

## **CROSS PARTY GROUP: INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**20 JANUARY 2015**

**COMMITTEE ROOM 5, SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT**

**5.30PM – 7PM**

**Attendees:** Sarah Boyack MSP, Kate Fry, Greg Baker, Godwyns Onwuchekwa, Marjorie Clark, Liz Cooper, David Stevenson, Kirsty Kurcik, Andrew Marin, Rebecca Marek, Nancy Russell, Gail Wilson, Sophie Tolley, Fiona Forsyth, Rebecca Walker, Rachel Campbell, James Smith, Barbara Bompani, Alastair Carr, Chris Bermudez, Marie Kamfjord, Declan Murray, Bryony Nicholson, Sinead Cook, Oonagh O'Brien, Carolyn Ford, Helen Gourlay, Anh Dang, Basanta Katwal, Manisha Singh, Kimberly Vires, Siobhan McMahon MSP, Patrick Harvie MSP, Irene Mosota, Jonathan Ssentamu, Martha Baillie, Frances Johnston.

**Apologies:** Linda Todd, Neil Robertson, Agnes Holmes, Robert England, Andrew Bevan, Duncan McNeill, John Mason, James MacLean, Pat Bryden, David Kenwyn.

### **Welcome, Introduction and Approval of Minutes**

Sarah Boyack MSP opened the meeting and wished everyone a happy new year. She then offered special thanks to Patrick Harvie MSP, Anne McTaggart MSP and Siobhan McMahon MSP for their attendance as the last two meetings of the CPG were not quorate due to lack of MSPs so she appreciated their support.

Sarah asked for approval of the minutes from the previous meetings which had been circulated to members. Two meetings in October and November were not quorate so were not able to approve minutes there. The CPG on 29 October 2014 was on Ebola. Andrew Marin moved, and Sarah Boyack MSP seconded, that the minutes represented an accurate description of the meeting. The CPG on 08 October 2014 was on Rewilding. This was a quorate meeting. Patrick Harvie MSP moved, and Sarah Boyack MSP seconded, that the minutes represented an accurate description of the meeting.

Sarah then thanked everyone else for attending this meeting of the CPG on the issue of worldwide increases of cases of homophobia and the public health implications of this. Sarah introduced the two speakers, Godwyns Onwuchekwa, who is the founder and main spokesperson for Justice for Gay Africans, and Greg Baker, who is a research associate with Waverley Care on the Scottish African Men who have sex with Men (SAMM) Project.

Sarah went on to say this is an important issue both for promoting equality as well as health, where this subject can still sometimes be taboo. Our country has just legalised gay marriage but for many Africans living in Scotland, it is far from similar in terms of equality at home; in many African countries being gay is severely punished - they might be imprisoned or attacked, and certainly there is a huge stigma involved. Sarah then emphasised how important a subject this is to address.

### **Presentation by Greg Baker, Research Associate, Waverley Care**

**Sarah Boyack MSP** introduced Greg Baker. Greg is currently working on the SAMM (Scottish African Men who have sex with Men) Project. It is funded by NHS Lothian and Waverley Care. Greg has also taught sexual health in Edinburgh high schools.

**Greg Baker** began by mentioning those organisations that are funding his research with SAMM – Glasgow and Lothian NHS and the Lottery. Glasgow Caledonian University are also supporting with academics. Greg then warned that some slides contained violent images.

Greg spoke of the purpose of his work with SAMM – it is about looking at the communities of men who have sex with men (MSM), the barriers they face with engaging with services and the best ways to help them engage.

As part of the project, he interviewed African MSMs and faith leaders. The key focus groups they began with were community members, African women, African men, young people (mixed gender aged 16-24) and service providers, though they later removed “community members” as that suggested that MSMs were not community members themselves. Greg discovered that fellow Waverley Care Colleagues were wary of approaching this issue so Greg later added the staff as another study group. He recorded and transcribed all the interviews and then analysed them.

Four MSM were interviewed. Back in their native African countries, being gay is referred to as being evil or cursed and that attitude has travelled with them to Scotland. These beliefs are exacerbated by rigorous programmes in Africa to indoctrinate children; there are open protests against homosexuality including the church and regular violence.

Greg also interviewed some Pastors. One said that the country is living in denial – “most married African men have sex with other men.”

