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# Homosexuality in Ethiopia

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the concept and the construction of homosexuality in relation to the issue of gender and feminism in Ethiopia. While Female homosexuality is simply overlooked, male homosexuality has been criminalised under Ethiopian law with imprisonment up to three years. The media and the elite has been creating homophobia in discourse and linguistic terms; however, it is the church which has been effectively campaigning for hatred and abhorrence against homosexual persons in the county. My hypothesis is that besides the campaigns by the church and the media, gender relation and the absence of feminism have much to do with the status of homosexuality in the country today. My intention is to understand the concept and the construction of homosexuality by the elite and the church, and how this process has shaped the views ordinary citizens currently hold against homosexuality. By analysing media discourse, earlier empirical studies and primary data from interviews, I have come to the understanding that there is a discrepancy between the concept of homosexuality as defined in the west and the concept of homosexuality in Ethiopia. Homosexuality is the least understood subject because it is mostly viewed as only men's behaviour or disease, which is contagious due to association. Generally, Female homosexuality is unknown to ordinary citizens, and it is less active than male homosexuality. Despite the oppressive environment however, homosexuality is under transformation from being taboo to the issue of public debate due to attitude change induced by the process of globalisation.

**Key words:** Homosexuality, Gender, Feminism, Discourse, Globalization

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# 1. Introduction

In 2008, for the first time in the country's history, hundreds of homosexuals in Ethiopia signed a petition in order to appeal to the prime minister for equal right; however, their appeal was blocked before it reached the prime minister's office. More dramatically, the first unofficial gay marriage took place at Sheraton Addis Hotel in the capital between two male Ethiopians during the same year, and just recently, in January 2009, the first semi-official gay event had been organised in Addis Ababa.

Apparently, this rather bold and daring act led Ethiopian clerics to seek constitutional ban on homosexuality in December 2008. At a meeting in Addis Ababa, religious leaders, including heads of Ethiopian Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches adopted a resolution against homosexuality, which they termed as "the pinnacles of immorality." Homosexuality is illegal under Ethiopia's penal code; however, it is not mentioned in the country's constitution (Africafiles 2009). In January 2009, I travelled to Ethiopia in order to conduct field work on the subject; however, I had to leave the country just after nine days, and only a pre study because, according to the police, I was found "promoting Western culture" in the country. The incident reminded me of Dawit Isaak, a Swedish/Eritrean Journalist, who has been jailed in Eritrea since 2001 allegedly for involving in the country's internal affairs.

Though I was forced to leave the country within 48 hours after the interrogation by the police, I decided not to shy away from the subject I am interested in. After all, in the age of information technology, a researcher doesn't really have to be physically at the site (though preferred) in order to study a social phenomenon there. According to the Swedish Immigrant Institute (2008), there are 11783 Ethiopian migrants residing in Sweden, a great majority of them in Stockholm, thus, the study is conducted among Ethiopian migrants who have been living in Sweden for less than one year. Before embarking on the concept and construction of homosexuality in Ethiopia however, it would be necessary to put the concept of homosexuality into perspective.

Throughout history, we have noticed that culture in the form of idea or life style has been diffusing from one society to another. For instance, the world adopted the idea of democracy and Olympic sports from ancient Greece for the benefit of humanity; however, there is another ancient Greek culture which is probably as important as the idea of democracy that most societies have been striving against- sexuality, more specifically homosexuality. This has much to do with the introduction and expansion of Christianity because, in Europe, it was after Christianity that homosexuality was viewed as 'anathema and unnatural crime' (Crompton, 2006, p. 1). Etymologically, the word 'homo' reminds us its Greek origin, thus it would be essential to examine the concept of homosexuality in ancient Greece. As Crompton noted:

The ancient Greeks had no word that corresponds to our "homosexual." *Paidierastia*, the closest they came to it, meant literally "boy love," that is, a relationship between an older male and someone younger, usually a youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty. The older man was called the *erastes* or

lover. Ideally, it was his duty to be the boy's teacher and protector and serve as model of courage, virtue, and wisdom to his beloved, or *eromenos*, whose attraction lay in his beauty, his youth, and his promise of future moral, intellectual, and physical excellence (Crompton, 2006, p. 3-4).

This may suggest that in ancient Greece, relationship between a young and older male was accepted, and it played a role in cultural reproduction. Even though there was a positive value attached to it, the concept of homosexuality in ancient Greek excluded women, and the relationship is defined by specificity in age. For the Romans however, homosexuality served a different purpose perhaps due to the kind of relationship they had with their subjects. Crompton writes:

Homosexual relations were perceived primarily as a form of dominance, an extension of the will to power... Same-sex intrigues are not between men and freeborn youths but exclusively between masters and slaves... For the Romans, homosexual relations were not in themselves good or bad. But to submit to penetration was to be feminized and humiliated (Ibid., 2006, p. 80).

Interestingly, almost similar view of homosexuality has been maintained in modern Ethiopia probably because of the connection between religion, gender and feminism issues. Whatever the original meaning of the sin of Sodom might be, church leaders effectively used and still use the story of Sodom and Gomorrah for the purpose of regulating sexuality. Similar to today's Ethiopian penal code, same-sex love between women was never mentioned In Hebrew scriptures, but much later on, In medieval Europe, both male and female homosexuality were regarded as crime and women were executed (Ibid., 2006, p.48).

In modern times, the church's view on same-sex relationship remains almost similar. However, in the secular world, which is in most cases influenced by religion, it has been conceived and constructed differently in different societies, the most common arguments revolving around nature versus nurture or the combination of the two. Today, with the development of democracy, human right, and knowledge about gender and sexuality, some countries in Europe, north America, and Asia seem to come in terms with homosexuality; however, there are still hostile attitude towards same-sex love in most parts of the world. In general, Africa (except the Republic of South Africa) can be mentioned as an example where homosexuality has been regarded as un- African culture. Some of its leaders such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe went to the extent of labelling homosexuals as "sexual perverts and sodomists, who are less than dogs and pigs", banning gays and lesbians of Zimbabwe from the Zimbabwean International Book Fair in 1995. Later that decade, President Museveni of Uganda, former President Nujoma of Namibia and former President Daniel arap Moi of Kenya all threatened homosexuals with jail stressing the un-Africaness of homosexuality considering the act as a danger to nation, religion and African cultural traditions. Such perceptions seem to be common not only among African political and religious leaders but also among ordinary citizens (Hoad, 2007, p. Xi-xii).

## 2. Objectives

In Ethiopia, which is the focus of this study, religious dogma has been effectively applied to ostracise homosexuality for long period of time. Orthodox Christianity had been a state religion until 1974 and as a result, it had been encroaching on the secular sphere of government rulings. Homosexuality is still a crime which is partly a direct manifestation of the past relationship between the state and the church. It is this relationship between the secular and the religious life, shaped by culture or viscera; and the current social and economic phenomenon such as globalization and the introduction of the internet, which is the motivation for this study. It is widely believed that gender and sexuality is partly a social construct, and from this one can assert that their construction is largely context specific and therefore not always the same across cultures and time. While the concept of gender and sexuality is central to queer theory, its concept and construction however remains complex and at times controversial. The point of departure for this study therefore will be exploring the concept and social construction of homosexuality in Ethiopia and the impact of globalization such as the introduction of the internet on social change. It is apparent that in countries where the idea of gender and feminism is well developed, homosexuals or LGBT persons more or less enjoy their rights as citizens; therefore, the paper also aims at exploring feminism and gender issue and its relation to the notion of homosexuality in Ethiopia.

