

A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Lesbian University Students in Kenya

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Abstract: The rising cases of homosexuality and lesbianism in our learning institutions in Kenya is worrying. The Kenyan cultural attitude towards same sex sexual behavior is negative, whereas, homosexuality is proscribed by law. There is, however, limited scientific information in Kenya that explains why students are predisposed to homosexuality and lesbianism. The current qualitative study (N=12) examined the underlying, causes for lesbianism, perceptions, and psychological support lesbians receive in our universities. These participants were purposively selected using snow ball sampling technique. Focus group interview was conducted to generate data. Data were analyzed using a thematic approach. Findings from this study revealed that lesbianism is mainly caused by Social Psychological factors such as peer pressure, childhood sexual, and physical abuse, and poor self-esteem. These students reported favorable perceptions towards lesbianism. That lesbians are stigmatized, operate in secrecy, and cult-like manner. Lesbians behave, and play masculine and feminine roles respectively. Intriguingly, these students reported that they needed psychological support at the same time. This study concluded that this practice is prevalent in our institutions of high learning, and operates in secrecy, and cult like manner the knowledge of members of the faculty and Administration. This study recommended that these students should not be condemned for their deviant behavior per the Kenyan cultural and religious beliefs, and law, but offered professional counseling.

Keywords: Lived Experiences, Lesbian, University, Students, Kenya

1. Introduction

Lesbianism is a term used to describe people whose sexual, emotional feelings, and behavior that are exclusively or predominantly directed towards members of the same sex [4]. The rising cases of homosexuality and lesbianism in our learning Institutions is worrying to all education stakeholder in Kenya. Kenya is a country where homosexuality is frowned at and illegal [17]. The tragedy is that this is affecting Primary, Secondary School through to university level. It does not help matters that most African cultures regard discussion on homosexuality and sex as a taboo. Therefore, this means that the youth are largely left to their own devices to experiment. Unfortunately, the experiments result in homosexuality, and lesbianism [7].

The permanent secretary of education noted that homosexuality, lesbianism and drug abuse were wide spread in our learning institutions, and warned that students found engaging in this vice would be expelled from school, and

prosecuted. He blamed the immoral practice on ignorant parents who fail to discuss sexual matters with their children, and negative socialization process which is the cause of homosexual practices in schools [17]. The minister for Education hinted that homosexuality could be taking place in our schools. He said: "If you want to hop from one bed to another, then you need to be released to go to a day school where you will be closer to your parents who are your first responsibility" [7]. Wakhisi [27] reported that a 24-year-old third year student said that she got involved in lesbianism while in high school before joining university. Wakhisi. noted that this girl continued with this practice in the university because there was a lot of freedom there. Homosexuality, Lesbianism, gay and bisexuality have for many years been described as deviant behavior [28]. However, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) recently removed it from the designation of official documents [28].

Debate on the issue of homosexuality in Africa is largely driven by emotions that are inspired by stereotypes,

prejudices, and religious doctrine with little scientific research. African population is predominantly religious, and any form of homosexuality is frowned at. Africans believe that homosexuality is not African, and stems from western influence [18]. New Combe noted that homosexuality has also faced condemnation from African leaders for example, leaders from Namibia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Somali have sought various measures to eliminate it in their countries [9]. According to Harding, homosexual acts are illegal in Uganda, and convicted offenders are sentenced to life imprisonment. Moreover, Ugandans believe that homosexuality is a behavior that can be learned and unlearned.

In Kenya, Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgenders (LGBT) people experience several social discriminations like: being expelled from school, fired from work place, or being cut off from family support [12]. The Kenyan constitution, article 45 part 2 under the family section of the constitution states that every adult has the right to marry a person of the opposite sex based on the free consent of parents [26]. This article is being interpreted to mean that same sex (both gay and lesbian) marriages are proscribed in Kenya.

