

Transgender Women Call for Unity and Recognition

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Trans sisters raised their voices in a call for unity and recognition amongst their peers at the third leg of the Exchange Program. "We are human beings and deserve the necessary respect and recognition"

By Leigh Ann Van der Merwe

The Exchange Program is a partnership between Gender Dynamix in South Africa and SIPD in Uganda. The program is aimed at capacitating emerging transgender activists in South Africa and the East African region. Selected participants get together twice annually to discuss relevant, burning issues on the agenda for the region. The third leg of the exchange program was hosted by SIPD, in the second week of May, in Uganda this year.

This year, Ms Beyonce Amooti, a self-proclaimed sex worker, joined the sixteen activists in discussing transgender issues. A Ugandan national, Ms. Amooti said it is possibly one of the worst countries in which to be a transgender person. "We are not considered to be human", said Beyonce. It is a well-documented fact that transgender people are not even considered for employment opportunities. Even more so in a country like Uganda, where homo and trans phobia is rife.

Beyonce (30), said she grew up in a family of seven and knew from a young age that she was different. Says Beyonce, "I always use to wear my sisters clothing and as a result of this my father sent me away to boarding school". Money was a problem for her family and they struggled financially. This is how she got into sex work. "During my secondary level of school, I tried to balance studying with my sex work".

About the challenges for transgender women in Uganda, she lists HIV and Aids as a top priority of intervention. She says transgender women are not allowed to

even test for HIV in Uganda. With despair she describes an incident when she fell ill and needed to make use of a public health facility. "All the clients were called in, even the ones who came after me. I sat there awaiting my turn and when everyone else was helped, the staff refused to see me". She called on the staff at WONETHA, a feminist sex worker rights organisation, and after negotiations with the public health facility, the clinic agreed to see her.

She affirms the presence of LGBTI and transgender advocacy organisations in Uganda but adds that up to now, they have not been of much help to her. "When another trans woman died, the landlord had thrown her remains out of the building. There was no one that we could turn to for help. Again, we called on WONETHA who assisted us to have her remains taken in by the morgue". She says the removal of the anti-homosexuality from the parliament in Uganda, will grant Ugandan trans people the freedom of movement because "there is no longer the fear of moving in places where your life might be in danger".

The ladies felt the exchange program is an important platform to voice issues relevant to trans women. Christina Mavuma, a trans woman from Botswana, said more can be done for trans women from Botswana. She added, "abandonment is a very real threat for young trans women in my country. In most cases, trans women are thrown out of their homes and cut off from the family's financial sources". In this sense, the exchange program is so important in capacitating trans activists to help those who need to deal with trans issues.

Christina said trans women in Botswana have many challenges. She cites legal status for trans people as being the single most challenging aspect of being trans in Botswana. She describes a laborious process in going about to get legal recognition of one's gender before or after gender reassignment. Another obstacle, she says is access to health services. "It is possible to get access to hormones in my country and no availability of surgery, but such treatment is only available in the private health sector. Since many trans women are unemployed and often abandoned by family, they are not afforded even the hormone treatment".

Both ladies agree that Africa has a long way to go in understanding sexual diversity and gender identity. "More often than not, being trans gender is perceived as being unAfrican and goes against out cultures and religions". Africa has a long way in changing its thinking towards sexual minorities. One strong sentiment that beams from this interview, is the need for education and a human rights approach. These ladies are calling for respect and recognition. To be afforded human rights, but more importantly to be acknowledged by the world as women.