CAN ANYBODY HEAR US?
Exploring the realities of being lesbian, gay or bisexual in Rwanda
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Imprint

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Disclaimer
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“Opposing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is a matter of justice. It is also a matter of love. Every human being is precious. We are all – all of us – part of God’s family. We all must be allowed to love each other with honor. Yet all over the world, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are persecuted. We treat them as pariahs and push them outside our community. We make them doubt that they too are children of God.”

Desmond Tutu 2011
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Foreword

Throughout the world, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people (LGBTI) experience stigma and discrimination. The same is true for Rwanda. Even though homosexuality is not criminalized, many LGBTI keep their sexuality and gender identity secret in an attempt to avoid rejection, discrimination and abuse. And many more chose to remain silent when faced with injustice.

This booklet includes the stories of six people, who have decided to break the silence. Their stories provide us with a rare glimpse of what it means to be gay, lesbian or bisexual in Rwanda. They talk about the difficulty of accepting their identity, about family rejection and acceptance, social exclusion, expulsion from school, discrimination at work, and other issues.

It is widely recognized that such stigma and discrimination is one of the most important reasons why men who have sex with men are disproportionally affected by HIV. In Rwanda, they are 4.5 times more likely to be living with HIV than the general population. For this reason, the Ministry of Health has recognised men who have sex with men as a key population in the 2013-2018 National Strategic Plan for HIV and AIDS.

And the Rwanda Biomedical Centre is taking critical steps to ensure this group has access to HIV prevention, treatment and care – including by training health care providers on targeted and stigma-free service delivery. These efforts should be applauded and applied to other sectors as well.
This booklet therefore also includes stories from four people who work with and for the LGBTI community. They talk about their motivation, their observations, the impact of their work, but also the continuous challenges they face.

Health Development Initiative (HDI), too, works to improve the health and rights of disadvantaged communities in Rwanda. Using a rights-based approach, we aim to empower marginalized individuals and communities, such as the LGBTIs, to access services and live healthy lives – free from discrimination and stigmatization.

With this booklet, we hope to shed some light on the challenges and difficulties of being LGBTI in Rwanda today – challenges that go far beyond HIV and health. By sharing their stories, their voices are being heard. By sharing their experiences, they might clear the way for a more tolerant and understanding society. We hope that the stories will provoke you to think about and discuss these issues. Above all, we hope they will compel you to act and contribute to a Rwanda in which all its citizens can live in peace.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Aflodis Kagaba
Co-founder and Executive Director
Health Development Initiative
Introduction

Men and women with diverse sexual orientations and/or gender identities are present in every society around the world – and have been present for many, many years. Despite popular belief that homosexuality is the result of western influence, studies have shown that homosexuality and same-sex relations existed across the African continent well before colonial times. These studies cite examples from the San, Ndele and Shona in present-day Zimbabwe, from the Langi, Bahima, Banyori and Baganda of Uganda, the Nandi and Kisii of Kenya and the Igbo of Nigeria among others.

In present-day Rwandan society, the topic of homosexuality is very much taboo. Gender and social norms promote heterosexual relationships and do not condone homosexuality. In a survey on youth perceptions conducted by Never Again Rwanda in 2014, 43.5 percent of the respondents considered sexual orientation as a human right, and 39 percent believed that homosexuality is an abnormality. In fact, homosexuality is often mistaken for a mental illness, even though all major (mental) health organisations – including the World Health Organisation – have declared this not to be the case.

The taboo, social stigma and discrimination against LGBTI people piles considerable pressure on individuals to conform to societal norms and become “who they are not”. It also makes it difficult for LGBTI people to enjoy certain rights, such as their right to health. Although LGBTI individuals are
not officially denied access to health care services, they often avoid seeking health care because they fear judgement and discrimination by the health care providers. Furthermore, services specifically geared to LGBTI people and their sexual health and HIV needs are still limited – though this is starting to change.