Witchdoctors came up a lot during the interviews as often being turned to, to “cure” the homosexuality but they are known to gossip so it can be very risky to turn to them for fear of being outed.

Some MSMs in Scotland had found new ways to embrace their sexuality. Going out and clubbing was mentioned as a big part of life for several of the MSMs in the focus groups; as the one place you can definitely find people who accept you. One MSM hadn’t even realised being gay was legal here as he couldn’t imagine it being legal anywhere. Many of those interviewed in the focus groups talked of being cut out of their family, or an agreement that being gay was never spoken of again after their coming out.

Greg also found that many of the MSMs were having trouble with the difficult process of immigration. Some live constantly in the fear of not knowing if it is their last day in Scotland and are unable to take work, resulting in the feeling of a lack of identity. One man was too scared to even apply for a permanent visa in case he got denied and sent back to Africa. He did not care where he lived as long as he didn’t have to go home as it was getting too hard to live as a gay man in Africa, and he had seen one friend stoned to death because of it.

There was some resistance from Waverley Care when Greg first brought up this issue but some felt that they should be bolder and defend Human Rights.

Greg said the additional issue with finding these men in Scotland is that so far he had only met a few MSMs who define themselves as gay but knows that many married men see men on the side. As such, they want to find out more about these men but the research money has come to an end. However, on a positive note, things are changing at Waverley Care for the better.

**Sarah Boyack MSP** then commented that it would also be interesting to talk to the women who are in relationships with African MSM and to see what support they needed.

**Presentation by Godwyns Onwuchekwa, Main Spokesperson, Justice for Gay Africans**

**Sarah Boyack MSP** introduced Godwyns Onwuchekwa. He campaigns on many subjects, particularly on the issue of justice. He is drawing on the insight he has gained in the UK to affect change for LGBT people in Africa.

**Godwyns Onwuchekwa** has lived in the UK for 11 years, though he is originally from Nigeria. He said while living in Nigeria there were no role models so people are expected to follow the pattern of history. Godwyns said that Greg had shown good examples of the typical life in Africa, particularly the huge expectation of marriage. It is not just LGBT people who have pressure put on them from society to live a certain way. The West often campaigns for Human Rights in Africa but fails to remember that identity is different in Africa. There is a focus on the individual in the West, but in Africa, identity is entirely based on family or the community so what you do affects everyone. In order for you to get married, for example, your entire extended family has to agree. Family pride is so important, and it becomes even more complicated when people can get killed just to defend the family name. One man who Godwyns met said his father had said he could not live and be gay.

For this reason, and others, Godwyns founded Justice for Gay Africans.

One year ago, Nigeria instituted a further law against homosexuality, creating another hurdle for gay rights. Same sex marriage was already banned, and to be found out as LGBT can mean seven years in prison. A similar law that came in in Uganda was more famous – there were campaigns around the world, but it was still signed in as law. The courts overruled it, though there are still ongoing attempts to reinstate it in a different form, which is likely to be worse. Gambia also has made a new law which targets LGBT people.

Godwyns said an important question was why do MSM not feel free in Scotland - a free country? Coming from a culture with so much prejudice has a lasting effect on these people. Another issue is that while the UK is liberal and same sex relationships are legal, there remain people within the system who are homophobic – for example in the justice system and NHS. As such, African men may still find it difficult to be themselves. On top of this, the Home Office makes people prove they are gay when applying through immigration. How can anyone prove that? So often, LGBT people feel frustrated and discriminated against.

Another reason MSM may find it hard to integrate into gay society in Scotland is that there is absolutely no gay anything in Africa, so it would be difficult to just jump into an actively gay life in the UK. It results in people being unable to live freely in a country where they should be able to live free.

A further issue is the family. Family comes first in Africa. Before you do anything, you need to think “would my family be proud or happy as a result?” Some men here still think marriage, house and children are the greatest achievements, or that other people would look down on them if they did not have them.

People who are LGBT in Nigeria can't access any healthcare, particularly if it is to do with sexual health. A doctor has the right (and is under obligation) to report them. The whole healthcare system is openly discriminatory.

Religion is also very important. Nigerian Christians who miss church on a Sunday are openly looked down on. In many African countries, it is religion that is at the forefront of law making, including in Uganda, Nigeria and Gambia. This can cause pain for MSMs as they grew up as part of the church community but suddenly they are ostracised by that very community..

