

RAINBOW CHILDHOODS



| We are called
“Punglu”
“Kuchu”
“Senge”
“Shoga”

Back then, we used coded names to help us identify each other and talk about ourselves in words that no one else out of the community could understand because we were in fear of what others would do or think about us.

- *Anonymous Contributor*

ABBREVIATIONS

AFRA-Kenya	Artists for Rights and Acceptance Kenya
HAPA KENYA	HIV & AIDS People's Alliance of Kenya
HOYMAS	Healthy Options for Young Men on HIV/AIDS/STI
ISHTAR	A community based organization that advances sexual health rights of Men who have sex with Men
Jinsiangu	Works to increase safe spaces for and enhance the wellbeing of intersex, transgender and gender non-conforming (ITGNC) people in Kenya.
KCSE	Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education
KEMRI	Kenya Medical Research Institute
K-CLA	Kenya Campus Lasses Association
KISLEB	Kisumu Lesbians and Bisexuals
LBQ	Lesbian Bisexual and Queer
LGBTQI+	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transsexual Queer Questioning Intersex and other sexual minorities
MAAYGO	Men Against AIDS Youth Group
NYARWEK	Nyanza, Rift Valley and Western Kenya Coalition (Network)
PEMA Kenya	Persons Marginalized and Aggrieved (PEMA)
SOLACE PROJECT	A project for LBQ identifying individuals seeking safe, non-judgmental and confidential spaces to resolve emotional distress, heal and awaken. Project was run by AFRA-Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

“It was during drama festivals, at the national in Nakuru, I think at Menegai High School, I think I was about ten and a school from the coast had just finished their play... And then there was this Arab-Swahili guy in tight leather pants, this was in the 1980s where those were strange things in Nakuru. But they are supposed to come from Mombasa, you just know how people from the coast have come to Nakuru, flashy, strutting like at the festival. And so thing is bouncing after they’ve won the play and he is bouncing between the buses and guys are like ‘yo yo yo’, and the somebody from the other schools just said, ‘shoga’! What was shoga? coast, tight leather, flashy, Mwrabu, I don’t know, but what I know there was a slight change in the temperature where these people were surrounded. And then there was him playfully running and then him running and then being beaten. So then, when I get home and I’m questioning and then I’m asking if these things are mine and they are private, then I am not dealing with them.”

These words were spoken by the late Kenya writer and activist, Binyavanga Wainaina during a panel session at the launch of Invisible – Queers Stories from Kenya.

This collection of stories portrays different aspects of the LGBTQ+ experiences, their childhood struggles in understanding sex, gender roles, sexuality and gender identity.

In these deeply moving and empowering stories of LGBTQ+ persons in Kenya, readers will understand the lives of LGBTQ+ people growing up, from the beginning of their childhood experience to their young adult lives they tell these remarkable and under-told stories. The stories of love, hope, equality, and pride will open our eyes to how children who know that they have “alternative” sexual orientations or gender identities understand this component of their personality as they grow up and the impact of this on relationships with their families and peers. You will see first hand how children with alternative sexual orientations and gender identities feel included and excluded from

their various communities; their school communities, peer groups, religious groups, healthcare and others. Forms of support that they indicate would have been helpful to them and how they view their own health and well-being

This collection of stories started out as a research project because we realized that there is a major gap in research and stories being told about LGBTIQ+ childhoods that cannot be overlooked. Nearly all of the research/stories that have been produced come from the west, only a fraction of studies come from countries outside of those regions. Individual experiences with gender and sexuality are different in every region and country of the world, and this collection of stories aims to expand the understanding of LGBTIQ+ childhoods in Kenya. In order to gain a broader knowledge on the Kenyan LGBTIQ+ experience, the geographic coverage of the collection focused on five different locations in Kenya; Nairobi, Kisumu, Mombasa, Eldoret and Lodwar. Due to ethical considerations, everyone who contributed to this collection of stories was 18 years or older.

