

# RIGHTS FOR EVERYONE: MEDIA, IDEOLOGY, RELIGION AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC<sup>1</sup>

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As in most of the countries that make up Latin America, in the Catholic Church in the Dominican Republic has an overwhelming influence on society. The conceptions, ideas and Catholic dogmas form a fundamental part of the core of religious beliefs professed by the Dominican people.

The Catholic Church and the Dominican State have utilized each other to reinforce their positions of power in society. Because of this relationship, the conservative mentality of the traditional Catholic Church marks aspects of social life in a more evident way than in other countries.

The conservative position of certain sectors inside the Dominican government, due to an authoritarian past, has purported to deny basic rights to persons that belong to the LGBT community, rights that are automatically recognized when referring to persons that are considered “normal” i.e., not members of the LGBT community. This position is present also in the media.

In 2002, during the celebration of the Santo Domingo International Book Fair, a group of NGOs dedicated to promoting human rights and antidiscrimination strategies erected an exposition booth called “The Pink Booth”. In this booth, NGOs that work for the rights of women, Haitian immigrants, black Dominican women, the handicapped and the LGBT community were present.

The Commission in charge of the Book Fair decided to close the booth after a prominent newspaper published an article entitled “Homosexual Promotion in the Book Fair”. The article asked the question, “What would happen if your son, after arriving from the Book Fair, instead of educational materials, brought brochures speaking of homosexual relations and lesbianism, without censure and using vulgar terms?”

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The booth displayed material about the rights of the LGBT community and about AIDS prevention. This material was considered “pornográfico” by said newspaper.

This act of closing the booth provoked heated polemics in which the right to free expression and tolerance in the media were debated. Renowned communicators responded by supporting the freedom of expression and tolerance toward the LGBT community.

Shutting down the booth evidenced the crass violations of both the right to free of expression, and intolerance toward the LGBT community, mentalities that dominate sectors of the Dominican government and the mass media. In spite of this situation and due to the fact that they did not have proof of the “distribution of pornographic material to children”, the Book Fair Commission annulled the order and the Pink Booth was reopened with the agreement that “they would not give out pornography to children”.

The public discussion of this issue in the newspapers allowed the groups that work with the LGBT community to explain their work and the rights of the persons belonging to that community, which was anew opportunity for these groups to find a voice and greater visibility in the media.

Some months later, the LGBT rights groups requested permission from the government to hold a march for the rights of gays and lesbians. The government granted them permission, surprising many, and the march was celebrated and reviewed by the newspapers.

This fact does not indicate that prejudices have disappeared, but it does suggest that a window of opportunity has been opened where prejudices and stereotypes affecting persons that belong to the LGBT community can be reduced or eliminated. These stereotypes are maintained in good part by the official position of the Dominican Catholic Church.

In the summer of 2002, groups that support the recognition of the rights of the LGBT community were denied permission to celebrate

a gay pride march. In the first months of 2002, newspapers and radio and television programs have dedicated time to the issue of homosexuals in the media.

During the dispute, the polemic has endured, but the root of the debate is not so much if “homosexual characters” in TV are apt for kids, but if gays should be permitted to work in the media at all.

In the Dominican Republic no laws exist against “homosexuality” and the laws that referred to “acts against the good customs or the morale” have been eliminated. Hence the LGBT community is not persecuted legally; however, depending on their social status, gays or lesbians may feel marginalized to varying degrees given that in many cases public displays of their sexual orientation are frowned upon by the more conservative segments of Dominican society. There remains much work to be done to overcome these prejudices and ideological obstacles. This would allow for recognition of the rights of all the citizens, regardless of sexual preference.

The question that is on everybody’s mind right now is: how, in this culture, can a homosexual foreign student have a rich intercultural experience? I do not have the solution to all the problems that a student may encounter in the Dominican Republic. I only have some recommendations that are useful for heterosexual and homosexual students alike:

- Try to blend, mingle with the local population by using the same type of clothing and fashions. To use fashions that have not yet been generalized among the Dominican youth will forestall integration and draw attention.

- Be cautious when speaking of religion or sexual orientation; these are delicate issues for the majority of Dominicans. These issues, especially sexuality, are best discussed with persons with whom you have trust. Do not feel the need to inform everyone of your sexual preferences.

- Have a great deal of care when striking up conversations and planning social activities with people you meet in street. Many Dominican men think that it is easier to abuse gays or lesbians because they are stereotyped as “weaker”.

- Be very cautious about showing affection in public. A heterosexual couple showing affection in public is frowned upon; the same actions taken by a same sex couple could cause a disagreeable situation.

- Specifically for the Dominican Republic, if you have an encounter in the street with the police or the military, always speak in English.

I do not want to finish without reminding you that although the mentalities change very slowly, they do eventually change and evolve. Ten or twenty years ago, nobody could have imagined that Dominican newspapers would publish articles stating that persons belonging to the LGBT community have the rights as the straight community.