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Explaining Positions on Same-Sex Sexuality in Conservative Societies: Do Cultural and Religious Precepts Matter?

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Authors' contributions

All the authors participated in preparing the manuscript including the study design, data gathering, interpretation of the data, and drafting the manuscript for publication. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Studies show that social rituals, norms, and values shape perspectives on sexuality in many heteronormative societies. However, a handful of studies have explored the underlying factors and reasoning behind this assertion. Leaning on the theory of social integration, this study qualitatively explored how residents in Kumasi Metropolitan area in Ghana, explained their perception of same-sex sexuality given the profound religious and cultural milieu. Drawing on in-depth interviews and a group discussion, data were obtained from adults aged 18 to 59 years for the study. The findings supported the claim that same-sex sexuality is disapproved in conservative societies. Reasons and concerns including procreation, spirituality, economic attributes, mechanism of sexual intercourse, and origin of same-sex sexuality emerged as grounds for disapproval of same-sex sexuality. However, underneath these reasons were inherent cultural and religious values of the people. The study posits that, it is essential for contextual elements that shape perspectives on sexuality such as religion and culture to be granted the requisite attention in a bid to understand the meanings ascribed to non-heterosexuality in different contexts.

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Keywords: Heteronormativity; procreation; spirituality; economic reasons; sex; origin of homosexuality; Ghana.

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies show that social rituals, practices, and values shape perspectives on sexuality including appreciation of chastity and heterosexuality in many societies [1-5]. However, a handful of studies have accounted for the disapproval of non-heterosexuality in conservative societies such as those in Ghana through religious and cultural lens. This study attempts to fill this lacuna.

Organised religions across the globe have historically taken positions ranging from ambivalent to outright hostility regarding same-sex orientation [6]. In Islamic dominant societies for instance, social, spiritual and civil laws including conventions on sexual behaviours are usually determined by religious laws and norms [7]. Religious doctrines and cultural precepts have been secularised as “common knowledge” about sexual relationships even in court proceedings over the years [8]. Moreover, even in western societies such as those in the United States of America (USA), religious precepts informed even the judicial process until recently. For instance, in 1974, Washington court simply concluded that John Singer and Paul Barwick were excluded from “the nature of marriage itself” because “two males cannot produce children” [8]. Religious and cultural precepts have and continue play a pertinent role in societies across the globe.

Sex and sex-related behaviours are widely acknowledged as a cultural object [9]. While some cultures remain liberal about sex and sexual behaviours in general (sex positive societies), others (sex-negatives societies) remain extremely conservative. Sex-positive cultures consider sex to be life-affirming and pleasurable whereas sex-negative societies view sexual acts as purely procreative [10]. Each society thus interprets sexuality and sexual activities in different ways [1]. Cornwall, Correa [11]. Therefore contest that sexuality is about a lot more than sexual intimacy. It is also about the social rules, economic structures, political battles, and religious ideologies that surround physical expressions of sexuality. Durkheim’s proposition on social integration buttresses these assertions [12-14]. Social integration refers to the social bonds tying individuals to socially-given ideals and purposes; regulations, to those that

regulate individual’s desires [13,15]. According to Durkheim [16], social institutions including schools, religious groups and social values, norms and ideals shape attitudes, expectations and actions about everyday lives [13]. In expanding Durkheim’s work [14,16], Turner [12] argues that individuals within a given society are attached to the social collective through ritual and mutually reinforcing practices. To this end, Haldeman [6] posits that the influence of social institutions such as culture and religion on sexuality and same-sex sexuality cannot be underestimated.

