

Being Ourselves! Being Resilient!

A guide to well-being for
young lesbians in Namibia



Resilience is our ability to overcome challenges and difficulties in our lives, and to make choices that are good for us.

Women's Leadership Centre

Loving ourselves as lesbians

A lesbian is ...

a woman who is emotionally, spiritually and sexually attracted to women rather than men. She is a woman who loves other women.

Loving and accepting ourselves as lesbians is not easy in a society that stigmatises and dehumanises us. The fear and hatred of lesbian and gay people is called **homophobia**. Many of us experience homophobia through rejection by our families, bullying at school, emotional and physical violence including rape as an excuse to 'cure' us. Some of us have been forced to marry a man. Some church leaders demonise us, some traditional leaders call us 'un-African', and some political leaders incite hatred against us.

As a result we often feel isolated, alone, afraid, and depressed. We internalise the hate we experience and turn against ourselves, our sisters, our friends and our partners. We sometimes abuse alcohol or drugs, and think about suicide. We call this **internalised homophobia**.

Knowing our human rights to dignity, equality and happiness, including our **sexual rights** to choose our sexual partners and love whom we want, can help us to become strong and resilient to the challenges we face in our everyday lives.

When we love and accept ourselves 'from head to toe' as unique and precious human beings we can make choices for our lives that are good for us, that protect us from self-harm and open the path to happiness.

When we reach out and connect to others as true sisters, lovers and friends, we can share our life experiences, support one another, and work together to build a different future!

Coming out

Coming out as a lesbian to family, friends, our community, at work and in public spaces is a life-long process. Every time we come out to someone we take the risk of facing rejection and discrimination. But we can also experience acceptance, affirmation and support, and feel relieved that we are not hiding an important part of who we are anymore.

Starting our coming out journey

We should make sure that we are emotionally ready for this step, and not let ourselves be pushed into it. We should choose a trusted and supportive person to start with. This could be a close friend, a family member, teacher or school counsellor. Being able to talk with someone can strengthen our belief in ourselves and our right to make our own choices.

Building a support base

It is often particularly difficult for our parents to accept our sexual orientation: they may feel they have failed as parents and also fear discrimination from the community. So it is wise to build a support base of trusted people around us first, who can be there for us when others react negatively and reject us. Fortunately many of our parents eventually come to love and accept us as their lesbian daughters, as they learn more about human rights and sexual diversity.

Coming out can empower us

By coming out we break through our fears and come out of our isolation. We strengthen our self-esteem and self-acceptance. We connect with others and learn to stand up for our human and sexual rights, and to speak out against stigma and discrimination.

Taking good care health and

As lesbians we are excluded from public health information, and are often unaware of the need to protect ourselves from preventable diseases. Many health workers treat us in humiliating ways, denying us our right to respect and dignity. We need to find clinics and staff who are lesbian-friendly, and share this information among our networks. At the same time we need to challenge the prejudicial treatment and call for access to safer sex measures for lesbians.

Myths about lesbian sex

We need to break the myth that lesbians don't need protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV and Aids. There are many STIs common among lesbians who do not use protection, and many lesbians are living with HIV.

How to protect ourselves and our partners during sex

- We should use latex gloves (buy a box in a pharmacy) or cling wrap as a barrier to prevent vaginal fluids mixing with blood from sores on our hands or in our mouths.
- We can cut off the fingers from the gloves and use them individually on our fingers.
- We can cut open the rest of the glove, or a condom or Femidom, and place this over our partner's vulva or anus during oral sex.
- We can use water-based lubricants to prevent damage to the latex or cling wrap, but also need to make sure that sharp finger nails do not tear them.
- We need to make sure that we use a protective barrier only once, and that we also use them on sex toys that we share.
- We need to acknowledge that lesbians may also sometimes have sex with men, and make sure that we always use condoms.

of ourselves healing

Voluntary counselling and testing

Going for regular voluntary counselling and testing is also very important. We can go together with our partners and educate the counsellors on safer sex for lesbians!

