

***Creating ourselves
in our own image***



**Photos and texts by
young lesbians in Namibia**

Women's Leadership Centre

About the Women's Leadership Centre

The Women's Leadership Centre (WLC) is a feminist organisation based in Windhoek, Namibia. We envision a society in which all women actively engage in shaping the politics, practices and values of both public and private spaces.

The WLC facilitates the voice, visibility and leadership of Namibian women, in particular women from marginalised groups, through research, education and training, advocacy, writing, photography and the publishing of critical feminist texts which we distribute within our society.

In our current programmes we work with San young women from seven indigenous communities in Namibia as well as communities in South Africa and Botswana; lesbian young women from across Namibia; and young women living under customary law and exposed to violence and HIV/Aids through harmful cultural practices in Zambezi Region, north-eastern Namibia.

Contact details

Women's Leadership Centre
PO Box 90675 • Windhoek, Namibia
Tel: 264 61 227828 • 081 309 4630
Email: info@wlc-namibia.org
Website: www.wlc-namibia.org

Acknowledgments

This publication was compiled and edited by Elizabeth /Khaxas and Liz Frank.

We acknowledge and warmly thank all the young lesbians who contributed their texts and images to this book. The writers and photographers are: Anthea, Ashanté, AuLau, Bianca, Damarah, Delz, Ellen, Eugenie, Florence, Khay-Em, Irene, JayD, Joanna, Judy, Melody, Merlin, Olli, Renadia, Ruusa, Saxalo, Shakoo, Tangi, Tangeni and Toshi. Elizabeth and Liz also contributed text and images to the book. Individual photographers have not been credited as most of the images were taken with shared cameras, making it impossible to identify who took which image.

We thank Amy Schoeman, Haiko Bruns and Bryony van der Merwe for their input into the design and layout.

We are also grateful to the Goethe Centre in Windhoek for providing us with the space to perform the poetry and exhibit the photos included in this book.

© WLC 2014

ISBN 978-99916-845-5-0

We thank the following donors who have supported our Building Lesbian Feminist Leadership Programme and made this publication possible:



We thank the US Embassy, Windhoek, for supporting this programme and funding this book through a PEPFAR grant.





Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the courageous young lesbians who have participated in the activities of the Women's Leadership Centre over the past years, and have contributed their knowledge, experience, insight and passion to make this book possible.

They have followed in the footsteps of the great lesbian poet Audre Lorde, confronting their greatest fears and embarking on the transformation of silence into language and action. Beyond this they have used photography to create themselves in their own image.



Contents

Foreword by Advocate John Walters, Ombudsman	5
Introduction by Elizabeth /Khaxas, Director of the WLC	6
Photographs and texts	8 - 51
Reflections on the achievements of this project	52 - 55
What participants said about the project	56 - 57
Other publications by the Women's Leadership Centre	58 - 59

Foreword

This publication is evidence of the courage, creativity and pride of young lesbian women in Namibia. They have come together under the guidance of the Women's Leadership Centre to strengthen their voice, visibility and resilience, creating themselves in their own image as a form of resistance to the intolerance, exclusion, discrimination, stigmatisation, hate speech and violence they experience in their everyday lives.

The notion of gender identity can be defined as the inner sense that all human beings have of themselves in terms of gender. Traditionally, only two gender identities were thought possible - woman and man, the only ones recognised by most states even today and which shape the gender reference normally adopted by various human rights instruments. However, there is a need to acknowledge the existence of a wide variety of possible genders. There is also a need to recognise sexual diversity and the right of individuals to have sexual and loving relationships with persons of their choice.

The essence of human rights is the recognition of the dignity and equality of every human being without discrimination. Every person, by sole virtue of being a human being, possesses certain rights whose enjoyment no-one can impede, and which all states are obliged to guarantee.

I wish to call upon all Namibians for a spirit of social tolerance, a greater understanding of inclusiveness and acceptance, and to refrain from violating the rights of fellow Namibians based on sexual and gender diversity. Inclusiveness draws on the notion of equality which is enshrined in our Constitution.

The photographs and texts in this book speak for themselves – expressing the joy, sisterhood, creativity and resilience of young lesbian women from our various communities in Namibia. I invite the broader Namibian public to engage with these powerful images and texts, and to reach out in affirming and supportive ways to our lesbian daughters, sisters, neighbours, friends and members of our church congregations.

The Office of the Ombudsman will continue to be actively engaged in minority rights issues, and I warmly thank the Women's Leadership Centre for the privilege of becoming a part of this project.



JOHN R. WALTERS
OMBUDSMAN

Advocate John Walters
Ombudsman: Namibia

Introduction

The images and texts in this photo book were co-created with young lesbian women who have participated in the Building Feminist Lesbian Leadership Programme of the Women's Leadership Centre. During 2013, this programme aimed to strengthen the resilience of young lesbians through the use of creative forms of expression. We brought together young lesbians from across Namibia to deepen their self-knowledge and self-awareness, build their leadership, and strengthen their resilience and resistance for the prevention of stigma and discrimination, violence as well as HIV and Aids in their own lives and the lives of their peers.

We understand 'resilience' as the capacity to move on from adversity strengthened and more resourceful, and 'resistance' as the capacity to change an adverse situation for better. All people develop resilience through struggles and resist in many different ways when faced with violence and oppression.

The lives of young lesbians are negotiated under various forms of oppression in the different cultures of our society, which expose them to multiple forms of violence and damage their self-esteem and identity. This diminishes the voice of young lesbians, as citizens, as artists and storytellers, thereby excluding them from participating in co-creating the dreams, visions and hopes of this country. The project therefore used creative forms of expression including writing, dance and photography as tools for building self-knowledge, voice and visibility.

The focus of our project was on strengthening the feminist consciousness of young lesbian women, their capacity to recognise their particular oppression as well as their power and agency to individually and collectively change their situation for better by making strategic choices, taking action, speaking their mind, creating their own images of themselves, and by speaking and writing themselves into existence. It built their capacity and agency to protect themselves from all forms of violence, discrimination, HIV and Aids.

