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FROM / DE Canadian High Commission/KUALA LUMPUR

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SUBJECT • **HOMOSEXUALITY AS A FACTOR AFFECTING**  
SUJET **POSTINGS TO MALAYSIA**

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ENCLOSURES  
ANNEXES

DISTRIBUTION

Approximately two years ago, you sought the views of all posts concerning the impact of male or female homosexuality as a factor affecting one's effectiveness on a posting. We provide the following by way of update. With respect to Malaysia, providing a homosexual employee is relatively discrete, and does not openly advertise their sexual orientation, we would not expect any adverse consequences. Some Western embassies and high commissions have, in recent years, assigned homosexual employees here. To our knowledge they have not experienced any problems. We are not, however, aware of instances involving a homosexual couple living openly together. In such instances, if the employee had representational responsibilities, there might be some difficulties.

2. We are attaching for your background information several articles from a recent series on homosexuality in Malaysia, published in a local newspaper, the New Straits Times (January 27-28, 1993). Several points from those articles, supplemented by our own observations and research, are noted below:

- Research indicates that the incidence of homosexuality in Malaysia, at seven percent, is comparable with Western countries (1984 study by Dr. Khairuddin);
- As a society, Malaysia is becoming less tolerant, though more open, about homosexuality than it was twenty years ago. Unlike the West, however, there are very few reported instances of physical violence or other forms of serious harassment directed at homosexuals.
- Malaysia is a multi-religious society. None of those religions condone homosexuality. The most negative attitudes lie with Islamic fundamentalists, some of whom take the view that their religion prescribes death for engaging in homosexual acts. Such an extreme view is not held by the vast majority of Malaysians, however, and is not reflected in Malaysian law.

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- At the political level, PM Mahathir explicitly condemned the Human Freedom Index, published by UNDP in May 1991, because it established tolerance of homosexuality as a valid criterion for human rights. He has referred to this subsequently on several occasions as demonstrating the decadence of Western society.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gordon Brown", is centered on the page.

Canadian High Commission

# The other side of homosexuality

**A** SPECK of grey matter has stirred speculation as to the beginnings of homosexual beings. But numerous studies and research done on the subject have failed to elucidate this perplexing issue.

Not even the recent discovery by neuroscientist Simon LeVay, that a tiny spot of brain tissue called the inah 3, which is located in the hypothalamus, is much smaller in homosexual men than in heterosexual ones.

Sexologists say this minute difference that lies in a region of the brain (the inah) that seems to supervise sexual activity, despite tickling much discussion and controversy on the "born or bred" issue, does not resolve the question.

Moreover, LeVay's acknowledged homosexuality raised questions of bias for some.

Another study of homosexuality in twins which followed LeVay's work also did not resolve the issue.

The results of the Bailey-Pillard study showed that identical twins were three times more likely than fraternal twins to share a homosexual orientation.

While some scientists believe that this study suggests that a common genetic makeup is part of the cause, others see it as a piece of "badly interpreted genetics".

Associate Professor Dr Kasmini Kassim, a consultant psychiatrist at the General Hospital and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, believes that it is a combination to varying extents of both nature and nurture that produces this sexual tendency.

*Newsweek* suggests that scientists have yet to scratch the surface of this complex interplay between "something in the environment" and "something bio-

**Everyone has some opinion or other about homosexuality but do we try to go beyond the labels to understand more about it? In a two-parter beginning today, *Lifestyle* looks at recent research, case histories, environmental factors, transvestism, a sex change operation and religious views on the subject.**

logical".

The *Newsweek* article referred to June Reinisch, director of the Kinsey Institute, who prefers to think that we are only "flavoured, not programmed."

Genetics, she says, only gives us "a range of outcomes".

It quoted psychologist John Money, who is sometimes called the dean of American sexologists, as stating: "Of course it (sexual orientation) is in the brain. The real question is, when did it get there? Was it prenatal, neonatal, during childhood, puberty? That we do not know."

In the past, electroconvulsive therapy, hormone treatment and psychoanalysis have all been used to try to "straighten" gays, many of whom resent being made the object of these experiments.

Gays interviewed for this article generally say that the cause of homosexuality or lesbianism does not concern them.

A majority believe that learning to deal with it is more important than understanding what makes one gay.

Arif, 29, is a closet gay. Born into a middle-class, conservative Malay family, he lives in constant fear of being found out. Arif is sure that his family will never accept him as a gay.

Like many homosexuals, Arif admits to having had gay tendencies when he was very young but he refuses to take a stand about his gayness.

He is also ambiguous

about what it feels to be gay in Malaysian society. However, he admits to feeling guilty about being a homosexual.

"Sometimes I wish I was straight; life is much more complicated when you are gay."

In fact, the situation has become so unbearable that Arif hopes that someday soon he will "become straight, get married to a nice girl and have children of my own."

What about his gay feelings? Would it be fair to his bride and his children?

Arif says if he remains faithful to his wife, everything will be all right.

One of Arif's platonic friends is Salimah H., a 33-year-old closet lesbian who works as a store assistant.

She feels that homosexuality is brought about by a "combination of nature and nurture".

"My attraction to girls was not sexual in the beginning. I just felt more comfortable with them," she says.

What started out as friendship progressed into lesbian relationships when Salimah became a teenager.

She says life as a lesbian in Malaysia is "one problem after another".

"Being a male homosexual is less frowned upon than being a lesbian," she says.

"To many people, you cannot do worse than being a lesbian."

Salimah prefers the company of women to men because "being a woman I understand other women

better."

How does she resolve her sexual preference for women?

"It's a constant mental torture because I have been conditioned to accept that what I am is terribly wrong," she says with a sigh.

Like her friends, Salimah has a deep yearning to become a mother, "but I may never get that wish".

Nathan K., 42, is a bisexual businessman. He is, he says, happily married with an adopted daughter.

Nathan's wife does not know about his other life, and he says what she does not know won't hurt her.

He admits to a steady supply of down-and-out young men looking for a break in the business world. Unlike Arif and Salimah, Nathan is proud, if not defensive, about his sexual preference.

Nathan had his first gay experience in Canada where he graduated with a degree in business administration.

Having experienced heterosexual and homosexual relationships, Nathan says homosexual relationships are always more intense.

All the interviewees say the AIDS threat affects the gay community with many gays resorting to limiting their sexual partners.

Nathan always takes the necessary precaution before sex by wearing condoms.

"We understand and respect each other's health, and we would not want each other to be exposed to a deadly disease," he says.

— *By Joseph Edwin and Ruby Khoo*

# Sexual behaviour of young adults

**STORY ONE:** Abdul Latiff was 12 when he entered one of the residential schools in the country. His good looks earned him the label of *jambu* (a male with cute feminine features) and he attracted the attention of a senior.

As the "girlfriend", Abdul Latiff was treated the way a normal woman would be by her lover — they did everything together. Abdul Latiff's boyfriend was fiercely protective of him.

When Abdul Latiff left the school, he maintained his feminine ways, changed his name to Susie and began cruising gay joints.

His friends were shocked when they saw him all dressed up like a woman.

"What happened to you, Abdul Latiff?" became the standard question.

"Susie, if you don't mind," "she" replied, seemingly offended.

**STORY TWO:** Farouk, from the same residential school, was even more *jambu* than Abdul Latiff.

"He was beautiful and sexy," was how a former classmate described him.

Farouk was really in demand as a "girlfriend" — the boys would fight for him as they would for a woman.

But, unlike Abdul Latiff, Farouk discarded his effeminate ways after leaving school. Instead, he became a womaniser.

Stories of homosexual activities in boarding schools and correctional institutions such as prisons where people of the same sex are living together for prolonged periods are not uncommon.

If such stories are to be believed, the question that comes to mind is: why do these things happen?

Datuk Dr Khairuddin Yusof, professor of Social Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Senior Consultant at Universiti Hospital, says that it is important to first of all recognise that it is not a normal situation when

people of the same gender are thrown together — especially young adults who are going through a critical phase in their lives.

"In such a situation, one would expect homosexual activities to flourish."

Rapid changes are taking place in the adolescents' mental, physical and sexual development. They are starting to discover their bodies and their sexuality — a phenomenon which will occur whether or not a young person is in boarding school.

The need to release sexual tension may drive them to masturbation and to indulge in sexual acts with members of the same gender.

Having said that, it does not mean that when they leave school they will continue with their homosexual activities, says Dr Khairuddin.

It is in recognition of the above need that some prisons in the West allow conjugal visits.

"I think this is good and prison authorities have found that management of prisoners becomes easier as a result," he says.

Admittedly, verbal accounts of boys living in residential schools and other institutions being sodomised have given the impression that such places may play a big part in triggering off this development.

But Dr Khairuddin dismisses the notion. "The boarding school system is not such a major event in a child's life as to influence his sexual preferences. If someone forms some kind of attachment to somebody in school, he or she will eventually grow out of it."

All too often, many will revert to normal sexual behaviour upon leaving school. It is not correct to label young adults or people in situations described above as "gay".

By Dr Khairuddin's reckoning, only seven per cent would continue to become practising homosexuals.

The figure was derived from the first study on human sexuality in Malaysia conducted by Dr Khairuddin and his team in 1984.

The findings revealed seven per cent of the population, described by Dr Khairuddin as a "surprising figure", have had homosexual encounters.

There were no figures for bisexuals.

Says Dr Khairuddin: "In the United States the figure is about 10 per cent or slightly higher. Roughly, our homosexual incidence is about the same as that in the United States."

The source who told *Life-style* about Abdul Latiff and Farouk agrees with Dr Khairuddin's observations.

A product of the boarding school system himself, the source is today a senior executive in an established company.

He says his experience and those who went to residential schools show that an all-male environment (and an all-female environment) can do "funny things" to a person.

"You come in when you are about 12, free from your parents. But from then on, your interaction will only be with males, doing almost everything with them. Contact with the outside world is rare and with females nil. Although you may not want to, you'll find yourself being attracted to the *jambu* types. I must admit I did too."

"Once you get attracted to the *jambus* you will treat them as though they were your real girlfriends, go on dates and everything. At night, after lights out, around 10.30pm or 11pm "crawling" — when the 'aggressors' crawled to their *jambus*' beds — would take place. Only the lovers could say what really took place."

"The rule is, if you were caught out of your bed you would be sent to detention class the following morning. At the next assembly day, your names would be announced and the whole

school would know about these nocturnal activities."

According to the senior executive who begged anonymity, the school authorities know what is going on but they never talk about it, not openly, anyway.

Dr Khairuddin, however, says "there is no cause for concern". Even so, those who manage boarding schools must understand the natural physiological events which occur in an adolescent's development, he adds.

If they find the homosexual activities to be a little excessive, they must devise projects that will enable boys and girls to channel their energies creatively.

Get them to take part in a marathon run, organise trips to the mountains, camping or any scheme that will exhaust them physically. The last thing to do is to reprimand them severely, he says.

Dr Khairuddin cautions against being judgmental towards homosexuality.

As the eye-opening 1984 study has shown, Malaysians are not such "a morally tight group" as generally perceived by the majority of the population. Many Malaysians cannot bring themselves to readily admit that homosexuality exists and when they do talk about it, it is usually to condemn the poor souls or to poke fun at them.

Yet, Bahasa Malaysia has words which reflect the phenomenon. *Jambu*, *mak nyah*, *pondan* and *bapak* are words which are used freely and frequently.

And, popular television sitcoms have featured effeminate characters — 2+1 being a good example.

As Dr Khairuddin observes: "About a decade or two ago, the Malays were tolerant about homosexuality. But, it seems we are becoming intolerant now." — By Faezah Ismail

□ Part Two appears in tomorrow's Lifestyle

# A woman trapped in a man's body

In the second and final part of Lifestyle's focus on homosexuality, we look at the world of transsexuals, the religious perspectives on homosexuality, and run a first-person account of a sex change.

