Attitudes, knowledge and perceptions about homosexuality among undergraduate Social Work students at the University of Zimbabwe, School of Social Work

Vincent Mabvurira, Department of Social Sciences, Bindura University of Science Education, Private Bag 1020 Bindura,Zimbabwe vinmabvurira@gmail.com

George Alex Muchinako, School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe,Private Bag 66022 Kopje,Harare muchinakog@yahoo.com

Francis Maushe, Department of Social Sciences, Bindura University of Science Education Private Bag 1020,Bindura,Zimbabwe

Abstract
The study sought to assess the attitudes, knowledge and perceptions of social work students at the University of Zimbabwe, School of Social Work about homosexuality. A sample of 60 students was drawn from a frame of 142 students. The study also targeted lecturers as key informants. It was found that the students are homophobic and lack knowledge concerning the etymology, etiology and factors surrounding homosexuality. This is despite the fact that the lecturers have a positive attitude towards homosexuality. Some factors like sex, religion and knowledge on homosexuality were found to influence the students’ attitudes and perceptions. The study recommends that the School of Social Work should include a topic on homosexuality in its curriculum and social workers should promote social justice by fighting for gay rights as part of human rights.

Key words
Homosexuality, social work, Zimbabwe, attitudes, knowledge, perceptions.

Introduction
For a long time, homosexuality has lingered on the political agenda of Zimbabwe, mainly because of revulsion from the ruling party. It has attracted a lot of attention in the context of biases, prejudice, discrimination and even violence. The future seems to be bleak for this minority group. This is worsened by the belief that homosexuality is a western concept that was brought to Africa by white colonizers. The challenges presented by homosexuality in different cultures of the world assume various degrees but so far, the phenomenon has raised issues that have proved to be a thorn in the flesh in many scholarly debates as well as in other aspects of life (Mudavanhu, 2010). It is an issue surrounded by mythology and stigma. This stigma is mostly perpetuated by religious beliefs and lack of knowledge pertaining to its etiology and etymology.

Although historical evidence points to the fact that homosexuality has always existed in Zimbabwe (Garlake, 1995 and Epprecht, 1999), most traditional healers portray homosexuality as an abnormality that can be corrected or treated and a spirit possession that can be exorcised (Mudavanhu, 2010). Under the Shona culture of Zimbabwe, marriage is specifically for procreation and any sexual act for any other reason is considered absurd. Most Shona would like to portray homosexuality as a foreign phenomenon. One of Mudavanhu (2010)’s respondents reiterated that homosexuality is a malady that has caused drought (chipini-pini chinotadzisa mvura kunaya). Whether homosexuality exists in Zimbabwe or not, it is surrounded by a culture of silence and is not overtly acceptable in most circles.

Most people in developing countries and in Zimbabwe in particular are homophobic. Culture and religion have been used to justify this homophobia. However social work as a profession has a special
mandate to serve humanity without judging. Surrounded by homo-hatred, how then do social workers react when they meet gay clients? It is therefore of paramount importance to assess the attitudes, knowledge and perceptions of trainee social workers about homosexuality from a Zimbabwean perspective. Zimbabwe has a longer history of social work education than most African countries, dating back to the colonial period but is reported to be one of the most homophobic countries in the world.

Politics of sexual identities and the struggle for gay rights are new to Africa though Africans have known for a very long time about people who do not fit the heterosexual ideal (GALZ, 2008). Recorded history (Epprecht, 1999, Garlake, 1995) attests to the fact that homosexuality has always existed in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is rated among the world’s most homophobic countries as there are so many misconceptions, fears and prejudices around homosexuality in it. According to GALZ (2008), Zimbabwean gays and lesbians who choose to publicly declare their sexual orientations are often perceived as a threat to the morals of black African society, aping a western pervasion. Goddard (2004) notes that one of the greatest strengths of anti-gay lobby in Africa has been the absence of proper historical record of same-sex conduct before the coming of the whites. A historian Mark Epprecht (1999) notes that anthropological records of homosexuality prior to the coming of the whites are vague and flawed by the moral prejudices of the past but the fact remains that homosexuality occurred in Africa before the whites came. GALZ (2008) argues that the first people to claim that same sex sexual relations were un-African were not African themselves but early white settlers.