The project educated young lesbians on their human rights and developed a feminist critical analysis of the patriarchal ideologies and structures in our society that underlie homophobia, discrimination and social exclusion of people with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. It created a space for building the next generation of feminist lesbian leaders in Namibia.

During this project, we also collaboratively developed two educational booklets: *Being Ourselves! Being Resilient!* - A guide to well-being for young lesbians in Namibia, and *Loving and supporting our lesbian daughters - A guide for parents, families and friends of young lesbians in Namibia*. We further developed and launched the photography exhibition: *Creating ourselves in our own image*, which forms the basis for this photo book. Reflections on the achievements of this project are included at the end of this book.



The images and texts in this photo book demonstrate our understandings of feminisms which are grounded in our everyday life experiences and insights. They express our organisation's vision of creating a strong feminist legacy for young lesbians in Namibia. As stated in the opening poem:

*We yearned for you / Longed for you / Now / Freedom is here
The future is here / Embraced in your eyes / Tasted in your words / Captured in your images*

Feminism is the struggle for our lives, for our very existence, which we take up through finding our voice, becoming visible, naming ourselves, claiming our space and our rights.

Despite the scars of violence and discrimination on our bodies and our minds, these pages make visible the joy of being together, learning together, helping each other to heal, playing, dancing and climbing mountains together, embracing and carrying each other, singing our freedom songs and performing our poetry.

Feminism as the practice of solidarity, collective resilience and resistance is demonstrated in our coming together to transform ourselves into powerful activist citizens and transforming the world around us into a nurturing place that respects the dignity and rights of every human being.

Elizabeth /Khaxas
Director, Women's Leadership Centre

The future manifests in you!

Elizabeth |Khaxas

With which words
shall we welcome you
precious daughters of this land?

With which words
shall we welcome you
daughters of courage?

We yearned for you...
Longed for you...
Now
Freedom is here!
The future is here!
Embraced in your eyes
Tasted in your words
Captured in your images

Welcome to this space
lovingly prepared
with ideas for you
to call into existence
our world of love and dignity

The future manifests in you!





Daughters of Courage

Unapologetic *Feminist*

Radical lesbian feminist

Florence F |Khaxas

If an assertive, outspoken
flirtatious personality makes
a womyn butch
then i am a butch

If choosing not to wear a bra or makeup
trading my heels for funky blue sneakers
to match the shorts i bought in the men's section
makes me a butch
then i am butch

If wearing my body hugging short black number
smoky eyes, blood-red lips makes me a femme
then i am femme

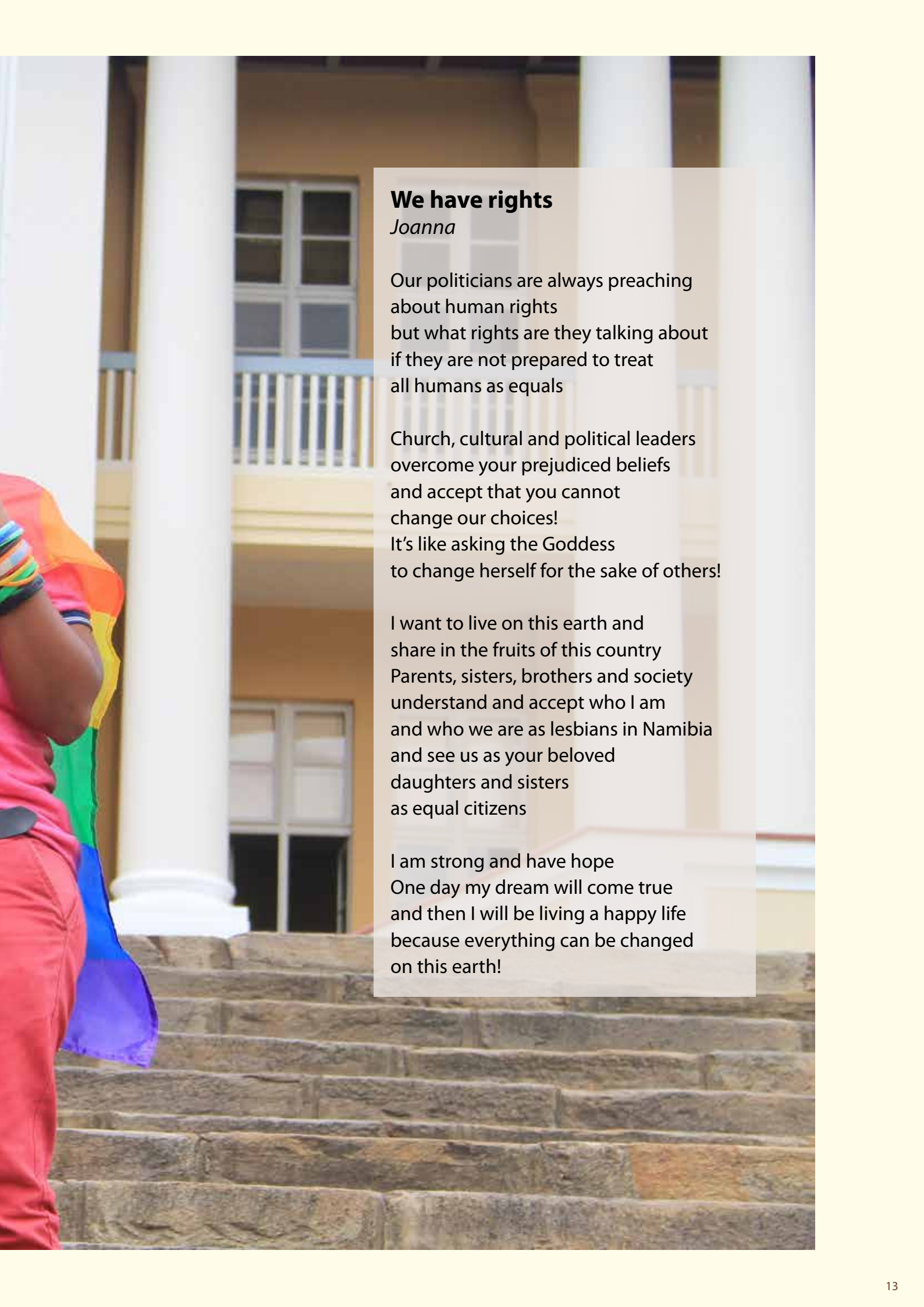
If going for what makes me comfy
happy, content, unique
intelligent, a leader
means that i'm stepping outside
my female gender stereotype
then i will gladly wear
the pants in my life

I am a free spirited womyn
liberating my soul from whatever
oppresses and limits me
If that makes me a
radical feminist then hallo....
i am a radical feminist!





*We are
Citizens*

A person wearing a vibrant rainbow flag shirt is standing on a set of wide, stone steps. In the background, a building with large white columns and a balcony is visible. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an outdoor setting.

We have rights

Joanna

Our politicians are always preaching
about human rights
but what rights are they talking about
if they are not prepared to treat
all humans as equals

Church, cultural and political leaders
overcome your prejudiced beliefs
and accept that you cannot
change our choices!
It's like asking the Goddess
to change herself for the sake of others!

I want to live on this earth and
share in the fruits of this country
Parents, sisters, brothers and society
understand and accept who I am
and who we are as lesbians in Namibia
and see us as your beloved
daughters and sisters
as equal citizens

I am strong and have hope
One day my dream will come true
and then I will be living a happy life
because everything can be changed
on this earth!

Embracing *our Love*

I treasure her

Anthea

The room is dark, only
illuminated by moonlight

She starts to undress me, touching me
Stroking my body so tenderly
Caressing me

She makes love to me
like it is
her first time

Every touch
Every stroke
Every kiss

I will treasure for life!



Coming out in the Desert!

It's my choice!

Ruusa

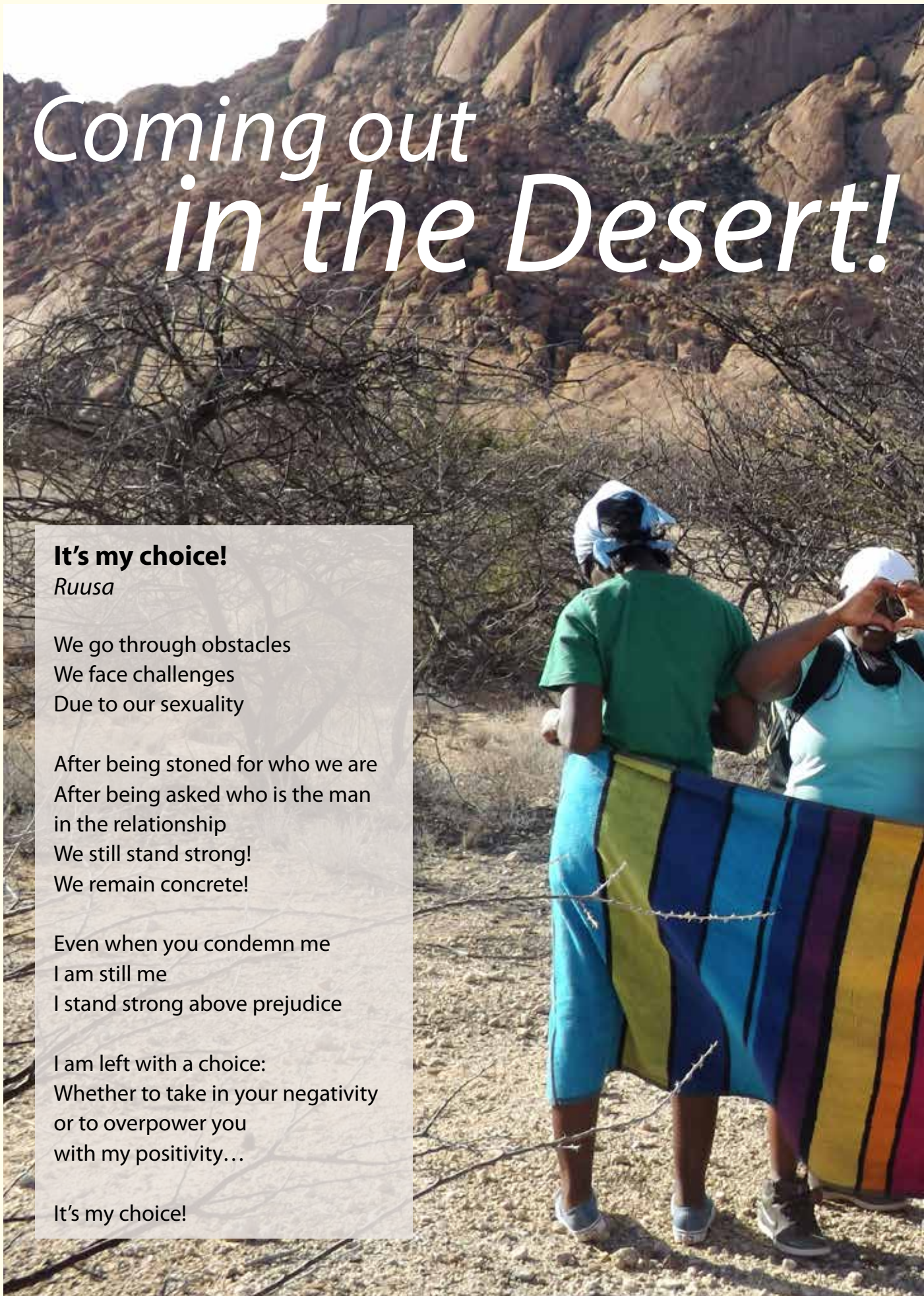
We go through obstacles
We face challenges
Due to our sexuality

After being stoned for who we are
After being asked who is the man
in the relationship
We still stand strong!
We remain concrete!

Even when you condemn me
I am still me
I stand strong above prejudice

I am left with a choice:
Whether to take in your negativity
or to overpower you
with my positivity...

It's my choice!





