

Homosexuality in Cameroonian prisons: Perspectives of female inmates, prison staff and NGO representatives

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Abstract

Homosexuality is highly resisted in Cameroon by all spectrums of the social strata and it is a criminal offence under Cameroonian criminal law. Yet there has been little research on homosexuality in Cameroon, let alone prison sexuality. Defence lawyers for lesbians, gay, bisexuals, transgender and intersex individuals (LGBTI) and their families receive anonymous telephone calls and text messages threatening them with death if they do not withdraw from defending homosexuals. The National Commission for Human Rights and Freedom (NCHRF) refuses to protect LGBTI victims from arbitrary arrest and police brutality, and their subsequent incarceration in prison. Workshops organised for sexual minorities are being disrupted even when the organisers obtain due authorisation. The article examines the continuation or spread of the practice of homosexuality despite its criminalisation, as well as the dynamics of the practice within a prison system. The research is qualitative, involving the narratives of 38 research participants distributed as follows: 18 female inmates, 18 prison staff members and two NGO representatives. The findings reveal that homosexuality exists in Cameroonian prisons and is more common in men's cells than in women's cells. Prison staff have attempted to limit its practise in the cells, yet it is ongoing and both prison staff and inmates punish the perpetrators of this offence. The decriminalisation of homosexuality as an offence has become imperative, because in this author's view sexual orientation is not biologically determined but rather the result of socialisation.

Keywords: Cameroon, female inmates, homosexuality, NGO representatives, prison staff, prisons

Introduction

To discuss sexual relations in prison effectively warrants a definition of the concept of sexuality. From the working definition of the World Health Organisation (in Izugbara 2011, p. 533),

[s]exuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life, which encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships.

While sexuality may include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. The concept of homosexuality, as espoused in this study, is based on Foucault's suggestion that the inclination to define the psychological character of individuals in terms of their sexual preferences is a recent phenomenon (Moodie 1994, p. 119). This article has been divided into six major subsections, which focus on the methodology employed, Cameroonian law, homosexuality

and international human rights, conceptual underpinnings, the notion that homosexuality is ‘un-African’, an overview of homosexuality in Africa, and the reality of homosexuality in Cameroonian prisons. The article also discusses power relations and power structures within the discourse of sexuality in prison.

There is limited or no data available in Cameroon regarding homosexuality, let alone in the prison milieu. At this juncture scholarship on the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships between two consenting adults becomes pertinent, particularly when Cameroon justifies its submission to Amnesty International (AI) by claiming that ‘the position of Cameroon law is based on Article 29 (2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and 29 (7) of the African Charter for Human and People’s Rights that are safeguard clauses, invoked by each democratic society according to the moral specificities’. The government of Cameroon also justifies the fact that the criminalisation of sexuality is not contrary to duly ratified international instruments that guarantee freedom. For example, Article 12 of the UDHR and the provisions of article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) state that homosexuals cannot be denied the enjoyment of a right or a service because of their presumed sexual orientation, forgetting to acknowledge that Article 12 of the UDHR also guarantees the right to privacy of all persons, while Article 26 of the ICCPR guarantees the equality of all persons before the law, without discrimination. This, according to AI (2013), is a subversion of human rights standards, as the persecution, prosecution and imprisonment of individuals on the basis of their perceived sexual orientation does not conform to international standards, but rather constitutes a negation of their rights.

The question is: If the general opinion towards homosexuality is homophobic, what therefore is the situation of lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals held in Cameroonian prisons? Is it any better, or are their conditions more deplorable than they would be within the community? The aim of this article is to examine whether LGBTI people exist in Cameroon prisons despite the criminalisation of alternative sexualities. If such individuals do exist, what is the reaction of prison staff and inmates towards those inmates involved in same-sex relationships? To what do they link these homosexual practices? The article concludes with policy recommendations.

