UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF LAW

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM

Turkey – special report

Country Report for use in refugee claims based on persecution relating to sexual orientation and gender identity

Produced: July 20, 2009

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity research – sogi.ihrp@gmail.com
International Human Rights Program
University of Toronto

Question #1: Is there any academic commentary on non-state psychological repression of sexuality in Turkey?

Question #2: Is there any academic commentary on late self-realization of sexual orientation, particularly amongst people from homophobic countries or families?

Introduction

This memo addresses the topic of homosexual identity formation in Turkey and its relation to Western models of gay identity formation. Much of the literature surveyed shows that the concept of a homosexual identity is a grounded in contemporary Western culture. The studies suggest that the sexual identities and patterns of sexual identity formation of individuals who engage in same-sex behaviour in non-Western contexts do not necessarily correspond to those of their Western counterparts. A non-Western individual's same-sex desires or behaviors, the literature asserts, may not lead them to believe that their sexual identity is a homosexual identity.

Bereket and Adam (2008) observe that homophobic versions of Islam predominating in Turkey afford limited alternatives to men who participate in same-sex activities. Their study also notes that Turkish MSMs (men who have sex with men) often subscribe to identity positions reflecting gendered imperatives and which do not correspond to a Western gay identity. In another study, Bekerket and Adam (2006) assert that Turkish homosexual identity formation incorporates local and Western conceptions of gay-ness. Cardoso (2009) contends that a homosexual identity can be formed in Turkey that that its formation depends on factors like dwelling in a large city, less rigid control by family, autonomy, anonymity, social security independent of the family. This study asserted that life in a rural area of Turkey would not permit the development of a homosexual identity. Dubé and Sávin-Williams (1999) aver that the Western process by which homosexual identity formation occurs is not universal and that the entire process is highly sensitive to ethnicity. Non-whites, their study suggests, experience lower levels of identity disclosure. Gençöz and Yüksel observe that Turkish men express great anxiety about being labeled homosexual (2006). Minwalla et al (2005) addressed the cultural differences between East and West inhering in the construction of homosexual identities. This study noted that many Islamic immigrants to the West were resistant to the process of constructing gay identities. Lambevski (1999) found that same-sex activities produce very different sexual identities in different ethnic groups. Oksal's study revealed that Turkish parents used several means to oppress or change their homosexual children. Waite (2008) asserted that concepts of same-sex behaviour or gender identity are culturally specific. Coehlo (2009) addressed the central role of local contexts in the definition of sexual identity. It also identified individualism and anonymity and urban settings as conditions for the development of homosexual expression; the presence of gay activist groups was also instrumental in how individuals interpreted their same-sex behaviour. Khan (2001) observed that, in India, an individual's awareness of discussions of Western concepts of homosexual identity and access to forum wherein homosexual identity issues can be articulated corresponded to his or her membership in an elite, English-speaking group. Those not belonging to this group tended to interpret their same-sex sexual behaviors through indigenous culture and did not possess a language

with which to identify their sexual difference. Moreover, Khan's study revealed an Indian would not necessarily deduce a gay identity from the fact of his or her same-sex sexual practices.

1. Tarik Bereket & Barry D. Adam, "Navigating Islam and Same-Sex Liaisons Among Men in Turkey" (2008) 55:2 *Journal of Homosexuality* 204.

This article addresses the coexistence of Islam and same-sex relations through responses to the question, "What joys and difficulties have you experienced regarding your sexual orientation and in relation to Islam?" Research relies on interviews with 20 Ankara men.

According to Bereket and Adam, homophobic "interpretations of the Koran currently circulating in Turkish society" afford "limited alternatives" to men making "moral decisions about same-sex activities in a Muslim context" (210). 11 interviewees reported gradual loss of faith, 3 stated religion was not a concern due to more secular backgrounds while 6 "continued to try to resolve the apparent tension between their sexuality and religion" (210-211). Those unable to "harmonize Islam with" their sexuality were limited to "fixed alternatives" of sin or abstinence (216). The "religious convictions" of participants, moreover, often diminished with participation in the "gay scene" (218).

