

Loving and supporting our lesbian daughters!



**A guide for parents, families and
friends of young lesbians in Namibia**

Women's Leadership Centre

Lesbians are equal members of the human family

Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is indispensable for freedom, justice and peace.

Constitution of the Republic of Namibia

Lesbians are members of the human family with the same rights to dignity, respect, equality, happiness, freedom from discrimination and violence as all other human beings. As girls and young women they have the same right to love and support as all our other children.

Yet learning that our daughter, niece, sister, cousin, friend is a lesbian often comes as a shock - something we have not prepared ourselves for. This is especially the case where we have uncritically taken on social, cultural and religious prejudices and beliefs that being a lesbian is abnormal, unnatural, sinful, in other words not human, and therefore something to be ashamed of and hidden away.

- We may go into denial and reject what we are hearing, hoping that this is just a 'passing phase'.
- We may blame ourselves for not raising our daughters properly.
- We may take them to doctors, social workers, psychologists or traditional healers to try and make them 'straight'.
- We may reject them, beat them, verbally abuse them, throw them out of our homes and disown them.

None of these reactions would occur to us if we lived in a society that promoted understanding and respect for the human rights of all its citizens in all their diversity, as required by our Constitution.

This booklet aims to help parents, families and friends of young lesbians to better understand and overcome our own fears and prejudices so that we can give them the respect, love and support they need and deserve.

Understanding gender and sexual diversity

The question we all ask at the birth of a child is: *Is it a boy or a girl?* Actually it's just a baby, but on the basis of its **sex**: it's female or male sex organs, we will raise this baby to take up its **gender identity** as a girl or a boy by teaching it the typical behaviour expected of a girl or a boy in our society and culture.

"Be strong; fight back; don't cry; don't cook; don't wear dresses or play with dolls!" we tell our little boys in raising them to exercise power and control as 'real men'.

"Respect and serve others; don't raise your voice or complain; sit like a lady; don't play soccer!" we instruct our little girls in raising them to become 'good women' who are obedient and subservient to men.

However, some of our children resist and reject these **gender roles** and grow up to be **gender non-conforming** in the way they dress and behave, despite all the coercion we may exercise as parents, family and friends.

We also expect our girls and boys to be **heterosexual**, to be attracted to and fall in love with members of the 'opposite sex' as they grow up. Yet in almost every extended family there is a child who grows up being emotionally, physically, spiritually and sexually attracted to and loving people of the same sex. Today many of them identify as **lesbian** or **gay**.

Being gender non-conforming and being lesbian or gay are two different aspects of people's lives. Some gender non-conforming people may be lesbian or gay, many are not. We cannot make assumptions about a person's **sexual orientation**, that is whether they are heterosexual, lesbian or gay, from the way they look, dress, or express themselves.

The sooner we learn to accept the choices children and young people make regarding their gender identity and sexual orientation, and to love them for who they are, the less coercion, rejection and violence we will subject them to and the more we can support their emotional health and well-being.

Myths and facts about being lesbian

Myth: Being lesbian is un-African, it has not existed in the cultures of our continent but has been imported from western countries in recent times.

Fact: Many of us know of an aunt or great aunt in our extended families who is (or was) 'different', and studies on sexuality in the various ethnic communities in our country reveal that there were names for same sex practices and relationships in our different languages long before we were born.

Myth: Being lesbian is illegal in Namibia.

Fact: There are no laws that make any reference to being lesbian, although there are still some laws from colonial times that criminalise certain sexual acts between men, which are not criminalised if conducted between a man and a woman. These laws must be repealed, as they violate gay men's rights to dignity, equality and privacy as protected under the Namibian Constitution.

Myth: Being lesbian is an illness that can and must be cured.

Fact: Doctors in western countries tried for centuries to cure lesbians using the most brutal procedures. However, the World Health Organization removed being lesbian or gay from its list of mental illnesses in 1981.

Myth: According to the Bible, being lesbian is sinful and against the will of God.

Fact: The Bible can be read in different ways. It has been used to support ideologies of oppression, for example that one race is superior to and must rule over another (apartheid), or that men are superior to and must rule over women (patriarchy). Alternatively, the Bible has also been used to promote tolerance, acceptance, love and respect for 'all God's children,' (liberation theology) - including lesbian and gay people. We all have a right to our religious and cultural beliefs, but we may not use these to deny others their humanity and human rights as protected under our Constitution.

The impact of stigma and discrimination

Much damage is done to our children, our families and our society through the perpetuation of the myths about being lesbian, which create a climate of **homophobia** – the fear and hatred of sexual diversity.

