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Profile of the homosexual asylum seeker from a Muslim society



Report on research on gay asylum seekers.

Commissioned by the Secret Garden Foundation.

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A. Introduction

Despite all the attention given to the subject of homosexuality in the last decades in the media, there still exists much resistance and ignorance on the topic by a substantial part of the population. This is especially true for groups in society in which homosexuality is considered taboo as a result of cultural and / or religious influences. Growing up gay in such a hostile climate can have serious consequences for the welfare and safety of people with a homosexual orientation.

There is not always enough awareness amongst the 'liberated' portion of the gay community of the impact of such a hostile climate on the personality development of homosexuals. Specifically regarding traumatic experiences of homosexual asylum seekers, there is unfortunately still a diffuse image. Generally speaking, the quality of life that homosexual asylum seekers have escaped has been extremely unsafe and degrading – a fact which is rarely recognized. This is due mostly to a lack of understanding and a limited knowledge of the dismissive attitude that the Islamic faith and Islamic culture adopt towards people with a homosexual orientation. I hope that this research report will contribute to greater insight into the profile of the homosexual asylum seeker and that it can improve the situation of this vulnerable group.

In the past three years I have conducted a number of interviews and psychological tests on this target group on behalf of the Secret Garden Foundation in Amsterdam. This foundation aims to reduce the taboo of homosexuality in general and specifically within the Muslim community. In addition, I also provide psychological reports at the request of attorneys who specialize in immigration law.

In this study I report on the results of fifty surveys. The subjects were all men and women with a homosexual orientation who were born and raised in an Islamic culture. To support and complement my conclusions I have gone through relevant literature regarding the manner in which the Islamic community experiences and condemns those with a homosexual orientation.

I have also interviewed several people who have followed academic studies in Arabic Language and Culture. Furthermore, I specifically chose to also conduct an interview with a homosexual academic from a Muslim background, who, in addition to a thorough theoretical knowledge, also possesses relevant personal knowledge on the topic. Finally, the Secret Garden Foundation also served as an important source of information.

About faith, culture and traditions

Within the Muslim community there is only one definition of 'family' and/or 'kin', namely: a man and woman, married in a Muslim ceremony, and including their own progeny and/or adopted children. This definition is utilized in all Arab cultures and is rigorously applied. It does not matter whether the Arab culture is Islamic, Jewish or Christian. This age-old enforcement is based on the definition of Muslim scholars who enjoy the highest religious authority in Islam. These Muslim scholars label all homosexuals as sinful and condemn them to death. By extension, they proclaim the doctrine that all gay people deserve to be "burned, beheaded, or thrown from a tall building." Such punishments, to name just a few, are included in Sharia (Islamic law) and must be applied in an Islamic country. Moreover, these laws are respected throughout the Arab world.

The aforementioned traditions regarding homosexuals in Islam are very difficult, if not impossible, to break or to change in a positive way. Muslim scholars like the Shi'ite Ali as-Sistani and Sunni Muhammad Ahmad at-Tayyib, who both live in the Middle East, will never change their hostile interpretations towards homosexuals. Even Western Muslim scholars like Seyyed Nasr (Shi'ite) and Tariq Ramadan and Khaled Abou El Fadl (both Sunni), who work in renowned Western universities, openly express their disapproval of homosexuality. Consequently, the life of a homosexual in a predominantly Muslim and/or Arab country or community is made nearly impossible and the fear of being murdered and / or socially excluded is always present. Also, it is therefore impossible to provide an additional definition to family and kin.

How the Muslim society treats sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular

Within the Muslim community there is a taboo on sexuality in general. This topic is avoided and not discussed either at home or in society at large. The Muslim man and woman learn about sexuality from trusted family members and friends. Information is given in rare cases, but that is not nearly enough to provide most Muslim men and women with sound information. Homosexuality is seen as sinful and is strongly denounced [see above].

B. Research Findings

The research findings relate to 47 men whose ages range from 16 year to 46 years, and 3 women of 19, 43 and 46 years old. Their countries of origin include Abu Dhabi, Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Gambia, Gaza, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Palestinian refugee camps, Pakistan, Syria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. The conclusions are as follows:

1. 92% of the 50 people interviewed did not dare to talk about their sexual orientation during previous asylum applications.

Ninety percent of gay asylum seekers are not capable of bringing up their sexual orientation with the IND [the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service] interviewer during asylum applications and therefore present themselves primarily as political refugees. The main reasons for this are the following:

- A lack of self-acceptance of their homosexual orientation, which leads to the development during the interviews with the IND of psychological defense mechanisms related to the topic of homosexuality, in the form of "repression," "denial" or "reversal into its opposite." Noteworthy is that the majority of the respondents did have serious homosexual relations in their country of origin, albeit hidden to the outside world, but that this experience did not affect the process of self-acceptance in a positively way.
- The fear that their homosexuality will be known to the inmates of the refugee center where asylum seekers stay during the application and the fear that those inmates will commit acts of violence against them. It should be noted that some of the asylum seekers in the recent past have been victims of physical and verbal abuse from relatives or neighbors.
- The fear that if one talks openly about sexual orientation during the IND interviews, information about this might leak out to relatives, and this might put them in danger of becoming a victim of honor killings.
- The presence of an interpreter during the IND interview who comes from the same country as the applicant is perceived as threatening, because the interpreter might make contact with relatives in the country of origin.