### 2.1. Statement of the problem

The concept and understanding of homosexuality in Ethiopia seems to be static and unevolving because Contextual and local understanding of the concept takes roots by eliminating western concept of homosexuality, which has partly been developing with the advancement of social and natural sciences. It is believed that this contextual and local understanding of the concept is the main source of stigma, discrimination, and physical violence against homosexual persons in the country. Religion has been one of the driving forces behind the stigmatization and abhorrence against homosexuality; however, most Ethiopians who are not close adherents of any churches or mosques also reject homosexuality on cultural grounds. For many, homosexuality is non-existent in Ethiopia simply because it is not an Ethiopian culture. If any Ethiopian ‘becomes’ gay, then it is viewed as an acquired behaviour or disease due to an association with white men and their culture.

Some scholars and gay activist claim that criminalizing homosexuality prevents gays and lesbians from seeking medical help or counselling in case of suspected sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS in fear of prosecution. For instance, in Ethiopia, the HIV/AIDS protection program and Medical experts seem to ignore the implication of excluding homosexual persons from protection and care programs, which might have direct or indirect link to the general population well being.

Though unmentioned in the country’s constitution, the misunderstanding, and stigmatization of homosexuality extends to structural level where homosexuality is criminalised under the country’s criminal code, which exposes homosexual persons for

discrimination and other forms of abuse simply because they lack protection before the law. Journalists, pop stars (Live Aid in the 80s), human right activists and humanitarian governmental and NGOs, all have voiced their concern for democracy and humanitarian relief aid whenever the country finds itself in crises. Unfortunately, none of these organizations or individuals showed much concern to the plight of homosexual persons in the country; therefore, this study strives to bridge this gap by bringing the subject to attention both abroad and at home with the aim of achieving recognition to the LGBT community there.

## 2.2. Research question

Homosexuality has been a taboo word in Ethiopia therefore the subject is mostly excluded from public debate; however, at the end of 2008, the church leaders and the media started talking about homosexuality for the first time. Why did Ethiopian clerics, the elite and the media decide to ‘break the ice’ at this point in time? Is gay culture more visible today because of the forces of globalisation such as the introduction of the internet to the country in the 1990s or it is just the usual church routine of regulating sexuality and exerting power to the secular sphere of people’s life? Is there any relationship between the social construction of homosexuality and its abhorrence and legal status?

## 3. Method and source

A triangulation of qualitative methods, that is, Interview and discourse analysis has been employed in order to overcome the limitation of a single method. Data triangulation or in other terms the use of different data sources, that is, primary data and secondary data, has been adopted in order to maximise the validity of data. In addition to the primary data that has been gathered through interview method, secondary data from earlier empirical studies on gender, feminism and sexuality issues in Ethiopia has been used. Helen Pankhurst’s ethnographical study (1992), which was conducted in Menz, central Ethiopia is important because, among other issues, it explores gender relation in Ethiopian society by examining the way everyday language is used. Given the population of Ethiopia, which is 85% rural, Helen’s study is relevant as it mainly represents the rural perspective; however, it shall by no means be considered as representative of the entire Ethiopian rural population. Other ethnographic studies by Tadele (2000) and a journalistic report by Mammo (2009) have also been used as secondary data source. These sources are particularly important to this research because they deal with the issue of homosexuality, which is usually an overlooked subject both in the academic circle and the media. Moreover, in contrast to Helen’s study, they provide the urban perspective on the concept and social construction of gender and homosexuality in Ethiopia. Theory triangulation, which means, having various types of theoretical perspective and hypothesis before and during data collection and analysis believed to be vital in evaluating the

relevance of data; therefore, When analysing both primary and secondary data, theory triangulation is used so as to test their validity and relevance.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.1. Interview method

Semi-standardized interview has been chosen because it is said to be appropriate when the interviewee have a subjective theory concerning the topic and when the researcher aims to reconstruct the content of subjective theory of the interviewees. Moreover, it allows the use of theory-driven and hypothesis-directed questions. The interview has been conducted in such a way that I first introduced the topic areas and then used purposely formulated questions based on theories on homosexuality and its construction. During the interview, I also presented my theoretical assumptions to the interviewees depending on how they have dealt with the original question; However, options are left to the interviewees to agree or dismiss the hypothesis depending on whether my hypothesis are relevant to subjective theories they hold or not. Semi-standardized interview method is also proved to be facilitating the use of questions that ensures transforming the implicit knowledge of the interviewee into more explicit. In this case, the interviewees are believed to have a subjective theory of homosexuality. The knowledge the interviewee believed to have on the subject of homosexuality in Ethiopia included assumptions that are both implicit and explicit which the interviewees expressed impulsively to the question. Then the interviewee's subjective theory has been reconstructed out of their view on homosexuality and its social construction. The statements from the interview have been structured so as to achieve communicative validation, that is, the interviewee's approval or disapproval to the statements they have made during the interview session. This was done through the technique of "structural laying"; this involved that after transcribing and analyzing the content of the interview outline, second round meeting has been held with the interviewees where the core statements have been presented to the interviewees as concepts on written form to evaluate the content. Contents that are incorrect or unrepresentative of the interviewee's original statements have been reformulated.

### 3.2. Discourse analysis

Studies in the area of gender and sexuality are very much limited in Ethiopia; therefore, scientific literatures on the subject are in short supply. However, there are local newspaper articles and gay and non-gay websites where formal and informal forums and debates on homosexuality in Ethiopia take place among Ethiopians. The debate mainly revolves around the concept of homosexuality; why should it constitutionally be band; and how to deal with homosexual persons in order to reverse their sexual orientations and so on. So, data from newspaper articles and texts from online forum discussions have been collected and analysed in order to understand the concept of homosexuality and its construction contextually.

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<sup>1</sup> The qualitative method and procedures used in this study have mainly been adopted from the work of Flick (2006).

I believe that discourse analysis of online debate and newspaper articles is the second most appropriate method regarding this particular subject because as Edward and Potter (1992 cited in Flick, 2006) demonstrated, discourse analysis enables us to illustrate how participants or debaters construct version of events or realities in conversation or talks. The other reason why discourse analysis has been preferred as a second method is that, as Flick (2006) suggests, it is appropriate for analyzing data from interview and media reports, which makes it somehow compatible with the first method. Here the focus has been on how, in discourse, homosexuality is constructed and explained in Ethiopia by analysing the interpretive skills and repertoires employed in the construction. This has been achieved first by selecting relevant texts from local newspapers and the internet, transcribe and read them meticulously. Then the texts have been coded and analysed for content, context, construction in the text and interpretive skills and repertoires used. Finally, the material has been rewritten in accordance with scientific criterion and requirements.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.3. Sample

Samples for the interview have been taken from Ethiopian migrants who have been residing in Sweden for less than one year. Those individuals who have been residing in Sweden for more than one year have purposely been excluded from the sample so as to ensure the representativeness of the sample. The idea is that Ethiopian migrants who have been living in Sweden for longer period of time may have acquired a different view on homosexuality as a result of cultural assimilation due to their integration into the Swedish society; therefore, their representativeness of the Ethiopian population back home might be questioned. The sample is heterogeneous in that it includes a group of six people involving three women and three men with different educational background, age and place of origin in Ethiopia. About 85% of Ethiopian population is rural, thus, Place of origin has been considered in order to include both the urban and the rural perspective.

Theoretical sampling developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967 cited in Flick, 2006) has been adopted because it is believed to allow the generation of theory where the researcher collects, codes, and analysis data; what data remain to be collected next and where to access them. This has provided possibilities for gradual accession and collection of empirical evidences (cases and materials) during the course of data collection and interpretation. Moreover, it provided options for unlimited possibilities of including more cases and materials when needed. Sampling was conducted at different stages, that is, while collecting data (case sampling) and material or evidence sampling, which is, sampling within material according to their relevance and importance.

### 3.4. Generalization

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<sup>2</sup> The technique is based on Willig's work (2003 cited in Flick, 2006).

