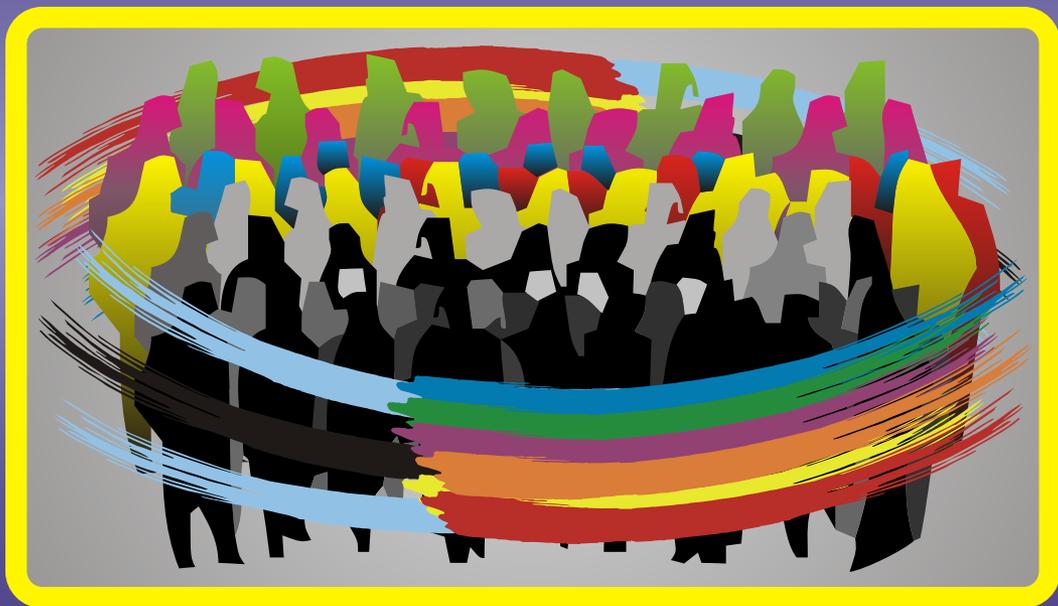


# LEGABÍBO

True-life Stories & Poems  
that may  
change your perceptions



Dancing to the Beat  
of a  
Different Drum

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## Acknowledgements

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LeGaBiBo

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## CONTENTS

1. Background	...	iii
2. Introduction	...	iv
3. Glossary	...	v
4. Stories	Bisexual or heterosexual? Big deal!	... 1
	Trapped in a man's body, but proud to be a woman	... 3
	Your daughter is actually your son	... 7
	Do you have a problem with my being gay?	... 11
	Call me lesbian, bisexual or queer; I am happy and I love myself	... 14
	My lesbian journey	... 18
5. Poems	Setlhodi se sa go swal!	... 20
	Shut up, you lesbians!	... 21
	Me and my to be lesbian	... 22
	The female anatomy	... 23
	Free written 3 <sup>rd</sup> May	... 24
	What are you to do, parent?	... 25
6. Summary	...	26

## BACKGROUND

LeGaBiBo (Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals of Botswana) is the first LGBTI (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgender and Intersex) organization in Botswana. It was founded as a project under Ditshwanelo, the Centre for Human Rights, in 1998. Due to a lack of resources, however, the project could not be implemented, and was inactive until it resurfaced under BONELA (Botswana Network on Ethics, Laws and HIV/AIDS), a non-governmental organization established in 2001 to support human rights initiatives in the area of HIV/AIDS.

There has been an attempt to register LeGaBiBo as a society at the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs, but to no avail. The government of Botswana sees the registration of LeGaBiBo as aiding and abetting the commission of an illegal act, according to section 164 of the Penal Code.

In 2006, BONELA was approached by the Schorer Foundation, which was looking for LGBTI organizations in southern Africa to assist with setting up a programme that could advocate for the prevention of HIV and STI among sexual minorities. Due to LeGaBiBo being unregistered, the PRISM (Prevention and Research Initiative for Sexual Minorities) programme was set up. In 2007, a needs-assessment enquiry that targeted organizations mandated with HIV and STI response in Botswana, was conducted. Some of the findings referred to a lack of information and documentation on sexuality and gender identity as obstacles to understanding these issues.

This booklet is, therefore, a result of the needs-assessment recommendations, and is aimed at closing that information gap. The true-life experiences captured here will help people to understand and appreciate the perspectives in the lives of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and intersexual people.

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## INTRODUCTION

Society teaches us that there are only two human identities, male and female, and that we should embrace the notion of being uniform. To be acknowledged and accepted, everybody is expected to walk along one of two paths. Society ignores those who simply have no choice but to be different. The fact is that there are other identities, for example transgender people who eventually recognize that their gender identity does not correspond with their biological sex at birth, or intersexual people, who are born with the genitalia, biological and hormonal makeup of both sexes.

When a woman is expecting a baby, a commonly asked question is, "Will it be a boy or a girl?" If the newborn child is discovered to be intersexual, doctors and parents often decide to remove one part of the genitalia in order to make the child male or female. Society then assigns roles according to biological makeup. Whatever you are born as, there are expectations, either verbally expressed or otherwise, that you must conform to: males should be masculine, powerful and occupy decision-making positions; females should be feminine, submissive and homemakers. If a person marries, it must be to a person of the opposite sex. The stories and poems in this booklet, however, prove that gender identity is richly diverse.

This is the first book of its kind in Botswana. It contains true-life stories of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexual. We hope that these stories will assist in answering some of the pressing and frequently-asked questions about sexual orientation and gender identity. We are confident that readers and scholars will find the booklet interesting and academically viable, as local literature on sexuality is almost non-existent.

## GLOSSARY

**Gender identity:** A person's deeply felt sense of being male or female / a person's understanding and acceptance of gender roles.

**Gender role:** The socially and culturally determined behaviour that is expected of a person's masculinity or femininity.

**Sexual orientation:** An umbrella term that describes whether one is sexually and emotionally attracted to people of the same, opposite or both sexes.

**Homosexual:** A person who is sexually and emotionally attracted to persons of the same sex.

**Heterosexual:** A person who is emotionally and sexually attracted to persons of the opposite sex.

**Bisexual:** A person who is emotionally and sexually attracted to persons of both sexes.

**Lesbian:** A woman who is emotionally and sexually attracted to other women.

**Gay:** A term used for both males and females to describe a person's sexual identity of being homosexual. It is sometimes used specifically to describe men who are attracted to other men.

**Transgender:** An umbrella term for people who do not act according to the gender norms of their culture. It includes people who feel that they are neither male nor female, or are both. Such a person can make the transition with the help of hormone therapy and / or cosmetic surgery to live in the gender roles of choice.

**Trans-man:** A person who was biologically born female, but has made the transition to male, either through hormonal therapy, or by cross-dressing (FTM).

**Trans-woman:** A person who was biologically born male, but has made the transition to female, either through hormone therapy, or by cross-dressing (MTF).