Homosexuality is not a culture, it is part of human life. There is still a role for Scottish people to play in making life better for MSM in African countries. The people of Scotland need to say that being a gay person is not evil. There is also a role for individuals to make change – discuss this with your politicians, in work, with friends, everywhere. Godwyns said that we need to talk about the issues as people keep shying away from it when they should be taking

responsibility. However, we also need gay Africans to stand up and say that they believe in this as well. People in the public eye often think it is “bad for business” to talk about LGBT issues and so are supportive of gay rights in private but not public. Without people talking about these problems, they won’t change. We also need to reduce the fears that these men have when they are afraid of what might happen at the NHS, the job centre, immigration, or their local community.

Godwyns also felt that politics is not playing the role it should play; it needs to be more pragmatic, more engaging, to make this discussion happen. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association could also raise this more often. This should be discussed in both private and public interactions among politicians. People are blinded by politics or religion and not looking at the facts.

### **Question and Answer Session**

*A range of questions were asked following the presentation. Please note that it is not the intention of the minutes to record a verbatim account.*

**Andrew Marin** thanked Godwyns for his talk. Andrew is a Special Adviser to the UN on faith and is often focussed on Ugandan issues. He strongly agreed with Godwyns that Government sanctions aren’t helpful. In order to change the discourse in African views, it is important to look at the faith component. In African countries, there is a strong cultural interplay with religion and politics that is so embedded in the culture. Because they are so tied up together, it is difficult for other cultures to understand. Western understanding of Human Rights is from a Western viewpoint, which is so different from an African viewpoint. This causes a huge disconnect and people talking past each other. The West says it needs to be “our way”, imposing their world views on Africa, and the West thinks it is therefore better, but the Africans aren’t interested in that method. Faith education is what is missing on the ground, working within the African methods. Andrew asked how Godwyns feels about this, and who is facilitating with the religious facilitators?

**Godwyns Onwuchekwa** said that justice is the same everywhere; it is about fairness. The West has the wrong approach by trying to impose their views as there is no difference in the West thinking their ideas are right, and Africans thinking their ideas are right. There needs to be a new approach, of finding what is wrong and discussing it, not just storming in. The West has the right intention but the wrong approach, and this has been the case throughout history of Western intervention in Africa. In order to succeed, you need to work alongside those that live there, empower the grassroots and give them the dignity to change their culture themselves.

**Patrick Harvie MSP** thanked the speakers. He was glad Godwyns believed there were positives for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association as while Scotland doesn’t have direct responsibility for International Development (this is UK led), MSPs do want to get involved and have a responsibility for Parliamentary International Development relations. Some Christian conservatives from America and the UK have shifted their resources to Africa, as they were losing the battle at home so transferred their interests to a country they knew they could still influence in terms of anti-LGBT rights. This means that the messages being disseminated from the religious leaders can’t solely be blamed on African culture as they are also being manipulated from abroad. Patrick then asked if Godwyns knew if this is the case. Patrick commented on one MSM referenced in Greg’s talk who found it hard to believe that being gay could be legal anywhere, and in comparison when Patrick was an LGBT youth representative, he found that some young people some found it hard to believe that it was ever *illegal* in this country which is a huge shift in values in only a couple of decades. If the campaign to legalise homosexuality in the 1960s in the UK had been based on equality, it would have failed, and Patrick believes it was pity that got it passed. It was

then a long time before rights could be brought up. Therefore, is campaigning on rights and equality the right approach to take in Africa?

**Godwyns Onwuchekwa** asked the MSPs to ensure they didn't give up on the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association when it came to this issue as he believes that if they keep pushing, things will change. On the subject of the Evangelical Christians coming over from America, Godwyns believes this is true – there is a court case currently going through the US courts regarding Scott Lively's involvement in Uganda. There is also similar happening in Nigeria but very little is being recorded. Most of the church in Nigeria came originally from America and the UK and it is creating a lot of antagonism as they target anything against them; there needs to be a scapegoat to make everyone else feel righteous. On top of that, the Government is corrupt, which makes life very hard for people. Where life is hard, people rely on religion more as they turn to prayer when they have no other resources to turn to. As such, using the church makes the population easier to manipulate.