Trapped

Ashanté Garises

It's dark - I can't see
There's no window, no door
Just a four walled room
I can't breathe, suffocating
No oxygen - I can't breathe

I am trapped, held captive
Tied up, my mouth is taped shut
I can't help myself
I can't escape

Trapped by my own mind
Trapped by my own fears
Trapped in the closet
By my own self

Until
I choose freedom



Breaking Free

how to me
there 4 me
enough to hear me

She's free

Ashanté Garises

She sings, she soars, she flies
She is free

She glides, she swifts, she's majestic
spreading her wings far across her body
singing her beautiful song
calling out far beyond the horizon

She is amazing, unique
Fragile and powerful
She is
She is free

Naming Ourselves





The power within

Shakoo

I AM A LESBIAN

Whether by birth or by choice
is not what is important
I don't have to explain myself
I don't have to give you a
single or a million reasons
for being who I am

I AM A LESBIAN

and it is enough for me
to say it

I have the right to be happy
To please myself, not society

I AM HAPPY AS A LESBIAN
and well-pleased with my life

Dear 'normal' person
who has appointed you
to be judge over
my life?

We broke the norm

Tangi

We embraced our masculinity
raked, scored, fixed

Our femininity still intact
cooked, smiled, cleaned

Both boy and girl
Wo/man

Not defined by what society
expected

But with courage and pride
Living the truth of our being!





Living
our Truths

Healing Circle

Sisterhood

Damarah Haraseb

Between the press of my finger
and the flash of the camera
beautiful pictures are captured
our legacy lives on

Merged to a circle
of sisterhood
we dance in silence
to a song composed by
resilience born through love

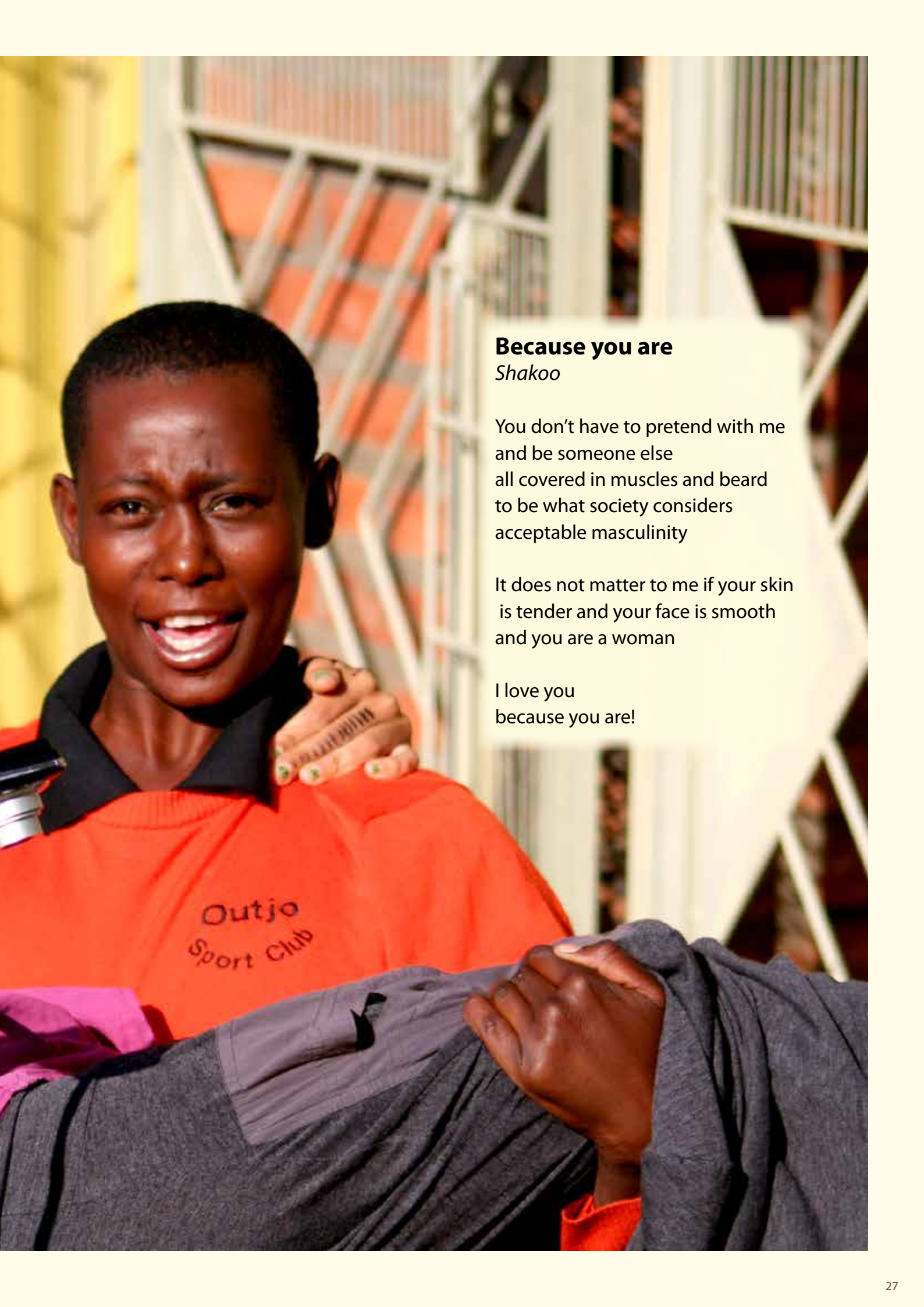
We the survivors
of hatred and violence
find healing
through our sisters





Enjoying
Our-Selves





Because you are
Shakoo

You don't have to pretend with me
and be someone else
all covered in muscles and beard
to be what society considers
acceptable masculinity

It does not matter to me if your skin
is tender and your face is smooth
and you are a woman

I love you
because you are!

Outjo
Sport Club

Songs for the Struggle





Outspoken

Renadia April

It's more than just an idea
It's the beginning of a revolution
Young hearts standing together
for change
Speaking through the language
they know best
The arts
Outspoken

It's more than just an idea
It's the beginning of a culture
building solidarity and unity
Outspoken

It's a platform for ideas
A space for expression
free from judgement
open for everyone
Outspoken

It's a tool for motivation
inspiration and self-healing
for sharing and affirmation
Outspoken

It's a space for feminist
critical thinkers
Outspoken

Dream
Dance







*Holding
you*



Ever loved a woman?