"Discretion and concealment" with regards to homosexuality is common and used to preserve family honor and in fear of expulsion from the family unit (211). While "general tolerance [for] same-sex activities" confined "behind [a] 'veil of secrecy'" exists, an LGBT person's social status requires concealment of sexual identity (213).

Bereket and Adam also distinguish men "with gay-influenced identities" with those "who imagination and practices are caught up with gender-inscribed sexualities differentiated into active (*aktif*) and passive (*pasif*)" (207). While the latter "leaves homosexuals with nothing but dichotomous gender definitions" and is common among men who are "influenced by Islamic teachings" and "more troubled by their 'inability' to resist the homoerotic," the former "question[s] the language of gender-inscribed sexuality" and is "found widely among urban, young, educated and middle class homosexuals" (217).

2. Tarik Bereket & Barry D. Adam, "The Emergence of Gay Identities in Contemporary Turkey," (2006) 9:2 *Sexualities* 131.

- **The identities of practicing Turkish homosexuals seeks to conform to the gender norms of hegemonic masculinity and do not strictly follow Western models**

According to Bereket and Adams, "Turkey has traditionally shared a sex/gender order . . . where male-male sexual relations are expected to embody a gendered division between an inserter partner (aktif) considered 'masculine' and a receptive partner (pasif) who is expected to show some aspect of the feminine gender in behavior, voice, or dress" (131). Conformity to this model appears to be a frequent condition of same-sex relations:

> It is clear that as long as certain scripts are in use to give others the impression that every participant is following their respective sex-roles as prescribed by society, the masculine partner can discreetly engage in homosexual relationships . . . (140)

While this model "remains widespread", a minority are turning from it toward a more Western-based "gay" (*gey*) identity (132). At the same time, "parental pressure" compels even these men to marry (141). Moreover, "hegemonic masculinity" continues to dominate relations in this category as well (142). According to the authors, "Turkish gey identity formation shows a capacity for adaptation to the 'modern', western precepts, yet also remains true to certain constituents of Turkey's traditional culture" (143). Their study found that local "modes of seeing oneself have not been replaced or lost their validity with the emergence of the gay identities, rather they continue to co-exist with gay identities that at times resemble European and North American counterparts but may also be adapted into syncretic gey identities" (146).

Bereket and Adams also observed that, while a decade ago teenagers were reluctant "to speak openly of their same-sex preferences", they are becoming more willing to express these desires (136).

3. Tarik Bereket & Jennifer Brayton, "'Bi' No Means" Bisexuality and the Influence of Binarism on Identity," (2008) 8 *Journal of Bisexuality* 51.

According to Bereket and Brayton, "sexual desire is structured by the existing gender structure in Turkish society as a whole, which also demonstrates how it has an influence on how men identify themselves to others in public" (56). Bisexual Turkish men cannot express themselves through the term bisexual because, even though it "may exist as a new word within the Turkish language . . . it is not a term that is used to publicize one's experiences and sense of self" (59). Bereket and Brayton attribute this to the fact that "[t]he language available for Turkish bisexual men is representative of rigid gender/sex roles" (59). Bisexuality, however, does not conform to the binaries arising from these roles (60).

4. Fernando Luiz Cardoso, "Similar Faces of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior: A Comparative Ethnographic Study in Brazil, Turkey, and Thailand," (2009) 56 *Journal of Homosexuality* 457.

