



a deeper love

INSIGHTS INTO THE *lifeworlds* OF TRANS MEN AND
TRANS WOMEN IN EASTERN UGANDA

a deeper love

*People let me tell you
I work hard every day
I get up out of bed
I put on my clothes
'Cause I've got bills to pay*

*Now, it ain't easy
But I don't need no help
I got a strong will to survive
I've got a deeper love
Deeper love
Deeper love inside
And I call it
Pride*

*It's the power that gives you
the strength to survive*

*Pride
A deeper love*

Artist | Aretha Franklin
Songwriters | David Bryon Cole; Robert Manuel Clivilles
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Developed by Positive Vibes, with support of the VOICE: Learning from Innovation mechanism

Compiled, edited and formatted for Positive Vibes by
Lee Mondry and Ricardo Walters | February 2018

In 2017, Positive Vibes implemented the *Learning From Innovation* project (LFI), supported by the VOICE mechanism, an initiative of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, administered by Hivos and Oxfam Novib.

The VOICE grant enabled Positive Vibes to *test and scale new approaches* with a focus on *human-centered innovations* that are *context-specific*. Of particular interest and priority was work undertaken to support, develop and amplify the voice of marginalized populations.

The LFI took the form of a one-year Participatory Action Research process in Uganda, in parallel to the implementation of The LILO Project, a partnership between Positive Vibes and LGBT Denmark. LILO is a participatory methodology and workshop experience designed along psychosocial, counselling and group facilitation principles to create a safe space for personalization, increased self-awareness and enhanced self-efficacy.

Through the LFI, Positive Vibes accompanied communities of LGBT people to design a process for joint learning, and to learn together: about programming, about implementation strategy, about the relevance and meaning of Positive Vibes' core ways of thinking and ways of working, and about the unique lived experience – the lifeworlds – of sexual and gender minorities in rural East Africa.

The learning from the LFI – generated collaboratively by a number of contributors across academic, activist, programming and community sectors – is captured in a series of Knowledge Products: *“Coming to Voice”*.

ACRONYMS

CBO	Community-based Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
IKS	Indigenous Knowledge Systems
KP	Key Populations
LBQ	Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer (women)
LFI	Learning from Innovation
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer
LILO	Looking In, Looking Out
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MSM	Men who have sex with men
NGO	Non-government organisation
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PLHIV	People living with HIV
PrEP	Pre-exposure prophylaxis
PV	Positive Vibes
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SGM	Sexual and Gender minorities
SOGI	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics

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WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW MORE?

For more information about the *Learning from Innovation* project – its methods and process – or to access more detailed source material generated from Field Visits and Technical Reference Group interactions, or for copies of other volumes in the “*Coming to Voice*” series of publications, please contact LEE MONDRY at lee@positivevibes.org.

INTRODUCTION

This Knowledge Product is one of several publications in the series ‘*Coming to Voice*’. The series has been generated by Positive Vibes through the *Learning from Innovation (LFI)* project, a one-year research and learning exercise, supported by the VOICE mechanism during 2017.

VOICE is an initiative by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, administered by a consortium between Hivos and Oxfam Novib. Through the Voice mechanism, Positive Vibes has accessed the ‘Innovate and Learn Grant’, available to groups and organisations to test and scale new approaches with a focus on human-centred innovations that are context-specific. Of particular interest and priority was work undertaken to support, develop and amplify the voice of marginalized populations.

Positive Vibes is a Namibian-registered trust, operating nationally since 2008 and in the broader-SADC region since 2012. By 2018, Positive Vibes has extended its programmatic footprint to encompass Southern, East, West and Central Africa and is exploring opportunities for partnership in the MENA region. PV has historically been grounded in the solidarity movement especially in relation to the liberation and independence of politically oppressed peoples. Its conviction is rooted in the philosophy of Paulo Freire, particularly the concept of conscientisation through which marginalised people come to critical awareness of the environment around them and are stirred to act for change and freedom. PV focuses on capacity strengthening – of human capacity and organisational systems – applied through a range of participatory methods with CBOs, NGOs and networks active in the areas of HIV, health and human rights.

Positive Vibes is not a research institution. It does, however, pride itself on being a learning organisation, learning systematically from its process and the outcomes of that process in order to evolve, innovate and deepen its practice. In collaboration with its partner LGBT Denmark and local LGBT organisations, PV utilised the VOICE grant to learn

from the implementation of LILO¹ in Uganda. Participant demographic data – generated from pre and post workshop questionnaires – gave insight into who was being reached by LILO; into who was responding to invitations to attend the workshop; into ages, sexuality and gender identities of participants; into opinions, attitudes, knowledge and perceptions around sexual orientation and gender; and into experiences with stigma, discrimination and marginalisation.

This data became the primary material around which the LFI took its initial shape and direction. Analysis and interpretation of that data by LGBT community members in Uganda determined other branches of interest and learning, including a focus on the lived experience – the lifeworlds – of queer-identifying women in rural Northern Uganda, and of transgender men and women in Mbale in the East of the country.

The *Learning from Innovation (LFI)* project took the form of a non-routine Participatory Action Research Process. This approach to learning alongside communities, from local action – close to where the action happens, and close to when the action happens – was a good fit for PV’s rights-based values and built participation and voice into the outworking of the Voice grant itself; direct participation of those traditionally excluded was at the cornerstone of the method. Communities participated in reviewing their own data, in interpreting that data, in sense-making, in constructing meaning, and then in determining direction for subsequent learning.

¹ LILO – *Looking In; Looking Out* – is Positive Vibes’ flagship participatory methodology, delivered as a suite of distinct multi-day workshops. Each workshop is customised to a specific audience, with the primary aims to sensitise, to raise awareness and to elevate consciousness. A secondary benefit of many of the workshops is increased interpersonal capability: communication, negotiation, conflict resolution. Common across all workshops is Positive Vibes’ emphasis on personalisation.

In its East Africa programmes, in Uganda and Tanzania, Positive Vibes implements *LILO Identity*, with its partner, LGBT Denmark, through a project funded by Danida through CISU (Civil Society in Development).

LILO Identity works with LGBT people, responding to high levels of self-stigma and minority stress in that population. Through a variety of approaches and disciplines, including positive psychology and narrative therapy, the process works with individuals and groups to raise awareness of the self, to reclaim and reframe personal narrative, and promote self-acceptance.

In Uganda, LILO Identity workshops were delivered by trained local facilitators to approximately 100 LGBT people in seven locations in Central, East, North and West Nile Uganda, including Kampala, Arua, Gulu, Mbale, Mbarara, Fort Portal and Masaka.

The process unfolded in three stages before the development of the *Coming to Voice* series of publications to document the process and learning outcomes.

1. A pre-process stage, during which time local partners in Uganda were briefed on the concept of the LFI, and their interest in working together was explored and confirmed.
2. A collaborative design stage, where teammates from Positive Vibes, LGBT DK and local Ugandan partner organisations, Queer Youth Uganda (QYU) and Health and Rights Initiative (HRI), discussed Learning Questions, and co-designed data collection instruments.
3. Two learning cycles (July and October 2017) during the course of the one-year project, during which time two sets of Reference Groups convened:
 - a. A Uganda-based field process, engaging LGBT teammates drawn from local implementing partners QYU (based in Kampala, and working predominantly in the Central, West and East regions of Uganda) and HRI (based in Lira, working predominantly in the North and Western regions). These processes are typically phenomenological in character and approach, drawing from and surfacing the lived experience of LGBT people within the Ugandan context, and exploring how those experiences are perceived and interpreted by the communities themselves in their specific contexts.
 - b. A South Africa-based Technical Review Group, composed largely of representatives of PV, LGBT DK and the HSRC² who have interest, experience and responsibility for design, programme implementation and strategy. This group applies a technical and methodological lens to the data generated from the field to consider the implications of what is being learned from LILO on the implementation science³ of the methodology.

² The Human Sciences Research Council is a South African-based academic research institution. Through its Human and Social Development Programme and the Genders and Sexualities in Africa Working Group, the HSRC partnered with Positive Vibes during the LFI, for joint learning in the field, for joint reflection on the partnerships possible between academia and civil society, for mutual learning around participatory research methodologies, and to develop a contextual and conceptual analysis of LILO in East Africa.

³ Implementation science is the study of methods that influence the integration of evidence-based interventions into practice settings.

