



An Eclectic Study on Stigma and Discrimination Subjected to LGBTQIA Individuals in a South African Context

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Submitted 10.02.2024

Accepted 29.05.2024

Published 30.06.2024

Volume No. 11

Issue No. I

ISSN (Online) 2414-8512

ISSN (Print) 2311-293X DOI:

Keywords: LGBTQIA, Discrimination, Stigma, Violation, Harassment, Homosexuality, Homophobia, Heterosexual

ABSTRACT

In South Africa, promises and legal progress notwithstanding, homophobia is still pervasive. LGBTQIA people experience serious rights violations, according to an analysis of numerous literary sources, especially journals, which was done for this article. They also encounter problems with their physical and mental well-being, face stigma and discrimination, and are not allowed to participate in cultural customs like customary male circumcision. It has been demonstrated that social work can be vital in ensuring that LGBTQIA people are able to exercise their rights, educate the public, and push for severe punishments for homophobes.



Introduction

While many countries' constitutions uphold the rights of their citizens to enjoy the freedoms of association and cultures of their own, it is perturbing that people who belong to same-sex orientation, which includes lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual and asexual (LGBTQIA+) continue to be excluded and being subjected to various kinds of human rights deficits and atrocities such as harassment, stigma, and stigmatisation in countries such as South Africa (Kaoma, 2018). This, in South Africa, is strange, considering that the rights of homosexuals are guaranteed in the country's progressive constitution (Resane, 2020; Baird, 2022). Conceptually, homophobia is the irrational condemnation of non-heteronormative individuals, which breeds violence, discrimination, estrangement, and stigmatisation (Rosik et al., 2007). This irrational behaviour is a consequence of mainstream social constructions of sexuality, which tend to demand conformity by adherence to heterosexual norms and practices (Resane, 2020). Arguably, in many countries, especially those from the African continent, the general society supports the notion that heterosexuality is the regular expression of sexuality and, therefore, fails to tolerate non-heteronormative individuals by subjecting them to various episodes of callous mistreatment and bouts of stigma, discrimination, and stigmatisation (Dietert & Dentice, 2009). Society presumes that unnatural sexualities are bad and immoral, and as such, they should not be tolerated. The society also upholds the belief that individuals who exhibit these unnatural desires should not be allowed to dent the image of society (Dietert & Dentice, 2009). As such, the "us" and "them" dynamic is visible and forms a fertile ground for stigma and stigmatisation that leaves homosexuals with immense states of phobia (Dreier et al., 2020).

It is good to deepen the underpinnings of homophobia in ubiquitous corners of the globe, South Africa notwithstanding. Culture stands out as a substantial ingredient driving homophobia. This is because it aids the internalisation of sexual norms and transmits sexual schemas, such as the meanings that sex and sexuality

need to be viewed as natural and intrinsic to individuals rather than being culturally produced (Kaoma, 2018). Even though it is not the sole cause of the surge of homophobia, Mulaudzi (2018) contends that cultural influence, such as the culture of marriage, plays a significant role. Essentially, and from many societies' cultural lenses, the sole purpose of marriage is procreation. As such, homosexuality is believed to be contrary to the conventional cultural tenets of procreation and livelihood, as two men or two women cannot procreate (Mulaudzi, 2018). Unequivocally, culture reinforces gender roles, and as such, anything that is deemed not to conform to socio-cultural-gender norms, such as same-sex attraction, is considered un-African and a significant threat to traditional ethos.

Inopportunately, the religious mindset and its views towards the LGBTQIA community have shaped the harsh attitude towards members of the same sexual inclination (Mutunga, 2021). Resane (2020) identifies this attitude to abound concerning sacraments, liturgy, and ordination of non-heteronormative individuals. Further, in attempting to influence legal norms, religious and political leaders are not only responsible for the isolation of same-sex relationships, but they have perniciously drawn their dagger towards the extinguishment of the practices of same-sex practices (Parsitau, 2021). Inopportunately, the religionisation of same-sex relationships has masked human rights debates and stifled serious academic and pragmatic engagements around sexual orientations and sexual differences while fuelling negative attitudes towards people with the same sexual orientations (Parsitau, 2021).

Therefore, in ubiquitous African contexts, non-heteronormativity has been framed as unacceptable, un-African and a threat to African moral and cultural sensitives, as well as an affront to African moral and family values (Mulaudzi, 2018; Dreier et al., 2020; Parsitau, 2021; Mutunga, 2021). Evidence abounds that homophobic attitudes largely shape many parts of Africa and view homosexuality as an evil attempt of trying to westernise the African continent (Mutunga, 2021). Further, religious teachings intensify the politicisation of homosexuality and further solidify individuals' rejection of homosexuality, more especially since these messages are relayed by trusted religious leaders who play an influential role in stimulating adherents' political attitudes in society (Dreier et al., 2020). To this end, Kutunga (2021) argues that the criminalisation of homosexuality is based on the wrong premise of it being un-African.