LGBTQ+ stories are captured here because of the strength and struggle of diverse individuals, cultures, and communities that have been considered nonnormative in the context of Kenyan perspectives and norms. They are stories of discovery, first moments, finding self, talking to younger selves, coming out, moments of triumph and tragedy that LGBTQ+ people have faced growing up and often continue to face in their daily lives. We envision that this collection of stories will strengthen overall material on gender and sexuality minorities in Kenya and to increase the capacity of The Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya (GALCK) and other LGBTIQ+ organisations and service providing institutions targeted for this specific community. We also want to add to the ongoing conversations about what it means to grow up Queer in Kenya with LGBTIQ+ people themselves contributing to this discourse. We hope that you will indulge our contributors as they go through their own journeys through storytelling and that this will also provide the reader with an opportunity for introspection.

We want to deeply thank the contributors who trusted us with their stories that at times came with a lot of pain, we are deeply grateful. We also want to thank Kevin Mwachiro for working with us to ensure that this collection of stories is what it now is. And finally, we want to thank Columbia University for trusting us with this project and allowing us to see it through.

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The COAST
(Pwani)



Advice to My Younger Self

Telling mum about your news will not make mum's heart condition worse. Don't be fearful. Revealing who you are will not give her a heart attack, so be strong and courageous.



THE Backstory

I am a 25-year-old trans woman. I was a very different child as I did not like to interact with boys and I had a lot of feminine energy that I exuded.

My family is deeply religious and everyone had to obey and live up to their expected roles within the home. My mum would beat me frequently because I refused to play with boys. She would ask me every evening to go out and play with the boys, but I would prefer playing with girls or dolls. I realised I was a different from the girls because I had a penis yet I loved feminine stuff. I would secretly apply my mum's lipstick or wear her shoes.

I was brought up in Malindi town, where a lot of people who are different get stigmatized. I preferred staying indoors or on the balcony on my phone rather than go outside. Anytime I would walk in the neighbourhood, people would start hurling insults, calling me names, or laugh at me. This made me very uncomfortable therefore, I became very introverted. I would be terrified to go out on most times and would refuse to go out for errands because of fear.

The Discovery

I was 18 years old when I started experiencing my first sexual attractions. I would find boys cute and just wanted to kiss them. I never felt anything for girls. I didn't have a name for what I was feeling nor did I act

on these feelings. I had no access to information and all I just knew was that I was different from others.

My sister eventually explained what my attractions were about. This happened when she opened up to me and told me that she was a lesbian. She informed me that there was a dating application called **Mig_33** and it had groups for gay men, lesbians and straight people. After our discussion, I started identifying as a gay person because at that point I did not know about being transgender.

My sister took her role of big sister very seriously which made it hard for me to confide in her. She kept telling me not to act on what I was feeling and to keep it a secret.

That First Moment

One day, I decided to take a risk and act on my strong feelings. I was 18 years old. There was a boy who was my friend, neighbour and schoolmate. We were alone in his house and my heart was racing and I thought of kissing him but I was scared to make the first move, worried that he would tell on me to his mum, and then it would then get to my mum. But out of nowhere, I stood up, went over to him kissed him and then he kissed me back! I got such a beautiful feeling and it was like a dream was finally coming true. It was emotional, beautiful and sweet.

After the Moment

There was no one I could share what I was feeling with. My sister didn't want to hear of it so I kept everything inside me, just to cope and pretended like nothing happened or was happening within me.

On Being Trans

I started knowing more about other identities when I was about 20 when a friend of mine introduced me to an organisation that had people similar to me. Gradually, I stopped identifying as fem-gay and started identifying as a transwoman. This switched my life up A LOT as I was finally able to start living my own life. I was now free and I started dressing up however I wanted. Incidentally, rumours are doing the rounds about me. I am not yet out to my

parents and other family members. However, my life has more stability now as I am living away from them and this makes it easy for me to deny any allegations brought forward about me.

I feel unique. I now feel free. I have my own space, I can afford to pay my own bills and this has helped me live the life I desire.

“ *Advice to My Younger Self*

Be ready before you come out but come out before being outed. There really is nothing to fear, nor is there anything abnormal about you. Mum was the only person you'd need to worry about. Do you and be you.



The Backstory

I am a 34-year-old bisexual person. I was a jovial outgoing child and pretty secure about myself.

I am an ambivert and I come from a family of four. We grew up in different parts of Mombasa town like Sargoi, Kisauni, Bombolulu and Freretown. My mum came from a small yet tight-knit family and we did our best to replicated this as a family when we were together. But my parents separated in 1996 then my dad passed on shortly after that. My mum followed him soon after so it's just been my brother and I for a while now.

