VOLUME 2

LOOKING THROUGH THE PRISM

Narratives of queer dignity in South Africa

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ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

This series has been prepared by the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) Unit of the Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria.

The Centre for Human Rights (the Centre) is an academic department of the Faculty of Law at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. It also doubles as a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO). It therefore functions as a teaching, training and research department as well as implementing human rights projects akin to the style of an NPO. The Centre's reach is within South Africa and beyond, particularly on the African continent. The Centre enjoys 'observer status' with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Centre has also submitted cases before the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. It, therefore, identifies itself as a pan-African organisation. It specialises in human rights law and human rights issues on the African continent, while linking these to global human rights knowledge streams and discourses from other regions of the world.

Formed in May 2016, the SOGIESC Unit's mandate is to advocate for and work towards equality, inclusion, non-discrimination, non-violence and non-heterosexism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and other non-binary and gender nonconforming people. The SOGIESC Unit has been responsible for presenting statements at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights on LGBTIQ+ issues; drafting soft law instruments and a model law on intersex rights for possible adoption by regional bodies; conducting research on and promoting awareness of LGBTIQ+ issues; organising a yearly advanced human rights short course on sexual minorities rights; and convening a strategic litigation and advocacy workshop for LGBTIQ+ human rights defenders in Africa.

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FOREWORD

In 1996, South Africa became the first country in the world to constitutionally prohibit unfair discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Along with the eradication of apartheid and the day-to-day renegotiation of race relations, this unique constitutional inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) people has truly earned South Africa Archbishop Desmond Tutu's fond nickname for the country 'Rainbow Nation'.

In the 25 years since that historic dawn, LGBTIQ+ people in South Africa have had to push through several social and legal challenges – from violence to institutional discrimination – in order to emerge as a vibrant and leading community in Africa helping to promote equality, non-violence, and decriminalisation for LGBTIQ+ people across the continent. While there are still a number of issues in South Africa that stand in the way of full realisation of LGBTIQ+ rights, the country has become a haven for persecuted sexual and gender minorities and allies from across Africa who seek an environment where they can thrive and self-actualise without the fear of state or societal harassment or persecution.

In celebration of the lives of LGBTIQ+ people in South Africa, the narratives in this photo collection offer a glimpse into queer life in the Rainbow Nation. The narratives shed light on the issues and concerns of LGBTIQ+ persons as they navigate their daily lives under the South African Constitution. Whether it is finding a career path, navigating academic studies in a new country, or finding love and friendship, these narratives bring together a collection of moving, joyful, and sometimes sad stories told from an often poignantly personal perspective.

Many of the themes in this series question conventional perspectives on queerness, self-expression and sexual and gender diversity. Despite the existence of extensive legal protections for LGBTIQ+ rights in South Africa, there is still a need for positive change in knowledge, attitudes and practice in addressing LGBTIQ+ issues and concerns by the general public and policymakers for the better enjoyment of rights by LGBTIQ+ persons.
While the photographs and interviews serve to depict the specific individuals featured in this

collection, they are the distinctive representation of the experiences of LGBTIQ+ persons in the wider South African context. They can be seen as part of a growing movement challenging the traditional, confining categories into which representation of the queer experience in South Africa has been polarised between the binaries of glitzy or violent that are often showcased in the media. Instead, these narratives attempt to show the everyday-ness of queer life beyond the headlines, while at the same time demonstrating its difference from the everyday. In the words of one of the interviewees, Sohela: 'Being queer is not just like being everyone else, it has this tiny difference where there is real scope to question things much more widely and I think that is something worth celebrating.'

Prof Frans Viljoen
Director, Centre for Human Rights
September 2021

INTRODUCTION

'[H]uman dignity, like art, must be understood within a person's own social and cultural context'
- C Craven, 'How the visual arts can further the cause of human rights'

South Africa continues to remain a contradiction when it comes to the protection of human rights. On one hand, its history of apartheid has created a fierce social culture around the protection of individual rights, particularly against violations by the government. On the other hand, there are still worrying social attitudes towards the rights of groups vulnerable to violence in South African society, particularly women, migrants, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) community. In several instances, this attitude has led to sudden bursts of violence.

In the case of LGBTIQ+ persons in South Africa, violent hate crimes and other forms of social discrimination have continued against the community despite shifts towards the legal protection against discrimination for LGBTIQ+ people. For instance, in early 2021, a string of excessively violent murders led to the murders of Bonang Gaele, Nonhlanhla Kunene, Sphamandla Khoza, Nathaniel "SpokGoane" Mbele, Andile "Lulu" Nthuthela, Lonwabo Jack, Buhle Phoswa and Lucky Kleinboy Motshabi.1 The legal recognition for the equality of LGBTIQ+ persons appears to be insufficient in effecting material change to address these questions of discrimination, harassment and persistent violence. These hate crimes and other forms of discrimination are so well documented that they have spilled into other disciplines including the visual and performing arts.

Our work at the SOGIESC Unit of the Centre for Human Rights has often focused on academic and policy engagement (including encouraging and supporting litigation before the Equality Courts), but we also understand that visual arts, especially photography, can be utilised to create awareness of human rights violations in a more visceral way. Certainly, engagement with legal methods and the scholarly analysis of human rights principles have their uses in the advancement of knowledge, but this approach is often susceptible to prioritising form over function; and prone to focusing more on the state and less on the affected community. As such, even when policies change, social attitudes remain the same.

1 P de Vos 'The religious fig leaf that conceals the justification of hate crimes against the LGBTQ community' (2 May 2021) https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2021-05-02-the-religious-fig-leaf-that-conceals-the-justification-of-hate-crimes-against-the-lgbtq-community/ (accessed 1 September 2021).