The origin of the same sex sexual attraction remains a puzzle. No singular cause for same sex sexual attraction in human being has been found through empirical research. According to Spring and Dailey [25] the lack of definitive biological evidence for the cause of same-sex sexual attraction suggests that these feelings may originate from a complex mix of psycho-social factors. Childhood Psycho-social influence such as childhood sexual abuse, are found in literature related to same-sex attraction. Bramblett and Darling [1] found that child abuse survivors might have possessed same sex sexual attraction prior to the abuse.

Hill and Pettit [11] examined the experiences of Lesbian, gay and bisexual college students, and found out that participants felt increased levels of burden amongst members of the community. Some of these students expressed feelings that led to suicidal ideations. Love [16] reported that higher institutions environment did not favor sexual minorities, who felt rejected, isolated and lonely. He noted that some students who practiced same sexual activity felt, their sexuality was a taboo, and not addressed by key leaders on campus including faculty and staff. Lopez and Chism [15] reported that gay and Lesbian students felt that faculty members avoided discussing or addressing same sex attraction in class in an effort to avoid awkward or messy conversations. Thus, students with same sexual attraction face many unique challenges and barriers such as experiencing feelings of invisibility, cold and sometimes hostility on campus environment. Pope Benedict XVI, said that same-sex sexual behavior, is a grave sin, both intrinsically, immoral, and contrary to the natural law [22].

In Africa the attitude towards same-sex sexual activity is highly negative. The number of people who identify themselves as lesbians is difficult to determine since not many declare this openly. Interestingly, women hold more favorable attitudes towards same-sex sexual attraction than

men [10]. Diamond [6] asserted that men have often viewed women as their natural sexual partners and not men. Males have a negative attitude towards same-sex sexual relationship than females D'Augeli [5] study in South Africa revealed that male students display more negative attitudes towards gay than their female counterparts. Pew Resource Centre [20] indicated that women are more tolerant to homosexual practices than males. Consistent with the notion that women are socialized to develop greater interpersonal intimacy and to be more relationship-focused, studies have detected a tendency for lesbian couples to report greater intimacy with partners, assessed by self-reported factors such as shared time together and the degree to which partners maintained a "couple" identity [6]. One pattern of same sex romantic intimacy that has been observed primary among young women is passionate friendship [6].

Research indicates that most gay first become aware of and experience their sexual thoughts and feelings during childhood and adolescence [19]. D' Augeli [5] noted that all gay college men in a study of 61, were aware of their sexual orientation as teenagers with romantic relationship and disclosure of sexual orientation soon to follow in college. Edobor and Ekechukula [8] reported that lesbianism commences during the onset of adolescence. This experience is perfected when they are admitted into tertiary level education where they have enough freedom coupled with the fact that more experienced persons are there to lead them. Thus, the need to carry out the current study at the university level of education.

It is note worth that, though in the recent years, the lesbian population has attracted increased attention, little is known about lesbian practices in Kenya, particularly at the tertiary level. Kenya is predominantly a religious country whereby majority of the citizens have a negative attitude towards the practice of same-sex relationship. Kenyan culture believes that sexual activity is basically between the opposite sex and socializes its young people towards heterosexual marriage. Given the Kenyan culture therefore, it is difficult for homosexuals/lesbians to live an open life. However, there is scarcity of empirical data to explain this phenomenon in Africa, and Kenya in Particular. Secondly, there are a few studies related to lesbianism that directly explore current students' experiences in Kenya. Notably, there are few studies in Kenya carried out on homosexuality by Kodero and Misigo [13] which revealed that many high school students in Kenya have been socialized into homosexuality. This behavior is mainly acquired in single sex boarding schools. These were quantitative studies carried out in high schools. The current study sought to generate in depth data at the university level where it is perceived that students have freedom and are not restricted as it is the case with high school. It sought to understand the female students lived experiences with regard to their lesbian practices and behavior. The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences, practice and behavior of lesbian students in a Kenyan public university.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Twelve students participated in the focus group discussion. The research population comprised female university students who were involved in lesbianism in a public university. Undergraduate university female participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The snow balling technique was used to obtain the sample size. Purposive and snow ball sampling are commonly used techniques for the recruitment of Lesbian and bisexual women [19]. The twelve female students from the university participated in this study and, were given an opportunity to choose their own pseudonym and describe their experiences in their own words. The age range of these participants was 20-24 years. All participants were full-time students, over the age of 18 years. No participant dropped out of the study after the group was formed.