However, I have an experience when I was young which is quite hazy at this point, but I remember being taken advantage of by two of my mum's cousins--my uncles. The abuse did not involve physical penetration but I remember being inappropriately touched sexually. The two uncles made me also touch their sexual organs. I was disgusted and felt vulnerable because no adult should have taken advantage of me at that tender age.

The Sargoi and Kisauni neighbourhoods are mostly populated by coastal people while the other two neighbourhoods that I'd mentioned were a mixture of 'coastarians' and 'upcountry' people. I would say we were comfortable, as my mum sold clothes and my dad was a small-scale businessman. We were happy

when we were still one family unit, even though my parents had their own issues and had numerous arguments.

At the age of ten while in Class Four, I learnt that my 'dad' was not my biological father. We had gone to the village for Christmas and that was when my mum introduced me to my real father. He promised to buy me what I needed for school in the coming new year. However, he never honoured his promise nor was he ever there for me. It seemed like he didn't want anything to do with me. I really don't have a relationship with him, even though he is still alive. My stepdad and I had a good relationship, for he loved me like his biological daughter.

The Discovery

The following year while in Class Five, I realised I had such strong feelings towards this girl who was a very good friend of mine. I remember how I always wanted to be around her though I tried not to make this obvious. I would feel terrible when she was absent from school and during our lunch breaks, I wanted us to be together. At my age then, I thought I just had those feelings because she was my close friend. Therefore, I did not explore this any further and it was not until much later that I realised that I was attracted to both boys and girls.

The First Moment

It was not until secondary school and while in Form Two did I act on my same-sex attraction. It was at a party and amongst the crowd there was this female friend who also happened to be present. I really do not remember what happened, but it was dark. We found ourselves alone and we started kissing. It felt right. However, after that, I had several questions in my mind whether I had done something wrong and why I felt good about that moment. That experience felt awesome. That was not the first time I'd kissed someone though because I had kissed a boy before. However, this particular feeling was heavenly as well as confusing.

It was not until Form Four when I had my first serious relationship with a girl and by this time I had a phone where we would constantly text one another. Unfortunately, my mum found out. She was furious and hurled insults at me. I really loved my

mum and did not want to disappoint her, therefore I ended that relationship. I turned my focus on completing high school, college and then find employment.

Before I discovered the word bisexual, I joined one of the LGBTQI+ organisations, though I never even took time to find out a name for my feelings. I kept on constantly questioning why I was strongly attracted to both sexes. I concluded that maybe it was because I wanted to get children someday that I still found myself going to men. Eventually, a friend of mine introduced me to one of the Mombasa LGBTQI+ organisations who were hosting a workshop, and that was where I finally found out a name for whom I was and I got a greater understanding on gender identities.

After the Moment

It was a struggle trying to understand what I was going through. My religious inclination and cultural background added to the confusion, I was in constant fear of being outed and unsure of how could handle that .Unfortunately, there was no one I could talk to about what I was feeling. At some point I developed depression and started having anxiety attacks. They would hit me twice weekly. I chose to suppress what I was feeling and never spoke about anything personal when I was with my friends. I avoided being alone just so that I could avoid getting the attacks.

The Now...

It was not until I turned to the internet did my learning begin. I found people there who are like me. I was able to talk, share my experiences and I was reaffirmed that who I was and felt was not wrong.

My life did change after I discovered my identity. Before that, I felt like I was sitting on the fence as I was attracted to both genders without really understand what that meant.

 *Advice to My Younger Self*

Don't doubt yourself or the decisions that you will make because you know exactly what you want. Don't let other people's opinions weigh you down.

You are on the right path, keeping doing you.

**The Backstory**

I am 29-year-old queer person. As a child, I was extremely playful.

I was born at Coast General Hospital. We lived just around the Tononoka area. There were several people living in our house. There was my mum, myself, my two sisters, aunts, cousins and our grandmother. We had so much fun as kids playing and eating together.

After our grandmother died, we had to surrender the government house we occupied. My aunts each took their kids, and everyone went their separate ways. My mum took my siblings and me, and we moved to Likoni where my father moved in with us. The area is predominately Muslim, and at some point, I wanted to convert to Islam because all the kids in my neighbourhood would go for madrasa (Islamic religious school) and I would be left all alone. My mum would hear nothing of it. So I often found myself staying indoors while all the kids had left for madrasa.