**Intersex:** A person who is born with the full or partial genitalia of both sexes.

**To come out (of the closet):** to be open about one's non-heterosexual orientation.

**WSW:** Refers to women who have sex with other women, but who do not identify as lesbian or bisexual.

**MSM:** Refers to men who have sex with other men, but who do not identify as homosexual or bisexual.



6  
Stories

§

Poems



## **Bisexual, heterosexual? Big deal!**

My name is Setso and I am a 24 year-old Motswana woman. I am the oldest in a family of three daughters. My parents spent most of their working lives abroad.

I love both my immediate and extended family. They are a very important part of my life and I make sure that I see both my paternal and maternal family at least three times a year; that's how close we are. I think the closeness is particularly cemented because my parents are quite liberal, yet still traditional. When we were kids, they encouraged all of us to explore and pursue our interests, but also to keep close links with relatives and tradition.

This is my story, the story of a part of my life that I am willing to share. I have actually shared it with some members of my family, but not with my parents. I consider myself a very private person, but not necessarily secretive, as I am open about some aspects of my life. I am a bisexual woman. I always knew this because I have always been attracted to both men and women. When growing up I used to admire older women, especially my parents' friends. Initially I thought it was out of admiration for their self-assurance, confidence and independence, so I aspired to be like them, but I could not explain the physical attraction; I hadn't had any contact with bisexual people. I only knew lesbian and gay people: some of my teachers, some of my friends and some friends of my family had come out and were proud.

My physical attraction towards women first surfaced when I was at university. I became infatuated with women, but never acted upon those feelings because I was sure they were heterosexual. I also became actively involved with a man, but felt that it was not out of choice. There were very few women around me who were attracted to other women, as either lesbians or bisexuals. That is not to say there were no women at all; I had my moments. I slept with one and kissed a few.

My relationships with men were quite normal. I broached the subject of my sexuality with my boyfriend and my other male friends and, as it turned out, they were neither dismissive nor negative. They were rather intrigued by the idea of two women in a relationship. Their first reaction was often to ask whether they could watch next time I intended to get intimate with a woman!

In my third year at university, I had a chance to fully express my bisexuality when I first dated a woman. Sebaga and I met through a friend who set us up. I soon realised that the dynamics of a woman-woman relationship were very different from those of a man-woman relationship. With us, there was no dominant figure, nor were roles very clearly defined when it came to decision-making or during sex. It suited me fine, because I prefer equality in relationships, even with men. Sebaga was butch, but did not assume a traditional male role in the relationship. She preferred male clothes, but performed all the 'girly' chores and acted more like a girl than I did. Apart from her cross-dressing, Sebaga was feminine and her friends just regarded her as butch.

Although I am a very open person, I am not comfortable discussing the details of my personal life. That is why Sebaga and I never openly told people that we were a couple. I have never introduced a man to anyone as my boyfriend, so, when I started dating women, I never introduced them as girlfriends. Everyone gets the same generic introduction, "This is my friend ..."

Because society more readily accepts opposite sex relationships, it is easier for a man and a woman to show affection for one another than it is for two people of the same sex. We have to be pretty clandestine about it, but I have caught myself with my hand on my partner's thigh, giving her 'that look' in public.

There are misconceptions among homosexuals that bisexuals are promiscuous and selfish. I don't feel that this is necessarily true; I don't see myself as being promiscuous. Promiscuity is neither influenced by, nor aligned to, one's sexual orientation. It is a type of behaviour that anyone can engage in, irrespective of her or his sexual preference. I am attracted to both women and men, but if I were with someone, female or male, I would never cheat on them. That is just who I am; I respect my partner and I would be faithful to whoever I was with at the time.

So have I come out to my parents? No, not yet. The explanation is simple: I just do not feel the need to come out and tell them. To be honest, it's just not a big deal for me. I don't think it's something that is so special and different that I should announce it. I often wonder, if I were heterosexual, would I tell my parents that I liked boys? I doubt it. Do such conversations take place between heterosexual daughters and parents?

If, however, my parents did ask me, then I would tell them. All they know is that I am involved with LeGaBiBo, and that I have numerous LGBTI friends. Like most mothers, mine has asked about the origins of the little gifts I bring home, and about whom I spend the weekends with. I came home with a gift one day and my mother asked if it was another one from Sebaga. Judging by this, and other similar questions that she's asked, I sense that my parents know and that they understand.

I intend to have children one day, no matter who I end up with, female or male. I would love to have a son as my first-born and I would also want to adopt, but this is something that I will think more about when I meet the person with whom I hope to spend the rest of my life. If I end up with a woman, I would like to have a traditional Tswana wedding. It would be interesting to see how we would negotiate Bogadi. "Ke ya go batla mosadi? Kana ke batliwa ke mosadi?" Or alternatively, we could do it in such a way that, "Re nna le dipatlo tse pedi".



## **Trapped in a man's body, but proud to be a woman.**

There are people who don't fit into a traditionally categorized gender and do not conform to societal expectations of gender roles. These are transgender and intersexual people, commonly known as non-gender conforming. Society teaches us that human beings must behave, present themselves, dress and walk in only two defined ways; female and male. The rules on how a man should dress in order to appear masculine govern gender, and this, unfortunately, excludes transgender and intersexual people.

I am one such person because I am a trans-woman. Biologically I am male, but my gender presentation is female, therefore I identify as a woman. Because of my feminine identity, I prefer to be referred to as a woman. My name is Chris and I am the fourth of five children. I am originally from Enfondweni, which is in a rural area of the Eastern Cape in South Africa. I moved to Botswana 23 years ago with my family and have spent most of my life here.

Growing up, I lived with my grandmother. I was not very close to my mother; she was not the kind of person you could sit and talk to. She had her own beliefs.

At school, I liked being around girls and played with them rather than boys because they were gentler. Boys were rough and this put me off. However, I felt that the girls did not want me around all the time, and so I was forced to seek the company of boys. I really wished I were born a girl, as I felt comfortable in their company and preferred female to male teachers.

Sometimes I hid my penis between my legs so that I looked flat like a girl, and I would sit down when peeing. I used to dress up like a woman too. My brothers and sisters did not disapprove too much; they were just okay with it and they didn't make any bad remarks about me. At that time, I had no idea that there were labels like transgender or trans-sexual. At home I preferred doing household chores, like washing dishes, cooking and cleaning the house.

My primary school years were a nightmare. I had to dress like a boy, and this was the most painful thing I had to go through. I couldn't wait to be old enough to make my own decisions about what to wear. At junior school I enrolled in Home Economics, which was considered a girls' subject. This was a strategy for me to be close to my girlfriends. It was exciting, as I was the only male in the class and I didn't have a problem with that. Of course other kids sometimes teased me. I have a woman's voice and body structure: breasts and hips, and the way I walk – you see me, you see a woman.

