Butler, A.H. and Astbury, G. (2005). South Africa: LGBT issues. In James T. Sears (Ed.), *Youth, education, and sexualities: An international encyclopedia*. Pp 810 – 814. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.

South Africa, LGBT Youth in

Despite political, legal, and educational reforms, South African **lesbian**, **gay**, **bisexual**, and **transgender youth** (LGBT) continue to battle against **homophobia** in their daily lives. Although problems confronting these youth are similar to those faced by those within other countries, it would be a disservice to chararcterize LGBT youth experiences as generic. South African demography, family and cultural support, access to peer support, **curriculum** development and homophobia in education, lobbying efforts, access to accurate literature and information, as well as **mental health** provisions within a new democratic society create unique challenges for these youth. Further, according to the 2001 Census, within a population of nearly forty-five million there are eleven official languages, with the most commonly spoken being Zulu, Xhosa, English, and Afrikaans. Although **urban** centers are well-developed, disadvantaged **rural** settlements are in the majority, with cultural norms and mores strongly influenced by conservative traditionalism. There is no formal method of determining the numbers of LGBT young people, as the 2001 Census did not include LGBT lifestyles despite protests from gay civil rights leaders.

Many rural groups still adhere to the extended family tradition, with strong adherence to African male patriarchy. Even within urban settings, old tribal dictates such as coming of age rituals hold sway. For those from a tribal culture, the extended family plays a role in decision-making and nurturance until such

time as the young person undergoes a ritual or symbolic transition to being socially accepted as an adult man or woman. There is no leeway for queer youth to sidestep this cultural transition in order to allow constitutionally sanctioned recognition as LGBT citizens. This conservatism is also found in traditional Afrikaans families, which strongly emphasize **Christian** norms and support for mainstream lifestyles.

Traditional beliefs combined with homophobic **stereotypes** have resulted in traumatic experiences for lesbian and gay youth in South Africa. Young lesbians have been raped by older males "teaching" them to be real women or "curing" them of lesbianism. Young gay men are beaten by other males in order to make them "real men." Further, ignorance, stereotypes, and lack of medical resources in impoverished communities have compounded the problems of **HIV education** and **AIDS**.

Three-quarters of South Africans are black. Due to residual effects of apartheid, those most socioeconomically disadvantaged are within the black population. The legacy of apartheid restrictions mean that many black young people reside in what were formally known as "townships"—black settlement areas on the outskirts of urban centers. This significantly impacts LGBT youth as public transport services remain underdeveloped. Many young people must rely on trains and expensive taxi services, hindering their ability to become involved with LGBT groups predominantly found in urban centers.

Isolation is thus a key issue confronting many LGBT youth, resulting in mental health ramifications such as internalized homophobia, suicidal ideation,

and lowered self-esteem. The National Youth Commission has been slow to recognize the vulnerability of LGBT youth within the South African context. The Lesbian and Gay Equality Project (formerly the National Coalition on Gay and Lesbian Equality) has been instrumental in allowing the voices of LGBT young people to be heard, but the sheer size of South Africa and isolated rural areas hamper efforts to network these youth. International organizations such as Gay Rights Watch seek to network adult and youth activists, using the **Internet** and media sources to disseminate relevant information to policy makers, educators, and social service providers.

In South Africa, adolescents spend five years in high school, roughly from ages thirteen to eighteen. However, due to educational injustices in the past, historically disadvantaged students may be considerably older by the time they leave high school. At the 50th General Meeting of the African National Congress (held in Mafeking, December 1997), a commitment was made to LGBT youth to ensure their protection from **discrimination** at home, at school, on the streets, and in the media. Yet, feedback from South African young people indicates that they are not protected in their everyday environments (Human Rights Watch 2003). LGBT youth experience deeply entrenched homophobia within their school contexts, reporting both staff and students are responsible for name calling (e.g., "*moffie*"–an Afrikaans, derogatory term, denoting overtly feminine characteristics), exclusion, and physical and emotional abuse (Butler, Alpaslan, Strümpher, and Astbury 2003; Human Rights Watch 2003). Resultant feelings experienced by LGBT youth include guilt, sinfulness, fear, internal turmoil,

helplessness, degradation, and humiliation. For many LGBT young people it is safer to remain invisible.