Visual arts can be an effective medium of communicating the nature of human rights, their function within social, economic, and political systems of the state, and the mechanisms they provide to access a life of dignity in a way that is accessible to everyday people in society and that focuses on the affected communities. This ideal informed the conceptualisation and development of this series. Our approach to the photography and interviews was designed to 'centre' the person featured and present their stories as authentic representations from the queer community. It was also important to include include narratives from lesser documented community members including transgender women and men and LGBTIQ+ persons who still have to conceal their identities.

This project does not just seek to share the challenges facing the LGBTIQ+ community in South Africa, but also to highlight the various experiences, encounters and moments in the lives of LGBTIQ+ persons. These moments range from understanding one's sexual orientation or gender identity to inflection points in relationships with family, friends, and lovers. The narratives in these series are a journey of discovery into the unique and yet ordinary lives of an everyday LGBTIQ+ person.

We have tried to preserve the narratives in the form that they were shared with us as much as possible – and any imperfections are ours. However, we hope that through this collection, you will have an even better appreciation of the human experience in all of its diversity and in all of its sameness. And we hope that, in turn, this appreciation will inspire you to work towards the better protection of LGBTIQ+ persons in South Africa and across Africa.

Thiruna Naidoo and **Dr Ayodele Sogunro**
Centre for Human Rights
September 2021

ANONYMOUS

I'm basically a girl from Pretoria currently living in Johannesburg because of my work as a business consultant. I am a black woman and I subscribe to the term queer because I've never really assigned a solid label to my sexual orientation, nor do I feel I need to because then I'll just keep changing it. And why should I? Because it will mostly be for other people. I understand my sexuality. I just don't have a label for it.

I think the most significant relationship I have is with my mom. Growing up, I saw her as literally the ideal for me, for what represents a strong woman. I always tell people – even to this day – that if I can be even half the woman that my mom is, that would be amazing. But at the same time, I feel like seeing her that way has also scarred me a lot and put me in a lot of difficult situations. As much as she is a very strong willed woman, she has also been in a very toxic relationship with someone who is close to me – my father.

And that has affected me a lot. In all of the relationships that I have had, I have ended up in abusive situations. I have put up with a lot of things that I wasn't supposed to put up with because what I saw as my representation of positivity was actually something that's very negative and toxic. I thought she's amazing. I thought that's just how life is, whereas it's something that I have to work through. And, yeah, it has affected me in a lot of ways, but I think I'm moving past that now and learning new things, new boundaries and just figuring myself out as a human being. I think being in therapy also helps because sometimes you tell yourself that 'Oh no, I'm an adult now' but I'm realising that I'm 26 years old. I'm actually learning who I am now. I'm figuring myself out. I'm learning who I am as an individual, not based on other people, what they expect, who they think I am, which is something really hard, because you expect that at this age you have things figured out, which is not how it is.

I'M LEARNING WHO I AM AS AN INDIVIDUAL, NOT BASED ON OTHER PEOPLE, WHAT THEY EXPECT, WHO THEY THINK I AM, WHICH IS SOMETHING REALLY HARD, BECAUSE YOU EXPECT THAT AT THIS AGE YOU HAVE THINGS FIGURED OUT...

The first time I noticed I was genuinely attracted to a person of the same sex was when I was 16. I always go back to this because it is such a vivid memory. I saw this woman while I was walking through the mall with my mom. I remember I couldn't stop looking at her and I was like 'This person is so attractive', but not in a passive way where you see somebody and you're like 'This person is so pretty'.

I was genuinely attracted to her, but I let it go and didn't pay much mind to it because at that point I didn't take it seriously or understand it until I got to varsity.

I think so far I've decided to just sort of keep myself within the heteronormative space. But now I've become more relaxed in terms of, if it comes up, then I open up about my sexuality and who I am. Recently at my new workspace, this came up in a conversation with people and I just said 'No, I'm not straight.' I think it also depends on who you are engaging with at the time, because the general space might not be receptive, but the individual that you're communicating with might be. So now I just feel the room and if I feel comfortable with the risk, then I open up regardless of how I see the environment around me, but I never lie about it.