According to the 2013-2018 National Strategic Plan for HIV and AIDS, the HIV prevalence among Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) is 13,7%. The NSP has therefore named MSM as one of the key populations and includes the goals to reduce the annual number of new HIV infections among MSM from 235 in 2012 to 46 by June 2018. It aims to achieve this by delivering a minimum package of services addressing their particular needs. Outside of the health sector, little attention has been given to the plight of LGBTI individuals in Rwanda. Currently, the relationship between sexual orientation, gender identity and poverty is almost entirely undocumented – though there is empirical evidence of widespread social and economic marginalisation among MSM.

This reality, among others, has sparked some members of the LGBTI community to form associations and advocate for the acceptance of LGBTI in Rwandan society.

These grass-root associations are not (yet) registered organisations and tend to operate solely within the confines of the LGBTI community. Still, they are making progress in helping people come to terms with their sexuality.
As a result, there is growing and increasingly significant number of LGBTI individuals who are finding ways to emerge from the “shadows” of Rwandan society and make their voices and plight heard.
Rwandan legislation concerning LGBTI

Rwanda's legislative framework is enshrined in the Rwandan Constitution and well as international human rights conventions and instruments. Unlike other countries in the region, Rwanda's laws do not criminalize homosexuality, but rather emphasize equal rights for all its citizens. For example, the 2015 Constitution of Rwanda states that:

- Every person has the right to physical and mental integrity. No person shall be subjected to torture, physical abuse or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (Article 14);
- All Rwandans are born and remain equal in rights and freedoms. Discrimination of any kind or its propaganda based on, inter alia, ethnic origin, family or ancestry, clan, skin colour or race, sex, region, economic categories, religion or faith, opinion, fortune, cultural differences, language, economic status, physical or mental disability or any other form of discrimination is prohibited and punishable by law (Article 16);
- Every Rwandan has the duty to respect and consider his or her fellow beings without discrimination and to maintain relations aimed at safeguarding, promoting and reinforcing mutual respect, solidarity and tolerance (Article 46).
Given that homosexuality is not criminalized, the rights guaranteed under Articles 14 and 16 apply to LGBTI individuals as much as they apply to other citizens. The laws confirm that discrimination, abuse or harassment is something that no Rwandan should experience—whatever their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. At the same time, however, Rwanda does not have an anti-discrimination or hate crime legislation that protects LGBTI people. This leaves them vulnerable to discrimination, abuse and harassment—including from people, who, ironically, consider such discrimination, abuse and harassment an appropriate way to uphold the “good morals” of society.

As a member of the UN, Rwanda has ratified many of the main international human right instruments which impact on the rights of LGBTI people—including the international Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) and the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights. The latter, for example, recognizes that all people shall be equal, enjoy the same respect and have the same rights. It also recognizes that all people shall have the right to a general satisfactory environment favourable to their development.

These principles of equality and inclusive growth and development are also at the core of Rwanda’s Vision 2020 and the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy II (EDPRS-II).

Specifically, EDPRS-II states that “Rwanda does not intend to leave any of its citizens behind in its development.”
As such, specific steps will be taken to ensure that people with disabilities (PWDs) and other disadvantaged groups are able to contribute actively to the country's development and to benefit from it." (para 6.60, p. 88). As such, the overall legislative and policy framework is conducive to the rights of LGBTI individuals in Rwanda. However, as highlighted in the introduction, it is the social norms that continue to result in social and economic marginalisation of LGBTI people
Stories from LGBTI people
My name is Henry
Please hear my story.

When I was about to finish secondary school, I was caught kissing another guy in a hidden corner inside of my school. The person who caught us immediately reported the incident to the head master. That’s where the trouble started.

The head master arranged a big meeting for everyone to attend, both teachers and students. “We have a big, big problem at this school” were his words. Me and the guy I kissed were made to stand on the stage, while the head master told everybody what had happened.

Being a Christian school, he even labelled the incident as an act of Satan. After that meeting, the school informed our parents about the incident and that we were no longer welcome. This incident has devastated me, as I was excluded by my family, including uncles, aunts and cousins. Luckily I was able to re-join school after two years, with support from other Samaritans.
I am now 30 years old and I am open about my sexual orientation as a bi-sexual. Most of the time, I do not face discrimination or abuse as I “do not look like a bi-sexual”. However, as soon as people find out about my sexuality, they tend to exclude me. Even friends, who I thought I could trust, have shunned me when I confided in them. It always hurts when that happens. I am now experiencing loneliness.

