

SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS IN CAMEROONIAN PRISONS: PERSPECTIVES OF FEMALE INMATES AND PRISON STAFF MEMBERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper conceptualises sexuality by examining the intersection of gender, human rights, biology and bodies through the voices of female inmates and prison staff members. Drawing on qualitative research through the discourse of power relations, gender and power and standpoint feminism, 13 female inmates were interviewed alongside 5 prison staff members and 2 NGO representatives. The paper therefore recognises the need for the public to be informed about how sexuality is lived and experienced in prison, considering the existence of practices that attempt against human dignity. It specifically shows that sexual offences -mainly rape- lingers around the prison walls, yet largely undervalued due to widespread myths about rape victims. The paper also highlights the fact that neither heterosexual nor homosexual relations are allowed in Cameroonian prisons. However, inmates have improvised ways to satisfy their sexuality through letters and what I call “cellular phone sex”. It concludes by questioning what mechanisms could be used to get both the government and the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedom to decriminalise same-sex sexual practices, considering that sexuality is an important aspect of human rights.

KEYWORDS:

Same-sex, Relationships, Cameroonian prisons, Female inmates, Prison staff members

INTRODUCTION

This paper discloses power relations and power structures within the discourse of sexuality in prison. It explains the link between sexual relationships, intimacy and care related to the fact that women can cook their own food and exchange for money provided by male inmates. The idea that female inmates in Cameroon cook for themselves is almost unique in prison practices where the norm is for the prison to cook for all inmates. Subsections in this paper include power relationships, sexuality and sexual satisfaction, sexual offences in prison and same-sex relationships in Cameroon prisons. This paper argues that sexual orientation and gender identity are important parts of the human rights agenda.

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is informed by two major theories – Foucault's analytical framework from his seminal work "Discipline and Punish" (1977) and a feminist analytical framework which enhances the gap in Foucault's thesis that is largely void of gender analysis. Foucault's views of penal relations as power relations within the prison structures understands prison authorities as the "powerful" while the female inmates' bodies remained "powerless" – a notion that was later criticized by Garland since it appeared as though female inmates had no agency. The feminist analytical framework bridges the gap on gender and power by giving the female inmates a voice to express sexuality in prison. Foucault's notion of prisoners' bodies being docile bodies is replaced with notions of feminism with female inmates as agents.

This research is qualitative and was conducted within a period of ten months in six out of 73 prisons in Cameroon. It involved a sample of 20 research participants, comprising 13 female inmates, 5 prison staff members and 2 NGO representatives, with informed consent. Through tape recording the female inmates were able to tell their stories and how they experienced unequal power relations and sexualities within the prison wall. Standpoint feminism emerged as an all-encompassing methodological tool contrary to criminological theories where men were projected as the only gender in prison.

POWER RELATIONSHIPS, SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION

Power relationships stems from the fact that, male inmates have access to resources such as money but they must eat prison food which they describe as poor in quality and quantity. Some of these inmates do not eat prison food and have no facilities to cook their food in prison. The female inmates dispose easy acquisition of raw food from the prison to cook to their taste contrary to the male prisoners who do not have that privilege. Although the facilities are available in prison, the male prisoners have not formally requested to cook for themselves as their female counterparts but even if they did, it might not be granted considering their large number. Male prisoners must eat the cooked food from the prison irrespective of its quality. The male inmates think it is the role of the woman to cook so they project their manhood by providing money to their "female lovers". Provision therefore becomes a significant criterion for masculine identity in the prison milieu. For instance, a respondent narrated that:

My uncle has been complaining that I have so many boyfriends in prison and that I should behave myself and not disgrace him. I tell him these relationships cannot go out of prison; I am doing all this to survive. I can never fall pregnant for these boys. The best I can do for these inmates is to show my face or breast once in a while and sometimes they ask me to open my vagina and buttocks for them to see and that is all and I get what I want...

This narrative portrays the respondent as someone who has power through exposing body parts at the request of male prisoners which is their source of sexual satisfaction to keep the relationship active. The role the female inmates play gives them agency and so they will do anything just to keep these relationships.

The concept of sexuality is further demonstrated when female inmates fall pregnant in prison. This usually happens when female inmates compromise church services because they have an appointment with male inmates. Church service time seems to be the most convenient time they could meet with their boyfriends as all the other prisoners meet at the church hall. This period was also convenient because as an inmate both the national and international policy does not compel them to any religion if they chose not to belong to any.

Prisoners who subjected their bodies to sex were described by other inmates as “cheap”. According to these prisoners food and money are not sufficient reasons for a woman to fall for another inmate. It is possible to wait after imprisonment if you truly have affection for a particular inmate. This judgemental position is not different from Foucault’s theory of gendered bodies as the product of disciplinary practices which operate in prisons and other institutions. Respondents seem to manifest a kind of knowledge which sorts people into categories, which are interwoven with techniques of social discipline that police their bodies (Connell 2002).