The topic and the method used in this research may suggest that generalization is inevitable partly because generalisation in most cases had been at the core of most scientific researches. However, the idea of generalising the issue of homosexuality in Ethiopia based on a small scale study such as this one might risk criticism because of the context specificity of the findings and/or due to the insufficiency of materials. It is understood that bias or the influence of subjective knowledge either on the side of the researcher or the participants or both can be unavoidable; therefore, there is a danger attached to generalisation in the traditional sense. In order to deal with these challenges, Sample and data diversification in combination with systematic collection, analysis and translation of data have been employed.

With the above cautious procedures in mind however, 'loose' generalization can be made, for example, by making context specific statements. As Flick (2006) indicates, the generalizability of research findings has much to do with sampling types and procedures. For instance, theoretical sampling, which has been adopted for the purpose of this study, provides possibilities for devising the environmental circumstances under which a social phenomenon is investigated and understood as broadly as possible. Moreover, another procedures suggested by Flick (2006) such as careful integration of cases and systematic analysis and comparison of collected materials have been applied for the findings to allow generalization to certain degree concerning some of the research questions; however, due to significant rural-urban, infrastructural and socio-economic gap that is prevalent in Ethiopia, it is difficult to say that the results are conclusive and relevant to all parts of the country.

## 4. Limitations

Studying homosexuality in Ethiopia was not particularly an easy matter. Sometimes, I had to think twice before I tell the topic of this paper to some of my fellow Ethiopians because from their perspective, writing a thesis on homosexuality automatically downgrades my degree or the future of my carrier in Ethiopia because the word itself is a taboo, and no institution or individual is ready to listen or discuss the subject.

The quality and availability of material both printed and electronic on homosexuality in Ethiopia can be questionable. No full-fledged study has been done on homosexuality in Ethiopia so far except few studies that have dealt with the subject in connection with HIV/AIDS and sexual behaviour among the urban youth. Due to the legal status of homosexuality in Ethiopia, information on the subject is mainly found on the internet; therefore, Concern may mount over the credibility of the information regarding their relevance and content. One of the practical ways to proceed has been to meticulously evaluate point of views, authorship and the intention of the authors and the publishing bodies.

Informal meeting with some of the interviewees suggests that heterosexual Ethiopians are less willing and less engaged to discuss homosexuality. As most of them claimed, it is a taboo and unpleasant subject to talk about. As mentioned earlier, some even went to the extent of saying that homosexuality doesn't exist in Ethiopia; therefore, there is no need for

discussing it. From this might follow the idea that personal bias will be introduced on the side of the interviewees; however, that has not been considered as a danger to this study because I am mainly interested in understanding that. It can be an error on my side to think that the unwillingness to fully engage on the side of the interviewee has been overcome through informal meetings and 'lobbying' the interviewees to engage. However, the informal discussions, for instance, at Ethiopian cultural centre, Ethiopian churches and restaurants in Stockholm prior to the actual sessions might have improved their willingness to engage.

## 5. Introducing Ethiopia

Ethiopia is situated on eastern Africa between the Tropic of Cancer and the Equator usually called the Horn of Africa neighbored by Eritrea, Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan. Geographically, the country is one of the largest in Africa covering the area of France and Spain combined. It has a population of 73,918,505 in 2007(Ethiopian Population Census Commission, 2008) Out of which 60% are Christian (50.6% Orthodox and 10.2% Protestant), 32.8% are Muslim and 4.6% are traditional believers. Addis Ababa, the federal capital of Ethiopia, is centrally located with a population of 2,738,248 (Ibid., 2008). According to the World Bank (2008), with the population of 76.9 million, Ethiopia is the second most populated country in Sub-Sahara Africa. The per capita GDP of US\$200, which is much lower than the Sub-Sahara Africa characterises the country as the world poorest (Ibid., 2008).

### 5.1. An Overview of Modern History

Emperor Menelik started the modernization of Ethiopia with the establishment of Addis Ababa as the capital of Ethiopia in 1886. Emperor Menilik conquered much of today's Ethiopia, and introduced the first currency; railway connection to Djibouti; telephone and postage stamps to Ethiopia (Pankhurst, R. 2001, p. 195-197). Ethiopia maintained its independence from colonial rule by defeating the Italian army at the battle of Adowa in 1896 (Ibid., 2001, p. 188-193); however, the country is located between what was then the two Italian coastal colonies, Eritrea and Somalia, therefore, in 1936, Mussolini of Italy invaded Ethiopia with the ambition of unifying it with the rest of Italy's east Africa colonies; however, Ethiopia was liberated with the help of the British army in 1941, and Haile sellassie was reinstated as an emperor of Ethiopia (Ibid., 2001, p. 238-248). After Italy lost the war, Eritrea became independent but federated with Ethiopia, the conflict of which led to long war between the two neighbouring courtier which lasted until 1991(Ibid., 2001, p. 260-61).

With the removal of Haile Sellassie in 1974 mainly due to government corruption and famine, the monarchy was later replaced by a military junta called the Dergue under the leadership of Colonel Mengistu who later introduced a socialist form of government. However, differences among various political and ideological blocks, and the war with Eritrea led to bloodshed that lasted until 1991 (Ibid., 2001, p.267-70). Popular discontent and disagreements within Mengistu's government itself led to the formation of ethnic and regional based political movements namely EPRDF which later toppled the central government in 1991. As a result, Eritrea became independent and a semi-democratic government was established (Ibid., 2001, p.275-77).

## 5.2. Religion

Ethiopian Orthodox Church claims that Ethiopia is the second oldest Christian state in the world. Orthodox Christianity had been state religion until 1974; however, today all religions are constitutionally equal. Christianity is still essential to most believers perhaps due to some biblical references to Ethiopia. For instance, Psalm 68, 31 reads as: 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.' Furthermore, the bible is used as a source for one of the most influential legends of the country where Queen Sheba of Ethiopia visited King Solomon of Israel where the Queen had a son by King Solomon, who later brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia, and finally established a Christian dynasty that ruled the country for about three thousand years (Pankhurst, R., 2001, p. 18-19). In addition to the formal religions, spirit beliefs and rituals play a central role in Ethiopian society. Tenk'way (sorcerer), adbar (female spirit), Buda (evil eye), aganint (Satan), wukabi, Zar and chelle are some of the informal religions or spirits that are worshiped usually in combination with Christianity and Islam. As indicated by Helen Pankhurst, people are possessed by at least one spirit or more. Birth and death; health and illness; wealth and poverty; temperament and other human behaviours are interpreted in relation to spirit interference (Pankhurst, H., 1992, p.164).

## 5.3. Human Right Record

The current Ethiopian authorities claim that the country is fully democratic; however, the country's human right record remains poor. For instance, Human Right Watch accuses Ethiopia for political repression; war crimes and other abuses by Ethiopian military forces; and undermining or criminalizing the work of many human right organizations (Human Right Watch, 2008). The US state department also accuses Ethiopia for human right abuses such as unlawful killings, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention; infringements on citizens' privacy rights, restrictions on freedom of assembly and association; violence and societal discrimination against women and persons with disabilities. According to the department, homosexuality is illegal and punishable by imprisonment; however, there were no reports of violence against lesbians, gay, bisexuals and transgender individuals. The report relates this lack of reporting to fear of retribution, discrimination, or stigmatization (US department of state, 2009). Gay Ethiopian discussion Forum, which is established by gay Ethiopians home and abroad claims that gays in Ethiopia are deprived of their right because the country's record shows that human right in general is still being grossly abused by authorities (GayEthiopians, 2008 cited in Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2005-07).

