

HIV/AIDS and HOMOPHOBIA

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What is Homophobia?

Homophobia refers to a variety of negative attitudes that arise from the fear or dislike of homosexuality. Reactions can range from expressions of outright violence, to ostracism, jokes, discomfort or stereotyping of people who are suspected of being gay. It could also include well-meaning but misguided attempts to convert homosexuals to a social ideal of exclusive heterosexuality. Heterosexism reflects a structurally or culturally held belief that heterosexuality is superior or more natural than homosexuality. It is frequently validated through some of our most basic legislation, such as marriage laws which discriminate against same sex couples. Despite the important legislative changes implemented over the past two decades, the effects of homophobia and heterosexism on the lives and relationships of lesbians and gay men are pervasive. Negative messages continue to surface in the media and other basic institutions such as the school system, government and organized religion.

Homophobia has contributed to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in important ways. While HIV did not originate among gay men, the virus gained its first public profile in the gay subculture of North American urban centres like Toronto and San Francisco. The co-relation between this gay subculture and the first wave of AIDS deaths was so strong that many people originally referred to AIDS as a gay cancer. Scientists also mistakenly labelled the disease GRID, or gay-related immune deficiency. Early in the epidemic many people insinuated that AIDS was God's punishment for gay sexual behaviour. Widespread homophobia made it politically difficult to justify appropriate, timely public expenditure on research and prevention. By

the time US president Reagan made his first public reference to AIDS (May 31, 1987), over 20,000 Americans were dead. A similar delay set the stage for a wide outbreak in Canada, where the federal government only announced its National AIDS Strategy in 1990, seven years after the first Canadian death.

Stigma and Discrimination

Homophobia is often accompanied by racist or xenophobic discrimination. Since the stigma of homosexuality can be so great, people typically want to blame it either on foreigners or to deny that it occurs within their own culture. This phenomenon has had a terrible impact in both the developing world and upon ethnic minorities within the West. Encouraged to believe that AIDS was a white man's disease, people from other parts of the world assumed they were not at risk. This meant slow government responses and in many cases outright denial or suppression of evidence about the spread of HIV in their countries.

Sadly, some politicians and religious leaders have inflamed homophobic, xenophobic and racist stereotypes in recent years. This can be seen particularly in countries where a lack of economic development and increasing Western economic and cultural domination has led to growing frustration. President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has been consistently offensive in this way. Since 1995, he has not only denounced homosexuals as immoral and animalistic, but has also claimed that homosexuality among Africans is somehow connected to British opposition to his land reform program. President Sam Nujoma of Namibia and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia have similarly characterized homosexuals as a

threat to their national security and have urged patriotic citizens to drive homosexuals and their sympathizers out of the country.

Perhaps even more worrisome is the emergence of broad alliances between fundamentalist Christian groups in the West, and Islamic and other groups in the developing world. While these factions otherwise share little in common beyond a hostility to gay rights, together they have blocked the United Nations and other multilateral donor agencies from providing funding to education and prevention programs that target homosexuals or men who have sex with men. Similarly, prominent leaders of the Anglican Church have threatened to split from the worldwide congregation in protest against the recognition of sexual orientation as a human right. Along with more subtle cultural and religious pressures, this stigma and discrimination drives gays and lesbians into a secretive, closeted life that places them at great risk. It is a position that does little to promote safe sex, and only serves to encourage the further spread of the disease.

The prevalence of homophobic attitudes may prevent many people from dealing with their sexual orientation. Thus many married people, who regard themselves as heterosexual, may still engage in occasional sex with members of their own gender. Guilt, fear of exposure, denial and ignorance expose them to unsafe sexual practices. Consequently, they may fail to take appropriate precautions or learn about the risks. This is a particularly dangerous scenario for young people, who may be attracted or curious about gay sex, and who enter into relationships while still lacking the basic information as to how to protect themselves against unsafe practices.