Non-heterosexuality is often abhorred in places of profound religious and conservative culture [5,17]. This gives rise to heteronormative societies. Heteronormative assumptions refer to automatic and unconscious beliefs and expectations that reinforce heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as the ideal norm. In heteronormative societies, systematic institutionalised enforced practices create a society where only heterosexual relationships are visible [18]. People within heteronormative contexts tend to conceive themselves and their social worlds in particular ways including gender roles and expectations, and who constitutes an appropriate sexual partner [18]. This is contrary to happenings in contexts such as the USA where sexual heterogeneity is accepted [19]. Previous studies affirm that socially defined gender roles and expectations determine views on same-sex sexuality [20]. In a related study, Collier, Bos [21] found that young males who were more religious (as indicated by frequency of religious service attendance) were less accepting of same-sex sexuality. Similarly, Nguyen and Blum [22] found among Vietnamese female youth that sexual conservativeness predicts intolerance in both men and women for homosexuality. In Ghana, sex is only expected of married couples and it is chiefly regarded as a means of procreation [23]. In Nigeria, marriage and procreation is an item. Without procreation marriage is incomplete [4].

Purview to these, many have used procreation as grounds based on traditional and religious precepts to debunk the notion of same-sex sexual relationships and same-sex marriages even in less conservative cultures [24]. The argument is usually geared towards the maintenance of sanctity of the family [25]. Others

have also ascribed spiritual meaning to same-sex sexuality owing to its impact on perception and actions of individuals, which has been tremendous [6]. For instance, there have been situations whereby self-identified non-heterosexuals have reportedly sought for sexual orientation change owing to the internally polarising effect that religiosity—which tends to become one's culture in due course, exert on them [6]. However, these disparities in explanations on same-sex relationships could be attributed to inadequate knowledge on sexuality and sexual relationships in general as Mustapa, Ismail [26] identified among Malaysian youth.

This study took place in Kumasi in Ghana. There are three main religious groups in Ghana viz. Christianity (71.2%), Islam/Muslims (17.6%) and Traditional religion (5.3%). These three religious groups thus account for over 94.1% of religious affiliation in Ghana [27]. Approximately 95.1% of residents in Kumasi profess an affiliation with at least one of the three main religious groups [28]. The Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly describes religious and cultural institutions as indispensable development partners [28]. Moreover, the study context is ethnically diverse [29]. There are over fifty ethnic groups in Ghana whose common values and institutions represent a collective national heritage [29]. However, increasing urbanisation and globalisation are somewhat reducing the influence that cultural and even religious precepts exert on views and behaviours towards gender roles and same-sex sexuality across the globe [4,20]. For instance, the culture of Asantes—the indigenous ethnic group in the study area, has undergone some noticeable changes over the years. Certain cultural practices that used to be held in high esteem are now considered outdated. For instance, practice of puberty rites—as a relevant requirement in the initiation of boys and girls into adulthood, and widowhood rights for instance have been halted [28]. The local culture however remains conservative on several issues given the profound influence of religious and cultural elements on everyday lives [28].

Based on results of previous studies [3,20,22,24,30], it is ideated that inhabitants of Kumasi Metropolis in Ghana disapprove of same-sex sexuality given the profound religious and conservative cultural environment. The paper qualitatively elucidates how adults (people who are aged 18 years and above) [31] in Kumasi, Ghana, employed religious and cultural precepts to explain their position on same-sex sexuality.

2. METHODS

2.1 Data Collection

The study applied two interview techniques namely: In-depth interviews and group discussion [32] to gather data from 15 adults. The two interview techniques helped to gather public opinion about same-sex sexuality through consensus building [33]. The group discussion consisted of two females and two males. The participants for the study were selected from four out of the nine sub-metropolitan areas within the Kumasi Metropolitan area. The four localities included Bantama, Old Tafo, Oforikrom and Nhyieso areas. The participants were considered for inclusion based on their age (adults only), religious affiliations, the place of abode, and ethnicity. This was to ensure that the sample reflected the sociodemographic composition of the study area.