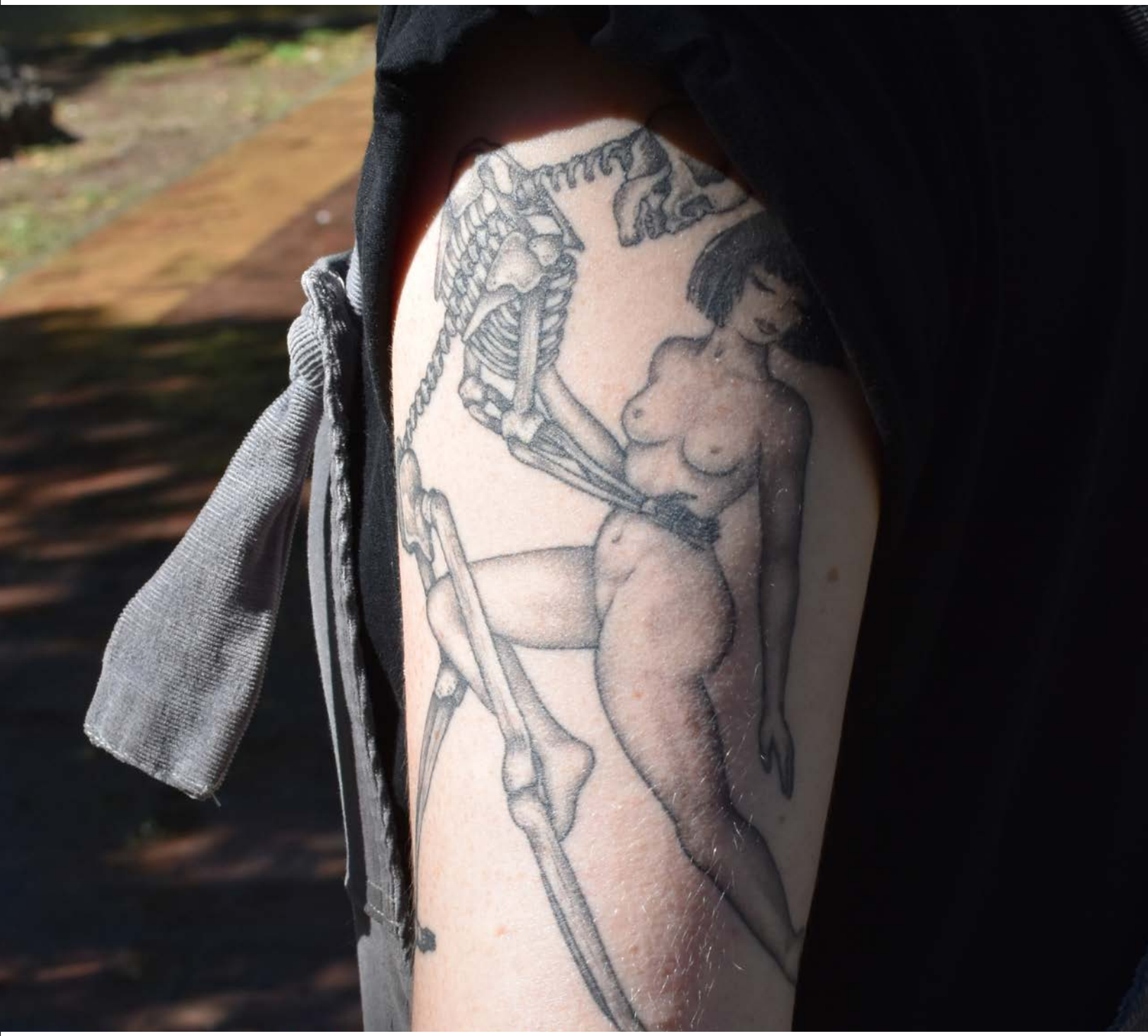
I would never bring it up with my boss because we're not cool like that. Like there's no reason. But if you were to ask me, I would answer the question honestly, but I don't think it would come up. It's not everybody that needs to know if it comes up or you feel that you've reached this level of comfort with that person or that kind of topic comes up, then I do open up and I'm like, 'Yeah, well, I'm actually not heterosexual.' So that's that, and then I watch for the person's reaction to what I just said.

JESSICA

My name is Jessica Stemmett. I am a 27-year-old queer identifying, cis-gendered woman and I currently live in Cape Town, but I am from Port Elizabeth originally where there were not a lot of queer people to get to know. I was a former attorney in family law, but I've made a complete career shift and I am now an artist and a creative freelancer among many things. Mostly, I think I identify as a person who is trying to get through the world.

A lot of my art is about the strength and power of femininity because it is not that valued in the world. To create feminine art through a woman's eyes and not through the male gaze. I struggle with the way that women are heavily sexualised through the media and heavily sexualised through the male gaze. To represent yourself in a way where you choose the way that you are going to be represented or where you choose the way that the feminine form in your eyes is going to be represented is important to me, and with those aspects of kink and aspects of fetish because I am involved in the kink community as well. What they have taught me about consent and about boundaries and ways to be yourself and acceptance has really been impactful on a lot of my work as well.

What I found most surprising about the LGBTQIA+ community and about people who identify as queer, and when I started thinking about it, was the levels of infighting, and the levels of fracture within the community.



Even when I attend Pride, there is so much hatred, there is so much differentiation and for me as a white person, I have been exposed to a lot of white people who are not particularly intersectional.

I would love for those people to make those connections and understand that without intersectionality, you are not seeing the full spectrum. Once you start to become a bit more involved in your ideology, your thinking, your understanding of where queer rights come from and where queer identity and queer culture comes from, you realise that everything that we have built upon we owe to transwomen of colour and that you cannot start picking apart yourself and start discriminating against other people within your community.

ONCE YOU START TO BECOME A BIT MORE INVOLVED IN YOUR IDEOLOGY…YOU REALISE THAT EVERYTHING THAT WE HAVE BUILT UPON WE OWE TO TRANSWOMEN OF COLOUR…. THERE IS NO WAY OF BEING QUEER WITHOUT BEING AN ALLY TO ALL QUEER PEOPLE.

There is no way of being queer without being an ally to all queer people. So, the lack of intersectionality there is really sad. But also, I really want to encourage women who are queer and who struggle with how to identify in this world because it is something that I have personally struggled with. Being around men and being in the male gaze and constantly having so much pressure on how to present and what to do, what is acceptable and asking yourself 'Am I gay enough? Am I presenting gay enough? Am I straight enough? If I am choosing to present straight, is that me abusing my straight privilege? Is that me hiding my sexuality?'

I think that everyone must go through a process of deconstructing their internalised sexism and why they make choices that they do so that they are more comfortable with how they appear in the world. As queer people, we see each other interacting in the world and it is so much easier if you see a queer person who is strong in themselves and you can reach out to them, and who you can approach as another queer person, and you can create a bigger sense of community. It is difficult to go through any of these things if you don't have a community to lean on and to grow from. You can't exist as a queer person in a bubble which is what a lot of white queerness in Cape Town is about. It's about them dealing with their specific issues and people need to expand their minds a little bit broader.

I left my job during lockdown. However, I had been wanting to leave my job for over a year before that. I specialised in family law, and I went into that line of work because of my own experiences as a child of divorce and having lived through many messy family law disputes under the old Children's Act. I really try to dedicate a lot of my time and life to assisting people so that I could be able to help children and not let them be a part of a system that I grew up under. Unfortunately, I am also a massive empath which can be quite disabling in a very toxic and masculine working environment. There was a total lack of care and diligence and focus on taking care of employees who work on situations where there is child abduction, sexual assault, sexual abuse of minors, abductions, because it is in the legal world, and it is in a heteronormative, very patriarchal, very masculine society. I realised that I needed more care to be taken. I eventually burnt out because I just gave too much, and it was very difficult for me to keep those boundaries in place.