Problem Statement

Arguably, the Republic of South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions in the region (Mureno, 2019; Mutunga, 2021). This constitution is accorded this status because it contains its bill of rights that protect and defend all citizens irrespective of their colour, race, gender, and sexual orientation (Mureno, 2019; Mutunga, 2021). The rights of the LGBTQIA community continue to be violated, and they suffer the scourge of discrimination and stigmatisation 28 years after the adoption of this 'world-class constitution' (Mutunga, 2021). This entrenchment of homophobia can be attributed to the rigidity of the general society, which is mainly heterosexual (Dreier et al., 2020) and feels that the homosexual community defies the sexual norms as well as conventional cultures (Dreyer, 2007). Further, the phenomenon of many religious bodies outlawing homosexuality serves as a strong motivation for homophobia, with its concomitant results of stigma and stigmatisation (Izugbara et al., 2020). Broadly, the embracement of the variegated metaphysical beliefs by many traditional practitioners (traditional healers, spiritualists, witchdoctors, and wizards) endorses the myth that homosexuality is taboo and, thus, un-African (Kara & Duyan, 2022). The article will explore some dynamics of human rights violations, such as stigma and discrimination meted out to the LGBTQIA community in South Africa, and their implications for the social work profession.

Methodology

This is a literature review article aimed at using the already available data to bring to the fore the experiences of homophobia by the LGBTQIA community and the implications to social work, particularly the role social workers could play in minimising these experiences. The researchers did not only use the data from the journals but also their experiential observations and intuition on the lives of the LGBTQIA community. The article further hopes to unearth some of the gaps that continue to influence the denial of the LGBTQIA community and what social workers can do to mitigate the quagmire.

Theoretical Frame

The philosophy of Ubuntu

Undeniably, this article, using an array of African-informed theories, draws on the underpinning of *Ubuntu* as a theoretical framing that works to denounce heterosexual discourses in the society that denigrates, undermines and condescends the LGBTQIA community. *Ubuntu* is derived from the African thinking that "*I am because we are*" and "*a person is a person through other persons*" (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Mabovula, 2011).

Predominantly, *Ubuntu* is a philosophy and a way of life that has, for many years, sustained the African values of interdependence, mutuality, reciprocity, trust and love that made life for many liveable and

enjoyable (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005). In another way, *Ubuntu* recognises the use of indigenous knowledge systems in fostering peace, love, trust, mutuality and reciprocity (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019).

The theory finds relevance to this article as heterosexuals need to embrace the values of love, respect and being there for one another so that they may view the members of the LGBTQIA as valid members of society. With the application of *Ubuntu*, heterosexuals need to tolerate the community by embracing and tolerating members of a different sexual orientation. As *Ubuntu* epitomises the respect of the law, interdependence and mutuality, heterosexuals should respect members of LGBTQIA as brothers befitting the rights enjoyable by all according to the countries' constitutions (Mligo, 2021), placing South Africa as an example.

Since the members of the LGBTQIA are stigmatised by society, including many institutions, the application of ubuntu principles of being there for one another and providing a shoulder for one to cry on can be applied to make the community access services in equal measures (Mafoko & Peschken, 2021). The choice to accept or reject someone is determined by their sexuality and is impacted by their religion and fear of culture (Chisale, 2020).

Unequivocally, the tenets of *Ubuntu* provide a framework for rethinking the anti-homosexual discourses prevalent in South Africa and throughout Africa in general (Bongmba, 2016). The LGBTQIA community experiences discrimination and prejudice. Optimistically, Ubuntu's interdisciplinary approach will encourage the integration of all persons into the web of life, regardless of their sexual orientation (Chisale, 2020). LGBTQIA individuals suffer bouts of exclusion (Moagi et al., 2021; Subhrajit, 2014; Kaoma, 2018). This exclusion relates to how members of the LGBTQIA community interact with others, how they are prevented from engaging in pedagogical, economic, religious, and political activities, and how they are systematically denied equal development possibilities (NgubaneMokiwa, 2018). Ubuntu epitomises the fundamental idea of an inclusive society in which everyone is treated equally before the law and has access to variegated services (Shanyanana & Waghid, 2016).