Eugeny van Rooi

Ever known a woman say
your name so sweetly?
Ever seen eyes that clear
ever kissed lips so warm?

Ever loved a woman
whose joy rivals the sun?
Ever loved a woman with
arms of steel
and the heart of a child?

Ever loved a woman
whose silence
filled the ocean
and whose laughter
expanded the heavens?

Ever loved a woman in
a violent conservative society?
Ever loved a woman
with no discrimination?

Ever loved a woman as
only a woman does?

Ever loved a woman?

Resilience





Letter to my rapist

Ashanté Garises

It's been nine months
I haven't forgotten yet
I still despise you
In time I will learn
not to feel anything for you

I still remember everything
you did to me
Every word you said to me
Your scent
The scars you left on me
are a constant reminder
of the pain you put me through

I want to forget you...so badly
I want to forget you exist!
But unfortunately you are a part
of my life that I might never forget...

The days when you made me feel
sick, violated, unsafe, worthless
will pass!

You will not ruin my life and
I hope for your sake that I
Forgive you!

I choose you

Khay-Em

I don't remember
when I started playing soccer
soccer my soul food!
Freedom in action!
My male identity forever...

He coached me in soccer
accepted me
as one of them
a man!

Until that fateful day
when he raped me
and my life changed
from being a man to
becoming a mother...

I never wanted to be there
but
I choose you
the cup of my life
my son!

I choose to SPEAK

Irene //Garoes

There is a lie that acts like a virus
within the minds of humanity
claiming that some people
are more human than others
and those who dare to be different
should not be allowed to talk, walk
write, live, breathe
or even to exist

So I ask you, is that it?
Should we just stand aside and watch?
Hoping that our silence will protect our thoughts
while the whole meaning of Africa
unity, peace and love
is being snatched away from us?

I say the time to act is now
Now while we still can walk freely in the streets
Now while we have that freedom of speech
Now while there is still that liberty

So today
I choose to BE OUTSPOKEN

For every lesbian who has been murdered
For every lesbian who has been gang raped
family raped, raped raped raped
in the name of 'correcting' her
I choose to STAND

*But I can't do this on my own
so what is your choice today?
For a hatred-free, love-abundant world
Today - what is your choice?*



Taking a stand



Being the Captain

Childhood games

Khay-Em

Running around in a skirt
playing *amagus*
with my girl friends
full of laughter
strength and happiness

But as darkness approached
and it was time for
hide and seek
I only had one partner
and we were always
found the last!

I had lots of freedom
After school
I had to play soccer!

At the age of 14
I crushed on a
beautiful young woman

All the eyes of the boys
were on her
but I was the captain!







I Adore **You**

Unapologetic love

Florence F | Khaxas

Politically incorrect you say
Un-African you say
Satanic you say
Yet my heart beats
to the shape of her image

Your mission has failed!
My heart is deeply rooted
strong and resilient
meeting her at the
centre of my being

Lesbian Goddess

Rising

Ashanté Garises

As they tease, ridicule
and discriminate against me
the child in me hides

But then I rise
I stand tall
comforting the child inside me
protecting her from
their ridicule, discrimination and scorn

And that's when the goddess
rises inside me
She gives me the strength
and courage to speak
She gives me the power
to be me
to be free

This child inside me
is the goddess
that is me!





Wedding Day

My dreams

Ellen Muriame

I just want to be happy
I want to be myself
I want to marry the woman I love

I know it's a hard struggle
but if we stand together
we can do it
we will get what we want

I want to be one of the
Namibian lesbian people
who makes a difference
in the journey
we are going through

I want my family to accept me
I want to go to church freely
with my wife and daughter
by my side

Those are my dreams
I'm not asking too much!



Aiming to win



*We claim our space, play hard
and win*

Unconditional **Love**

Daddy, I am your mannetjie vrou

Khay-Em

Daddy, you are my role model
I have always been proud
to have you as a father
I have always wanted to be
your *mannetjie vrou!*

Remember that day when
I caught my first fish
and we talked about how people
are diverse, just like the fish...
all adapting in different ways to
the change of tides
yet all living in the same ocean

You bought me my first bicycle
a blue BMX
and I rode head-high
into the blue sky
without you having to show me
what to do!

You are the reason
I can do anything with my two hands
You told me
Never give up!
Never give in!

And so I hold my head high
and walk this life
as a *mannetjie vrou!*



Accepting my daughter

Conny

I love my daughter so much
but it took me a long time to accept
that she is a lesbian.

I blamed myself for not having been a good mother.
I was afraid of what might happen to her.
There was so much hate in the community
stirred up by some of our church leaders and politicians.

Eventually I realised that I can't change her.
I opened my heart and embraced my daughter
as the strong young lesbian she is.

Across the sky

Damarah Haraseb

It is I who chooses my journey
I have cut myself loose from your norms
Resilience is the vase that holds me
As I grow
Stretching myself across the sky
A product of divine creativity
Spreading the colours
Of the rainbow



Creating
Rainbows



Reflections on the achievements of this project

With this project the Women's Leadership Centre sought to strengthen the resilience and resistance of young lesbians in Namibia so that they are better able to overcome stigma and discrimination, protect themselves from violence as well as HIV and Aids, and claim their rightful place as equal citizens of our country.

We focused on building resilience through strengthening feminist critical consciousness; identity and pride; voice and self-esteem; and connectedness with others. Here we share our collective reflections on the processes and achievements of this project.

Building resilience through strengthened feminist critical consciousness

Understanding and expressing our oppression: Through learning our human rights, and specifically our sexual rights, and exploring the various forms and structures of power from feminist perspectives, we strengthened our capacity to recognise our oppression as young lesbians as well as our power and agency to prevent violence and HIV. In interviews, discussions, story-telling, writing, dance and photography we began to unpack and express the many forms and multiple layers of discrimination and homophobia in our lives.

We recognised that the humiliation, marginalisation and oppression experienced by young lesbians is not unique to each one of us but is created through the system of patriarchy which entrenches heteronormativity as a means for men to own and control women.