**Study location**

This study focused on undergraduate social work students at the University of Zimbabwe, School of Social Work. The University is located in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe but it draws students from all over the country. The School of Social Work started training social workers around the 1960s. It was administered by Catholic Jesuit Fathers. In 1964 it became an affiliate college of the then University of Rhodesia. Now it is a department in the Faculty of Social Studies. Most of the students at the School are Zimbabwean by origin. The School of Social Work offers a certificate in social work, a four year Honors Degree in Social Work and Master of Social Work degree.

**Research problem**

Homosexuality is not legally acceptable in most African countries with the exception of South Africa. In Zimbabwe, male homosexuality is illegitimate and is punishable by prison sentence. It is detested by politicians and religious leaders; it is regarded as unnatural, un-African, immoral, unethical and a nefarious sin. Homosexuals suffer discrimination, persecution, prejudice and isolation. Just like any other stigmatized group, homosexuals frequently face vindictive stereotypes and discrimination. Most languages are filled with derogatory epitaphs about homosexuals, and gay-lesbian-transgendered-bisexual peoples are often chided for being emotionally immutable, promiscuous, self-indulgent, indecisive, and prone to pedophilia. There have been a number of international studies, which have shown that social work students demonstrate negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbian women and it is important to assess whether negative views prevail among social work students in Zimbabwe.

**Social work and homosexuality**

Social work core values related to service, social justice, respect for the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence are universally either implicitly or explicitly adopted as guidelines for social work conduct. Social workers have a professional and ethical responsibility to learn about and work to eliminate injustice and discrimination based on sexuality, and to practice competent and ethical social work with gays and lesbians. Osei-Hwedie (2000) argued that social workers should embrace social diversity and should not discriminate people based on sexual orientation.
Mabvurira et al (2012) noted that social workers have an arduous task to change the homophobic attitude of most African societies and not the sexual orientation of lesbians, gays and transgender people. According to Jacques (2000), social workers require preparation for practicing in the field of homosexuality, which demand a pragmatic curricula and experiential opportunities that capture theoretical and practice knowledge.

Zastrow (2008) discovered that many social workers in the USA have negative views about homosexuality. As a first step in working with gays and lesbians, it is crucial for social workers to confront their homophobia. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2004) also noted that, one of the worst things a practitioner can do is negatively label a gay or lesbian client and criticize that client for his/her sexual orientation. This contradicts the basic social work values of acceptance and client self-determination. A negatively biased practitioner can unknowingly work against a client’s development and maintenance of a positive self-image.

Zastrow (2008) also recommended social workers to become familiar with gay and lesbian lifestyles and gay and lesbian resources in the workers’ geographical area. Gays and lesbians need various services that address their specific aspects. These services include support groups for lesbians and gays who are coming out, support groups for lesbians/gays who are questioning their orientation, legal advice for gay or lesbian parents, couple counseling for gay or lesbian partners. Social workers are also expected to make appropriate referrals and educate the society at large about the special issues confronting homosexual people.

A research carried out by Camilleri and Ryan at La Trobe University among social work students in Australia showed that there seemed to be less homophobic than those in the United States and Korea and held generally positive attitudes towards homosexuals. These findings could reflect a tendency for those who enter social work to bring slightly more liberal attitudes than those who choose other professions (Newman et al, 2002).

Some research suggests that the influence of LGBT interactions on attitudes is more than a matter of quantity. When exploring different sorts of interpersonal contact, conversations with gay siblings or friends seem to have greater impacts than contact with homosexual parents, strangers, or acquaintances (Anderson, 2002). For example one study of social workers by Berkman and Zinberg (1997) found that knowing gay peers lessened homophobia more than knowing homosexual bosses or clients. Having gay or lesbian friends was the biggest inspiration to work with gay and lesbian clients among Bachelor of Social Work students (Oles et al, 1999). Thus, contact seems to create greater ramifications when participants share both emotional closeness and similar amounts of power.

