

Pseudo medical clinics promote to heal homosexuality with illegal procedures

Yesterday was the International Day Against Homophobia, but in Ecuador some so called medical clinics offer to treat homosexuality with extreme procedures, and in exchange of money. Some of the methods applied such as therapy are hitting and electrifying the patient. They also use drugs, pornographic films, and hormone injections. These tortures have the consent of the victim's family.

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Without a doubt many women would like Chiqui's silhouette. The features of her face are thin and her body is so slender that hers is the stereotype of how the ideal woman should look like. Men also glaze her with amazement because the truth is that Chiqui has had fans of both sexes.

However, it's enough to see her ID to understand that, no matter if everybody calls her Chiqui in the street, her legal situation is different, because her real name is Pedro Luis Nieto Castro. Today she is 22 years old but, at age 6, she discovered that she didn't feel like a boy. That is why instead of enjoying a childhood full of toys and dolls, hers was full of complaints and punishments from her parents.

But the worst came later, when she became an adult, as she recalls. "My father paid USD 1.000 to get me locked up in a clinic that would change the way I was. As I remember it, it was practically a kidnap because four men came out of nowhere in the street and forced me to go with them. Those days I had long hair and I had just taken hormones, so my breast had grown. But at the clinic, myself and other three gays were shaven. We were locked up in a room so tiny that the four of us had to stay on our feet. Besides, it was dark and full of flies."

Chiqui describes herself as a healthy person because she doesn't smoke, drink or take drugs. Yet her family confined her at a centre called 'Paraíso de Dios' (God's Heaven), that is outside of Durán, a town near the city of Guayaquil (second in importance after the capital, Quito), where she lives. The place is run by Jorge Flor, who is called "minister" by his supposed patients. Some have been there for many years and most are addicted to alcohol and drugs. According to Chiqui, there is a similar center in Milagro, another town near Guayaquil.

"I once tried to escape, and when I was caught they beat me till my nose bled, while they constantly asked me if I was a man or a woman. Then, as punishment, they pulled down my pants, threw me water in between the legs and stabbed me an electrical cable to electrocute me."

The so called "minister" Jorge Flor denies this accusation, or that he runs a place to heal homosexuals. "Look, they are all men," he says while showing a sort of evangelic temple where 40 people were listening the preaching.

Although this type of stories is not registered in statistics, they are part of Ecuador's reality. Many unknown homosexuals have suffered at these centers or clinics, where supposedly their "sickness" will be treated, but with no scientific or legal argument.

Nationwide there are 140 clinics or rehabilitation centers, but only 80 count with the legal permits required to deal with drug addict and alcoholic patients. Neither of these attempts to heal homosexuality, because of a simple reason: it is not an illness. The American Psychiatry Association (APA), which is a medical organization of the United States, erased homosexuality from the list of pathologies in 1973. Ecuador used to consider homosexuality as a crime, but ten years ago the law abolished it.

“There is no authorization to run clinics that change someone's sexual preference because it is not an illness. It's a choice. To do so is an act of deceive done by false professionals,” states Patricia Castro, coordinator of the Sanitary Surveillance Department from the Public Health Office at Guayas (one of Ecuador's provinces and where the city of Guayaquil is located).

In Guayaquil there are two ONG's specialized in helping gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals (known as GLBT groups), that have met many cases of mistreat at these so called clinics.

At Aequalitas, its director, Orlando Meléndez, explains that many victims don't place a formal complaint because of fear of their parents or any other threat. “Some have had to lie just to get out of those dreadful places,” he says.

As a matter of fact neither the Public Defense Council (where people can ask for a free lawyer paid by the Government), nor the local Court of Justice, register official complaints about this subject.

At these centers the use of drugs is also frequent as part of the medical treatment. That happened to Jorge, who prefers to reveal only his first name, at an underground clinic located downtown Guayaquil. “They gave me hormones that changed my voice. They showed me pornographic movies of men to check if I was having an erection and if I did, they hit me. Every morning I woke up at 5:30 am, and breakfast was like a gift to those who behaved properly to them. I remember that once they gave me electric shocks in between my legs and in my hands.”

This occurred to Jorge two years ago. Now he has a steady relationship with someone of his same sex and he is part of a GLBT group. He recalls that the centre was run by men, who identify themselves as “ministers” and who used to touch the patients in between the legs to verify they hadn't had an erection and were, therefore, “healed”.