Furthermore, male inmates give females money to cook food for them with a sexual hidden agenda. *“They will start to give you money and along the line if you are cheap then they will have sex with you” (Sheila)*. The idea of men giving female inmates who are their girlfriends money to cook for them to share is a reproduction of the male breadwinner model depicting the housewife pattern of social control and a male breadwinner (Connell 2002). This argument is not different from that of Owen (1998) suggesting that the needs of women in prison are based on the family and kinship structure, where the women take on family roles such as wife, mother or sister. According to Owen (1998) the main reason for this is that imprisonment blocks women from attaining the traditional goals of being a wife or a mother, therefore the social order of the prison provides an alternative way to achieve these internalised expectations.

Food provision to solicit sexual relationships was also reiterated by respondents who feared pregnancy. According to these respondents, the consequences of accepting a male inmate’s request at the initial stage of food preparation may result in pregnancy which may later affect education upon release. Male inmates however, are not only looking for sexual favours but also support, considering that the sentences of most female inmates maybe shorter than those of men. Therefore, engaging in a sexual relationship with female inmates reflects a long term project that may even continue after the female inmate leaves the prison. The problem of visitation is evoked as one of the greatest desires of inmates since nutritional, health and hygienic facilities are substandard in prison, inmates have to rely on their relatives and friends. The need for support from

outside explains why some wealthy male inmates incarcerated with girlfriends in the female wing, do everything to help female inmates financially to pay their fines if they have shorter sentences.

The boyfriend/girlfriend relationship occurs for adaptation to prison life. Such relationships help inmates in overcoming stress. Some respondents confirmed having boyfriends but denied the allegation that male inmates touched female inmates through holes dug on prison walls, as shown in figure 1 below. Denial was based on the fact that all the holes which were earlier found on prison walls were all closed by the time they were incarcerated. This was facilitated by the construction of an iron gate that prevented male inmates from touching the body parts of female inmates.

Figure 1 shows female inmates outside their ward in February 2012 during a visit of an NGO. All communications and exposure of body parts took place through the grid on the iron gate. A male inmate can be seen through the grid peeping the female wing.

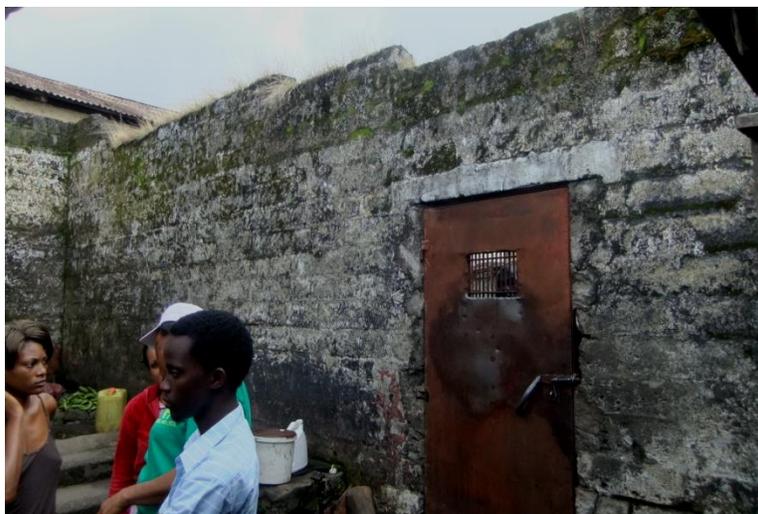


Figure 1: Wall and gate separating female and male inmates (Fieldwork 2012)

The use of the communication space provided on the female inmates' gate was corroborated by a prison staff saying:

They only converse through a hole that is at the middle. They can't see their faces the other end except they jump and it is difficult for them to jump...here the hole is right up that even to see with the eyes you have to take up your heels to see the person you are talking to... they could display their body parts where the holes are right down.

The blockage of holes did not prevent inmates from negotiating sexual relationships through letters and phones. There were female inmates who had sexual intercourse with boyfriends to express their feelings and sexual desires. Phone sex is therefore a new concept introduced by female inmates which has implications to Cameroon prison regulation that denies cellular phones in prison. Inmates are not only subverting Cameroonian prison regulations that deter them from

having sexual intercourse but are also carrying cellular phones. The inmates invented ways through which their heterosexuality can be expressed through emotional attachments and commitments in letters, phones and cooking.