I was a tomboy who loved playing football and that constantly made me stand out from the other girls.

There was one time we visited my aunt and one of her workers had always thought I was a boy. It was only after a while that he realised that I was actually a girl.

The Discovery

I noticed from a very early age that I was fond of particular girls whenever we were playing. I kept on wondering whether this normal. I was always drawn to older girls such as the house help or girls in the neighbourhood. For instance, I was once so fond of a girl in the neighbourhood who was 18 years old when I was only six years old. It was a very weird thing for me.

It was while in primary school that I met Arab girls. I found them so pretty and by that time, I was sure I loved those girls. However, it brought out mixed feelings within me. I was conflicted but what I felt seemed nice. By the time I was 16, I was certain that I was physically and sexually attracted to girls. I didn't know there was a name for it and honestly, I didn't give it much thought. I tried pushing the ideas and feelings to the back in my mind but no.

This is because our teachers especially the principal would refer to lesbians and queer people in such a derogatory way, I was able to find out the name for who I was and what I was feeling.

It was a struggle dealing with my sexual orientation because of my Christian background and a father who condemned homosexuality. We were told to keep ourselves 'pure' and it became a constant battle for me between being a good daughter, a good Christian and a good student. This really stressed me out to the point that I started to have internalized homophobia. I didn't want to be queer and especially because there were number of girls who had been suspended because of homosexuality.

So I gave myself a pep talk because the self-hate was consuming, after which I made the decision to wait until I completed my high school then act on my feelings.

The First Moment

It happened in 2008 when I was in Form Four. There was this girl and we were both in the same year, but she was in a different class. We got a window of opportunity one night when everyone else was back in the dormitory and we found ourselves together almost alone in class. There was another girl present but she was a friend of mine and she didn't seem to mind seeing us making out. It felt really nice.

I had been with a man before, but it didn't feel like that was the path for me. It was only after I completed high school did I go all the way with a girl. I was lucky that I had my high schools friends whom I would talk to about my feelings and everything that I was experiencing. I trusted them then and they are still my friends to date.

My life honestly changed for the better once I discovered I was queer. I was free from all the doubt, hate and all the internal conflict that tormented me. Once I accepted me for me, everything else aligned with who I am. Though I was socialising with other queers, we adopted a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach, hence creating our own kind of safe space. This was in high school.

After finishing high school, I embraced who I am fully. I saw no point in trying to pretend that I was a heterosexual.

My mum is one of those cool parents and she isn't homophobic. She is pretty chilled and it's because of that I have never seen the need to come out to her. I'm not really close to my sister and we tend to live rather independently. Everyone lives their own life.

I have also never really come out to any of the extended family. Maybe they've guessed it because of my behaviour or the muscular people I hang-out with. I am generally very outspoken about homosexuality and feminism on my Facebook profile, where my relatives are also friends with me. I guess as long as I am not doing anything to harm anyone, it's all good.

“ *Advice to My Younger Self* ”

Accept you are different and don't let that difference eat you up inside. Unleash the real you and be comfortable with that and be comfortable with yourself. People may never accept who you are but the moment you realise their perceptions aren't important, nothing will crush you.

Growing up as a gay man will be hard and you will encounter challenges from society and especially your family, who might not always defend you, so it is important to stay strong in yourself. ”

The Backstory

I am 26-year-old gay man and as a child, I was outgoing, eccentric, charming and kind.

I grew up in a fairly regular Christian family and we lived according to expected cultural, gender and societal norms. It was a comfortable environment where I got everything I needed and I was very sheltered as a child. We had a house-help who would take care of me during the day before my parents came back from work in the evening. I had a pretty good upbringing and did what was expected of me.

The Discovery

While growing up, I felt different internally and I could not understand what I was feeling. It felt crazy. Secretly, I liked peeping in on people when they were dressing up or when they were peeing, but I did not understand why I enjoyed that.

I remember when I was around five or six I would touch boys around me when we were playing. I also preferred playing with dolls and would happily play the female character when we enacted family type games. By the time I was ten or eleven, I started developing sexual feelings towards boys. It was extremely confusing and conflicting because growing up, my mum had warned me against being touched on my penis by a girl or being kissed on my lips by a boy which she termed as wrong. She said that if anything like that ever happen I should report it to her.

