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Putting Lesbians in Their Place: Deconstructing Ex-Gay Discourses of Female Homosexuality in a Global Context

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Abstract: The transnational ex-gay movement is an important context affecting lesbians and sexual minority women around the world. In 2015, the UN Human Rights Commissioner called for all nations to ban conversion therapies. This research investigates a neglected area of scholarship on the ex-gay movement by deconstructing and analyzing the implications of ex-gay discourses of female homosexuality in a global context. The ex-gay movement originated in the United States and has proliferated to nearly every continent. We argue that it is the main purveyor of public, anti-lesbian rhetoric today, constructing lesbianism as sinful and sick to control women's sexuality, enforce rigid gender roles and inequality, and oppress sexual minority women. Guided by Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality and Barbara Risman's gender structure theory, we analyze how, in ex-gay discourse, lesbianism is demeaned and demonized in the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of the gender structure. Finally, we examine the impact of ex-gay discourse on sexual minority women in global context.

Keywords: lesbian; gender; global studies; rights; social movements; reparative therapy; religion

1. Introduction

The transnational ex-gay movement, which originated in the United States in the 1970s, profoundly affects, both directly and indirectly, the lives of LGBTQ people and sexual and gender minorities around the world. Powerful international organizations are beginning to take action in response to the growth and the impact of this movement. For example, in 2012 the Pan-American Health Organization, representing North and South America in the World Health Organization, issued a strong statement denouncing “conversion therapies” that attempt to change sexual orientation as harmful, ineffective, and as a “severe threat to health and human rights” [1]. More recently, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has issued a report [2] calling for all nations to ban “conversion therapies”. Despite this, the ex-gay movement thrives in most regions of the world unhindered. In this article, we deconstruct and discuss the implications of the ex-gay movement’s discourses of female homosexuality in a global context, a neglected topic in scholarship on the ex-gay movement, as well as the scholarship on sexual minority women. We contend that the transnational ex-gay movement is the main purveyor of public, anti-lesbian rhetoric today and that it openly demeans, stereotypes, and demonizes lesbians and lesbian relationships as a way to control women’s sexuality, enforce rigid gender roles and inequality, and oppress sexual minority women around the world.

The ex-gay movement is thriving around the world, despite some evidence of its decline in the U.S. [3,4]. There is a critical need for research on the global dimensions of this movement, as well as deeper examination of topics that have been neglected or understudied, such as the movement’s discourse of female homosexuality and its impact. Guided by Andrienne Rich’s [5] theory of compulsory heterosexuality and Barbara Risman’s [6] gender structure theory, we analyze ex-gay discourses of female homosexuality to show: (1) how women’s relationships with women are “crushed, invalidated, [and] forced into hiding and disguise” ([5], p. 32) in different cultural contexts; (2) to deconstruct the movement’s gendered discourse of lesbianism at the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of society [6]; and (3) to contest its anti-lesbian rhetoric and politics. As shown elsewhere [7], although the movement’s main goal is to eradicate homosexuality, its ideology of homosexuality is fundamentally based on gender. Applying Risman’s scheme in the present study allows us to compare our findings with similar research on ex-gay discourses of male homosexuality. Although this movement is more focused on male homosexuality, its ideology and policy agenda are virulently anti-lesbian, and its anti-lesbian rhetoric is useful to the movement’s anti-LGBT and anti-feminist politics. We show how ex-gay discourse specifically singles out lesbianism as a grave public threat that requires political action. We further examine how it distorts social scientific research on women’s sexual orientation to oppress LGBT people in general. Finally, we indicate ways in which the movement’s policy agenda may pose additional harms to lesbians and a range of sexual minority women whose relationships and experiences fall within what Rich termed a “lesbian continuum.”

2. Contextualizing the Movement: Interdisciplinary Scholarship

The historical and geographical context in which the ex-gay movement was birthed is not accidental, nor is the movement’s global proliferation (see [7] for a fuller account). In the 1960s, gay liberation organizations in the U.S. successfully challenged societal attitudes toward homosexuality. In addition, research by Dr. Evelyn Hooker and others contested the mental health establishment’s assumption that

homosexuality represented psychopathology. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association decided that homosexuality would no longer be considered a mental disorder. In this context, the first Christian ex-gay ministries formed in the U.S. to counteract these social changes.

By the 1980s, this network of ministries had become a full-fledged movement and began integrating therapeutic approaches into its religious instruction. Over the next decade, the movement developed a global network of ministries, a professional association of therapists and religious counselors, and a political alliance with major Christian Right organizations. The ex-gay movement has had a direct impact on thousands of individuals who have either sought out or have been coerced into their programs, and an enormous impact on sexual and gender minorities generally by opposing civil rights laws for LGBT people in the U.S., and abetting anti-LGBT legislation beyond the U.S. [8]. Scholarship has not examined in depth the transnational ex-gay movement's discourses of female homosexuality and its implications for lesbians and sexual minority women around the world. Because this movement is the main purveyor of public anti-lesbian political rhetoric in the U.S. and has established a significant global presence, it remains an important context to examine for the lives of sexual minority women.

There is an emerging body of interdisciplinary social science research on the ex-gay movement beyond scholarship in psychology and mental health disciplines regarding the effectiveness and ethics of sexual orientation change efforts (See [9] for a thorough critique of conversion therapies, as well as the position of the U.S. mental health establishment on professional practice guidelines). Some studies examine the development of ex-gay identities and the everyday lives of ex-gay men and women [10–14]. Ethnographies document the experiences of men in an ex-gay residential program in California [15] and the experiences of individuals involved in ex-gay ministries in the “Bible Belt” of the U.S. [16]. Methodological scholarship has examined self care [17] and ethical issues in feminist ethnography in research related to the ex-gay movement [18]. A few studies examine the ex-gay movement's impact on professional mental health organizations and practices. Waidzunas [19] investigated the movement's influence on the science of sexual orientation in the U.S. Arthur, McGill, and Essary [20] analyzed the framing strategies used by reparative therapists. Thorn [21] studied how the Judeo-Christian tradition (including the ex-gay movement) is blamed for antigay prejudice in psychiatry and psychology. Sandley [22] examined the legal and professional health issues related to banning reparative therapy for LGB minors.

The largest body of scholarship on the ex-gay movement investigates its social and political impact. Moon [23] evaluated discourses in the Protestant dispute over church policy on homosexuality, including the use of ex-gay testimonials. Three studies [24–26] examined the collaboration between ex-gay and Christian Right organizations to advance antigay politics in the U.S. Robinson and Spivey [7] deconstructed the politics of the movement's discourses of male homosexuality. Finally, a few studies focused on the transnational impact of the movement, including its global expansion [27], anti-LGBT public policy positions with respect to international law [8], influence on educational policy in Australian schools [28], American antigay activism in Uganda [29] and Africa [3], and the ex-gay movement's activities in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina [30].

Scholarship on this movement, as well as research in lesbian studies, has not examined, in depth, ex-gay discourses of female homosexuality and its import for lesbian and sexual minority women in a global context. Our work in this paper primarily focuses on deconstructing and analyzing the implications of Western ex-gay discourses of female homosexuality, while also discussing the implications for other cultural contexts in which they circulate. Others have called attention to sexism in ex-gay ideology and

its focus on men [7,13,15,31–34]. Menasche mentions the ex-gay movement as one of many “myriad ways that heterosexuality is imposed on women” ([35], p. 10), but does not analyze the movement’s discourse or its anti-lesbian policy agenda. Further, while studies of social justice movements “constitute one of the most prolific bodies of research on lesbians” ([36], p. 719), no studies examine how modern counter-movements oppress lesbians specifically. This research contributes to scholarship on the ex-gay movement and lesbian studies.