I saw the people who had been in this line of work for 20 years and I saw that my options were to become extremely hardened and put up such intense boundaries that it would rob me of my empathy and rob me of the thing that made me good at my job, or I had to leave. For my mental health I made the decision to leave.

I wanted to be in a place and in an industry where femininity and the characteristics that we associate with being a female are celebrated and seen as valuable contributions and not seen as flaws and weaknesses Being queer as an attorney is also something that a person can never be too open about because you face pressure and judgement from the other people in your field to be acceptable and 'palatable' to your clients and, unfortunately as a young 24-year-old to 26-year-old, you often end up being more eye candy than being taken seriously as a woman.

I WANTED TO BE IN A PLACE AND IN AN INDUSTRY WHERE FEMININITY AND THE CHARACTERISTICS THAT WE ASSOCIATE WITH BEING A FEMALE ARE CELEBRATED AND SEEN AS VALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS AND NOT SEEN AS FLAWS AND WEAKNESSES,

I frankly got laughed at for my sexual orientation, which was terrible, but now in the art community it is completely different. The differences are celebrated here and it's something that's out of the patriarchal system so it's something where there is more room for you to be expressive, to be softer and there is just a lot less toxic masculinity which makes it easy for me to be a woman and a queer woman.

PRISCILLA

I work for SWEAT as a peer educator. I am trans and I am also doing sex work. Originally, I came from Eastern Cape, from a place called Umtata. I found that the trans (community) here in Cape Town are free to live the kind of life that they want to live, unlike myself, because when I was in the Eastern Cape, I was in the closet. There were many reasons, particularly because I come from a Christian background. That's why I decided to move and come here to Cape Town.

The people who are living in urban areas are much more familiar with the transgenders than those who are in rural areas. But at the very same time, it was not safe because there were people who would attack me and say, 'You are wearing women's clothes' and all that. I can only dress up when I'm travelling by car. It was difficult to just dress and walk on the street, but I found I found it more comfortable than being in rural areas, where there are customs and also Christian unacceptance.

They used to associate that being transgender is against the kingdom of God. You have to identify yourself as a man, so there's no way that you can live like a woman. So those are what made me run from Eastern Cape.

Because I ran away from home, I didn't even finish my matric. I was doing Standard Nine at the time when I left. So I came here and did my Standard Nine here in Cape Town. I passed and I also did and passed my matric.

I couldn't further my education, but I looked for jobs. I found jobs here at SWEAT where we were taken for training. At the time when I started working for SWEAT, I couldn't even speak in front of people because I was shy, and I was not used to being up there in public. So, it was a bit difficult for me. But then as the time passed, I became more comfortable.

I think that youth of today are better educated about the life of transgenders. Because there isn't as much stigma. Like, before they wouldn't ask anything. They would just throw stones at you, but such things are not happening often anymore.

I didn't get any support from my family. I think the reason why I didn't get support is maybe they were waiting for me to disclose. At the time, I was not ready. I was asking myself what is happening with my life, and I had no friends to share the kind of experience of life that I'm living. I only disclosed when my parents wanted me to get married.

When I ran here to Cape Town, I quit school. I stayed here for four years. My brother, my younger brother, wanted to go to the bush. Then they said I must also come because I'm wasting time for my brother. I went back home. I went to the bush, and I thought that was the last thing for them to ask me to do.

Only to find that it was not enough because, after I went to the bush, my parents told me that you cannot be a real man without having a wife.

That's when I decided to disclose and explain more about the kind of life that I'm living, and not having interest in women. But my parents did eventually accept it. My elder brother who grew up in Cape Town had been very supportive although he didn't ask me anything. But I got support after I disclosed what kind of person I am. For now, they don't have any problem. However, my other brother is so homophobic and is not happy with the kind of life that I'm living.

In Xhosa it is called Ulwaluko and in English, it is called circumcision. But it is not a circumcision. It is a traditional initiation. I didn't want to come to the bush, because I felt like a woman.

In terms of the treatment, because now we're hearing when some people are going to the bush, some of them die. But the treatment was very good. Even the guys that were there to look after me, treated me in a very respectful, way. I was treated as a woman. Some of them even told me that we are not here to change your womanhood.


Contact:

THE GUYS THAT WERE THERE TO LOOK AFTER ME, TREATED ME IN A VERY RESPECTFUL WAY. I WAS TREATED AS A WOMAN. SOME OF THEM EVEN TOLD ME THAT WE ARE NOT HERE TO CHANGE YOUR WOMANHOOD.

This is the custom that you need to do as an Umxhosa, a black person. Although everything that was taught in the bush were not things on my mind, and it was not even part of my life. But I did it and I made it.

With the community where I grew up, I think people became so curious to find out what is what. What else is going to happen now when I've gone to the bush? They have been asking me about having kids: 'Do you imagine yourself having kids? You are going to be a grown up tomorrow, if you don't have kids who's going to look after you? But if you had kids, you were going to have grandchildren to look after you as well.'

I don't think that was a problem for me. I didn't even think about adoption because I've got my sister's kids. There are two kids that I'm looking after now, because my sister passed away. I'm the one who's taking care of the kids.

They used to ask me as well about adoption, what do I think of adoption and all that? But I'm not thinking about anything, because I do have a responsibility now as a parent to look after my sister's children. I don't even know where the father is.

They are still young, the last one is seven, and the older one is eleven. I haven't sat down with them yet but sometimes when I'm dressing up, they would ask me 'Why are you wearing like this?' Then I used to tell them that 'I am your aunt and that's the reason why I'm wearing this', but they call me Malome [uncle] and I don't have a problem with that. They call me Malome when I'm dressing as a man and when I'm dressing like a woman,


Sisonke
AHF SOUTH AFRICA

they call me Magazi [aunt]. I'm not gonna hide anything from them, but now they are still young. When they are grown up, I'm prepared to let them know what is happening with my life.

