

Attitude and perceptions of university students in Zimbabwe towards homosexuality

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Abstract: The aim of the study was to assess the attitude and perceptions of university students in Zimbabwe towards homosexuality. One hundred and forty three students made up of 52% males and 48% females were selected through stratified sampling technique. The students were drawn from the faculty of social sciences at a university in Zimbabwe. A questionnaire was used to collect the data. The sample was composed of 99% Christians. The results showed that students were hostile towards those who practice homosexuality. However quite a substantial number of participants indicated that they tolerated to some extent those who practice homosexuality. The study also revealed that homosexuality was viewed as a choice. The study also established that homosexuality is considered a myth by most of the students. The study recommends that homosexuality be discussed at public gatherings such as church, political and academic forums so as to remove the stigma and prejudices that are attached to it.

Key words: Homosexuality, university, attitude, perceptions, Zimbabwe

I. Introduction

Homosexuality has been a topical issue in the entirety of the world. In Africa and other parts of the world the situation has been more hostile to those who practice homosexuality (Sollar & Somda, 2011). Cantor (2012) defined homosexuality as predominantly sex interest in persons of the same sex. Postnatal learning processes seem to be causally involved in the sexual orientation of some female lesbians and some exclusive male homosexuals (James, 2004). On the other hand homosexuality is seen not as a choice but it is based on biology (Boysen & Vogel, 2007). Some homosexual men have genes that predispose them to their sexual orientation (James, 2005, James, 2004). Thus according to the definitions homosexuality is either biological or something that is learnt. Attributing homosexuality to biological causes leads to more sympathetic perceptions because people usually oppose punishing others for conditions beyond their control (Lewis, 2009). Having these opposing scenarios it is not clear whether homosexuality is by nature or nurture. This implies that people will judge those who practice homosexuality differently.

Research has shown that condemnation of homosexuality is more emphasised in Africa than any other parts of the world. The reasons which were cited in the studies included morality, religion, procreation and culture. According to Sollar and Somda (2011), 46% of the countries that are hostile are in Africa. Only six countries (Gabon, Sao Tome & Principe, Mauritius, Central Africa Republic, Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau) signed the December 2008 UN Assembly Declaration to decriminalize homosexuality (Sollar & Somda, 2011). In South Africa the equality and prevention of Unfair Discrimination was passed by parliament in January 2000 and passed into law by President Mbeki in August the same year (Raizeberg, 2003). However many African countries continue to condemn and punish those who practice homosexuality. For example in Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe likened homosexuals to prostitutes, dogs and pigs (Shoko, 2010). In a study carried out in Ghana homosexuality was clearly and loudly despised (Sollar & Somda, 2011). The respondents of that study felt that homosexuality was against African culture and religion and it is a taboo and does not meet any of their time tested values. This was supported by Sadgrove (2012) who purported that if people are left to practice homosexuality procreation will be affected. Homosexuality is also viewed as an abomination, unnatural and against tradition, customs, values and norms (Sollar & Somda, 2011). In Senegal, homosexuality is strongly condemned and punishable (Lamerange et al., 2009). In a study carried out in Senegal, homosexual men were stigmatized and subjected to violence (Lamerange et al., 2009). Homosexual men live in extreme insecurity and are subjected to domestic, community and institutional violence (Larmerange et al., 2009). The list below shows countries in Africa and the penalties they give to homosexuality acts.

Country	Penalties up to
Algeria	2months to 2years
Libya	2years plus fine
Morocco	6months to 3years plus fine
Sudan	100 lashes flogging plus 5years, third offender life in prison or death
Tunisia	3years

Egypt	3months to 3years plus fine
Gambia	14years
Nigeria	14 years or death
Ghana	Not less than 5years and not more than 25years
Guinea	6months to 3years plus fine
Senegal	1 to 5years
Cameroon	5years plus fine
Sierra Leon	Life in prison
Malawi, Kenya	14years
Uganda	Life in prison
Tanzania	Not less than 30years to life in prison
Botswana	7years
Zambia	14years
Swaziland	Minimum 2years plus fine
Zimbabwe	1year plus fine

Adopted from Sallar & Somda (2011)

In an African context, the pressure to marry and have children with the strong social disapproval of homosexuality may partly explain the high rate of bisexuality (Lamerange et al., 2009). Theresa Raizenberg a South African lesbian activist once said, we live in much darkness. We are often uncertain. We are sometimes afraid (Taghmeda & Raizenberg, 2003). This explains the agony which homosexuals are exposed to. Even the church does not spare those who practice homosexuality. Bishops of the Anglican Church understand the question of homosexuality largely as in their words, “a presenting symptom, or presenting issue or presenting problem” and what they see as the underlying disease (Brittain & McKinnon, 2011). In Explaining why homosexuality is wrong, Bishop John argued that those within the church who are advocating for the blessing of same sex unions are effectively changing the gospel, quoting Saint Paul he included gay sex on a list of sins from which Christians need to repent (Brittain & Mckinnon, 2011).