Methodology

The article stems from a 14-month qualitative research project based on the narratives of female inmates, prison staff and two non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives working closely with female inmates. The study, conducted from January 2011 to April 2012, is based mainly on 38 in-depth interviews with female inmates,¹ prison staff and representatives of NGOs at six prisons (there are 73 prisons in Cameroon), amongst which are the two largest facilities: New Bell central prison and Kondengui central prison. Other prisons include Buea central prison, Bamenda central prison, and Kumba and Mbengwi which are principal prisons. The six prisons hold both male and female inmates, and were selected based on size and their urban and proximal location. The research involved participant observation of prison conditions from the perspective of female inmates² and an exploration of prison reports and newspaper articles. Interviewees were

recruited purposively, according to how long they had been in prison, their expert knowledge, age, socio-economic background and life experience. The participation of female inmates in in-depth interviews was voluntary, which explains why no lesbian was interviewed. Prison staff were selected purposively, given their expert knowledge of prison conditions and other dynamics (including homosexuality) inherent in the prison system.

The interviews were audio-taped and followed a semi-structured interview format, with the use of an interview guide. The interviews were, however, flexible enough for respondents to bring up additional issues and concerns (Babbie 2013). Interviewees answered general questions about sexuality, reproduction, the experience of homosexuality in prison and its consequences.³ Clearly the interviewees felt at ease in revealing very personal details about themselves, and even expressed deep pain. Some women revealed sorrows they had hidden for many years and as they spoke about the devastating prison conditions they had to endure, some cried during the interviews. Some told stories about sexual offences such as rape, while others revealed their homophobia towards those inmates who expressed their sexual orientation. The expressions on the faces of the interviewees, when questioned about same-sex sexual relations in Cameroonian prisons, were revealing. They grimaced when asked about homosexuality, and referred to those who practised it as prostitutes.

As a regular visitor, the author built up a friendship with the female inmates and therefore cannot be described as a distant observer. Her interaction with female inmates, most often in their cells, informed her understanding of the women's experiences as well as their discourse on sexuality. This helped her to gain perspective on the interview findings.

While collecting data, the author was reminded of the stigma accompanying imprisonment. During the interviews an attempt was made to create a safe space for participants. This relates to the issue of self-harm which, if not properly handled, stigmatises the responses. Besides her identity as a scholar and a woman, the author is also a counsellor. This helped her to understand the psychological harm the study might potentially cause the participants. As such, all possible measures were taken to treat participants with the utmost respect, confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms have been used to conceal the identity of the respondents – especially those who asked to remain anonymous. Being a university lecturer, however, made the inmates view the author as their advocate – someone from whom they could get help. The author was, therefore, careful to refer them to appropriate social workers and NGOs charged with that responsibility. Having examined issues of methodology, the next section investigates homosexuality in the Cameroonian context.

Cameroonian law, homosexuality and international human rights

The concept of 'homosexuality' has become a catch-all phrase in Cameroon. Homosexuality evokes contempt, and conjures up stereotypes and prejudices against those who define alternative sexuality as part of their being or their sexual preference, even if they are consenting adults. However, this is in contravention of all instruments and conventions which Cameroon has ratified, and which support section 347 of the Cameroonian penal code which criminalises same-sex sexual acts. Such acts are punishable by imprisonment for up to five years and a fine of up to US\$ 350. Those who are predisposed to same-sex sexual relations in Cameroon have lost all protection, even from the National Commission for Human Rights and Freedom (NCHRF), which is charged with protecting

the rights of individuals. Indeed, senior NCHRF officials argue that LGBTI individuals should change their sexual preference in order to avoid being arrested and punished, in accordance with Cameroonian criminal law. In common with the dictates of the Ministry of Justice, this specific argument of the NCHRF is based on the premise that Cameroonian law reflects the religious convictions of most Cameroonians, as contained in both the Christian Bible and the Islamic Quran (AI 2013). Such stipulations do, however, ignore the fact that international human rights standards protect the right to freedom of religion and thought of all individuals under the jurisdiction of the government, including those who do not adhere to a dominant religion – or any religion, for that matter.