The problem that teachers had was with my name, the male name. This also gave some students the opportunity to taunt, discriminate and call me names. It felt like I was a totally different person and that I was not human because of the way they went on and on. It felt so bad and I didn't like it. It was better with the girls because they didn't say anything bad, only when we fought did they use it against me.

My best moments were whenever I was among girls. They talked about boyfriends and mostly they didn't mind my presence but, since I never talked about a partner, they sometimes put pressure on me by demanding to know if I was dating anyone.

Some students did not understand; they judged me. Some asked why I wanted to be a woman, the weaker sex, and this made me feel bad and hate myself. I faced discrimination everyday, but I comforted myself that there were good and bad days at school.

I thought name-calling at school was bad enough, but then my mother started doing it, particularly when there were 'men's' chores to be done, and she expected me to play that role. I pretended not to care, but deep down, I felt that my mother hated me and did not want me. The taunting and pain I experienced at school was repeated at home. I still feel that pain now, as if it only happened yesterday. It still hurts; it doesn't go away.

After school, when I was about 17, I played 'games' with my 18 year-old neighbour, Emmanuel; neither of us was quite sure what we were doing, as we both had male genitals. Emmanuel used to ask me to pretend to be the wife, whilst he played the husband. We kissed, touched and had sex. He would take off my clothes and I would face the wall, then he would put on protection and we would do it.

Initially it was painful, but it became less so as time passed. To be honest, I loved playing this role because of what I was getting from him; I enjoyed it and wanted it to continue and be a real thing, because it brought out the real me, not a fake me. I felt like a real woman; I would sometimes think that I was dreaming. I wasn't sure about what we were doing, but I enjoyed having sex with Emmanuel. I wondered whether he knew what he was doing to me, or whether he thought it would have any impact on me.

After these first experiences, I got into the habit of doing the same with other friends, boys that is, when sleeping over at their houses. Emmanuel had an older brother and, when we were alone, he would touch me in a way that I thought was okay, a way that I had no problems with. Whenever there was no one around or when he was asked to look after me while my mother was away, he took me to bed and had sex with me.

Occasionally, when he wanted sex, he played a heterosexual porn video and asked me to watch it with him. While it played, he told me to behave like the woman in the video while he did his thing. He asked me not to tell anyone, but to keep it as our little secret. This little game went on for a while, and I thought it was fine for men to do that. I don't think he knew that his little brother was sleeping with me as well; Emmanuel and I also kept what we were doing to ourselves.

When I visited my cousins, I wanted them to do the same thing that Emmanuel's brother did to me, and my cousins did it and seemed to enjoy it.

Things got better when I went to stay with my grandmother. We were close, and could talk about anything. She used to call me "my girl". I was happy around her because I felt she knew what was going on and that she had decided to support me. My grandmother got to know and understand me well. She did not attack me like my mother did. She sat me down, we talked about it and she told me that she didn't have any problems with my being gay. Her feelings towards me wouldn't change; she still loved and cared about me.

I loved her very much, and knowing that she and my grandpa loved me made it easier for me to be myself. I really enjoyed being around my grandmother because she had found out that I liked men and had kept it to herself and never criticized me. She was a wonderful person who accepted and supported me as I was. I helped her at home a lot by taking care of the house and I think she loved that about me.

Although my grandmother had come to terms with my gender identity as a woman, my uncles, who were also staying with us, only accepted me as their nephew, a boy, and expected me to act accordingly. During family gatherings, my aunts had no problem with my working in the kitchen and this made me very happy, but they never associated that with my gender identity and I kept quiet about it as well.

I deliberately chose not to tell my extended family about my sexuality and gender identity because I knew very well that they would use it against me. However, they managed to find out on their own. Some of them began calling me names just for the fun of it, but others just kept quiet about it.

I am an adult now; I choose whom I want to be with and who to avoid. I decided to concentrate on accepting myself and moved on with my life. Now my grandmother is old, but I still consider her my hero, a mentor and the best friend I have in the whole world.

I was happy with my job when I first started working as a waiter; customers and colleagues had no problems with me, but there have been times when I got embarrassed and confused. I have to serve former schoolmates who still consider me male and they will sometimes call out loudly, "Mister!," so that the whole restaurant looks round. If I don't respond, they'll call me by my male name, the one that I used at school. Occasionally, colleagues become nasty and tell customers that I'm a man, not a woman.

All of this has really hit me hard, and I have considered having a sex change. Transition, though, is a big step that one must think long and hard about. I have sought information about transsexuals on the Internet, as I've never met anyone locally who has fully transformed into a woman, but have decided that I am not yet ready for this.

People who've only recently met me never mistake me for a man, and aren't surprised by my lack of manliness. But those who've known me for some time assume that I'm taking hormones or something. I'm not taking anything. I feel comfortable with my body: these breasts, curves and hips are natural, and so is my voice, which is that of a woman.

Always having to explain my sexual identity drives me crazy and I get really tired of it; in the end I just snap and ask them what's wrong with my being female.

As far as relationships go, finding a male partner can be really difficult because, when approached by a man, I have to explain myself. Sometimes I find it difficult to tell a potential partner for fear of his reaction. I never worry that they might observe the protrusion of my genitals, because I know how to tuck my 'tools' away; even when wearing hot pants, a blind man couldn't tell that I have them.

I am quite aware that disclosing could be really risky for me. I am open about my identity, but I have to be careful and selective. It's easier to share with gay men; they are very understanding, but I'm really scared and hesitant to disclose to any other man. I don't usually tell them until we are about to sleep together. I have been blackmailed and, after sex, some pretend that they were drunk and want nothing more to do with me, but they often call me up and ask to come to my house again.

I have been mistaken for a gay man, but I am not gay. I am attracted to men; I am a trans-woman who loves men. I am a very proud woman and a trans-activist and I would like to tell other transgender people out there that love, respect and acceptance come first from within, and then the rest follows.



## Your daughter is actually your son.

I was a good footballer at school. Whenever we played, girls cheered and screamed my nickname, which, of course, I didn't mind. Others, however, called out 'trasi', meaning that I had the genitals of both sexes. I did mind this, and was deeply hurt and embarrassed by it. However, these comments did not discourage me from playing my favourite sport and, at 26 years of age, I still play.

I grew up being regarded as a tomboy. I never liked wearing girls' outfits and I kept my hair short. In Lobatse, as in most places in Botswana, few people knew anything about sexuality or gender identity, and my tom-boyishness was a mystery. As a child, I was powerless; I couldn't always have things my way as societal norms dictated my appearance.

At primary school and at church on Sundays, I was forced to wear clothes that matched my biological make up. Teachers were very confused by my biological sex because I was registered as a girl but, physically, I was a boy. I was born female, but I feel masculine and identify myself as a man. My masculine traits manifested themselves in many ways. In classes at school, for example, I felt I obliged to protect and defend girls from their male aggressors, and this often earned me the type of punishment usually reserved for boys.