## 6. Theoretical Development

### 6.1. The Social Construction of Gender and Homosexuality in the West

Unlike in Ethiopia, much has been said and done in the western world in the name of understanding homosexuality. In 1869, the term homosexuality was coined by a Swiss doctor called Karoly Maria Benkert in preference to the derogatory term “pederast” to denote men who had sex with other men (Sullivan, 2003, p.2). Since then, homosexuality has been constructed in one way or another by emancipators, scholars, writers, film makers, and the media and ordinary citizens. So, what is homosexuality? How does the concept develop through time in Europe and North America?

A German lawyer, Karl-Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895) is one of the pioneers of gay movements in Europe who claimed that homosexuality is congenital-“a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul.” Homosexuality for Ulrichs thus was a simple fact of nature where a human element or psyche positions itself in a wrong body, which he called “anima muliebris virili corpora inclusa.” Ulrichs used this idea to assert the naturalness of homosexuality in order to confront the view of homosexual love as crime against nature. While Ulrichs work believed to have some influences in the legal, medical, and sexual studies, his theory however falls short of expectations by today’s thinkers. As Sullivan noted:

Ulrichs’ thesis is firmly founded on dichotomies such as male/female, active/passive, subject/object, mind/body, and so on, which construct the world in terms of one valued term and its opposite (Sullivan, 2003, p.6).

Influenced by Ulrichs, a German-Austrian Psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902) published his famous work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) as a medical undertaking to be applied by doctors and lawyers with the aim of categorizing all non-procreative sex and the persons involved. For Krafft-Ebing too, homosexuality was congenital; however, the innateness of homosexuality according to Krafft-Ebing was related to heredity and degeneration (Ibid., 2003, p.7). The difference between the two is that For Ulrichs, homosexuality was natural or normal but for Krafft-Ebing, it was a kind of disease or perversion.

Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), a British sexologist and the author of *Sexual Inversion* considered same-sex love as abnormality similar to colour-blindness but not as a disease. Ellis also doubted the purely biological determinism of sexuality because, according to Ellis:

It is probable that many persons go through the world with congenital predisposition to inversion which always remained latent and unroused (Ellis, n.d. cited in Sullivan, 2003, p.8).

This is to suggest that in Ellis' account, nature and nurture, that is, both congenital predispositions and cultural factors influence the making of sexuality; therefore, it is by no means a sickness to be treated or behaviour to be criminalised. Ellis supports his thesis with the example of only-boys or only-girls boarding school where, according to him, bonding between two same-sex adolescents might take place easily due to close associations (Ibid., n.d. cited in Sullivan, 2003, p.8-9).

The medication of homosexuality started with Karl Westphal's (1800-1979) idea who, like Ulrich, Krafft-Ebing, and Ellis believed that homosexuality is in one way or another congenital. For Westphal however, male inverts are sexual deviants, actually a woman in a man's body and vice-versa, and therefore medical intervention was a necessity (Westphal, n.d. cited in Sullivan, 2003, p.10).

The founder of the first homosexual right organisation, Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935) first introduced the concept of third sex as determined biologically; however, he later developed this idea into sexual plurality by breaking the old and adamant paradigm of sexual binary. Hirschfeld not only rejected the theory of degeneration and the labelling of sexuality as normal or abnormal but also introduced the notion of unbounded sexual variability that can be as distinct as our finger prints. Unlike Westphal however, Hirschfeld insisted the medical intervention to cure homosexuality was futile; therefore, what is needed according to him was a sort of therapy to help homosexuals accept and celebrate their sexuality (Hirschfeld, n.d. Cited in Sullivan, 2003, p.11-12).

The founder of psychoanalytic school of psychology, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) hypothesised that humans are basically bisexuals where both the masculine and the feminine traits have been carried by every individual therefore, for Freud, homosexuality is far from being just a simple gender alteration (Freud, n.d. cited in Connell, 1995, p. 8-9). He considered same-sex desire less as degeneration by claiming:

Inversion is found in people who have no other serious deviations from the normal, indeed, it is often apparent in those who are distinguished by especially high intellectual development and ethical culture (Freud, 1996 cited in Sullivan, 2003, p.14).

Through this Freud dismisses not only the notion of inversion as related to degeneracy but also its innateness and permanency. Freud was in disagreement with some of his predecessors who viewed inversions as purely acquired by claiming:

There are a whole range of possible sexual aims, object choices, and states of psycho-sexual being, which are the products of each individual's psycho-sexual development and of the context in which such development occurs (Freud, n.d. Cited in Sullivan, 2003, p.14).

However, Freudian psychoanalysts later on viewed homosexuality mainly as a result of environmental factors, which is subject to therapeutic treatment, and it is this view that

dominated the post-war academic circle both in Europe and across the Atlantic (Sullivan, 2003, p.16).

## 6.2 Gender Relation in Ethiopia

Gender seems to be one of the least understood concepts in some part of the world probably because it might mean different things in different languages and cultures. From one of my last seminars, I recall how thorny it was for most researchers in gender studies to just translate the word gender into their respective languages. In Amharic,<sup>3</sup> for instance, the concept *tsota* corresponds only to biological sex [male/female] and from this follows, *ya tsota equlinat*, literally means gender equality with the emphasis on equity in terms of income and participation in politics between the two sexes. Most of my readings suggest that the concept of gender as related to sexuality, class, ethnicity and race, and most importantly, gender studies as a way of understanding the social and cultural construction of masculinities and femininities seems to be almost absent in Ethiopia. However, there are some exceptions. An ethnographic study conducted by Helen Pankhurst (1992) may provide some insight on the issue of gender and feminist movement in Ethiopian society. It is conducted in Menz district, which is located in Northern Shewa province some 300 kilometres north of Addis Ababa. Under the subtitle ‘juggling with gender’, Helen Pankhurst explores gender relation by examining the way everyday language, that is, language as gendered construct that communicates cultural meanings and other information is used. For example, in Amharic language, sexual distinction can be made for inanimate objects, and this can be a point of departure for understanding the social construction of gender in Ethiopian society. H. Pankhurst (1992, p.168) writes:

Thus male soils, *yewend meret*, are rich and fertile whilst female soils, *yeset meret*, are light and relatively infertile. Size will also determine gender, the feminine being used to suggest a smaller, the masculine a larger object.

Probably, it will not be an error if I state that gender blurring has been the ‘trend’ in the western society. Ironically, the same statement can be made for Ethiopia where gender is believed to be rigid; however, there are different meanings attached to the idea of blurring gender through everyday language here, For instance, by reversing the biological gender when talking to someone either affectionately or in hostile manner, the meaning depending on the intention of the speaker. As H. Pankhurst (1992, p.169) noted:

Ante hid [‘you go’, masculine singular] or ante na [‘you com’, masculine singular] might be substituted by the female, anchi hiji [‘you go’, female singular] or anchi ney [‘you come’, female singular].

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<sup>3</sup> Amharic is the official language of Ethiopia.

To simplify the above example, in a country where women assume an inferior position, because power is vested in men by the society; and in a country where gender never actually ‘floats’, the biological male is simply referred to in the feminine. Thus, in this particular case, it is this act of “juggling with gender” through everyday language, which is worth examining so as to understand gender in this particular context. So, a masculine in this case can be address in feminine:

As a term of insult, to belittle or express distancing from or superiority over someone; for example, an elderly person to a younger or, as a way of referring to an enemy. It was often used to refer to the rebel groups as a put-down... This is also common usage in the context of an older man using the feminine to address a younger boy (Pankhurst, H. 1992, p169).

This is an instance where biological gender is reversed in order to downgrade the social status of the biological male, by including the biological male effectively, but only verbally to the biological female that holds a lower status in Ethiopian society. The paradox to this kind of gender reversal is that the same process may apply to express affection and love particularly when it is used between two male adolescents. In this case, it is used:

As a term of rapprochement, or a term of endearment and closeness between friends... The reasons are perhaps located in a connection with heterosexual love rather than a comment on relative power and status (Pankhurst, H. 1992, p.169).