However, although the government and other institutions have taken tremendous steps to defend LGBTI rights, there are still widespread, culturally-based homophobic tendencies (Chakale & Marumo, 2019). This is despite South Africa's Constitution explicitly protecting the rights of the LGBTQIA community (Bongard, 2018). This calls for members of social service professionals such as social workers to workshop communities on operationalising the tenets of Ubuntu as a universal idea that includes bringing them together to form a global "family" where people can learn important lessons of interdependence, making it a communalistic notion (Bongmba, 2016; Chakale & Marumo, 2019; Subhrajit, 2014; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). Being communalistic implies it includes everyone, and this holds for LGBTI people as well (Bongmba, 2016). This connotes that ubuntu can be utilised to promote harmony and cohesion to combat the widespread quagmire of homophobia in South Africa (Bongmba, 2016).

Thematic Findings

LGBTQIA Suffer Bouts of Exclusion.

The LGBTQIA community is perhaps the most misunderstood and overlooked group in contemporary society (Burdge, 2007). As such, social attitudes towards this community determine whether LGBTQIA individuals will be rejected or accepted by employers, family members, teachers, clergy and, in some cases, the general society (Flores, 2019). The literature suggests that their very existence questions the traditional gender dichotomy, and by stepping outside the fundamental social norms, they fall prey to discrimination, oppression, and stigmatisation (Burdge, 2007; Kaoma, 2018; Dreier et al., 2020). Because of these experiences, the LGBTQIA community is disenfranchised and shunned from mainstream societal practices (Philanthropy, 2013). Inopportunistically and paradoxically, the community is more likely to experience victimisation and abuse by their peers as well as by the social work professionals who should be assisting them (Baams et al., 2019). These social workers need to undergo countertransference (Otava, 2022). Due to the fact that some members of the LGBTQIA fail the resilient test as states of stigma and discrimination take a massive toll on them, some have abandoned their domiciles and withdrawn from looking for jobs, which is a key to their survival (Biçmen & Bekiroğulları, 2014). This has driven them to a state of economic marginalisation and exclusion.

Some studies have found various forms of social exclusions that LGBTQIA individuals experience (Moagi et al., 2021). Marginalisation is at the core of exclusion from fulfilling whole social lives at individual, interpersonal and societal levels (Subhrajit, 2014). Moreover, they have little control over their lives and available resources. They are perniciously stigmatised and are often at the receiving end of negative public attitudes (Subhrajit, 2014). This ostracism originates from cultural stigma that is produced and reinforced through the actions of some family and society members (Riggle, 2017). This is an environment that heralds their vulnerability and calls for policy and practice interventions by the government, NGOs,

human rights bodies, and members of social service professionals, such as the social workers who need to advocate and educate communities on the need to respect the rights of all in the country (Bongard, 2018). Perhaps members of social service professionals working in the LGBTQIA need to educate African societies on the rights the LGBTQIA community enjoys in many countries of the Western world (Mapp et al., 2019). Further, African societies need also to be reminded that their homophobic attitude is not only inhuman but is also against the norms and conventions of ubuntu that they take pride in embracing (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020).

LGBTQIA Suffer Immense Violations of their Rights

Ubiquitously, human rights are characterised by being universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated (Bongard, 2018; Mutunga, 2021; Mureno, 2019). By implication, all human rights should not be viewed as a hierarchy under which certain rights are deemed more significant (Mutunga, 2021). However, extensive literature suggests that LGBTQIA individuals suffer severe human rights violations based on their sexual orientation (Elze, 2019; Mutunga, 2021; Sansal, 2021; Tiu Jr, 2020; Bongard, 2018). This violation in many countries is usually endorsed by the view that the rights of the LGBTQIA community have no legal foundation (Tiu, 2020). In South Africa, there is still a chunk of individuals who do not accept the practice of the LGBTQIA community and are on the frontline in subjecting them to horrible and perniciously unimaginable ways (Bongard, 2018).

In South Africa, there has been a surge of sexual and gender-based violence meted out against the LGBTQIA community. Evidence abounds that since the dawn of democracy, this community has been brutalised, raped, and killed across the country, with perhaps the law enforcement officials dragging their feet to pin the culprits. At least six members of the LGBTQIA community were brutally killed in hate crimes in February 2021 (Wayne, 2021), thus violating their right to life. This happens although the Constitution's Bill of Rights explicitly addresses the issues of sexual orientation, amongst others (Bongard, 2018).

The LGBTQIA Community Suffers from Physical and Mental Health Deficits

Undeniably, the preponderance of studies indicates that LGBTQIA youth experience a significantly higher risk of emotional distress, physical abuse and verbal harassment as compared to their heterosexual peers (Daley et al., 2007). The relationship between stigma, prejudice, and health is well-documented worldwide (Flores, 2019; Daley et al., 2007), South Africa notwithstanding. Further, the stigma and prejudice that LGBTQIA individuals experience produces the stress and anxiety that perniciously impacts their physical, psychological, and mental health (Flores, 2019). Although anyone may express stress and anxiety, the LGBTQIA suffer the most. Perhaps this is because attitudinal-driven stigma and discrimination subjected to them pose profound stress imprints of mental health deficits (Flores, 2019; Kara & Duyan, 2022; Moagi et al., 2021; Smidt & Platt, 2018). Moreover, these stressors are called chronic stressors and are structural or produce institutionalised discrimination, rejection, and internalised homophobia (Kara & Duyan, 2022; Moagi et al., 2021; Price-Feeney et al., 2020). Furthermore, non-heteronormative individuals may also be at risk of committing suicide or embracing suicidal ideation due to the gravity of these stressors (Kaniuka et al., 2019; Moagi et al., 2021).