Traditional Attitudes towards Homosexuality

Historical evidence of positive regard towards homosexuality exist in many cultures world wide. Attitudes toward people whose sexuality, manner, or style of dress do not conform to heterosexual ideals have varied enormously over time and across cultures. In ancient Greece, the homosexual relationship between a man and a youth was idealized as spiritually superior to the husband-wife

relationship. Alternative gender roles were among the most widely shared features of aboriginal North American societies. The social category of berdache or "two-spirited people" has been documented in over 155 tribes. Berdaches most often formed sexual and emotional relationships with non-berdache members of their own sex. The existence of this third gender was widely believed to be the result of supernatural intervention and was often validated by tribal mythology. In southern Africa over the past century, hundreds of thousands of men took male "wives" while they were absent from home for long periods of work at the mines. These relationships did not call the men's roles of patriarch and provider into question. Similarly, Islamic societies that denounce homosexuality deny a long and rich history of diverse same-sex relationships in Islamic literature, poetry, and music.

Progressive attitudes toward homosexuality are generally quite a recent development in the West, which is just emerging from a period of particularly strong homophobia. In the 1950s and early 60s, for instance, suspected gays and lesbians on both sides of the ideological divide were entrapped by the police and hounded out of their jobs. Today homophobia continues to contribute towards widespread denial, self-hatred and low self-esteem among many lesbians and gay men. A high incidence of depression and suicidal feelings and behaviour has been consistently established by several studies of gay and lesbian communities. Young gay men and lesbians who are going through the coming out process are particularly at risk. They are three times more likely to commit suicide than heterosexual youth.

The Rise of a Global Gay-Rights Movement

A gay rights movement in the West began to emerge following the Stonewall riots in New York City. This spontaneous outburst of protest against police homophobia in New York City is widely acknowledged as the birth of the modern gay liberation movement in North America. Gay rights activism has since spread worldwide to achieve enormous successes in overturning discriminatory laws and attitudes. An especially impressive

achievement in the developing world came in 1996 when South Africa adopted its post-apartheid constitution. This equated discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation with other forms of discrimination and has allowed gay rights activists to begin challenging homophobic laws. The benefit of these challenges to the wider society has been recognized by the highest court in the land. For example the South African constitutional court in overturning the existing sodomy law noted that homophobia "gives rise to a wide variety of other discriminations, which collectively, unfairly prevent a fair distribution of social goods and services." Thus, ending homophobia can contribute to reducing other forms of discrimination such as class, gender, racial and other inequalities.

Gay rights associations can now be found in over 100 countries around the world. These groups are building distinctive cultures of affection, support and political activism. While extremely diverse, these groups have typically shared a common commitment to HIV/AIDS education and counselling. Indeed, in contexts where an openly homosexual identity can attract state or religious persecution, gay rights activists have often used HIV/AIDS as a discreet way to organize and network. The 2004 All-Africa Rights Initiative, for example, brought together participants representing lesbian, gay and transgender groups from 17 African countries under the banner of HIV and human rights. Gay rights activists in countries like Brazil and South Africa have been so successful in winning new freedoms and public visibility that many have shifted the main focus of their activism to the struggle against HIV/AIDS. The Treatment Action Campaign based in Cape Town is a prime example. Men and women who once led the campaign to gain the equality clause in the South African constitution now devote their energies (and in the case of founder, Zackie Achmat, have risked their lives) to promote access to affordable, generic anti-retroviral drugs for all citizens.

The Road to Activism

How then can AIDS service organizations and other development agencies in the West build alliances

with groups like TAC and learn from their effectiveness in addressing homophobia and heterosexism? There is a growing body of research that shows how sexualities have been expressed and explained in different cultures, worldwide. It is important to understand that same-sex behaviour is a universal phenomenon that takes place regardless of how conservative a culture may appear.

AIDS Service Organizations can show leadership on this issue by continuing to challenge homophobia and denial in the societies where they work. This would include prevention strategies that involve cross cultural understandings of sex, gender, homosexuality and the specific practices that put people at risk of contracting HIV. It is crucial that such discussions emphasize mutual respect and not stigmatize the practices by presenting them as foreign to any specific culture. AIDS Service Organizations are well positioned to engage and promote such strategies particularly in consultation with gay rights activists in the developing world

Resources

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ICAD's aim is to lessen the impact of HIV/AIDS in resource-poor communities and countries. We are a coalition of Canadian international development organizations, AIDS service organizations and other interested organizations and individuals. Funding for this publication was provided by Health Canada. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Minister of Health. Additional copies are available on the ICAD Web site at www.icad-cisd.com. Le feuillet « L'Homophobie Juin 2004 » est disponible en français.