<http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/medicalschoo/programs/crisp/about/Pages/About-Dissemination-and-Implementation-Science.aspx>

We speak often of science with reference to various disciplines: physical sciences; chemical sciences; financial and accounting sciences; medical sciences. As such, these disciplines speak to facts, to systems, to causal relationships. They speak to catalysts and reactions, conditions and methods, apparatus. There is a predictableness to the action and the outcome and product of that action. The application of these sciences extends beyond artfulness or intuition or some idiosyncratic skill.

In July 2017, Cycle One of the LFI saw teams convene in Kampala, in Lira, and in Mbale to review, interpret and discuss data generated from LILO workshops. By the end of each review meeting, a small number of priority-interest themes emerged, identified by the communities themselves as important, and worthwhile for possible exploration and learning in the subsequent cycle.

Cycle Two aimed to generate learning around two such themes as identified by members of the Ugandan LGBT community:

- In Arua (West Nile/Northern region), exploring the multiple layers of discrimination and oppression experienced by LBQ women.
- In Mbale (Eastern region), exploring the lived experience of trans-diverse people within society and within the LGBT community.

Cycle Two followed a different format to Cycle One. Whereas Cycle One analysed graphs to broadly identify patterns and themes and questions, Cycle Two sought to explore the human stories within each specific theme that are illustrations of exclusion and marginalization, and at the same time stories of resilience and strength. The process followed a narrative approach: meeting with individuals in each location to listen to, to appreciate, and to capture their personal story. And to reflect together on the meanings and implications of those stories.

The same might be said for the discipline of Implementation Science. Traditionally, those who do programming in development work perceive some need, then devise some intervention to respond to that need. Often the response is intuitive: to do what is possible to do, and what makes sense to do without available capacity and resources, and within the parameters of a unique project. Implementation is matched with healthy doses of aspiration and hopefulness that the outcomes of intervention will, over time, confirm the initial intuition.

By the time of the LFI, Positive Vibes has been implementing LILO and LILO-based programming for several years; intensively so across a range of environments and applications. Sufficient learning has been amassed for there to be something considerably less ethereal about how that programming is applied: a more systematic application with predictable results because certain effects are triggered by certain causes; the organisation understands what conditions are necessary for good results, what methods are necessary to achieve those results under certain conditions, and how those methods may need to change for different conditions in order to maintain the same causal effect.

This is systematic, and disciplined. There is a science to the implementation of this kind of programming.

LifeWorlds

During Cycle One of the LFI in Uganda, participants gathered in two locations to review data gathered through LILO pre and post workshop questionnaires, from approximately 100 LILO participants in seven locations around Uganda. This data had been analysed into graphs for interpretation and discussion.

Reflection on the Cycle One data had a notably sobering effect on participants. They were curious and moved, this strong emotional response becoming the convictional motivation through which they determined direction for focus and process in Cycle Two.

- As a group gathered from Northern Uganda and the West Nile region in Lira, they were troubled to note the high concentration of MSM in LILO workshops around the country and, contrastingly, the low levels of participation in these workshops by women.
- As a group convened from Western and Eastern Uganda in Mbale, they were challenged by the disproportionate levels of stigma, discrimination, exclusion, isolation and marginalisation experienced by transgender men and women, becoming conscious of the transphobia that exists even amongst gay and bisexual men, and lesbian and bisexual women.

Ironically, not dissimilar to general society, cisgender men appeared privileged amongst LGBT people, and within LGBT programming. Whilst the stigma and persecution of gay and bisexual men were not diminished or invalidated by LFI participants, it was recognised that queer women and trans people were somehow less well understood within the LGBT-sector itself. For a variety of reasons, queer women and trans people were – sometimes consciously, but often unintentionally and inadvertently – marginalised. Cycle One LFI participants were keen to gain a deeper understanding of the reality of life for people in these populations, to better understand their lived experience in the day to day.

To enter more fully into their *lifeworlds*.

The natural and physical sciences offer a set of objective rules to explain how the world works. But everyday life – the mundane, the ordinary, the personal – is subjective. For each individual, the world registers on the senses in different ways. It is perceived, filtered, experienced through a unique set of lenses that connect the individual with the social, and the practical with the perceptual. Life – as it is experienced by each person, and in relation to others– is constructed, as is its meaning. Fascinatingly, each person inhabits a space that is their unique *lifeworld*, the realm of their lived experience, the place in which and the way in which they interface with the world around them, and experience its impact on them.

Programming that is person-centred requires a sensitivity and appreciation of these *lifeworlds*. Work amongst those who experience marginalisation requires that these *lifeworlds* are not only recognised in and through the work, but validated. How people experience the world around them matters. How they perceive the world around them describes their reality, and how they think about that reality for themselves and others.

The stories that follow offer a privileged insight into a facet of the *lifeworlds* of nine trans men and women in and around Mbale. Mbale is a city in Eastern Uganda, the main municipal, administrative and commercial centre of Mbale district. Each story has been generated by community members – locally based teammates who participated as part of the LFI – who spent time with individuals who volunteered to meet and share their story. The entry-point to each person was local relationship, not programme; in fact, many participants had never attended a LILO workshop. Volunteers have generously given their permission to have their stories retold – in order that others may better understand – and to have a non-identifying image attached to that story.

These nine stories are hardly representative of all trans men and women in Uganda; or even all trans people in Mbale. They are nine unique stories, set in a specific time and place. But, they are illustrative. And, as the LFI invited teammates gathered to reflect on the impact of these encounters and the meaning contained in each human story, they were stimulated to apply those meanings to their own experience, and frame observations, implications and key lessons. These insights are interspersed between the stories, and deepen the analysis of how marginalisation is expressed, encountered and experienced by trans-diverse people in this context.

What are we
LEARNING?

Visibility means VULNERABILITY



To grow up as a trans person is to be intimately and inwardly familiar with a sense of profound difference. Of *otherness*, that comes from within. Of figuring out how to be at home in a birth-body that does not match who you experience yourself to be, who you know you are. Of learning to embrace and celebrate who you are by allowing your gender expression to reinforce your gender identity.

In societies, communities and families across Uganda where conservative, traditionalist, fundamentalist values fuel homophobia, gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people are all vulnerable to stigma, discrimination, exclusion and harassment. Within these sexual and gender minorities, however, cisgender people have a layer of additional protection; they have the option, in many cases, should they choose to exercise it, to “hide”. To “pass”. To keep their sexuality private; to find cover – as many lesbian and bisexual women do – in a heterosexual relationship.

A measure of safety and security may be achieved simply by becoming unremarkable. To blend in is to be safe.

The lack of secrecy is a recurring theme across the stories of trans people in Mbale whose experiences of stigma, abuse and marginalisation are disproportionately higher than other sexual and gender minorities and, often, dramatically more extreme and severe in presentation and consequence. Their visibility makes it difficult for them to hide safely in society. Their non-conforming physical appearance, gender presentation and gender expression make them conspicuous and noticeable in a society uneasy with difference and diversity.

And in this reality lies a constant tension. Living openly and freely as a trans person increases vulnerability and danger. It is safer – significantly more so in many communities – to simply be less visible. To conform to societal gender norms for the birth-body one has been assigned. It would make many of the mundane tasks of life – sitting in a clinic waiting room; travelling by public transport – easier. But conforming requires a denial, a suppression, a refuting of one’s essential identity with – over a sustained period of time – damaging psychological and social effects.

JD is a 24-year old transwoman from Mbale, who lives with her mother. Her dad died when she was only 8 years old, leaving behind a family where JD was the only brother to her three sisters.

JD was always “a typical girl”, even more so than her sisters, playing games that girls played and fighting for the nice dolls. She was especially talented in netball and it was a sad day for her when she was removed from the team because she was a boy. She remembers crying so much, because she loved this sport. The experience was very painful for her.

JD grew up believing she was gay – she did not know about transgender persons. She treated her hair with chemicals. While other boys forgot to bring soap to school, her school trunk was packed with powders, perfumes, and products for her hair. Boys would tease her about her beauty products, calling her girl’s names – Jacqueline, Joyce, Sarah – any time they talked to her or about her.

Even at home, JD’s mother realised that her son was more like a girl than a boy, and acknowledged that; instead of using his male name, she referred to him by a shortened female version: a name JD still uses today.

School was not easy for JD. When she went to shower, she tied her towel in a feminine way like the other girls, because she felt that she did not want anyone to see her chest. She tied a towel around her head so that the water will not destroy her hair. The other boys wondered what was wrong with JD. She recalls when three students from the dormitory tried to rape her. As they held her down, she made a lot of noise which a teacher heard. The boys ran away. JD was not comfortable to share with the teacher that other students had attempted to rape her. Instead the teacher punished JD, because she was not where she needed to be. JD was caned, but still she did not disclose what really happened. She never mentioned it to anyone, because it was an embarrassment at school.