The ex-gay movement’s anti-LGBT public policy advocacy in the U.S. is well known. Ex-gay leaders have lobbied to uphold the criminalization of consensual homosexual relations; prevent family recognition of same-sex couples; and prevent LGBT people from adopting or rearing their own children, serving as foster parents, or having access to medical technologies that would enable them to become parents. It has opposed hate crime and employment non-discrimination legislation [8] and laws banning reparative therapy on minors. We know far less about the movement’s impact on sub-populations (for example, sexual minority women and transgender people) as well as its activities in countries beyond the U.S.

3. Compulsory Heterosexuality and Gender Structure Theory

The social position or “place” of lesbians (and sexual minority women in general) in any society is significantly affected by the social constructions of sexuality and gender in that context. We draw from Adrienne Rich’s [5] theory of compulsory heterosexuality and Barbara Risman’s [6] gender structure theory to analyze ex-gay discourses of female homosexuality. Rich explains that compulsory heterosexuality is an ideology and a political institution—and a cornerstone in the denial of lesbian existence, control of female sexuality, and the oppression of women. Risman explains how social inequality is maintained by how gender (including sexuality) is defined and structured at all levels of society. Combining these frameworks, we analyze ex-gay constructions of female homosexuality at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels of society [6] to discuss the implications of an important context in which women’s relationships with women are “crushed, invalidated, [and] forced into hiding and disguise” ([5], p. 32). Rich’s framework, despite feminist critiques that it promotes an essentialist notion of lesbianism, provides insight into a myriad ways in which the movement denies the authenticity of lesbian existence and coerces male authority and sexuality on women. Risman’s theory enables us to show how this movement uses gendered discourses to demonize, pathologize, and control sexual minority women through gender socialization at the individual level, marriage and submission to male authority in social interaction; and legal sexual subjugation at the institutional level.

4. Methodology

In this study, we employ critical discourse analysis of ex-gay movement texts on female homosexuality to reveal relations of power and domination in these texts. Our analysis is informed by Norman Fairclough’s [37] approach, because it is more sociological than other (more intentionally linguistic) methodologies. Fairclough proposes three lines or levels of analysis (focusing first on the text itself, then “discourse practice”, and finally “sociocultural practice”). In the first, the purpose is to analyze the texts to identify and then deconstruct the relevant discourse or discourses; is, to illuminate how relations of power and domination that are embedded in the texts (in this case, ex-gay movement texts of female homosexuality).

The second level of Fairclough's approach, what he calls "discourse practice" aims to illuminate how a discourse (or discourses) is promoted and circulated by its advocates. This includes examining the means and forms of discursive production and circulation, the intended audiences, as well as the "infrastructural supports" that facilitate the movement's ability to promote and "sell" its message to various audiences. The purpose of Fairclough's third level of analysis, sociocultural practice, is to examine the cultural and structural impacts of a discourse or discourses on wider social arrangements. In our paper, we explain how the ex-gay movement's discourses of female homosexuality have had an impact on policy, on the social position or "place" of lesbians and sexual minority women, and LGBT civil rights broadly. Analyzing these three levels, using Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis, facilitated our efforts to: (1) reveal and contest the movement's ideology of female homosexuality by deconstructing relations of power and domination embedded in its religious and scientific discourses; (2) situate ex-gay discourses and ideology within larger social contexts of how, by whom, and for whom they are produced and circulated in different cultural contexts; and (3) evaluate the extent to which they may reflect, reproduce, and/or change wider social arrangements. Critical discourse analysis is a particularly useful approach to deconstructing discourses and analyzing ideologies that are proffered by adherents as natural, universal, and God-given, as in the present study.

Data for this study represent the views of ex-gay movement spokespersons and these organizations, all of which have or had significant global and political import: Exodus International, a large network of predominantly U.S.-based Christian ex-gay ministries, founded in 1976 and disbanded in 2013; Exodus Global Alliance (EGA), an independent organization created in 1995 to coordinate ministries globally, based in Canada; the National Association of Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), a professional organization for ex-gay therapists and religious counselors, founded in 1992 and renamed Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity (ALLIANCE) in 2014, based in the U.S. with an international division; Focus on the Family (FOCUS), the largest evangelical Christian parachurch organization in the U.S. with offices in several countries, which has supported ex-gay programs since 1998; and, finally, the Restored Hope Network (RHN), created in the U.S. in 2013 after EXODUS folded. Some former EXODUS ministries are now part of RHN. All of these lobby against LGBT civil and human rights. With the exception of FOCUS, all of these organizations are focused on ex-gay ministry or therapy (or both), and are made up of local, grass-roots member ministries or individual therapists or religious counselors. FOCUS is a Christian Right organization that developed a significant ex-gay division called Love Won Out from 1998–2009, when it transitioned to EXODUS until 2013.

The leaders of these organizations have invested significant resources over many years establishing an enormous global presence through creating, locating, and supporting the development of member and affiliate organizations in other countries and developing world-wide networks with religious and political organizations outside of the U.S. North American organizations provide trainings and conferences all over the world, occupy an enormous Internet presence (with resources available in multiple languages), sponsor Christian radio and television programs that reach millions around the world daily, and disseminate a substantial collection of publications. NARTH's website provides its "practice guidelines" for therapists in several languages. Ex-gay conference recordings from FOCUS are available in Spanish, the second-most spoken world language. EGA conference recordings are available in multiple languages. Some EGA conferences are organized by the international office in Canada, while others are organized and hosted by regional EGA member offices in other countries. EGA coordinates and provides

some oversight for regional offices of ex-gay member ministries in Australia, Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, which commonly provide links to and translations of U.S. ex-gay publications as well. Automatic translation technologies built into Internet web browsers make materials easily accessible to non-English-speaking audiences.

We have been doing research on the ex-gay movement since 2004, and have gathered and analyzed an extraordinary collection of materials representing a wide variety of texts (audio, video, print, and online) created and/or circulated by these organizations over time. They include books, websites, social media, newsletters, conference recordings, and other sources. All of the organizations in this study, including FOCUS' Love Won Out division, hold or held regular conferences, provide extensive materials on their websites, and promote (or sell) books and DVDs. We acquired (in many cases, purchased), transcribed, and analyzed as comprehensively as possible all of the various kinds of texts from these North American organizations and their experts have produced on female homosexuality, representing several hundred items. From organizational materials, it was easy to identify the people the movement considers to be the most prominent expert authorities on female homosexuality and to find testimonials by "ex-lesbians". Several women whose testimonials are referenced in this study have since left the ex-gay movement, come out as lesbian or bisexual, and/or renounced their views. We specifically sought out additional publications and conference presentations given by these individuals, even beyond the materials available from these ex-gay organizations. We coded texts on female homosexuality to: (1) identify and articulate the elements of their discourses; (2) show how discourses of female homosexuality are circulated and modified for audiences in different countries; and (3) evaluate the impact of these discourses on lesbians on sexual minority women.

5. Quintessentially Masculine

Dissecting the ex-gay movement's gender discourse of female homosexuality requires analyzing the movement's religious and therapeutic accounts of gender and sexuality in historical and geographical context. Historical research has documented how, for centuries, Christian and Western medical constructions of lesbianism as masculine deviancy have oppressed women, socially and sexually. Homoeroticism was viewed by early Christian authorities in Rome as a gender issue [38], which continues in conservative Christianity today. The Romans rigidly divided sexual behavior into active (masculine) and passive (feminine) roles, and considered sexual relations between women as masculine [38].

Similarly, 18th century European medical authorities reinforced this view [38]. "Women with masculine desires" were considered diseased and in need of medical treatment [38], which continued into the 19th century when medical experts deemed all non-reproductive "pathological" ([39], p. 630). Gibson [40] details scientific constructions of lesbianism as masculine degeneracy in the U.S. from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century. Minton [41] explains how the medical view of homosexuality as a gender pathology that could be controlled therapeutically undermined the struggle for homosexual rights prior to the 1960s. American psychotherapists re-popularized gender etiologies of homosexuality in the 1960s until they fell out of favor by the establishment in the 1970s. Today's transnational ex-gay movement has proliferated the view of homosexuality as a sin against God's design for gender, a treatable gender disorder, and a societal threat requiring political intervention [7].

Ex-gay texts typically weave religious and psychological narratives of female homosexuality together, rendering lesbianism a deviation from "Biblical femininity" [42–48] and a breach of "God's

design for gender and sexuality” [49]. From their perspective, “God does not create women to be lesbian” ([43], p. 2). Simultaneously, these narratives invoke the secular authority of psychology to deny the authenticity of lesbian existence, constructing “the condition of lesbianism” as quintessentially masculine, advocating that “women with same-sex attraction” undergo reparative therapy, which focuses on “restoring” a woman’s feminine identity so she can recover her “inherent” heterosexuality [45].

At the individual level, ex-gay discourses instruct women to accept that God intends and expects for them to assume a feminine identity and to be sexually attracted to men, and that this is psychologically healthy. At the interactional level, ex-gay discourse compels women to adopt a feminine appearance, accept female submission to male authority, and pursue heterosexuality as God’s will and as indicative of a woman’s mental health. Finally, ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality at the institutional level clearly aims to shape society’s views of lesbians and influence public policy by denying their civil and human rights, legal protection and recognition of women’s relationships with women (and their children), and gender equality. At all levels, ex-gay discourses of female homosexuality deny the legitimacy and authenticity of lesbian existence, demean lesbians, demonize relationships between women, and contribute to the oppression of sexual minority women generally.

6. The Individual Level: Detaching from Femininity as the “Root Cause” of Lesbianism

For the first few years, ex-gay ministries in the U.S. were predominantly religious in character, emphasizing redemption from the sin of homosexuality through devotion to a Christian way of life. Since the early 1980s, however, ex-gay ministries began to incorporate into their programs the ideas of Elizabeth Moberly [50,51], a Christian psychologist from Britain who repackaged older, discredited American and European psychological theories of homosexuality and developed “reparative therapy” (see [7,52]). Moberly theorized that female homosexuality is caused by a girl’s failure to relate to and identify with her mother, and is an unconscious search for mothering that results in “quasi-masculinity in the female homosexual” ([50], p. 8). This framework, which has dominated ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality ever since, negates the authenticity of lesbian existence and constructs lesbian desire and identity as fundamentally masculine, psychologically unhealthy, and against God’s will.

The texts examined in this study—predominantly representing the movement’s white, Western experts on female homosexuality and “ex-lesbians” themselves—reiterate and elaborate on this framework, positing “the lesbian condition” as a sin and a curable mental disorder. While ex-gay reparative discourse proposes a variety of possible explanations for female homosexuality, the “root cause” is the development of a masculinized gender identity, most typically brought on by a disturbance in a girl’s family environment, causing her to detach from her feminine identification with her mother [51,53–56]. Since lesbianism is cast as an unholy psychological condition, there is no such thing as an authentic lesbian identity or, in Rich’s [5] terms, lesbian existence. This is evidenced by commonly-used euphemisms for female homosexuality in ex-gay narratives, such as: “women ‘involved in’ or ‘affected by’ lesbianism, ‘a lesbian struggle’, female same-sex attraction (SSA), lesbian-identified, and “emotional dependency”. As ex-lesbian Jane Boyer [53] and former EXODUS Board member puts it, “Homosexuality is...a symptom of unmet needs...so she’s not a lesbian, this behavior is a symptom...it’s a label.”

Ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality, including the (American-British) reparative model and its religious beliefs about sexuality and gender, has been exported to many other countries and is the dominant framework of the movement world-wide. Although North American ex-gay organizations

have diligently sought to globalize, this process has not been passive or unidirectional. Esly Carvalho, a Christian counselor from Brazil, initiated a collaborative relationship with one of the founders of EXODUS to bring reparative therapy to other parts of the Americas, and established Exodus Latin America [30].

Etiologies of the “Lesbian Condition”: The Mother Wound and Sexual Abuse

The movement’s authorities on female homosexuality attribute the gender-deviant behavior of mothers as the most probable cause of the masculinization that leads to lesbianism [49]. Testimonials by women “formerly involved in lesbianism” [57–59], and ex-gay spokespersons consider the following women (all from the U.S. except Moberly) to be the foremost authorities on female homosexuality—Janelle Hallman, Jeannette Howard, Elizabeth Moberly, Anne Paulk, and Lori Rentzel—and regard Hallman as the movement’s most esteemed expert. Hallman served on NARTH’s Board and has been a regular speaker for NARTH, EXODUS, and FOCUS. She is an ordained minister, has a counseling degree from Denver Seminary, and directs Desert Hope Ministries. Hallman (2002) describes: “the typical profile of the mother of a lesbian daughter”:

According to my clients... The mom of a lesbian struggler... hid in bed under the covers when dad became abusive or rageful; was mentally ill and relied on her daughter to continually talk her out of committing suicide; didn’t even know the basics of housekeeping let alone caring for a baby or child; was a social butterfly and alcoholic leaving her little daughter alone and unsupervised; was unable to separate from an abusive husband; was a dutiful wife but a shell of a woman; bragged incessantly about herself and kids... hated being a woman, never shed a tear and despised... [or] was openly jealous of her daughter. These... describe a woman who is insecure, dependent, afraid of being alone, weak, lost and broken and underdeveloped in her own femininity. It is easy to understand why a daughter... might conclude that if becoming a woman means becoming like mom, she wants nothing to do with it. Unfortunately, in the girl’s detachment and flight from femininity... she too begins to live out a... crisis of her true gender identity... Many of my clients feel and believe they are not women. This is... an indication of their alienation from their inherent design as a feminine being.

Blaming “the mother wound” [60] is so prominent a theme in ex-gay texts [51,61–63] that Melissa Fryrear [64] enumerated “six types of damaging mother-daughter relationships that can cause lesbianism”: “dispassionate, doormat, manipulative, domineering, my best friend, and self-consumed”.

Testimonials from professional “ex-lesbians” in the U.S. to Christian audiences validate the notion of a masculinized identity as the root cause [42,46,47,59,65–71]. However, EGA’s website shows this is also reinforced in ex-lesbian testimonials representing women from other countries, including Brazil [72], China [73], Australia [74], Malaysia [75], Scotland [76], Singapore [77] and Taiwan [78]. Juliet Pragasam [77] from Singapore, attributes her homosexuality to a variety of traumas in her youth, including emotional and physical abuse from her adoptive mother, who “bought” her for \$2,000 when she was eight months old. Christine Sneeringer, who directed an EXODUS ministry in the U.S., explains:

My alcoholic father had a violent temper and would often hit my mother. Because my mom was a victim, I rejected anything to do with femininity and wanted no part of being a girl... I preferred sports over playing with dolls... I walked [and] talked like a boy... people often called me “son” or “young man”. I also hated my feminine name, Christine, and went by the

more generic “Chris” ([79], p. 27).

Jane Boyer [80] similarly explained “Because my mother was a victim of my father’s violence, I became her protector and caretaker. ‘Mom’, I vowed, ‘I hate it that you are weak, clingy, and powerless. I will have nothing to do with womanhood.’” Testimonials such as these are far more likely to blame mothers than fathers, even when fathers abuse their wives.

Ex-gay narratives occasionally implicate fathers [42,81–83] when they fail to adhere to masculine roles. Melissa Fryrear [84], who directed an EXODUS ministry in Kentucky prior to working for FOCUS, claims a father may contribute to a daughter’s “SSA” by being “unprotective, inattentive, unadoring and unsupportive...A father’s opinion of his daughter provides either affirmation or disapproval in a way that a mother cannot.” NARTH ([85], p. 3) indirectly suggests that fathers may be culpable if a daughter “identified with or desired his power and freedom. This can result in a disowning of her femininity as she is treated like a son or one of the guys”. Ex-gay proponents are more likely to positively frame the father’s “critical” importance in securing his daughter’s healthy gender identity [49,58,62] or to excuse him when he is abusive or absent, blaming no-fault divorce in the U.S., for example, instead [68]. Ex-gay discourse explains the development of female homosexuality by faulting mothers for failing to personify Godly femininity, and by exalting the father’s masculine authority as the remedy.

The second explanation for a woman’s “detachment from femininity” is sexual abuse, according to the movement’s North American and British experts on female homosexuality [49,50,86–88] and is validated by the testimonials of ex-lesbians from different countries [43,58,67,75,76,79,84,89–98]. Janelle Hallman [49] cites discredited “researcher” and American hate group leader Paul Cameron as a credible source for this claim, which is rejected by the American Psychiatric Association [99]. Prior scholarship [7,8] documents how ex-gay movement experts, leaders, and organizations repeatedly reference discredited researchers and hate group leaders such as Cameron and Scott Lively for their “evidence”. Several sub-themes emerge from this trope. The first is that sexual abuse is far more pervasive for women “involved in lesbianism” [58,61,62,100]. Allen and Allen ([43], p. 21) report “within Exodus circles...at least 80% of the women...have experienced sexual trauma.” Janet Boynes [101] told a Campus Crusade audience that “...85% of women who live a lesbian life had been raped...Some of us just become prostitutes, drug addicts, bad mothers, we have eating disorders, and we might get involved in homosexuality.” Melissa Fryrear [84] insists “...in almost a decade of [directing an EXODUS] ministry, I never met one woman with this struggle who had not been sexually threatened...violated, or abused or molested.” NARTH [85] claims that male sexual abuse of lesbians is “twice as high as of heterosexual women” and that “50% of lesbians have been sexually abused”. The implication is that the genesis of lesbianism leads to perverse sexual expression.

The second is that sexual abuse causes SSA women to emulate “typically masculine or mannish behaviors” ([100], p. 181) and to “disdain” or hold “contempt for femininity” [68,102]. The third is that sexual abuse leads SSA women to hate men generally, reinforcing lesbian stereotypes [80,89,92]. A final sub-theme conjures images of “lecherous older lesbians and predatory professors”. This caricature, recurrent in testimonials [74], depicts predatory older women abusing their authority to victimize innocents. Sometimes this did not involve sexual contact, but rather, as Melissa Fryrear [64] contends, exposure to “...radical feminist ideologies which are so devaluing...and degrading of men...in...liberal colleges”. Amy Tracy [103], stated that enrolling in an all-woman college, majoring in sports medicine, exposure to feminism and being surrounded by lesbian professors influenced her sexuality. More often,

however, are claims of sexual contact. In a different testimonial, Tracy [104] says: “I had a faculty advisor who suggestively flirted...and even touched us in inappropriate ways.” Yvette Schneider [59], who spent 14 years working for EXODUS and Christian Right organizations, says her first lesbian encounter was initiated by a professor. Ex-lesbian Debbie Thurman ([105], p. 277) suggests that pedophilia by lesbians may be an organized phenomenon, referencing the pro-pedophile North American Man-Boy Love Association three times and noting the “Women’s Auxillary of NAMBLA”, which “celebrates erotic relationships between women and girls”.

The “homosexual predator” in Western ex-gay discourse is not limited to male perpetrators. Further, this rhetoric can be used by non-Westerners not only to amplify anti-lesbian hostility, but anti-Western sentiment. Ugandan political and religious leaders allege that adults “recruit children into homosexuality”, ideas explicitly reinforced by American evangelicals advocating reparative therapy at a 2009 conference in Kampala, one month before the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (which became law in 2013) was introduced into Uganda’s Parliament. When asked why he drafted this legislation, David Bahati, who attended the conference but denied its influence on his bill, said “for the sake of protecting our children here in Uganda. We have a problem of people promoting homosexuality, especially using money and materials to recruit young people” [106]. To rally support for the bill, Pastor Martin Ssempe called a press conference of local and international media and introduced “Sandra, a young girl who was recruited from school at the age of 16 after three years of living with older lesbians”. Journalist Maria Van Zeller reported “Ssempe regularly paints a picture of opportunistic Westerners with deep pockets preying on Africa’s impressionable, poor youth” [106].

Although Uganda does not appear to have an ex-gay ministry, the reparative framework promoted by Americans (including former EXODUS Board member Don Schmierer) at the Kampala conference could resonate with local perceptions of lesbians. According to Tamale ([107], p. 2), “Women who embrace a ‘kuchu’ (gay or lesbian) identity or subculture repudiate conventional femininity” to identify one another. Lesbians tend to wear “trousers, shirts, baseball caps, and other forms of ‘masculine’ attire. Many in Uganda interpret this as lesbians’ desire to be ‘like men’ or to adopt the role of ‘pseudomen’.”

Ex-gay discourse emphasizes mothers and sexual abuse as the two main causes of female homosexuality; however, Melissa Fryrear [84] provides a laundry list of thirteen:

damaged family relationships...abuse; misperceptions of the genders; same-sex peer relationships; positive portrayals of lesbianism...radical feminist ideologies; personality temperament; negative experiences with boys or [in] marriage; loneliness; parents’ hope for a son...pornography; and negative spiritual influences. Is there a lesbian alive who hasn’t experienced at least one of these?

Perhaps to some, Western ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality appears moderate, perhaps even compassionate, rendering strugglers as victims, not only in contrast to accusations that gays “choose” homosexuality, but also in contrast to nations that criminalize sexual relations between women. However, a close analysis of these texts reveals, ultimately, who is responsible. Melissa Fryrear [64] makes this point directly:

Mike and I are always trying to balance the fact that there can be contributing factors, but that we are culpable, responsible for own decisions...the Lord...began to show me the

depth...and the gravity of my sin, of all the people against whom I had sinned, and most significantly, the One against whom I had sinned...

Fryrear [108] reminds her audience that Hell is the ultimate penalty for sin. The bottom line is that, whatever the cause, those who violate God's design will be eternally damned.

Deconstructing ex-gay etiologies of female homosexuality at the individual level reveals an ideology of compulsory heterosexuality that uses religion and a discredited, medical framework to coerce women to define lesbianism as a degenerate, dangerous form of masculinity, to deny the authenticity of their own sexuality, to repudiate the legitimacy of lesbian existence generally, and to compel them to exhibit "godly femininity" and accept their subordinate place in relation to men, for their salvation and their sanity. This discourse is the dominant framework of most ex-gay organizations around the world. It is highly adaptable to diverse environments, including politically progressive countries such as South Africa (discussed in the next section), for example, and potentially very repressive nations such as Uganda. In both cases, Africans craft culturally-specific anti-lesbian narratives that accommodate aspects of ex-gay discourse and transform it. Ex-gay discourse at the interactional level provides a blueprint for how "SSA women" can overcome their condition and assume their proper "place" as women of God.