**T**HEY are born boys and they grow up into women. Physically, they may be men but emotionally they feel like women and thus, they behave in feminine ways.

In society, the transsexual has no place at all. All sorts of names have been coined for this group of "in-betweens", for instance, *pondan*, *bapok*, drag queen, *faggot*, *shim* and *Mak Nyah*.

Indeed, very few understand the turmoil of being transsexual and almost no sympathy is offered to this group of people who basically feel they are women trapped in male bodies.

Says University Hospital's senior consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology Prof Datuk Dr Khairuddin Yusof: "Malaysian society still does not understand the difference between homosexuals, transvestites and transsexuals.

"Homosexuals are basically people who attain sexual satisfaction with partners of their own sex. Transvestites, on the other hand, are men who dress like women but do not think and believe they are women.

"They get great sexual satisfaction by cross-dressing but, unlike the transsexual, have absolutely no desire to be women."

Transsexuals, he says, are a different group of people.

Physiologically, they are men but they have the emotional make up of a woman.

"They feel and behave like women and wear women's clothes out of the need to express themselves as members of the opposite sex.

"They want to be accepted as women and have an intense desire to change their sex," says Dr Khairuddin.

The pattern of abnormal behaviour among transsexuals begins very early in life.

"Normally before the age of five, the child will start playing and behaving in ways that are characteristic of the opposite sex. Little boys will want to play with dolls and are often feminine in their behaviour.

"The feelings of being a transsexual are persistent and, once established, are often very difficult to change."

As transsexuals become more and more like women, they undergo a lot of stress and trauma. Often, they are isolated by the family and parents tend to be very harsh on them.

Dr Khairuddin says that studies have shown that these individuals start experimenting with women's clothes and make-up in the isolation of their rooms. Later, they start sneaking out at nights dressed in drag.

"It is often between the ages of 16 and 18 that they start cross-dressing. By the age of 21, they become bolder in their actions."

This period is also a time when they face major social, economic and religious problems. By the simple fact that they are not accepted by society at large, they find comfort in each other.

Most transsexuals want to have a sex-change operation as they hate being male.

During the years when sex-change operations were legal in Malaysia, Dr Khairuddin headed a team of medical specialists involved in this area of medicine.

"Sex-change operations involve a two-year period of detailed investigations and assessment. The transsexual goes through psychiatry and psychology assessment, counselling and clinical assessment before a final decision is made," he explains.

While the psychologist will assess whether the individual is a transsexual and not a homosexual who thinks he is transsexual, the psychiatrist will investigate the individual's mental stability.

"There have been cases where homosexuals think they are transsexuals and want to go for a sex-change operation. This is very dangerous and that is why the psychiatry and psychology assessment is of utmost im-



portance."

Finally it is the surgeon who will analyse and evaluate the case.

The operation itself is very complex, taking between three and four hours.

"In cases of a male transsexual, an artificial vagina is 'fitted' while for women transsexuals, the uterus and breasts are removed and an artificial penis 'fitted'.

"Hormones are then given to the patient."

The post-operative period is a very difficult and traumatic period for these individuals as they suffer a lot of pain.

However, he says, transsexuals are very motivated people. Their desire to be members of the opposite sex can be so intense that they are able to withstand much pain without complaining.

Post-operative counselling is conducted for all transsexuals where a team of counsellors and social workers will advise them on how to behave and assimilate into society.

"Most transsexuals tend to exaggerate their behaviour and act in an ultra-feminine way which may

make them a laughing stock. We give them social counselling so that they will be well-adjusted," says Dr Khairuddin.

Although sex-change operations are no longer conducted here, he still treats many transsexuals and often refers them to Singapore and Thailand for sex-change operations.

Malaysian society, he feels, is still not mature enough to accept individuals who have had sex-change operations and this is why many who are successful in their new lives never tell friends and loved ones of their past.

