

# The World Minimized, The Homosexual Maximised?

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In a global world, the homosexual community is faced with various conflicting tendencies. The most important of these are the emergence of homosexual life and movement in all corners of the globe, and the growing activities of puritan organisations that embitter the life of sexual minorities. An important question concerning homosexual rights is, who are these gays that claim their place under the sun and what rights are they fighting for? I will discuss these four themes of movement and anti-movement, of identities and rights.

## **Globalization of the Homosexual Movement**

The homosexual rights movement that started in 1897 in Germany has spread around the world, slowly at first, but rapidly in the last decade. Up until 1970 these types of organisations only existed in western countries, excluding Spain or Portugal. With the sexual revolution they spread to Latin America, South Africa and South East Asia. Since 1990 such movements sprang up in the countries of Eastern Europe, throughout Asia, and there were even some brave initiatives in black Africa and the Arabic world. In communist China there are no formal organisations, but homosexual initiatives rustle on the Internet, around karaoke clubs and on sports fields. In India the queer movement is booming. In Nepal, politicians debate whether the rights of gays, lesbians and transgender persons must be anchored in the constitution, as in South Africa but this time including transgender people. The *International Lesbian and Gay Association* (ILGA), the *International Gay Lesbian Youth Organisation* (IGLYO) and the *International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission* (IGLHRC) promote the international concerns of the gay movement. A small group of countries (the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Canada) and NGOs such as Hivos and Mama Cash in the Netherlands also support gay and lesbian initiatives.

It is not only the gay and lesbian movement, but the entire homosexual community that is flourishing. Gay bars and nightclubs can be found in all corners of the world, from Tokyo, Shanghai and Surabaya to Havana and Paramaribo. Even in environments that do not favour gays, places can be found where gays and lesbians gather. Internet, media and films show homosexuality in many forms, and many young people discover that they are gay or lesbian via these reports and images that are produced in a world that is completely different from their own. All this attention stirs not just gays and lesbians but also their adversaries. The Canadian-Indian movie *Fire*, for example, about the love between two women in India has led to disturbances between police and Hindu nationalists who are opposed to homosexuality. Gays and lesbians ensured they stayed out of view.

## Counter Forces

Opposing the gay and lesbian movement is a much more powerful lobby of religious organisations, nationalist parties, states and NGOs, which have adopted positions opposed to sexual human rights. Indeed, there was a powerful bond between former US president, George W. Bush and the 'axis of evil' in the sexual politics area. Christian and Islamic politicians are both opposed to sexual rights for gays, lesbians, sex workers, transgender persons, unwed women and children. Bush, Pope Benedict and Bin Laden created a devil's pact against sexual freedoms, even against erotic frankness, where non-governmental and intergovernmental organisations play an equally pernicious role. Some countries, including the US, use development aid for sexual politics, to fight sex education, abortion and the use of condoms. For UN organisations, children's rights mean protection against sex rather than preparation for sex, and you are a child until you are eighteen. As a result of that policy, youths that make choices other than heterosexual ones are left completely out in the cold. Organisations such as ECPAT and Terre des Hommes, which say they want to protect children, focus vigorously on young sex workers, who often make more money with less effort and risk prostituting themselves than they would working on a farm, in a factory or re-stocking shelves in a supermarket. They prefer to denounce gay prostitution and to exaggerate the number of minors who are (gay) sex workers. These organisations, with the UN in the lead, are strongly orientated to women, marriage and family, and so far offer no recognition whatsoever to gender and sexual diversity. On most levels, sexual citizenship (Hekma, 2004) is no match for the religious citizenship. There is no UN treaty that has included gay rights. Sexual freedom is not guaranteed anywhere, while freedom of religion, even if it is used against others, belongs to the mantra of international rights. Taiwanese researcher Josephine Ho (2008) warns against the broad puritan lobby that is supported by some countries, mostly out of opportunism, to avoid difficult sexual questions.