The intense **hate speech** by individual political leaders in recent years has cast lesbian and gay people as non-human, non-citizens, people without rights, people whom the state does not need to protect against stigma, discrimination and violence, people whom state agents such as the police can brutalise with impunity.

This has undermined the foundation of our democratic society, which is based on respect for the dignity and rights of all our people. It has poisoned the minds of parents against their own children, leading to all forms of violence in families and communities.

It promotes the bullying of lesbian and gay children at schools, leading some to drop out and thus give up their right to education, access to fulfilling employment and an independent life. It sanctions stigma and discrimination at places of work, leading to marginalisation and exclusion.

It perpetuates a health system that excludes the health needs of lesbian and gay people, while their spiritual needs are often disregarded by religious leaders who exclude them from their congregations or vilify them in their sermons.

All of this creates a culture of fear and the silencing of voices defending all human rights for all.

Some lesbians internalise the hate and rejection, engaging in self-destructive behaviour and bringing violence into their own relationships.

Coming out as advocates for our lesbian daughters

Just as our daughters have gone through a difficult journey of self-acceptance, seeking support and building their knowledge about being a lesbian as well as their courage to **'come out'** to us, we as parents, family and friends must now embark on that same journey of learning, acceptance and courage in 'coming out' as supporters and advocates for the rights of our lesbian daughters.

To start with, we have to respect our daughter's decision to identify and live her life as a lesbian. We have to understand that this has nothing to do with her upbringing, and that blaming ourselves for not raising her to become a 'good woman' only creates unnecessary feelings of guilt and anger.

We have to know that it is impossible for doctors, social workers, psychologists or traditional healers to make our lesbian daughters 'straight', and it is unethical for them to try. Being lesbian is not an illness and cannot be 'cured'.

The only way we can become active to protect our lesbian daughters from stigma, discrimination, hate and violence is to overcome our own fear of being labelled and stigmatised so that we can love them unconditionally, support them whole-heartedly in their life choices and advocate for their rights.

Research has shown that having at least one supportive adult can make all the difference to the emotional well-being and life chances of our lesbian or gay children.

The responsibility lies with us. Let us not sacrifice our lesbian daughters on the altars of political ambition, religious and cultural intolerance and hate.

As parents, family and friends of young lesbian women we are called on to support them in building the new society we all yearn for: that respects the dignity and promotes the freedom and happiness of all.

Living and sharing our truths



Conny's story

"Ellen was my firstborn child, when I was still very young myself, and we have always been very close. I love Ellen so much, but it took me a long time to accept that she is a lesbian. We used to quarrel a lot, use bad words with each other, slam doors.

The Herero side of my family put me under a lot of pressure, saying this was not part of our tradition and would bring a curse onto the family. Fortunately my sister defended Ellen and supported her during the time I was feeling too angry and confused to be there for her. I blamed myself for things that happened in the past, for not having been a good enough mother. I was afraid of what might happen to her, as there was so much hate in the community stirred up by some of our church leaders and politicians.

But Ellen was so strong, saying she's not going anywhere, she's still my daughter and nothing has changed. Eventually I realised that I can't change her. Talking to some of her lesbian friends and watching films about the lives of lesbian and gay people helped me to open my heart and embrace my daughter as the strong young lesbian she is!"

Ellen's story

"There were times when I felt so alone and rejected, but I decided to really fight for the love of my mother, telling her she has to accept me whether she likes it or not! Emotionally it was very tough for both of us. But we learnt to communicate despite our hurt and anger, and we have a much stronger mother-daughter relationship now."



About the Women's Leadership Centre

Our lesbian daughters did not ask us to bring them into the world. We have to love all our children equally.
Conny

I decided to fight for my mothers love. We have a much stronger mother-daughter relationship now.
Ellen

The Women's Leadership Centre (WLC) is a feminist organisation based in Windhoek, Namibia. We envision a society in which all women actively engage in shaping the politics, practices and values of both public and private spaces. The WLC facilitates the voice, visibility and leadership of Namibian women through information sharing, education and training, advocacy and lobbying, research, writing, art, photography and the publishing of critical feminist texts which we distribute within our society.

Our organisation promotes a grassroots development of leadership among Namibian women, by supporting poor and marginalised women to form women's groups and to articulate their experiences and needs, informed by the knowledge of their human rights as women and as citizens.

Through our national **Building Feminist Lesbian Leadership Programme** we are reaching out to young lesbian women, their parents and other family members across Namibia. A major focus of our work is to strengthen the resilience and resistance of young lesbian women to homophobic stigma and discrimination, violence and the risk of HIV and Aids. Participants of this programme developed the contents of this booklet. Further information can be found at www.hearusout.org.za

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