Nowadays, I have a better understanding of myself. I recall that when I was in Standard Six, I started developing feelings for girls. Along with the confusion that I had about my identity, these feelings shocked and confused me even more, and I did not know what was happening to me. I thought it was abnormal and wrong for a girl to be attracted to other girls. But nature had its course; the attraction persisted, and I found myself buying sweets and chocolate for this special girl and even shared my lunch with her.

If my identity confused me, how then was I going to explain it to someone else? Worse still, explain it to a girl I felt I loved? I was scared to tell her; I didn't know how she'd react and I didn't want to lose her friendship. Thankfully she enjoyed my company and whenever I was unable to see her, she got upset. Did she really understand how I felt? I walked her home one evening after a school concert and, before parting, I hugged and kissed her. She asked me why I'd done this and I told her that I just felt like it, and that I had long wanted to kiss her and that I thought I was in love with her. She hugged me and this time we kissed each other briefly.

I was happy that night; I couldn't wait to see her the next day. That's when a relationship started. It wasn't intimate, though. We spent most of our time together, but only kissed. The relationship was very secretive, and not even our close friends knew about it.

At high school I found the freedom to express myself more; I could be whom I really felt I was, and I could wear boys' clothes. I became interested in learning about non-conforming gender and it was easy for me to come to terms with my gender identity.

Some people know me as a girl, so they still refer to me as 'she', but I am not a girl. I was biologically born female, but my gender presentation is masculine. I wear men's clothes because I feel comfortable with myself wearing them. Most of my friends understand my sexuality and gender identity, especially the LGBTI community, and that makes such a huge difference; I am not alone any more.

As I grew into adulthood, things did not become as easy I had thought; it is difficult to go through life ambiguously gendered. I faced numerous challenges, both at college and in the environment where I was living.

First was the national identity card, which specified my biological sex. Whenever I produced my ID, my sexual identity was interrogated. I often had to answer the humiliating and embarrassing question, "Are you a man or a woman?"

I studied Accounts at tertiary level and, to fulfil the requirements of my course, I had to do on-the-job training in an accounting environment. That was where the second challenge arose. I couldn't be attached to a bank as they all felt that I must match the sex stated on my identity card.

The unhappiest and most difficult moments were at interviews where potential employers and panellists addressed me as 'he' because of my physical appearance and the clothes I wore, but my identity documents stated that I was a woman. I dreaded the questions and bewildered stares of the interviewers.

Discrimination in employment isn't the only issue that I face. I am also confronted by the dilemma of rejection in public spaces. We may take this for granted, but public toilets, the use of which is prescribed according to one's biological sex, present contradictions that make life difficult for transgender people; they're our worst nightmare. If I go into the Ladies, I get disapproving looks; the women start whispering among themselves that a man has come into their toilets. So I resorted to using the Gents and have only encountered problems in the town where I was born, where people know my biological sex. Sometimes I fear them finding out that I am a woman biologically, because that could lead to rape, especially in the Gents at a bar.

Then there is home, my family and siblings. I am the last born of six and my late mother never knew that her daughter was actually her son. She knew that I wasn't involved in relationships like other girls my age in the neighbourhood. Whenever she was angry with me she used to say, "O diriwa ke bone banyana ba o fitlhelang o itswaletse le bone mo rumung ke sa itse gore le abo le dirang." (The reason you behave like this is because of these girls you always lock yourself away with in the room, and I don't know what you're doing in there). I didn't know whether my mother had any idea or whether she was just saying that because she was angry with me.

I am happy that my mother never had to worry about my getting pregnant. She knew I was not dating and, when asked if she was fine about me staying at home alone (something which is not considered good for a girl child), she remarked to her friends

that she trusted me and that I wouldn't do anything foolish, as I was not interested in boys. That response surely surprised me, and I guess it went some way to making it more manageable for me to disclose myself to my family, most of who, I suspect, had long-guessed my sexual orientation.

Four years ago, my sister found out by first hearing rumours from her friends. My then-partner was invited to a party, hosted by my sister's colleagues, and she invited me to come along. After a few drinks, we became affectionate and started kissing and fondling each other, with no mind to where we were. My sister eventually got to hear what had happened; that her younger sister was involved with another woman. I couldn't lie to her face and told her that what she'd been told was true. I was relieved that she now knew, because I had previously been agonising over how I was going to tell her.

Of course, this was a bitter pill for her to swallow; she was baffled by the revelation and wanted to know why. She knew that I had always been boyish, but she never thought that I'd go to the extent of identifying as a man. She struggled to accept the fact that I was a man trapped in a woman's body, and that I was in a relationship with a woman. Once more I had to go through the painful experience of explaining my sexuality, and why I was not attracted to men or boys. I decided then that it was time to share the load with my other siblings and let them know that I felt myself to be more masculine than feminine, and that I did not see myself as a woman.

Two years ago, when celebrating my birthday, I had lunch with my family. This was the day I chose to break the news to them. I wanted them to understand my sexuality and gender identity. I was sure that it was not going to be easy for them to accept me but, to my surprise, when I'd finished explaining, all they said was that I should be careful and take care of myself.

If you think coming out to family members is all there is to it, you had better think again! There are also members of the local community and the neighbours to reckon with. Whenever I try to explain, I get the same bewildered looks and have to answer the same questions. Society sings its song, "Are you a he or a she?" It embarrasses me.

My response depends on how the questions are asked. Some people don't want to accept me as a man in a woman's body. It causes me pain, but I can console myself with the knowledge that not everyone will like me, no matter who I am. I too can dislike a stranger; I mean it's natural, isn't it? I've accepted myself the way I am and I feel comfortable with myself. I don't feel that straight people's opinions matter that much. I am a man; my girlfriends clearly understand that, and treat me as such.

Sometimes boys who know that I am biologically female make advances towards me. It feels strange because I don't find males attractive. It sounds very weird; it turns me off, and every time I tell them that I don't 'do' guys, they start saying things like, "You are a woman, what do you mean? Maybe you haven't met the right guy, which is why you've not changed." It's mostly males who don't want to accept that I've always been like this.

Women, however, react differently. I've been involved with women who identify as heterosexuals, or have never been in a same-sex relationship. In most cases, the ladies never doubt that I'm a man, and when they find out that I'm a man trapped in a woman's body, most of them don't seem to mind, although some feel uncomfortable at first and find the relationship weird. Once that bridge is crossed, I find that ladies soon learn to see me as a man and treat me the same way any woman treats her boyfriend.

There are many people who are trans-phobic and homophobic, so I always introduce my partner in public as a friend; but when I am among the LGBTI community, I feel free to introduce my girlfriend as such, and we may kiss and hold hands without people staring at us. I am very comfortable with and proud of myself, but if my girlfriend isn't ready to face the trans-phobic community, I cannot force her. I understand because I was once there, but I have long since come to terms with it.



## Do you have a problem with my being gay?

My mother died three months after I was born, so I never knew her. I was raised by my father and grew up around hoards of cousins and aunts. My family originates from Molepolole in the Kweneng district, where I was born 20 years ago, the third-born in a boys-only family.

There are a few facts about me that I'd like to share with you. One such fact is that I wear tight jeans. I always have; I love them and I feel comfortable in them. They make me feel confident and define my uniqueness. Another fact is that I am gay.

You may be wondering how I arrived at that conclusion. Well, this is how I know: I grew up enjoying the company of girls; I played with dolls, applied nail polish, cross-dressed and kept my hair long. I used to wear my cousins' and nieces' high-heeled shoes and wigs and imitated their walk. Of course, nobody made anything of this. In fact many people admired my style and didn't think of me as being different. They thought of me as a curious child and I think they assumed I would grow out of it.

When I was 16, I had a friend, Kabo who was my 17 year-old neighbour. I think this was where my attraction to males started. I didn't understand the feelings I had for him then, but I knew I liked him very much. We may not have known the meaning of love, but we liked each other; we enjoyed each other's company and he visited me daily. We chose a good spot to hide, and there we kissed, as per the lessons learnt from the romantic movies we so loved watching. We kissed the same way that we saw men and women kiss on television. It didn't feel different or weird. We knew we were in a relationship, so I was as comfortable as any girl could be with a boy.

I was also eager to share the experience of my first kiss with my three best buddies at school - two girls and a boy. I was really excited and all gooey with emotions. My friends didn't judge me, but accepted me the way I was. Contrary to many gay boys' experiences, they were intrigued. They even went as far as asking me if they could watch us kiss, and I agreed. In my mind, kissing another boy was natural, and I just flowed with it and it felt right, although I accept that we were both under the age of sexual consent. Between Kabo and me, kissing felt so right that we decided to take the kiss to the next stage. I looked forward to it and couldn't wait to share the feelings and the excitement with my friends at school.

I don't know if gay genes run in my family, but in my extended family there are two gay men, both of them my cousins, so I never felt alone or isolated because I had people with whom I could share my experiences and disclose my sexual orientation to. I told my cousin, who is also a 'star' (gay people use this word to refer to each other without being blunt), that I'd had sex with Kabo. He was so jealous that he even asked me why I didn't share Kabo with him. I made it clear to him that I would not share Kabo with anyone.

At junior school, I had to make new friends. There were a few boys who wanted to be friends with me, but this confused me because I didn't know whether they wanted a

relationship or just an innocent friendship. It's hard for people to accept that they are gay because same-sex relationships are not talked about like heterosexual ones. At some point, I kissed one of the boys at school and, although we both wanted the kiss, we never talked about it afterwards. These are some of the situations one faces as a gay man. Most of these gorgeous boys are either heterosexuals or in denial, so getting too involved can result in getting hurt; sometimes I just wanted a kiss with no strings attached.

I got into a lot of trouble over my long hair at the Government school I attended. Attempting to enforce policy, the Head Teacher ordered me to cut my hair and this caused a big debate. My uncle (actually my auntie's boyfriend) was the school Guidance and Counselling teacher and was the one who was supposed to sit me down and talk to me about my hair and nail polish. Instead of doing the expected though, he showed quite a lot of support and understanding. He even got books about sexual orientation and relationships for me to read, and they really helped me to understand myself and who I was.

After three years at junior school I went to high school, where I had to explain myself once again. I had no support there, so I decided to cut my hair. I compensated for that with my own designer uniform by reducing the size of my school shirt and trousers, so that they were tighter than normal. Although teachers didn't complain about the uniform being too tight, I became popular; everyone from the Head Teacher to the cleaning staff knew that there was a boy who sashayed around school in his tight-fitting uniform and talked with a soft voice. Rumours started going around the school that I was gay, as if being gay was such a terrible thing! This didn't bother me at all because it was just a rumour with no one owning up to starting it. Actually, it gave me the opportunity to shine brightly.

One day, one of the school prefects confronted me by asking if I was dating males. What nerve! I became very angry and unhesitatingly confirmed that yes, I was gay, and, without flinching, asked him if he had a problem with it. I was forced to be aggressive because I was tired of defending myself all the time and always having to prove that I was the same as everyone else.

After that I decided to confront the gangs that were spreading rumours about me. I told each and every one of them that I was gay and that I didn't care how they classified me, because that was who I was.

During my last year at senior school, I made a move on one of the boys who I could tell was gay by the way he talked and presented himself. I went straight up to him and asked for his contact details. He wasn't at all comfortable with my directness, so he asked me to give him my details, so that he could be the one to get in touch. I was disappointed because I like doing things my way, but I gave him my number anyway. He didn't get back to me for weeks, but I didn't lose hope; I was patient with him.

One day after I had completed my examinations, he called and told me that he wasn't out of the closet yet, but that he wanted us to have a relationship. So we flirted for a few months and we then decided that we were not good for one another.

Being a gay man in a tertiary establishment can be much harder than in other levels of education; there is less fear of authority; emotional and open verbal abuse is executed much less subtly. During a lesson once, we were discussing human sexuality and it soon turned into a heated debate, full of hatred and fear of homosexuality. I felt obliged to re-educate my classmates, as they clearly understood very little, so I asked the lecturer if I could take over the lesson and clarify the myths. That was when I disclosed myself to my classmates. I told them that the person they were looking at was gay and I challenged them to tell me if I was any different now that they knew. I was pleasantly surprised by the way they responded. I am happy to have helped them understand, so that they could respect me in a way that I deserved; as a human being.

It was quite easy for me to confront my schoolmates and to disclose to them, but I must admit that I couldn't be that blunt with my two brothers. I stay with my brother Kagiso, the second-born boy of the family, who I haven't told yet, but I believe he knows. I feel that there is no need to state the obvious. Kagiso makes jokes and funny but inoffensive comments like, "I saw a cute boy today, should I get his number for you?"

Then there's my oldest brother, Mpho; he is so homophobic that he even hates the sight of me wearing tight clothes. He loathes gay people with a passion; I have no idea why. One day he came home and caught me wearing a pair of jeans that Kagiso had bought for me. The jeans were very tight and revealing. Mpho got angry and ordered me to take them off because he had long told me that people who wear tight clothes are gay. I did as I was told very quickly, but decided that I would not let this pass. I sat next to him and asked him what he'd do if he learned that I was gay. I asked him whether he would accept me or stop treating me as his brother. Mpho stood up and walked away. It's been almost a year since we talked or saw each other.

My other worry is my maternal aunts. They are aware of my feminine tendencies, but they always talk about me getting married. They consider that the woman I marry will be very lucky because I will ensure that the house is clean at all times and cook for her.



## **Call me lesbian, bisexual or queer; I am happy and I love myself.**

My name is Matilda Dumbu. I was born 35 years ago, one of eight children, the second of three girls. I was born after a pair of male twins. My mother was a single parent. The last memory I have of my father is when I was 6 years old, just when I was starting school in the remote village of Kgari.

I grew up in a loving and caring family. There was always an assortment of relatives around to help my mother with the children. Most important of all was my grandmother, who lived with us until her death at the age of 98 in 2001. My aunts, uncles and a million cousins were always around to lend a helping hand. Food was abundant, as we all pitched in to help at the small farm that my grandmother had allocated to my mother after she was divorced from my stepfather.

Growing up, I loved playing with my brothers, and enjoyed going to the cattle post, mainly because of all the fun stuff that went on in the bush. I would escape household work, especially the cooking (which I am still bad at, even today). I have always been reserved and a little dreamy, so I resorted to books; I loved reading. I believe I have read and reread every book that has crossed the threshold of my mother's tiny hut, including the bible, whose stories I found incredibly fantastic as I was growing up.

I was a very bright child and excelled at school without having to try too hard. As a result, I was always in trouble for noise-making or reading books not designated for school learning. When I was 10 years old, I moved to Gaborone with my older sister. It was a kind of huge and frightening change for a northern-hillbilly girl like me but, at the same time, it was quite exciting because it brought me some celebrity status with other kids back in Kgari.

Life in Gaborone was very different. For starters, kids were more competitive, assertive and could be quite cruel. I was never aware that I was ethnically different from other people living in Botswana; my moving to Gaborone rudely introduced me to the ethnic hierarchy of Botswana tribes and made me fully aware that I belonged to a lesser one. I am of Kalanga lineage: my tribe's people are descendants of the old Shona of Zimbabwe and we are dark, whilst most people here are light-skinned Tswana speakers, mostly descendants of the Tswana-Pedi-Sotho people, who consider themselves superior to all other tribes in the country. It was going to be a hard pill to swallow, if it meant accepting that I was a lesser human being because of where I was born and what language I spoke. I refused to accept my lower status and decided to show everyone that my complexion and tribe had no bearing on my intelligence, and to prove to the so-called 'superior breed' that it isn't all about tribe and colour, but that it's brains and character that count.

Growing up, I liked boys as friends. I have often wondered if this was because I was from a minority tribe, because it was something that differentiated me from my friends. At this stage I wasn't bothered by my lack of real interest in dating or when my friends talked and shared their juicy stories about girlfriends and boyfriends. My mother must've been the happiest woman; she had no reason worry that her daughter might

come home pregnant one day. She was, however, baffled by my lack of interest in the so-called feminine things, such as wearing skirts and cleaning the house. My peers teased me, calling me a ball-buster, because I was very good at everything. In class I got better grades than most. Playing sports, I was often chosen as captain of the team and I was a natural leader, something that boys my age couldn't handle well.

At the age of 17, I decided I should have a boyfriend. The one I chose was considered a weirdo, a nerd and a bore, but he was perfect for me, and the relationship went on for four years. We were compatible in every way that mattered.

Adolescence brought a completely new dimension to my life, as I knew little about sex and absolutely nothing about sexuality; it came with such force and urgency. Sex became a commodity I could not do without; it defined who you were. However, it was equally confusing, because I suddenly found myself noticing little things about people, especially their bodies - both male and female. It was exciting and frightening at the same time, so I decided the best way to find out more was by experimenting.

Despite not being the most beautiful person out there, I had no trouble getting takers for my experiment. Even though my boyfriend was determined to keep our virginity until marriage, I intended to lose mine immediately. When I failed to convince him to do it, we broke up. So, I experimented with another boy. However, sex was not as spectacular as I had thought it would be. My expectations had been heightened by what I had read in romance novels; it turned out not to be as they suggest. However, I was determined to keep experimenting with as many different boys as possible, and did eventually find some enjoyment in the act.

I found bodies very fascinating; especially the butt. I did not discriminate. Male bodies looked great when they were hard and athletic. Female butts were my favorite, nicely rounded when in tight jeans. I loved to sit outside the university library and watch people passing by. I continued my adventure, flitting in and out of relationships, with little concern as to why I found some women so beautiful. I knew about lesbian relationships, but never associated my attraction to other women as lesbianism, rather as an appreciation of beauty.

Even after completing college, I continued with my experimentation. Whilst this was going on, my mother and aunts were pulling their hair out, as they realised I was no nearer introducing them to a possible husband and father of the grandchildren they longed for.

Life became even more interesting when I joined an elite group of women, lawyers, human rights activists and politicians who all cultivated and advocated for a world where men and women were equal; different but equal. In my naive view, this was the epitome of freedom and I told myself that I would learn and excel in this world of equality. We discussed everything and criticized many things, especially all things traditional that involved men's privileges. These women fascinated me. They were beautiful beyond my imagination, empowered, educated and independent.

So, I immersed myself in learning as much as I could. I always thought that no one knew about my secret fascination for women; I thought I hid it well, and had no idea that some people were able to spot it from a mile away.

Whenever I got what I recognized as a pass from a woman, I became amused and confused as to why they thought I was attracted to them.

One day I travelled to Harare on a business trip and went out to a pub with some friends. I love dancing so much that I cannot resist any kind of music. I jumped onto the dance floor as the 'weekend special' played and was joined by a beautiful young woman who asked if she could dance with me. It is normal in Botswana culture to find people of the same sex, especially women, dancing together without being sexually involved, so I accepted the dance, but I never thought that the woman could be a lesbian. We danced the whole night away, holding hands and looking at each other. I asked her why she was holding me so closely. She laughed and asked me if I had any idea of what I was doing to her. She said that she had been watching me and wanted to be with me. I was terrified, but curious, so I decided that the only way to find out what this was all about was to experiment. I asked her what it was she wanted to do with me as we walked outside into the garden. She touched my face and kissed me, softly and slowly, just a whisper of a kiss. I held my breath and could not breathe because right then I knew this was it; the kiss that I had read about in romance books. It felt like my heart had moved, my brain was feeling different: light and fluffy. It felt good. We sat outside in the garden and made out all night. I still wasn't sure what it meant, but I knew then that my life had to change.

I came home and did as much reading as I could on same-sex relationships. All I knew for sure was that sex between people of the same sex was not socially acceptable and was a criminal offence, punishable by law. In fact, if I wanted to be stigmatised for being different, this would be one sure way of achieving my goal. For a long time, I didn't meet anyone who made me want to experiment in that way again. So, I continued to enjoy meaningless relationships with nameless men. I was almost happy, but always knew there was something out there, something scary and exciting, so I decided to be patient and wait.

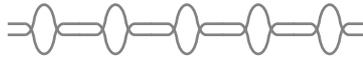
Two years later, I met my dream woman. At that point, my family had stopped asking about meeting my boyfriend or enquiring about grandchildren. Although, by then, my mother had plenty of grandchildren from my siblings, she still hoped that I would one day give her more. I asked my dream woman out. She was great and I loved her very much, but we were both pig-headed and stubborn; neither of us was willing to compromise. So we broke up after a short while. It was just as well because, although I believed that she was my first and only love up to that point, we were better off without each other. While we were together, I put off thoughts of defining my sexuality; I still found myself looking at men the same way I had before, and could still find them terribly sexy. I didn't care whether people called me a lesbian, so the confusion continued.