Once, I got a job as a sales executive and was very happy. After a few month, however, it became apparent to my colleagues that I was bi-sexual. Almost every colleague started to distance themselves from me. Worse, some of the managers started to accuse me of not doing a good job, even though I did my job as well as before. They were really making life hard for me. Eventually, I decided to quit. Although my employers never cited my sexuality as the reasons for their criticisms, it was obvious to me that it was the case.

Unfortunately, such mistreatment is very common for LGBTI people in Rwanda. The legal framework protects LGBTI people, in the sense that homosexuality is not criminalized, but I worry about the lack of social acceptance. The negative mentality towards LGBTIs influences the way society treats us.

For example, I know many stories of LGBTI people that got arrested by the police with bogus claims and charges. The police know they cannot arrested us because of our sexuality, but they use false accusations as an opportunity to harass us. Some policemen believe that if you beat a homosexual man hard enough, he will become “normal” again.
Some gay people now consider it normal to be abused by the police, as they do not know their rights. This fact brings me to what I believe is one of the biggest issues regarding LGBTI in Rwanda today: the need for LGBTI people, police and law enforcers to know about the rights of LGBTIs.

Because many LGBTI people have been kicked out of school there is a big knowledge gap. The LGBTI community needs to know the laws and their rights to be able to stand up and say “This is not okay!”. Furthermore, training the police and the media would serve as a step to stop discrimination, abuse and stigma and to make society more understanding.
My name is George
Please hear my story.

Early 2008 was the first time I felt comfortable telling another person that I was gay. This person was a very good friend. It was an easy decision to tell him due to our long-lasting friendship, but this is rarely the case. Even today, as a 28-year-old, I have yet to tell my family about my sexuality. I am certain that if my family ever found out, they would disown me and treat me horribly—like so many Rwandans treat LGBTI people.

I dream of the day when I no longer have to keep my sexuality a secret for my family and tell them who I really am. However, I am often consumed by fear when these thoughts come to mind. The negative consequences are too great. I know that my family, as well as the majority of people in Rwanda, have the opinion that homosexuality is a curse on the Rwandan culture. Thus to my family, me being a homosexual is a curse on our family as well. I could not bear losing their love and support.
In my daily life, I do not face many problems because of my sexuality. But that is only because very few people know about it. It makes the situation better for myself and others alike, because they do not always have to watch their backs. I do feel that the situation for LGBTIs is better today than five years ago. Although not many people accept us, some are warming up to the idea that there are homosexuals in Rwanda. I really hope that, as time goes by, more people will accept LGBTIs, so that people like myself can feel secure and safe about expressing our sexualities. Today, LGBTIs still face many problems that need to be addressed.

I know for sure that many people in the LGBTI community face poverty, stigmatization and lack legal recognition. There are also many homosexuals who do not want to seek medical care or get tested for HIV and STIs because they fear discrimination at the hands of healthcare workers. Specifically, they fear that doctors and nurses will judge them and blame them for the prevalence of HIV and other STIs in the Rwandan society. Luckily, there are some organisations that are helping LGBTIs and I am very grateful for those. Still, I wish there were more organizations and health care facilities where people in the LGBTI community can feel safe to access services. Hopefully, societal recognition of LGBTI issues and rights will pave the way for more organizations to address the many issues faced by the LGBTI community in Rwanda.
to reach adulthood, many people asked me when I would get married. In these days I had an uncle, who was a very important member of my family. My uncle knew a guy that he thought might be a good match for me, so he arranged for us to meet and make acquaintance. We started seeing each other regularly. After a while, and because I felt so much pressure from my uncle, we eventually became a ‘couple’. Though I did not really want it, it was as a happy relationship. It was more like a friendship, as we did not engage in any sexual activities. After we had been a couple for some time, my boyfriend told me that he thought we should get married. However, I already knew that I was a lesbian.

I loved him as a person, but I did not feel any physical attraction towards him. I felt extremely guilty and started to distance myself from him. I knew that I was wasting his time, but I also knew that telling anyone about it would mean trouble. I was scared.
At the time of the relationship with my boyfriend, I also had a secret girlfriend. One day I was sending a message to my girlfriend, but I accidentally sent it to my little sister instead, which she shared with my mum. When my family found out about this, they were furious. They asked me straight out what this was all about. I decided to tell them and admitted that I am a lesbian. My family was devastated and very upset.