I was never fascinated by what any other boys were interested in. For instance, when they were busy flaunting new girlfriends, I told them that I did not see the need for a relationship. I ended up spending lots of time alone. I kept my admiration for boys hidden.

While in primary school every time I went to the boys' toilet, I would get a thrill from seeing other boys pee. One day, one class eight boy threatened to have sex with me after he caught me looking at his penis. I dared him to do it and we ended up having sex in the toilet. I didn't even think twice about saying no. It felt great and confusing at the same time. Deep inside I was happy but was afraid about what other people would have done or thought if what we had done in secret was revealed. I did have sex again and though I can't remember whether it was with the same boy and another boy, after that time I didn't think much of it. Because the language that we used in our school was vulgar, I got to know the name for what I was feeling or doing. For instance, if a regular boy showed effeminate tendencies he was quickly labelled a shoga¹. Because of the way I am, everyone would call me shoga both in the neighbourhood and in school.

Being called shoga was bad enough, but what if people knew about me having sex with the other boys? I was always afraid of their reaction and the possibility of the double discrimination that would come. There was no one I could speak to about what I felt. I would have loved to speak to my mum but she didn't entertain conversations around sex or sex education. I suppressed a lot of what I felt and it was a pretty depressing time for me.

¹ *Shoga* – Kiswahili slang term for gay homosexual man or effeminate man.

After the Moment

Everything changed once I discovered my identity. I became more sceptical towards people and how they perceived me. My relatives would criticise my mum for not bringing me up in the right way. This changed my personality and I stopped relating with people freely and retreated into a cocoon.

In high school, I fell for a guy and we would meet up and be sexually intimate. I think at some point, people noticed and decided to snitch on us to the teachers. I was expelled for having sex in school and I was indifferent to this decision. After a certain period, I started by dealing with my fears, and I got to understand even more coming to be at peace with myself. I recognised that I was different. Some people could not deal with this, while others thought I was experimenting saying that I was going through a phase. However, when it became clear I was different, I was ostracised and thrown out on the streets by my family and that was when my journey with my sexuality began.

I became a street boy and with no academic papers, I had to find a way to survive. I therefore turned to sex work. I was only 16 years old at this time. It wasn't long before I discovered other individuals like me and the streets became my teacher and my means of survival.

Along the way, I got to find out about places where people like me met, and of organisations like KEMRI, HOYMAS and ISHTAR, who helped me towards my journey of healing. I got to have a better understanding of myself and my sexuality. I enrolled as a member of two coast based organisations, PEMA Kenya and HAPA Kenya that gave me a positive outlook on life through the social gatherings that they organised.

“ *Advice to My Younger Self* ”

Do not beat yourself up for things that you don't know and take life as it comes. Do not dwell on the shame of being different, enjoy the life and things will get better. Invest in the community around you and they will always have your back. ”

The backstory

I am a 27-year-old lesbian woman. I was the last born child, stubborn and got away with so many things.

I was brought up in the Ganjoni area here in Mombasa. I come from a very big family. I am the last born of 12 kids. Our home was always packed with people. In addition to my immediate family there were always other relatives around our house. Ganjoni was a very communal neighbourhood and had very many families from different backgrounds and cultures. Plus, there were lots of children in the neighbourhood and we used to meet and play at the common playground.

Being the last born, I got away with very a lot like I said and I was never reprimanded for my actions. I would even refuse to do chores as most of my siblings were older than me, so it was fairly easy to get away from responsibility.

I remember that from a very young age, I hated being dressed up in girls' clothes. I remember this one time, during a festive season I wanted to wear jeans and a shirt and not a dress. Other kids started asking me if I wanted to be a boy and why I did not want to dress like a girl even though I was one. I remember crying and staying indoors anytime I had to dress up like a girl.

When I was 11 years old during a family discussion, my mum was addressing us her children and she started 'predicting' who would get married first and so forth. When she got to me, she made a comment implying that she would not be surprised if one day I brought home a woman wanting to marry her. That statement stuck in my mind and I kept wondering what she meant at that time.

The Discovery

I think the realisation that I was different started when I was around 12 years old. I would be bored of hearing girls-likes-boys stories. I had already started feeling attracted to girls and it felt weird in a way. I could not openly talk about it and I was not sure if that feeling was even right in the first place.