2.2. Research Method and Design

The lived experiences of learners who participate in gay and lesbian practices cannot easily be determined from a quantitative study. Qualitative method provides a viable approach in addressing a phenomenon that has not been widely addressed in Africa such as gay and lesbianism. The open-ended questions that require respondents to articulate their views in their own words can uncover information that is not revealed in quantitative data from surveys [14]. In particular, the ways in which they reveal their thinking and attitudes and provide an insight into why they hold those particular views about gay and Lesbianism.

A qualitative research approach was used in this study due to the exploratory nature of the study. This approach was appropriate in generation of data that unpacked the inner world of female students involved in lesbianism. This study employed a phenomenological design because the researcher was interested in participants' lived experiences, particularly how an individual thinks about an experience or how consciousness is experienced. Pattons [19] noted that a phenomenological study addressed issues that pertain to experience whereby responses are obtained from participants who have lived that experience. Phenomenology refers to the inner world of an individual and focuses on what the individual feels as well as their understanding (25). The participants of this study were undergraduate university students in their youthful stage who were involved in Lesbian practice. This design enabled the researcher to understand the subjective experiences of the female lesbian students.

2.3. Instrumentation

Qualitative data generation included focus group discussion. Data were gathered from self-identified lesbians. This data was obtained through semi-structured interview approach so as to ensure that all participants were asked questions on the interview topics, while simultaneously allowing flexibility, so that participants could discuss issues

not predetermined by the research [24]. Participants were individually and in focus group discussion asked about their experiences, and perceptions of lesbianism. Example: of questions asked include:” What are the causes of lesbianism? ‘What are views about lesbian practice? How is lesbianism practiced, do you thinking people practicing lesbianism can change or need help? Prior to data generation the researcher and, a trained research assistant established a rapport with the respondents and explained the purposes of the study to them. They were allowed to ask questions and given time to fully give details of their experiences and perceptions.

2.4. Procedure

This study was described to potential participants as an exploration of lesbian perception and lived experiences. They were given more detailed information about the study, what participation involved and the use to which their data would be used for. The participant signed the consent form, participants openness and our honesty helped us to build connection and rapport with participants. Focus group involved group discussion on a predefined topic where participants were asked open-ended that were administered by the researchers. Before moving on to each question, participants were given the opportunity to provide any additional comments. This group generated large amount of information which was then qualitatively analyzed took the focus group 45 minutes and was moderated by the research assistant.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

The researcher explained the objectives of the study to the participants. They were informed that there were no physical or psychological risks involved. Their participation in this study was voluntary and they had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time they deemed fit. They were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses; they were asked to choose their pseudonym and were requested to read and sign consent for audio recording, and a confidential form before engaging in the study. These participants were later debriefed at the end of the study by the researcher.

2.6. Data Generation and Analysis

Focus group interview was conducted to explore the experiences of gay and lesbian students. The focus group discussion was facilitated by the research and trained researcher assistant. This interview lasted 90 minutes. It was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Analysis was done using a thematic approach (19) which involves coding, classifying, and organizing the focus group content into themes and sub-themes. Based on a thematic approach frame work analysis,(2) each line of the transcript was numbered, then read by the researcher and the research assistant to identify recurring concepts and categories and formed the basis of a conceptual thematic framework. This framework was used to code and classify data and modify, and refine it throughout the analysis to reflect the content and issues expressed by respondents in the focus group.