Semi-structured interview (Appendix 1) approach was used in all the interviews to ensure that the discussions remained within the scope of the study at all times while giving participants ample chance to express their opinion [33]. All the interviews were conducted using the Twi language—the dominant language in the study area. The authors constructed the interview guide. The content was aligned towards the sociocultural milieu of the study area, which was initially assessed and understood through preliminary interviews and a reconnaissance survey as well as the authors' familiarity with the context. The questions were informed by Durkheim [14] assertion that religious and cultural precepts shape views and attitudes of people regarding different phenomena in their environment. Other works consulted in constructing the instrument included Adamczyk and Pitt [2], Sands [7], Doyle, Rees [20], and Siker [34]. For lack of better words, same-sex sexuality or non-heterosexuality was represented by two key words that were more familiar to the participants viz. "gays" and "lesbians" during interviews.

2.2 Ethical Issues

Informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to the commencement of the interviews. The purpose of the study was thoroughly explained to each of the participants before including them in the study. They were made aware of the possibility of backing out of the study at any time without having to provide

any reason for their action. Moreover, participants were asked to divulge only information they were comfortable in sharing. All the interviews were taped-recorded with permission from the participants. The authors and one research assistant transcribed the interviews. A third person who had no fore knowledge about the study assessed the credibility of the transcripts. As a way of protecting the participants, all the participant names used in this paper are pseudo names. The privacy of participants during the interviews was ensured by together deciding on appropriate location for the interviews. The interviews took place either at the homes or at work places of the participants. The group interview however took place at a neutral location.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The majority (53.3%) of participants were females. The youngest and oldest persons in the study were 19 years and 59 years respectively. The majority of participants were from Old Tafo sub-metropolitan area. The commonest highest educational level experienced by the participants was Junior High School level (or form four level). Christianity (66.7%) was the commonest religious affiliation among the participants followed by Islamic religion (26.7%) and African traditional religion (6.7%). The majority of participants were Akans (53.3%)—the dominant tribe of the study area Northern tribes (40%)—consisting of participants who hailed from any of the three northern regions of Ghana, was the next commonest group. The rest of the participants were Ewes, a dominant tribe on the eastern boarder of Ghana.

Leaning on the religious and cultural precepts, the majority of the participants expressed sentiments that demonstrated their disapproval of same-sex sexuality. The explanations offered by participants on why same-sex sexuality is culturally and religiously unacceptable, are discussed under five themes including arguments on procreation, spirituality of same-sex sexuality, origins of same-sex sexuality, mechanism of sexual intercourse, and economic attributes to same-sex sexuality.

3.1 Procreation as a Social Value

Many participants habitually cited procreation as a reason for abhorring non-heterosexuality. They unanimously regarded procreation as a key cultural value that must be preserved through

legitimate sexual relationship between heterosexuals. To many, legitimacy in this wise referred to practices deemed as culturally and religiously appropriate rather than any dictate of laws or even personal choices and beliefs.

“...God created Eve when He created Adam [a passage from the Christian Bible] So a man marrying or dating another man is senseless because two men cannot give birth” (Adwoa Manu, Female, 33 years).

“Marriage is how families expand. If our great grandparents practiced same-sex sexual relationships...What would have become of our families? Maybe we will not be here. ...Since the olden days, we only know that a man marries a woman ...not a man marrying a man or woman marrying a woman. It [homosexuality] is an abomination....I would never indulge in it nor encourage any of my family members to do it. Is it not envious to see families get together to celebrate the life of new-borns or for naming ceremonies? These are part of us. We cannot entertain same-sex sexuality here” (Akua, Female 45 years).

(Extract from Interview with Kwaku Afriyie, male, 19 years)

Interviewer: If two girls want to stay together as partners, why and how is that wrong?

Afriyie: Oh! There is something wrong with that. If your mother stayed with a girl, she could not have given birth to you [referring to the interviewer]. ...So, if girls stay together, how could they bear children?

Interviewer: Should procreation be the main reason for sexual relationships?

