

Spark Lunchtime Discussion-17th July 2008: *The role of the media and social change in addressing Homophobia and the decriminalisation of sex work in Jamaica*

On Thursday 17th July, Doctor Robert Carr from the University of the West Indies was guest speaker at the Spark lunchtime discussion and spoke about his advocacy work with the media in Jamaica on the issues around the rights of sex workers and of men who have sex with men, with the aim of raising public awareness and addressing hostile public attitudes.

Dr Carr explained that his presentation was a reflection on approximately four years of work. Originally he was involved in HIV prevention work - handing out condoms to sex workers and observed that, in the mornings, they would often come in showing signs of having been beaten up. The context was destroying the intervention, and the situation was similar for gay men. Dr Carr therefore decided that it was necessary to focus on the human rights abuses first, because people only wanted to talk about human rights for people living with HIV and not for sex workers or for gay men, so that social exclusion was a real issue.

When Dr Carr first started his work, there were often instances where gay men who were being chased by mobs would run into a police station for protection and the police would chase them back out again to the angry mob, instead of protecting them. Dr Carr also gave the example of an article that was written in a newspaper about gay men and women who had come together through religion, called '*Inside a Gay Church*'. There was a strong backlash against this article with readers writing in stating that "homosexual acts are contrary to natural law" and "homosexual action...evokes moral concern".

Dr Carr and his colleagues decided to tackle this through a multi-pronged campaign focusing on the rights of men sleeping with men, people living with HIV, and sex workers. This included a media campaign, the launch of a website, and radio and TV personal appearances. However, the cost in human resources was considerable and the people involved had to withstand the pressure of negative responses. Funding was also an issue. There is a culture of violence against men having sex with men in Jamaica and this was celebrated in popular music. One of the campaigns, called '*Stop Murder Music*', lobbied against and exposed the lyrics which incited violence against gay men. Human Rights Watch supported this project which was reported in the international media.

Another campaign was based upon a report, entitled '*Hated to Death*', which documented abuse against bisexuals, men who sleep with men, and sex workers. It was seen as important to encourage groups to work together to advocate for their own humanity. Human Rights Watch, the local Human Rights Coalition and Jamaica AIDS Support (JAS) were involved, as were human rights groups whose primary focus was police brutality. The partners developed a real sense of solidarity - a breakthrough for

the overall campaign. The general response was that the report could not be true or the 'middle classes would have known about it'.

Dr Carr explained that radio is generally the freest form of media, followed by television (although this has the disadvantages that people can be more easily identified). Print media is the most controlled and conservative with many newspapers refusing to print letters etc. The campaign preferred to use interactive media and gay men and sex workers were primed before speaking on radio or television to prepare them to cope with negative comments. On one occasion a gay man, who had his jaw wired and was in a wheelchair as a result of a violent attack, was brought to an intervention at a human rights public meeting to prove that violence against gay men actually happened despite people's refusal to believe it.

Alongside these campaigns there were continuous behind-the-scenes strategies between 2006-2008, to engage various groups within Jamaican society including; the Church, National HIV programmes, the police, local human rights allies and international alliances. A significant breakthrough came when police actually intervened in a mob attack on three gay men outside a drug store, whereas previously they would have ignored such a call. This demonstrated a real switch to the realization that such things are happening, from a previous position of denial. Respected human rights groups also held their own press campaigns to emphasise that homophobic violence is not acceptable.

There has also been some breakthrough with regards to sex workers' rights. The different levels of tolerance towards sex workers are mirrored by inequalities in society; for example, it is considered perfectly acceptable to have sex workers in clubs, whereas street workers are regarded far more negatively. The media also contributed to the negative view of sex workers by associating sex workers with crack addiction etc.

Sex workers broke into the mainstream media when a newspaper article entitled '*Tax Sex Workers!*' calculated that this could bring in \$3.0 billion. The notion of taxing sex workers raised fundamental questions with regards to citizenship, power and the social impact for the Caribbean, because sex work is illegal. The article prompted a huge explosion in the media, where the issue was picked up by radio broadcasts and two major national newspapers and finally by television - especially the nightly news broadcasts and rebroadcasts. Sex workers even issued their own press release and the debate spread to parliament and the Prime Minister.

