Gay Muslims keep religion and sexuality separate

Homosexual men in Beirut consider their sexual orientation to be a transitional phase rather than a lifelong part of their identity.

Erica Li Lundqvist studies how gay Muslims deal with and practice their homosexuality.

Her research is essentially ploughing virgin territory.

Lundqvist is an islamologist at Lund University in Sweden. She has resided in Beirut as a master's degree student and a research fellow.

She lived with what she calls “tysta bögar” [quiet queers] for a total of a year and a half and interviewed them at gay bars in the city.

Forbidden by law

Lebanon is considered one of the most liberal countries in the Middle East. It is home to several clubs that are frequented by gays and is even described in a Lonely Planet guidebook as gay-friendly.

But this doesn’t mean that homosexuality is accepted or openly practiced. Homosexuality is illegal and gay-bashing – verbally or physically – pervades society.

A double life

As a result, gays live dual lives. They have to find a precarious balance between mosques, families and the gay clubs.

They are in constant fear of discovery. They know that if their sexuality is revealed, it could mean losing their jobs or even being murdered by their families, so-called honour killings.

The homosexual men interviewed by Lundqvist had chosen strategies that compartmentalised religion and sexuality, keeping them well apart.

In some periods religion took priority. At other times they were more sexually active.

“After a period of excesses at the clubs the men would often purify themselves, such as by taking a pilgrimage to Mecca. Then they could return to their mosque,” she said.

Marrying and having children

The men interviewed by Lundqvist said they lived in sin. They thought of their homosexuality as a phase in
their lives – something that would pass.

All of them were certain they would get married to a woman and father children. This was something they wished to do.

“One of my informants, in fact one whom I considered to be the most ‘purely gay’, sent me a text when he was getting married. He was happy and proud,” says Lundqvist.

These gay men said that after getting married sexuality would no longer be so important. They would sacrifice themselves to be good family men and Muslims.

**Family prejudices**

The researcher says the fear of being ostracised by families and relatives overshadowed everything else for these men.

“One of my informants had told their families about their sexual orientation. One told his sister, the other his mother. The mother had strongly urged him against opening up to his father, in fear of his safety,” she said.

“There’s a tendency to be more liberal about homosexuality in the Beirut middle class, especially if the parents have studied abroad. But for those with a rural background, parents are pretty likely to condemn homosexuality,” says Lundqvist.

**Possible honour killing**

One of the researcher’s informants died under mysterious circumstances. His friends think he may have been a victim of an honour killing, but they have no proof.

“Gays in Beirut live precarious lives. For instance there are lots of brutal stories of taxi drivers demanding sexual services of them,” says Lundqvist.

**Changes underway**

Lundqvist has seen lots of changes in society over the course of the years during which she studied homosexuals in Lebanon. In part because of American TV series, homosexuals have become more aware of their situation.

Positive things have also occurred in connection with the Arab Spring. The Swedish researcher thinks human rights issues are more on the agenda.

“How many have become more accepting of their own homosexuality. But gay bashing and persecution have also come hand in hand with more openness,” says Lundqvist.

**How is it in Sweden?**

Many of the men she interviewed wanted to come to the West and to a society where a more tolerant form of Islam could be practiced. But this was a distant dream for most of them.

Lundqvist is now compiling informants for a new study on what it is like to be a gay Muslim in her secular home country Sweden.
“I have come in contact with a group of homosexual immigrants in Sweden. Although I haven’t begun the study I see that it isn’t necessarily so much easier for them to be gay in Malmö than in Beirut,” she said.

Mistrust of the safety net

Gays in Sweden have a safety net in legal rights that protect individuals who are open about their sexual orientation. But the emotional costs and social consequences of coming out of the closet in Sweden are much higher for Muslims and immigrants.

Many have doubts as to whether the country’s social democratic safety net will give them protection.

A gay immigrant in Sweden has to deal with two types of estrangement.

“It’s more risky to break one’s family ties here, in a foreign country. That makes you very much alone,” says Lundqvist.

------------------------

Read the Norwegian version of this article at forskning.no [9]

Being homosexual and disabled [13] Young Muslims in Oslo: From riots to responsibility [14]
Erica Li Lundqvist's profile [15]
Gayted Communities : Marginalized Sexualities in Lebanon [16]

Siw Ellen Jakobsen [17]
Glenn Ostling

January 8, 2014 - 06:29
This field is not in use. The footer is displayed in the mini panel called "Footer (mini panel)"

Source URL: http://sciencenordic.com/gay-muslims-keep-religion-and-sexuality-separate

Links: