

The Hong Kong Government Teaching Social Workers to Cure Homosexuals

The Social Welfare Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) organized a workshop for social workers on curing homosexuality of their young clients on 17 June 2011. Dr. Hong Kwai-wah, a registered psychiatrist notoriously known for his private practice of conversion therapy (i.e. changing sexual orientation from homosexuality to heterosexuality) was invited by the Department to provide training to the social workers in this workshop. He is also the chairperson of the New Creation Association, which is founded in the belief that homosexuality is a sin that the Bible condemns and is a close ally to another equally notorious local Christian right group the Truth Light Society in its many causes against equal rights and protection of LGBT people in Hong Kong. We found that the workshop has highly likely contravened 10 international and local charters and covenants by spreading prejudices and pathologizing homosexuality. We strongly urged that the Department immediately stops organizing similar workshops in the future.

Conversion therapy, or reparative therapy, is a pseudo-science advocated and promoted worldwide by American-based Christian Right groups. In Hong Kong, it is primarily introduced by the New Creation Association, an ally to the Truth Light Society. The Association teaches that homosexuality is either a mental disorder because of family dysfunction in the childhood or demonic possession. Clients who seek conversion therapy are taught to stay celibacy or repress their same-sex desire by, for instance, having a cold shower or praying homosexuality away. Major psychological and psychiatric associations such as American Psychological Association and American Psychiatric Association have already denounced conversion therapy for its unsubstantiated claims and consequential harms done to its clients. Many scholars have exposed that advocates of conversion therapy often exaggerates the success rate by adopting a shifting definition of “successful change”. Those who claim to have successfully changed their sexual orientation are, in fact, staying in celibacy or repressing their same-sex desire without developing sexual attraction towards opposite sex. Worse still, it has been proven in a number of longitudinal studies that conversion therapy is highly harmful in inducing anxiety, self-hatred, sexual dysfunction, attempted suicide and suicide leading to death.

It has been 38 years and 21 years since the American Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from their lists of mental disorders in 1973 and 1990 respectively. Homosexuality is now understood to be a sexuality in the rich human sexual experiences and identities. By inviting Dr. Hong Kwai-wah to speak to youth social workers on curing homosexuality, the Social Welfare Department has implicitly endorsed an unscientific, prejudiced and unethical medical abuse that does harm to LGBT people. The workshop is found to have violated the following charters and covenants:

1. the Social Welfare Department of the HKSAR violates the Guidelines on Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers stipulated by the Social Workers Registration Board, HKSAR (the Code stipulates that registered social workers should “respect the unique value and dignity of every human being irrespective of one’s ... sexual orientation” [Part 1 - Basic Values and Beliefs]);
2. the Social Welfare Department of the HKSAR violates the World Health Organization’s position on sexual orientation (the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders on 17 May 1990);
3. the Social Welfare Department of the HKSAR violates the Hong Kong Bill of Rights (the Court of Final Appeal rules that the “other status” in the Hong Kong Bill of Rights include sexual orientation and discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation is unconstitutional);

4. the Social Welfare Department of the HKSAR violates the Convention of the Rights of the Child (advocates of conversion therapy often targets young people and persuade their parents to send their lesbian and gay children to treatment. It effectively strips the children of the right to scientific information on sexual orientation. The Department violates Article 29 of the Convention: “the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”);
5. the Social Welfare Department of the HKSAR -violates the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;
6. the Social Welfare Department of the HKSAR violates the sexual health position of the World Association for Sexual Health (the Association contends that “there is insufficient, sound, scientific evidence supporting the claim that attempt to modify a person’s sexual orientation actually works and are helpful to people”);
7. the Social Welfare Department of the HKSAR violates the Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools issued by the Curriculum Development Council, HKSAR (the Guidelines suggests that when teaching sex education, sex should be regarded as part of a healthy life. Sex is neither sinful nor shameful. It also advises teachers to guide students to understand and respect different sexual orientations sexual values);
8. the Social Welfare Department of the HKSAR violates the Code of Practice against Discrimination in Employment on the Ground of Sexual Orientation issued by the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, HKSAR (the workshop is an implicit endorsement of a homophobic attitude towards homosexuality by the Social Welfare Department, which in effect creates a working environment that LGBT people find unfriendly and insulting);
9. Dr. Hong Kwai-wah violates the Code of Professional Conduct by Medical Council, HKSAR (as a registered medical doctor, Dr. Hong Kwai-wah violates the Code of Professional Conduct by delivering information that is exaggerated, misleading, sensational or unduly persuasive, and generate unrealistic expectations [5.2.1.2]. And being prejudiced by his religious faith that homosexuality is a sin and demonic possession, he should ask clients to seek medical advice from another registered medical doctor);
10. the Social Welfare Department of the HKSAR violates the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders

Pathologization of homosexuality is an incitement to sexual orientation discrimination because it legitimizes the act of discrimination by arguing that homosexuals deserve no equal rights and protection but medical treatments.

We strongly urge the Social Welfare Department to

1. immediately stop doing harm to the LGBT community
2. issue an apology to the harm and contempt it has done to the community
3. immediately review all events and activities and make sure that no one of them incites hatred against LGBT people, spreads bigotry and pseudo-science of conversion therapy
4. establish policy that eliminates sexual orientation discrimination

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