I don't have any problem when it comes to pronouns. The only thing that I always avoid is when a person calls me 'Bhut'Sisi' [Editors' note: derogatory, brother-sister/hermaphrodite]. I really don't take that one! I just feel like having no sense of belonging if you're gonna call me Bhut'Sisi, right. If you call me sisi [sister], I don't have a problem. If you call me bhuti [brother], I don't have a problem. But you mustn't mix it and say Bhut'Sisi, that's something else.

For instance, if you want to know about my life, I pick it up from, you know, your body language, and the way you are speaking. But if you are speaking in a rude way, I'm not answering I don't respond. I don't respond. Because they are words that they call us, they call us moffies [Editors' note: derogatory, referring to men who engage in same sex sexual activity]. They call us amatollies [Editors' note: a derogatory word roughly translated as those of dicks; those who like dicks, often referring to men who engage in same sex sexual activity]. For instance, if you are being called italasi, it's not nice. It's not nice because I have one sex organ, I don't have two. For me being called italasi, it makes me fight.

They can't differentiate between a transgender and an intersex. If you look like a woman and at the same time you're looking like a man, that's when they start calling you italasi. It doesn't make you feel good. Because that's what they assume: that once you are transgender, it means you have two sex organs, you've got a vagina and a penis.

There are still more challenges that we are facing as transgenders. For instance, when they are accessing services at the clinic, they are getting discriminated against and stigmatised which leads to defaulting of their treatment. Also, the same with the police and securities, if they are doing business, the condoms are being taken by the police. I don't want to say confiscate as if the police have got a right to take condoms from them. At the end of the day, we as trans are being labelled as HIV spreaders but the government is issuing condoms for people to protect themselves. They also lose IDs as well because when the police are taking their belongings, they lose IDs, and they also take their medication. Remember, when you go to a clinic, you are given a date, and they know that this amount of medication they have given you, it's going to last until such date. So now when you go in and you ask for medication and your date to come back hasn't yet arrived. it's becoming a problem.

When I'm doing business, sometimes I go with other sex workers and go do business. But it has got some challenges as a transgender woman because they there are times when by a client would tell you 'I thought you are a woman.' Depending on what kind of client, they can become aggressive, or someone would say, would let you do the business. Afterwards the person refuses to pay you and says, 'I thought you are a woman.'

To be able to overcome those challenges, that's why we always prefer that a client must pay you before he changes his mind.


Contact:

GRIZZ

My name is Valencia but I go by Grizz. I was born in Mpumalanga but I have also been taken everywhere because my father was working in different places most of the times. So I was never in one place for longer than two years my entire life but the main house is in Mpumalanga so that's where I call home. I am currently studying at AFDA, Cape Town to be a director and writer.

I am very, very interested in telling real life stories that have happened to people, actual experiences that people have gone through and dealt with, and stories that people don't even think about. Like, I'd look at people and try to imagine what their life is like, what their background is, how old they were when they first tried smoking and stuff like that and then I would create this whole story for their life. I just really like interacting with people and really learning how humans work. The human condition is something I am very interested in and I would like to spread that around.

So I was just going on about my business and I realised my sexuality in Grade Five. I was 11, I think, when our teacher was talking about the whole lesbian thing. I would hear it in church sometimes, but I wouldn't really pay much mind about it. My first kiss was from a girl and, for me, it was just like, people are people. And if this person is cute, then they're cute. It would be like to dig deeper, to love the soul instead of the body. So, whatever form the soul comes in, just accept the person.

MY FIRST KISS WAS FROM A GIRL AND, FOR ME, IT WAS JUST LIKE, PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE...TO LOVE THE SOUL INSTEAD OF THE BODY. SO, WHATEVER FORM THE SOUL COMES IN, JUST ACCEPT THE PERSON.

I remember when I was eight, I think my sister was dating some girl around the corner and then I saw them kissing and I didn't find it weird, and my sister and I were very close. She and I share a mother and the rest of my siblings are my half siblings – my father's children. So she would share stories with me. I would ask her about things and she would educate me.

Although, it was a bit uncomfortable for her to talk about it with me because I am her little sister after all.

I moved around so much. I kind of learned to stick to one form of myself. So it didn't really affect me too much, but it did give me the space to learn how to be more open-minded and diverse and learn how different people interact with each other and the different dialects. I've learned how to speak different languages and I'm multilingual and multicultural. That's really affected me as a person because it gave me the space to be diverse and I'm diverse in everything that I do. I can't just like one thing.

I've always wanted to skate. I've always wanted to try everything and I would see people skating on TV. More specifically, Jaden Smith. Then I saw a couple of my friends skating and I was like 'Okay, this is my chance to start doing that' and then I got a board, and I started skating. Let's go!

You have to wear proper attire because, when you are skating, you get people looking at you and sometimes in ways you don't even like. The other day, there was this guy who was staring at me and one of my male friends noticed and then he started hollering at the dude like 'No, don't do that!' I didn't even notice, I didn't even see him staring.

My board is like a friend who I can just count on whenever, because I know she can't just leave without me. She's that one thing that can take you places and you can have fun with her – and fight sometimes when you can't get the trick or when she makes me fall, but I love my board.


THE
FEMALE
EVOLUTION

SIVU

I am Sivu, originally from the Eastern Cape. I'm 26. I'm currently unemployed and looking for a job. I just recently graduated from the University of Western Cape. I was doing a Bachelor of Arts.

It's such a funny story because I think I was 10, but I didn't understand then because I would see there was a female at church who was muscular. I would love to sit behind her just to be closer to her, just to look at her and admire her. I didn't understand what was happening until I was in Grade 9 and I had a friend who was queer. Then I wanted to understand what was happening and her relations. I got interested in understanding all of this. In grade 10, that's when I first came out to myself before anyone else and when I got my first girlfriend. Even then, I didn't understand. I was a bit scared because it was something new. Being from the small community, in fact being from a township and a small town Mthatha, you don't see many gay people and you just feel like you are the odd one out or there's no one like you or you are just doing something wrong.