According to Swank and Raiz (2007) while certain demographic features and contextual settings may lead to homophobic sentiments, so might the adherence to certain ideological perspectives and attributional styles. They also noted that cultural scripts may be the cornerstones of homophobia because they work as filters that help people organize and categorize incoming information on matters of sexuality. Viewing homosexuality as a violation of or break with traditional gender roles and cherishing conventional prescriptions can influence opinions on homosexuality. Yoder and Preston (2007) found that certain religious institutions might push their members into greater disdain of homosexuals.

On the same note Cramer (1995) found that students from Sweden and the United States were less homophobic when they thought homosexuals were "born that way". King (2001) noted that college students were less likely to befriend a lesbian mother when they thought homosexuality was controllable and a self-selected status or that people were more homophobic when they thought homosexuality was a purely voluntary choice.
Methodology

The study was mainly qualitative in nature and it targeted 142 third and fourth year Bachelor of Social Work Honors degree students at the University of Zimbabwe, School of Social Work. Simple random sampling was used to select 60 students and purposive sampling was used to select lecturers for inclusion into the study. A questionnaire was used to gather data from the students and key informants were interviewed.

Presentation and discussion of findings

The ages of the students ranged from 20 to 27 years with a mean age of 21.5 years. The students were generally young adults who would have graduated from high school and enter university.

Earlier studies have shown that attitudes towards homosexuality can vary with sex and this study looked at the concept to see whether the same can be proved true or false with respect to students at the School of Social Work.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Study</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
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N=60

Of the 60 students who participated in the study 35 were female and 25 were male. Generally there were by chance more female respondents among both third and fourth year students who participated in the study. There were certain responses that tended to be affected by sex of the respondent. For example more female than male (25 versus 1) indicated that they feel comfortable working with a gay man. Another example is that more female than male candidates indicated that they are comfortable sharing the same house with homosexuals of the same sex.

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by religion

N=60

A snapshot of figure 3 above shows that most of the respondents are Christians(53), those subscribing to the African Traditional Religion (ATR)(2) and Muslim(1). Four respondents indicated that they didn’t subscribe to any specific religion. The percentage score of the various religions were 67 percent for Christians, 64 percent for ATR subscribers, 66 percent for Islam students and 66 percent for students without a specific religion. Religion has a very strong bearing on attitudes towards homosexuality. Most of the people in Zimbabwe subscribe to the Judeo-Christian religion which chastises homosexuality.
basing on Bible passages from both the Old and the New Testament (Mudavanhu, 2010). There are very few churches in the world that are pro-gay and no such church has gone public in Zimbabwe. ATR seems not to be clear in terms of its opinion on same-sex relations. Some schools of thought argue that some spirit mediums practice it while there are reports of punishment for those caught practicing it (Epprecht, 1999). Most Islamic factions also condemn same sex relations. The main interpretation of Quran verses and hadiths opposes homosexuality and cross-dressing. The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is cited in both Christianity and Islam. It is therefore possible that the respondents’ attitudes might have been shaped significantly by their religions.

Figure 2: Distribution of respondents by place of origin

![Distribution of respondents by place of origin](image)

N=60

Most of the respondents (N=51) indicated that they have never associated with gays or lesbians. Of paramount importance is the fact that 11 of the respondents indicated that they have never seen a gay or lesbian but have only heard of them. Of the nine who indicated that they have associated with gays, five did so in high school and two in the communities they stay/stayed while two interacted with them during fieldwork placement. Students who associated with gays had an average score of 60 percent while those who did not associate with gays had an average score of 72 percent on the Index of Homophobia Scale.