As the bullying grew worse, JD complained to her headmistress who decided to place her in the girls’ dormitory instead. Some days later, a teacher called her to the staff room – in front of all the

other teachers – and asked her whether she was a boy or a girl, or a hermaphrodite. JD remembers feeling really bad. But despite these abuses, she embraced herself and did not force herself to change just to fit the expectations of others at school.

When she completed school, JD took a course in hairdressing, and got a job as a hairstylist in a salon owned by her aunt.



She loved the job and many customers also loved her. But some customers pointed fingers and talked about her: *‘That one behaves like a girl. That one is a gay. That one is a woman-man.’* When her aunt asked whether this was true, JD told her the truth, believing she would support her; instead, she was fired from her job. This experience would lead to more harm later on. When JD heard that her aunt was outing her to other people, she grew frustrated and angry. Confronting her aunt, she lost her temper and assaulted her. This led to her being arrested and locked up by the police when her aunt reported the incident. Only the appeals of her mother to the police saw her released the next day.

When JD realised she was different, she confided in the pastor at her church. She wanted to be prayed for, to find a way of changing her feelings. The pastor, however, rebuked her and told the entire congregation about this ‘gay choir boy’. He called her evil and demon-possessed and, joined by other members of the church, told her they did not want people like that in the church. JD left the church and never went back. Now, she wants nothing to do with church, because of the shame this pastor brought upon her. She believes in her own prayers and knows that God is listening to her.

At home, JD’s sister talks about the evil sin of homosexuality. She wishes the *‘Kill the Gays’* Bill would be passed, because homosexuals need to be killed. JD wonders how her own sister could say something like that to her all the time. But, even though her sister tries to influence their mother against her, JD’s mother is loving: if it is true – that JD is a homosexual as her sister claims – she cannot deny her; she is still her child. She has never denied her or chased her away, although she does beg her to try and change. After LILO, JD has realised that she is not a mistake, that she is not a sinner; instead, people who think she is evil for being who she is are evil themselves. She has learned that they do not have the right to judge her, but that only God can judge her, and she awaits that. She believes in doing good and being a good person so she can freely face her final judgement.

JD has been in several relationships, but they usually never lasted. She thinks that gay men do not trust trans women and do not take the relationships very seriously. JD has been cheated on every time and she has repaid her partners by cheating on them, in turn. Once she met a man on social media and chatted for several weeks. She travelled to Kampala to meet him. He was surprised to see JD, because he expected a woman and not a female man. Still, they had drinks together over the course of an evening that led back to his room. This man was very big and muscular; he wanted sex, and refused protection when JD asked about condoms. When JD resisted, he forced her and violently raped her, leaving her behind in the room, alone and injured. JD called a friend, who helped her to a hospital and treatment. Currently she is in a relationship she takes very seriously. She has fallen in love with a bisexual man, who is married in a heterosexual relationship. He looks after JD like a man looks after his girlfriend. JD is very happy in this relationship, because he respects her and is there for her when she needs him. Even though he is a married man, he loves JD and she is very comfortable with that. JD knows who she is. She knows that she is a woman and that she will not change for other people.

She no longer goes to the aunt’s salon. She has some customers who call her privately. Her dream is to open a salon for herself, where she can do the work she really loves and support herself. But she also wants to use that opportunity to help other trans women by teaching them how to braid hair and apply make-up. She wants to inspire them with the passion she has.



Trans people are vulnerable to amplified and extreme DISCRIMINATION and VIOLENCE

with very few available or accessible legal or social protections.



The stories from Mbale startlingly reveal the wide-ranging and generalised vulnerability of trans men and trans women. The scope of their marginalisation is incredibly broad; in most cases, there is no aspect of life that is free from some level of discrimination or persecution.

With very few protections under the law, trans people are regularly excluded from employment on the basis of their gender expression. They are exploited by landlords who escalate rental fees to either prohibit them from affording accommodation or take advantage of their limited options so as to extract higher rates. Social stigma creates a barrier that limits their ability to generate adequate income in the informal sector.

They are frequently the victims of public authorities and institutions that should exist to serve and protect the vulnerable. Teachers, health workers, policeman number amongst those frequently responsible for acts that range from simply unkind and unfair, to unjust and malicious.

Most alarming is the frequency with which violence presents in almost every trans *lifeworld*. Violent family rejection and eviction from home, leading to homelessness. Violence by others, arranged by family members, to pursue and harass, persecute and punish children who are trans. Physical violence and beatings are commonplace. And brutal sexual violence is visited routinely with impunity and with no consequence on, particularly, trans women at every stage of life – from schooling to adulthood.

Often, reporting these violations does little more than attract further attention and scrutiny, leading to further persecution.

What are we
LEARNING?



MICHAEL* is a transman, who is now 35 years old.

As early as Primary School, Michael liked the way boys dressed, and liked playing games with boys. He realised he was different from other girls but did not understand what that meant. Later in High School, he began feeling attracted to girls. He thought he was a lesbian. As he grew older, Michael realised he felt different in even deeper ways.

He was not a girl attracted to girls. He did not feel like a girl at all.

MICHAEL was expelled from so many schools, because he was found kissing other girls. After his third expulsion, his father placed him in a school where his uncle was the Headmaster and he could be closely monitored. In this way, he managed to complete his A-levels without further incidents.

During his second year at University, Michael was outed to his father. He got very disappointed and angry, saying that he had produced a daughter, not a son. He threatened Michael: if he would not change his ways, his father would no longer pay his fees. And he followed through on his threat. Michael did not change, and his father stopped paying for his tuition. To this day, it remains a painful, emotional regret. Michael was never able to find money to pay for his final year of university. Now he feels he has missed his opportunity in life.

But life carried on, and Michael continued to embrace his identity as a transman. He would wear dresses to special events like weddings or funerals, until that too stopped completely and dressed only like a man. The community began to talk, accusing Michael of corrupting other women in the community. Michael's mother – who always had hopes for his future and had initially been a bit more accepting of him – could not handle it. She felt shamed and humiliated, threatening to commit suicide if Michael did not change.

Michael begged his mother not to commit suicide and promised to change. But, he could not and – after some time – decided to come out to his mother. She was not happy at all, and their relationship has never been the same. She blames Michael for her high blood pressure, claiming he has caused the disease by disclosing to her. And she continues to threaten to kill herself someday, because he refuses to reform.

Life is a struggle. Michael has a small kiosk where he sells household items and some refreshments to support himself. He also stocks handmade sandals, beads, bags and Vaseline he was trained to make when he joined a local trans organisation. But people refuse to buy them, saying those products have demons in them, because they have been made by homosexuals; using them will lead to possession and becoming a homosexual.

Finding a place to live is also a challenge. When renting, he is usually asked to pay a higher price. Landlords tell him that no one else will rent to people like him. Laughing, he tells us: *"White people have to pay mzungu price. I pay trans price."*

At one time, Michael stayed at a place where he had a good relationship with the landlord, until neighbours started talking about him. They asked the landlord how he could allow someone like him – a homosexual – to stay at his place. And the landlord began to view Michael differently, increasing the rent he was asked to pay for his room even though other tenants' rents stayed the same.

One late night, Michael was stopped by a large group of police who, for no valid reason, arrested him – even though he told them he was coming from work – and bundled him into the police truck. At the police station, they debated whether to hold him in the cells with men or those with women, eventually concluding that – since he behaves like a man – he should be in the cell with the other men. Michael protested and threatened to sue them in the morning if they knowingly placed a biological female in a cell with men. Eventually, after interrogating him about his gender expression and behaviour, they relented and put him in the cell with other women. The ordeal continued the next day: processing his arrest, the police made up many stories about him; they expected a bribe and, when he refused to pay it – saying he had committed no crime – they put him in prison to await trial. Three times, he appeared in court; each time his files were missing and he was referred back to prison. Human Rights lawyers were unsuccessful to change the situation. Desperate, Michael's mother phoned his sister, who is married to the driver of a magistrate of another district. She begged him to intervene, to talk to his superior about the case. And fortunately, he did. After three weeks in prison, Michael was released within two days, without charges. Police told him he was only the beginning. He was to be an example to the others, who they would be coming for soon.

Michael – who has participated in LILO – has come to understand that his feelings are normal, and many others also have such feelings. Each person is created special.

"People say that God created us in His image. If He created a woman, that woman is also in His image. So even people like me, who are a little bit of both, are also in His image. Being transgender is like a pregnancy. There comes a time when you can no longer hide it. I wish that my fellow trans people will embrace their gender identity and gender expression. To be proud of who they are, but also to be respectful and responsible within their communities, because that will add respect to you in return."