Afriyie: ...If you come to this world and you don't give birth, then you have failed to proclaim the word of God [in reference to Genesis 1:28 of the Christian Bible]

Actually, procreation—in a strictly biological sense, remains the all-important end product of sexual intercourse in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions [17]. The notions expressed by participants also depicted a popular traditional value in Ghana and many other sub-Saharan countries that, sex is purposely for procreation [3,4,23]. In these contexts, procreation is also deemed as a legitimate responsibility and expectation of married heterosexual couples [23].

This is contrary to occurs in sex-positive cultures [10].

Religious and traditional values largely drove the procreation argument by the participants as can be gleaned from reliance on verses from the Christian Bible as reference points. The inherent cultural expectation that procreation is a fundamental responsibility for people in sexual relationships elevates cultural and religious heteronormativity that assumes that only heterosexual relationships are natural and normal as that is the only form of sexual relationship that could biologically speaking, bring forth children [17,24].

3.2 Spiritual Interpretation of Same-sex Sexuality

Both cultural and religious values have spiritual inclinations [34] as the participants portrayed. The accounts of some participants took the religious and culturally inspired arguments to an ultra-abstract level. These accounts bordered on spirituality. Same-sex sexuality was deemed as something perpetuated by the “devil” [see also 2]. Non-heterosexuality was considered as a lifestyle that is spiritual in nature. One that implies that being a non-heterosexual is a curse— an evil spell, by a demonic spirit.

(Extract from Interview with Frema, Female, and 29 years)

Interviewer: Would you befriend a person who is gay or a lesbian?

Frema: No! I will not even go near him or her.

Interviewer: Why not?

Frema: They are human beings. However, I have heard that it [being gay or lesbian] is spiritual.....When someone enters into it, only divine intervention can get him or her out of it.... If God does not intervene, you can never withdraw from it.

Interviewer: In your view, do you see a gay or a lesbian as cursed?

Esther (Female, 26 years): Yes, in my view, such a person has being cursed because the Bible even speaks against same-sex sexuality. Therefore, I do not understand why someone will engage in it. ...The curse can be because of the bad deeds of a person's family or even their great grandfathers.

The above extracts demonstrate the crucial influence of religious and traditional beliefs on participants' position on same-sex sexuality. Participants regarded same-sex sexuality as spiritual illness—an illness that requires spiritual healing. The argument was that, “dissident” behaviours such as same-sex sexuality were a curse. In fact, popular opinion in such contexts is that divine punishment awaits people who engage in same-sex sexuality and whoever associates with non-heterosexuals also stands the chance of sharing in the misfortune [17,21] as one participants stated:

“...No! ...No! ...No! It [same-sex sexuality] is an enormous sin! I cannot even go to the mosque if I do that. Allah [God] will punish me if I do that or even affiliate with people who do that...and then go to mosque...My prayers will not even be answered. A man has to be with a woman. ...In Islam, I can even marry more than one women but to be with a man...no ...no my brother...” (Issah, male, 38 years).

The statement of Issah was somewhat in reference to the Holy Qu'ran 7:80-84, which states “For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds”. This belief system excruciatingly links to African traditional beliefs on the existence of spirit world that can inflict suffering on people [34]. The spiritual elements associated with same-sex sexuality are moreover a recipe for heightened stigmatisation and ostracism considering the heteronormative cultural values. The believe that spiritual elements can alter aspects of human lives and the expectant punishment for those who go contrary to religious traditional values also have the potential to deter people who ordinarily would not have problems in associating with non-heterosexuals to despise them.

However, the spiritual aspects of same-sex sexuality in these many African contexts do not always connote a bad thing. In contexts such as Burkina Faso, gays have roles in traditional religious systems that have less to do with sexual activity. They are deemed as connections between the spirits of this world and the spirits of the other world [34]. In Cameroon, Guinea, and Gabon, the Fang people engage in male-male intimacy as a way to promote prosperity [34]. Thus when people in these contexts indulge in acceptable same-sex sexual activities, it is usually not simply an orientation, but a vocation, which may carry spiritual power and significance

[7]. Yet, people who actively engage in same-sex sexual activities and profess it as their sexual orientation engage in a dissent act in the same societies [7]. Among the participants of this study however, both passive and active same-sex sexual activities [7], irrespective of its purpose was spiritually unfit.