If same-sex relations are openly stigmatised in a free society, what is the position of ‘homosexuals’ in prison?

Conceptual underpinnings

According to Kiragu and Nyong’o (2005), ‘homosexual’ is a term used to describe people who are physically, emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the same sex. In the context of Cameroon, sexuality is influenced by religious fundamentalism, which emphasises heterosexuality as opposed to homosexuality. This makes homosexuality a criminal offence, and it is regarded by most Cameroonians as a taboo. Although being gay or lesbian is considered a vice, it is a human rights violation to prevent two consenting adults from exercising their sexual orientation. The responses of two female inmates reflect their homophobia:

For what I have experienced is that when I came I was told by the old set of prisoners that lesbianism existed. But these set of prisoners are children of God and so do not behave like that. (Christie)

Ehhh! No, this does not happen amongst women, I have never seen it for my three years in prison. Maybe because we are not many. We are just six of us. (Alvine)

Similarly, AI (2013) confirms the presence of homophobia amongst the Cameroonian public. A case in point was when three women in Ambam, in southern Cameroon, were accused of and arrested for being lesbians. The husband of one of the three accused told the authorities that his wife had been enticed by the two other women into engaging in a same-sex sexual relationship. The matter went to court and the case was repeatedly adjourned. To date, the court of appeal has not yet pronounced judgement. The children of the victims have, however, been subjected to verbal abuse by fellow pupils, and the accused have reportedly been ostracised by their families on the grounds of their perceived sexual orientation, even though sexuality is not seen as natural but socially constructed and policed. As a result, the children of the accused have been removed from urban schools and been sent to rural schools. This is, however, problematic because if the accused are found innocent, the effect of the stigmatisation may continue to haunt their children – and them – for the rest of their lives.

Another school of thought may read the respondents’ statements, as reflected above, as denialism. The impression is that female inmates are unfamiliar with the concept of homosexuality, which to them is taboo if it does exist, and therefore must not be discussed in public. Nkealah (2013) asserts

that in many cultures people tend to attach negative labels to behaviour they perceive as unfamiliar, and therefore unacceptable.

Furthermore, the responses of the research participants show that Christians abhor the practice of homosexuality, and it is also not acceptable in Cameroonian culture, which explains why the female inmates were shocked about the nature of the subject matter. There is a power struggle between the various forces in the prisons which aim to prevent inmates from engaging in homosexual practices and those that apparently do not mind what the inmates do as far as their sexuality is concerned. The attitude of the research participants is not surprising, because the position assigned to sexuality, by law, is deployed by the instruments of state control and dominance. For instance, the criminal justice system in most African countries attempts to regulate how, when and with whom citizens have consensual sex. Thus, the criminalisation of homosexuality affects all males and females who do not conform to the dominant discourse of heterosexuality (Tamale 2011).

The homophobia or denialism reflected in the narratives of the research participants is embedded in discourses on heteronormativity, and which are widely used in contemporary political, social and critical theory to describe socio-legal, cultural, organisational and interpersonal practices deriving from and reinforcing a set of taken-for-granted presumptions relating to sex and gender. These include the notions that human beings fall into two distinct and complementary categories (male and female), and that sexual and marital relations are 'normal' and 'natural' only when people of different genders are attracted to each other. Such attractions may then be publicly displayed and celebrated. Therefore, same-sex couples are, if not 'deviant', then a 'variation on' or an 'alternative to', heterosexual couples (Kiragu and Nyong'o 2005; Kitzinger 2005, p. 478). These conceptual underpinnings paint a picture of homosexuality that warrants an examination of the concept in the African context.