7. Lipstick Ex-Lesbians

Ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality at the individual level, like male homosexuality, reveals the socially constructed nature of gender and sexuality in movement ideology. At the interactional level, it illustrates the performative [109] character of heteronormative femininity. Further, it reveals how the movement's religious and reparative frameworks oblige and instruct "SSA women" to take part in the institution of compulsory heterosexuality—and thus, to participate in their own oppression [5]. Training "SSA" women to exhibit heteronormative femininity is the main prescription for delivering women from their same-sex attractions and nurturing the development of heterosexuality.

Reparative prescriptions direct women to conscientiously fashion a feminine appearance, exhibit feminine behavior in social interactions with others (through homosocial mentoring relationships with feminine women), and submit to male authority in relationships (especially in marriage, literally and/or spiritually). The movement showcases the personal testimonials of "success" from women all over the world who have followed these prescriptions. Regardless of national origin, ex-lesbian testimonials promoted by these organizations typically dramatize the transformation from a former masculine self (while also vilifying lesbians and their relationships) to a heteronormative, feminine persona, which not only appears to substantiate the power of the movement's religious teachings and the effectiveness of reparative therapy, but the universal "nature" of sexuality and gender itself.

Western reparative therapists and "ex-lesbians" emphasize in scrupulous detail the ways in which women should alter their appearance and behavior to become feminine [49,58,110]. Because they define femininity according to what they imagine is attractive to men, feminine performances and dress codes are, as Rich [5] notes, essential elements of compulsory heterosexuality. Testimonials of "ex-lesbian" women dramatize "change" with photos and graphic verbal imagery, contrasting "old" with "new" selves [42,58,89,111,112]. Typically, former selves are depicted in unflattering and unsavory ways that demean lesbians and relationships between women, while "new" selves are exalted. At a Campus Crusade event in Atlanta, Janet Boynes [101] showed photos of her "old" self and told her young

audience: “For 14 years, I tried sex...drugs...pornography...everything that a man does. I was the dominant one...that wore the pants...buy all the sex toys to try to do something that was unnatural.” Jeannette Howard [113] describes how God redefined and now approves of her “new” self:

One of my most traumatic times...occurred during a “make-over” session...by the ministry leaders...Women tried on...makeup...to complement our skin, eyes, and hair...I felt like a performing monkey...but, with the encouragement of the other women...I persevered...learned to say “thank you” and smile...“You have believed a lie” God told me, “but I’m going to change your name”. From now on, He showed me, I was to be called “woman”...I entered into my rightful role as a woman of Christ...God is healing my views on men. Now I see them as having a major role in my life...I sensed God smiling at me.

In her testimonial at an EGA conference Brazilian Carla Pinheiro [72] portrays her femininity as emblematic of her healing:

...I rejoice when I look myself in the mirror and I see a different woman...from the woman I was in the past...The way I dress today, the way I do my nails, my hair, everything is different from the way I used to look in the past.

Joan MacDonald [76], from Scotland, titled her testimony at an EGA conference, “From Man-Woman to Woman of God”, and faithfully delivered, from beginning to end, a reparative-religious narrative. American Melissa Fryrear [64] explains how becoming a Godly woman healed her sexuality.

I looked like a stereotypical gay woman...very mannish...I show up to [FOCUS] every day in a skirt and panty hose and high-heeled shoes...I began to learn about the opposite gender...womanhood...I’m grateful for the changes that He made...on the inside, a Godly woman...[K]eep your eyes open for me for a tall red-headed man in his early 40’s who loves football and would look great in a Scottish kilt...I’m not married, but I would treasure marriage if the Lord has that...Scripture says that singleness is a calling as well, that undivided devotion to Christ...I love serving the Lord Jesus and being His hand maiden.

Regardless of one’s cultural background or national origin, ex-lesbians testify that submitting to Godly femininity is the crucible of one’s exodus from lesbianism toward heterosexuality.

Reparative counselors and professional “ex-lesbians” encourage “SSA women” to develop mentoring relationships with feminine women, euphemistically called “healthy female friendships” [108,114–118]. Therapist Janelle Hallman [49] recommends:

...a mentoring relationship or friendship with a few women who exhibit desirable qualities as women...comfortable with their femininity...so many women with SSA...assume that other women automatically know how to put together a nice outfit...style their hair...act in social gatherings with other women or men...As she requests, she might be given tips on basic hygiene and self-care, shopping strategies, stores and clothing styles, clothing budgets, nature of fabrics and color coordination, hairstyles, hair salons, hair maintenance and...products, body products, body treatments or undergarments. She should not be merely told about all of these products and services; she should be literally and sensitively escorted to a store or through a manicure...by her trusted friend ([49], pp. 275–76).

Another recommended form of mentoring is the therapist-client relationship [45]:

I believe that the most effective component of therapy with a female homosexual is the...therapeutic relationship formed between female counselor and client...as I love, accept and affirm my client...she can...develop as a female being.

Hallman's clients "look to me (similar to how daughters look to a mother) to cast a vision of femaleness that is both desirable and respectable..." ([49], p. 263). Ex-lesbians [42,43,47,58,93,114,117,119–121] attest to the effectiveness of mentoring.

Falling in Love with Jesus: The Heterosexual Imperative and Submission to Male Authority

In ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality, the last step for SSA women in fulfilling what it means to be a Godly woman is submitting to male authority in marriage. The movement's authorities on female homosexuality explicitly state that diminishing homosexual attractions and developing heterosexuality is the goal of reparative therapy [50] and that heterosexuality as "God's design" for a woman's sexuality [44]. It is clear from the movement's discourse on female homosexuality that women are obliged to submit to male authority in heterosexual relationships. Dutch psychologist Gerard van den Aardweg, who serves on NARTH's and ALLIANCE's Board maintains that submission to a husband's authority is the defining feature of becoming a "normal" woman:

Many lesbians...would greatly profit from small exercises in ordinary submissiveness, even—I hardly dare say the word!—in obeying; worse, in obeying the authority of men. Their preferred masculine role of dominance and independence must suffer some violence—exerted by themselves, by their own free will—if they are to feel what normal feminine "docility" and "softness" are ([122], p. 140)...The last step is the change from feeling and behaving like...the "ungirlish girl" to...a normal...woman...Becoming a man means...to take responsibility for and "lead" a woman...making decisions for a woman...the woman with a homosexual complex has to fight her infantile resistance to surrender happily her feminine role and to accept wholeheartedly the man's leading role ([122], p. 147).

In ex-gay discourse, heterosexuality is also a divine imperative; however, proponents claim that obedience to God's will is the ultimate goal. Allen and Allen claim, "God intends us to enjoy heterosexual experiences—sex within a committed marriage relationship...You need to be committed to...what God intends for you" ([43], pp. 9–10). Although ex-gay texts provide ample instruction to women on heterosexual dating, preparing for marriage, and marital relationships [58,61], leaders are clear that one's primary obligation is obedience to God's will and not heterosexuality or marriage [92,100,108]. A close reading of these texts, particularly by ex-lesbians, shows that submitting to God's will is not to heterosexuality itself, but rather to a heterosexual imperative—a heterosexual role or presentation of self—whether that means submission to male authority in a literal marriage, or figuratively as the "bride of Christ". The heterosexual imperative has nothing to do with a woman's actual desires; it is about allowing God to control women's sexuality and their "place" in life, regardless of what they want. As Melissa Fryrear illustrates [44], even unmarried women are bound to the heterosexual imperative, as single Christian womanhood is cast in heterosexual imagery:

Christianity recognizes two ways...to express love...Christian singleness or...marriage...if we are called to be the bride of Christ...singleness is not a rejection of sexuality...[for] those who...forego earthly marriage in anticipation of...Heavenly marriage...[A]s a single person I am still waiting for a 10-carat on this hand but I'll take two-tenths, I will take a cigar band at this point...