Staying healthy and fit

Through regular exercise, a balanced diet, using alcohol in moderation and staying away from drugs we can keep ourselves healthy and fit, which creates a positive sense of well-being and builds our resilience in the face of life's challenges.

Screening for breast and cervical cancer

We also need to go for regular cancer screening checks, including breast exams and pap smears testing for cervical cancer. This is particularly challenging for those of us who identify as butch or masculine – but it could save our lives!

Healing ourselves

There are many ways in which we can heal ourselves mentally and emotionally from the pain of rejection, stigma and discrimination that we experience almost every day of our lives.

- We can explore and practice our creativity through music, writing, art, dance...
- We can explore our spirituality through meditation, reiki, and finding our goddess within
- We can practise hobbies that fulfil us, such as gardening or adopting a pet
- We can socialise with people who inspire and motivate us
- We can focus on achieving long-term goals for our lives.

Be safe! Always have protective measures with you!

Nurturing our relationships and friendships

Our lesbian friends can give us a warm place of belonging. With them we can be ourselves, feel comfortable and at ease. They are the ones who can stand by us through thick and thin and give us emotional support. However, there is also competition and jealousy amongst us, and we need to find friends whom we can trust, and be trustworthy ourselves. We should never use gossip or social media to expose others and break each other down.

Building loving relationships

A loving partner can be an important part of our happiness and well-being. Strong and lasting relationships are built on shared interests, respect, mutual support and equality.

Because we have grown up in a society based on inequality in relationships, where men often exercise power and control over women, we need to be aware how this affects our own relationships, especially if we are taking up butch and femme roles.

Internalised homophobia can also lead us into abusive behaviour against ourselves and our partners. We must remember that love, kindness, patience and forgiveness are the biggest gifts we can give ourselves and our partners.

We need to develop skills for resolving conflicts in constructive ways, and seek counselling and support where needed.

Becoming active for social justice

Joining with others to better understand the causes of our oppression and working together for change can be a powerful way to strengthen our resilience and give us a vision of a different future.

A first step can be to join or start a **lesbian friendship group or support group**, where we can share the stories of our lives, educate ourselves about our human rights and especially our sexual rights, understand how change happens, think about who can support us as partners and allies, build solidarity amongst ourselves in the group, and develop our critical thinking and creative voice through writing, photography, music...

In this way we can begin to **speak for ourselves, create visibility** for the needs and rights of young lesbians, and **take collective action** to educate our communities, political and religious leaders on our rights as young lesbians in Namibia.

Becoming part of the movements fighting for social justice for all people in our country can be an act of empowerment!

Volunteering

If we are unemployed we can also look for opportunities to work as a **volunteer** at a community or national organisation working for women's rights, or LGBT rights, on health or environmental issues, animal protection or any other social issue we find interesting and worth supporting. This will provide us with new knowledge and skills, and may open doors for employment in the future.

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 through information sharing, education and training, advocacy and lobbying, research, writing, art, photography and the publishing of critical feminist texts which we distribute within our society.

Our organisation proposes a grassroots development of leadership among Namibian women, by supporting poor and marginalised women to form women's groups and to articulate their experiences and needs, informed by the knowledge of their human rights as women and as citizens.

Through our national **Building Feminist Lesbian Leadership Programme** we are reaching out to lesbian women across Namibia. A major focus of our work is to strengthen the resilience and resistance of young lesbian women to homophobic stigma and discrimination, violence and the risk of HIV and Aids. Participants of this programme developed the contents of this booklet.

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*Writing is
my process
of healing.
I become
one with my
pen, and feel
complete.
With my
heart I cry,
with my pen I
heal.*

*Every
morning I
stand naked
in front of
the mirror
and look at
myself from
head to toe.
I tell myself
that I am
precious and
worthy of
love.*