

Empowering The Eastern Cape's Trans People

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By Leigh-Ann van der Merwe

Early morning of 21 April I, Leigh Ann van der Merwe and Charlie Takati departed from the Cape Town International Airport to East London. The flight had been delayed so we sat down to some coffee to discuss our strategy for this outreach effort. Most of the candidates invited to this workshop were mobilised by our ally, the contact person for this workshop and also president of the Executive for the Eastern Cape Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Organization in East London, Zamanguni Mzimela.

A great deal of work had gone into the planning of this workshop. A large part of the groundwork was done by me in consultation with Charlie Takati and former Outreach Officer at Gender Dynamix, Tebogo Nkoana. Since it was the Easter period, Charlie and I, being originally from the Eastern Cape, the suggestion was that both go home into rural EC for this period and meet in East London on the set date of 28 April.

As per schedule, Charlie and I met on the morning of 28 April 2011. In line with "African time", participants arrived later than scheduled and some time adjustments had to be made. As per our set program, the transgender workshop kicked off with some introductions and expectations. Many individuals attending were gender questioning individuals and it was not desirable to "label" individuals as being transgender.

Although it was very clear to me that some of them are trans by their presence, body image and gesture, behaviour and overall appearance through a transgender lens. It is not desirable or even ethical to impose gender on anyone and as a result, I steered clear of making assumptions about anyone's gender. Also, in a province like the Eastern Cape, it is not uncommon for people to confuse being a butch lesbian and a transgender man given the lack of language and terminology. For some people being transgender is a relatively new concept. As a point of departure and providing some clarity on the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation, we screened Robert Hamblin's short story on the DVD Transformations with the aim of clearly differentiating between the two phenomena. This sparked the discussion and soon some real interesting questions surfaced like:

- How do you know that you are transgender?
- What is the difference between being transgender and being gay, lesbian or bisexual?
- Is transgenderism a form of bisexuality?
- Transgender vs Transexual

Charlie and I answered most of these questions based on our personal experiences, feelings and emotions. Now the room was enthusiastic, the discussion flowed freely and soon debate ensued. I encouraged the participants to think about questions and/or comments in terms of our discussion during the tea break which was to follow. After everybody settled back in from the tea break, we screened Charlie and Tebogo's short stories also from the DVD Transformations and this provided a foretaste of Charlie's subsequent discussion on the challenges encountered by transgender men. This discussion gave rise to some of the medical questions related to bodily modification and hormone treatment of transgender people. This was a very interesting discussion for the participants and left some of them in awe.

This conference was also attended by Buhiswa Mhambi, who is the country co-ordinator for Amanitare, the Sexual Rights Network, and I quote Buhiswa: "Up to this day I thought I knew a lot about the world, but I am amazed at this new information because we have heard of the concept of transgender, but have never had the experience of first hand information and this information can empower us as a province to identify people who might be transgender". The work done by Amanitare is aimed at advancing Sexual and reproductive health and rights in Africa. Another participant, Mapha, said: "We are grateful for this training because we might have transgender people in our communities of which are not even aware".

After a lovely lunch, I screened my short story on the DVD Exquisite Gender which explains some of myths that are part and parcel of being transgender. The humour of the short story created a very "light" spirit and atmosphere for the rest of the afternoon. This was followed by a discussion on the surgical aspects of "creating a vagina". This certainly set off the giggles and blushing for some in the workshop and at some point the workshop was cautioned against venturing too far in some intimate and private details. It was the majority decision that, given the surgical elements and sexual dimensions of transgenderism, it would be desirable for an individual to point out when he/she feels uncomfortable with certain discussion, but it was the preferred view that issues (whether sexual or not) should be discussed openly and honestly and with a great deal of maturity. This was followed by an afternoon tea break and the floor was opened for questions and discussions. The discussions raised more medical issues and I gave an explanation of how transgender people are vulnerable to HIV and Aids and the government's lack of programming for trans people. I explained the concepts MSM and WSW and the position paper developed by the activists of the African Exchange Program. During the last discussion for the day, Zamanguni from ECLGBT gave a brief discussion on a lecture that was given to their group by a professor of Anatomy from the University of Kwazulu Natal in which she attempted to explain how on a physical level all genders are encompassed by femininity, initiated by the female and how male genitalia "morphed" itself from the vagina. A very graphical and interesting

discussion indeed. At the end of the first day, after everyone had left, Charlie and I very quickly strategized the next day.

Day two, the 29th of April 2011 started off on a very poignant note when Zamanguni requested a moment of silence in observation of the slaying of 24 year old lesbian Noxolo Nogwaza. Who had been horribly murdered at KwaThema. This was followed by silent prayers and we got right into the day. A brief recap of day 1 was followed by a discussion on some of the challenges for trans people.

This discussion was in line with the theme for the day which focussed on The Alteration of Sex Description Act 49 of 2003. Skipper's Mogapi's DVD addresses the issue of crossing borders with a passport in the gender assigned at birth while trans people like to have their acquired gender acknowledged. The training on Act 49 was interesting for people in the Eastern Cape because while they were still wrestling with the medical implications of being transgender, we made them aware of some of the legal issues involved when changing one's documents. Charlie discussed with the group some of the difficulties he encountered with the implementation of Act 49 by the Department of Home Affairs. I pointed them to the definitions in the Act that facilitates:

"... any person whose sexual characteristics* have been altered by surgical or medical treatment resulting in gender reassignment

may apply to the DG of NDHA for the alteration of the sex description on his or her birth certificate." (Section 2 paragraph 1)

I urged them to ensure that this Act is properly implemented where it concerns their constituency and gave them the assurance that GDX will assist in holding the department accountable for the implementation of this Act. Furthermore, it will render advice and aid to individuals making this change.

After the tea break for the day, we began paving the way forward for transgender people of the Eastern Cape. The general feeling in the room was gratitude for this information as most people attending were leaders of support groups and/or organisations. It means they can further this training with their various constituencies. The proceeding was finalized by Lundi. Lundi attended the training in his capacity as a family counsellor from the Masimanyane Zanempilo centre.

For those who are gender-questioning, it now means considering the future and the way forward in terms of their own identities. The workshop ended with an evaluation of the training provided and the questions for the evaluation were as follows:

- Did this training meet your expectation(s)?
- Please highlight the most important/interesting sections or information for you.
- Please rate the facilitation of training.
- Please rate the catering for the event.
- Please state how we can improve on this training.
- How can we map the way forward for transgender people in the Eastern Cape?

We had a generally positive feedback from participants. It had been a very positive first step for Charlie and me, and I believe that from here we can grow positively.