The coded categories were sorted into broader themes based on similarity and content by the researcher assistant. Illustrative quote is provided to aid transparency of categorization and them representation. To protect anonymity, every participant in the focus group was given a pseudonym.

3. Results

The following emergent themes resulted from the analysis of data reflecting the richness of the explanation for the female students lived experiences as lesbians. The emergent themes captured what participants perceived as: the underlying causes of their, initiation into Lesbianism, practice and behavior, beliefs and attitude, cult, social stigma, and support. The results of verbatim analysis are reported here in from of the views and opinions given by the respondents.

This study presents direct quotations of the participants. The excerpts are reported under the following themes identified in this study as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Break down of the Themes and sub-themes.

No	Themes	Sub-themes
1	Underlying causes	1. Defilement/sexual 2. Physical violence aid 3. Building 4. Body structure 5. Fear of pregnancy and STI 6. Pear pressure and 7. Role modeling 8. Rejection
2	Cult	1. Secrecy 2. Marks 3. Coded language 4. Under world
3	Practice and behavior	1. Normal sexual 2. Relationship 3. Use of sex toys 4. Dress codes 5. Marks 6. Feminine/masculine behavior
4	Perceptions and Belief	1. Seek recognition 2. Positive attitude
5	Social Stigma	1. Excluded 2. Viewed as evil 3. Taboo
6	Support	1. Counseling 2. Prayers

Six key cross-cutting and over overlapping themes emerged (see table 1) To provide detailed results of the data generated and discussions based on the thematic framework approach (2), the views of the participants are presented under each theme as follow:

3.1. Underlying Causes of Lesbian Practice

Throughout the focus group discussion, all the participants reported a variety of reasons for joining lesbianism. These factors included Social Psychological factors and physical body structure. The following are typical of the comments made by the participants with reference to getting initiated into lesbianism. Cindy reported: *I joined lesbianism while in*

class 8 in primary. I got into lesbianism because most of the boys in our school were bullies and I felt safe being around girls who protected me. When I joined high school, I found this practice there and I was invited by Form 3 students. Since then, I have never looked back to date. Another student called Joylene said, *I was defiled by my dad when I was young, that pain made me hate men. I believe I cannot get anybody better than my dad. My father also used physically assault my mother at home therefore, I grew up hating and mistreating men.*

Fear of pregnancy and contracting sexually transmitted was another reason of joining Lesbianism. Respondents spontaneously mentioned this as the cause of their recruitment. Amy for example said that: *I became a lesbian because of the fear of getting pregnant or contracting sexual transmitted disease.* Whereas Susy reported: *I was heartbroken when I got pregnant and got dumped by my boyfriend. I procured an abortion and swore never to get into opposite sex relationship again.*

All the twelve respondents reported that they were influenced by their peers to join Lesbianism.

Brenda reported *I joined lesbianism while in class 6 in primary. I was initiated by my cousin who was at the university by then. She told me that when I have a relationship with a girl, I would never be heartbroken because most men tend to heart break ladies' heart when in a relationship. That I would never contract any sexually transmitted disease, I would work hard and focus on my studies because I will have everything in terms of sex. Since she was pursuing medicine and she was doing quite well. I admired her and that is why I ended up joining lesbianism. I have never regretted.*

Moreover, within this theme, some of the participants said that they were influenced by their friends to join lesbianism. Joyleen stated, *my friends influenced me into becoming a lesbian. They told me it was cool having sexual relationship with a fellow lady.* Physical and body structure also emerged as a major reason of joining lesbianism. Daisy reported *I was initiated into lesbianism in Form 1. Most of the students used to call me a Tom Boy because I look like a boy. I would get a lot of favors from friends. I did not understand why they were so excited when they saw me and gave me gifts until I was introduced to this practice.* Whereas, Mindy said, *my physical appearance is like that of a man. No man approached me, hence I joined lesbianism due to low self-esteem, and rejection.*