"Our society does not understand the problems of transsexuals and does not offer the psychological help they need. This is why many of them turn to their own kind for support."

Transsexualism is something that will not disappear from our society.

Says Dr Khairuddin: "Instead of heaping abuse on this group of people, if in time we made an effort to understand their problem and be compassionate towards them." — By Surinder Jessy

# Religions do not tolerate homosexuality

THE major world religions do not compromise on the question of homosexuality.

Theologian and scholar Rev Dr Liew Sau Pheng, who teaches at the Malaysia Bible Seminary, says, "Basically the Church regards homosexuality as immoral."

"It is sinful and the church cannot tolerate homosexuality. But the Christian's attitude towards a homosexual would be one of compassion and understanding."

Liew, who stressed that he was not talking on behalf of any particular church, says that the Christian attitude is to "condemn the act but not the person".

Can a practising Christian be a practising homosexual?

"There is no such term as a Christian homosexual," says Liew.

"As I said earlier, all Christians should see homosexuality as immoral. There is no compromise."

"Homosexuality violates God's moral standards. The Bible clearly teaches that homosexuality is dishonourable, against nature."

"It is a kind of deviant sexual behaviour, dangerous to social order, the family and religious belief."

"God created man and woman and instituted marriage primarily for men and women to love each other and for procreation."

But marriage in itself is no guarantee. It is not known how many women have faced the problem of being married to closet homosexuals, but such cases do exist.

Maz Siddik (not her real

name), a career woman in her early 30s who filed for divorce after she found out her husband had an affair with another married man, describes her experience:

"My ex-husband happened to be very attractive. In a boarding school, he would be one of the sought-after *jambus*."

"I should have realised that if I found him attractive, a certain sort of man would also find him attractive."

At first — when he evaded her questions about his frequent "business trips" and supposedly innocent "golfing weekends" — Maz suspected he was seeing a younger woman. But after talking with his colleagues, she discovered an uglier truth.

The divorce went through with minimum fuss. Even her mother-in-law did not know of her ex-husband's sexual orientation.

Prof Madya Mahmood Zuhdi of Akademi Islam at Universiti Malaya says that a woman can divorce her husband on the grounds of his homosexuality; in fact, from the Islamic view, she would be doing wrong if she remained married to one after ascertaining the truth.

In Islam, says Mahmood, the ultimate penalty for engaging in homosexual acts is death. This, he says, reflects the gravity of the crime and is a strong deterrent.

It would prevent homosexuality from being so widespread that "those who do not condone homosexuality are then regarded as irrational," which, he adds,

"is almost happening now."

When homosexuality is freely practised in a civilisation, that civilisation will fall, adds Mahmood.

"If society no longer abides by the limits (*hudud*) the whole system breaks down."

If a crime — say theft — was committed in a community, he adds, Islamic scholars in the past have concluded that the community must compensate the victim because it is the community's responsibility for not preventing the crime in the first place.

Similarly, says Mahmood, discouraging homosexuality is the responsibility of the community as a whole, and not just the family unit.

Islam discourages free mingling between the sexes, and for Muslims sex is allowed only within marriage. The strong stand taken against homosexuality is based on the Quranic revelation where Allah sent down divine retribution on the people of Lot for their abomination.

In Islam even the actions that would lead to gender confusion or encourage homosexual inclinations are forbidden, says Mahmood. For instance, the Prophet Muhammad forbade men from dressing like women (and likewise forbade women from dressing like men); he forbade men from wearing gold and silk although women are free to wear them.

Like Mahmood, Liew says it dangerous for society to regard homosexuality as a normal part of life.

In 1974, the American Psy-

chiatric Association voted by a majority to remove homosexuality from the category of conditions which are in themselves pathological or diseased.

Commenting on the Le-Vay-Bailey-Pillard research on identical and fraternal twins, which suggested a genetic basis for sexual preference, Liew says:

"Their conclusions are far from conclusive. Even if it can be proven that genetic or biological influences predispose people towards homosexuality, that will never prove homosexuality is in and of itself normal."