In Namibia, as young lesbians we experience discrimination on the basis of being women (gender), homophobia on the basis of being lesbians (sexual orientation) as well as discrimination on the basis of being young and poor (age and class). Those of us living with HIV experience yet another layer of discrimination and stigma.

Making the personal political: We have been called names; we have been targets of hate and hate speech including from our political leaders and communities; we have been disowned by our families, beaten up and chased out of our homes; we have been raped and molested in our homes and on our streets; we have been teased and bullied in our schools and dropped out as a result; we have been humiliated, condemned and made outcasts in our churches; and many of us are poor and unemployed because we lack education, because we look butch, or because we are fired when we come out at our work places.

There is a constant pressure on young lesbians to conform to the cultural perceptions of 'good' girlhood and womanhood in terms of our bodies, behaviour, dress code, relationships and leisure activities. Some of us have been forced into heterosexual marriages. Some of us have been in relationships with men to hide our lesbian sexual orientation and to please our families.

Many of our families still hope that we will marry a man one day. Some of us have experienced beatings and 'corrective' rape to 'cure' us from lesbianism.

Because of our sexual orientation and gender identity, lesbians have been constructed as not having rights, for example the right to health and well-being. We have been excluded from information on sexuality education, safer sex messages and supportive health facilities,

undermining our ability to protect ourselves and our partners from HIV infection. It was only through this project that many of us learnt about the need for lesbians to practise safer sex and the methods that we can use, as well as the need to conduct regular pap smear tests to prevent cervical cancer.

Overcoming internalised homophobia: Homophobic prejudice and hate can result in feelings of confusion, shame, isolation, disconnectedness and not belonging. This makes us struggle to accept ourselves and our identity as lesbians, and to become visible in a society that sets heterosexuality as the norm.

Internalised homophobia happens when we believe the negative messages and stereotypes of others about ourselves as lesbians. Low self-esteem, a loss of self-worth and pride in our lesbian identity is a key theme that ran through our discussions and stories in the workshops. These can be manifested through self-destructive behaviour such as drinking, smoking, doing drugs, sleeping around without protection, and other forms of self-harm.

Violence breeds violence, including in our lesbian relationships. Experiences of violence and discrimination can lead to the loss of a sense of safety, security and personhood, resulting in silencing, anger, anxiety, losing confidence in our own abilities - including our ability to make responsible healthy choices, to speak and act to protect ourselves.

Yet the stories of our oppression are simultaneously also the stories of our resilience and resistance. The project activities encouraged us to recognise our power and agency in all our struggles. In exploring our oppression as young lesbians we were no longer victims but intellectuals and knowledge producers who collectively contemplated on our experiences of culture, violence and poverty, including the patriarchal oppression of lesbians, and how they impact on our vulnerability to violence and HIV and Aids.

Building resilience through strengthened voice and self-esteem

Creation of safe spaces: This project provided spaces in which we were able to feel safe, experience trust, confidentially, and start and renew friendships. In these safe spaces we could be ourselves as young lesbians, learn, share and express ourselves freely, speak for ourselves and claim our space.

Developing our creative voice: We were given opportunities to learn and deepen artistic and creative skills: we engaged in story-telling, writing, photography and expressive dance. Some of us improved on the existing skills we had. For many of us it was the first time that we had ever written a poem or personal story, held a camera in our hands or danced with the purpose to tell our stories. We used these skills to create new ways of being writers and photographers.

Solving problems in creative ways: A painful issue for many of us was how our mothers have treated us with rejection, criticism and humiliation. Through discussion and reflection we realised that our mothers are also suffering from the effects of patriarchy and homophobia, afraid of being judged for not raising an obedient heterosexual daughter and future wife. So our mothers try to make us conform through treating us badly! Some of us are now writing stories from the perspectives of our mothers, and starting to build a different relationship with our mothers. Creativity thus encouraged us to solve problems in new and surprising ways!



Building resilience through connectedness and solidarity

Through coming together in this project we have been able to connect with each other at deeper, more personal as well as political levels and create sisterhood. We have disclosed life experiences that we never expected to share with others, supported each other in releasing painful emotions and shared in healing processes through creativity and spirituality.

There was also a lot of joy in completing and sharing a poem or a story, a lot of laughter in experimenting and performing our dances. When we danced we were relaxed and focused, full of energy and joy, and for a while we danced away our troubles. Through our stories we were able to laugh at ourselves and see the humour in our lives, for example when relating stories of how we got into trouble for holding onto our masculine identities in hospital, prison and church environments.

Celebrating self and solidarity: Breaking through with new ideas and new practices in the wider society requires arenas for deliberation and public discourse. We held public cultural events that created visibility for the work of the Women’s Leadership Centre and showcased our voices as young lesbian poets, photographers, musicians and activists. These events boosted our pride and self-esteem and made our capacities visible.

Building resilience through strengthened identity and pride

All our project activities strengthened our sexual orientation and gender identities as a source of creativity, pride and celebration. Our identities are shaped by the account of our lives, found in our stories. In other words, we create who we are through the stories we tell

about our lives. The following are the protective factors that are strengthening our identities as young lesbians.

We are bearers of human rights! Knowledge of our human rights helps us to understand that we are individually and collectively responsible for claiming our rights, and that the Namibian state has the responsibility to protect our right to freedom from torture and degrading treatment, as well as our rights to education, to health, to well-being and happiness.

Knowing our sexual rights and practising safer sex! We shared our knowledge and experiences with safer sex practices as lesbians and encouraged each other to take more responsibility for our sexual and reproductive health and well-being, as well as the health and well-being of our partners and peers. At the same time we recognised the many socio-cultural factors that create barriers for lesbian sexual and reproductive health and well-being, which require resilience and resistance to overcome. We know that poverty forces young lesbians into transactional sex, that homophobia forces us into heterosexual sex, and that we are raped, all of which increase our risk of becoming infected with HIV and Aids. We know now that we have to take our own protection seriously through the use of condoms, dental dams, finger cots and plastic wrap! We shared information on which lesbian-friendly health facilities we can visit in Windhoek and other towns at which LGBT people are working. We advised each other on going for regular health checks and screenings for breast cancer and cervical cancer, even if we identify as butch or masculine/male.

