

Anti-Homosexuality Laws in Africa: The Complexity of Context

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-The recent signing into law of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda led to condemnations and threats to halt aid from powerful countries. This situation had CGE-Southern Africa students conflicted. Most students who attend CGE's Nation-Building, Globalization, and Decolonizing the Mind program support LGBTI rights and were clearly upset by the passing of the act. However, we have spent most of the semester critiquing foreign intervention by a powerful country into the affairs of a less powerful country. What sense can be made of this situation by those CGE students who support both LGBTI rights and the sovereignty of independent countries?

Beyond Uganda, what is happening in terms of LGBTI issues in other parts of Africa? In Namibia, where the CGE semester program is based (and where many of our short-term programs are rooted), the only law that criminalizes same-sex relationships is a 1957 sodomy law. The government has said they do not want to remove it off the books, yet no one has been prosecuted under this law since 1980.

The reluctance to remove the law is often interpreted as the government's resistance to appearing soft on homosexuality. While hate crimes against LGBTI people in Namibia are rare, generally speaking, LGBTI people are also not yet widely accepted in society. The strong influence of

Christianity in Namibia has also led to a very high level of homophobia and ignorance with respect to LGBTI issues.

Namibia's neighbor, South Africa, has a different situation. The LGBTI community had a strong voice when the new constitution was drafted in 1994, making it one of the most progressive constitutions in the world with respect to LGBTI rights. Same-sex marriage is legal and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity is illegal.

Cape Town is widely known as a gay-friendly tourist destination. However, similar to other situations in South Africa, the reality is quite different for a white affluent gay man in the center of Cape Town, than a poor black lesbian in the townships. "Corrective rape" and other hate crimes have been widely publicized. While the parliament affirmed these actions are hate crimes that will be tried in the courts as such (which means more rigid penalties), the crimes continue.

The LGBTI rights issues in Africa have been confounded by the fact that many of the countries with anti-LGBTI legislation have couched it in anti-Western, anti-imperialism rhetoric—using statements declaring that they will defend their culture from Western imperialists' ideas regarding homosexuality.

To be clear, same-sex relationships are definitely not as un-African as

several African leaders claim. There is a plethora of archaeological and anthropologic research that clearly establishes pre-colonial same-sex relationships were accepted by the community. In fact, significant evidence shows that the first anti-gay laws were enacted during the colonial period, particularly in British colonies. Colonizers and Christian missionaries brought their ideas of sin, morality, patriarchy, and heterosexual relationships. This homophobia persists today. So, heteronormativity is actually a result of colonization rather than an indigenous African idea.

While same-sex relationships are certainly not a Western-imposed idea, the discourse surrounding LGBTI rights and human rights are not indigenous African concepts. African leaders are correct in saying that the LGBTI rights' movement is uniquely Western. Therefore, unfortunately, when Western countries threaten to withdraw aid as a result of anti-gay legislation or non-protection of LGBTI rights, it only serves to perpetuate the idea of LGBTI rights as a Western construct.

Many critics argue that African leaders are using LGBTI issues to distract their citizens from issues such as poverty and corruption. Coming out against homosexuality allows the leaders to appear strong against Western imperialism and strengthens their masculine image, while taking

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Anti-Homosexuality Laws in Africa (continued)

attention away from other issues. The more Western leaders condemn these actions, the stronger the African leaders who resist their condemnations become in the eyes of homophobic citizens.

Western leaders believe they are in a conundrum. If they condemn the legislation, they are perpetuating the idea of LGBTI rights being Western and condemnation may be completely counterproductive. But it will also be very unpopular for a Western leader to simply stand aside and ignore gross human rights abuses, particularly in a country that is a recipient of significant amounts of aid.

Fortunately, these are not the only two options. Condemnation, sanctions, and withdrawal of aid are often the knee-jerk responses of many Western countries when they want to influence a less powerful country, but many LGBTI activists across Africa have asked that donor countries not withdraw aid because it means they may be further stigmatised. They will suffer the loss of important aid-dependent programs and resources. Donor nations need to ask the LGBTI activists in these countries what response they believe will be most effective. In most cases, an effective response will be complex and nuanced, which makes sense considering the world usually doesn't work in simple "yes/no" binary decisions.

Donors can also provide support and funding for LGBTI activists to wage their own battle internally, trusting that they know the most effective ways to influence their own government. Likewise, support can be provided for indigenous and local people to develop their own discourse around LGBTI and human rights, which is more likely to be understood and respected than a Western discourse. Finally, LGBTI people who choose to leave their home country for fear of their safety must be granted asylum while they work for change from the outside.

Back to the question posed at the beginning of this article: How might a CGE student respond to the situation? Anger at the enactment of the Ugandan law is appropriate. But anger at their own country's lack of respect for the wishes of the

LGBTI people in Uganda, and apparent lack of understanding of the history of colonization and how that may play out today is also appropriate.

Based on this emotional response, what action might CGE students take? They can support LGBTI movements wherever they exist, while respecting that LGBTI activism is specific to the context in which the activists live.

