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Illegal Ecuadoran Clinics Claim to Cure Homosexuality

by Luis Ángel Saavedra

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Donna is a 22-year-old woman who lived in Lima, Peru. She had never left her home city, much less her country. In October 2010, her parents told her they were going to visit Quito, Ecuador, and invited her to come along. Donna was surprised since she did not live with her parents and had a somewhat difficult relationship with them. However, thinking that the trip might bring them closer together, she accepted their invitation.

Once in Quito, Donna's parents took her to the Un Puente a la Vida (A Bridge to Life) clinic, which specializes in drug and alcohol rehabilitation, where they left her locked up. Her parents returned to Lima after making a commitment with clinic personnel to make monthly international bank transfers for Donna's "treatment."

Although the clinic, 20 km west of Quito, cannot be reached by public transportation, Donna was able to escape, and she denounced her confinement to organizations that work with LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) communities. Donna's parents had taken her to the clinic because of her sexual orientation; she is a lesbian.

"My parents thought that if they had me locked up in Lima, I could contact my partner to get me out, so they decided to take me to another country to keep me isolated and have the clinic cure me," said Donna. "The clinic said they could cure me in two years."

**Forced exercise and cold-water baths**

Michel, aged 23, had a similar experience. Her parents, in complicity with the Una Luz en la Tormenta (A Light in the Storm) clinic, sedated her and took her to the clinic, some 30 km north of Quito and equally inaccessible by public transportation.

The clinic director told Michel that he would carry out a treatment to cure her homosexuality, subjecting her to a regimen of physical exercises and Bible-reflection sessions.

Una Luz en la Tormenta also provides rehabilitation for persons with addictions, and they do so based on keeping people locked up and inflicting physical punishment.

"They convinced me that everything revolved around physical punishment. If a plate is not washed correctly, the punishment is 20 push-ups; the same if the bed is not made correctly. If the transgressions are more serious, such as insulting the clinic staff, the punishment is a cold-water bath at night," said Michel.

Michel became convinced of the effectiveness of physical punishment, leading her to become the clinic staff's accomplice. "Since I behaved well and had no drug-withdrawal anxieties, they put me in charge of ensuring that the others fulfilled their punishments, and they said this would also help cure my homosexuality," said Michel. "In time, I imposed the punishments."
Beatriz Villarreal, coordinator of the psychosocial-assistance department of the Fundación Regional de Asesoría en Derechos Humanos (INREDH), says that deception and physical punishment are associated with depersonalization of "patients"; during these processes, persons lose their self-esteem and are predisposed to accept any idea as true.

"First, they make them feel they are unworthy, or sinners, as they say in religious circles, and because they are unworthy, they must accept any punishment to be redeemed, to supposedly obtain forgiveness and be freed of their addictions, which include homosexuality. Since this is regarded as the worst sin, the punishment tends to be the most severe," said Villarreal.

**Good laws, but ignored**

Ecuador's Constitution recognizes the right to freely exercise any sexual orientation; therefore, to confine a person in a clinic against their will and under the pretext of rehabilitating them because of their sexual orientation is considered illegal detention, for which not only clinic personnel but also the state should answer.

In addition, homosexuality was decriminalized in Ecuador in 1997. In the 1998 and 2008 Constitutions, the right to make free and responsible decisions regarding sexuality was recognized, and sexual orientation was included as a category of possible discrimination; that is, people of various sexual orientations can take legal action if their rights are violated because of their orientation.

The Corte Constitucional (CC) has ruled that incarcerating people in clinics, psychiatric facilities, or addiction-rehabilitation centers against their will or without a court order calling for internment in such a center is illegal detention, and persons subjected to such detention can make use of all legal avenues to obtain release.

Clinic personnel, and even some justice officials and police personnel, are unaware of these decisions and accept as valid parents' decisions to lock up their daughters to cure them of being lesbians. When a young woman in one of these clinics is found and a release order is issued, the police and clinic personnel often even turn her back over to her parents, believing that they have legal authority over their daughters, despite their being legal adults and having no legal impediment to exercising their rights.

When a young woman is released into the custody of her parents, they often look for a clinic even more isolated to intern her again.

Pressure from human rights organizations and the LGBT community forced the Ministerio de Salud to issue regulations to control these clinics. On Sept. 6, 2010, the Reglamento de Calificación, Autorización, Funcionamiento y Sanción de Centros de Recuperación para Personas con Adicción was issued. However, far from prohibiting the practice, it gave a green light to creating centers specializing in the treatment of "persons with identity or sexual-orientation disorders primary to their addiction, as well as impulse-control disorders, such as gambling and other nondrug addictions," as Article 9 of the law stipulated.

The Ministerio de Salud had to do an about-face and amend the law in October 2010; thus, Resolution 543 of Oct. 8, 2010, eliminated Article 9 and now reads, "Any center that violates human rights and that threatens patients' sexual identity will be permanently closed."
Faith and business go hand in hand

Several evangelical pastors defend the homosexuality-rehabilitation clinics. For example, former governing-party lawmaker and evangelical pastor Balerio Estacio not only defended them but asked for state funding for them. "The state, by decree or through the legislature, should fund the centers run by churches to cure homosexuality because it is the devil who invades the body. It's something normal people don't understand, not even psychologists. The only solution must come from God, and God is in the church," said Estacio in the Asamblea.

Pastor Nelson Zavala said that homosexuality is "immoral" and a product of the "foolish times in which human beings are living." He also stressed that homosexuals are persons who have respect and rights but not to be who they are but rather to return to what God had commanded that they be, that is, men and women. A process to return them to "being what they should be is long and rigorous, at least two or three years," said the pastor.

The conviction that homosexuality is a sin leads evangelical denominations to collect large sums of money in their congregations to cure "these deviations," which turns the young women into a good business.

Efraín Soria of Fundación Equidad, which works with the LGBT community, says that a clinic can manage a project costing US$15,000 to US$20,000 annually to "cure" a person, and some churches have provided donations for this purpose.

Thus, the laws, good as they are, can be repeatedly ignored if what is sought is to protect a business hidden behind a religious conviction. As long as that exists, young lesbians are in real danger.

-- End --