

## Transmen and butch lesbians meet to explore shared identities

“I asked my mother if there was a hospital that could change me. She told me I was God’s creation and I would live as a girl my whole life. It was painful but I had to accept it”. This is the story of Xola from Langa-East in Cape Town. Like most transsexual men (transman) he grew up feeling bad about his body, “wearing dresses was a punishment”. People call him a lesbian, but Xola doesn’t like that because he says he is a man.

There was excitement and anxiety on the 2nd of March 2011 at the Saartjie Baartman Centre in Athlone. A workshop was held where transmen and butch lesbians discussed their similarities, differences and how they identify. A video of digital stories of transmen was also played. The workshop, organised by Gender Dynamix, is the first of a series of meetings to be held monthly, focusing on issues affecting these marginalised groups. There was a positive turnout from the public, who wanted to hear the stories shared, and ask questions. These women, who transgress gender boundaries, had a lot to say about masculinity in an environment that was open to both young and old. The talk was facilitated by Nomhla Kalipa, who ensured that the meeting ran smoothly. The debate was heated, and the crowd wasn’t pleased to hear they had run out of time, before they had run out of questions.

The first video played was about Gerald, a 29 year old transman who believes “a woman without breasts is not less of a woman, and a man without testicles is not less of a man. Masculinity is within an individual. I was born as a girl, but in my heart and soul I’m a man. Breasts don’t make a woman and balls don’t make a man”. This transman who likes men and loves women, is labelled as lost by people; wants to know why he can’t just be a man? The butch lesbians, who were part of the panel like Zimaseka from Gugulethu, all said they were comfortable with their bodies. Zimaseka has brothers, and is the only girl; her family has accepted her - “they know I’m a girl who dates other girls” and is currently living with her partner. She says “like some straight women. I hate going on my period, but I don’t have issues with being a woman”.

Post-op transman Tebogo’s video was then played. He talks about the anger and sadness he felt after his operation because his reproductive system was gone, which means he can’t have his own kids. “I’m a man raised as a woman. I had many questions in terms of relationships and my life. The world sees a perpetrator, but I’m glad for the chance to get the essence of being a transman”. After the video was played there was a stunned silence as everyone tried to digest what they had just viewed - the harsh realities faced by transsexuals.

According to Robert Hamblin, Advocacy Manager for Gender Dynamix, the problem faced by people is lack of information, which deprives transgenders of a chance at happiness because they can’t be who they really are. Now living as a transman Robert says, “I didn’t know about transgender people, it was after meeting a transman that I knew who I was and started transitioning very soon thereafter.

Looking at them, you might assume Lwazi and Zinhle are the same gender but that’s not the case. Proud of being a butch lesbian, Zinhle was the first lesbian to come out in her community; as a result she faced harassment from the local men. While Lwazi grew up playing with boys, he hated urinating sitting down and would hide when he went to the toilet. He stopped playing with boys, when he developed breasts and always asked God why he has girl features because inside he is a man. Charlie also identifies as a transman, “growing up I didn’t have any challenges because my grandfather fought all my battles. It was after his death that life became difficult for me. I moved in with my uncle who said I was an embarrassment to him because I wanted to wear trousers to church”, although he tried to explain, his uncle would not hear any of it. Imbeleko (traditional ceremony) was performed and when that didn’t cure him; he was kicked out of the house, which caused him to drop-out of school. Being a Christian and member of the Presbyterian Church his faith grew in the Lord. Charlie is now a member of the men’s organisation at Church.

The floor was then opened for the audience to ask questions. It is clear that members of the LGBTI community also lacked information and understanding of transgender people and butch lesbians. One woman wanted to know: how do you address a person who doesn’t want to be called a he or she? Other questions posed to the panel were: What is a butch in a relationship? Have you always hated your female body? Are there any cultural challenges for transmen?

This ongoing discussion will explore the lives of transmen and homosexuals from all angles, with the aim of educating and answering questions that are sometimes taboo even in the LGBTI community.