This observation may suggest that despite rigid division of labour between the two sexes and male supremacy in the county, there is a degree of false gender flexibility in linguistic terms for different reasons. As noted above, Helen Pankhurst relates the reversal of the biological gender identity as a term of friendship between two male adolescents or men to heterosexual love; However, viewed from LGBT perspective, in a country where homosexuality is a taboo and punishable by law, I don’t see any reason why the linguistic flexibility of gender, when used as term of endearment, may not be related to homosexual love.

## 6.3 Feminism

Discussing feminism in connection with homosexuality may suggest that I lack focus in my approach because it can be difficult to justify the relation between the two. Furthermore, trying to reconcile gender as conceptualised in the famous work of Butler (1990) and feminism might also sound inconsistent;<sup>4</sup> however, it is my conviction that in order to understand the unique status of gender, feminism and homosexuality in this deeply religious and traditional African country, one has to investigate the general psyche and the setting of the society. Though the commonality between feminists and gays is somehow questionable, the goal-oriented alliance and solidarity between the two has been important in challenging political and religious conservatism in some part of the world; therefore, exploring feminism and the position of women in Ethiopia may shed light on the kind of rights homosexuals and other minorities enjoy in the country. Before going into the issue of feminist movement in Ethiopia however, it would be necessary to look at how feminism is conceptualised in the west. Despite the variations and disagreements on some of women's questions, the issue of representations and the concept of women itself, feminism in general can be regarded as:

Both an intellectual and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms... Motivated by the quest for social justice, feminism inquiry provides a wide range of perspective on social, cultural, and political phenomena (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2009).

The Stanford Encyclopedia (2009) adds that the issue of class, human rights, race, popular culture, body and the self, reproduction, sex work and sexuality are all the focuses of feminist theory and politics. From this may follow that feminism is not only an alliance of women that strives to guarantee women's rights and gender equality but also a broad and dynamic social force that deals with past and present power relations including the construction of gender and sexuality, discrimination, oppression and stereotyping in society. This said about the role of feminism in the west, what is then feminism and its role in Ethiopia?

In the past, few women who were members of the royal family or the elite played a leadership role by commanding their own army and/or governing a region of their own. Though some women started to involve in various associations during the 1930s, they all lacked a feminist base. The student movement of the 1970s had an element of women's rights activism that induced the first wave of women's movement in Ethiopia; however, even this movement was very much influenced by a socialist ideology rather than feminism. After 1974, the emancipation of women became impossible as the socialist government directly controlled the newly established national women's association-The Revolutionary Ethiopian

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<sup>4</sup> Butler criticises feminism for depicting women as a group with common characteristics. She claims that the feminists have done a number of errors by reifying gender relations, that is, by reinforcing the binary view of gender and the cultural assumption that masculine and feminine genders are built upon male and female bodies.

Women's Association, which served the interest of the state rather than women's questions. With the help of civil society, a new women's movement started taking root in 1991; however, this movement too ended up promoting the ruling party's agenda, thus, the development of genuine and independent women's rights activism became a rarity, the exception being the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association and some NGO projects ( Biseswar, 2008, p.134-35).

The most serious challenge however comes from the country's educational sector, which is usually regarded as an institution for social change. As Biseswar indicated:

In the academic sector, Ethiopia finally pioneered a graduate course in gender studies in 2005, after lagging behind many of its neighbouring countries for years. It could be because of the novelty of the course or perhaps inexperience, but at the moment the gender studies department clearly lacks feminist leadership and is run by staff that do not have a gender or feminist background. This might well be a case of calculated state control of the academic sector to comply with a pre-ordained societal agenda that aims to cultivate women activists rather than feminists (2008, p.135).

Biseswar further notes that despite the increasing number of women in political leadership and enrolment for higher education, women in Ethiopia today fail to take on feminism and radical gender perspective because of different reasons. A large proportion of the population is affiliated to orthodox Christianity and Islam; however, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are becoming more popular. Though these religions depict women as subordinate to men, religion has a historic importance to the society, therefore, being producer and keeper of culture and tradition women adhere to religion firmly. Studies confirm that the majority of church attendants at weekends particularly on Sunday mornings, saint days and during fasting seasons are women (Pausewang et al. 2002 cited in Biseswar, 2008, p.142). With the role of cultural reproduction and guardianship comes the obligation to remain faithful to religion, which through time comes to dominate every aspect of their life. However, the most alarming truth for feminism in Ethiopia is that even educated women seem to remain religious, probably as a way of escaping "androarchal domination". Most women feel incapable of making decisions regarding their everyday life or the future due to authoritarian and exploitive household and political situation, which has led them to seek spiritual solace in religion that may offer hope (Dolan, 1998 cited in Biseswar, 2008, p.142). As Biseswar Put it:

Religiously devout women holding senior positions in the government's machinery are seen as lacking the passion and commitment to do more for women than simply following the dictates of the government. Civil society activists with religious backgrounds also show a marked reluctance to step outside the parameters demarcated by donors, NGOs, and government. Many are forced to co-operate with women's machinery which continues its apolitical, de-radicalized, agenda on the 'women's questions'. There are no vibrant radical voices, for example, challenging issues of legalizing abortion and sexual rights; nor are they

questioning the state-led women's movement that is rooted in a biased, deformed and outdated 'women question' (2008, p.143).

This may remind us Karl Marx's famous quote "Religion is the opium of the people", where people as a result of their enthusiasm to religion accept oppressive societal sanctions because resistance to religion is seen as resistance to the reality on the ground.

In the secular sphere of life, Very few gender workers practice gender as it is conceptualized. For many, the demarcation between the concept of gender and feminism is far from being clear due to the country's political and historical backgrounds. The issue of gender and feminism has been marginalised because, for many, "women are now equal to men in terms of *de jure* constitutional and policy guaranties", which in most cases led to the rejection of affirmative action; and the tendency to maintain the *status quo* (Ibid., 2008, p.145). In addition to the influence of religion and theoretical misconceptions, studies that have been conducted on the issue of women's leadership in Ethiopia commonly identify patriarchy and male domination; traditional and cultural belief; lack of confidence in women's capabilities and low self-esteem among women; poverty and economic insecurity as factors that may discourage Ethiopian women from assuming feminist leadership (Azeb, 2003; Meron, 2005; Berouk, 2004 cited in Biseswar 2008, p.138). That said on the weakness of feminism in Ethiopia, we will be examining its implication on homosexuality in the next section.

## 7. Homosexuality in Ethiopia

In Europe and North America, the construction of homosexuality has been going on for several decades by human right pioneers, scholars and the media. ‘Right or wrong’, this process which started approximately in mid nineteenth century in Europe seems to be contributing to the creation of ‘better’ image and status LGBT persons in the west achieved today. Homosexual persons in Ethiopia however lack that kind of image and status because even their basic existence has been directly or indirectly denied for long period of time. The majority of my respondents unanimously agree that homosexuality is not, and cannot be an issue in Ethiopia. Some Ethiopians strongly believe that homosexuality does not exist at all in the ‘holy land’. It is a white men’s culture or disease smuggled like some kind of luxury goods. The following statement contributed to online forum discussion is representative of such views:

Amiru:

I never heard gays existed in Ethiopia. The issue is raised by the Abuna [the Patriarch of Orthodox Church] for the first time (Nazret Ethiopian News Portal, 2008).

Such views have much to do with the position of the church regarding homosexuality because the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is probably the most notorious institution in the country which has been organising campaign of abhorrence and ‘terror’ by using a two thousand years old ‘argument’ that allegedly involves the cities of Sodom and Gomorra which were engulfed by fire due to the impenitent sin of the inhabitants.