Homosexuality is 'un-African'

A tide of homophobia is sweeping through the Cameroonian public, masterminded by the media (principally newspaper articles), religious leaders, politicians and the wider community. Discourses on homosexuality being un-African dictate the pace at which those practising same-sex relationships would be accepted, especially when such discourses emanate from presidential spaces. President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Sam Nujoma, his former Namibian counterpart, repeatedly described same-sex sexual relations as an un-African 'disease', introduced by disreputable European settlers (Niehaus 2002, p. 77). Both presidents have, on several occasions, threatened to expel gays and lesbians from the body politic. To Mugabe, homosexuality on the African continent is inexcusable: 'Let them be gay in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, they shall be sad people here' (Clark 1997, p. 32).

Apart from presidential voices manifesting homophobia, female parliamentarians also decry the practice of homosexuality as un-African. This is evident in the voice of Sabina Thembeni, member of parliament for Mufakos, Zimbabwe, who indicated that 'homosexuality is not African. It hurts us mothers to hear that our children are turning to homosexuality, our children must be punished' (Clark 1997, p. 32). Furthermore, in South Africa, visionaries such as Kenneth Meshoe,

charismatic leader of the African Christian Democratic Party, often uses the phrase ‘God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’ (Niehaus 2002, p. 77).

In Cameroon, political leaders also condemn homosexuality as a ‘foreign imposition’. Against this backdrop a state minister noted that ‘the Cameroon people are not ready or disposed to accept the promotion of such homosexual practices on their territory’ (AI 2013, p. 29). This is premised on the fact that homosexuality is a criminal offence under section 347 of the Cameroon Penal Code, and on the general public’s reticence towards same-sex sexual relations, which they claim is foreign and a product of neo-colonialism and sexual abuse.

Apart from politicians fuelling prejudices against and hatred of LGBTI individuals, religious leaders also join the queue. *L’Effort Camerounais*, a newspaper of the Catholic Bishops’ conference, reported that in 2009, the Catholic Church in Doula Archdiocese protested against Cameroon’s ratification of the Maputo Protocol.⁴ According to the newspaper, the Catholic Church finds fault with the protocol’s stance on issues of reproductive health and same-sex marriages, which the church considers an aberration (AI 2013). It is rather outrageous, because although the protocol’s article 14 forbids all forms of discrimination based on sex, it does not overtly protect the rights of LGBTI individuals, hence the protest was not necessary.

Moses Tazoh, contributor to *L’Effort Camerounais*, wrote that ‘homosexuality is an abnormal behaviour that goes against natural law and human behaviour. Thus it is detestable and punishable as a crime in most African cultures and countries’ (AI 2013, p. 30). That explains why defence lawyers for LGBTI individuals and their families in Cameroon receive anonymous telephone calls and text messages threatening them with death if they do not withdraw from defending homosexuals. The Cameroonian government and security officials also turn a blind eye to individuals or groups who attack those defending the rights of LGBTI individuals. For example, a European Union-sponsored workshop on the rights of sexual minorities, scheduled for 27 March 2012, was disrupted by Cameroonian government officials and a self-confessed anti-LGBTI group known as the Rally for Cameroonian Youth. The workshop was disrupted despite authorisation from a local government official (AI 2013, p. 30). Moreover, people accused of being gay or lesbian continue to be arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned.

It is noteworthy that a writer of *L’Effort Camerounais* views African politicians, soldiers, prisoners and some professionals who perform homosexual acts as people seeking spiritual, political or social power, promotion, status and riches. He does not believe any man in his right mind can indulge in homosexual practices. This homophobic attitude continues to gain ground in Cameroon: in December 2012 the Cameroon Ministry of Justice stated that ‘homosexuality ... is an unnatural activity that seeks to eliminate human reproduction. As a result, during the passage of the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council, Cameroon rejected the recommendation relating to decriminalisation of homosexuality’ (AI 2013, pp. 4–6).