Only recently did the Turkish language acquire a comprehensive term for "homosexual" (467). Homosexual activities were originally classified according to the position the parent assumed in intercourse (467). The passive partner was generally associated with weakness and effeminacy while the active with power and masculinity (468). According to Cardoso, a homosexual identity can exist in Turkey but its existence is predicated upon a number of factors:

> [T]he role of "homosexual" in society and the self-identity that goes along with being "gay" exists—only in the big cities—where the middle class is more common and noticeable. For an individual to develop the role and identity of "a homosexual" and for society to recognize it, to accept it in whatever manner, a certain social climate is required: the big cities with less rigid control by family and neighbors (acertain anonymity), less personal dependence, more reliance on an impersonal

> society (social security independent of family or patron), and more privacy offer this climate. Life in rural areas does not leave room for the development of individuality: almost everything is predetermined . . . (469)

Cardoso also observed that participation in same-sex sexual practices was not a necessary indication of a "homosexual orientation" and that such acts may have different meanings and applications depending on the cultural context in which it occurs" (478).

5. Eric M. Dubé & Ritch C. Sávin-Williams, "Sexual Identity Development Among Ethnic Sexual-Minority Males" (1999) 35:6 *Development Psychology* 1389.

According to this article, traditional models of understanding the process by which "individuals become aware of, acknowledge, and accept lesbian and gay identities" which suggest a universal sequence of awareness of same-sex attraction, same-sex behaviors, self-identification and development of relationships is sensitive to factors like ethnicity (1389). Such models "do not equally apply to cohorts of men" and "may not predict the timing and sequence of events among ethnic-minority youths" (1390). It asserts that "[t]he theoretical literatures suggests that ethnic-minority youths may experience delayed timing of identity labeling . . . and disclosure . . . due to a variety of factors such as internalized homophobia, perceptions of rejection, and availability of support resources" (1390).

Dubé and Sávin-Williams found that in comparison with White youths, non-White populations "experience delays in labeling and disclosing their sexual identity and report lower levels of disclosure and higher rates of internalized homophobia" (1391). According to their research, "[e]thnicity proved to be a significant context in which to understand the formation of non-heterosexual identities. Ethnic groups varied in the developmental trajectory through which they established their sexual identity, the extent to which they disclosed this identity, and the rates at which they became involved in heterosexual relationships" (1395).

6. Tülin Gençöz & Murat Yüksel, "Psychometric Properties of The Turkish Version of the Internalized Homophobia Scale," (2006) 35 *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 597.

Internalized homophobia refers to homophobic attitudes held by homosexuals which reflect a view of heterosexual culture that "homosexuals are inferior and that they should be ashamed of their sexual tendencies" (597). This phenomenon is linked in the scholarly literature with impediments to "the development of a positive homosexual identity" and "attempt[s by homosexuals] to deny their emerging homosexual identity" (597). According to the study, "Turkish gay men were quite anxious about being labeled as homosexual and being associated with a gay community" (599). Participants in this particular study, however, experiences low levels of internalized homophobia; the authors suggested that this fact might be attributable to greater acceptance of identities by participants (601).

7. Omar Minwalla, B.R. Simon Rosser, Jamie Feldman & Christine Varga, "Identity

Experience among Progress Gay Muslims in North America: A Qualitative Study Within A-Fatiha," (2005) 7:2 *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 113.

In this study, "[a]ll participants had reached at least a sufficient level of identity development to self-identify as gay and as Muslim and were willing to talk about these issues with a researcher" (116). Several male participants in the study noted "East-West cultural differences in how homo-sociality is constructed, expressed, and understood" (120). A Pakistani interviewee, for example, states that there was neither a concept of gay or gay identity in his home country (120). Those who had migrated to Western countries "had some initial resistance to, and difficulty with, the Western process of constructing a gay identity" (120). Labeling a practice as a "homo-social expression" was particularly difficult for some (120). There is also danger of physical violence from family members that is attached to coming out (121). Participants in this study had "a heightened awareness that the process of constructing of a gay identity that is, constructing homo-social expression into an internal and social identity-is more of a Western process. This may be why some respondents seemed to struggle with and resist the construct of gay, perceiving it as a confining label or a box-a resistance to cultural assimilation" (124). Eastern cultures, the study reports are "more permissive of homo-social expression" but "more repressive and hostile to a gay identity" (124).