Fryrear commonly displays heterosexual desire, perhaps especially because she is single.

In “ex-lesbian” testimonials, women commonly describe falling in love with Jesus as a necessary pathway to heterosexual desire [80,123]. According to Fryrear [112], “When God intervenes in your life, He makes himself known to you and you fall desperately in love, and then your heart’s desire is to yield and to defer and submit to His will”. Alan and Willa Medinger [102] explain how SSA women should imagine themselves in a marital relationship with Jesus:

This is the starting point...[for] women...to get in touch with the heart of Jesus...a man free of sin and could never hurt or abuse her...there is great difficulty in trusting even Jesus. But He can overcome this. He...will just keep wooing her until she can begin to trust Him. So this is the first step in becoming free from a controlling spirit: starting to nurture her relationship with Jesus, gradually seeking to see Him as her friend, her protector, even her husband. Focusing on His nature and not her own needs...she starts to trust at least that one man—Jesus.but it may not lead to a trust of others...The spirit of control must die...she must let Jesus kill that thing...either a real demonic presence, or a deeply embedded rule of life...There will be pain...But through her failures and God’s faithfulness she will eventually know that...Jesus is offering to be her protector. To say no to Him is to say no to His love, to love itself...To say no to Him is to say no to...the life that He offers...It is rebellion. It is a sin...He will woo her until she can trust Him, and then He will call her forth to freedom and true womanhood, and He will give her a good place to dwell in. The goal is not marriage. The goal is obedience, becoming who God created us to be.

For SSA women—single and married—submission to male authority is inherent in the marital covenant, whether one’s husband is Jesus or mortal. Further, any woman who does not accept Jesus’ overtures is a sinner. Married [58,92,124] and single women [89]—cite scriptural authority to compel women’s obeisance to God’s will for their sexuality and establish a husband’s authority over his wife and her duty to submit. This is the heterosexual imperative; it has nothing to do with a woman’s desire.

Ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality at the interactional level requires not only feminine performances but, in Rich’s terms, compulsory heterosexuality. Heterosexual displays are a staple of ex-lesbian testimonials, regardless of marital status. Married ex-lesbians present husbands and children as evidence of their healing [42,58,59,77,80,82,92,114]. Single ex-lesbians [108,111,117] often present heterosexual identities as well, noting that “marriage is not the measure of change” and that singlehood does not negate one’s heterosexuality. The narratives of SSA women most typically recount the personal horror stories of masculine deviance and destructive lesbian relationships, and are particularly harmful to lesbians and sexual minority women because they are based on personal experience. Ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality—including the views of the movement’s experts as well as the testimonials of ex-lesbians themselves—demean lesbians and infantilize women’s relationships with women as “emotionally dependent” [43,53,56,58,80,82,84,102,114,124–129], unfulfilling or

unsatisfying [61,80,115], violent [56,59,74,79,92,98,130,131], predatory [43], controlling and/or manipulative [43,102], unfaithful [92,111], and addictive and disordered [84,108,111,132].

Ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality goes well beyond the assertion that femininity and sexual attraction to men are innate, psychologically healthy, and divinely conferred to women. Heterosexuality and submitting to one's husband are compulsory, a woman's Christian duty and a psychological imperative. In Rich's [5] theory, the supposition and habitual declaration of the inherent naturalness of heterosexuality confines the gender identities and sexuality of all human beings. Compulsory heterosexuality also legitimizes women's economic subordination to men through the division of labor [133]. Reparative prescriptions for women further illustrate the socially constructed nature of gender and sexuality in ex-gay discourse [7,134]. Heteronormative femininity is performative [109], requiring continual practice in social interaction.

Transnational ex-gay movement organizations in this study present a unified discourse on the etiology and "treatment" of female homosexuality. It is highly adaptable to cultures beyond North America, including countries that are politically progressive and punitive with respect to LGBT rights. We have suggested that ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality could also resonate with and reinforce culturally-specific anti-lesbian discourses and practices in other countries. Ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality is especially compatible with societies where Christianity is growing and where there is already enormous pressure for young women to marry and procreate.

At the individual and interactional levels of society, the impact of this discourse primarily relies on the extent to which individual women and girls seek or are coerced into ex-gay or conversion programs. A 2015 UN Report ([2], p. 15) expressed concern about "rehabilitation clinics' [in Ecuador] where lesbians and transgender youths have been forcibly detained with the collusion of family members and subjected to torture". Currently, most countries of the world do not ban mental health professionals from practicing reparative or conversion therapy. Prominent U.S. medical associations oppose sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) and discourage health professionals from attempting them, which they consider unethical and potentially harmful [9]. Despite this, and a fledgling movement in the U.S. to ban licensed professional counselors from attempting to change the sexual orientation of minors, current public policy in the U.S. and in most countries around the world permit therapists and religious counselors to practice SOCE with few barriers or consequences [135]. It is beyond our scope to elaborate where and how such practices are regulated or banned. There are some important developments in Latin America (see [30]). In the U.S., only four states (California, Illinois, New Jersey, and Oregon) and the District of Columbia make it illegal for licensed professional counselors to practice therapies with minors. Ex-gay proponents advocate preventing homosexuality in youth [54,136–141], and NARTH/ALLIANCE members have challenged, in court, laws that ban such therapies on minors [142]. Further, the medicalization of homosexuality through the ex-gay movement's global influence is of great concern, whether or not ex-gay organizations endorse some of ways it is carried out. Goa, a state in India just announced a government-sponsored program targeting youth to "get over same-sex feelings" [143].

The implications of the ex-gay movement's discourse of female homosexuality for the "place" of lesbians (and women in general) in social and sexual relations is clear: universally, regardless of the cultural context, one becomes fully a woman through obeisance to God's will and submission to male authority, inducing women to become complicit in their own subordination [5]. Ex-gay discourse of

female homosexuality at the institutional level has more far-reaching consequences for the social position of sexual minority women.

8. The Perils of Lesbian Existence: Compulsory Heterosexuality and Public Policy

Ex-gay organizations have devoted significant resources to public policy advocacy. At the institutional level, the ex-gay movement not only seeks to defend the right of therapists and religious counselors to practice sexual conversion “therapies”, it also seeks to legally codify and enforce the oppression of sexual and gender minorities as a matter of public policy, which is well documented [7,8]. Adrienne Rich [5] argued that to understand the oppression of lesbians, and women in general, heterosexuality should be examined as an ideology and as a political institution. As we have shown in earlier sections of this paper, the movement’s ideology of female homosexuality casts lesbianism as a threat to and denial of God’s and Nature’s essential condition for womanhood, femininity, which is viewed as critical for the Family and Society. Lesbian existence flouts female submission to male authority and women’s duty to the heterosexual imperative itself. According to Tamale, writing about Uganda, “What is particularly threatening...is the idea of intimate same-sex relationships where a dominating male is absent, and where women’s sexuality can be defined without reference to reproduction” ([107], p. 2).

In this section, we focus on the how the movement uses its discourse of female homosexuality to promote its public policy agenda, identifying some of the most significant ways that the transnational movement specifically singles out lesbianism as a grave social threat that requires political action, and misuses social science research on sexual minority women. In addition, we identify the ways in which the movement’s policy agenda disproportionately harms lesbians and a range of sexual minority women whose relationships and experiences fall within what Rich termed a “lesbian continuum”.

