

# Lesbianism in Boarding Schools in Kenya: Causes, Manifestations Consequences and Pragmatic Interventions

Anastasia Gakuru, Rose Oloisul, Brian Aseno, Lewis Muli Ngesu

University of Nairobi

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8090295>

Received: 10 September 2024; Accepted: 24 September 2024; Published: 24 October 2024

## ABSTRACT

Lesbianism is an emerging issue which has had far-reaching impacts on schools in Kenya. These impacts touch on different aspects of society such as culture, religious beliefs of a people, family and education. This study will therefore delineate the prevalence, manifestations, effects and possible measures that can be taken to address the issue. Although different sectors in the society have united to address the issue, there have been a number of setbacks such as the global advocacy to legalize LGBTQ. Since time immemorial, Africa as a whole and Kenya in particular has been on the forefront to conserve cultural beliefs thus regarding lesbianism as a foreign practice.

**Keywords:** homosexuality, lesbianism, learners, academic performance.

## INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality can be defined as a sexual activity between two people of the same sex. Lesbianism in schools in Kenya poses a major challenge to the education system of our country since it touches on different domains of a learner's life. As the norms of the society keep evolving, new practices such as Lesbianism gain prominence. This has led to numerous debates all over the world especially in the western countries. Kenya's cultural and legal frameworks are deeply rooted in conservation of cultural values therefore, same sex relationships are considered as a taboo. According to the Kenya Penal Code Cap 63, homosexual acts are equal to committing criminal offences and this also contributes to the society's attitude towards lesbianism. This legal perception is intertwined with societal attitudes. Moreover, according to a study by the Pew Research Center (2013) 90% of Kenyans consider homosexuality as a socially unacceptable practice. The same findings also suggested that about 67% of Kenyans perceive homosexuality as a western influence.

The effects of lesbianism can range from short-term to long-term. These effects have been revealed through the findings of interviews, surveys, and case studies conducted during qualitative researches. They reveal that reformed lesbian students often face discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion from peers and educators. These can lead to poor academic performance, and social exclusion. The paper suggests that family, schools and religion need to work in unison so as to offer support system where learners can get good counsel on why same sex relationships are against societal norms. Moreover, they can support reformed lesbian learners to also overcome the urge of engaging in lesbianism. The paper will therefore underscore the importance of family, religion, education and the legal framework in shaping learners' attitudes towards sexuality.

## CAUSES AND MANIFESTATIONS OF LESBIANISM IN SCHOOLS

According to a survey conducted by Mucherah et al (2016), 52% of the students who participated in the survey believe homosexuality is caused by 'sexual starvation' in single-sex schools. It occurs at specific corners, behind tanks, in the bathrooms, computer labs, dark and crowded places especially during entertainments on weekends. one of the victims also confessed to Mrs. Wanderi that they used to practice it in church on Sundays

by covering themselves in jumpers. Moreover, the survey suggests that many teachers as well as the administration of schools is not aware of what is happening to girls. In cases where they are aware, very little action is taken for fear of being perceived by the public as an undisciplined school. Technology and social media have also created a harboring ground for the spread of lesbianism since children and youths can easily access pornographic content online.

Miss Loice Noo who is also a counsellor agrees that cases of lesbianism have been on the rise in girls' boarding schools. She underscores that this is due to the 'strict syllabus' which focuses more on producing academically smart students thus forgetting their physical, social, spiritual and emotional aspects of development. This in turn deprives them the opportunity to burn up their energies thus engaging in sexual explorations. Ms. Noo suggest that in order to overcome 'the mean-score mania' in schools, educators should appreciate the importance of recreational activities in school, sports and physical education. A confession by one of the victims revealed that lesbianism is like an organization which starts as a form of recreation in schools, however, it has strict rules and rituals to be performed. New recruits normally take an oath to keep the secret as well as being loyal to the organization. The leader keeps a flag as a symbol of identity and they exchange gifts with partners such as clothes, sweets, perfumes, rings, bracelets or any other precious thing to solidify their relationships. The recruitment starts as a normal friendship until one is completely lured and captivated by them. (Nation Africa, 2020).