## Diversity of Homosexual Forms of Expression

The third question is what homosexuality is all about. In the West the image people have of gays and lesbians is one of adults that have an almost exclusive preference for their own sex and form a minority. Many people think that that sexual preference is innate; it is nature, according to many gays and lesbians themselves. Persons with such a preference would have no special gender identity. Most heterosexual people feel differently. The most common idea about gay men remains that they are faggots, not real men, while lesbian women are viewed as masculine and sporty. In the past, although many gays and lesbians were eager to find a 'normal' identity, most people accepted the idea that gay men were sissies that did not fancy each other, but fell for real men, machos, soldiers, sailors and construction workers, on stage guaranteed heterosexual, but not off stage. The same was true for lesbians. They were butches who did it with femmes, real women. Sexual desire was all about the existence of differences between man and woman, masculine and feminine, young and old and rich and poor that would attract each other. At that time sex between equals was almost inconceivable. These days the tables have been turned and unequal relations have become taboo.

It is exactly these old-fashioned forms of gay relationships that are still considered standard everywhere in the world; butches with femmes, ladies with gents (see the article regarding the Graeme Reid's thesis in this publication). The faggots of the Arabic and the Turkish world (zemels and ibnes) do it with 'normal' men - who never view themselves as gay but do engage in gay sex. This kind of gay and lesbian love is generally practiced in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Only in the West is the homosexual model of two men, no longer faggots, who have an equal relationship, the norm. This model is gaining ground in other countries, but is still far from common. Many men have same-sex contacts in addition to their heterosexual relations. This can be with transgender persons in prostitution or with other men in parks and other places. This is called MSM (Men who have Sex with Men), a term that implies they do not adopt a homosexual identity.

Although many homosexual men and (fewer) homosexual women embrace this western model, it is also criticised. In his book, *Desiring Arabs* (2007), Joseph Massad accuses the 'gay-international', such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), of forcing their model of homosexuality and homosexual experience on the rest of the world, his most important issue being that all men and women that are involved in gay sex will have to ask themselves whether they are homosexual or heterosexual. Most will make a heterosexual choice and, as a result, will abandon homosexual sex, and homosexual liberation will not move forward because gays will be viewed just as negatively as faggots were previously. LGBT persons remain second-class citizens. There is no reason to assume that it is any different in the Arabic world than it is in the West, where nowadays, fewer people actively participate in gay life, but those who do participate more intensively. Exclusive heterosexuality has become the norm, while 'situational' homosexuality is losing favour, particularly amongst youths that are developing their sexual preferences.

Massad's criticism is important, but there are two questions that are not sufficiently addressed. First, the western gay model is propagated via media, NGOs, church and science and by anti-gays such as Robert Mugabe. The gay-international has limited influence. The emergence of the gay model might not be an unavoidable process, but for now it does set the tone worldwide, in spite of the homosexual movement. Secondly, there is the question of how appealing it is to be a faggot or a sissy in the current political constellation. Women in South Africa are protected by the constitution, but in most countries, faggots, transgender persons and bull dykes are scum who face insults and violence on a daily basis and turn to these themselves at times out of defence. In my opinion Massad glorifies gay life of the past too much. His criticism does raise the question of what conditions are required for universal sexual freedom to flourish. In the West, the space for sexual diversity remains limited, but it is doubtful whether it is much larger in the Middle East. There is a great deal to be negotiated within the current culture of doing it and keeping it a secret. Heterosexuality might not yet be the norm, but the reproductive marriage is. It is a matter of out of the pan and into the fire, and in both cases it leaves little room for undisturbed gay life.

Few people who display homosexual behaviour identify themselves as homosexual. There are local variations everywhere, such as transgender persons, people who do not view them-

selves as typical male or female. On the male side, there are the *Warias* in Indonesia, *Kathoeyes* in Thailand, *Hijras* and *Kotis* in India, *Travestis* in Brazil and dozens of names in American-Indian cultures. In the West we are familiar with drag queens, transvestites and transsexuals. On the female side there are the butches, lady boys, lesbian men and tomboys. The sexual partners of these transgender persons are completely invisible and have no names like the 'hetero' men that have sex with faggots and sissies or the femmes that go out with butches.