That explains why some newspaper articles in Cameroon condemned homosexual practices as un-African, assuming that embracing same-sex relationships means indulging in demonic sexual orgies and is a reflection of humanity rapidly sinking into barbarism (Opio 2012, p. 9). Similarly, Adams’ (2012, p. 4) newspaper article on Cameroon, entitled ‘Homosexuality: We vote God’s ways’ argues that it is through the Bible that Africans knew of Sodom and Gomorrah and how God

turned his wrath against sodomy by destroying the community of those practising it. Although Adams can be criticised for his essentialism, he seems convinced that homosexuality is a Western concept. He therefore recommends that Western powers identify homosexuals and transport them to their own countries, where such a sin is not a crime.

An overview of homosexuality in Africa

The preceding section painted a picture of homosexuality in Cameroon. In some parts of the African continent, heterosexuality is celebrated and any person who does not conform to it is punished severely, by law, for such abominations. This supports Telesa (1995), who argues that certain religious institutions have turned sexual expression and practices into an abomination, if not done for the purposes of procreation within heterosexual marriage.

Dlamini (in Lewis 2011, p. 208), for his part, writes that African sexuality was defined in relation to reproduction, with the assumption that Africans could not possibly display homoerotic desire or agency – attributes associated with sophisticated human desires and eroticism. Denial of the existence of same-sex practices in Africa continued until the mid-20th century. Therefore, colonial and early anthropological representations of sexuality remain central to many taboos, laws and attitudes surrounding sexuality in Africa today (Dlamini in Lewis 2011, p. 208). This assertion is no different from Jane Bennett (2011) suggesting that European and Christian colonial values denied sexual liaisons outside of sanctioned marriage and same-sex sexual display as the reason why homosexuality is considered un-African.

Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that homosexuality has always been part of the social fabric of Africa. Mutua (2011) points out that in Uganda, as in many African states, homosexuality and related sexual practices were first criminalised by the colonial state. He notes that there were few epithets in African languages for gays – words in Kiswahili, for instance, are mostly derived from the Arabic.

Jacklyn Cock (in Ratele 2011, p. 410) problematises the use of the terminologies ‘gayness’⁵ and ‘lesbianism’⁶ as ‘identities’, since it is politically dangerous and can provoke strong reactions, arguing that ‘the assertion of a public gay identity is particularly problematic in an African context’. Ratele (2011), citing Kendall, found out that the notion of ‘lesbian’ was not helpful in understanding female–female relationships among the Basotho. Research found widespread, apparently normative, erotic relationships among Basotho women, but these were not defined as sexual, and not a single Mosotho – to Kendall’s knowledge – defined herself as a lesbian. As a result, Kendall (in Ratele 2011, p. 410) concludes that ‘love between women is as natural to Southern Africa as the soil itself, but that homophobia is a Western import’. She reiterates the fact that Basotho society has not constructed a social category ‘lesbian’. As far as she is concerned, Basotho women define sexual activity in such a way that makes lesbianism linguistically inconceivable.

Homosexuality: A reality in Cameroonian prisons

I remember that when I was working in the Northern part of the country inmates used to confide to us that there were some people who were harassing them in the night and that they will sleep and they will come and start caressing them. Usually it is prisons in the urban areas, not rural areas like

Mbengwi ... but I make sure I educate the inmates on such practices, that is why we have beds I always insist that the beds be separated. No two beds are put together because it can lead to such practices.
(Superintendent, Mbengwi)

The narrative of the superintendent mentions that inmates were being caressed at night, which indicates the existence of homosexuality in Cameroonian prisons. That homosexual practices took place in urban (and not rural) prisons cannot be belaboured. The narrative of the superintendent also brands homosexuality as an unacceptable practice in prison, that is why, as a superintendent, he went the extra mile to ensure that the beds were placed at some distance from each other. This leaves the impression that failure to separate the beds gives rise to homosexual practices. However, the strategy of the Cameroonian prison authority, which is geared towards lessening sexual activities amongst inmates, is not unique to Cameroon. The issue is also discussed by Blackburn, Fowler and Mullings *et al.* (2011), who highlight how, in America, correctional administrators responded to prison homosexuality in men's and women's facilities respectively. The authors discuss how the state of Virginia came under fire for separating women who were thought to be lesbians, since the segregation was not meant to protect the women from victimisation, but to decrease sexual activity among female inmates.