The National Ministry of Education has invested enormous resources in outcomes based education methods and the development of a life skills training approach, which allow for the protection of cultural identity and minority group self-actualization. Life skills training briefly discusses homosexuality. Curriculum 2005 seeks to actively redress **prejudice**, focusing on racial and gender equality. However, this does not explicitly address LGBT issues or the particular needs of queer youth.

Curriculum content and the provision of accurate and ethical LGBT information to young people is a gap which is felt acutely by South African youth (Butler 2000; Human Rights Watch 2003). These efforts are hindered by the residual inequalities of apartheid and the lobbying of conservative religious groups. The publication of *The Pink Agenda* (McCafferty and Hammon 2001), for example, condemns the inclusion of homosexuality in school curriculum and assists young people "trapped" in a homosexual lifestyle. Church groups have campaigned to place it in every high school library. However, LGBT activists have succeeded in a government ban of this work for those under the age of eighteen. Accurate and positive material on LGBT issues remains difficult to access. In urban centers, popular magazines like *Outright* and *Exit* are available. These are effectively outofreach for LGBT youth who are poor, live in rural areas, or cannot read English. A similar language problem exists with the provision of suitably themed **literature** for LGBT youth. Literature written by and for black

LGBT youth in the black languages of South Africa and set in contexts to which the disadvantaged can relate does not exist.

The Internet is another source for mostly privileged LGBT youth. The majority of historically disadvantaged schools in South Africa do not have Internet facilities and rural or poor youth lack the family financial resources to access the Web. Further, in schools with such facilities, parental and religious groups exert pressure to restrict access to LGBT content.

Having recourse to knowledgeable and supportive school counselors or guidance teachers is another problem facing most LGBT students. There are four types of schools in South Africa: independent, government, Christian, and home schooling. While independent schools may have better educated counselors, few are trained in working with LGBT youth. In the majority of state schools, the lack of funding is the major barrier. Historically disadvantaged schools still require large-scale development and investment to provide even the basic essentials of education such as adequate buildings, school books, and desks. These schools typically have no formally prepared guidance teachers or counselors, relying instead on teaching staff not trained in **counseling** or knowledgeable about LGBT issues. Finally, there is no interest within Christian schools or in home schooling in addressing the needs of LGBT youth; these youth are silenced and remain invisible. ***See also* Africa, LGBT Youth and Issues in; Bullying; Educational Policies; Mental Health; Race and Racism; Religious Fundamentalism; Sexual Abuse and Assault; Social Class; South Africa, LGBT Issues in; Youth, At-Risk.**

Bibliography

Butler, Allister. 2000. *The Coming Out Process of South African Gay and Lesbian Youth.* Unpublished Doctoral Manuscript, University of Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

Butler, Allister; Nicky Alpaslan, Juanita Strümpher, and Gaynor Astbury. 2002. "Gay and Lesbian Youth Experiences of Homophobia in South African Secondary Education." *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* 1, no. 2: 3-28.

Human Rights Watch. 2003. *State Sponsored Homophobia and its Consequences in Southern Africa*. New York: Author.

McCafferty, Christine, and Peter Hammon. 2001. *The Pink Agenda, Sexual Revolution in South Africa, and the Ruin of the Family*. Pretoria: Africa Christian Action.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. (1996). *Act 108 of 1996*. Pretoria. Government Publishers.

Web Sites

Behind the Mask. December 2004. Accessed December 2, 2004. http://www.mask.org.za/SECTIONS/AfricaPerCountry/ABC/south%20africa/south%20africa_index.html. A Web site on gay and lesbian affairs in Africa, examining constitutional changes, topical issues, and ongoing debates. This contains links to other South African LGBT sites.

Home School Legal Defence Association. A Critique on South Africa's New

National Curriculum Proposal. February 2002. Accessed December, 2,

2004. http://www.hslda.org/hs/international/SouthAfrica/200202110.asp. A

critique of South African schools' inclusion of LGBT issues

The Revised National Curriculum. Accessed December 2, 2004.

http://education.pwv.gov.za/DoE_Sites/Curriculum/New_2005/overview-

doc.pdf. Outlines the background to the development and contents of

Curriculum 2005

South African National Youth Commission. November 2004. Accessed

December 2, 2004. http://www.nyc.gov.za. Provides a useful overview regarding

general youth issues in South Africa and includes a search function to identify

issues pertinent to LGBT young people.

Dr Allister H. Butler and Dr Gaynor Astbury