population liberated from homophobia. There is no doubt that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, which Christianity more or less shares with Islam, comes out very strongly against homosexuality. It doesn't cause homophobia, it is only a ready tool used to rationalise it. The professors ought to know that many a fanatic youth would be ready to earn Heaven by suicide bombing on the issue. We should not add to the problems of Nigeria, especially at this time when internal cohesion is badly needed for the country's survival, but it is presently difficult to perceive even with a powerful microscope.

The situation is easier in developed countries because they are now far less fanatical about religion. This has arisen from the higher rate of public literacy, higher standards of living and social security, and better enforcement of the law. It will also come to our countries when we attain that level of development, but we can still get there faster given the modern means of information exchange available to our generation.

The Nigerian Minister of Internal Affairs classified homosexuality among many crimes, including armed robbery, in a Channels Television interview on 17 January 2014. This view is shared by a huge number of Nigerians. It indicates the seriousness of the challenge to health workers, particularly doctors, to mount a massive campaign to educate the public. Prejudice often comes from what we fear or do not understand. People should not think understanding would cure them of feeling squeamish on the subject. I still do, but it does not stop me from appreciating that I did not consciously create my own sexual orientation, neither did any gay person. Why do people forget this wonderful statement, 'But for the grace of God there go I?' It is the mother of tolerance and the driving force behind empathy.

Reference

Gyoh S. What is homosexuality? *Africa Health* 2012; 34: 5.