8. Sasho A. Lambevski, "Suck My Nation—Masculinity, Ethnicity and the Politics of (Homo)sex (1999) 2:4 *Sexualities* 1363.

This study contrasts how "the same sexual acts at the 'gay' scene produce very different (if any) sexual identities" in two distinct ethnic groups (406). In comparing Macedonians with Albanians at the same gay scene, the study notes that the "privileged access of (middle class) Macedonian homosexuals to (*scientific*) knowledge makes their very imagining of as *homosexuals* possible." (406). While most of the ethnic Macedonian interviewees could identify themselves as homosexual, all of the Albanians were clear that the term homosexual was utterly foreign to them (406).

9. Anyar Oksal, "Turkish Family Members' Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men" (2008) 58 *Sex Roles* 514.

According to Oksal, parents in Turkey "use several methods to change and oppress their lesbian or gay child by taking her/him to psychiatrists to provide treatment, expelling her/him from home, and punishing her/him by threats, beating, and by limiting social support. Another method which parents usually prefer is not to hear or to talk about the issue of homosexuality" (514).

10. Matthew Waites, "Analysing Sexualities in the Shadow of War: Islam in Iran, the West and the Work of Reimagining Human Rights," (2008) *Sexualities*.

"Even where 'human rights' in relation to allowing same-sex relationships are accepted, some may question the reliance of such organizations upon, for example, the concepts 'Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender' to frame human rights claims, in the light of the

cultural specificity of such concepts" (67).

11. Tony Coelho, "When the Global and the Local Collide: Gay Identity in Brazil and South Africa according to Parker and Reid," (2009) 1:2 *Amsterdam Social Science* 6.

Contexualizing the internationalization of gay identities within the paradigm of globalism, this article asserts that "[i]ndividuals and communities and non-Western societies are beginning to adopt the gay identity and its imagery which can run counter to local meanings of same-sex behaviour" (7). Nevertheless, "local contexts still play a pivotal role in re-shaping people's ideas of what it means to be gay, contributing to a complex system in which the global (modern) and the local (tradition) are at odds with one another (8). The article identifies "individualism and anonymity" as "grounds on which various homosexual expressions and communities could develop" (14). Local contexts "centred on traditional gender roles and class structures still remain an important part in people's lives and serve an integral role in how gay communities are uniquely constructed in these countries" (14). Coelho also observed that "[u]rban settings" were venues in which gay communities resembling the Western model could be formed while rural settings provided "a challenge for the emergence of gay spaces since tradition and conservative ideals remain embedded in the culture" (16). Gay activist movements, moreover, play "a large role in changing the way people interpret their homosexual behaviour" (20).

12. Shivananda Khan, "Culture, Sexualities, and Identities: Men Who Have Sex with Mean in India," (2001) 40:3/4 *Journal of Homosexuality* 99.

Khan asserted that, with respect to the term homosexuality, "too often language and terminology are used inadequately outside the cultural context in which that language is used" (103). The study stated that "contemporary Western understandings of lesbian and gay identities are beginning to be imagined, to emerge and to develop among some men and women" in India (104). However, access to information that "addresses the concerns of emerging sexual identities" and access to the "public arena where lesbians and gay men in India can articulate identity issues" is restricted to those "privileged to be a part of an English speaking, urban elite, who have more options and choices than the vast majority of people whose same sex desires and acts have to be bounded within tradition, custom, and culture, and who often do not have language to articulate their sense of desire and difference" (104-105).

The sexual behaviors of MSMs in India do not "have a central significance" to identity (106). Moreover, "[d]escriptions of sexual behavior are not necessarily coterminous with personal identity" (109). Khan noted, for example, that men assuming the active role in anal sex acts usually do not deem themselves homosexual, gay or bisexual and that most of their "passive" partners see themselves as "feminized" men (106).