In December 2008, the Orthodox Church in alliance with the Roman Catholic and the Protestant Churches launched a new crusade against homosexuals by using apparently fictional accusation (because they had no evidence to defend their claim that gays in Ethiopia abused children) for their campaign in order to win the hearts and minds of law makers and ordinary citizens. Presumably, the Sodom and Gomorrah ‘terror’ could not stop homosexual persons from being subtly visible on the internet; therefore, the Churches had to come up with the idea of relating homosexuality to paedophilia, sexual abuse and pervertism so as to achieve the support of the public and the government with the aim of attaining a constitutional ban on homosexuality. In a resolution adopted by all participants, the religious leaders stated that homosexuality is “the Pinnacle of immorality”, which is responsible for an increase in sexual attacks on children and young men. After the meeting that took place in Addis Ababa, the Patriarch of Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Abuna Paulos stated:

For people to act in this manner, they have to be dumb, stupid like animals. We strongly condemn this behaviour. They have to be disciplined and their acts discriminated, they have to be given a lesson (Behind the Mask, 2009).

The Ethiopian criminal law, Section of penal code 600 and 601 criminalises homosexuality; however, it is not mentioned in the constitution (ILGA, 2000 cited in Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2007). Thus, the religious leaders urged members of Parliament to constitutionally ban homosexuality because only outlawing couldn't discourage the behaviour. In this resolution, the religious leaders recommended:

- Parliament to endorse a ban on homosexuality in the constitution because same-sex union contradicts the country's constitution which acknowledges the value of heterosexual family that insures generational continuity.
- Government to establish rehabilitation centres in order to provide psychological counselling and medical treatment to homosexuals.
- Government to censor the internet because it is the channel through which homosexuality and other unwanted cultures are imported in the form of films, pictures and texts (Mammo, 2009, p.28).

The first two recommendations suggest that similar to Krafft-Ebing and Karl Westphal's decades old view, homosexuality is regarded as unnatural or sexual deviance that requires medical intervention while the last recommendation suggests the un-Ethiopian character of homosexuality. The paradox here is that, according reports from hospitals in Addis Ababa, 35% of sexual assault against children mainly young boys has been committed by clergymen (Ibid., 2009, p.5). The question is that how that could happen if the church has been battling against homosexuality for centuries claiming that it is not an Ethiopian culture? Mammo explains that people who identify themselves as gay usually believe that they are falling victim of God's anger and punishment, and as a way out, they join the church in order to reverse their sexual orientation through regular pray and fasting. As a quirk of fate however, they end up being church regulars and even clergies with their sexual orientation intact. What they originally regarded as place of redemption becomes place of 'gay reproduction' (Ibid., 2009, p.5). This view is also shared by the majority in the society who earnestly believe in every word of the bible and its reference to some of the verses which claim that as a mark of his anger and his castigation, God may permit his people to fall into the hands of clergymen who practice cruelty and wickedness instead of charity and goodness.

An ethnographic study conducted among the youth in Dessie (North central highlands of Ethiopia) also reveals that there is an element of ignorance and/or extreme conservatism in the way homosexuality is conceived. For instance, Anal and oral sex, whether between same or opposite sexes, is considered extremely abnormal, which is "beyond the imagination for human beings to commit." Any form of sexual practices beyond the purpose of reproduction or penile-vaginal sexual gratification is considered indecent, a practice against culture and nature. Diverting from the standard by using organs for other purposes than what they are originally designed for is seen as an act against the will of God. The ignorance I am referring

to however comes in relation to how the respondents to Tadele (2004) viewed anal sex and masturbation which is also the view of some sections of the society. According to this view:

Semen released inside the rectum during anal sex produces worms in the rectum, causing people to become a homo. Masturbation is regarded as causing weight loss, eye problems, sterility, mental problem or madness, and spinal deformation eventually leading to homosexuality (Tadele, 2004, p.120-21).

## 7.1 New Era, New Developments: Breaking the Ice

If this paper was to be submitted before December 2008, it would have been difficult to investigate the role of the mass media in influencing attitudes towards homosexuality in the country. The mass media that had commonly been used in the construction of homosexuality was the state owned TV and radio stations that mentioned homosexuality only in relation to male paedophilia or cases of child molestation, for instance, Michael Jackson's court case that involved young boys. However, Hagos (2006), a graduate student at Addis Ababa University wrote about men who have sex with men in relation to his assessment of HIV/AIDS related risks, and at the end of 2008, a detective journalist called Mammo also broke the ice by extensively writing about homosexuality in Ethiopia based on his empirical observations and interviews with some homosexual and heterosexual Ethiopians including professionals in medical and educational sectors. So, how do Mammo and Hagos's 'ground-breaking' works presented homosexuality to the nation?

From the outset, Mammo defends his case of touching the untouchable topic, homosexuality as follows:

It is not only shameful and terrifying subject that may put Ethiopian culture and decency in jeopardy but also a topic that may challenge the power of government because it failed to fulfil its responsibility of controlling citizens. I choose to speak out because this knowledge will save the nation and generations to come (Mammo, 2009, p.3).

Embarking on the subject matter, Mammo refers to homosexuality as mere Sexual intercourse between men excluding women from the multiplicity of human sexuality. Based on his local sources, he identifies some representative homosexual/gay<sup>5</sup> behaviours which may include:

- Male to male anal, and oral sexual practices(lesbians are excluded)
- Uncontainable sexual lust that often leads to (male) child molestation.

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<sup>5</sup> Mammo's definition of homosexuality effectively excludes female homosexuality, thus, the behaviours allegedly refer to male homosexuals or gays.

- Paraphilia<sup>6</sup> and exhibitionism
- Alcoholism, gambling and high dependency on pornography, cigarette and khat<sup>7</sup> (Ibid., 2009, p.32).

Mammo further claims that homosexuality has nothing to do with Ethiopian culture or history. For him, it was first introduced by foreigners who came to Ethiopia on mission usually involving rape or payment. Then it was ‘imported’ by Ethiopians who had been living abroad for an extended period of time or other Ethiopians who travel abroad frequently. These are economically well to do individuals who viewed same-sex love as something luxury or a sign of modernity (Ibid., 2009, p.4).

This may suggest that homosexuality in Ethiopia is mainly viewed as learned behaviour, being conceptualised in relation to socio-economic status and national identity. It is depicted as a behaviour that can be learned as a result of association or socialisation. Similar to the view held by the church leaders, Homosexuals are portrayed as sexually violent individuals who tend to promote prostitution with the intention of redirecting or bending other people’s sexual orientation through violence or monetary means, thus, they are generally viewed as deviants from societal norms and values.

In relation to the claim made by the churches and the report by Mammo, It would be interesting to investigate how some Ethiopians who have access to the internet reacted to these developments. Even though the religious leaders appeared to the local media with their ‘unholy’ resolutions on the subject of homosexuality for the first time in the country’s history, the culture of debating on the issue of sexuality, for example, on local TV or radio stations is absent, thus, the bulk of the debate usually takes place on the internet through forums such as Nazret.com Ethiopian News Portal, which is one of the most popular websites frequented by Ethiopians both abroad and at home. These are some of the responses by forum members to the clergies’ and Mammo’s depiction of homosexuality:

Halafi Mengedi (nickname) writes:

I agree with churches...please eliminate them. Ethiopia doesn’t need gays. They are sick people and need treatments and confine them in prison if they do not change their behaviours after treatments. They should be wiped out from the world as whole (Nazret.com Ethiopian News Portal, 2008).