Asked what they think homosexuality is 100 percent (N=60) indicated that it is sex between members of the same sex. Thus most students at the School of Social Work equate homosexuality with sex which is not wrong (Mondimore, 1996). Most sexologists and researchers in the area argue that homosexuality is not about sex but love.
Figure 3: Causes of homosexuality

![Figure 3: Causes of homosexuality](image)

*N*=60

Most students (42), cited demons as the major cause of homosexuality with only one student attributing it to biological causes, 13 attributed it to individual choice while 4 indicated that they did not know. Their results on the IHP scale were 67 percent, 58 percent, 72 percent and 67 percent respectively. These results show that most of the students at the School of Social Work don’t know all the causes of homosexuality as they generally attribute it religious factors (demons). Asked why they think homosexuality is a matter of choice, some respondents mentioned the need to gain material things. One respondent said “…mahure anoda mari” (they are prostitutes who want money). Students at the School of Social Work are more likely to be homophobic because they mainly attribute homosexuality to other factors other than biology. This is in tandem with the attribution theory which holds that people who are perceived as causing their own hardships will be evaluated more harshly than people who come by their stigma as a perceived result of biology or accident.

All (N=60) the respondents indicated that they were not taught anything about homosexuality by their families or communities. However 83 percent (N=50) indicated that they have been taught in their churches that homosexuality is a sin before God and should be stamped out in any Christian community. It must further be noted that sex is a hidden subject among most native Zimbabweans which cannot be discussed easily at either family or community level (Mudavanhu, 2010). Among the Shona sex is generally not a topic for open discussion. The culture places a strong taboo upon the open discussion of sexual matters. The fact that 83 percent indicated that they were taught that homosexuality is a sin shows that their attitudes are likely to be negative towards it.

All the respondents indicated that they have never received any training from the School of Social Work specifically on homosexuality. They reported that they never covered the topic in any of their courses. However generic social work training was cited as having been provided. Felix Biestek’s seven principles of Social Work were cited by respondents. The two lecturers who were interviewed admitted that they did not teach their students anything specifically on homosexuality to undergraduate students but the concept can be mentioned in passing in various courses. Both lecturers also confided that their students are well equipped to work with minority groups like gays. They indicated that they emphasize social work ethics and values which are applicable when working with all groups of clients.

The key informant confided that homosexuality is a social phenomenon that has been warped and placed on the political agenda. He could not agree that Zimbabwe is a homophobic state since no any opinion survey has been done to assess how ordinary Zimbabweans feel about homosexuality. “The few garrulous people do not represent the whole of Zimbabwe, its politics rather...” he said. He went on to
argue that as of now, no conclusion can be reached about the feelings of Zimbabwe towards homosexuality. “Social workers in Zimbabwe should make a difference”, he reiterated. The same conclusion was reached by Mabvurira et al (2012) who argued that social workers in Zimbabwe have a mandate and professional authority to demystify homosexuality and to promote social justice.

Most, 83 percent of the respondents (N=50) indicated that there was no need to assist gay clients since homosexuality is un-African and illegal in Zimbabwe. One of the respondents even reiterated that “…hazvina hunhu, chero mukuru wenyika chaiye haaevide” (it shows lack of manners, even the president doesn’t like it). Interestingly one respondent said “I am a Christian, helping them is like promoting it, I will also be sinning against God”. Another notable response was from a female student who said “…even if I want to help, I am afraid of them, am nervous….”. This simply shows that despite social work’s call for fighting against discrimination, there are a myriad of factors that compel social work students to shun homosexuality.

Of the 10 who indicated that there is need to assist gay clients, three highlighted that they do so because their profession requires them to help every person in need and they cited social work values of service, non-discrimination and justice as the main reasons compelling them to assist every person in need. One female respondent indicated that as long as they don’t engage her into their business, she is prepared to work with them. The results are congruent to what Humphries (2000) noted that most social work students in developing countries are not geared towards being sensitive to exclusion based on sexual orientation.