I went back to dating men and women and both continued to be fulfilling; I didn't want to box myself in. I know now that people like me are called lesbians or bisexuals, and that there will always be an issue there because some find it hard to define what it is they want. I am happy as I am now, having decided to honour all that defines me as a woman and a sexual human being. I fall in and out of love; I accept that I am attracted to both men and women and, if that makes me different, then that is something to celebrate.

One of my brothers lived with me whilst I was in a relationship with a woman. He is very gentle and a good guy, but even he struggles when he sees me with a woman. He was confused when he saw me enjoying the company of a man a year later, but I could see the relief on his face when that happened.

One of the reasons why I've decided not to come out to my family is because it took me so many years to understand myself, to stop questioning and to come to terms with my own sexuality, so how will my mother, who understands nothing about same-sex relationships, deal with it? I would rather not confuse her. I deal with the issue on a day-to-day basis.

Instead of fighting battles with my family, I chose to take on the role of an advocate. I use my expertise as a human rights activist to call for social change. I know that it is just a matter of time before all sexual orientations are accepted as natural in Botswana.



## My lesbian journey.

At primary school, there was a popular game that only girls played. It had no specific name, but what I know is that, later on, when I was in boarding school, it became more than just a game to me. If you liked another girl, you would write a letter asking her if she wanted to be your daughter or mother. If she accepted, then she became your pretend-daughter and you became the pretend-mother. The benefits of this pretend-relationship were numerous. You were assured of friendship, company, academic assistance, gifts and protection. Any girl could have more than one daughter or mother; the advantages of that were even greater. I think I took the game to extremes. I protected my daughter all the time because I really didn't want anything to happen to her. I even did her laundry and made her bed. In a boarding school, having a pretend-mother was very important because it assured you protection and company in those lonely days. My relationship with my pretend-daughter was the beginning of a long journey of self-realization.

At that point in my life, I didn't know anything about same-sex relationships, but from time to time I would kiss my 'daughter' and ask her not to kiss anyone else besides me. By then, I was dating a guy who was in the same school as me: I only had a boyfriend, who I'd approached initially, because all my friends had one; I had to fit in. Strangely enough, I couldn't bring myself to kiss him. I couldn't explain this; it's just the way it was, I just couldn't. You see I am from Majwaneng, a rural village in the Tswapong district, where nobody knew nor talked about these types of issues, so I had no reference point.

Now I am 38 years old and I am a mother, a real one, I mean. I have an 11 year-old son. I now know a lot of things about myself that I didn't know back then at boarding school. I know that I am a woman who loves other women. I understand, now, why I enjoyed the pretend-mother game so much, and why I preferred my 'daughter's' kiss to my boyfriend's.

I am the fifth-born of eight children. I grew up as a tomboy and performed what were seen as male duties. There was nothing strange about my masculine traits. In fact, they compensated for, and were encouraged by, the lack of a male figure in my family at that time. I took on male roles and, whenever there was need for a male hand, I volunteered to help. Most villagers were impressed and encouraged by my hard work and asked other girls to emulate my example. Although villagers seemed to have accepted my masculinity, there were roles I was never allowed to take on, just because of the mere fact that I was a woman; I was never allowed to go to the Kgotla wearing trousers; I had to adhere to gender roles and wear a skirt or a dress to attend meetings there.

I lived at home with my family after not doing well in Form Five, and didn't go for Tirelo Sechaba. That was when my mother decided the time was right to marry me off. Marriage was the last thing on my mind, because I had my own internal battles. I wasn't sure if I wanted to be with men, after being sexually abused several times. I never told anyone about the rape incidents, though.

When I became pregnant, I lied about who the father was. I was scared that he'd kill me if I told anyone, as he'd threatened to do. After the birth of my son, whom I named Maduo, I tried to be happy staying with a man who was providing for both of us, but it wasn't easy because he sometimes refused to use a condom. I was unemployed, so my solution was to date other men so that my son could grow up with a father figure. I still have no idea how to tell my son who his real father is. Am I supposed to tell him that he is the result of his mother being raped?

When Maduo started going to school, I moved to Mathangwane to make new friends and start a new life there. I soon got into a relationship with a man and, although he did everything for me, I was not happy in the relationship. Sex with a man was painful and, although he may have loved me not just for sex, I just couldn't take the pain any more.

One day I shared my experiences with a friend who suggested that, because I no longer enjoyed sex with men, I might be a lesbian. This shocked me, as I'd never thought of myself as a lesbian, nor did I know of any lesbians in Mathangwane. I didn't think lesbianism existed in Botswana, but rather that it was just a European thing. How could I be one when I had a child? Lesbians are not supposed to have children!

So, the conundrums about my sexuality continued. I suggested that my dislike for men was a result of being raped, but then I realized that I was afraid to face reality. I distanced myself from everyone, especially the friend who suggested that I might be a lesbian. How dare she tell the truth about me! Maybe she was a lesbian herself and wanted me to be one as well.

Two years later I braved the reality by spontaneously kissing a woman after a nightclub excursion with my friends. The following weekend this woman slept over. This was my first sexual experience with a woman and I must admit that it was the best sex I'd ever had. I had multiple orgasms and my legs just wouldn't stop shaking! I was worried, though, and kept asking myself, "What's going on? How come I never felt like this with a man? If I am a lesbian, how am I supposed to explain this to my family?"

I was confused and had no one to talk to about my newfound self. I did some research into sexuality and found out about homosexuals and bisexuals, mostly from the Internet. This was the beginning of my journey as a lesbian. I know that, one day, I must face my son and family and tell them the truth about myself. How will he view his mother? Will he resent me or accept me? Will he be able to accept his mother's partner?



## Setlhodi se sa go swa!

You see ... i am drunk with  
Potions of your hate and sink  
Portions of myself  
You spell "normal" to me  
Slap it into me  
I play hide and seek  
Never find what I need

You see ... i am the fruit  
Of your devilry  
Wretched wreckage wasted and waning  
You see ... i am you  
Bitter brute burnt and breathing my last

You see ... because of you...  
You diluted my sense of me  
Tinted my eyes with inadequacy  
Now you sing me lullabies...  
" Setlhodi se sa go swa!!"  
" Setlhodi se sa go swa!!"