3.2. Practice and Behavior

These students also discussed about lesbian behavior and practice in campus. The twelve of them spontaneously said that lesbianism was prevalent and, practiced like a normal romantic relationship in campus. Marylyn mentioned that: *3 out of 10 female students are lesbians we do have, and enjoy sex like any other couple, we normally have foreplay, breast nipple play, cuddle and kiss to make one have the urge for sex before the actual act.* Another one called Cindy *We use sex toys such as strappers, cucumbers and vibrators to get*

the best satisfaction. All the participants reported that among them, they had those who behaved like men, whereas other played the role of female partners, and exhibited feminine mannerism.

Amy reported,

Ladies who behaved like Tom Boys exhibited male behaviors. They have masculine features and body structure, they shave like men, walk and dress like men; they engage in masculine games and sports. We even have a master called a 'King'. Whereas, those who are lady like, apply make ups put-on tight-fitting dresses with bright colors, are soft and weak.

3.3. Cult Like Practice

Another theme identified thought the focus group discussion was that lesbian students feared stigmatization and discrimination from their colleagues. They unanimously said that this practice was a cult like and operated in secrecy. They noted that lesbianism activities were under world such that lecturers, university administration including their parent were not aware about this practice. Vienna said,

We operated like a cult. We have a Korean cult, and that is how we hide in it. We exchange our notes in coded language, and mostly in Korean. This helps us since no one get the meaning of our messages and intentions. We also cut our sleeves as a sign of commitment. It is called sweet pain. We also have tattoos on our body as assign of identification. We also know one another 10% of the population in my university are homosexuals.

Mindy reported

Lecturers are not aware of our activities because they handle large classes, they do not know all their students. There is also no direct contact between students and lecturers beyond the lecture halls hence they cannot know what is happening. When I am at home, I make sure that my parents are not aware of my activities.

3.4. Perception and Beliefs

Perception and belief category emerged as an important component of Lesbian practices and experiences. The twelve participants had positive perceptions and beliefs in Lesbianism. The following are some of the strong comments they made in support of this practice.

Jayleen reported,

Lesbianism should be recognized like any other group or society like sex workers union. There is also need for gay people to have their own category of schools and institutions. Such as schools for the gay, just like we have boys, girls, and co-educational schools.

3.5. Social Stigma

All the twelve participants reported that lesbians is viewed as a taboo and sin in the society. They commented that those who were labeled lesbians were frowned at, and discriminated.

Army Reported.

The society view us as evil. Therefore, I also see myself as an evil person. I cannot go to church because I am evil.

Marylin concurred by saying,

We need to have an organization that should fight for our rights like sex worker union. The society should stop seeing us as sinners, we should be accepted so that we can operated freely without hiding from the public. We should also be given space to express ourselves. Mindy said that: Lesbianism has helped me find self-esteem, sense of belonging, love, acceptance and escape from early pregnancy and sexually transmitted.

The fact that virtually all participants commented on this issue with a laughter suggested that they were entrenched, and believed lesbianism was right.

3.6. Psychological Support

The support category also emerged as a very important to them during this study. Participants had varied views about the helping support they got from the society and its effectiveness in helping them.

Shirleen said.

Though I need help, I believe no counselor can empathize or understand me. I was defiled when I was young, unless I get a professional counselor who is also highly qualified, I believe I cannot get out of this practice. One cannot change their body structure. It is impossible. I was discriminated by men. Nobody approached me. Even if I changed the situation, I will be the same.

Brenda reported

I went for counseling but it did not help me because of my body structure, someone like me with a male physique cannot change.