In ex-gay discourses of female homosexuality, lesbianism poses a particular threat to the Family and Society. The heterosexual imperative is a vital *social* good that lesbian families (in particular) undermine, rationalizing political and cultural interventions aimed at institutionalizing it and opposing LGBT human and civil rights. The ex-gay worldview imagines that healthy (Christian, patriarchal) societies are built on healthy (Christian, patriarchal) families. This is reinforced beyond North American ex-gay discourse as well. For example, Oscar Galindo [144], Director of Exodus Latin America, claims that homosexuality is likely to develop because of “matriarchal” cultures, such as those that embrace Catholicism and venerate Mary [7]. In the institutional dimension, ex-gay discourses of female homosexuality construct the heterosexual imperative as necessary for the well-being of a society, and consider lesbian families (even more so than those of gay men) as particularly threatening to the social order, rationalizing public policy advocacy aimed at institutionalizing it. As shown elsewhere [8], ex-gay representatives have advocated a range of anti-LGBT public policy positions in the United States and elsewhere, including criminalizing consensual adult sexual relationships and gay advocacy; opposing marriage equality, parental rights, hate crime legislation, and laws that would ban employment discrimination. Examining ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality reveals the movement’s particular concern about the threat posed by lesbian sexuality. We further evaluate the implications of this discourse in light of current research that suggests that sexual minority women are likely to be disproportionately harmed by some of the movement’s policy positions.

Laws criminalizing consensual homosexuality, which exist in nearly 80 countries, were declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2003. In the U.S., they were more likely to be used to discriminate rather than prosecute sex acts. In 1995, Virginia's Supreme Court justified forcibly transferring custody of a woman's son to her mother based on the state's statute. The ex-gay movement, with assistance from Christian law firms, advocates a variety of legal strategies to undermine parental rights, including access to reproductive technologies, the right to foster and adopt. Because lesbians are far more likely to become parents than gay men [145], this disproportionately affects them. EXODUS' policy explicitly stated support for legal prohibitions on parenting except by married, heterosexual couples [8]. In 2004, Matt Staver, founder of Liberty Counsel, provided legal representation to Lisa Miller, an ex-gay woman who attempted to deny her former partner visitation rights to their daughter, claiming that a "lesbian lifestyle" was harmful to her daughter. After Miller abducted her daughter and fled to Nicaragua, Liberty Counsel and the ex-gay organization PFOX continued to provide her legal support. Staver, who serves on the Board of RHN and regularly provides legal advice at ex-gay conferences, and Rena Lindevaldsen, also affiliated with Liberty University Law School, defended Miller's abduction of her child as an act of civil disobedience [146]. Ex-lesbian Meleah Allard [147] praised Miller as a "very brave woman of God".

The ex-gay movement has been actively involved in the movement against marriage equality in the U.S., which disproportionately affects lesbians, who are more likely to marry than are gay men [148]. A 2014 analysis [149] found that lesbian couples account for almost two-thirds (64%) of all same-sex marriages in the U.S. NARTH has filed amicus briefs in several marriage cases, including in Hawaii [150], California [151], and the Supreme Court case on the Defense of Marriage Act [152]. The ex-gay movement's policy advocacy has particularly harmful consequences for lesbians, not only when they are disproportionately affected. Ex-gay political rhetoric specifically singles out the alleged dangers of lesbian families. NARTH's ([150], p. 4) amicus brief states:

A lesbian household presumes that fathers are not necessary, but fatherless families are associated with devastating social and personal problems, including youth violence, unsafe neighborhoods, domestic violence against women and child sexual abuse. Perhaps...the Scandinavian countries that have accepted marriage-like arrangements for same-sex couples have explicitly denied these couples access to adoption and/or artificial insemination.

NARTH misuses social science to erroneously claim that children of lesbians are inherently disadvantaged because they are "fatherless". One will not find such concerns expressed about "motherless" families. Further, rather than confront the true sources of problems (especially men's oppression of women), NARTH blames lesbians for perhaps what it truly fears about "fatherless families"—a challenge to society's gender structure, and women's second-class status. NARTH's suggestion that the absence of a father *increases* the incidence of domestic violence and sexual abuse is bewildering.

To the extent that people believe the ex-gay movement's claim that people can change their sexual orientation, there could be significant legal consequences for public policies based on sexual orientation in the U.S., as well as harms perpetrated by governments and non-state actors against lesbians in other countries. In the U.S., there are three criteria that courts have historically used to grant minority status to groups seeking Constitutional protection from discrimination: (1) a demonstrated history of discrimination; (2) political powerlessness; and (3) the immutability of a group's defining

characteristic [153]. The movement has sought to undermine all three criteria [8]. With respect to the third criterion, ex-gay leaders misuse scholarly research on “sexual fluidity” in women as a public relations tactic and legal strategy, which is especially pernicious for sexual minority women. Psychologist Lisa Diamond [154] found that women’s sexual identities over the life course are more “fluid” than men’s. Ex-gay proponents [68,115,151] routinely cite this research to defend ex-gay therapies and claim that sexual orientation is not immutable, despite the American Psychological Association [9] rejecting these claims and despite Diamond’s statements that NARTH “grossly and deliberately” misrepresents her research [155].

Promoting the belief that women’s sexuality is “fluid” in other countries could reinforce anti-lesbian prejudice in unintended ways. For example, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women noted that in South Africa, El Salvador, and Kyrgyzstan “lesbian women face an increased risk of becoming victims of violence, especially rape, because of widely held prejudices and myths” including “for instance, that lesbian women would change their sexual orientation if they are raped by a man” ([156], p. 18). The Committee expressed, with respect to South Africa specifically, that:

The Committee expresses grave concern about reported sexual offences and murder committed against women on account of their sexual orientation. The Committee further expresses serious concern about the practice of so-called “corrective rape” of lesbians ([156], p. 18).

South Africa is a progressive nation, providing legal protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation in its constitution. Further, it is the only nation on the continent that recognizes same-sex marriage. However, the practice of corrective or “curative” rape of lesbians is reportedly increasing in rural areas [157] where lesbianism is viewed as a sin, masculine, and a Western, “white disease” [158]. These culturally-specific anti-lesbian discourses could render ex-gay ideology more credible to South Africans who hold them. Ex-gay organizations have developed a significant presence there. The EGA website provides a link to a South Africa’s ex-gay ministry website, which almost exclusively offers resources from the U.S., as well as contact information for South Africa’s three ex-gay ministries. FOCUS also has an affiliate office in South Africa. In 2010, Cape Town, South Africa hosted the largest-ever global gathering of evangelical leaders, representing nearly 200 countries—the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization—where EGA was provided a platform to promote its message.

9. Conclusions: Place Matters

The transnational ex-gay movement is an important context affecting the lives of lesbians and sexual minority women around the world. This research has sought to examine a neglected area of scholarship on lesbian life, as well as a neglected topic of research on the ex-gay movement, by analyzing ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality in a global context. Despite the dissolution of the movement’s founding and most prominent ministry network, as well as repudiation by American professional health organizations and major UN committees, ex-gay organizations continue to thrive and proliferate in most regions of the world, disseminating a discourse of female homosexuality that harms not only women and girls who seek or are coerced into ex-gay programs, but lesbians and sexual minority women and girls in general.