3.3 Origin of Same-sex Sexuality

Sex is hardly a discussion subject in some cultures whether at home, school or even among peers [10,23]. In such societies, heteronormativity reigns. Same-sex sexuality is often regarded as abnormal and foreign to such cultures [3,30,35]. Sex and even worse same-sex sexuality was an uncomfortable topic for many participants including religious leaders. Same sex-sexuality was regarded among the participants as something “foreign” to the local culture.

“...For me, I will never officiate a marriage involving people of the same sex. Our tradition does not even permit that. It is taboos” (Pastor, clergy, male, 33 years)

“..You see, homosexuality is not our culture. It is the whites and the Ghanaians who travel abroad that are introducing it here (Adwoa Manu, Female, 33 years)

Indeed, homosexuality is widely acknowledged as western phenomenon in many conservative societies, which brings forth alternative cultural and religious interpretations [5]. Homosexuality was regarded as a negative trait among the participants. One that goes against the glue that knit the society together. Similarly, in many sub-Saharan African states, homosexuality is not even regarded as a form of sexual relationship [3]. Religious traits therefore left an indelible influence on the views of people with regards to same-sex sexuality to an extent that cannot be simply understood yet needs to be profoundly appreciated as Haldeman [6] acknowledges.

3.4 Mechanism of Sexual Intercourse

The participants also contested the notion of what constitute sexual intercourse, and how and when it was appropriate. This was demonstrated through statements such as:

Interviewer: What do you think about marriage or sexual relationship between people of the same sex?

Response 1: “...I do not understand why a female should be with a female. How would they have sex? How will they feel? ...God made a man in a special way to have sex with a woman....There's no other way to do it....They can have sex but it is not good. All these are evil in the sight of God” (*Sly, Male, 28 years*).

Response 2: “...It does not have to go that way. Because that is not how God meant for it to be. How can a man have sex with another man? It is a great mistake and a sin because homosexuals break God's command. In our tradition, it does not go that way. God did put something special in marriage between a man and woman ...not a female and another female [she continued]...How would they have sex? It would be a deviation even if there was a way. ...How? ...With the hand, wood, or banana? Either way it is unacceptable. It is not good (*Serwaa, female 30 years*):

The knowledge of participants on sexual intercourse as portrayed by Sly and Serwaa's comments showed the conservativeness of the society. The act and art of sexual intercourse had its own meaning and method to them. For anything to be considered as sexual intercourse in the study context it had to constitute the genitals of a man and a woman as the participants insinuated. Gender roles and expectations—‘proper’ ways for men and women to behave [9,21,36], based on cultural meanings underpinned the disagreement with sexual heterogeneity in the study context. This underscores the contention that sex is more of a cultural object than a strictly biological and universal experience [9].

3.5 Economic Gains and Same-sex Sexuality

Some participants attributed same-sex sexuality to economic gains rather than say a spiritual omen or even an actual sexual orientation. To these participants, economic deprivation explained why people engage in non-heterosexual relationships and why they also abhorred same-sex sexuality:

Interviewer: As a clergy, do you agree that same-sex sexuality is the work of an evil spirit?

Pastor (Male, 33 years): Currently and most at times, it is lust for money. ...It is not

everything that is spiritual. ...I heard that people who are homosexuals are also involved in secret societies that are very wealthy....many people go into it to because of the money. ...the Bible says when the end is nigh, all things will be made known. Homosexuality shows that we are in the end times.