The “LGBT” acronym is problematic in the way it homogenizes all sexual and gender minorities; in the way it presumes the relational connections, commonalities and accountability that characterise “community”; and in the way it conflates sexual orientation and gender identity by locating trans issues alongside gay, lesbian and bisexual issues.

Being trans leads to isolation on many levels. Trans people, often separated from family and their geographic community, may also experience isolation from other sexual and gender minority groups for a variety of reasons.

Trans realities and gender identities may be poorly understood by cisgender men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women who continue to see trans women as effeminate homosexual men, and trans men as butch lesbians. This limited understanding of the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity leads to judgement, stigma and marginalisation.

At other times, the visibility of some trans people may risk drawing unwanted public attention to gatherings, events and activities of LGBT people, presenting a perceived – if not actual – threat to safety and security. There is a projected and anticipatory anxiety and fear of associating too closely with trans people, in case this carries risk for unwanted exposure.

As one LFI teammate – a lesbian woman – later reflected:

“Talking to these trans brothers and sisters was mind-opening for me as a lesbian in Uganda. I realised that we are all marginalised as LGBT people, but the trans people have bigger marginalisation, bigger stigma. It is more difficult for them to be integrated into daily life like a gay man or a lesbian woman. They are at the extreme. A trans person has to work much harder to be at the level I’ve got to. I’ve learned that I knew nothing about the struggles of trans people; I was one of the people who told a transman to just go to the doctor and that it would be okay to just tell them he is a woman for those few hours, instead of feeling that he had to go there as his full self; as a man just to prove a point. Because it will ensure that he gets his treatment without issues. But it is because I see the inside of the health sector, I did not know the inside of a trans person’s heart.”

TRANSPHOBIA

is common within

the sector of

LGBT people



What are we
LEARNING?

“ We have realised that not many trans people attend the LILO workshops, so **their voices are not strongly represented** in our data.

Often, **we fear inviting trans people** because of the drama they cause; their visibility is a security threat to the workshop. We therefore only invite those we feel safe with, those who can adjust to the social norms; and it is very strange when LILO tells them to be who they are, but **we ask them to change who they are** to be able to attend, and others do not benefit from LILO because of this security threat they may pose.”

- local Ugandan LILO workshop facilitator

MM* is a transman.

Born in a female body, he started developing feelings for women. His parents, seeing these developments, wanted him to get married as soon as possible. As Muslims they traditionally arrange marriage for their daughters at a young age – 14 or 15 years old – although this was not allowed according to Ugandan laws. As soon as MM was old enough, however, his father insisted it was time he got married. MM refused and ran away.

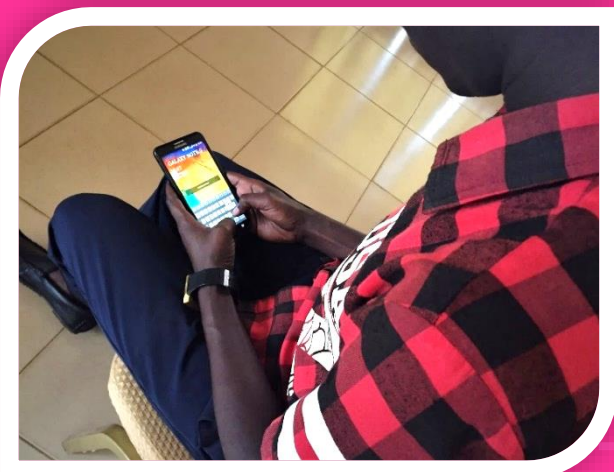
He went to Kampala and stayed with his sister, until she discovered that he liked girls and would not let him stay with her anymore. He went to Jinja where he stayed with his second sister, a doctor, for some time.

MM's mother loved him so, so much. She begged his father to leave their daughter alone, so she would feel free to come back home. After a while, MM came home. But it was not long before his father insisted:

"My daughter, you are not a man, you are a woman. You should get married. We Muslims, we marry you in Sharia law."

Once again, MM refused, and was again chased away from home.

MM was dating a girl called Alice* whose family was well off. Alice's father was a prominent businessman, a politician, and a mobiliser for the ruling government. When he discovered MM and Alice were in a relationship, he chased Alice away from home. MM and Alice moved in together and stayed as a couple, making a living from a small bar MM started from some little money he had been saving.



All the while, MM would go home when his father was not there to see his mother. He visited his sisters in Kampala and Jinja, to show them the girl he loves. One sister accepted this, but others were not accepting at all.

MM stayed with Alice for some time, but there was constant pressure from her father. He

asked Alice to stop operating the bar, since they were Muslim. He asked Alice to stop staying with MM, who was not a man, but a woman. Despite this pressure, MM and Alice kept their relationship. But things did not stay that way.

MM's father fell sick and was transferred to Kampala for treatment. Knowing how sick he was, MM's mother spoke strongly to his father:

"Don't die without blessing my daughter. You have cursed her that she is not a man but is a woman. But you give a blessing to our daughter before you pass on."

MM's father summoned him to Kampala, and he arrived with Alice alongside him, only to have his father say:

"My daughter, my son, I have forgiven you. But me, I am sick. I don't know whether I will be cured, or whether I'll die. But you go back home and stay with your mum."

Soon, MM's father passed away. MM felt he had to go back home to care for his mom. And his relationship with Alice began to fall apart.

Now, at home, MM is accepted in the family even though he is a transman. He buys everything needed in the home, like his father did when he was alive. He is liked because he is very hard-working, and he can provide the family with bread. They look to him as a son in the home, because he is providing for them.

To this day, MM loves his religion and participates in the faith. When he goes to Mosque, he wears the hijab, the traditional dress code for Muslim women. During fasting, he dresses like a woman, because he does not want to make enemies during the holy month of Ramadan.

He wishes parents would be more accepting of their children:

"Let the parents know their children, what they want, and then leave them to be. Because this is inside-born. They will not change. If you are a lesbian, you will remain a lesbian. If you are a gay man, you will remain a gay man. If you are a transman, you will stay a transman. If you are a transwoman you will be a transwoman. No one can be forced to be a transwoman unless they are born with this feeling inside."

**not their real names*



In this society, one matters if one is A MAN.



Trans identities in Mbale throw into sharp relief the presence and influence of patriarchy in Ugandan society, as they trouble, challenge and confront traditional and conventional constructs of gender; how gender is experienced and expressed by individuals; what it means to be masculine or feminine.

The disturbance is unsurprising in a society that so intrinsically and explicitly emphasises the centrality and supremacy of men – in power, in authority, in value – and institutionalises that dominance, structurally and socially. By contrast to men, women are subordinate; much of their value lies in their relationship and utility to men and society: as instruments of pleasure; as reproductive partners; as caregivers to family and household.

The *lifeworlds* of trans people in and around Mbale are coloured by twin axes of oppression that have their roots in patriarchy: heteronormativity (where birth-assigned, biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and gender roles are aligned and arranged according to two distinct, opposite and complementary genders) and genderism (including the way that gender is considered a binary conventionally linked to sex assigned at birth, and the societal and cultural belief that one gender is superior to another). And from these axes branch others: *transphobia* and – as illustrated in the experiences of too many trans people with violence – *transmisogyny*, a disdain and hatred towards, particularly, trans women.

From experiences shared in Mbale, it might be inferred that:

Relatively speaking, it is more socially acceptable to be a trans man than it is to be a trans woman.

In those cases where individuals have been able to live relatively peacefully and successfully as trans men, the traditional gendered expectations are applied to them by family: to fulfil the role a man plays in the family and in society, and to take up the responsibility to provide for the family.

It is not uncommon for trans men, in particular, to adopt the same ‘masculine pathologies’ that are prevalent in mainstream society, as they reinforce their maleness: aggression; dominance; lesser regard for women and trans women; violence; intimate partner abuse. These reflect their inherited and internalised construct of what it means to be a man.

Often it is not about your sexual orientation, but about **how you present yourself** which brings you in trouble. It is worse that you carry a bag of powder and creams and Vaseline when you are **perceived to be a man** than who you sleep with. They just assume that you are gay, but it is because of **how you present yourself**. In Ugandan culture **a man behaves a certain way** and if you don't they come with excuses for it: blaming it on homosexuality is easier, because it is something they believe we copy from the West, but understanding that **someone is born differently, they cannot** do that.

- Trans man; Mbale LFI teammate

NIELSON* was born in a female body, but started realising something different about him when he was in Primary 6. Nielson always preferred to be in the boys' games when they played games at school for boys and girls.