When asked why they think it is not necessary to assist gay clients the respondents echoed that it is ungodly, it is un-African, it goes against nature, it is not part of our culture, it is nuisance and many other reasons were cited. An interesting response was from a male student who said “….if it’s allowed many people will join it and the number will just increase”. This fear was recorded by Gramick (1983) who argued that some people are homophobic because they feel that if homosexuality is liberalized few people will marry and the human race will become extinct. Yet another respondent argued that there is no need to have special rights called gay rights because the gays were enjoying rights just like any other Zimbabwean citizen. Of the few who indicated that there is need to recognize gay rights, they felt so because gays are human beings too and they don’t disturb the functioning of the society in anyway. “…As long as they do it clandestinely I don’t see anything wrong, in fact people should mind their own business” reiterated one respondent. Both of the key informants indicated that there was need to depoliticize homosexuality in Zimbabwe and promote tolerance at all levels of the society.

All the respondents indicated that gay marriages should not be recognized in Zimbabwe. Reasons cited include the fact that it goes against nature, it is unproductive, it is not natural, and God created men and women for a reason.

All the respondents (N=60) agreed that gays were facing numberless challenges in Zimbabwe. Issues like discrimination, social exclusion, police harassment, family rejection, social isolation were mentioned. This is congruent to the findings of Goddard (2004) who noted that homosexuals in Zimbabwe face a myriad of problems and sometimes commit suicide due to rejection and persecution.

Asked what they think should be done about homosexuality, 12 percent of the respondents argued that Zimbabwe should maintain a culture of silence. However 69% of the respondents proposed serious imprisonment for gays. Reasons given included that homosexuality is unholy, it violents the law of nature, it is un-African, gays can influence others to join them. One of the lecturers who was a key informant however gave a different view. He argued that since gays pose no threat to the social functioning of Zimbabwe, the law should be liberal about same sex conduct and it must be decriminalized. He also maintained that the phenomenon should be separated from politics and be treated just like any other social phenomena like prostitution. Yet another key informant gave her opinion that media reporting should be objective and the gays should be given an opportunity to air out
their views. She further suggested that Zimbabwe should embrace social diversity and be receptive to social differences.

All the respondents indicated that homosexual people just like any other persons can make positive contribution to society. Some respondents, (N=7) cited examples of professional people who were said to be homosexuals. Same sentiments were echoed by King (2001) who argued that homosexuality per se poses no threat to social functioning, but it is rather how society views such a phenomena which makes a difference. Of late the United States of America has co-opted gays into its army after finding that their performance was just the same with that of heterosexuals.

**Recommendations**

Based on the results of the study, the researchers give the following recommendations:

- There is need to include a topic on homosexuality in social work curriculum at the School of Social Work. Social workers need to understand what homosexuality is, its causes and the various theories that have been propounded to explain the concept. Earlier studies have found that a lesson on homosexuality reduces homophobia and homo-hatred.

- There is need to carry out a national opinion survey in Zimbabwe to assess how Zimbabweans feel about homosexuality. It is not proper to make conclusions that Zimbabweans don’t like homosexuality based on the opinions of few individuals. A national picture will help in decision making.

- State controlled and private media in Zimbabwe should be objective when reporting on homosexuality. Negative reporting fuels negative attitudes towards homosexuality since the media is a strong agent of socialization. Gays and gay organizations should be given enough space in the media to air out their views.

- Zimbabwe as a nation should embrace social diversity and accept differences in human sexual orientation. Social workers have a professional mandate to fight for social injustice at all levels including discrimination based on sexual orientation. Social workers in Zimbabwe speak on behalf of orphans, the disabled, women and other marginalized groups but they tend to ignore gays and lesbians as an oppressed group. It is therefore recommended that social workers should lobby for non-discrimination of humanity in Zimbabwe as a society.

- There is need to clarify the historicity of same sex conduct in Zimbabwe. Social people in Zimbabwe believe that it is an un-African concept suggesting that it was brought to Zimbabwe by the whites while some scientists and researchers believe that it is a universal phenomenon.

**Conclusion**

This study which sought to assess the attitudes, knowledge and perceptions of social work students about homosexuality found out that the students were generally negative about it. The students lack proper knowledge about homosexuality and the factors which surround it. Factors such as religion, sex, place or origin and knowledge on homosexuality were found to affect attitudes towards homosexuality. The study recommends that Zimbabwe should desist from homo-hatred and social workers should promote social justice by assisting the gay community.
References