2. Only four of the 50 people (8%) interviewed dared to talk openly with the IND interviewer about their sexual orientation during the first asylum application.

Of this group, one person received a tourist visa for a temporary stay several years ago, at the invitation of a gay friend. After staying in the Netherlands for some time, he filed an initial application for asylum based on his sexual orientation. The other three people had contact with Secret Garden before their initial asylum application was submitted.

3. To ensure that applicants are open about their sexual orientation during the interviews with the IND, support by an entity with knowledge of and experience with the target group is essential.

Almost all respondents in this survey were not supported by an experienced expert during their first asylum application, and mostly because of that were not able to openly bring up their sexual orientation during the interviews.

4. The mental health of the respondents was undermined during the asylum procedure.

All 50 respondents reported serious psychological problems during the asylum procedure – problems the beginning of which dates from the period when their homosexual feelings first became clear. These problems include both depressive disorders and posttraumatic stress disorders, and in one case also a gender identity disorder. In all cases respondents reported suffering memory loss and lack of concentration, with the result that the applications did not always have consistent answers in consecutive IND interviews.

5. The Islamic faith is critically judged and / or the Christian faith is chosen.

Their homosexual orientation appears in the majority of the respondents to be incompatible with the Islamic faith. As a result of the intolerant attitude of the Islamic teachings against homosexuality, homosexual Muslims experience an inner imbalance, and often prefer to become Christians. Because of the strong emphasis on religion while growing up, there is frequently a strong religious drive in homosexual asylum seekers. Because the Christian faith often has a generally tolerant attitude towards homosexuality, and even marriage between persons of the same sex, they find a connection with the Christian church.

6. The 'honor killing' principle poses a serious threat to the existence of gay asylum seekers

In almost all the 50 asylum seekers that I have examined, the 'honor killing' principle is a threatening factor which played an important role in their decision to flee their country. Account must therefore be taken of the fact that the family of the homosexual asylum seeker in the country of origin will be socially excluded by the community if it is known that their son / daughter / nephew / niece is homosexual. The family then ends up in social isolation, and this can only be reversed if the homosexual family member is killed by a member of his or her family. In fact, such an execution has more than a rehabilitative result, since the murder of the homosexual family member is viewed as a courageous act regarded to be for the benefit of society as a whole. As long as the homosexual family member lives, the entire family is disgraced and their social isolation remains; this also implies that the unmarried daughters of the family will not be asked to marry, and therefore not provide further offspring.

7. As the age of the male homosexuals increases, so does the social pressure.

Within the Islamic culture it is customary for a man, once they are 25 years old, to be married off, or assumed that they will in any case get married soon. If not, his family and friends exercise gradually increasing pressure on him in order to eventually force him to marry. For a

man with a homosexual orientation, this means that he cannot avoid being married off. The tensions that this prospect induces typically cause the onset of psychological problems in the form of anxiety and depressive symptoms.

8. The eldest son is a role model and has a father role in Islamic family

The position of the eldest son in the Muslim culture comes with special duties and responsibilities. The oldest son is de facto a role model for his younger brothers and / or sisters. He is also expected to play an active role in the education of his brothers and / or sisters. This means that it is particularly difficult for the eldest son to openly come out for his homosexual orientation.

9. Extremely unsafe Islamic countries and territories

Islamic countries where it is extremely unsafe to be open about one's homosexual orientation are Iraq and the Palestinian refugee camps. In Iraq, now labeled by the Dutch government as officially unsafe area for homosexuals, the EI Mahdi militia, a radical Islamic group, performs systematic raids on homosexuals. As a result, homosexuals are known to be under a structural risk of getting killed. There are already dozens, if not hundreds, of Iraqi gays brutally murdered by the EI Mahdi militia. This is common knowledge among all Iraqis.

The Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are also an extremely unsafe area, because here, too, radical Islamic militant groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Fatah, ruthlessly persecute homosexuals. Moreover, the Palestinian refugee camps are small, enclosed and (literally) contained communities, making the social control particularly large and therefore making it impossible for homosexuals to express their feelings. Moreover, they have no right to settle outside the boundaries of the camps, as they are stateless.

10. Detention facilities

Three of the 50 homosexual asylum seekers interviewed stayed in detention facilities in the Netherlands for a prolonged period of time (ranging from five to eight months). All three consequently developed severe psychological problems, including psychotic symptoms and suicidal behavior.

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