The most important finding of this study is that the ex-gay movement has successfully used an essentialist politics of gender and sexuality (but also race and nationality) in its discourse of female

homosexuality to impair the social position of lesbians in distinct ways from gay men, and to assail LGBT rights in general. Exposing the mechanics of this discourse is crucial for challenging the movement itself. The most important implication of this finding is that there is a need for a multi-issue analysis of ex-gay discourse that includes (and goes beyond) deconstructing the movement's gender politics. The ex-gay movement is the leading public source of persistent, harmful rhetoric about lesbians today. Although its most obvious objective is to purge society of homosexuality, a close analysis of the movement's discourse reveals its unique anti-lesbian ideology and gender politics at every level of society. At the individual level, the movement's "reparative" ideology coerces women to believe that female homosexuality is a sinful and sick version of masculinity and to adopt a heteronormative feminine identity for their salvation and their sanity. In interaction, reparative and religious proclamations from the movement's experts on female homosexuality include pejorative depictions of lesbian life and relationships, and demand pain-staking feminine makeovers and performances, enforcing a heterosexual imperative that requires submission to the authority of men. A key point in Adrienne Rich's theory [5] is how the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality convinces women to participate in their own oppression. To the extent that women internalize ex-gay ideology as "God's will" and "natural", the ex-gay movement's appeals to religious and medical authority are powerful tools of sexual and gender oppression and social control that compel women to deny the authenticity of their own sexuality and accept their inferior status. The belief that homosexuality, and lesbianism in particular, is malleable is an idea that has forestalled political progress for LGBT people in the United States, disproportionately impacting lesbians in some ways, and allows professional therapists and religious counselors to appeal to the authority of science and God to coerce women into heterosexual marriages that reinforce their inferior status. It is also an idea that has the potential to produce or reinforce devastating, and possibly unintended, outcomes for sexual minority women in other parts of the world.

In the institutional dimension, the ex-gay movement's public policy advocacy in the U.S. and abroad has profound implications for oppressing lesbians, as sexual minorities and women. Although conservative Christianity appears to be losing the culture wars over gender and sexuality in Europe and North America, the ex-gay movement continues to flourish there and influence how large populations perceive and act toward lesbians. The movement has significant potential to harm sexual minority women in other regions of the world as well, not only in countries that deny them civil and human rights, but also in progressive countries that provide legal protection for sexual and gender minorities (such as South Africa). Further research examining the movement's political and religious influence outside of the U.S. is sorely needed.

There are several limitations of this study. First, we focus mostly on the movement's Western (and North American) discourse of female homosexuality. Even when we provide examples of how this is applied in other cultural contexts, these examples mostly come from North American organizations and are available in English. More in-depth research in other cultural and national contexts (particularly non-English speaking) could illuminate how this has been adapted or modified elsewhere, and to what effects. Second, we did not have space here to give enough attention to the racial and nationalist aspects of this discourse, and these are very important aspects of the movement's past and present success in forestalling progress for LGBT rights the U.S. and world-wide. Third, the organizations we examined have been the most influential in the ex-gay movement; however, there are other ex-gay organizations that are both similar to and very different from those examined here that are worthy of study and that have a

transnational impact. Not all ex-gay organizations embrace the “reparative” model of homosexuality and are focused more exclusively on religion. Some, though not all, of this is likely a political choice. For example, conversion therapy by professional therapists is banned in Brazil (and other parts of Latin America). Consequently, the EXODUS movement in Brazil has retreated from a reparative framework into an exclusively religious one [30]. Further research is needed to examine how bans on reparative therapy, whether by mental health establishments or government entities, alter the discourse and practices of ex-gay ministries and professional counselors. Such bans will not eliminate ex-gay ministries or keep professional counselors from doing ex-gay therapy, but they will likely alter their trajectory, potentially in ways that will make them more difficult to examine and potentially impossible to regulate. This is particularly concerning regarding the well-being of minors, which leads us to another limitation. This study did not explicitly examine the movement’s outreach to young people. Although we did reference in this study presentations by ex-lesbians to youth groups at different Campus Crusade for Christ youth conferences [68,101], we did not have space here to discuss student groups (and educational settings more broadly) as an important evangelizing context of the movement in more depth. Prior research [27] has documented the ex-gay movement’s outreach to campus Christian youth organizations in the U.S. such as CRU and InterVarsity as well as its attempts to use legal means to influence how homosexuality is discussed in sex education curricula. An important 2015 study [28] documents the movement’s impact on educational policy in public and private schools in Australia. There is a tremendous need for research in this area, especially given the concerns expressed by APA Task Force Report [9] about the impact of this movement on youth. Fourth, we do not include the voices of individuals from the ex-gay survivor movement in this study. We did not have space to adequately address this important aspect of the movement’s impact. There is a tremendous need for, and adequate data available, significant research on the ex-gay survivor movement. There are, no doubt, additional limitations of this study that we have not articulated here. We hope that scholars will use this work, both its revelations and its omissions and limitations, to further investigate the impact of the transnational ex-gay movement.

This research suggests additional fruitful topics for future scholarship on the movement’s gender discourse, and far beyond the movement’s politics of gender. For example, research is needed on the ex-gay movement’s “ministry” to transgender people, as the recent suicide in the U.S. of teenager Leelah Alcorn, whose parents forced her to undergo ex-gay therapy, reminds us [159], as well as do reports of forced therapy on transgender youth in Ecuador [2] and state-sponsored programs in India [143].

Additionally, it is important for scholars, human rights advocates, and policymakers to critically re-examine how the essentialism-constructionism debate is used to advance or deny human rights, and to evaluate the merits and shortcomings of advocating for human rights of people based on essentialist criteria. Ex-gay discourse of female homosexuality is formulated through religious and medical narratives that rely on essentialist assumptions about the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality. Essentialism is also found in lesbian theory [5], LGBT studies more broadly [160], the criteria used by the U.S. Supreme Court to grant minority status for protected classes [153], and in the very terminology currently used to advocate for the human rights of sexual and gender minorities at the United Nations. “Sexual orientation” and “gender identity” are also Western legal categories founded on essentialism [161]. As we have argued here, there is an important historical precedent for concern. In the U.S., the ex-gay movement has been successful in persuading large groups of people that LGBT people do not deserve civil rights because their identities are malleable, unlike allegedly immutable characteristics such as race.

Finally, and most relevant to the theme of this special issue, the 2015 UN [2] report calling for all nations to ban conversion therapy should encourage scholars to carry out additional research on the transnational ex-gay movement's impact on LGBTQ people, with particular attention to race, religion, culture and nationality—essentially, the role of place. Ex-gay discourse is a white, Christian, Western invention. Although there are non-white proponents involved in the U.S. ex-gay movement, including at least one whose testimonial is represented here [86], racial minorities are underrepresented. Similarly, although the movement began as a Christian phenomenon (and remains so predominantly), it has both secular and non-Christian religious proponents.

The ex-gay movement has the potential, ironically, to capitalize on anti-Western sentiment to evangelize American Christianity and discredited Western therapies in countries that are predominantly populated by non-whites, to deny LGBT human rights, by promoting the belief that homosexuality and transgenderism can be cured. The racial, cultural, and nationalist politics of the ex-gay movement deserves greater attention in scholarly research. Although the movement is predominantly white, Christian, and Western, both white and non-white movement figures use racial (and nationalist) politics explicitly to undermine civil rights for LGBT people in the U.S. Further, this study suggests that, to the extent that homosexuality is perceived as imported or a “white disease” [158] and human rights for LGBT people as a “Western” agenda, contrary to “Asian values” [162,163], “African values” [164], or any other “values”, the transnational ex-gay movement may be able to exploit this sentiment to further its agenda around the world.

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Author Contributions

Both authors contributed to the study design and authorship. Sue Spivey developed the theoretical frameworks. Christine Robinson gathered and analyzed the data.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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