Another category are sexual acts engaged in by youths, with each other and with adults, that probably occur just as often as those of adults of the same sex, particularly when observing an age limit of eighteen years old. Such contacts are still common in India and Latin America, and were common in ancient Greece, Japan, China, amongst Melanesians and Moluccans, and in various African tribes. Until recently in Europe, little distinction was drawn between homosexual and paedophile contacts. Celebrities such as Oscar Wilde and André Gide operated more on the paedophile side of today's age limit than the homosexual side. People from this large group will seldom identify themselves as gay or lesbian; the youths because of their age and the adults because of the demonization of 'paedophile' contacts. The gay-international distances itself vigorously from this group of gay relations. In the early nineties, pressured by the US, the ILGA banned all organisations that pleaded for sexual rights of youths and paedophiles. Instead of fighting for homosexual rights, including those of the youngest participants in gay life and combatting abuse, the ILGA went along with the denial of such rights for youths that often can and want to make their own erotic choices.

There is tremendous variety in the forms in which people have homosexual contacts and define their gender positions. The western gay model might be moving forward in the rest of the world, but for now there are many other ways to experience same-sex sex as well.

## Sexual Rights

The fourth point involves rights for which the homosexual movement pleads. In the US, same-sex marriage and admission to the army are high on the agenda. In Europe, visibility and sex education have become central themes, as has discrimination in the streets, schools, sports, at the work place and with housing. In many countries resistance against legalised discrimination is the most important point. In some, gay sex is still punishable by death. These are Islamic countries such as Iran, Yemen, Sudan and Saudi Arabia. In former English colonies including India, Malaysia and Zimbabwe, prison sentences apply. The legal practice differs by country. In some states the law is just a dead letter, but Saudi Arabia and Iran still execute men that have been accused of 'liwat' (what is called sodomy in the West) on a regular basis.

Apart from equal rights, for which the homosexual movement generally fights, there are two more general points that are important to mention with respect to developing countries. First, gays and lesbians generally do not have any private space for sexual expression; no bedrooms, homes, or even bars where they can meet each other unhindered. As a result, gay men in particular use public areas such as parks, urinals, deserted alleys, porches and train

wagons for their sexual contacts. Even in the West the gay movement hesitates to fight for the right to public sex. In developing countries it is of bitter necessity because there are no other places. To me it seems an important theme for the international movement, not just for gays but also for sex workers and youths. Transgender persons that used to perform 'women's' work are more often banned from these jobs since women are now allowed to do these public jobs (cleaning, hair and body care, hospitality, entertainment, ritual tasks). As a last resort, they make money from street prostitution.

The second point concerns the sexual rights of youths. In spite of a worldwide movement to keep youths in a state of tutelage with regard to sexuality, youths remain sexually active everywhere, and there is no way to stop it. In the old days this did not always create a problem, or little attention was paid to it. Elsewhere it was strictly forbidden, particularly for girls whose virginity had to be 'protected'. In some cultures, such as India, child marriages were common practice. The prophet Mohammed married Aisja, a six-year-old girl, and when she was nine they started to cohabit. Homosexual practices were sometimes part of the initiation of boys in the man's world. Papuans thought that a boy could not become a man without taking sperm either orally or anally. With the Sudanese Azande and the Ottomans, adolescents performed all 'women's tasks', including those of a sexual nature, for men during war expeditions. It was no different with the mineworkers in South Africa. In his book *Travesti*, Don Kulick describes how eight-year-old boys hit on men and enjoyed it, ten years younger than the UN allows.

The efforts of the UN, states and NGOs in the area of child protection 'in actuality both reinforces heterosexual monogamy and debunks cultural diversity as inherently confusing and thus harmful for children'. (Ho, 2008, pg. 2) Children are protected by parents or schools and are raised to be reproductive heterosexual and monogamous adults. In such a system there is no place for gays or lesbians or for youths that feel like having (gay) sex. Instead of describing children's rights as protection against sex, it would be better to emphasise their right to sex education and self-determination. The pretence that children are autonomous sexual creatures only from the age of eighteen does not do justice to reality nor to their rights as sexual beings. For non-heterosexual children it means that they are exposed to the force of hetero norms that are not theirs and that can cause them lifelong harm. The same is true for children who do not fit into the typical male-female-image, such as the transgenders and intersexuals, sluts, girls who do not behave in a feminine way and boys who do not behave in a masculine manner.

