

## Lesbian Conference - August 2006

Through contacts made within the JWG, Gender DynamiX was invited to the 2006 National Lesbian conference in Johannesburg at Constitutional Hill. It was a landmark event in the South African LGBT calendar, for more than one reason. Not only was it after 10 years since the first lesbian conference, but also a much more diversely attended conference. The other reason for this event to be a landmark: right from the start it was such a Trans-inclusive space! Not one time, anybody made any "slips" when referring to the LBT womyn "movement" that was to be formed.

Transgenderism was never excluded! It was such a welcoming space. I was accompanied by a post-op transsexual woman that identifies as lesbian. She was invited to make a speech, and it was categorised under: "Reflections on the struggle, from the political to the personal", with focus on marginalization.

Liesl, CEO of Gender DynamiX was also time allocated to present a speech, and the opportunity was used to create awareness regarding transgender issues, under the category of research. Focus was placed on the importance of story telling, and to urge transgender people in Africa to define their own definitions and terminology to describe themselves.

Extract from the CEO's speech:

One would ask why we need to include an organisation such as Gender DynamiX in a Lesbian Conference. There are actually a lot of spaces and times when lesbian issues become transgender issues and transgender issues become lesbian issues. Let me explain: I will start with my own story. Being a lesbian and previously involved in a relationship with a FTM person, (a person who is transitioning from female to male) creates an area of need of understanding. It is not easy for the person who transitions if the couple were previously accepted in lesbian circles. It is surely also not easy for the couple in that situation. But the "most easily-forgotten" person in that situation is the partner of the person who transitions. If she decides to stay in the relationship, and want to support her partner, she is the one who needs to deal with her own set of issues. She loves her partner, and wants to be there in support. She has not always the answers to her partner, how to deal with situations, how to address friends, etc. She is in the same process as her partner where they as a couple and as individuals stand risk of losing some friends, who do not understand, "approve" or accept. But what are most commonly ignored are her own struggles: In this whole process – what does it make her? Her partner is transitioning to become a man, a heterosexual man. It leaves a question of: "what am I now?" Where does she turn to for support? Her partner who is busy transitioning has many social issues to deal with and their couple/ relationship dynamics change drastically and they spend a lot of energy on that. There is not really support and understanding for lesbians whose partner is transitioning from female to male. Both the two individuals in a relationship like that were "previously" fully accepted in lesbian circles – what changed when the one partner comes out as transsexual and transitions to male? That's why I want to advocate for understanding within the lesbian communities.

Another friend of mine is also in a situation that she did not necessarily chose, but nevertheless is dealing with dynamics regarding their relationship. They were married as a heterosexual couple and after many years the husband came out as transsexual, wanting to transition to female. Not in all cases a partner of a MTF or male to female person wants to divorce or end the relationship. This leads to a set of "problems" of its own. As I mentioned with my own story as well, there is the same type of risks the couple experience as a couple and as individuals regarding friends and "status" if I may call it that. I don't refer to financial status here, but rather "where" they are placed or boxed in society. Previously they were seen as a heterosexual couple, and all of a sudden society sees them as a lesbian couple even if they themselves don't necessary choose to define as such. The partner of the MTF person, still views and define herself as a heterosexual women. Even if they as a couple in an experimental phase want to try and "blend in" they by no means are used to the lesbian culture. They don't necessary feel comfortable in lesbian circles – but where do they fit in?

This two examples is from the perspective of a partner of a transsexual person. Needless to say in both situations whether the partner chooses it or not, but somewhere her life's journey brings her sexual orientation somewhat close to that of a lesbian.

And then on the other hand, many a time before a FTM person comes out as transsexual, that person may start out in the lesbian community. Because sexual orientation and gender identity is closely inter-woven and sometimes even a bit confusing it happens so many times that when a FTM person as a young person start realising the "difference" and fall in love with another woman, it easily gets confused with being a lesbian. Especially so in times when internet was not accessible, or even existed.

Then lastly when a MTF person choose to be with a woman, and that can be with her current partner, or future

relationship she is then a lesbian transsexual or lesbian transwoman, or just a lesbian! (A woman who loves a woman)