His parents did not think anything bad because of this. They thought this was innocent, and were okay about it, even when he started wearing shorts instead of dresses and enjoying socialising with boys instead of girls.

In high school, Nielson began to feel attracted to the female students who were his friends, and not to boys like the other girls were. He was confused, not knowing what he was feeling until, at sixteen years old, he felt a physical attraction to a girl. He could not really explain the feelings he had – nothing sexual happened between them – but he knew that it felt good and right. And, at the same time, wrong. He hid those feelings; he had been taught that such feelings were *haram* and evil.

Nielson's father became more and more concerned. He often asked NIELSON why he behaved like a boy, why he moved and walked like a boy. And although his father thought it was behaviour Nielson would eventually outgrow, Nielson's dislike of his female body only grew stronger, along with his conviction that he was a man.

Nielson's family is prominent in Mbale. It was not long before the community started to talk and gossip that this 'daughter' was a man around town, who loved women – even the wives of other men. Nielson got attacked by the community living around his home. They gathered outside his house shouting that his homosexuality was spoiling the community. It felt that the entire neighbourhood was ganging up on him. And, when the local chairman of that area rejected his plea for support and assistance – saying he could not help homosexuals – Nielson knew it was time to leave home. Believing strongly that his own father organised the community attack with the hope that it might change him – make him the girl his father wanted him to be – home was no longer a safe place for him to stay.

Nielson came to Mbale town where he lived with friends, and joined a local organisation for lesbian women and trans people. Surrounded by fellow trans men, he felt appreciated as a person for the first time in his life. He felt at home. But his father persisted. He investigated where Nielson lived and what he did. He sent *boda boda* drivers to attack him at his new home. The drivers beat him badly, and planned to rape him to remind him that he is a woman. Somehow, Nielson escaped and sought treatment at a hospital, although he did not report exactly what happened.

Nielson's friends had been there for him during these difficult times, and he was very grateful. But, after some time, these friends became tired that they had to provide for him when he had nothing to offer in return. He was dependent on them. He had no job. He could not contribute financially. The time came when they sent him away.

Nielson tried to create a life for himself in Kampala with the help of a friend. He applied for several jobs, but was always dismissed at interviews since his documents stated he was a female; Nielson did

not conform to the employers' view of a woman. The person who applied for the job was not the person they saw in front of them. And when he applied for jobs that advertised for a man, he was also denied.

Nielson's gender expression made him unemployable. Unable to support himself financially he was forced to go back home. Home was the worst place for him to be, but he did not see any other options. He would humble himself, go back to the drawing board, listen to his parents. He would change for them in exchange for a roof over his head and food on his plate.

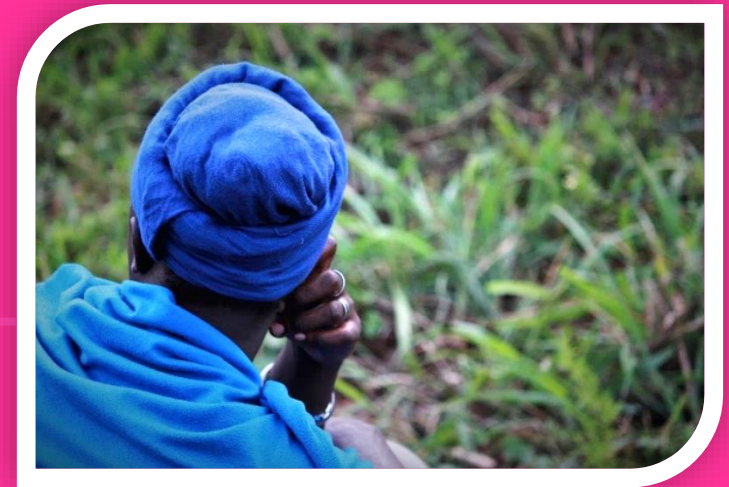
Being home meant following his father's rules. Nielson's father wanted to put the woman back into him, to reform him. He demanded that Nielson dress and behave like a woman, following all the traditional, cultural and religious norms for women. He told Nielson he was a lost person who had a demon inside him. He got Nielson's old job back, but required him to be dressed in a hijab like a true Muslim woman. He instructed Nielson's employers not to pay him his salary unless he reformed so that he would not use his money to rent accommodation elsewhere and go back to his old ways. He came to the workplace to check up on Nielson, that he had not changed clothes, that he was behaving appropriately. He restricted Nielson's interaction with friends, requiring that he be home by 18h00 like a responsible Muslim woman.

Nielson's father is not alone. Nielson's brother – a police officer – agrees. Since coming back home, Nielson's brother has affirmed him, proud that 'she' is a very beautiful woman, encouraging 'her' to make her breasts more visible.

Through all this, Nielson has been true to his promise to himself: he humbled himself and followed his fathers' guidelines. He wore the hijab; he dressed in long skirts. With no other options, he put his gender identity aside. That choice is taking its toll. Nielson is struggling every day, living a double life in order to see his friends – and to dress like the man he is around them – although his interactions with these friends is controlled and restricted, so that it becomes less and less.

He cannot find a way out. His father's influence makes it difficult for Nielson to rent, to work, to build his own life.

"I feel like I am bleeding every day. Like a lab rat, tested and monitored for improvements. I wish I could be able to sustain myself, to be able to start a life of my own. My life is worse than suicide. Trans people need to become independent. Being dependent on others – especially family – gives them control. That is the reason trans people are not free to be who they are. I wish that parents would carry their responsibility of being a parent to their child no matter what. Parents need to understand that certain decisions are not theirs to make. Children should not have to beg their parents to be their children."



*not his real name

Religion is not innocent; much of the blame for the systematic marginalisation and victimisation of sexual and gender minorities in Uganda can be laid at its door. Religion has been confidently wielded as a weapon to demonise sexual and gender minorities, to fuel fear and hate, and to justify injustice as the exercise of pious moral authority.

Many trans people contend with constant religion-based rhetoric and narrative about sexual and gender minorities at both societal level and, with greater personal impact, at home and family level.

Faith, however – perhaps surprisingly, given its role in their persecution – remains a deeply personal and meaningful facet of the *lifeworlds* of many trans people. It forms part of their complex, intricate individual and social identities. Many reference faith and practice – prayer, worship, scripture, singing – as sources of hope and strength, however they might be restricted or excluded from those communities. For many, a simple faith provides them with an explanation for how they are uniquely created, and a comforting affirmation that they are loved by a Creator.

Experiences shared in Mbale show that it is more difficult to live as a trans person and as a practicing person of faith. Being trans makes religious life difficult, especially authentic participation in the community of faith. And being a person of faith – in the way that conventional religion describes, defines and defends gender and gender roles – adds yet another layer of complexity for individuals trying to reconcile their identities.

Faith practice in many religious settings is gender-coded. Practically, there are traditional expectations about dress codes for worship that limit the freedom of trans people. Transmen, for instance, are likely expected to wear a dress if they want to go to Church.

RELIGION
has significant
personal and
social impact
for trans people
of faith.





R. V. stands very still and does not keep eye contact as he speaks to us, focussing instead on two elderly tourists swimming in the pool of the hotel where he has chosen to meet us.

He speaks slowly, as he introduces himself: 'I am known by the names of R. V. Mbale is my home and I am a member of Hope Mbale. I am a proud trans man.' He smiles and looks at M*, another trans man in the team; they shake hands and laugh.

R.V. talks about what makes him proud.

'You know, I am me. I am not hiding. I used to hide too much. I denied myself and I was very unhappy, but I no longer hide. I am who I am, and I am right that way. I am not a sin, I am no mistake. That's why I am a proud trans man.'

His gaze shifts inward as he pauses to reflect before speaking again. 'Trust me, it was not an easy journey to get to this point.'

R. V. currently has no job, although he is a trained nurse. He had to leave his job because he refused to wear the uniforms required for female nurses.

'When I studied I did not mind. That was also the time when I was not yet sure of my own feelings. But I always hated the uniforms, especially because of my big legs, which were freely shown. I thought that after I have my degree, I will just put on the uniforms for male nurses. But those hospitals here do not allow it. I tried, and I could not get permission.'

He laughs when we ask him what reasons were given for why he was not allowed to wear a different uniform.

'As if they ever give you explanations. That's just it, you know. Our culture here in Uganda tells us that women have to wear dresses. If you argue against that, they just laugh at you and say you are crazy. Even in private hospitals. Unless I open my own hospital where I can make the rules for the dress code, I have to just go with it.'

R.V. is extremely sad that he no longer works as a nurse.