There is no denying the fact that some prisons which harbour fewer female inmates might not be exposed to lesbianism, while those in urban areas, like Kondengui and Douala central prison, may very well experience it. A female inmate in Kondengui explained her experience as follows:

... and then there is this lesbianism. I saw it ... I had doubted before I saw it with my own eyes. I was in one room with one girl, that girl she is just like a boy so I have never called her a woman so she was having her boyfriend (another woman) in the other room, room 6, there was a time they were having problems ... she sent and they bought her a shirt. She now came and folded it, perfumed it and was asking the other girl ... I am telling you that there are lesbians, and then I was denying and then she said do you think that she will fall in love. Then the other girl said it is you who has to know her objective. So generally there are lesbians in prison and they carry out the act openly especially as most of them are prostitutes. These lesbians smoke cocaine with the complicity of the guards. (Dorothy)

It is worth noting how the research participant equates lesbianism with prostitution. From Dorothy's narrative it is clear that she labels lesbians 'bad girls', especially as she links them to the use of drugs. Such prejudices around female sexuality are rooted in ideologies that good women are not expected to enjoy sex, whereas 'fallen' women (nymphomaniacs, prostitutes and lesbians) are thought to crave sex and can therefore be labelled 'pathological' (Nzegwu 2011, p. 264). These women are deemed to have disrupted the normal and natural order. Chacha (2011) points out that the assumption of universality has subtly influenced thought patterns with regard to deviations from the norm as sick, perverse or immoral – a picture demonstrated in this narrative. The research participant further raised the issue of lesbians smoking cocaine with the complicity of the guards, which echoes the research findings that some inmates in South African prisons bought cannabis from wardens (Niehaus 2002). This is thought-provoking, because drugs are prohibited in prisons, yet some prison staff subvert the rules.

It is also evident from the narrative of the female inmate that she abhors lesbianism. This is not unique to Cameroon, but manifests in most countries, and is driven by natural law.⁷ For example, Ojo (in Izugbara 2011, p. 551) points out that the Nigerian Anglican Communion stipulates that ‘there could be no compromise over homosexuality because it is clearly outlawed by the Bible’. The Anglican Communion also insists that ‘homosexuals are worse than animals in the forest’. The former stance is milder when compared to Williams Kumuyi’s argument that any form of sexual activity occurring before and outside marriage is an unwholesome submission of the body to sinful pleasures, punishable by eternal damnation (Izugbara 2011, p. 552). No wonder inmates who are caught practising homosexuality in their cells in Cameroon are given snake beatings⁸ by fellow inmates, and are further punished by prison staff if the matter is brought to their attention. An NGO research participant had this to say:

Another problem that worries the prison is homosexuality, it is both a house problem⁹ and probably sometimes they say at the end of the day, what do you do? There was one of them who was almost killed because he was caught like that and he was beaten mercilessly. It is what goes on in the prison; I was looking at the male inmate with somebody who is condemned to death. They have friends there and they practise same-sex relationships, some of them. (NGO research participant)

Irrespective of the fact that homosexuality is condemned in Cameroonian prisons, it is widely practised in the men’s cells, which are often overcrowded. The vulnerable and newcomers to prison suffer the consequences. The NGO research participant explained:

Some of them practise homosexuality and one of the ex-prisoners was explaining to me what happens, it is very dramatic. It is usually those who have the urge they start looking for clients who are weak, young people who have come into the prisons and maybe in one or two weeks they realise that they don’t have this or that, they are suffering. They are suffering they are poor, so they propose to them that they will care for them and with that sometimes they drug them and they use them and some of them have just developed partners there ... There was one who was beaten because the partner found him with another person and they started fighting and there was such a big fight and ...