Loving ourselves, self-acceptance and coming out: Creativity opened us up – we could come out to ourselves and others in writing, in dancing, in our images as well as our public performances. Our positive expression of our identity created self-acceptance and pride. Through creative activities we are healing ourselves from internalised homophobia and strengthening our capacity to protect ourselves from violence and HIV and Aids.

Naming ourselves: We discussed and rejected the names we are called by others: devil, Satan, man hater. We said that we have to actively claim our lesbian identity and that there is power in naming ourselves. We named ourselves lesbians, women who are attracted to and love women. We are the ones who choose independence and pleasure on our own terms, and who do not need a man ‘to protect’ us. We said we are womyn, queer, dykes, butch, femme. We said that our identity can be fluid and that we can choose to have labels or not. We said:

I love being a woman and I love other women. I am free spirited and spread my love.

I have been lesbian since childhood. There is a small boy inside me.

Inside me there is a hard butch sister.

I called myself a political lesbian before I ever fell in love with a woman.

Some of us are lesbian men.

We are feminists!

Breaking the silence on violence, stigma and discrimination in our lives: When we write and tell our ‘herstories’, our experiences no longer remain isolated incidents shrouded in secrecy and taboos. Instead they become a record of the system of patriarchy and homophobia which rules in our society. In breaking the silence we are contributing to feminist knowledge on sexuality and sexual rights in Namibia and Africa. Through breaking the silence about our lives and facing the painful experiences and emotions that silenced us we are healing ourselves. We are standing together in our resistance against heteronormativity. We are rebellious and courageous. We give our love to other women.

What participants said about the project

Writing

When we cannot express our emotions and feelings they become trapped within us and create something close to cancer. This project has allowed the release of these destructive emotions through writing, and helped me regain my focus and desires.

Every time I write I am empowered, I grow stronger and I start developing more confidence in my writing.

Because I have written my story, I know that my history will live on. I am proud of that. Young women don't write enough and most writing is done by men. As a young woman it's still challenging to find good literature by other young women, especially lesbians.

I feel like change is here.

Through writing I found hope for tomorrow.

With the poetry skills, some friends and I started a spoken word movement called Outspoken with the aim of doing something positive as an LGBTI youth and to give back to the community.

This project has encouraged me to write, write and write, and now I can finish short stories and write poems about things I am passionate about. I also got inspired to document my stories through photography and other arts.

Building solidarity

I have grown as a person, and I learnt how to embrace others even though we are different as human beings. I also learnt that we are the same on some grounds and that we need each other and can build each other through writing, photography and being outspoken. With the support and the open space I had in the project I found the love of my life. Thanks for the sister/brotherhood support!

Our mentors in the WLC are a blessing from the goddesses of my foremothers, I will forever be grateful to have met them at this point in my life. I have grown spiritually and mentally through these workshops, and connected deeply with many of my sisters.

Gaining courage and confidence

I have gained courage and confidence. I have learnt to trust and believe in my writing. This project has helped me grow as a lesbian and feel comfortable in my own skin. I feel myself growing as a person, a lesbian and a feminist. The help and support of others just like me is a wonderful assurance of my sexuality!!!!

Making positive life choices

My life changed when I became part of the project in Swakopmund. I really enjoyed every moment we had, and I realised that I should get out of my home town because I was having a very bad time there. I also realised that I was missing out on so much.

I was in a relationship for three years. The beginning was very good but during the second year it started to be violent and aggressive, my partner was abusing me a lot. When I came to this project I learnt through the stories of others, through their poems, and I started to heal. When I came back from the workshop I decided to get out from that particular relationship and meet someone special.

Through this project I was able to reclaim the lesbian word. To love myself and look beyond my circumstances. To identify the feel of all the things that have hurt me. To face my fears and make peace with myself. To love without limitations and not to allow societal norms to break the person that I am within.

Claiming our human rights

I got to know my rights, how and when to use them to defend myself against those who oppress us.

I will not fear anything when it comes to my human-hood, because I am human just like the heterosexuals.

All my rights are protected under the Constitution of Namibia.

As long as I'm oppressed for being out and proud I don't feel I have rights.

My rights are my backbone!

I feel very strongly about my right of choice for my sexuality.

Becoming a feminist activist

This project was the door to a new life for me - it built me into a person and opened my eyes. It gave me courage, inspiration and awakened a new skill in me, which is poetry. It brought out the feminist, the activist and the humanist inside me. With the WLC encouraging us to start our own group I became part of an action group at my university that deals with sexual and reproductive health and rights, representing the LGBTI community. We travel to different campuses to do outreach.

Personally I have met young strong women who have helped me understand the struggles of our people, women who have the same aims and vision in life and who have the drive to change the world around them. More than anything this project has taken me away from the traditional way of life and introduced me to bigger and better things such as having something to fight for.

I have been very privileged to be part of this journey, I have learnt so much more in this one year than I did in my whole 12 years of schooling - things that I can personally use to inspire and empower not only myself but others too. This project helped me greatly in becoming the feminist activist that I have grown to be: I have decided to refuse to let my silence kill me slowly.

Photography

Photography was very exciting for me. It allowed me to be creative, we were coming up with ideas to show how powerful our love can be and even how we are breaking the norm. I believe photography can be a powerful tool in portraying a message.

I have realised the importance of images for political activism.

The photography sessions opened my mind. They helped me to think about where I am coming from and where I want to go – to connect with my dreams.

We made my marriage to my beautiful girlfriend a reality through the images!

It showed me that I am full of ideas and I can express them through photography.

I was able to demonstrate my masculinity and my attractiveness visually to send a message of recognition.

It empowers me to take the pictures back to my people at home, to show them how people are free to be in a lesbian group in other places in my country, so that we can come up with a strong and active group in my village in the North.

Our photo exhibition is a permanent record that will be there for the next generations and I'm very proud of it. We are visible, we are here and there is still a lot to be done.