I was kicked out of the house and excluded from my family. What hurt the most was the fact that my mother told me that I am no longer her daughter. Even to this day, I do not have any contact with my mother. Sometimes, she sends evangelists to my house to preach and pray for me. She feels that the devil is inside me and that the evangelists can “cure” me from being a lesbian. I am not proud of being a lesbian, and I wish I could change and not be a lesbian anymore.

When my family found out that I am a lesbian, they stopped supporting me financially as well. With no money or financial support, I had to drop out of university. I told some of the sector leaders about the situation and asked if they could help me financially so I can finish my degree. The sector leaders have spoken to my family, but my family told them that it was because of misbehaviours and not the fact of me being a lesbian that they have rejected me. Today, I feel very lonely.

I still hold hopes for the future, though, and wish to finish my higher education so I can become an independent woman.
My name is Richard
Please hear my story.

I am a 25 year old male and open about being a member of the LGBTI community. Well, I am open about my sexuality to some. I have not told my family about it. I believe that they will exclude me if they found out, so I prefer to keep it a secret from them. The first friend I ever told about my sexuality was very surprised, but he was fine with it and did not reject me as a friend.

Because of cultural believes and perception among Rwandan people, the situation for LGBTI people is tough. To me, it is shocking that the community marginalizes and judges me based on the way I was created. I mean, I can not change the way I was created; it is a force of nature. Why should I be marginalized and discriminated because of this?

The only reason why I haven’t faced much discrimination myself is because I hide my sexual identity. Still, having to hide my identity means I am losing my freedom. People in our society need to know how hard it can be to live as an LGBTI in Rwanda.
If only they could live in the body of an LGBTI person for one day, they would realize the struggles and discrimination we face. I can give you an example. I used to live in harmony with my landlady and other neighbours. They would always told me I was a good guy, but when they found out about my sexual identity, they excluded me and the landlady kicked me out of the house.

I believe that organizations working on LGBTI issues can make a difference. When members of the LGBTI community can come together, it is easier for us to have one voice. In that way, we can be a stronger force for creating a society where we can be accepted and not be marginalized.

I also wish for the government to clearly state their position on LGBTIs and their rights. At the moment, the government is too silent about the issue. This makes our situation more difficult. It is as if we do not exist and our issues are ignored.

It is hard to say whether the situation for LGBTIs in Rwanda will be better or worse in ten years. It all depends on the laws and if the society can be more tolerant towards us. Perhaps if people – including LGBTI people – are more aware of the laws, their rights and duties, and these laws are applied, the situation might improve.

We also need legal instruments that protects minorities from discrimination and stigma in the society. There is no need for any further human rights, it is just a matter of applying the ones that already exist.
My name is Brian
Please hear my story.

I was born to a Swiss father and a Rwandese mother, but I have only known and lived with my Rwandan family for the majority of my life. I am very close to them and love them very much – which is why I have never been able to tell them that I am a homosexual.

When I was about nine years old, I started to realize that I am gay. I realized that I did not relate at all to the social norms of what a boy is supposed to be or how he is supposed to act. It was a very confusing time. But even at a young age, I realized that I could never share this experience and confusion with anyone, because I was afraid of being judged and rejected by those I love the most.

Growing up, I often wished that I was not gay. I even tried to become “normal”, and do what is expected of me in this society. Sadly, that did not work out for me. I cannot be someone I am not and need to stay true to myself. Nevertheless, telling my family that I am gay has never been an option.
I was and am genuinely afraid of what might happen to me. There have been times when my family has asked about my sexuality, but I do not think I can trust them with my secret. In a way, I have to live a double life in order to be comfortable and safe.

In recent years, I have been able to reconnect with my father’s family in Switzerland. With them, I have been able to share my true identity and that I am gay. They are more open-minded and accepting me as gay was easy for them. In many ways, I wish that could be the case with my community and family in Rwanda.

Even though I am not “out” with my sexuality, people still suspect that I am gay and discriminate against me. For instance, I once applied to work in the kitchen of a popular hotel in Rwanda. Despite the fact that I was qualified, the hotel owners kept postponing to hire me officially.

After several tries, one of the hotel staff took me aside and asked me if I am gay. He explained that this seemed to be affecting my hiring. When I reluctantly confirmed that I am gay, the staff member told me that the managers will not hire me. Most of the hotel clients are foreigners and the management thought that I might fornicate with them if they would hired me. Imagine! Although such blatant discrimination is traumatizing, I can never tell anybody about it. How can I? It would mean I have to tell them that I am gay.
Slowly, I am starting to gain confidence in myself and my sexuality. Meeting other LGBTI people has been very important. It made me realise that there are many other people like me in Rwanda.

And that they, too, want to be free to express themselves without discrimination. Unfortunately, I am not very optimistic about the fact that Rwandans will accept homosexuality. Many think that being gay is a foreign thing and not African. At least in the short term, we will not be able to express ourselves and live in peace.
My name is Leo
Please hear my story.

As a Rasta and a musician, I pride myself with always being truthful and upfront with my personality. I have used my music as a platform to gain confidence in myself and my sexuality as a gay man. However, this was not that case when I found myself being more attracted to “feminine boys” at the age of 12, even though my behaviour and physique were very masculine.

I was afraid of what my family might say or do to me if they found out that I was gay. Regardless of this fear, I gathered the courage to tell my family that I was gay and that I was not going to live a life that was a lie. To my surprise, my mother and my brother were very quick to accept the fact that I was gay. However, my father refuses to accept my sexuality. He thinks that I am possessed by the devil. One time, my father asked, “But you look like a man and you act like one so why do you like other men and not women?” The question made me realize that my sexuality has nothing to do with my physique.
I am confident in my feelings for other men and that is something that is not going to change regardless of how I look. I hope one day my father will understand that.

I am proud to be openly gay in my community and people have accepted me the way I am. I am happy to walk through the neighbourhood with my male fiancé who identifies as a transvestite. Because I am well behaved the neighbours do not judge me. Although I have not introduced my fiancé to my father, my mother and brother are well aware of our relationship. That makes my life less complicated.

Since the community I live in is more accepting of LGBTI than other parts of Rwanda, I have seen a lot more LGBTI people relocate there. I try to tell them that, as long as you behave well, have self-respect and are hardworking, no one can stigmatize or marginalize you.

I certainly believe that if people within my neighbourhood are able to accept gays, then other people around Rwanda can eventually do the same. In general, I would say that I have had a very straightforward life since I came out as gay. I never really had to lie about my sexuality because of fear. The only form of confrontation I have received is when people come up and ask “Why are you gay?” to which I happily reply “That is how I feel".
Stories from people working with the LGBTI community
My name is Patrick
Please hear my story.

I am an active member in a project that focus on HIV-prevention among men who have sex with men in Rwanda. The project focuses on MSM, because they are seen as a risk group for HIV infections as a result of their inability to access health services for fear of discrimination. As part of my role, I meet and counsel people within the LGBTI community on how they can prevent HIV and improve their sexual health.

It has taught me that there needs be continuous follow-up with the LGBTI community regarding HIV. This is key to making sure that those with HIV take their ARV medications, in order to live healthier lives and protect others from contracting HIV. The project also follows up with LGBTIs without HIV and provides them with information regarding safe sex and HIV prevention. Indeed, it is a continuous work to ensure that the LGBTI community in Rwanda stays healthy, but it is one that I am happy to keep participating in. The project allows me to contribute to ensuring that all Rwandans are aware of HIV and AIDS – regardless of sexuality. And treating LGBTIs with
equality and respect does not require people to become gay or lesbian. They are just like everybody else.

Ever since I joined the project, however, I have come to realize that LGBTI people face a lot of difficulties that arise from social stigma and family exclusion. These difficulties manifest themselves in many ways. Many people from within the LGBTI community, for example, have not been able to finish school. This, in turn, makes it difficult for them to get a job. And when they do get a job, many face discrimination in their workplace because of their sexuality. The stigma and exclusion also makes that LGBTI people feel forced to hide their sexual health issues rather than seek help. I have noted that LGBTI people often turn to alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism. However, under the influence of alcohol or drugs people are more likely to end up in risky behaviours like unprotected sex, fights and addictions.