The explanation the inmate gave to the NGO research participant is similar to practices in other prisons in countries such as South Africa, where same-sex marriage is legal. According to Gear (2011, p. 317), newcomers to South African men’s prisons are vulnerable because they are not familiar with the unwritten prison rules. As a result they are easily tricked and manipulated by other inmates, especially if they are naive or needy. The risks further increase for the poor, physically weak, ‘pretty’ prisoners, those linked to crimes associated with women, and men who identify as gay or transsexual. Nonetheless, Hunter (1993) points out that even males put into a position of subservience through force and intimidation are blamed, much like female rape victims, and their identity is mistaken for that of a male who actively wishes to give other males sexual pleasure. It is important to note that some inmates who did not ascribe to such vices before imprisonment accepted it once they were incarcerated, as a means of survival, even though these men also have agency, for they are not merely silent victims.

All 18 prison staff who were interviewed reported that homosexuality is common in prison. They did, however, note that they were doing all they could to reduce this crime, but *'it cannot really be abolished where there are only men. We educate, separate them and at times that is why I told you that we put them on restraint.'* A prison staff member explained what they are doing to reduce homosexuality:

I want to say we have reduced this happenings ... those of them who are of good comporment are allowed to go outside. When they go outside they can have their deals with their wives and things like that ... It is a right in developed countries ... under very organised conditions. Do you understand, because they are human beings, but here we don't tolerate it? (Prison Administrator, Buea)

This quote supports the belief that sexuality is a human right and that inmates should not be deprived of this right. Conjugal visits are permitted in other parts of the world, specifically in many Western-European jurisdictions such as Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Spain (Coyle 2002). Prisoners in these countries can be visited by their spouse or long-term partner, for a period of up to three hours. The couple is given privacy in a small unit which contains a bed and a shower, along with other sanitary facilities. According to Coyle, a much less formal version of these visits occurs in many Latin American prisons, where the norm is that at the weekend there are family visits for male prisoners, and in some places for female prisoners. These visits take place in the cell areas, and often sheets and blankets are hung on ropes to create a private space.

Similarly, in Hameenlinna prison in Finland, even though sexual contact is forbidden in prison, the staff take flirtation and attraction to be part of human nature (Talvi 2007). In addition, inmates' sexuality is respected, since women are allowed monthly unsupervised, overnight visits with their male partners in a small yet comfortable room, regardless of whether they are married or not. When prison authorities in Finland were asked if same-sex couples should be allowed to spend the night together, the reply was: 'No one's asked yet, but if they do, of course we'd let them. If they're in a relationship, then that's that' (Talvi 2007, p. 256).

The author's research suggests that homosexuality is more prevalent amongst male inmates than female inmates. The findings also suggest that some homosexual activity in the cells (in men's and women's prisons) is consensual and rooted in affection and attachment, instead of dominance motives as found amongst South African gangs.

Yes it happens in prison especially homosexuality but I have never seen it with women. I have seen how men do it. A man will pay his fellow prisoner 10¹⁰ FCFA and then use him for sex. When the other male inmates find these same-sex couples enjoying sex, they punish them before the prison authorities know about it. By the time we come you will see the prisoner beating the man. We shall come and separate the beating and take the culprit to the solitary cell and punish him. (Prison Administrator, Buea)

In a nutshell, no one can deny the existence of homosexuality in Cameroonian prisons, despite the criminalisation of this practice. It is suggested in the narrative that sexual access to a fellow inmate is not expensive (20 cents; the equivalent of 10 FCFA). The economics of sex within a homosexual framework accounts for why gayness is commonplace in Cameroonian prisons. In some prisons in South Africa, homosexual 'husbands' provide their lovers with extra food, cigarettes, cannabis and

small amounts of money (Niehaus 2002). Therefore, provision determines who has power in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. When looking at the narratives of female inmates, as reflected in this article, it is possible to conclude that sexuality involves more than the physical act of sexual intercourse – it extends to a range of personal services that male inmates may be reluctant to forego.