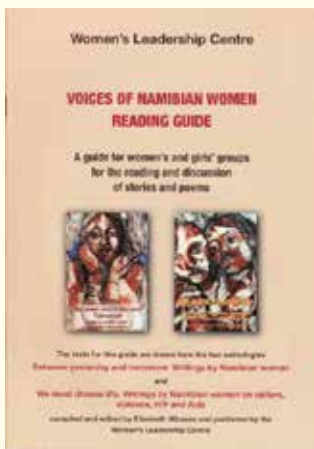
It made me realise "I am beautiful" inside out.

Other publications by the Women's Leadership Centre

Texts and photography by Namibian women



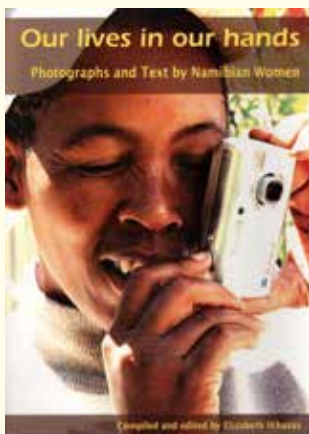
These two **anthologies** contain poetry, short stories, dramas, letters and memoirs written by women from across Namibia. In their texts, women have shared their life experiences with regard to cultural beliefs and practices that violate their human rights and expose them to all forms of violence as well as HIV and Aids. The stories and poems reveal the strength, humour and agency of the authors in facing and overcoming their many challenges, and their passion for creating better futures for their daughters and sons.



This **Reading Guide** has been designed to support teachers of English and Life Skills in using texts from the anthologies in their classrooms.

The anthologies and Reading Guide can also be used for adult education classes – for English language learning as well as discussions on women's and girls' human rights.

The Reading Guide shows how teachers and their learners can engage with the texts in terms of contextualised understanding and emotional responses. Readers are guided to relate the texts to their own life experiences, and to explore possibilities for social change in their families and communities.



The **photo book** *Our lives in our hands* was compiled from photos and texts produced by women across Namibia who are affected by HIV and Aids.

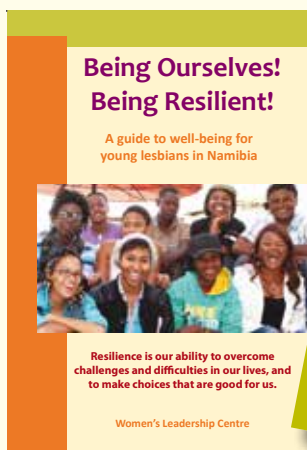
Many of the contributions are by rural women who held a camera in their hands for the first time.

Promoting women's creativity as writers and photographers helps to restore their dignity in the face of stigma and discrimination.

The book can be used by teachers of English, Life Skills and Art to promote creative expression among their learners.

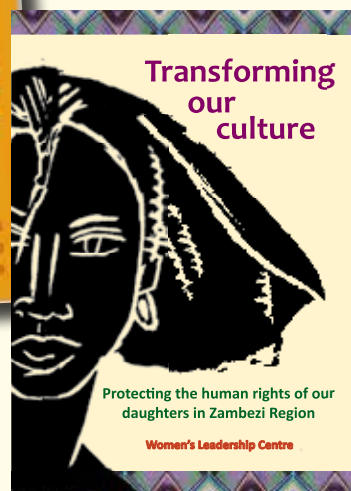
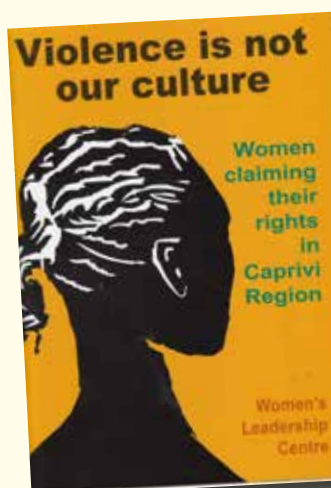
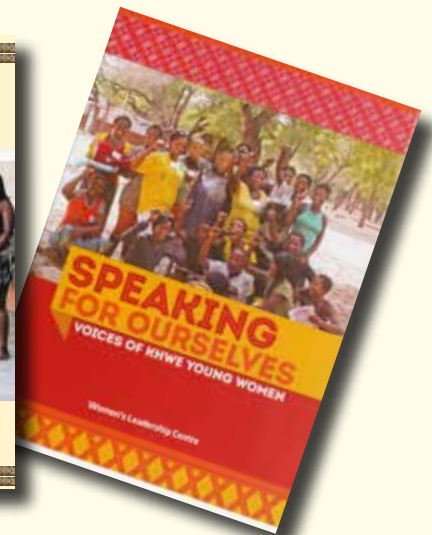
These books are available at the Book Den in Windhoek, and from the Women's Leadership Centre

Educational and advocacy booklets



These booklets were developed together with young lesbian women. **Being Ourselves! Being Resilient!** gives guidance to young women on loving themselves as lesbians, coming out, health and healing, relationships and friendships, and becoming active for social justice. **Loving and supporting our lesbian daughters!** educates parents family and friends of young lesbians on human rights, gender and sexual diversity, the impact of stigma and discrimination, and coming out as advocates for their lesbian daughters. This booklet is also available in Afrikaans and Oshiwambo.

These booklets were developed together with San young women from different communities in Namibia. One booklet deals specifically with issues of economic justice, education, access to information and media, health and violence facing Khwe young women in Omega 1, Zambezi Region. The second booklet educates San young women on their human rights/women's rights and encourages them to take up leadership in their communities to overcome their extreme marginalisation as indigenous young women in Namibia.



These booklets were developed together with adult and young women in Caprivi/Zambezi Region based on the participatory research conducted by the Women's Leadership Centre over many years. The booklets make the link between specific harmful cultural practices and the extremely high prevalence of HIV and Aids among women in this region. They call on young women, their families, communities, traditional and political leaders to stop these practices that violate the rights and are a danger to the health and well-being of young women in the region. The booklets are published in both Silozi and English.

These publications are available from the Women's Leadership Centre