There are many problems, but the most daunting to me is the fact that many LGBTI people hold no hopes for the future. We must help the LGBTI people to overcome their past struggles and help them to get a positive outlook to life. Maybe if we can help them go back to school or help them to find a job, then we can play another role in shaping their future. When people can look forward to a better, they have a reason to protect themselves from HIV or to adhere to the treatment and stay healthy. It would make the work for me and my colleagues in the project a lot more easy!
My name is Victor

Please hear my story.

I work as a president for an organization that is promoting the rights of LGBTI people. Working for this organization actually once cost me another job.

Let me explain how it all happened. One day, I was sitting at my desk at work, and had an telephone interview regarding LGBTI rights. As it turned out, my boss overheard me.

After the interview, he called me into his office and simply said that I did not deserve the position at the company anymore. He said that if I was a member of the LGBTI community, he would have to fire me as my involvement with the LGBTI community would make the company lose clients. So, I felt that I had no choice but to pack up my belongings from my office and leave.

The organization I currently work for advocates for LGBTI issues and rights, and also promotes HIV prevention and counselling in the community. Many of the LGBTI community members who are involved in the projects have a lot of trauma. They find it extremely difficult to accept their nature as LGBTI, and have experienced a lot of stigma and discrimination.
The majority of them find it difficult, for example, to find employment as a result of their sexuality and are unemployed. The situation for transgender people is the worst, as they are very stigmatized and discriminated in the society. Those that are living with HIV are especially vulnerable, and face many social and economic problems.

Through the organisation, we provide counselling and support services and orient members of the LGBTI community to health centres for treatment. I believe this is a first step in helping the LGBTI community. But I am also very aware on what needs to be done to improve the overall situation.

There has to be a recognition and acceptance of the LGBTIs from local authorities, especially at village and cell level. A lack of recognition means lack of funding for organizations and that makes it very hard to work with issues concerning this marginalized group. Once they are legally recognized, they can be more accepted among the community and society in general.
My name is John
Please hear my story.

As coordinator for projects designed to improve the health and rights for key populations, I have a lot of experience working with LGBTI issues. The organization I work for targets key populations such as female sex workers and men who have sex with men, as well as the wider LGBTI community.

Our programs aim to improve their sexual and reproductive health and rights by promoting behaviour change. They also involve psychosocial trainings and advocacy for human rights. Basically, the projects target all aspects that can improve the lives of these key populations. This also means reaching out to important stakeholders – like local authorities and health care providers – as well as the community to raise awareness on LGBTI issues, through workshops, conferences, meetings and outreach programs.

I strongly believe that one of the biggest challenges we face, is that we are working with a community that is not socially
accepted. This leads them to live a hidden life and can result in violating human rights. Without social recognition and acceptance, the effectiveness of our work can also be hindered.

For example, we cannot operate everywhere in the society as the community is not friendly towards it. LGBTI people, as well as those working with them, face so much marginalization and exclusion. They are not free to access and enjoy fundamental human rights.

One of the ways through which the society would grow to accept LGBTIs, is to have a governmental recognition of and respect for the varieties of human nature and sexualities. At least, that’s my opinion. The priority is to let LGBTIs access their human rights the same way as all other human beings can. To strive for this reality, there needs to first be a communal behaviour change and acceptance in order to make LGBTIs feel welcomed.

Even I, myself, face stigma, discrimination and exclusion. I constantly encounter people who are not friendly towards the LGBTIs and the people working to promote their rights. Let me tell you what happened to me. Two members of the LGBTI community came to visit me at my house one time. And you could physically tell that they were a part of the LGBTI community. Later that evening, when they had left, I sat down to share a drink with two of my neighbours. They told me that they did not think I was that kind of person, and from now on they would never greet me nor share a drink with me.
They thought that by me being friends with LGBTIs, I could make my straight friends fall into a trap so they would become like the LGBTI people. However, such incidents do not deter me and I continue to be a strong advocate for LGBTI rights in Rwanda.
My name is Robert
Please hear my story.