In terms of the right approach, Godwyns agreed that using rights and equality wasn't the best option. Human Rights means nothing in an African context as society is formed totally differently, and Godwyns even has trouble explaining it in the Igbo language to his family. Establishing yourself as a respectful person with a respectful life, while also being gay is the one of the only ways of trying to change views on homosexuality. If your immediate family can see and understand your progress and think you are doing well, then you could try and change the extended family's view from there, and then it could spread, but you need to be able to have that discussion with your immediate family first. Unfortunately, The Nigerian Bar Association, and the Police Force both backed the anti-homosexual law in Nigeria. These are organisations that are supposed to be looking after justice and yet are backing such a discriminatory law; it doesn't matter about rights.

**Sarah Boyack MSP** said that in even her own lifetime, culture has changed so much. So society *can* change and we need to hold onto that.

**Barbara Bompani** works on politics and faith in Uganda at the university. She said there is an undeniable link between religion and sexuality in many African countries; you can never overemphasize the religion, which is a concept that is not always grasped by people in the West where politics is secularised. Barbara agreed that the Christian right is having an impact in Uganda, and they are also preaching a homophobic message in Rwanda and Burundi. However, Barbara said it was very "colonial" to say that good or bad, issues in Africa came from elsewhere, when it is a very African problem. Also, the technique of LGBT activists in Africa have to be very different from in the US and UK as resources are much more limited over there.

When people in Africa realise they are gay, they have no healthcare, no role model, no support group, so they are likely to turn to their religious leader who will tell them they are sinful and evil, which would be a traumatising experience. For politicians to make a change, they would need religious support and backing from the church. There is no current space to talk about LGBT life as no one will publish anything to do with homosexuality in case it is seen to be promoting it as a lifestyle; not everyone has access to the internet, meaning they also don't have access to information from outside of Africa. Those that do have the internet are only the richest in society, and certainly not the gay majority. The only voice in the nation on homosexuality is the conservative right who are saying it is perverted. In order to make a difference, it is very important that we seek to give louder voices to the more progressive politicians or religious leaders.

**Jonathan Ssentamu** is from Uganda and said there is a need for us to understand why the churches are doing what they are doing. The Americans, on the other hand, have found an avenue for making money by feeding it into the right wing and homophobic church groups. Pastors are often among the richest people. Jonathan has personal experience of the

information being disseminated from the church, during his time at university and believes the West can play a big part in changing attitudes.

**Godwyns Onwuchekwa** said that evangelical churches were imported from the US and UK so disagreed with Barbara Bompani that you cannot blame the West at all. Africa does want to take responsibility of its destiny but the issue is not about who brought what to Africa, but about “what colour justice is”. People should want to help, not because these are gay people, or black people, but because they are human.

**David Stevenson** emphasised that in Africa there are Christians, Muslims and people who practice traditional African religions. Both the African Christians and Muslims mix these religions with traditional elements.

**Greg Baker** found during research for SAMM that the faith leaders who were willing to talk were more open than his colleagues had expected. One was really open and liberal, one was fairly middle ground and one was very conservative and would disown a homosexual child. The diaspora are going to Western countries and being exposed to different attitudes, and then going back to their own countries; maybe this is when the dialogue can really start? Africa currently reminds Greg of the gay marriage debate in America in the 1990’s when it was an intense and emotional debate. Because of this, Greg was surprised things had moved so quickly in the US. The younger Africans travelling and being exposed to these attitudes are beginning to question things more, and that might instigate the time when Africans say “there has been enough hatred” and find other ways to deal with this issue.

**Sarah Boyack MSP** said that was an interesting point to finish on as none of us know the real answer to how we start that dialogue or when things will change. Sarah commented that Godwyns had set the MSPs an action – to get in touch with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to raise this as an issue.

Sarah then thanked both speakers again and said this meeting had had a different kind of discussion to the standard meetings which is healthy. She gave a special thanks to Godwyns for travelling up from Surrey, to Greg for work that is so important and also to Martha Baillie from Waverley Care who helped organise the speakers.

Sarah then raised that there was a third set of minutes that needed to be approved. The meeting was held on 18 November 2014 on the International Justice Mission. However, there were not enough people present that were at the November meeting to pass so these will need to be approved at next meeting in March.

### **Forthcoming meetings of the CPG**

- 24<sup>th</sup> March 2015
- 16<sup>th</sup> June 2015 (AGM)

All meetings are held in the Scottish Parliament and commence at 6pm until 7pm.