While the issue of taxing sex workers continues, the idea that gay people have rights too is still seen as counter to development. Dr Carr and his colleagues have started to tackle issues of governance and have improved their relationships with politicians, local human rights organisations, and religious leaders. Stigma and discrimination, human rights abuse and gender inequalities are so multi-layered and embedded that they have led to engagement with key institutions and a need to be aware of both the internal and external politics in order to create an enabling internal and external environment for change. Such structural challenges require strong alliances and it has been necessary to work at sustaining these relationships.

People then had the opportunity to ask Dr Carr questions:

Q: Have you been able to do any work with the University of the West Indies to develop the students' understanding of these issues?

RC: "The University of West Indies is my employer and it has been more a question of 'where in the university are certain things possible?' There have been groups of gay men and lesbians who have come together and formed their own groups at the university. However, some lecturers do not want to focus on these issues and you have to be careful not to push the issue too hard or people can shut down."

Q: Are people prosecuted for violence against gay men? There was an incident in Australia where four young men went to jail for beating a gay man to death. This led to a school education programme discouraging homophobic violence (although the motivation and focus was on the loss of the four men's lives as they were in prison, rather than the loss of the gay man's life!)

RC: "There are groups lobbying for the fact that, regardless of your view point on men sleeping with men, the police should do what they are meant to do and are paid for, i.e. protect people. It's a question of citizenship. The police were not initially ready to hear this, however, things have moved along slightly. An example of this was a story that was in the paper only the other day where police were called out to a house where gay men were reported to be having loud parties with drugs etc. The police stated that they arrived at the scene and asked the men to turn the music down, which they did, and so that was the end of the story and there was nothing more to be reported."

"However, Jamaica is a long way from acknowledging that gay young people exist. Workshops have been carried out with gay men about experiences they had growing up i.e. how did they family/school react? Often these young people live in communities where they are known as the 'local gay person' and as long as they do not bring other gay people into that community then that was fine - although naturally, the situation could turn at any time."

Dr Carr explained that there was evidence that, if you worked with parents to increase their understanding then it helped to build resilience within that young person.

There was then a short break for a sandwich lunch where people could network and carry on the discussion.

After lunch, there was a general discussion where people were invited to give their thoughts on Dr Carr's presentation and share their own experiences of work in similar areas. Most of the questions were directed at Dr Carr:

Q: Has the position of the Church in the UK with regards to gay bishops generated discussion in the Caribbean?

RC: "Yes, the Archbishop (of Jamaica) sided with the African community, i.e. he was outraged. There was a very emotional debate as people were battling with their own emotions."

Dr Carr had recently heard a 'Dear Pastor' programme on the radio, where people call in to ask the pastor about their problems etc., and the pastor was actually pro sex workers having the right to sell sex.

"The fact that the debate itself is in the media is a sign of progress. The Church is very powerful, especially in Jamaica, and Governance is tied to what is *interpreted* as being godliness."

Q: Is it possible to debate from another angle e.g. that traditional Christian values are against violence?

RC: "It's a slippery slope as these people know the Bible inside out and can usually quote it better than the person making the counter-argument. Often people have been taught that religion is condemnatory."

Q: In Sydney, regardless of people's attitude to gay people, everyone loves the Mardi Gras as it is considered as something Sydney does "best" and so can have pride in. An economic impact analysis was carried out and the positive advantages were marketed. Is there any way that the positive aspects of men sleeping with men/ decriminalisation of sex workers could be marketed as a positive thing in Jamaica?

RC: "It's very difficult. A recent study has revealed the high HIV infection rate in Jamaica. The 15-19 year old age group has been shown to be the highest. We will need to prepare the media for this and special training will be carried out. The notion of 'tax cheats' is very powerful and everyone has an opinion on whether or not sex workers should be taxed and sex workers have been given a voice for the first time. Relationships are being built with key people, which is important."

Q: Are you planning on doing something on 'lessons learned' from this project?

RC: "Yes, but this has to be owned locally at the lowest level so people feel that it is *theirs*. The sex work projects have benefitted from the homosexuality work. We have achieved an awful lot in four to five years and have been dealing with deep rooted beliefs etc. We also have drug dealers and prisoners in mind. Our work has fundamentally been about changing social norms."

Q: Would it be possible to get this work funded?

RC: "It would be very difficult to get donors to agree on the indicators etc. The people involved are currently volunteers who work elsewhere during the day."

Robin Vincent thanked Dr Robert Carr for an interesting and inspiring presentation and asked him to keep us informed as to how his work goes in the future.