Balageru:

May God protect our children from Satan... Please don’t come up with non-sense political correctness-born to be gay... Look at Ellen DeGeneres, dresses like a man

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<sup>6</sup> Paraphilia refers to mental disorder marked by obsession with unusual sexual practices or with activities involving non-consenting or inappropriate partners (Encyclopedia of mental disorders, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Khat, also spelled qat or kat is a widely available natural drug in Ethiopia that comes from *Celastrus edulis* plant.

walks like a man. David Bowie married to our sister Iman but nobody knows his sexuality bi or multi, God knows what. When I was a newcomer, I used to watch day time TV Jerry Springer. When somebody said “I was born a man now I am a woman”, it was shocking for me but now I am like oh yeah! Get a life! (Ibid., 2008).

Melelo:

This low life pervert homosexuals are not an issue in Ethiopia. I don't know why they [the church leaders] are making a big deal out of it. One thing I like about my country is we don't have this unhuman people. I hope we keep it like that (Ibid., 2008).

In a similar online debate under the topic ‘Ethiopian government is torturing and executing gays’, which was posted on Ethiopia Forum in May 2008, participants respond:

Ras K:

I don't think Ethiopians should be seen as the only one who rejects homosexuality. It is tolerated in very few countries where children are targeted and groomed for homosexual exploitation and degradation... It is unhealthy and dangerous practice that attracts those who derive enjoyment from inflicting pain, denigrating and abusing others (Ethiopia Forum, 2008).

An Ethiopian (nickname) writes:

It will be a grand time if you [gays] have a mass suicide, thus leaving us to worry about those immediate concerns of our country. But those of you, who are residing in the cities claiming to be discriminated... Have a life and wake up and look around your fellow country folk and observe how they are leaving... For sure it is that and your kinds [gays] must be recruiting the young defenceless children in hope that one day you will be the majority (Ibid., 2008).

Semunee:

Being gay is a choice... Ethiopia will not teach this kind of weird things to its own people (Ibid., 2008).

The information from the forum discussions may suggest that In line with the views held by the clergies and the report by Mammo, forum members associate homosexuality with religious belief, disease or sexual pervertism, and national identity. For an Ethiopian (nickname), sexual orientation has to do with economic wellbeing, behaviour or a desire to be considered when at luxury. Samunee views homosexuality as a learned behaviour where individuals can simply manoeuvre their sexual orientation to fit dominant culture. For Ras K, homosexuality is a collective cult-like behaviour where sexual pervertism and sexual abuse against minors is tolerated by some countries at national level. In the case of Balageru who is

making reference to celebrities, the false linguistic flexibility that exists in Amharic language regarding gender disappears perhaps due to the explicit nature of the subject under discussion, giving ways for gender rigidity to surface.

With this information on mind, I now move onto exploring the view of my respondents regarding homosexuality in Ethiopia. Six Ethiopians who identified themselves as heterosexuals have been interviewed; however, after close analysis of the data collected, three of them have been excluded through material or evidence sampling depending on the information and the relevance of the data they provided.

Getu, 31, who has been living in Sweden for the last nine months, identifies himself as an orthodox Christian but with no regular church attendance except on big holidays such as Christmas and Easter. He was born and grew up in Addis Ababa, and educated at college level (two years).

*To the best of my knowledge, homosexuality is about sexual intercourse between two men. I heard about Piazza [shopping district in Addis Ababa, which also has a bustling night life] where guys with cars drive around to pick up poor boys at night. I guess women too can be homosexual, you know, I have read about lesbians on the internet. But we are talking about 'ferenji' [white people] because I never heard about the presence of lesbians in Ethiopia. But, I know gays are a bit all around including Bole [an upscale district near the international airport in Addis Ababa]. I do not mean that homosexuality is our culture. It is just for spoiled people who want to copy western life style without knowing the consequences. You know we Ethiopian must be proud of our culture such as taking care of your family or family members even distance relatives, offering great hospitality to a stranger, patriotism, like defeating the Italians twice who tried to colonize Ethiopia or being an Athletic hero like Haile Gebrselassie-this are some of our cultures, not homosexuality.*

Emebet, 43, who is on evangelical mission at Ethiopian church in Stockholm, has been in Sweden for about four months. She was born and grew up in a small village near Dembi Dolo (western Ethiopia). She is a high school graduate with bible training at Mekane Yesus church of Ethiopia.

*I cannot explain homosexuality as human sexual behaviour because God has said clearly what it is all about. It is just a work of devil misguiding our children, our brothers and sisters. You know, he [the devil] possesses their mind so that they fail to see the natural thing. I cannot say if homosexuality is our culture or not but I know that in 'white countries', homosexuals even get married or cohabit. You see, the devil is everywhere and he is working hard, day and night, to deceive the sheep. But, I have a message for you. All it takes is a prayer to the Lord- he will bring them back. Ah! Of course we have our own culture, for example, respecting the elderly, showing love to people even to your enemy, following God and keeping the faith. You know, the bible says that Ethiopia stretches her hand onto God. Everything that may contradict his word is not in our culture.*

Abdu, 24, has been living in Sweden for the last ten and half month. He is a Muslim from Dire Dawa (about 500 km east of the capital). He is educated up to junior high school level but spent most of his youth as a shop assistant there.

*I think a homosexual is a bushti [local derogatory word for gay] as I know it in Ethiopia. I never experienced anything like that myself, but, I heard about the white people and some Ethiopians who lived abroad doing the same thing-male wanting to sleep with male, and disseminating the culture to our country. The problem is that as people usually say in Dire Dawa [his home town], the gays might beg you the first time, and the next thing you know is that you have to beg them because there is no going back once you are poisoned. I doubt about Women being homosexual- not in Ethiopia anyway. I don't think homosexuality is one of our cultures. Ah! You know this is not Holland. We are proud of other things. We are unique in Africa because we are never colonised. Ethiopia inspired African independence and that is why we have Africa's headquarter and a bunch of Jamaicans who want to resettle. We are fighters, we love freedom. We are real men. Real men don't sleep around with other men [laughter].*

Emebet explains homosexuality based on her religious background, and it is apparent that the level of her religiosity has much to do with the way she interpreted the concept. Homosexuality as learned or innate behaviour thus has no relevance in this case. For Getu, it is a learned behaviour whereas it is a contagious like disease for Abdu. The two however do agree that homosexuality in Ethiopian context is gender specific involving two male; however, the gender specificity might be questioned in reference to national identity or the level of individuals' modernity. The interview result above and the view held by most of the forum participants regarding the concept of homosexuality, the question of its basic existence in Ethiopia ; and its culture and gender specificity may indicate that besides the influence of religion and cultural conservatism, ignorance is at the centre of this rather unconventional concept of homosexuality in Ethiopia.

## 7.2 Globalisation: A Force for Social Change?

Globalization is said to be a process through which markets sets the rules for economic activities where a single or more western nations try to control the rest of the world by controlling the flow of information through the internet. Some claim that globalization can be detrimental for the well-being of countries, cultures and individuals because a change like globalization which is driven by market forces only aggravates inequality among nations and individuals by creating winners and losers. In so doing, globalization reduces the power and sovereignty of nation states as transnational institutions gain more power. However, there is a general consensus that globalization dramatically improved communication and transportation infrastructures increasing the global connectivity of countries, institutions and people. Now, in a global era, more people, capital and information move faster and easier from one part of the globe to another (Lechner & Boli, 2007, p.1-3).

Viewed from economic point of view, the anti-globalists argument might sound appealing to developing countries like Ethiopia whereas when viewed from human right perspective, it is the pro globalist argument, which is more appealing particularly to most civil society organizations, gay activists and sexual minorities all over the world. In Ethiopia, the social and economic transformation that started in the early 1990s is usually associated with regime change than globalization; however, to me, it sounds like calling the same thing with two names because there is a strong relationship between the regime change that took place in 1991, and Ethiopia's connectedness to the globe and increase in migration and other social and economic phenomena.