So I would have to tiptoe around it and hide it. Then in Grade 12, my friends saw me with my girlfriend. So I had to explain the thing. When I explained it, everyone was like 'Oh, we knew', but I didn't know how. I started doing my research around queer, lesbians, gays, bisexuals of all the other labels and the groups. Then when I came here in Cape Town in 2013, that's when I got more exposed to the queer community.

I was starting to come out to my family and then I came out to my father because I went through those phases of depression to an extent that I needed therapy. So I had to come out to my father first because he stayed here in Cape Town and my mother was back home, so he needed to understand what was happening. And then we spoke. He was fine and then after that he never spoke about it ever again.

Recently, I just came out to my mother and then she was like 'Oh, OK. Yet she's so very Christian. When she is speaking of lesbians, she was like 'That is Antichrist and it's not right. It's not natural', all of those things. But when I sit down and ask, what if one of her children was a lesbian or gay? She first mentioned that she would pray away.

In Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, people that side are very homophobic because they are from the rural areas, so many people are still in that heteronormative mindset. So we tiptoe around being queer and we tiptoe around marrying the same sex. You don't talk about the thing in front of people like all the elderly people. But people our age are trying to understand and they are learning. This side in Cape Town, I would say you are free. You are able to express yourself as much as you can because you have many races, many sexualities, like different people. Until you go to the townships, because in the townships, that's where you get your hate crimes and name calling people who say they accept you, but they really, really don't. They just tolerate your presence. I think because I used to stay in the township and you notice that many people know that you are queer but still ignore the fact for their own satisfaction and comfort. If we could remove the hate crimes, then it would be a free space here in Cape Town.

You see in the townships, you would see people's names who have passed from hate crimes. I usually thought it was far-fetched for me and I would go to the marches for people. When it hit me directly was when my girlfriend was killed in Gugulethu. She stayed in Gugulethu. She was killed and dumped in Nyanga Junction at a railway station. We suspected she was also raped but couldn't confirm it due to the fact that the body had stayed in the mortuary for about two months. She had gone missing in September. Her body was found in November. I think her case was documented as an inquest so they so they didn't do much of checking of the body, but we suspected that the main purpose that she was killed was because she was raped. It shaped my life.

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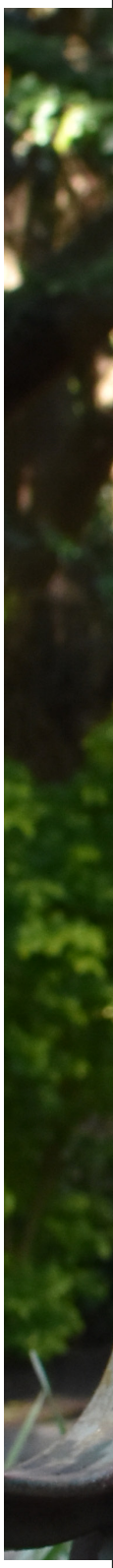
It's interesting to hear that you need to be queer, but not too queer. You need to tell people who you are, but not so loud because you might never know who you're telling.

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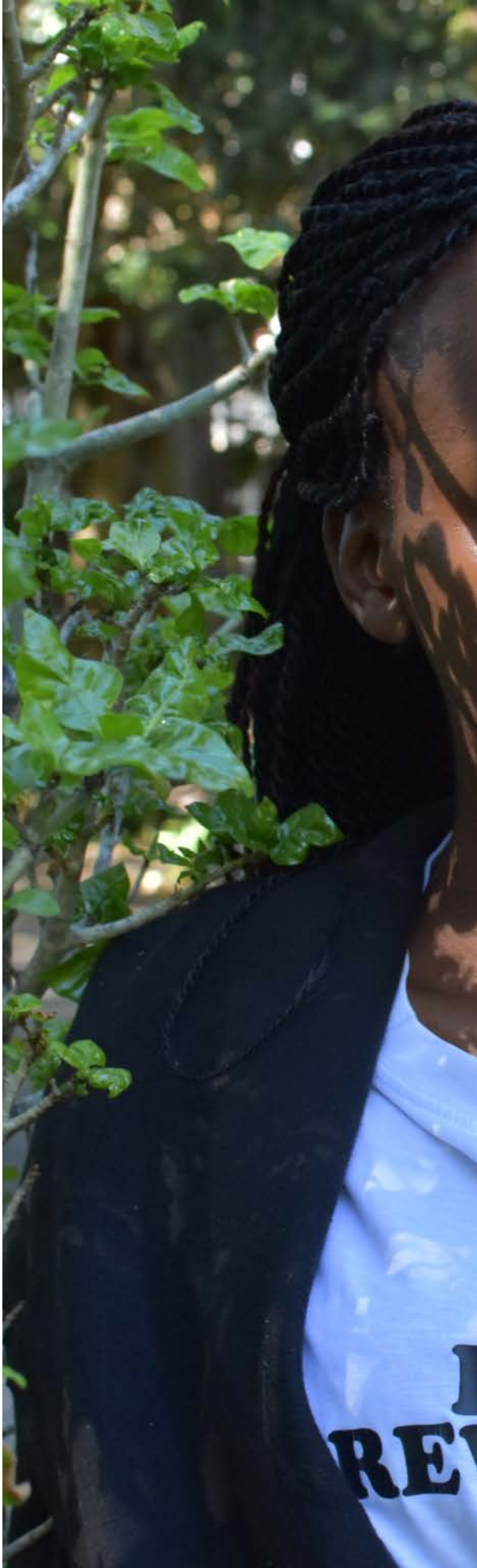
When she went missing, it was a matter of texting her now and then the next minute she's not replying. When this happened in 2018, our last contact with her was on the fourth of September and we realised when we were doing that documentation and like looking at the case, that she died on the 30th of September, which was my birthday and we had plans. She disappeared. And then I went looking for her. Then after a week, I went to her home to look for her, ask around, and then people in her community didn't know her whereabouts until someone anonymously came to a friend. Around that same time we were looking for her, they saw a body that was laying in Nyanga Junction and said we should go ask the police station. So we went to the police station and the DNA tests and the identification were done. And it was her.

