



An Open Statement from the Psychological Society of South Africa Concerning Vote of the South African Representatives at the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly on 16 November 2010

Introduction

On the occasion of the amendment to remove a reference to sexual orientation from the United Nations (UN) resolution condemning extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions and other killings;

And given that the South African Representatives at the UN General Assembly voted in favour of the amendment to remove sexual orientation from this resolution;

And given that South Africa's UN representatives explained the vote, saying that international law is insufficiently clear on the definition of sexual orientation;

It is therefore incumbent on representatives of organised psychology, as leaders in the field of mental health and well-being, to issue a statement as follows:

The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) is dismayed at the vote by the South African representatives, given the clear evidence that sexual orientation has been a motive for many extrajudicial killings, and that the inclusion of reference to sexual orientation was appropriate and necessary. Instead of leading the way in promoting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights on the African continent, and beyond with our foreign policy, given our progressive Constitution, we are voting at the UN to weaken the international community's response to extrajudicial killings based on sexual orientation.

While concurring with objections raised to date by others, nationally and internationally, mostly from a human rights framework, PsySSA also wishes to comment on the mental health and well-being implications of the proposed change.

Reports suggest that according to the official UN minutes, South Africa's UN representative offered an explanation for our vote, saying that international law is insufficiently clear on the definition of sexual orientation. While international law may be beyond the scope of PsySSA's expertise, we can confidently say that the definition of sexual orientation has been substantially documented in psychological literature¹, internationally. This statement offers one such definition, as well as a discussion on the psychological effects of discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The Nature of Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to one's emotional, romantic and sexual attraction to men, women, or both sexes. It can also refer to a person's core sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviours, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.

¹ Note, list of references available on request.

Research and clinical experience further concludes that for most people sexual orientation is not “a choice” or “voluntary.” The core aspects of sexual orientation, whether heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, typically emerge by early adolescence, even though the individual may not yet have become sexually active.

While “causes” for any of these sexual orientations remain unclear, they are highly resistant to change. Further, there is no reliable evidence that sexual orientation is subject to redirection, “conversion” or any significant influence from efforts by psychological or other interventions.

Research and clinical experience concludes that homosexual or bisexual orientations are naturally occurring minority variations of normal human sexuality. They are also documented widely throughout nature.

Effects of Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation

Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is a stark reality in Africa and elsewhere. Even in South Africa, where such discrimination is prohibited by the Constitution, negative attitudes towards LGBT persons persist and the expression thereof ranges from insults and defamatory remarks to violence in the form of so-called ‘corrective rape’ of lesbian women, and extends even to the murder of openly LGBT persons. In other African countries such as Uganda, Malawi and Botswana, to name but a few, the practice of same-sex sexuality is prohibited by their respective constitutions. This perpetuates negativity toward LGBT persons to the extent that in some countries, most notably Uganda, active persecution of LGBT persons as well as those who know of their sexual orientation is sought by legislators.

It is not inconceivable that an endorsement of the vote by the South African representatives could lead to the belief that discrimination, and even murder, on the basis of sexual orientation is justifiable.

Both international and South African research has found significant negative effects of exclusion and other forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation. Sexual orientation-based discrimination presents the same risks of psychological and other harms as discrimination on the basis of race, religion or gender.

Notably, among youth who identify as homosexual or bisexual or who think they may be, research concludes that family rejection and exclusion, as well as bullying by peers, correlates highly with a range of high risk behaviours and outcomes ranging from truancy to substance abuse to attempts at suicide.

In much of sub-Saharan Africa, homosexuality is firstly interpreted as “foreign,” portrayed as “un-African” and a “white import.” In some traditional African beliefs, those of a same-sex sexual orientation are considered cursed or bewitched; that is, damned by the forefathers and the gods. In primarily Christian and Muslim African countries alike, gay men and lesbian women are confronted with religious condemnation.

Much evidence points to this stigmatisation leading to deep-seated and widespread prejudice, discrimination and violence in Africa toward those who are not heterosexual. A session on homosexuality at the 2nd Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights, hosted in Kenya in 2006, noted that fear, hatred and abuse at the hands of largely intolerant and unsympathetic peers and elders hampers the personal growth and well-being of African homosexuals.

Also widely documented among the outcomes of prejudice and discrimination are consistently high rates of anti-homosexual harassment and violence, both state sanctioned and extrajudicial.

Furthermore, criminalisation on the basis of sexual orientation has been found to exacerbate social discrimination and, in particular, leads service providers to discount, ignore and neglect the needs of LGBT people, thus compounding their vulnerability.

Invitation

PsySSA invites other organisations and professionals dedicated to mental health and well-being, particularly throughout the African continent, to join us in speaking out in opposition to the removal of sexual orientation from the UN resolution condemning extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions and other killings.

Government and other decision makers are furthermore invited to make use of PsySSA as a resource to turn to when issues arise for which it may be uniquely qualified to provide counsel, such as in this instance where greater understanding of the concept “sexual orientation” is sought.

There are other international instances where use of the term, sexual orientation, is to be found, such as the recent move by the International Union of Psychological Sciences (IUPsyS) an umbrella organisation for psychology internationally, to endorse a change to its statutes that explicitly calls for the inclusion of sexual orientation as a “protected” category in policies on the universality of science and the free circulation of scientists (see www.iupsys.net for more information).

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The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) is the professional body representing psychologists in South Africa. PsySSA has since its inception been dedicated to making a significant contribution to solving the pressing human development problems in South Africa. PsySSA is committed to the transformation and development of South African Psychology to serve the needs and interests of **all** South Africa's people. PsySSA advances psychology as a science, profession and as a means of promoting human well-being.

PsySSA is represented on The International Network on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Concerns and Transgender Issues in Psychology (INET) and is committed to advancing the goals of INET. In particular, this statement is issued to promote the goal of increasing cross-cultural collaboration among psychological researchers and practitioners who are concerned about the mental health and well-being of LGBT populations.