*by Charmaine L. Olebile*

## **Shut up, you lesbians!**

I am silent  
Not because I can't talk  
Not because am ashamed  
I am invisible  
Not because you can't see me  
Not because am too diminutive  
I am voiceless  
Not because I can't speak  
I am inaudible  
Not because you are deaf

...because I fear  
Fear to be silenced  
Not that I make a hullabaloo  
Fear of discrimination  
Not that I'm a lesser creature  
I fear stigma  
Not that I'm a lesser female  
Fear of being arrested  
Arrested for fondness for my woman  
Am too scared to come out  
Walk the saunter with my woman  
Clasp hands and feel  
Ooh, yes am too scared

To love my woman in communal  
Why can't the world see?  
In my heart that Am head-over-heels  
I am not ashamed of my sexuality  
Let me be and let me love

*by Skipper*

## Me and my to be lesbian

Call me dirty call me whatever  
My emotions remain to be flooded by undesirable comments.  
Call me unnatural, call me just anything you so wish, am still human  
I hunger and thirst for love  
But what I get is beatings  
You make me feel like I am nothing,  
You corrode my integrity, you be little me for who I am  
Why do you do that to me???? Why, Why, Why  
You work so hard to accomplish your malicious, covetous and insatiable ambitions  
Why do you want me to live a lie????  
Days pass by and I seem to be perishing  
My emotions are drained by my identity  
My worth of self is diminished by the cruelty of the society  
The society caste me out like a demon  
A homo has no place in us they say  
They beat me because they say am a curse, everyday  
I have cried my eyes out  
Nobody heard me cry  
My crying is as silent as a vacuum  
My half is taken away  
I have no say  
What words have I to say because society hates me  
That is what they want  
They hate, despise ..... me  
Where should I go??  
Because am unwanted even at church!!!

*by Mpho Eith Lashani*

## The female anatomy

I want to appreciate the beauty that is the female anatomy  
For it is not a crime, a sin nor an abnormality  
I want to explore every coordinate  
Every slope, every depression, every peak, every landscape  
From the tips of her toes to her last strand of hair,  
is an oasis of splendour, nothing else can compare  
I want to plunge into her eyes and read what's on her mind  
and anticipate pleasure that simply can't be defined  
I want to liberate her senses and kiss her senseless  
Run my hands on her ever soft canvas  
As she sets her plan in motion, to take a dip in my ocean,  
I want to feel a ripple of waves, an internal explosion  
As she tastes the cream on the cones of my chest,  
I want to watch as a deeper love for her manifests  
As my heart beats for her from miles and miles,  
I want to see her love for me in her eyes, in her smile  
A girl like me needs a woman to admire,  
To make sweet love to, to frantically desire  
A girl like me needs a phenomenal woman in her life  
One who would gladly be a mother to my child  
And if her love for me rendered deep,  
She would fill my heart with infinite glee  
If she possesses enough passion to make me erupt with pleasure  
I would surely be happy beyond measure  
As surely this would mean one thing...  
She would appreciate the beauty that is my female anatomy...

*by Tumani K. Molefe*

## Free written 3<sup>rd</sup> May

Behind bars I was  
Bars of hate  
Bars of discrimination  
Behind bars I was placed  
Placed by hate  
Placed by discrimination  
Behind bars, I was frozen  
Frozen with fear  
Frozen with misery Behind bars, I was bound  
Bounded by disgust  
Bounded by oppression  
Behind bars, I was chained  
Chained by rejection  
Chained by isolation  
Behind bars, I was trapped  
Trapped under the load being put on me  
Trapped in a large abyss Behind bars, I was crushed  
Crushed under my oppressors feet  
Crushed under their stampede  
Behind bars, I was held  
Held for being who I am  
Held for being special

Behind bars I was  
Behind bars  
I am  
No more

*by Caine*

## What are you to do, parent?

The pain of giving birth  
your one and only first  
probably your last born child  
wishing you had paid attention when she got wild  
or carefully searched his room, he loved the mirror  
but what do you think you would have done  
first you screamed out lovingly, "My son, my son!"  
now you disown him, believing he is an outcast and sinner  
how about sitting her down when she became a loner  
daydreaming within her little border  
now she's older and openly bolder

What do you think you would have done  
now that you know it's too late  
still believe there is a way out? a parent with great faith  
if genes could be interchanged  
would you have taken your neighbours daughters  
now that you are standing by his coffin regretting your rage  
simply killing your own son out of anger and rage?  
you beat her up, but did it change anything? her father?  
now that we are facing reality  
what are you going to do now  
your son is gay and your daughter is lesbian  
you can't forever feel hurt and frown  
will locking up your child help, bring back brilliance  
so you believe, but what will you do as you read this poem  
I see you are thinking of Sodom and Gomorrah  
good thought, so what's next, more thought and stress?  
what are you to do as a parent, accept  
now that you have homosexuality in your home, right & left

Imagine yourself in your daughter or son's shoes  
having tried all to change, so you think they choose?  
how long did you expect it to remain hidden  
an embarrassment to the family practicing what's forbidden.

What are you to do as a parent  
reminiscing all that pain of birth  
you simply can't deny that which is valuable and first  
your own child, whom you love, love and raised  
what are you going to do, remain amazed?  
over a weird poem full of question marks  
or over the reality of homosexuality exposed from the dark  
that's your flesh and blood, what are you going to do?

by Rachel

What are you to do, parent?

## Summary

This booklet's main theme is 'coming out'. The stories and poems included here highlight this in the context of a patriarchal Botswana society which, like most world societies, categorizes human beings into gender roles, tribes and classes, and defines what is natural and unnatural about human nature. The storytellers are Batswana from a variety of backgrounds who share their life experiences and how they have negotiated the path of self-realization and the whys and wherefores of coming out, or not, to their families and friends.

One important lesson we learn from the stories and poems, is that disclosing one's sexual identity to family and friends is, above all, a personal choice and an ongoing process that can be encouraged, or hindered by, either intrinsic or extrinsic factors. Obstacles may stem from intrinsic reasons, such as fear of rejection, loss of a relationship, financial support or employment, or being thrown out of the family home. Extrinsic obstacles can result from experiences in public spaces and schools, where one's reception echoes society's lack of acceptance and understanding, and where name-calling, gossip, and staring are common occurrences. These obstacles may also result from being forced to dress according to one's biological sex, or from a confusion of pronouns directed at trans-gendered people, which is often followed by the question, "Are you a man or a woman?" or from blatant discrimination.

Nevertheless, some of the stories give hope and show that, with more readily available information on sexuality and gender identity, families can learn to understand and become supportive of their son's or daughter's situation. Other stories make reference to the pressure that is put upon LGBTI, but not upon heterosexuals, to explain and disclose their sexuality and gender identities. Again, others speak of multiple disadvantages: being a woman who is a lesbian from a minority tribe intensifies the complexity of social identity.

The poems explore, amongst other themes, the 'Catch-22' situation that all LGBTI find themselves in: to disclose is to unburden, just as jumping out of the frying pan leads to jumping into the fire! This is the tragic reality that LGBTI can experience, both before and after coming out. In silence one is afraid, imprisoned, and invisible. On becoming visible, although it gives LGBTI a voice, one is exposed to rejection, discrimination and hatred. Society uses religion and culture to oppress, deny and thwart some people's very existence. The poem "What are you to do, parent?" advises parents to be accepting and accommodating. It emphasises the fact that no amount of rage, abuse or rejection will succeed in changing a person's identity; what is, simply is.



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