The hate crimes, I think it affects everyone, but in different ways, because since then, I've never been fully myself as before. I always live with that fear that something might happen as a result. I don't usually go to that place, to Gugulethu anymore, because I have that fear that maybe if I go there, something might happen to me besides being triggered. I was afraid to the extent that we had to move from a township to a more quiet place, because I always lived with that fear that something might happen, maybe tomorrow or any other day because people know that I'm queer and people have seen me with her.

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The actual story came about because with our frustration, we recalled people who were last seen with her and apparently a friend came to her house and asked her around eight o'clock to accompany her. It was the last time everyone saw her. And then around those times when we were asking around, because when something like that happens in a community, there are a lot of speculations and people pointing fingers. There were people who were telling stories around that she was kept in some place to the extent that the community marched to the house and destroyed the place that was she was suspected to be kept in. After that, no one actually came out to say 'This is what I saw, this is what happened.'

No one actually went to the police station to report what was happening. I think the community knows something but it's those individuals who are like 'I don't want to say anything because I might put my life in danger.'

There were marches around there, they held meetings and then things are discussed. People were saying their assumptions about the case. But all those meetings that were held were for the community by the community. The community leaders said that people who know anything should go to the police station. No one went. Every time we went to the police station to inquire about the case, we only got that no one came forward to say anything. There are those people who say 'Yes we are with you, we are with you, and we are fighting with you.' But at the same time, they know they're just there to listen to what's happening.

There was a detective dealing with the case. He was a nice guy because he did most of the things that we would ask him to do and go to people. But the people were not willing to talk because they knew that he was a detective. He even went to the point where we meet in town so that we are out of the community. But people were like 'No, we know you and people know you, that if I talk to you, then that is pertaining to the case.'

It was that big. I feel like people are sitting on top of this information that they're supposed to be giving. It is also the fault of the police that they didn't look at the body then, because if they did, they would have seen that it was a made to look like a suicide and they would have recorded it as a murder and not an inquest, if they had looked thoroughly in the body.

In 2018 to 2019, it was the hardest because it was between then when we did the marches. The other NGOs who organised a march were Free Gender, Sonke Gender Justice and Triangle project. They organised a march from Gugulethu police station to Manenberg police station. There was a memorandum which was read and it was received.

From the time where she went missing till 2019, early 2020, I think those were the hardest times because sometimes I would get triggered by something and then go back to depression, especially when we went to the police station. Every time we went to the police station, the interaction with the police, you had to fight, you had to scream. I think that took a toll on me without me realising because I thought I was strong at that time. I

ANITA

My name is Anita and I am 28 years old, coming from George. I moved to Cape Town in 2016 but I was born here. I started as a human rights defender to where I am today in my current position as a lobbyist. I'm a civil lobbyist going to MPs, to lobby them to support the full decriminalisation of sex work.

I started doing sex work when I was still at school here in Cape Town. I moved to George and I was introduced by a fellow human that was working for SWEAT at that time. They usually used to bring condoms to my place because I used to have a house. So they actually introduced me to the spaces because we used to have creative spaces. That's what we call them but it's actually workshops. I got there and I saw that this is actually my interest because I lived most of the stories that people were sharing in the space. So I was like I also wanted to be part of this organisation. I also want to work and help to fight the laws that we are still under. I also want full decriminalisation of sex work.

People like saying that George is a plaas [farm]. It's a small place. It is one way in, one way out. If there's something that is happening, it is caught. There's different humans and human races there. I was working for SWEAT in George then we moved. It also helped me with my type of work that I also do on the side, because here there is more clientele than in George which is also small, and you might be at risk. At that time, I used to hide what I'm doing and it was too small for me. I saw that Cape Town is actually going to be good for my clientele because I know lots of tourists do come here. So it's a place where people want to be. I was like, I grew up here already, so why not come back and explore Cape Town as a new person, as an older person, so I can understand it more?

I was in Grade 2 or aged 9, between those two, when I suddenly didn't understand my feelings for a girl in my class. So I was like, 'OK, what is going on?' I want to be with this person as a friend or what?

So I saw that it was more than the friend kind of thing. I think one of the things was I realised that we had more rights than people were supposed to be fighting and we both were interested in each other, but we didn't know. We wrote each other letters, and we're like, 'Hey, I don't know what's going on but I'm into you.' And that's when we started. That's when I understood that 'OK, fine, I also like boys. I also like girls. So I don't know what's going on, but I'm going to hide this.' I started hiding my liking for girls until I was tired of it. Then I spat it out to my aunt and my aunt just laughed.

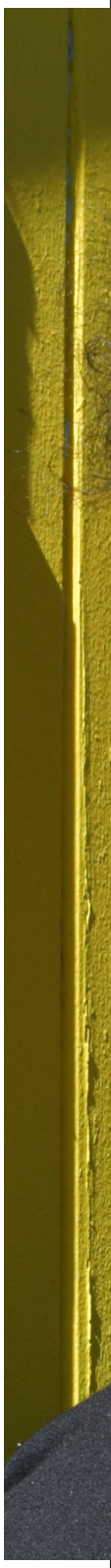
I think she laughed because she didn't believe me. She said 'Yazi, I don't believe you telling me this now, because I've been seeing things from you that you never saw.' And then I was like 'What do you mean?'