The community may be hostile to the gay men and lesbians, the church may deny them the right to marry but the call for the world to live together in a global village has exposed the people to different cultures to homosexual activities through the internet and digital satellite televisions. According to Kubicek et al. (2011), for young men who have sex with men, the internet may be a space to gain exposure to a number of sexuality related topics and experiences that may not be readily available to them. In the absence of more traditional sources of information about sexuality and the mechanics of sex such as schools, friends and family members pornography is available through the internet to provide the first glimpse of gay sexuality and locate other gay men (Kubicek et al., 2011). Those (either by choice or biologically) who wish to locate other homosexuals may do so through internet. University students seem to be more exposed to the internet than any other group of people hence the need to investigate their perceptions and attitude towards homosexuality.

Goals of the Study

The goal of this study was to explore the attitude and perceptions of university students towards homosexuality.

Objectives

The study sought to

- identify the source of information on homosexuality
- investigate the attitude and perceptions of university students towards homosexuality

II. Method

The study used the quantitative survey design in an attempt to explore the attitude and perceptions of university students towards homosexuality. A survey was appropriate since it allows the researcher to collect information from a sample at one time. The quantitative survey is good at providing information in breadth from a large number of units (Muijs 2011). Stratified random sampling was used to select the participants so that both males and females were represented. The researcher made use of questionnaire to collect data. The questionnaires were hand delivered to the participants by the researcher at an agreed place. The questionnaires were collected at a later date which was agreed upon. Data was presented and analysed using inferential statistics and tables. Three categories which were compared were (disagree, neutral and agree). Percentages in table 1 were rounded off to the nearest tenth.

III. Results and Discussions

One hundred and forty three students out of 200 from the Faculty of Social Sciences at a university in Zimbabwe participated in the study. This was 72%. It is assumed that those who did not return the questionnaires had a negative attitude toward homosexuality. Forty eight percent of those who participated were females and 52% were males. Of all the participants 99% were Christians and the remaining 1% were from other religions. Eleven of the participants were bisexuals and 3 were homosexuals. Of the eleven who were bisexuals 6 were females and 5 were males. Of the three who said were homosexuals, two were females and one male. This implies that there are more bisexual students than homosexuals. This is consistent with Lamerange et al. (2009) who stated that the pressure to marry and have children with the strong social disapproval of homosexuality may partly explain the high rate of bisexuality. Despite males having a higher percentage in terms of participants more females came out and exposed their homosexual status. Males could have been pushed to participate in this study because of the hostility of the environment. This is consistent with Lamerange et al. (2009) who stated that homosexual men were more stigmatized and subjected to violence. It is also in line with Airakoglu (2006) who presented that the label homosexuality is more associated with men than with women. From this study the majority of the students were heterosexuals followed by bisexuals. The number of either homosexuals or bisexuals could be higher given that coming out is a serious issue. Since homosexuality is an offence in Zimbabwe students could be afraid to reveal their status. Another factor that could have affected the coming out could be the Christian teaching which despises homosexuality.