"It proves what we already know — that genetic variances can and do affect future behaviour."

And, he adds, "If some people have a genetic predisposition towards alcoholism, should we conclude the disease is a 'normal' condition and refuse to treat it? Genetic origins do not justify sinful behaviour."

While homosexuals who do not feel guilty about what they do might resent any attempt at "treatment" for their "condition", it cannot be denied that others are unhappy, ashamed and guilt-ridden with the moral and ethical implications of their homosexual lifestyle.

For some, the solution comes after repeated failures and only after a religious conversion (in Islam, a return to man's original state or *fitrah*). Because homosexuality is one step removed from the *fitrah* of man, it is a veil between man and spiritual understanding.

Mahmood refers to one

tradition of the Prophet Muhammad where he says that Allah loves two people who love each other for the sake of Allah.

In the Prophet's life, find examples of this deep and abiding friendship. His friends were willing to sacrifice for him, and were willing to die in defence of the revelation that he brought.

Mahmood adds that close same-sex friendships can be trusting, and stable, and based on love, and that such friendships can be sex-free but equally lasting and meaningful. It is distinguished from ordinary marriage by the perpetual God-consciousness that forms the basis of friendship.

But, he says, "in an increasingly secular environment very few subscribe to the notion of intimacy between friends based on love for God."

And, he agrees, fewer still would go on the path of God-consciousness where love for the Almighty transcends all.

Only those who have been through this route realise what a liberating experience it can be.

And the ones who have remained friends with their partners after finding the path in faith would probably be the best counsellors for others.

In the West, Liew says, a group of ex-homosexuals calling themselves Exod International have shown a high success rate in getting practising homosexuals to change their lifestyle. — J Alina Raneer

## Feminine behaviour started early in childhood

PEARL was born a boy. However, at the age of 25, he had a sex-change operation in Holland. Now, a year later, she is getting ready to marry her Dutch boyfriend. She tells Surinder Jessy her story.

I WAS a woman trapped in a man's body and as much as I tried to be a man, I simply couldn't. Instead of playing with guns and trucks, I would rather have dolls and masak kari sets. While my classmates in secondary school were sporting crew-cut hairstyles and were active sportsmen with muscular bodies, I wanted to have nice curly locks and a slender

body with sexy, slim long legs.

My feminine behaviour started very early in my childhood and I couldn't understand why I was happier being a girl. I always wanted to wear my sisters' dresses and was never happy when my mum insisted I put on pants and shirts.

I tried very hard to please my family by doing boyish things but it was never me. I finally found the courage to wear a dress one day at the age of 10. Yes, my father hit the roof but strangely enough my mother never said anything. In fact, as I grew in my teens, my moth-

er understood how I felt and I too slowly began to realise that there was definitely a hormonal disorder in me. I was so much a woman yet I could not be a woman physically.

I began dressing in drag during my secondary school years and virtually led a double life. It was traumatic as I was often called all sorts of names.

None of my friends understood how I felt and it was sad because I started isolating myself from them and found solace in other transsexuals. Slowly they were my only friends. They understood me and offered me

the understanding and comfort I yearned for.

Finally, seven years ago, I decided I wanted to have a sex-change operation. Knowing well that it was going to cost a lot, I worked as hard as I could to raise the money. I travelled to Japan and Europe doing all sorts of odd jobs and finally last year I had enough funds for the operation. I had my sex changed in Holland and today I am very much a woman.

The operation was painful but I was happy and that is all that matters to me today. I fell in love in Holland and am getting married in the

middle of this year.

I am home in Malaysia spend some time with my family but right after Hari Raya Puasa, I will leave for Holland which will free then on be my home. Though I am sad to leave this country I do know it is the best thing to do. There is no place for people like me here but I do hope one day things will be different.

Transsexuals are not weird people. We have a problem and it will surely help if society understands our problem and empathises with us instead of abusing and insulting us.