'I really loved that job. I loved caring for people who really needed help. Getting them the relief they needed. Supporting them. It filled me with warmth. I knew I was important in this world.'

As he looks off into the distance, his concern shifts from the personal to the system, and how much Uganda needs LGBT+ friendly health staff.

'There is too much discrimination in our hospitals, especially the public hospitals and clinics. And true, I should have stayed and helped change this. But I could not handle all that discrimination and pressure I felt. At least I still get to help a bit. I still nurse my kuchu [queer] friends when they get beaten or when they have other issues and do not want to go to the health facilities, because they fear their reaction. It makes me proud that I can still do that.'

R. V. wishes for his future that he can go back to his nursing job.

'I wish I could educate the health facility staff on trans issues and on LGBT+ issues in general. I wish they could listen to me and others like us, who have studied medicine or nursing. We can also teach them something and use the medical approach. I think then someone like me would also again feel welcome in the hospital and we could give the right services to our kuchu community.'



Trans people who make a POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION to their families EARN RESPECT

irrespective of their gender identity.



What are we
LEARNING?

Trans people are stigmatized and marginalized, an experience that is broad and general within society. Mbale experiences, however, suggest that if trans individuals are making a positive contribution in their families or in their communities – usually earning an income and providing for the material needs of their families – they will be respected, irrespective of their gender identity. They demonstrate worth and value and, whilst this might be instrumentalist and utilitarian, it also offsets physical and psychological abuse.

As an LFI teammate recalls:

“In Mbale, P -- a trans woman – spoke about her struggle before she came out as a transwoman, and the pressure she felt to stay closeted. But she felt convicted within herself: how could she say she was a certain identity that she knew she was not? Was she going to hide? Or would she be herself within her community, irrespective of what the community thinks? She made the choice and came out as a trans woman. Despite this disclosure, she was forced to marry a woman, and they now have three children. But it’s working for them; she has an arrangement with the wife. But she also has a job. And a house. She owns her own house, not renting. And as long as she provides for the family, she is okay.”*

The LFI has repeatedly emphasised the importance of context, and the uniqueness of *lifeworlds* in particular environments that are complex and intricate. What does this dynamic – that stigma and intolerance might be exchanged for social benefit – suggest about the nature of society in these settings?

It may well be that, in a neo-liberal advanced capitalist context (such as Western industrialised nations), interdependency is not a social value. Self-autonomy and individuality and independence are the social values. Not reliance on others. Not an ethic of care. These values, however, may be highly prized and regarded in societies that are not neo-liberal, such as Mbale in Uganda. The prevailing social norms and values of that society surely impact on the social norms and values and interaction with sexual and gender minorities.

Through a particular lens, where “LGBT” issues are human rights and social justice political issues, social requirements on sexual and gender minorities to be married and have children – for instance – seem inconceivably unjust. Interestingly, however, a consideration of the lifeworlds of this place – where a community value of care an inter-reliance may frame social interactions – that practice may well constitute a positive contribution that is valued in society, and accords people greater regard and respect.

ESTHER* walks very calmly, as she approaches our table. She holds our hand for a long time as she introduces herself individually to each of us. When she sits down, she holds her bag closely to her chest. She smiles.

Esther is a 24-year old trans woman. She has never denied her feminine side.

'My family accepts me the way I am. But we don't really talk about it.'

Esther was always very good in school, which earned her the respect of her mother. She loved reading her books and she loved sports, but only the games usually "...like netball. Oh, and Blada* [a rubber-band jumping game]. I was so good at Blada."

Esther was most comfortable around girls. They talked about clothes and hair products and boys. She smiles behind her hand.

"Once a group of Kenyan boys blocked me in the dormitory. They asked me if I was a Kuchu [LGBT person]. I did not know what that meant, so I said no. But they said that I must be one of them the way I walk and because of my manners. But I didn't know. I was not yet aware of myself. When I grew older, other older students often groped my hips. I did not like it, but I didn't know what to do. I did not want to get in trouble."

Esther never reported the incidents to her school.

ESTHER went on to study Information Systems and has recently graduated.

"I loved university. I was very comfortable. I started to understand myself and I met other people like me. I felt very good. But I also understood that you have to be careful. Not everybody can understand what a transwoman is. Or even a gay. I think I was very careful and I did not have too many problems. Mostly people only comment on my soft voice. Then they ask if I am a man or a woman. Even my

professor told me that. When I presented my project and all the professors were sitting there, he interrupted me and said: 'Hey you, speak like a man!' I felt bad and embarrassed in front of all my professors. He continued mocking me and imitating my voice. I said that this is my voice and if they will reduce my marks because of my voice it is okay, but at least they should listen to the content of my project and mark that one."

Esther graduated and is very proud of herself, both for graduating, but also for speaking up. She smiles and sits tall in her chair.

"It felt good."

"Life as a transwoman is not easy. Most people wonder if you are a man or a woman. I am used to it. I know who I am. Let them wonder. But sometimes trans people really get problems. They are beaten and raped. For me I was very lucky."

She talks about her family. Her father left home when she was still young. She has a good relationship with her mother. They do the chores and talk and laugh together: *'She loves me. And I love her.'*

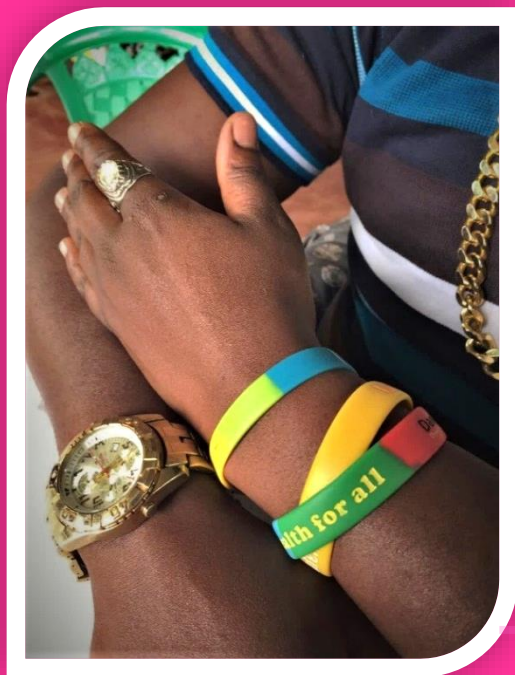
Esther talks about being harassed.

"I attended a sexual health workshop for LGBT+ people, which was raided by the police. They entered during tea break. They came through all entrances, so no one could escape. I heard that many people were outside. They shouted that they also wanted to see the gays. I saw them peeping through the window. One was my neighbour. She must have told my mother because she asked me to stop attending those workshops. But she still allowed me to stay at home. She still loves me. Even after someone found my Facebook page. That's how I really got outed. It had so many pictures of naked men and things like that. My mother asked if it was me or if someone just used my name. I could have denied it. But I told her the truth and told her it was my page. I could see she was disappointed. She again asked me to stop, but she never threw me out of the home. She never treated me any different."

ESTHER wishes that her fellow trans women do not suppress their feminine side.

"Be proud of who you are. Proud, yes; but control it within our society. People will get used to you slowly. I always thought that I am not a good ambassador to our trans community and I looked at the outspoken trans women instead. But they all had so many problems. They get beaten, arrested, chased from home. I learned from LILO that my way is a good way. And for sure it works here in our Ugandan society."

not her real name



It's about being a **part of community**,
it is about being yourself; **show that you are a member**;
don't think that you are special, don't force people to understand you,
but when they see that you are a good person they will accept you;

*My mum was like that – after LILO I went to talk to her; I wanted her to understand me
and I explained so many things, but in an aggressive way;
I forced her to accept me as her son;
she is not educated, and she is a very believing Muslim;
she cursed me and hated me; she even hid food from me so that I did not eat;*

*After some time where we had the worst relationship
I realised that I cannot force her; **I just did my part** in the family;
I washed clothes when they needed washing, she did not ask, I did it,
because it needed to be done; **I helped out**;
I stayed home in the evening just to spend time;
that's when we started having a good relationship;
she saw me as her child again; not the trans son I wanted her to see me as,
but her child; and even now she sometimes calls me the wrong pronoun and then
corrects herself; that shows me that she has now accepted me; that's what I mean; be
you, don't try and stick out, because we all stick out, trans or not trans, we are all special,
being trans does not make us more special* ;

HR has arrived early and orders a soft drink while she busies herself with her phone. After a short call, she is ready, and we begin our conversation.

HR is a Mugisu trans woman, who has lived in many different districts in Uganda. She realised she was different from other boys when she was in P6.