Non-heterosexuality was thus portrayed in some quarters as a lifestyle choice for the poor or people seeking to get wealthier rather than a natural or preferred state of being as Whisman [37] argues. This view is partly influenced by the opinion held by many that gays and lesbians tend fall within affluent section of societies [38]. In the opinion of the participants, poor people who want to improve their economic status pretend to be gay or get involved in non-heterosexual lifestyle as connection to the “pool of wealth”.

Religious and cultural values moreover inherently underscored the economic explanation offered by some participants. The Christians amongst them for instance deemed non-heterosexuality as one of the “signs of the end times”—series of prophecies in the Christian bible, that stipulate what adherents should expect “when” the world is about to end (see for instance Matthew chapter 24 of the Christian Bible). However studies show that, heteronormative societies rather induce poverty among non-heterosexuals [39]. In conservative societies and places with profound religious culture, ostracism and social exclusion tend to exclude and discourage non-heterosexuals from economic exchanges required for financial wellbeing owing to their “dissident” sexual orientation [39].

4. CONCLUSION

Cultural and religious institutions and their inherent values regulate individual and even societal passions, knowledge, and behaviours as Durkheim (2005) postulates. The study has appraised the ways in which cultural and religious values explain positions on same-sex sexuality. The findings support the conjecture that same-sex sexuality is not favoured in conservative societies such as that of Kumasi in Ghana. Factors including procreation, spirituality, economic attributes, mechanism of sexual intercourse, and origin of same-sex sexuality, emerged as reasons behind disapproval of same-sex sexuality in local context. The study moreover finds that underneath these reasons

were cultural/traditional and religious values. To the participants, same-sex relationships are essentially characterised by sexual intimacy. Other aspects of intimate human relationships such as companionship and social support [see 40] were least considered by participants. Moreover, this study affirms the claims and findings of earlier works such as that of Doyle, Rees [20], Costenbader, Otiashvili [30,2], Smith, Tapsoba [3], Nguyen and Blum [22], and Mustapa, Ismail [26] who conclude from studies in diverse contexts that religious and cultural precepts dictate reasoning on same-sex sexuality.

Despite the culturally and religiously induced behaviours and views on same-sex sexuality in the study context, it is reckoned that cultural, religious and sexual identities change radically depending on a given context [10]. It is thus not farfetched to anticipate a society that is tolerant of sexual heterogeneity in the near future in Kumasi and in many other sub-Saharan African states given the rapid globalisation and urbanisation, which are ensuring greater cultural integration across the globe.

The current public opinion on same-sex sexuality in places such as Kumasi, presents an uneven field for non-heterosexuals. The social stigma against non-heterosexuals has the potential to create uneasy living conditions for non-heterosexuals. Moreover, it is essential that key contextual elements that shape perspectives on sexuality such as religion and culture be granted the requisite attention in a bid to understand the meanings ascribed to non-heterosexuality in different contexts.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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APPENDIX 1

Semi-structured interview guide

Demographics

Sex, Age, Educational attainment, Ethnicity, Religion (if any), marital status, Locality of residence

Main discussion questions

1. What are the importance of [your] religious beliefs and cultural practices to every life in your community and home?
2. In your opinion, how much do religious and cultural rules/norms influence everyday activities of people in this community?
3. What is your take on the right of people to choose their own life partners, the right to privacy, the right to non-discrimination (arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy, family, home or correspondence) irrespective of religion, race/tribe, and nationality?
4. Why do you think it is good decision to have people choose whoever (human) spent their lives with?
5. What is your take on right/freedom to date, build, and maintain sexual relationships and even marriage with people of the same sex?
6. Why would you say that same-sex sexuality is a good or a bad practice? (expand on each point)
7. In your opinion, how should sexual relationships (dating, marriage) be?
8. What specific cultural rules or norms encourage or discourage same-sex sexuality?
9. What religious beliefs and rules encourage or discourage same-sex sexuality?
10. What informs your perspective/position on same-sex sexuality?

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