The socialist government that ruled Ethiopia until 1991 followed a closed door policy isolating the country from the rest of the world with the exception of the Soviet Union, Cuba, North Korea and other Soviet satellite states. The pro western government that took office afterwards however followed the opposite direction by liberalizing economic and social policies partially opening up to the demand of transnational institutions. The regime change led to deregulation of the market that eased the movement of capital, goods and even people. For instance, government introduced an incentive package, which included housing allowance, Medicare, import of tax-free vehicles, family insurance and pensions for Ethiopian professionals who reside abroad. The government also granted a dual citizenship to all Ethiopians who became or intend to become foreign citizens with the anticipation that such policy would attract the well-educated to commit their human and financial capital as investment to the development of the country (Solomon, 2006, p.271-72). Local reports acknowledge the change achieved after 1991 without acknowledging the role of globalization in it; however according to remarks made by Messina and Lahav:

The communication, technological and transportation revolution that have been unleashed since the 1990s have spawned the ever freer movement of capital, goods and services across national borders-transnational flows that have all but eradicated meaningful national frontiers. This rapid acceleration in the international flow of capital, trade, and technology has profoundly affected the nature of international migration as well (2006, p.569).

Therefore, the reforms introduced by Ethiopian government not only increased remigration but also changed the form of migration and the attitude of migrants towards the culture of their original country because migrants today are less associated with a single country as the form of migration in the global era is characterised by circulation and transnationalism that apparently encouraged migrants to openly express their sexual identity because they are no longer under the constraints of particular culture.

The new policies were not in any way intended to serve the interest of the LGBT persons in the country; however, it indirectly benefits this section of the society as well because with the return of the Ethiopian Diaspora came new attitudes and possibilities such as more liberal thinking regarding sexual identity, the chance to meet someone who permanently lives abroad, and employment opportunities due increase in investment. The introduction of internet to Ethiopia in the 1990s apparently transformed the life of LGBT persons here. For instance, Hagos (2006, p.22) and Mammo (2009, 28) have both claimed the fact that gays are much more visible in Addis Ababa and other urban areas particularly after 1991, thus, it is evident that there is a strong relationship between the regime change in 1991, Ethiopia's connection to the worldwide web and the union of homosexuals as an underground community. So, thanks to the internet, it is now possible for the underground LGBT community to have a common meeting place on the net. It provided not only easy access to information regarding LGBT rights but also facilitated dating both with Ethiopian gay Diaspora and others regardless of ethnicity, race or geographical boundaries. So, it is possible to establish a link between globalization, migration and cultural or attitude change that took place in just less than two decades.

To be more specific, the kind of cultural or attitude change I am referring to is the transition experienced by the general public and the LGBT community in Ethiopian and abroad from silence to voice. Gay returnees are encouraging gays at home to accept and express their sexuality. The public is also beginning to have more access to information regarding sexuality and other issues related to it, and so does the local LGBT community. Now, the clerics and governmental officials use the mass media including the internet to appear to the public and condemn homosexuality because homosexuals are now visible on the internet and probably all over the city. Ordinary citizens also forward their views on the issue using the internet, thus, just in the period of fifteen years, change is achieved. Homosexuality can still be illegal or a taboo, but the society has started talking about it- it is now a social issue. That is a remarkable change by Ethiopian standard because just two decades earlier, it is unthinkable to even mention homosexuality partly because the majority of the population would not even understand it.

## 8. Concluding discussions

From the outset, I had the objective of exploring the social construction of homosexuality with the assumption that religious dogma and misconceptions might be some of the possible reasons behind the abhorrence and structural discrimination against LGBT persons in Ethiopia. Moreover, I aimed at understanding why, probably for the first time in the country's history, the church and the media started showing interest in the subject of homosexuality.

Confirming some of the assumptions, Most of the information obtained from this study suggests that religious dogmas and misconceptions due to ignorance and disrespect for human rights are some of the most important factors behind the problem. As mentioned in the introduction, the great majority of Ethiopian population is characterised by high level of religiously that apparently led to homophobia among the public. Image distortion is one of the approaches employed by the church and the media to create fear among the public. The depiction of homosexuals as individuals with some kind of obsessive compulsive behaviour, that is, perverts, paedophiles and rapers appears to be some of the reasons why homosexuality is still a criminal act in the country. Though Ethiopia is one of the first countries to adopt the United Nations' universal declaration of human right in 1948, there is a noticeable relationship between the country's human right record and the legal status of homosexuality as political oppression and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, sex and sexual orientation is prevalent throughout the country.

Equally important is the level of ignorance among the public. As noted earlier, about 85% of the total population are rural dwellers, and rural-urban gap is at the highest, which means, rural dwellers are predominantly underprivileged tenants with little or no basic education whereas urban dwellers are characterised by relative heterogeneity in terms of socio-economic status. What is worse is that the rural has little or no access to services such as internet, television, cinemas, DVD players or other publications on sexuality due to infrastructural and economic reasons, thus, they have no ways of understanding human sexuality except tales and rumours usually spread by the clergies and urban dwellers with rural background who still have rural connections.

Still another possible reason as to why homosexuality has been denounced by most Ethiopians as western culture might be the influence of pan-Africanism.<sup>8</sup> Does anti-colonialism or African nationalism really have to do something with homosexuality? This

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<sup>8</sup> Generally, Pan-Africanism refers to a historical, cultural, and ethical and social- political movement or philosophy that aims at unifying Africa by promoting Africaness and African social Values and norms. The Organization for African Unity with its headquarter in Addis Ababa is regarded as its political manifestation that provides institutional framework for continental struggle and unity against colonialism/neo-colonialism. Like his successors, Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia until 1973, was a prominent figure in Pan-Africanism. (Chambers Dictionary of World History, 2000).

question is deep rooted in the history of African continent particularly colonialism and Africa's struggle for independence. By late nineteenth century, European imperial powers occupied most of the continent except Liberia in the west and Ethiopia in the east of the continent, but After the Second World War, many independent African states began to appear adopting the three colours of Ethiopian flag. (green, gold and red) as a sign of freedom and pan-Africanism. The election of emperor Haile selassie of Ethiopia as the first chairman of the organization for African Unity (OAU) in 1963 and the selection of the Ethiopian capital as a seat for the organization's headquarter also indicate the role independent Ethiopia played in Pan-africanism during the period of struggle for independence . This appears to cause many Ethiopians to believe that their country is the guardian of not only African freedom but also African ethic and culture. For them, rejecting neo-colonialism or cultural colonialism today involves utterly rejecting homosexuality because, according to them, homosexuality is a mere western culture.

Throughout my writings, I have used words and abbreviations such as 'homosexuality' and 'LGBT persons' because I chose my approach to be more inclusive and more general; however, my findings reveal that the western context of sexual category is almost absent in Ethiopia. All parties, that is, the clergies, law makers, the media, and others all refer to sodomy or men who have sex with men by overlooking lesbians and other sexual minorities even in the penal code. This does not in any way suggest that female homosexuality is tolerated in Ethiopia; instead, it can be seen as the manifestation of the masculine culture that obscures women and their role in society. The conceptualisation of homosexuality as solely men's sexuality may also suggest the poor understanding of gender and feminist issues in the country. Historically, it is the man who is the head of family, the boss, the hero, the criminal, and of course, the creator and the all doer, thus, this image of man as all doer directly applies when it comes to the interpretation of sexuality. As the country is characterised by cultural and linguistic multiplicity, the reason for false linguistic subversion of gender/sexual identity can be different depending on which ethnic group we are referring to; however, one thing appears to be clear. In Ethiopia, Culture through language reinforces not only the supremacy of men/masculine over women/feminine but also the supremacy of heterosexuality over homosexuality.

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## 10. List of Abbreviations

NGOs- Non Governmental Organizations

LGBT- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexuals and transgender

EPRDF- Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

ILGA -International Lesbian and Gay Association