On whether people who practice homosexuality are sick, 50% agreed but another 50% either disagreed or were neutral. This shows the divergence in perceptions. Fifty two percent as compared to 34.5% were antagonistic towards homosexuality. These statistics imply that homosexuality is viewed differently by the students at universities. However, most of the students were not friendly to homosexuals neither did they have homosexual friends as indicated by 76.2% who indicated that they did not have homosexual friends. This was expected since the majority of the participants were Christians. University students believe that homosexuality is foreign as indicated by 55.9% as compared to 33.6% who felt otherwise. Thirty nine percent compared to 60% of the participants have participated or told jokes about homosexuality. Juxtaposing the two one would be compelled to believe that students have different attitudes towards homosexuality. Since most of the participants were Christians they rated that homosexuality is against Christian teaching as reflected by 87% who believed that homosexuality was against Christian values. This is in line with the assertion by Brittain and McKinnon (2011) who state that homosexuality is a sin. Mixed feelings were also raised when 53% against 47% purported that homosexuality is a choice. There was an agreement that those who practice homosexuality if it were as a result of a chemical imbalance within the body that needed to be corrected. However most of the girls as compared to the boys were more sympathetic. The study revealed that the students are against both the kissing of boys or girls by partners of same sex as indicated by 72% and 70% respectively. Sixty seven percent of the participants do not condone homosexuality. Seventy percent of the students would feel disgusted if another person of the same sex asks them out. This is in line with Boysen and Vogel (2007) who explained that those who believe homosexuality is a choice condemn it. Students indicated that they learn about homosexual activities through television, pornography and the internet. This was also raised by Kubicek et al. (2011) who argued that homosexuality is available through pornography and the internet. The table below summarises students' views towards different aspects of homosexuality.

Table 1: Attitudes and perceptions

	Disagree		Tot	%	Neutral		Tot	%	Agree		Tot	%
	F	M			F	M			F	M		
5. I learn about homosexuality through the internet	8	6	14		12	12	24					
6. People who practice homosexuality are sick	31	14	45	31.5	17	10	27	18.9	21	50	71	50
7. I am antagonistic toward homosexuals.	14	21	35	34.5	22	13	25	17.5	33	42	75	52
8. I am friendly toward homosexuals.	36	23	59	41.3	11	21	32	22.4	22	8	30	21
9. Homosexuality is foreign.	25	23	48	33.6	8	5	13	9	34	46	80	53.9
10. I have homosexual friends.	47	62	109	76.2	10	4	14	10	12	8	20	14
11. I have told, or participated in, jokes about homosexuals.	22	38	60	42	11	5	16	11.2	26	31	57	39.9
12. Homosexuality is not a new phenomenon in Africa.	15	14	29	20.3	11	10	21	14.7	43	50	93	65
13. I would make fun of a homosexual person when I was alone.	40	45	85	59.4	11	15	26	18.2	18	14	32	28.3
14. Homosexuality is against Christian teaching	9	3	12	0.08	2	4	6	4.2	58	67	125	87.4
15. I think that a person chooses to be homosexual.	19	18	37	25.9	14	13	27	18.9	36	43	79	53.1
16. I think that if there is a chemical imbalance in a person making them homosexual, the person should have it changed.	17	8	25	17.5	16	20	36	25.2	36	46	82	57.3
17. I feel uncomfortable when I see two males kissing.	18	12	30	21	3	6	9	6.3	48	56	104	72.7
18. I feel uncomfortable when I see two females kissing.	15	12	27	18.9	5	10	15	10.5	49	52	101	70.6
19. I tolerate homosexuals.	45	52	97	67.8	10	10	20	14	13	12	35	24.5
20. I would feel disgusted if an attractive person of my sex asked me out.	16	12	28	19.6	6	8	14	9.8	47	54	101	70.6

N = 143

IV. Limitation of the study

Since data was collected from a single university, the results cannot be generalized to all the universities in Zimbabwe. The results could also have been affected by biased reporting where students would say what they felt was appropriate and the researcher would want to hear. Future studies should include more institutions to enable generalization of the results. Timing was also wrong since the students were preparing for their examinations. Students might not have given adequate time to study the items on the questionnaire. The researcher suggests that in future similar studies should be timed well to allow undivided attention from the students.

V. Conclusion

To the knowledge of the researcher this study was the first of its kind in Zimbabwe where students' attitudes towards homosexuality were studied. The variations between those who agreed and those who disagreed were on most of the questions quite marginal although those who were negative were higher than those who were positive.

Homosexuality was viewed by most of the students as a choice but not a new phenomenon in Africa. Students indicated that they were antagonistic towards those who practice homosexuality. Most of the participants revealed that homosexuality was against Christian values. They also categorically stated that they were uncomfortable to see people of the same sex kissing. However quite a substantial number either were neutral or not hostile to those who practiced homosexuality as indicated by 14% neutral and 24.5% who tolerated. Generally this study has established that homosexuality was a myth in Zimbabwe and most students do not want to be associated with those who practice it. However the study also revealed that there were students who were either homosexuals or bisexual and also that there were students who accepted and tolerated homosexual activities. The study recommends that homosexuality as a subject be discussed at public places such as church gatherings, political and academic meetings to reduce the stigma and prejudices that are attached to it.

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