"Mostly I liked to play with girls, but I never wanted more with them. Other boys started relationships, even if it was not anything sexual. But not me. Even my mother asked me when I will find a girlfriend. I just laughed at her. But in P7 I was in boarding school. I found several boys liked me. We played sex, but not penetrative. We experimented with each other and it felt so nice."

HR did a lot of research in internet cafés to learn more about her feelings. She went back almost daily to continue reading the various articles and personal stories.

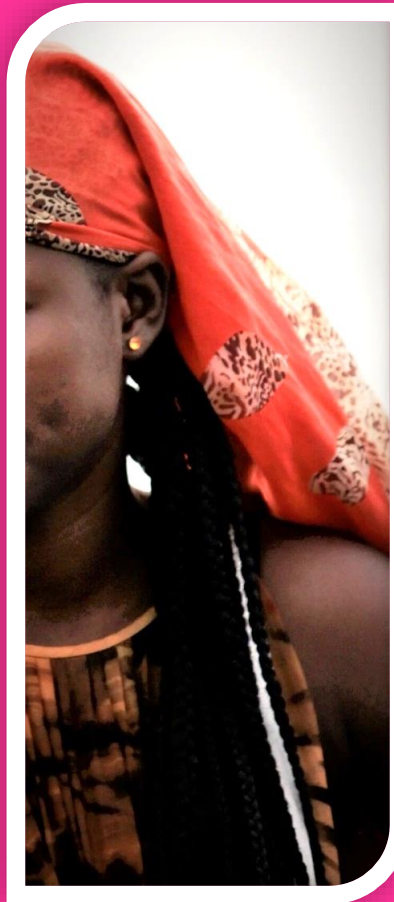
'It felt like reading my own story. Like someone just opened my heart and wrote its content down. I found this page called PenPal and wrote down all the e-mail addresses from Uganda and Kenya. I did not know what an e-mail was. I asked the owner of the internet café to help me to open an e-mail account. And then I started writing to all of them. I even got some responses. That's how I started to meet people who are just like me.'

When HR was in Senior 1, she met a boy she really liked. One evening they decided to sneak out at night to have sex near the washrooms, which was a distance from the dormitory. They were caught by a staff member, who alerted other staff. HR and her boyfriend were locked in a room for the entire night. They were released the next morning when their parents had arrived. The Headmaster told her mother what had happened the night before.

'He said we are a curse to the school; we are Illuminati.'

HR's mother slapped her hard in front of the school's administrative staff.

"She never said a word to me. She just walked away. I followed her. She stopped two bodas and pointed to me to get on one. They took us to the taxi park. She paid the conductor and even supervised the departure. All she told me was that when I reach Mbale, I should take the taxi to my father's village. She gave me 10.000 Shilling. That was it. No other words. No



goodbye. But she also never told them the reason why she sent me. She just said we quarrelled."

HR stayed at her ancestral home for some time, but never managed to settle in. *"They said I am just like my grandfather. He was a known gay. He had two wives in Uganda, but had moved to Germany, where he was married to a man. The community said that the children are not his, because a gay cannot produce children. They pointed fingers at me and said I am like that. I am cursed, I am possessed, Illuminati. I was not very happy, so I decided to go to Kenya to seek asylum."*

She managed to get into the system of the US Embassy and was in the process of filling in the required forms. At that time, her mother called and told her to come back, because her aunt, who lived in the UK was willing to help her to go to school in the UK. HR was very excited. She decided to leave Kenya. When she reached her mother's place, her aunt had changed her mind. Instead, she had found her a school in Turkey. HR was still happy. In Turkey, HR rented a small room where other international students rented. She quickly befriended some Nigerians, who asked her if she knew what homosexuals are.

"I played dumb. I did not know what they wanted, so I played dumb. They told me they would take me out and show me. I said I did not know what they mean, but really, I could not wait for it to be night so that we could go. When we went, they took me to this street. There was a woman standing. They said it was a man. I could not believe my own eyes. She was so beautiful. She had no beard and beautiful breasts and long hair. She was a woman. They told me to go and talk to her, so that I can hear a voice. I went to her to say hello and it was true: her voice was so deep. I ran."

HR laughs. She imitates the voice again and we all laugh with her. *"I tell you. These people really were something. I felt so good. I even found myself a boyfriend. He was from Angola. He spoiled me like his queen and I loved it. Then all of a sudden, my aunt called and said that she refuses to continue paying my school fees. She said that the landlady I rented from had told her that I am always together with some Nigerians, who are selling drugs. I was heartbroken and cried for a week. But I had nothing to do. I had to come back to Uganda."*

HR used to work in a motel at the bar. *"But you know, the Kuchus [LGBT people] used this as their meeting place. Every time someone would come and ask for me. Then another one. Always asking for me. My colleagues were suspicious, you know, because some of them looked funny. Men wearing make-up, women wearing man's trousers. I started to get too many problems with my colleagues. They asked me if I was Illuminati. When I said I wasn't, they asked why I am friends with people who are part of Illuminati. Even though my boss liked me, I could not handle the pressure. I q*

Currently her boyfriend supports her. Since she came back to Uganda, HR has not been back at school.

"I would love to become a lawyer. A human rights lawyer. I want to show our government officials, our health workers, our local leaders that trans people exist. I want them to see me. I want them to know how I am as a person, to show them I am just a normal person. So they can understand trans people and stop with their Illuminati nonsense."



‘...people emphasise their SOGIE,
but they forget to **use their productive day productively** and then they shout that they are not accepted or appreciated;
but why should we appreciate you if you do nothing?
This also goes for non-LGBT+ people;
they also have to **show something they can be appreciated for**;
we can appreciate you for you,
because you are a good person, but after some time appreciation stops when it is one sided;
I also need you to **appreciate me by contributing**:
if I house you and feed you, I can expect that at least you cook for us or mop the floor;
that is universal, gay or heterosexual, trans or cisgender.’

- Trans woman, Mbale LFI teammate

At seventeen, Zee* has self-identified as a transman. Previously he thought he was a lesbian, but now he has come to really hate his female body. He hated his breasts; he hated his hips. He hated to be vibed by guys. It made him very uncomfortable; he felt disgusted by it.

It was only through talking with a friend of his – also a transman – that Zee began to recognise his own feelings, to put into words how he was a man trapped in a woman’s body. His attraction to women also made more sense to him. He is not a lesbian; he is actually heterosexual, because he is a man. This thought comforted him.

Zee decided to disclose his gender identity to his mother. They were very good friends and he wanted to share this with her. Unfortunately, his mother was not accepting. Instead, she was so deeply disappointed in Zee. She changed her attitude towards him and the friendship they had between them died. As if it was never there to begin with. Once, when his mother was very sick, Zee took care of her and bathed her; but now, his mother did not even want to accept a glass of water from him.

Zee’s mother said demons had possessed her child. She blamed some of her relatives that her child had been bewitched. She no longer introduces him to visitors, saying she has four children, instead of five.

Zee feels very left out. At home, no one in the family takes him seriously and they no longer like associating with him. He is saddened that his mother no longer counts him amongst her children. He has lost his best friend and it pains him deeply.

He doesn’t only feel sad. He feels guilty that he has disappointed his mother. He has even tried to change, but the feelings just do not go away. He feels helpless and he wishes there would be something he could do to make his mother love him again, like she used to, because he really misses that.

Zee has finished school and obtained a diploma in Marketing. He does some work with Airtel Uganda and, on the side, sells craft items he was trained to make in order to earn money and support himself.

He wishes the broader LGB+ community would accept trans people more. He also wishes that the parents of trans people would hear them out first, before cutting them off from everything; to give their children a chance to explain how they feel. To talk about it.

“I sometimes regret that I opened up to my mother.”

He does not wish others to have to go through the same things.

“By the time someone comes out as an LGBTI, that person has had many considerations. We do not come out for them to condemn us, but because we want to be accepted in our own sense, just as we also accept everybody else. An LGBTI person faces the same struggles as everybody else, but then even faces more struggles because of their SOGIE. So, if the Ugandan people think that life is not simple, LGBT+ life is even twice as hard.

Now if someone comes out, they are not pretending. They are actually squeezed to the wall and do not see any other option. If they had a choice, they would pretend to be a heterosexual and cis-gendered person, but they cannot. And it is not their wish that they are like that, but they find themselves in bodies that they do not acknowledge and that they do not appreciate.

The world sees us as abnormal, they think we have a problem, we are sick. Let them see us as disabled if they want to, but just as they make the world easier for the blind and the lame, why do they block an LGBT+ person? If they see us as disabled, let them also create provision which would make life easier for us, because we are already struggling with ourselves.”