I work as a program officer for a national organization that focuses on female sex workers and the LGBTI community. In particular, my work focuses on health promotion and HIV prevention among these marginalized communities – like distributing condoms and lubricants. We also work together with health facilities to facilitate access to HIV and STI testing for the members of both groups. If someone tests HIV positive, our organization provides them with free health insurance and information on how to get medication and treatment.

Another element of the organisation’s program is a peer education training for LGBTIs. Each peer educator in charge of a group of nine others. I am a key player in ensuring that the peer educators have access to the right information, which they can share with others. Once a month, the peer educators gather for a session on different topics, including on the rights of LGBTIs in Rwanda.
Many of the LGBTI members tend to embody the stigmas and negative experiences they face in the society. As a result, they often hate themselves for being LGBTI. Along with my colleagues, we try to show them support and guide them in building their self-esteem.

With the help of the peer educators, I also hope to change the attitudes of the people at the grassroots levels. This is very challenging. Peer educators can sometimes fear going into the community to raise awareness on LGBTI issues and rights. Thus it is not easy to find more people who want to be involved in such activism. Additionally, it is hard educating people about LGBTI issues, when some do not even know they exist in Rwanda. I often hear bewildered comments like “Really? We have LGBTI people in this city?”

To help raise this awareness, the program has started organizing quarterly meetings involving LGBTI individuals, local authorities and health providers. These meetings are focused on reducing the stigma and discrimination faced by LGBTI people.

Due to the frequency of the meetings, this really works. For example, after local authorities have met with people from the LGBTI community they seem to be more understanding and friendly towards them. This improvement inspires me to suggest that more local authorities and decision makers should be involved in such workshops and trainings; to help them become better at addressing LGBTI issues. Additionally, I believe churches in Rwanda should be more open to the
LGBTI community as there are LGBTI people who are strong Christians.

I recall an experience in church where I was told that “LGBTI people are cursed by God, and if you are involved with them you can be cursed as well.” Nevertheless I know God loves all his children, regardless of sexuality.
Concluding remarks

The stories told in this booklet have a clear message. LGBTI people in today’s Rwanda face a lot of stigma, discrimination and exclusion because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This has far-reaching impacts on many aspects of their lives – from a lack of self-respect and confidence to family rejection and from school expulsion to discrimination at the workplace and unemployment.

The stories, too, make clear that this sad reality not only affects LGBTI individuals – we are all affected as a society. Without addressing the stigma and discrimination faced by MSM, for example, we will not be able to achieve the targets set out in the 2013-2018 National Strategic Plan for HIV and AIDS. As confirmed by the 2015 Rwandan Constitution, all citizens have the right of equal access to public service in accordance with their competence and abilities (Article 27).

However, as long as LGBTI fear or face stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings, their access to HIV information, services and commodities will be hindered. For this reason, the efforts made by the Rwanda Biomedical Centre and civil society organisations represented in this booklet are of such significance to the national HIV response.

At the same time, the issue of sexual orientation and gender identity cannot be reduced to a public health concern alone. As Rwanda continues to progress on its journey of transformation, we must ensure that our society leaves no-one behind and does not exclude or marginalizes parts of its population. More
efforts, in different sectors and aspects of society, must be made in order ensure that LGBTI people in Rwanda are able to contribute to and benefit from the country’s development. In order to achieve this, the following strategies will make an important contribution:

- Foster opportunities to include LGBTI voices in relevant forums and policy spaces – including by building the capacity of grass-root organisations to act as a national platform for voice and advocacy.
- Build on good practice from the health sector, to address stigma and discrimination in educational settings, among law enforcers as well as public and private employers.
- Adopt holistic, rights-based approaches when working with the LGBTI community – addressing their social, economic and health concerns as well as increasing their awareness on laws and rights.
- Raise awareness among decision-makers and government authorities – in particular at decentralized levels – on the laws and policies with regard to LGBTI issues.
- Adopt anti-discrimination or hate-crime legislation that protect people from discrimination, abuse and harassment based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

These recommendations are in line with what many people in this booklet have suggested and will go a long way in ensuring that all Rwandans are able to enjoy peace, development and human rights – no matter what sexual orientation or gender identity they have.
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