There are inmates who subvert prison regulations with the complicity of prison staff. These inmates, full of pride, give some money to the prison staff to permit them have sex. The pride inmates had in engaging their bodies in public intercourse corroborates Bosworth's (1999:128) assertion that women's attention to their physical appearances and sexual relationships with other prisoners are central aspects of resistance to imprisonment, rather than reactions to the deprivations and accommodation to prison life.

Demonstrating the fact that Cameroon prison policy deprives inmates from having conjugal rights, yet the inmates have devised other ways to abrogate prison rules through corrupt prison guards. The corrupt attitude of the Cameroonian guards is similar to the corrupt wardens in South Africa, described in Niehaus's (2002) work where wardens arranged women for the prison gang at an exorbitant fee.

According to prison administrators, sexual release is a natural, irresistible biological function rather than a social construction. Confirmed by a prison staff acknowledging moments when all men do get sexual tension. This is similar to Moodie (1994:128) quoting H.S. Cooke who stated that the "evil" at the root of migrant labour in South Africa was "the natural tendency of the male animal to give expression to his desires."

A respondent requested the right to parenthood where those who are married should be permitted to meet with their partners once or twice a month. In this study, the right of respondents have been deferred both internationally and nationally. Once imprisoned an inmate's right to freedom is withdrawn and he/she cannot lay claim to parenthood which deserves special protection. If the correctional policy were to allow the inmates establish their own families in prison, who was going to take responsibility over the children, given that most of the female inmates are not working in prison and are not likely to immediately get employment upon release?

The respondent also raised the concept of sexual satisfaction. Where the government must allow inmate have boyfriends and opportunities for sexual relationships. Sexual satisfaction however, means different things to different people. According to Swartz & Young (2009:1) the measure of satisfaction is merely a question: Are you satisfied with your sexual life together? How happy would you say you are with your relationship right now? In this study, sexual satisfaction among inmates is farfetched, because even if conjugal visits were permitted, the time allocated may not be long enough to be regarded as satisfactory. Nevertheless, to an inmate the shortest time given to satisfy his/her sexual urge and conceive may relieve mental tension. Similarly, Swartz & Young (2009) argue that satisfaction and happiness are correlated with mental and physical health.

Some adult inmates sometimes force female minors into sexual relations against their will. A female inmate was reported opening the gate for a minor to have sex with a male prisoner in the male section. This inmate was however punished by the prison authorities. Although this seems to be an isolated example, in the context of this study, it however, reveals what maybe going on in other prisons in Cameroon for further research based on whether older female inmates enjoy sexual satisfaction through younger inmates – power hierarchy.

SEXUAL OFFENCES IN PRISON

The interpersonal relationships between female inmates and prison staff members' revealed staff sometimes taking advantage of their vulnerability- female inmates mentioned gender-based violence. Men just like in the community were portrayed by female inmates as sexual aggressors. There is the fear of rape amongst inmates especially during incidents of men escaping from prison. The fear portrayed by female inmates is supported by prison guards and NGOs who reported rape among inmates in Cameroon (USDS 2011). Substantiated by the fact that in 2007 when prison staff were striking against poor working conditions, some male inmates at the Kondengui central prison went on rampage, during which they broke into the female wing and raped several female inmates before escaping (Afrol News 2007). However, female inmates cope with this situation by hiding during incidents of escape demonstrating agency.

Furthermore, the inmates were conversant with relationships between male and female inmates but were not certain with what happened between staff and inmates. Most of the staff interviewed denied its existence. Yet there were allegations of rape although inmates and NGO representatives thought it was a consensual relationship and not rape. According to female inmates and NGO staff if there was rape everybody would hear the inmate screaming.

This shows the inability of the criminal justice system to deal with allegations of rape, as well as cultural prejudices that blame and disbelieve women. According to the inmates and the NGO representative, the inmate who reported rape would have prevented this situation if she was careful, raised an alarm or indicated that there was force. The position taken by respondents excuses the perpetrator and undermine rape and its psychological effect. However, the respondents attested that it was common for prison staff to be in a relationship with female inmates only in prisons where the female prisoners were sharing toilet facilities.

SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

Same-sex relationships have become a catch-all-phrase in the Cameroonian public today. This phenomenon breeds contempt, stereotypes, and prejudices against those who have chosen it as a sexual preference, even if they are consenting adults. This is done against all instruments and conventions Cameroon has ratified upholding section 347 of the Cameroon Penal Code that

criminalises same-sex sexual acts for up to five years imprisonment and a fine of up to 350 U.S dollars. Those who engage in same-sex sexual relations in Cameroon have lost protection even from the National Commission for Human Rights and Freedom (NCHRF) charged with the responsibility of protecting the rights of individuals. Senior NCHRF officials argue that Lesbians, Gay, Bisexuals, Transgender and Intersex individuals should change their sexual preference to avoid being arrested and punished as prescribed by the Cameroonian criminal law. Just like the Ministry of Justice, the argument by NCHRF is based on the premise that Cameroonian law reflected the religious convictions of most Cameroonians as prescribed by the Christian Bible and the Quran. Such stipulations are made contrary to international human rights standards protecting 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 majority or any religion. If same sex relations are openly stigmatised in the free society, what then is the position of “homosexuals” in prison? That I turn to discuss in the next subsections below.

SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS ARE “UN-AFRICAN”

The growing tide of homophobia is sweeping through the African continent today masterminded by the media, principally newspaper articles, religious leaders, politicians, and the wider community. Discourses on homosexuality being un-African dictates the pace at which those practising same-sex relationships are accepted especially when it comes from presidential spaces. President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Sam Nujoma, his former Namibian counterpart, have repeatedly described same-sex erotic relations as an un-African “disease” introduced by disreputable European settlers (Niehaus 2002:77). Both presidents on several occasions have threatened to expel gays and lesbians from the body politic. To Mugabe, homosexuality is inexcusable on the continent when he evokes phrases like: “let them be gay in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, they shall be sad people here” (Clark 1997:32).

Female parliamentarians like Sabina Themban, of Mufakos, Zimbabwe also said “homosexuality is not African. It hurts us mothers to hear that our children are turning to homosexuality, our children must be punished” (Clark 1997:32). In South Africa, Kenneth Meshoe, often use the phrase “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” (Niehaus 2002:77).

Equally in Cameroon political and religious leaders condemn homosexuality as a “foreign imposition”. 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. According to this newspaper, the Catholic Church finds fault with the protocol’s stance on issues of reproductive health and same-sex marriages, which the Catholic 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.

Moreover, Moses Tazoh 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: 30). Tazoh views African politicians, soldiers, prisoners and some professionals who indulge in homosexual acts as people seeking for spiritual, political, social power, promotion, status and riches. He does not believe that a man in his right senses can indulge in homosexual practices. In December 2012, the Cameroon Ministry of Justice stated that “...homosexuality...is an unnatural activity that seeks to eliminate human reproduction. During the passage of the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council, Cameroon rejected the recommendation relating to decriminalisation of homosexuality (AI 2013).

SAME-SEX ACTS: A REALITY IN CAMEROON 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 and caressing them in the night when sleeping (superintendent).

The narrative of the superintendent suggests the existence of same-sex relationships in Cameroonian prisons and that it is an unacceptable practice.

Prisons harbouring fewer female inmates are not exposed to lesbianism like those in the urban areas. A female inmate explained her experience as follows:

... There is lesbianism. I saw it...I had doubted before, I saw it with my own eyes. I was in one room with one girl who looks like a boy, I have never called her a woman, she was having her boyfriend (another woman), and she bought her a shirt. They carry out the act openly especially as most of them are prostitutes. These lesbians smoke cocaine with the complicity of the guards.

The respondent associate lesbianism with prostitution and labels them as “bad girls” who consume drugs. Prejudices to female sexuality are rooted in ideologies that good women were not expected to enjoy sex, and “fallen” women were thought to crave sex and therefore labelled “pathological” (Nzegwu 2011:264). These women had broken the normal and natural order. They smoked cocaine with the complicity of the guards, similar to some inmates in South African prisons who bought cannabis from wardens (Niehaus 2002).

The abhorrence of lesbianism is not unique to Cameroon, but also Nigeria where Williams Kumuyi argued that any form of sexual activity occurring before and outside marriage is an unwholesome submission of one’s body to sinful pleasures, punishable by eternal damnation (Izugbara 2011:552). It is no wonder that inmates who are caught practising same-sex acts in

Cameroon prisons are seriously tortured by fellow inmates and further punished by prison staff if brought to their attention.

Although homosexuality is condemned in Cameroon prisons, it is practiced in the male cells which are overcrowded and the vulnerable and newcomers in prison suffer the consequences. An NGO staff explained:

One of the ex-prisoners explained what happens. Those who have the urge look for prisoners who are weak, poor, and propose caring for them; sometimes they drug and use them. There was one who was beaten because the partner found him with another person.

This is similar to practices in South Africa where same-sex marriage is legalised. According to Gear (2011:317) newcomers in South African men's prisons are vulnerable because they are not familiar with the unwritten prison rules. They are easily tricked and manipulated by other inmates especially if they are naive and needy, poor, physically weak, "pretty", linked to crimes associated with women and identifying as gay or transsexual.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that improvised sexual relationships, including same-sex practices exist in Cameroonian prisons despite the criminalization of such offences and efforts to reduce its practice in prison. The question therefore is: What can be done to get the Cameroon government to decriminalise same-sex sexual practices? Considering that sexuality is a natural biological function and therefore a human right for all individuals.

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