**not his real name*



COMING TO VOICE

What are we learning that has relevance for promoting the voice of the marginalized in the world?

1. No one is voiceless.

Everyone has something to say, something worthwhile, some truth of their own – from the power of their own experience – that has meaning and value. Everyone has a personal story, and a narrative that reflects how they perceive the world, and how they experience the world. Story is voice, and in that personal narrative lies power.

2. Marginalisation does not remove voice.

Nor does it extinguish it. Instead, through the exercise of power and privilege, marginalisation excludes people from spaces and opportunities where that voice can be recognised and expressed and appreciated. Extreme marginalisation – resulting through persecution and violence or threats to safety – suppresses voice, but it does not remove it. No one is voiceless.

3. People are the experts of their own lives.

Each person lives their lives within a rich tapestry of personal experience and perception that interfaces with a sophisticated, complex, intricate social, cultural and traditional environment. Communities are not homogenous and, in order to do good work amongst those who are marginalised – whose voices are often suppressed – it is valuable and necessary to tune into their personal *lifeworlds*, to find their voice and story, to understand how life works in that space.

4. The human spirit is resilient.

Despite environments where power and privilege work to silence voice, to erase story – to suppress – people on the margins do not quickly give in to despair, as if they have abandoned all hope. Even in harsh conditions, people are capable of a remarkable optimism – hopefulness, vision, yearning and believing for a future better than what they are presently experiencing – that sustains them in life.

5. Coming to voice may be more significant and powerful than expressing voice.

In a human rights sector driven towards a particular kind of strategic activism and advocacy, where communities are mobilised and power is confronted, there are steps – *stages* – before people in marginalised communities can speak truth to power.

Before people can *express voice* to respond to their external environment, there is a process through which they must *come to voice*; to construct their own narrative to themselves about themselves within their internal environment. To be both author and reader of their personal story. To become conscious – aware – of their *lifeworld* and the forces and factors within and without that act to limit, control, suppress or exclude

Learning how to think and speak *about* power may be a significant step before raising voice to speak *to* power. Coming to voice within is a prerequisite to expressing voice and may include making choices for oneself to not engage that external environment.

6. Coming to voice – a process of development and maturation in people, especially those who are marginalised – can be actively supported through a number of processes and practices:

- PERSONALISATION
doing the internal psychological, emotional and cognitive work of looking in, looking back, looking out, looking forward; identifying the *lifeworld* and the environment in which it is located.

- PARTICIPATION
opportunities for people to legitimately and authentically engage in processes and with material that is about them, that belongs to them, that affects them, and to speak to that material – to interpret it, to give it meaning.
- ACCOMPANIMENT
in suppressive environments especially, people sustain their will and energy and confidence for movement and response when they are consistently, intimately, appropriately companioned by supportive “others” who believe in and affirm their human capacity to make their own responses in their own time and commit in some way to walking alongside in solidarity.
- FACILITATION
a way of working with individuals and communities defined by “enablement” rather than “intervention”; not unlike the ethics of counselling, facilitation seeks to stimulate and support the unveiling of strengths in people and communities to make a response in their own lives, instead of prescribing or providing solutions, assuming people are unable or deficient.

7. Organisations may need to adapt their own ways of thinking and working, to consciously dismantle their own power that inadvertently marginalises those with lesser power.

If people are the subjects of their own response – with the energy and ability to choose a way of being in life and in the world, that is good for them at the time; if they are the protagonists, the lead actors, in their own story – and, if coming to voice within is a fundamental stage towards expressing voice without, then such beliefs, values and principles have important implications for organisations that wish to support and programme with communities to unveil, promote and amplify the voice of those who are marginalised:

- a. to facilitate, protect, defend, promote spaces for authentic and legitimate participation by communities.
- b. to respect the capability, insight, intuition and sensitivity of local communities to say what things mean, and to make choices about direction; to lead.
- c. that respecting the leadership of communities does not mean organisations abdicate or abandon communities. Accompaniment means participation – to

learn, to appreciate, to acknowledge, to support, to encourage, to celebrate – in the space where one does not lead.

- d. to support the inner work of personalisation within individuals and collectives where coming to voice is a healthy foundation for movement.
- e. to design programme in a way that is sensitive and considered of the local realities of people and places – their *lifeworlds* -- and to do so with communities so as not to presume or usurp local knowledge and expertise; or to implement activities that compromise the privacy, dignity or safety of people at the margins.
- f. to facilitate, rather than intervene.

'Mukwano, ogambaki?' Iggy* and the two transmen in our small three-person team greet each other like loved family members, or long-lost friends. They hug and hold hands and talk quietly in Luganda. They smile a lot. Rich, who is known to Iggy, introduces him to us. It is obvious they both like each other, and there is respect between them.

Iggy is a 21-year old transman from the slopes of Mount Elgon in Mbale. He offers to take us: *"One day, I'll take you to my village. It is very beautiful."*

His smile disappears. He looks down at his hands. When he speaks again, he does not look at us. *"I have not been back home in a while. It is not safe for me there. They don't want me. They have never wanted me."*

He looks up and laughs. Iggy's parents divorced when he was still very young. Tossed between his mother and his father, from home to home, he never felt that he belonged anywhere. Most times he stayed with his mother, but they quarrelled a lot because he did not fit her expectations. When he was 15 years old, his mother chased him away. He laughs again, looking up to Mt. Elgon.

"She did not want to see me anymore. I went to my father's home, but it was even worse. I felt like I constantly sat on a hot stone. I was never comfortable. I could never relax. I did not belong in my own father's home, my blood. But I found my real family, my kuchus [LGBT people] here in Mbale. They love me, even when I mess up. They are real to me."



Rich found Iggy when he was only fifteen years old, alone, sleeping in the streets of Mbale town. He had not eaten for some time.

"Yes, I slept hungry for one month. When I came to Mbale I didn't know anybody. It was my first time to come here, but I learned how to hustle. I met Rich here and Mr. Masaba. I knew I was hard working, so I asked for a job with Mr. Masaba. I was lucky, because he gave me a job. And they even paid my school fees up to Senior 5. I promised myself that I would never disappoint them. They have shown me love my family has never shown me."

IGGY found a job at Africell, a Ugandan telecommunications company, and loved it. The

management appreciated his hard work and did not mind his dress code or gender expression. His colleagues liked him.

He recalls only very few incidents where people would talk about him or point fingers. Usually he knew how to handle it, by talking to them and inviting them for a drink after work. During a visit to another branch in Tororo, however, he was attacked by a colleague working there. The colleague asked if Iggy was a boy or a girl, which Iggy dismissed by saying the colleague could choose for himself. He then started abusing IGGY and punched him so hard that he was unconscious.

"The colleague I was visiting that branch with demanded that I file a case of assault, but I was fine, so I just let it go. I was too afraid of witchcraft."

Three weeks prior to our meeting with him, the management changed. Iggy was fired because of his dress code.

"The new manager asked if I am a boy or a girl. He said he cannot have someone like me working there because I will curse the business and customers will disappear. No one wants to buy from someone like me."

When a colleague he was close to tried to defend him, highlighting how hardworking he is and how good he is with the customers, the manager said she was also 'one of them' and dismissed her too. Now Iggy is unemployed. He is trying to look for a job, but most managers look at him and quickly decide he does not fit into the business.

Iggy has not seen his family since he left at fifteen.

"My family called me about three months ago to come and visit. They wanted to talk. I was so happy. I went to the village. When I reached there I could not see anyone; they were not around. I went to grandmum's place. I saw many sticks on the wall of the house. They were branches from the tree, which they had prepared. Grandmum came out and told me to quickly run. She told me that they had prepared the branches to beat me. They wanted to beat me to death. She told me to take a path through the fields, because it was a shortcut to the road which would take me to Mbale. I ran, but that's when they came. My uncle, my father and also others. They had been hiding. I ran so fast, but they followed me. When I looked back at them, I fell down. Even though I was in pain, I just continued running. I was lucky, because when I reached that road, I found a boda and I just jumped on. They managed to beat me with the sticks on my back, but the boda was already driving. I really cried so much. How can they do that? But it is okay. I did not choose that family. They chose me. Now they don't want me. But I have my Mbale Kuchu family. I chose them and they also chose me. We love each other. That's my real family. I'm very okay. I want my fellow transmen to know that if you are true to yourself and know yourself and work hard and respect your family, you are very comfortable. You can handle every challenge. You will be fine. I am fine."

*not his real name



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