**Peer influence:** in the journey of a child's development, adolescence stage is the most crucial because this is when they explore new things. Majority of them get influenced by their peers thus the importance of emphasizing on good decision making and assertiveness. The Haravi Post (2020) assert that majority of learners who are caught in lesbianism are influenced by their peers. Majority admit that they trusted their peers too much to imagine they could lead them astray.

**Pregnancy free:** according to Mrs. regina Wanderi who is a family counsellor, majority of the girls who seek her help to overcome lesbianism confess that they got into lesbian relationships because it is safe from pregnancy. However, lesbianism can promote the spread is Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) in the cases where the girls use dangerous objects such as sticks, carrots, bananas or even test tubes as they try to satisfy their sexual urges. Mrs. Wanderi gives an account of one girl who had to undergo a surgery because an object stuck in her genitals as they were engaging in the practice thus causing server injuries (Nation Africa, 2020).

**Unsuspecting society and parents:** parents may contribute to the spread of lesbianism in cases where they encourage their daughters to only be in the company of other girls, without knowing that it can create an atmosphere for lesbianism to thrive. For instance, majority of the girls who shared their experience with Mrs. Wanderi admit that they were initiated by their best friends who would frequently visit them in their homes and their parents would not question anything. On another account, one victim revealed that her lesbian partner approached her in church and they would occasionally meet during youth camps and trainings. No one suspected them because in a church setting, and since both of them are girls, no one would be suspicious (Nation Africa, 2020).

**Divorce and Separation:** sometimes divorce and separation can influence children to have a negative attitude towards the opposite sex. For instance, if a father abandons, rejects or does not provide for his children, while the mother toils very hard to provide for them, there is likelihood that the children may develop a negative attitude towards males, while trusting females. Vice versa can also occur in boys thus the need for parents to ensure even if they divorce or separate, they still need to be present for their children (Nation Africa, 2020).

**Bitterness due to childhood sexual assault:** some girls who engage in lesbian relations admit that it was due to the bitterness they have towards males. This may have been as a result of the sexual harassment they experienced from their own fathers or close relatives as they were growing up. Dr Mwiti explains that some fathers harass their children sexually through touching them inappropriately. She further gives an account of

a girl who experienced the same at the age of 11-13 years and this later resulted into having sexual relationships with older women and sometimes men.

Ms. Noo suggest that the best way to curb the spread of lesbianism is by instilling values such as self-control in children from a young age, so when they grow up, even if they are tempted to engage in same sex relationships, their conscience will not allow them because it would be against their principles. she also suggests a constant reminder to the young girls that they have the capability of doing what is right even if they are tempted to engage in lesbianism or any other inappropriate practices. Dr Mwitii suggest that teachers, parents and religious institutions need to teach children about self-control. The more they practice it, the more they are able to overcome sexual urges as well as any other challenge as they grow (Nation Africa, 2020).

**Sexual Harassment and Assault:** lesbianism in schools can manifest in form of sexual harassment where by lesbian students forcefully recruit other learners even though they are not willing. There have been several cases where students, especially in single-sex boarding schools, have reported being sexually harassed or assaulted by their peers in the dormitories or washrooms where teachers can hardly notice them. For instance, a school in Kiambu was on the limelight after a form one student reported a case on sexual harassment by a group of older students on her first night at the school. This incident reflects a critical challenge of lesbianism through sexual bullying and coercion. (The Kenya Forum, 2014).

**Bullying and Hazing:** younger girls can be forced into lesbianism through bullying. Most newcomers admit having ever been approached or even bullied by older girls if they refused to cooperate. Dr Mwitii espouses that lesbianism can manifest in form of 'monolization'. In some cases, it is even treated as a school culture/ritual hence mandatory for newcomers to engage in. at times, bullying of this kind or sexual coercion can be dismissed by prefects or even teachers thus promoting the spread of lesbianism in schools. (The Kenya Forum, 2014).

## EFFECTS OF LESBIANISM IN SCHOOL

Lesbianism remains a major challenge to successful learning in schools. It can contribute to time wastage through punishments, suspensions and expulsions of those involved. These punitive measures are normally applied by the school administration so as to highly discourage any homosexual practices in schools as well as maintaining the school's image. However, such measures can disrupt the learning process of students caught in the act. According to Standard Media (2019), a school in Nyeri suspended 32 girls who were allegedly practicing lesbianism. From the interviews with parents and some of the suspended girls, it was established that they were frequently punished by the teachers because of their behavior, thus wasting a lot of time which could have been utilized in studying. A survey by Mucherah et al, (2016) further proves that homosexuality is among the major cause of punishments (66%), suspensions (61%), and expulsions (49%) in schools.

Most of the clients who visit Dr Mwitii normally have suicidal thoughts because of the guilt, helplessness, rejection from family and even addictions to pornography. They also experience numerous break-ups in the lesbian relationships which cause heart-breaks. 10% of clients admitted to Dr Mwitii that they always desired to come out of lesbian relationships but were not sure on where to start, whom to approach or even whether their sincere intentions to reform would be believed by the school and family. One client admitted that she had been contemplating for two years how to get out of her lesbian relationship, but the thought of embarrassment and severe from the school Principal held her back, until 2022 when she was caught in the act by the dorm captain. It was after suspension that the school gave her and her other counterparts a chance to seek assistance from a psychologist instead of expelling them from school. This clearly indicates the mental and emotional effects of lesbianism on those practicing it. However, despite all these, they still manage to seek help thus an indicator of willingness to change. With a positive attitude, support and empathy, they manage to overcome the challenges and forget about lesbianism as Dr Mwitii contends (Nation Africa, 2020).

## PRAGMATIC INTERVENTIONS

Solving the puzzle of lesbianism in schools in Kenya requires a holistic approach where all the institutions in the society will work together. According to a survey by Mucherah et al, (2016) 64% of participants believed prayers can stop homosexuality in schools whereas 86% believed counselling works and it can help lesbian learners to reform. In addition to that, the role of family and religion cannot be understated. Families are the main agents of socialization thus upholding the traditional values that reject homosexuality. On the other hand, religious institutions in Kenya, uphold societal norms, which generally condemn homosexuality (Kaoma, 2014).

According to Dr. Gladys Mwiti who is a clinical psychologist, homosexuality is not genetic condition but rather an acquired behavior. She further expounded that through behavioral psychology, lesbianism can be unlearned if the family of the victim works together with the teachers, religious institution as well as peers (Nation Africa, 2020). The custodians of our traditional beliefs as communities in Kenya should take the lead to instill values in younger generations so that they do not get influenced by foreign practices such as lesbianism among others. Since religion has strong influence on people, it can be used to inculcate moral values in children and youths as well as correcting any unwanted behavior in the society.

Students who reform from lesbianism relationships need societal support for them to completely come out of such relationships and focus on their studies. Due to the general culture of stigmatization in most schools in Kenya and the society, such students feel inferior and traumatized even though they have reformed. Dr. Mwiti recommends that schools should liaise with the family of lesbian students so as to seek psychological counselling and even therapy where need be so as to help them overcome the aftermath of reforming from lesbian relationships. At school level, Guidance and counselling teachers can also offer support to such students as well as sensitize the entire school fraternity on how they can support these students to reform instead of stigmatizing them.

Legal authorities should liaise with educational institutions to set strategies that will address the issue of homosexuality in schools. For instance, Education Cabinet Secretary Ezekiel Machogu has emphasized on strict vetting of individuals conducting activities in schools as well as the establishment of chaplaincies to curb the spread of LGBTQ practices in schools (The Kenya Forum, 2014).

Learners need to be introduced to the appropriate knowledge on sexuality from primary level where most enter the puberty stage. This will enable them become self-aware and acquire the correct sexual identity. It will also empower them with the right skills to approach challenges faced in life such as when approached by same-sex counterparts.

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