For example, in Namibia, where CGE-Southern Africa's semester program is based, the Director of OutRight Namibia, Linda Baumann, has said that their main aim is to achieve "tolerance." In South Africa, for example, LGBTI activist organizations are working with local communities to dispel ignorance about LGBTI people, as well as to encourage intolerance of violence or discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

The questions posed in this article cannot do justice to the complexity of the issue, but I hope the historical background, student reflections, and current context provide a firmer ground in which to consider it. I continue to encourage my students and the CGE family to listen, engage, and learn around this topic as it evolves on both the African continent and the world. I have included the following resources that may help in exploring this issue on your own:

- Stewart, C. (2014). 21 Varieties of Traditional African Homosexuality. Retrieved from:
 - o 76crimes.com/2014/01/30/21-varieties-of-traditional-african-homosexuality/
- Currier, A. (2010). Political Homophobia in Postcolonial Namibia. *Gender and Society*. 24(1). 110-129:
 - o jstor.org/stable/20676848
- Msibi, T. (2014). Is Current Theorising on Same-Sex Sexuality Relevant to the African Context? *Pambazuka News*, 667. Retrieved from:
 - o pambazuka.org/en/category/features/90723
- Nagarajan, C. (2014). How Foreign Governments Hurt Not Help LGBTIQI Rights. Retrieved from:
 - o sacsis.org.za/site/article/1932



Measuring CGE's Impact

Several of CGE-Minneapolis' staff members spent the last few months putting together a framework for better compiling data about our programs, specifically our impact on the personal and professional pursuits of participants. The Fall 2014 issue of GNN will contain a comprehensive summary of this data. For now, we wanted to share a few highlights:

- 79 percent of CGE summer and semester program alumni state that their experience abroad had at least a moderate impact on their ability to secure employment.
- Approximately half of CGE summer and semester program alumni lived abroad at some point after their CGE experience.
- Over 99 percent of travel seminar participants would recommend a CGE experience to others.

Thank you to our alumni and participants who submitted their positive comments and constructive criticism via program evaluations and surveys! Stay tuned for more.

From the Blogs

We encourage all of our GNN readers to visit the CGE blogs, which are easily accessible from our website's homepage. Both our staff and students contribute to the blogs. Reading them is a great way to stay connected to CGE; they also promote continued engagement with important world social issues and inspire action. Read on for excerpts from two blogs.

Social Work in a Latin America Context Blog:
Centro de Integracion Juvenil - Center for Youth Integration
by Simone Fuller, Augsburg social work student

Several weeks ago, the social work students in Cuernavaca visited the Centro de Integracion Juvenil (CIJ). The main responsibility of the social worker is to look at the patient and their environment. Most of the teens the CIJ works with live with their families. Contrary to what many of us thought, most clients are voluntary. Social workers at CIJ work a great deal with families to help them support the individual who is receiving services. Although family support is crucial, we were surprised to hear that for safety reasons, social workers do not make home visits. As we have learned, safety is a first priority, but I believe home visits can be extremely beneficial.

Termination, a very important stage in the therapy process, is also conducted by the social worker. This process happens when school, work, [and] family are not chaotic and also when the individual has learned how to become self-sufficient.

Social workers also play a key role by developing and implementing a variety of workshops. These are put in place to help the individual with their addictions. Prevention workshops are also an important part of the CIJ. These are held at schools and include topics relating to addiction, violence prevention, and developing self-care skills. The social workers' role is very important to the success seen at CIJ.

The visit to the Centro de Integracion Juvenil was a very eye opening and rewarding experience. Something that I found very interesting was that the organization believes that it is not necessary for an individual that is being served to give up their addiction entirely but rather the vital goal is to lower the dosage of the drug.

What are some possible benefits and harms this policy [could have]? See the blog at swkmexico.blogspot.com for readers' responses to the question posed.

Central America Site Blog: Boston College Sophomore Scholars Experience in Nicaragua
by Paul Davey, Boston College '15

...These moments make up just a small sample from a trip that included visiting women's centers that help females in a machismo culture, talking to people who face the abusive maquilas that make the cheap clothes we buy, meeting young political activists fighting against a corrupt and undemocratic government, seeing first-hand [a hospital] where patients were crowded in unsanitary hallways, and many other unforgettable experiences.

Any sophomore could talk for hours about the incredible people and the tragic situations we encountered in Nicaragua. We encountered injustice on a massive scale, but we also met people who have dedicated themselves to fighting it. This, above all else, was the key lesson of the trip; it's fashionable to say that one person can make a difference, but we saw it happening.

Whether it was Sabrina, the university student who builds houses for people living in unimaginable squalor; Silvia, the nurse who helps run an affordable women's health center in one of the poorest parts of Managua; Suyen, our incredibly kind guide in the country who spends her free time working for a political party dedicated to improving the lives of all Nicaraguans; or Fr. Cardenal, a priest whose dedication to social justice found him creating and leading one of the largest and most successful literacy campaigns in world history; the people that we met have changed lives.

Augsburg College President and Provost Visit the Mexico Site

President Paul Pribbenow and **Provost Karen Kaivola** recently visited CGE's site in Cuernavaca, Mexico. They took part in an excursion with our students to the impoverished rural community of Tlamacazapa, where they helped haul water from a well and learned how to make baskets. The sale of homemade baskets made of palm leaves is the main source of income for this town. In Tlamacazapa, students and staff met with members of Atzin, a community development agency that does important work in terms of health education, literacy, and female empowerment.

Staff News

The Mexico site is hiring for an **international resident advisor** to serve from August 2014 to August 2015. This position is tasked with promoting a positive living-learning community at our study center. Duties also involve supporting faculty with coursework and assisting with the coordination of short-term programs. Applications are due June 15, 2014. A full position description is available at augsborg.edu/global/about/careers.

Rebekah Menning, who served as a temporary academic programs abroad associate, has finished her nine-month term with CGE. Menning is currently applying to graduate school abroad. Check our website during the late spring and summer months, as we will be hiring for a similar position to start in August 2014.



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