

Brief supporting Evidence Report 129

BOOSHTEE! SURVIVAL AND RESILIENCE IN ETHIOPIA

Sexuality, Poverty and Law

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Homosexuality is not that common in Addis, but it is there! It is rather risky to come out of the closet, but we even have a term for it – BOOSHTEE! – which is regarded as an insult. The risk of admitting being gay is DEATH! Which is pretty sad.

Ethiopian blogger (BBC News 1999)

Although homosexuality is illegal in Ethiopia, same-sex behaviour is not prosecuted because the government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) views homosexuality as a low law enforcement priority. While this may suggest at first glance that the situation for same-sex attracted men is better in Ethiopia than in other countries that retain laws against homosexuality, in reality the illegality of same-sex relations functions throughout Ethiopian society to drive and justify social and economic exclusion and human rights abuses of same-sex attracted people. There is a powerful synergy between church and state and sections of the church are occupied with promulgating extreme homophobia by associating homosexuality with taboo superstition, undesirable foreign influence, child abuse and prostitution. Moreover, Ethiopia's strong economic growth and geopolitical situation has limited the influence of other countries, donors and agencies in respect of human rights and economic or social policy in the country.

Exclusion can take the form of dismissal from work, expulsion from education and housing, and lack of access to services such as health and education and resources such as credit and humanitarian aid. It also means that there are no programmes or policies to protect same-sex attracted people from economic hardship, crime, disease or human rights violations.

The structure of the Ethiopian economy and society means that dependence on family and place for livelihood, social and spiritual meaning is high, particularly in rural areas where the majority of the population live. Breaking away to live out same-sex orientation or rejection after being exposed as gay usually carries enormous social costs, including loss of family status and income. For the majority of Ethiopians lack of safety nets means that this quickly leads to destitution. This is particularly problematic for young and/or HIV-positive men but it also applies to middle-class gay men for whom the consequences of being exposed as gay would, in most cases, include loss of livelihood.

As in most Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) communities throughout the world, there are a number of individual and collective strategies for social and economic survival. The high level of discrimination means that secrecy about same-sex attraction is the primary strategy for maintaining social and economic life and family relationships (whether or not those relationships are experienced as satisfactory or not). In some cases this secrecy is a kind of 'networked secrecy' through which gay-identified men can live social, sexual and economic lives, and even develop joint enterprises and economic subcultures. Moving around the country or abroad is another strategy, as is sex work, but both are usually difficult and risky.

Direct advocacy for major policy or legal change from within the SOGIE community or by international agencies and governments is unlikely to be successful in the current context and would almost certainly make things worse for both individual agitators and possibly for same-sex attracted people generally. These include laws that limit free speech and non-governmental organisation (NGO) activity generally and the fact that the Ethiopian government is able to ignore international pressure on such issues. A further complication in this context is that social and economic survival are directly threatened by deep and multifaceted contempt for homosexuality that functions powerfully at societal and familial level rather than directly by the state and its instruments.

Although the Ethiopian context is unique, the preliminary goals of building safer lives for same-sex attracted men in Addis Ababa are similar to those identified by SOGIE activists elsewhere – reducing stigma and discrimination; protecting human rights, including tackling violence; and ensuring that there are adequate health services for men who have sex with men (MSM).

Even though the international community ostensibly supports these aims (especially the reduction of HIV) few agencies or governments can make the long-term and careful investment needed to ensure that the rights of same-sex attracted people are embedded in agendas for social and economic justice agendas in Ethiopia, the region and globally.

Recommendations focus on ways that governments and international agencies can influence development programming and law and policy reform in ways that reduce the exclusionary impact of hatred of homosexuality and those who practise it. In particular, it urges international agencies to find ways to help strengthen the nascent SOGIE community by supporting research and information sharing and establishing links with international HIV and human rights organisations, diaspora communities and African and international lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights movements.

Several prominent global watchdog organisations said Ethiopia wasn't on their radar... the US, UK and other governments give huge amounts of aid to Ethiopia while remaining tight-lipped about the extensive violations of human rights happening throughout the country.

Claire Beston, Amnesty International, quoted in Baker (2013)