Vienna Said that

Since lesbianism is cult like, one can get delivered through prayer. However, prayer cannot change someone's physical appearance like mine.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the lived experiences of university lesbian students in Kenya. The objective of the study was to identify the reasons behind their joining lesbianism, Secondly, their experience, and practice, and thirdly, the kind of support they have received. These objectives were achieved through gist analysis. This study captured through verbatim analysis the feelings, and perceptions the participants have about lesbianism. This study has provided perhaps one of the most comprehensive information regarding the practice of lesbianism among female students in our universities through their lived experiences.

This study revealed that the following causes influenced young female students to join lesbianism: defilement/sexual abuse, bullying/ physical violence, fear of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, peer pressure and role modeling, masculine body structure, poor self-esteem, and rejection. The current findings concur with some of the previous studies on

lesbian or gay practice such as [16] who reported that probably the most significant factors that influence lesbianism are psychosocial factors such as family relations, childhood sexual abuse, peer influence and rejection of childhood gender. Whereas, Munene [17] reported that this practice was due to negative socialization process.

Participants in this study reported that gay and lesbianism were being practiced in our learning institutions including universities. This was consistent with report by wakhisi [27] who reported that learners got recruited into this practice while in high school, and that this practice was rampant at the university. Edobor and Eke Chukula [8] reported that lesbianism commences mostly during the onset of adolescence and is perfected when students are admitted into tertiary level education where they enjoy a lot of freedom.

Lesbianism is practiced like any other sexual relationship between people of the opposite sex. Amongst them, we have those who behave and play the role of male and female couples. To aid their sexual activities they use their own fingers, other sex toys, and vibrators to arouse and satisfy themselves sexually. Studies have also revealed that lesbian couples have greater intimacy with partners, share time together, and maintains a couple identity [6].

Intriguingly, participants revealed that lesbian and gay practice is an underground, and cult-like activity. Lesbianism operates in secrecy, hidden and use coded languages and signs to identify themselves and communicate. They also inflict pain, and tattoos on their bodies as a sign of commitment to this practice. Interestingly, it was also revealed that lecturers and university administrators are not aware of lesbian practice due to its secretive nature. Lopes and Chism [15] reported that faculty members avoided discussing or addressing some sex attraction in class in an effort to avoid awkward conversations.

Female lesbian students held favorable beliefs, perceptions and attitudes towards this practice. They even argued that lesbians should be recognized the same way sex workers organization was recognized. This is consistent with studies by [10]. Pew Resources center [21] indicated that women are more tolerant to same sex relationship than men.

Our findings demonstrated that lesbian is frowned at in many cultures and religious and viewed as a taboo practice. The social and religious attitude towards this practice is negative. Participants reported that lesbianism was viewed as immoral, and evil practice in the society. They also faced discrimination in the society and the church. Love reported that higher institutions environment did not favor same sex attraction, they felt rejected, isolated and lonely. Pope Benedict XVI, said that same sex sexual behavior, was a grave sin, and contrary to the natural law [23]. In Kenya lesbian, gay, and bisexual people experience social discrimination such as being expelled from school, being cut off from family support [12].

Notably, most of the respondents appreciated the role of psychological support and religion in helping them to change. However, they noted that there was lack of trained counselor or psychologist to offer this help. They reported

that they need someone who could understand them, empathize with them and help them to accept themselves. Love [16] observed that students who practiced same sex activities were not addressed by key leaders on campus including faculty and staff.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of female lesbian students in our universities. This study reveals that lesbian is mostly a learned behavior caused mainly by social psychological factors. This practice is prevalent in our institutions of high learning, and operates in secrecy, and cult like manner the knowledge of members of the faculty and Administration.

6. Recommendations

This study was carried on a small sample thus there is need for a similar study on a larger sample of university female students. Lesbian behavior should not be condemned by the society, instead we should empathize with them help, and offer them social and psychological support. There is need for our learning institutions right from primary, secondary, and notably university faculty, staff, and administration to closely monitor and identify queer behavior among learners and offer psycho-social support including counseling services. Counselors and school psychologists should be trained and posted to school and university to offer these counseling services.

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