Unequivocally, the increased victimisation and discrimination explain the phenomenon of poor mental health outcomes among LGBTQIA individuals (Price-Feeney et al., 2020). Further, LGBTQIA individuals are also at an increased risk of depressive and anxiety disorders, which exacerbate their physical abuse and peer victimisation (Moagi et al., 2021). Consequent to the violence and social exclusion of LGBTQIA individuals is distress and dysfunction (Moagi et al., 2021). This has severe social work implications as the profession prides itself on motivating and bolstering people's social functionalities.

Exclusion from Cultural Dispensation (TMC)

Arguably, most cultures in South Africa, such as the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, are marked by rituals of initiation, symbolising the end of childhood and the rebirth into adulthood (Mashabane & Henderson, 2020). However, these rites of passage for men are sexually biased to heterosexuals and do not appear to recognise gay men within them (Mashabane & Henderson, 2020). These cultural rites are characteristically conservative and rooted in rigid patriarchal traditions that enforce binary gendered and sexual identification. *Ulwaluko*, or traditional male circumcision, is regarded as the cultural practice that teaches young men about the socially expected behaviours and morals of being considered a real man (Mashabane, 2018). This ritual places a strong emphasis on sexual socialisation and reinforces patriarchal gender norms (Siswana, 2020). Expectedly, this is conforming to heteronormative hegemonic masculinity (Mashabane, 2018). *Ulwaluko* rite of passage disregards and takes for granted the sexual orientation of the initiates (Ntozini & Ngqangweni, 2016). This is proven by the fact that the initiates, after reintegration, are expected to display traditional masculine behaviours, which include but are not limited to marrying and

fathering with a heterosexual partner (Ntozini & Ngqangweni, 2016). This cannot be expected of homosexuals, and hence their place in society is disregarded.

Conclusions and Implication for Social Work

The role of social work in intervening to assist all members of society, irrespective of their colour, gender, age and sexuality, cannot be overemphasised. This puts them on the spot to advocate for the rights of the LGBTQIA community in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. This is because, despite the enforcement of their rights in several countries, those from South Africa continue to suffer stigma, discrimination, homophobia, and social exclusion (Mutunga, 2021). Unequivocally, studies focused on the victimisation of the LGBTQIA community provide a trivial resource for social workers and other social service professionals in tackling homophobia and its concomitant ramifications (Daley et al., 2007). Notably, studies indicate that social workers' perspectives suggest the importance of intersectional approaches in conceptualising and addressing homophobia (Daley et al., 2007). Furthermore, on the basis that social work, from its conception, has always been a human rights profession, it is rightly positioned to advocate for the rights of the LGBTQIA community (Mtetwa & Muchacha, 2020); thus, it should advocate for access to all forms of resources to the LGBTQIA. A large number of citizens do not support LGBTQIA rights because they view them as morally wrong and an embarrassment (Bongard, 2018).

To absolve this, social workers and other social service professionals should undertake community education to inculcate among the societal members the need to respect the human rights of the LGBTQIA community. Social workers should mediate the many conflicts between the community and the largely heteronormative-minded community members (Amadasun, 2020; Russell et al., 2019). It follows that in order to confront these abuses and promote human rights education, social workers ought to join forces with LGBTQIA-friendly groups and individuals. The LGBTQIA community's legal rights, including the ability to marry, must be understood by society (Mutunga, 2021; Moreno et al., 2020; Parsitau, 2021). Since this law and numerous other laws protect individuals, groups, and minority groups in the nation, social workers have to launch effective educational campaigns to raise awareness of them. Imperatively, social workers should also advocate for a cultural and attitudinal paradigm shift among the cultural custodians who have rigidly been disregarding and discouraging the involvement of homosexuals in cultures such as traditional male circumcision in consultation with the traditional leaders.

Importantly, social workers who are behaviourists should unleash their behavioural and clinical interventions to persuade and woo the rigid cultural custodians to accept the members of the LGBTQIA as legitimate citizens of the country to partake in any cultural process, such as traditional male circumcision without any iota of discrimination. Since many cultural custodians are respectable members of society, their change of heart can win society's acceptance of members of the LGBTQIA community.

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