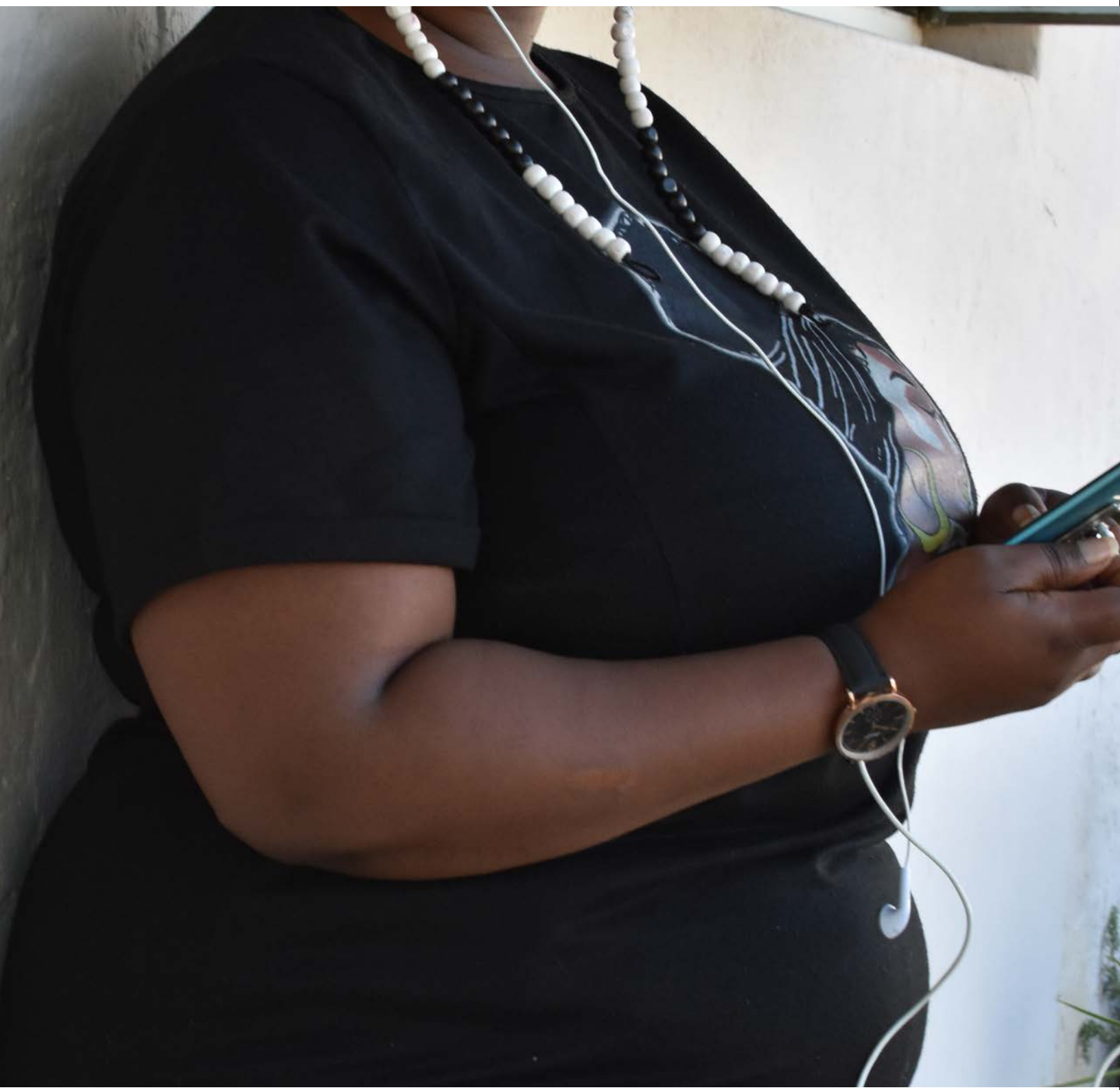
In Generations, there were characters named Jason and Senzo. So I was like 'See Jason? Jason is into girls and he's into guys, blah, blah, blah.' Then my aunt was like 'OK, so you're telling me you're Jason?' I'm like 'No, I'm not saying I'm Jason, but I'm into both parties.'

Then she was like, 'OK, if you say so, that is fine. But I did see some tomboy in you' because I didn't like to wear girls' clothes at that time. I was always in jeans and t-shirts and short hair. I used to cry when I had to grow my hair long. So, she said to me that she was waiting for me to say that because of the things that she saw when I was growing up but she was shocked as well. 'Are you going to bring a girl here? Are you going to say, "Oh, this is my girlfriend?" Do we have to understand that?' So, yeah, it was that.

I'M NOT SAYING IT'S HARD, BUT I JUST DON'T SEE A REASON WHY PEOPLE MUST KNOW OR I HAVE TO DISCLOSE MYSELF TO THEM BECAUSE IT'S MY OWN FEELINGS AND WHAT I FEEL IS OKAY. BUT IF THERE'S A SPACE WHERE I'M BEING ASKED, I SAY IT AND I SAY IT OUT LOUD THAT I AM BISEXUAL AND I'M PROUD.

I'm not saying it's hard, but I just don't see a reason why people must know or I have to disclose myself to them because it's my own feelings and what I feel is okay. But if there's a space where I'm being asked, I say it and I say it out loud that I am bisexual and I'm proud. It doesn't mean that I'm going to be into you just because I just said I'm bisexual.





I remember when I had a very close friendship with my friend. She was bisexual as well. She never told me. I never told her. So people were always saying that me and her, we are dating. Apparently she had feelings for me. So I just told her, 'Listen, we have to talk.' So I said to her 'I'm into guys and girls. If you see me with a girl, just understand that maybe I'm dating that person.'

She said 'Yazi, I also wanted to say the same thing to you, but I didn't know how because I didn't want you to judge me.' I asked 'Yeah, so are we still cool?' then she said 'Yeah, we're still cool but can I also say something?'

She said to me 'I'm into you.'

Then I was like "No, we can't.'

I blocked those feelings and I told her to block them because I don't want to lose our friendship for something that's going to not last or anything. So I was like 'No, no, no, no, babes just stop those feelings. It's just a phase that you go through now because you understand me, I understand you. So we're going to stop that.' And we did stop that. It stopped and we never did anything. We're just friends and we're still friends even now.

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