The battle for the right to public sexual space and for lower age-restrictions on sexual activity among youths is about essential controversial themes. The most serious forms of discrimination with regard to sexuality and gender take place during the period of puberty. When youths do not behave in accordance with hetero-norms, they go through rough times. It is the period of final disciplining that is often accompanied by invectives to ridicule 'deviant' behaviour, and it is often youths who do this to each other. The 'misfits' are scolded by the other students, parents, teachers and other authorities with insults like faggot, sissy, slut or son of a whore, and are forced to keep straight, which they often do not want or cannot. Sometimes it involves violence (honour crimes in extreme cases), often it happens with the

necessary force and pressure where an appeal is made to religious and cultural 'traditions', or sometimes 'nature', that grab bag of occasional arguments that are never used against marriage, but always against sexual diversity, which is much more natural than marriage.

## Conclusion

For now, the dominance of the western gay and lesbian model only applies in the western world and is controversial even there. There are plenty of men and women still completely in the closet who maintain distance from gay and lesbian worlds and identities. Moreover, there are 'queers' who believe that most people are capable of making a homosexual choice but do not because of hetero norms. Also, the local versions of what it means to be homosexual, lesbian or gay will always remain, failing to conform to the 'global gay' model. There are boundary conflicts between gays and lesbians that are often overlooked, and transgender persons that are almost always overlooked. People who only occasionally move in gay circles certainly cannot count on any recognition.

An important problem of the gay model is that it has led to stagnation and arrogance, and a sense of moral superiority of the West as opposed to the rest of the world. Many gays and lesbians in the West strongly believe in their sexual identity, are convinced that it is better here than it is there, and do not resist the hetero norms because they have become anchored within themselves. The rage that got the gays and lesbians going during the sexual revolution has died down. The western movement has achieved many successes, more in the EU than in the US, but they are relatively weak because the hetero norm has not been dampened; on the contrary, it has been reinforced. The western gay and lesbian movement looks worn down and seems to stagnate in the rigid machinery of institutions. In many countries the homosexual movement has become detached from the problems that gays and lesbians are faced with in daily life. The Dutch COC, for example, is dependent on government funding and hardly represents the interests of local LGBT people any more.

In developing countries these problems take a different shape. On the one hand there is great pressure from various organisations and foreign governments via aid programmes to implement western norms in the areas of gender, sexuality and relationships. In many places a strong belief in a strict gender and sexual dichotomy is drummed into peoples' heads if it did not already exist locally. The duty to 'protect' 'innocent' youths against every form of non-heterosexual contact or sex before marriage constitutes a serious threat to their sexual civil rights. Many countries know marriage coercion that, as a result of western influence, is changed into a hetero-norm that leaves no room for sexual diversity or public forms of sex. Sexual morals become more limited and restricted in a world that prides itself on freedom and diversity. Unfortunately, the anti-sexual movement is much stronger than the pro-sexual movement and it has more support from governments, religious organisations and NGO's.

There is no global movement that defends and promotes sexual civil rights against all puritan institutions, but one can distinguish a little bit of hope here and there. The internet offers extensive opportunities for meeting, activism and acquiring knowledge in the area of homo-

sexuality. In many places outside the West, the movement is more vital and more involved in the needs and desires of gays, lesbians, MSM and transgender persons. There, institution-alisation has just started and no political goals have yet been determined, so the future is more open than in the West. The energy, curiosity and drive in those countries might lead to different, more interesting results than in the West. We have already seen the example of South Africa. Ten years after apartheid, gays and lesbians serve in the army, may marry, and their rights have been secured in the constitution, while in the US these objectives, after fifty years of gay activism, still remain dreams of the future.

At the same time, gay and lesbian practices are not as consolidated as in the western world with its fixed identities. In Asian countries interesting ways have been created to integrate gays and lesbians into the family. There are lively street, sports and disco cultures for men and women with homosexual preferences that are not marked by the wariness and arrogance of the people of the West. The 'gay-international' still has a long way to go, but its chances might be better in non-western than in western countries, and in the 'new' countries (with regard to the movements) they might be more open to innovative themes such as diversity in the area of sex and gender, public gay expressions and sexual civil rights of youths. It is possible that the new 'sex/gay capitals' are no longer in the West, but in the South or in the East, in Cape Town, Bangkok, Mumbai, Manila, Shanghai or Surabaya. Queer people there are more innovative and curious.

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## Literature

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