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EXCERPT:



Senegal
Health | Gay - Lesbian

Senegal's gay community confronts social taboos

Misanet / IRIN, 21 January (2005) - The meeting-place was at a noisy down-market street café where the waiter as well as the clients were gay, but where everyone was staunchly pretending not to be. Senegal's homosexual men are peeping out from behind the mask, but social and religious taboos run strong.

- We are always pretending, said one of a couple of the leaders of the country's underground gay movement who had agreed to come out of the woodwork to talk to the UN media 'IRIN' on condition of anonymity. "Sometimes we feel sick of the lies," he said.

Hit by a spate of deaths and disease in the community five years ago, a group of gays got together "to find out whether it was HIV/AIDS and what to do about it," said 27-year-old Mamadou (not his real name). "There were no free tests available; people wondered if it was malaria."

Mamadou elaborates: "There were active and passive gays, transvestites, queens, a whole mass of people who're vilified and don't dare go to hospital because they're afraid of being blacklisted and marginalised. Many were illiterate too," he said. "Being gay means being shut out. We had to organise."

From 56 card-carrying residents of Senegal's fast-paced hip capital Dakar in 2000, group membership has leapt to more than 400 today, most of them aged between 18 and 40 and living in towns and villages across the land. A second group of MSMs - the acronym for men who have sex with men - claims to have signed up around the same number.

- Work with the gay community is beginning to bear fruit, said Alioune Badara Sow, head of projects at the National Alliance Against AIDS (ANCS), a leading non-governmental organisation. "The number of activists is getting bigger by the day, attracting men from all walks of life, tailors, politicians, the sons of traditional healers."

But the dilemma facing Senegal's gays is the same as it was five years ago - whether to work quietly but efficiently underground, or come out of the closet and face the music. "Sex is a taboo subject here," Mr Sow told 'IRIN'.

- Public opinion wouldn't understand if we talked about all this openly, he added. "People would think we were okaying homosexuality. But we must support men who have sex with men, focusing on their battle against HIV/AIDS in the interests of public health."

At a downtown public hospital, where ceiling-fans whirred in poorly-lit corridors peopled by wan, dejected patients, the head of the HIV/AIDS and STI [Sexually Transmitted Diseases] department, Abdoulaye Sidibe Wade spoke out against discrimination in the public health sector. Men who have sex with men "are part and parcel of the population, we consider them to be human beings, with rights and duties," he told 'IRIN'.

Sociologists say the "gor jigeen" - which means "man-woman" in Wolof, the dominant language of Senegal - have long been an accepted part of society, on condition that they avoid open displays of their sexuality. However, gays appear to have a very long bridge to cross to join the rest of the human race in Senegal.

As in most sub-Saharan African countries, homosexuality is illegal in Senegal. Article 319 of the penal code bans same-sex relations as "un-natural". Strong conservative values, plus the preachings of the Koran in this 95 percent Moslem country, mean trouble for those breaching accepted sexual practice.

Mamadou, a quiet dresser who wears his hair in long plaits in a sole slight sign of non-conformity, spent three weeks in bed on one occasion recovering from a beating after the gutter press published his photo and address. The experience terrorised his mother, who with rare tolerance has accepted her "deviant" son.

His friend Alain (not his real name) on the other hand, a highly-skilled 30-year-old sporting a mass of rings and cropped hair, would never dream of letting the family know he was gay. Like many homosexuals who due to social pressure live life as married men, he has a child.

- They take a man as a second wife, he joked, referring to the prevalent practice of polygamy. "But more and more infected gays are making women pregnant. There is a big transmission problem that has broken the bounds of the community."

Because of the ban on homosexuality, it took the group two years to legally register their association of men who have sex with men. They chose a vague name for the group to avoid running into trouble with the authorities or the police - "And Ligeey" - "Let's Work Together" in Wolof.

Step one was finding medical help, a Senegalese doctor willing to assist the outcasts. "They were afraid to visit doctors, afraid we would judge them," said one of a group of

medics who now helps homosexuals free of charge. "But we treated them like human beings. They needed health care, we dared look after them, and subsequently we came under verbal attack for assisting them."

Working on a voluntary basis, three Dakar doctors and two in each of Senegal's 11 administrative regions open their doors to homosexuals seeking help for sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and opportunistic infections.

The doctors, who provide drugs, treatment and even free transport when necessary, also organise information workshops to help homosexuals help themselves by spreading awareness and know-how through the community.

- It is difficult to find doctors willing to work with the community, the medic admitted. "But I believe that the Senegalese are basically tolerant people and that in the long run the homosexuals would be best off remaining underground and negotiating their health problems little by little. There is no point in coming out and upsetting social sensitivities."

However, Mr Sow, the head of projects at the National Alliance Against AIDS, disagreed. "One day, the community will be strong enough to come out of hiding. Until then we must support them. Some people are just plain scared of being associated with them publicly and of having to face a backlash."

Mr Sow said that although Senegal boasted one of Africa's lowest HIV prevalence rates - 1.5 percent - vulnerable groups and far-flung corners of the country were far harder hit. Sexual workers in the southern region of Casamance, for example, suffered a prevalence rate of more than 30 percent, he noted.

- We have no exact statistics yet on homosexuals and HIV/AIDS, Mr Sow told 'IRIN'. "But this is one of the potential carrier groups we need to target to ensure Senegal can continue to contain the pandemic. We must focus on homosexuals. There are more and more youngsters, 15 and 16-year-olds joining the community," he added.

The National Alliance Against AIDS started off by setting up a peer programme to boost the self-esteem of Senegal's gay community. It then helped to organise workshops on safe sex, prevention, condom use, sexually transmitted diseases, anal injury and the like.

But Mr Sow said there was still much to be done, notably in persuading reluctant health workers to assist homosexuals and providing them with the specialist training to do so. "Yet at the national level there is no overall plan to care for homosexuals," Mr Sow said, referring to a four-year programme drafted by the state-run National AIDS Council of Senegal (CNLS).

The Council official Katy Cisse Wone acknowledged that there were thousands of homosexuals in the country. "They are a public health concern," she assured 'IRIN'.

Mamadou and Alain and their friends have asked the internationally funded AIDS Council for a grant of CFA francs 36 million (US\$ 73,000) to finance a project to tackle AIDS in Senegal's gay community, but they fear it is being blocked due to discrimination. The Council told 'IRIN' their request would be considered once the organisation starts to assess a new round of project proposals in March.

As the debate rages over whether or not the time is ripe for Senegal's gays to rip off their mask, Mamadou and Alain are left mulling the even thornier and more basic question of religious stigma against the gay community. "Only God can judge you. He judges the heart," said Mamadou.

By UN media IRIN

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