Some people do attend to these clinics by their own will. That's the case of an anonymous 20 years old lesbian, who decided to go “to cease my family's pain.” She remembers that her mother took her to a place called 'Hogar de Jóvenes' (Youth Home), located downtown Guayaquil, that charged USD 200 per month. However, one day she woke up in another centre that was two hours away and at another town.

“Even though I never tried to escape I was forced to take some pills that made me sleep all day long. My roommates told me that I was awake but I don't recall anything. I once woke up at a clinic in La Libertad (another town), but I had no idea how I got there, I don't remember anything. What I do remember is that those who misbehave were locked up in a room without a bed.”

'Hogar de Jóvenes' is run by doctor Eugenia Macías, who assures that it only treats patients with mental problems. Although, she also admits that once in a while the place received some patients that used to be treated by her husband, who passed away. “My husband had a clinic for drug addicts in La Libertad, but it closed when he died on February.”

Other places offer more orthodox techniques with the help of doctors and psychologists. For instance Nelson Quintero is director at an evangelic centre in Guayaquil, that gives attention to those who willingly like to get out of homosexuality. “The purpose of our service is not to heal the person, but to help him at a spiritual and professional level. We condemn that some homosexuals are lock away,” says Quintero.

This other type of aid is provided basically by evangelic groups, although catholics also arrange some sort of inquisitions. The most renowned one is called 'Courage', that according to its web

site (www.couragerc.net) is an apostolate of the Roman Catholic Church, with presences in countries like Ecuador, Mexico, and Costa Rica.

Antonio Arregui, president of the supreme Catholic institution in the country called 'Conferencia Episcopal Ecuatoriana', says he has never heard about 'Courage'. Yet he admits that in Guayaquil some priests coordinate 'help groups' that deal with this issue.

This week, in the Ecuadorian Parliament, Balerio Estacio (from the government party) suggested that the State should finance those centers run by churches, although there are several stories of tortures that are not public, but exist. He tries to explain his theses with one phrase: "It is the devil who invades the body of the person. It's something supernatural that common people don't understand, not even psychologists. That is why the only solution must come from God."

Converted homosexuals don't search a couple of the opposite sex

A picture shows an image of a woman in dress, with long hair, and wearing makeup. It was taken 23 years ago when Luis, a 45 years old man, was homosexual. Currently he is an evangelic minister, has a wife and two kids. "It was on January 20 of the year 2000 when I found God. He showed me how bad I looked in the mirror", he recalls.

Luis' statement is quoted by the evangelic church to reinforce its argument that a homosexual can live a heterosexual life. And also to promote its centre called 'Camino de Salida' (Exit Path), that is part of a Latin-American net that defends that homosexuality can be healed.

This centre has an office in Guayaquil and another one in Quito, the capital of Ecuador. It is run by evangelic ministers and psychologists that, twice a week, hold meetings with their homosexuals patients and as a form of therapy they talk about the Bible and the reasons that made them turn their natural state of being. Each session costs USD 5.

"The purpose is not to marry them with someone of the opposite sex, but rather make them understand their natural genre so that they will live as males," explains Verónica Izaguirre, psychologist at 'Camino de Salida'.

Nevertheless some patients doubt this therapy. A woman declares that, at 'Camino de Salida', a minister suggested her that the only way her sister will drop lesbianism was by having sex with a male patient of the same place, who is addict to sex.

The process of transformation has not been easy to many. Nelson Ballesteros, a former gay, is 50 years old and has been a minister for several years. "It was very hard to behave like a man because my personality had torn female. Besides I had taken hormones that made my breast grow and change my body and voice."

Nelson keeps a female-like appearance and a woman's voice. He admits that, although 26 years ago he started approaching God, he has suffered some collapses. He affirms that since 2001 he hasn't had sex with a man, neither with a woman. He says that he doesn't reject the opposite sex but he confesses he lacks the will and determination to have a serious relationship with a woman. He recognizes that the therapy he received made him leave homosexuality, but not find a couple.

In a town called Huaquillas (located at the south side of Ecuador) there is a supposed clinic where homosexuals are kept imprisoned for a year. Timoteo Zárate, the "minister", admits that currently two young people, one of 15 years old and the other of 21, "have their own cell separately from the one of drug addicts", on petition of their family.