

Social Inclusion for Homosexuals

The 1994 democratic transition was a foundational step in creating, not only an open political society, but also in allowing the LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) community in South Africa to express truly who they are. South Africa's Constitution is hailed as one of the most memorable in the world because of its inclusivity. Yet, the goal of finding sexual orientation inclusion remains as elusive today as it was in 1994. The legacy of past discrimination and the reality of lost opportunities over the last 20 years continue to leave many homosexuals excluded from general society.

In the past, LGBTI persons, particularly black Africans, have faced many challenges. Tragically, this continues to happen in South Africa, despite the laws that seemingly protect members of the LGBTI community. Not many people outside of the LGBTI community understand the positions in which 'queer' or homosexually identified persons were placed throughout history, because openness to LGBTI rights is something, in many regards, new. The idea that same-sex couples can legally get married, according to South Africa's Constitution, is newer to most people than our constitution itself. Even so, some people are still grappling with the idea that people with the same gender are allowed to be married and live together. As such, the need for every LGBTI person to stand up and be an activist, for not just their rights, but the rights of future generations, is essential.

LGBTI people are frequently discriminated against because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The South African government and justice system is failing the victims of corrective rape (a hate crime wielded to convert lesbians in townships to heterosexuality, as an attempt to 'cure' them from being homosexuals), by setting ridiculously low bail and taking years to bring the court-cases to a conclusion. Victims and those who help them, see these rapists every day, and are regularly taunted and threatened by them.

LGBTI persons can, if they wish, completely suppress their sexual identity in public and assimilate to heterosexual norms, at least in outward appearance. Assimilation at its core is a threat to the freedom of individuality. Firstly, it denies history. LGBTI persons have been discriminated against for years, if one is to believe the written word. Religious institutions regularly point out LGBTI persons as being sinners, deviants, ill and, in recent years a threat to society and all its institutions.

There needs to be anti-homophobic education in our society to de-codify this learned behaviour of homophobia and hatred of people who are perceived to be different. Schools have an important part to play in challenging homophobia. Homophobia is fuelled by lack of awareness, and educating young people about LGBTI issues is fundamental to overcoming this widely accepted prejudice.



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Homophobia is commonly understood as hostility towards LGBTI. Negative feelings or attitudes towards non-heterosexual behaviour, identity, relationships and community, can lead to homophobic behaviour. This is the root of the discrimination experienced by many LGBTI's. Homophobia manifests in different forms, for example; homophobic jokes, rape, hate crimes, physical attacks, discrimination in the workplace and negative media representation.

There are many factors that can cause a person to be homophobic. Research has shown that prejudice against gay people and homosexuality can be influenced by the person:

- having strong religious beliefs that disapprove of sex and/or homosexuality;
- having little/no social contact with lesbian and gay people; and
- reporting no homosexual experiences or feelings

There are many different ways in which LGBTI people experience homophobia, including malicious gossip, name-calling, intimidating looks, internet bullying, vandalism and theft of property, discrimination at work, isolation and rejection, sexual assault, or even, in some countries, being sentenced to death. All forms of homophobia are destructive, not just for people living openly as LGBTI, but for society as a whole.

In South Africa, legislation and government policies are not enough to deal with the challenge of heterosexism. There has to be an actual culture of inclusion of homosexuals.

LGBTI's often have difficulty acknowledging and embracing their homosexuality, both personally and publically. This is because, starting in childhood, LGBTI individuals are often subjected to anti-homosexual attitudes, not only from strangers, but also from their own families and communities (especially for many black Africans). There is a lot of pressure in our society to fit into the status quo of heteronormativity. This childhood need to hide may persist into adulthood, leading many LGBTI

individuals to conceal important aspects of themselves. The culture of acceptance for the homosexual lifestyle has not been the norm.

Instead, heterosexism is what we tend to see in society and that is what is generally accepted. Heterosexism is based on societal values and personal belief systems which dictate that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual. It is intentional or unintentional privileging of heterosexuality and heterosexual persons, and negative valuing or treatment of LGBTI individuals. Heterosexism can be intentional by not allowing same-sex couples to get married. It can also be unintentional for example, if an employer gives benefits only to married couples, this discriminates against same sex couples who do not have the legal right to marry. In this society, heterosexuality is privileged. It is assumed that one is heterosexual "unless otherwise known".

Heterosexism is reinforced by many institutions and life patterns in society. The policies and practices of institutions that exclude, deny, erase or discriminate against these individuals or groups of people, contribute to systemic heterosexism. In South Africa, legislation and government policies are not enough to deal with the challenge of heterosexism. There has to be an actual culture of inclusion of homosexuals.

One of the best ways to deal with homophobia is for young people to be taught about the importance of respecting the different sexual orientations that we as a society have. There should be more LGBTI education for young people in schools. Since homophobia is a learned behaviour, it can be rooted out at childhood development, in order to create an inclusive society where people are not discriminated based on sexual orientation. Bullying of young LGBTI persons also happens in schools, and by educating young people the problem of homophobia could become less common. Lack of understanding and discriminating against people who are perceived to be different from the world order, could be, due to unawareness and ignorance.

Another important vehicle that could be used is the media's general portrayal of the LGBTI community. The messages that are sent out by the media need to demonstrate that homosexuals are part of society. The lifestyle that is depicted on our television screens, magazines and newspapers should reflect the LGBTI community. The media is a powerful weapon that is often used to direct our society's line of thinking. Therefore, there needs to be an effort to represent the LGBTI community in a manner that ensures social inclusion of people who are perceived to be different from the norm.

LGBTI rights are human rights, "not Western" ones, so everyone is enjoined to respect them. At the same time, there needs to be a culture of inclusion of people who are perceived to be different in broader society. This will go a long way to dismantle the stereotypes about the LGBTI community and most importantly, it would end the violence and hate crimes experienced by members of this community.