Conclusion

Inmates' adaptation to imprisonment through the expression of their sexuality obviously calls into question the functional theory of what is applicable in prison. There is a link between the findings in Cameroon and the early scholarly history of women's adaptations to imprisonment, as propounded by Ward and Kassebaum (1965) and Gillombardo (1966). These studies found that female prisoners had many roles, which revolved primarily around homosexuality and prison family relationships. According to the authors the prison experience could be understood by employing deprivation and importation paradigms. This was a way in which women specifically attempted 'to resist the destructive effects of imprisonment by creating a substitute universe within which the inmates may preserve an identity relevant to life outside of prison' (Gillombardo 1966, p. 129). The social system among female inmates aligns with the proposition that pre-prison identities are critical to understanding how inmates serve their imprisonment (Irvin and Cressey in Kruthschnitt and Gartner 2003).

What is particularly relevant in this study is the fact that male inmates were not interviewed, since the research focused on female inmates. Yet, through the voices of women, NGO representatives and prison staff, it became evident that homosexuality is more prevalent amongst male inmates than female inmates. This does not mean that men expressed their sexuality more than women did; rather, the findings suggest that overcrowding maybe an influencing factor. The percentage of female inmates to male is so small that it is negligible, with an average ratio of 1:40 nationwide (Atabong 2007, p. 72). Although this study did not focus on male inmates, the author agrees with the argument made by Ratele (2011), who states that any discussion of manhood in Africa is inadequate if it does not include same-sex male desires. Just as discussing men who have sex with men is important, so discussing women who have sex with women is important, for the simple reason that all forms of sexual desire need to be acknowledged in Cameroon until such time that it becomes obvious to Cameroonians that there is little point denying its existence and aiming to 'stamp it out'. A wider scholarship in Cameroon on homosexual practices will not only reinforce its existence, but will also deconstruct the notion of 'heteronormativity' to include other sexual preferences.

Moreover, a rethink is needed of societal norms which criminalise homosexuality and uphold heterosexuality, taking into consideration those who are behind bars (although the respondents were not behind bars because of their homosexuality). This is important because heterosexuality, which is the accepted norm in society, is not granted to inmates and therefore they are left with no choice but to improvise. Social norms and the Cameroon Penal Code both need to be interrogated for criminalising homosexuality, irrespective of whether or not it is practised by prison inmates,

because, in this author's view, sexual orientation is not biologically determined but rather the result of a socialisation process.

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Notes

- 1 The essence of targeting only female inmates was to capture their voice, taking into consideration that narratives do not require a large sample size.
- 2 The author sometimes spent a whole day with female inmates chatting, cooking, taking photographs and having her hair braided, which gave her some perspective on prison life.
- 3 Discussions on homosexuality became stronger, when the author posed the question: 'Have we missed anything?'
- 4 The Maputo Protocol of the African Charter for Human and People's Rights seeks to promote and protect the rights of women.
- 5 Has come to be referred to as 'men who have sex with men' or MSM (Ratele 2011: 410).
- 6 Refers to 'women who have sex with women' or WSW (Ratele 2011: 410).
- 7 Natural law refers to a body of principles and rules, imposed upon individuals by some powers higher than man-made law, that are considered uniquely fitting for and binding to any community of rational beings. Natural law determines what is right and wrong and whose power is made valid by nature; its precepts are eternal, universal and unchangeable.
- 8 Severe torture.
- 9 A common phenomenon in prison.
- 10 Offering 10 FCFA to a fellow inmate shows how desperate an inmate could be in prison. Currently, 10 FCFA has lost its value in Cameroon, as most items are sold for 25 FCFA. Therefore, the usage of 10 FCFA in the narratives portrays the kind of monetary transactions that underpin homosexual relationships in prisons, thus contributing to the stigmatisation of homosexuals as prostitutes.

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