

## What is homosexuality?

Sexual orientation is once again a division issue with several African countries introducing or considering draconian legislation against homosexuality.

Shima Gyoh brings some rational thought to the debate



Practically all African countries are intolerant of homosexuality. The dominant religions of Christianity and Islam condemn it in no uncertain terms. But what really is the nature of homosexuality? In our society many think that homosexuality is aberrant behaviour by people who deliberately want to do wicked things. They feel it is a matter of choice, and homosexuals can drop the habit if they wished, rather like stopping smoking. Things are not quite that simple. We need to understand how the body and mind develop to appreciate the issues involved.

The process of the development of a human being from fertilisation to the birth and maturity is a miracle by any standards. It is a highly precise and delicately balanced process controlled through hormones which start from the brain in the mother, then her ovaries and other glands in her body, succeeded by the tissues in the placenta and finally the baby's own body. In the new baby, the control process, working on the chromosomes switches on genes, and chemical regulators are released to act on specific tissues in various parts of the body. For example, chromosome Y leads to the development of the phenotypic male, and X to the phenotypic female genitalia. They eventually lead to the masculinisation and feminisation of the child's psyche. Each switch must occur at a very precise stage and at the correct dose to get everything just right. The influence of their parents and society (nurture) play an important but minor role. While all the processes balance to produce the desired result, it is not really surprising that things do sometimes go wrong.

When physical development goes wrong, we have perplexing sexual phenotypes (intersex), where the baby is neither properly male nor properly female, and may have a confusing mixture of the sex organs, internally, externally or both. This is easy to recognise, and gives doctors a very difficult problem of sorting out the lives of affected children.

Psychological disharmony can also occur in the maturation of the brain. The normal situation is that a male grows up with a brain that is happy to accept being a man, and the female a woman. However, another

group of disorders does occur where someone who is physically a female has a brain that makes her feel she is a man trapped in the body of a woman! It also happens the other way round. The medical world cannot explain it, but when it does occur, it presents a huge problem whose solution is complicated by the prejudices of society.

Another inversion affects only sexual orientation, that is the affected people accept their physical sex but they have inverted sexual instincts. To understand this, if you are heterosexual, i.e. a man sexually attracted only to women, think of a beautiful, shapely woman. You would like to hold and kiss her! Think of the sexual revulsion you have for kissing a man, no matter how handsome or debonair he may be. The thought of kissing a man makes you recoil with horror. Can you imagine these feelings being inverted – you, a man, are sexually attracted only to other men, and you have sexual revulsion for women? That is homosexuality! It is not a deliberate choice, it is simply the way the mind has matured, and the 'gay' person cannot change his sexual orientation any more than you can change your height. If anyone is to blame for these attributes, it must be the creator of the universe that made it so.

Fifty years ago, the medical world thought that the state of homosexuality was a psychiatric disorder, and attempted to treat and cure it, principally through an approach called 'abreaction'. The 'patients' were exposed to homosexual temptation, at the same time subjected to noxious stimuli like painful electric shocks or injection of an emetic to make them vomit, with the hope that the two stimuli would eventually become linked in their natures. Some pretended to be cured just to be free from the torture masquerading as therapy. It is impossible to change the sexual orientation of the mind without killing the person. For this reason, the developed world revoked the laws that made homosexuality a crime, to free the subjects from unnecessary blackmail and punishment. Doctors in our country should also educate the public on this issue and stop the cruelty of punishing people for a nature they cannot help having. 'Gay' people too must understand that unnecessary advertisement of their sexuality, demand for official recognition of their 'marriages', and their right to adopt children will be counterproductive at the present time in our society.

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