Whenever we would play games imitating the family scenario, I never wanted to play the 'wife' unless I would have been allowed to be a 'wife' attracted to another 'wife' not to a 'husband'. When I finally did develop these strong attractions, I was disturbed and in a dilemma. I didn't want to bring more attention or judgement to myself from people considering that I was already masculine presenting. So I buried my feelings and started pretending everything was okay with me and even started engaging in the some-girls-like-boys stories. I ended up befriending a girl that I had a huge crush on just so I would never tell her what I felt. I chose to keep it platonic, though inside me, I felt a completely different kind of attraction toward her.

Every time my crush would walk into a room, I would feel warm and happy inside. I am a rather arrogant person, but for my crush, I found myself being tender, kinder and I would want to always sit by their side just to inhale their scent.

I do not think I knew of a name for what I was feeling. I knew it was two things. Either I was crushing on her or loved her in the most basic sense of love. Thanks to TV discussions and shows on love I was exposed to how love presented itself. Using that knowledge, I assumed that I was in love.

When I was around 13, a group of other teenagers and I were playing a random question game and when it got to my turn, I

mentioned that I might have been in love with my female friend. My friends questioned how that could be possible, and then laughed it off because it seemed unbelievable to them. A few months later when we were chatting with the said girl, I opened up to her and told her what I felt. It felt normal telling her this, but scary at the same time. I was expecting the worst and was scared that I would lose her as a friend and she would disclose this to the other friends, but, funny enough, our relationship was never affected. We even dated a year later. I just felt good about finally having unloaded the burden off my shoulders.

I was fortunate that I had a likeable personality which made navigating school easy. When I was in form three, other students started referring to me as head boy. I consider myself lucky that people saw through me and by and large, I felt supported. Despite this, I was not able to speak to a single person. I kept my feelings to myself considering that the few times I tried to talk about that before, my sentiments were dismissed. My coping mechanism was journaling and listening to music. A friend of mine once found my journal and I had to lie to her saying that I was writing down lyrics from the music. Sadly, during a sleep-over at my home, my journal was discovered. I felt so exposed that I burnt it soon after that.

After the Moment

When I was in high school a group of girls were accused of being lesbians and were suspended. That's when I heard the word for the very first time. Fortunately, we are already in the era of the internet and I went online to search what the word lesbian meant. I discovered that there was a term for someone like me. I reasoned that if there was a word for them then I possibly wasn't alone. From then on, I embraced who I am. Before this revelation, I would go to church for confession and ask for forgiveness for my feelings weekly. I was so relieved that I had found an answer as to why I was not attracted to men. That was such a huge relief and it was not long before I regained my confidence.

With my renewed self-assurance, I started having an inclination towards people who were also masculine presenting. This had now become my space and it didn't feel isolating or weird. Slowly,

most of my friends were other tomboys too. There was one girl who was very masculine presenting in all her ways and even had a girlfriend in my year but in a different class. I really admired her and was very drawn to her. Soon we became friends and still are. I couldn't wait to experience what they had as a couple.

However, my two elder sisters cautioned me about the person that I was dating then. They said that they were concerned about the way I presented myself and my 'relations'. I remember asking them if there was anything wrong with two people loving one another. They would insist that people in our family do not present themselves the way I did. This sowed seeds of doubt within and I even contemplated going to a hospital to get myself checked.

During my last year of high school, my brother was sent as an emissary of the family to have a conversation with me on how I was living my life. Surprisingly, we didn't have a falling out and we are still on good talking terms. In as much as they don't acknowledge my partners, I still take my partners home to meet the family.

I have decided to surround myself with butch lesbians who are considered strange in the society because I found a family in them regardless of whether they were queer or not.

ELDORET
(ELDY)



Advice to my younger self

Explore the chances to have a relationship with the beautiful women that will come your way. Don't let the fear of anyone hold you back. Rest assured you will experience glorious experiences with some amazing women.



The Backstory

I am a bisexual woman. I was a very perceptive child and loved reading.

I am a Muslim though my family is fairly liberal. My mum ensured that my mind was not enchained by just reading children's books, so I was also reading novels. My dad is a hotelier and my mum is a teacher. My parents were fun and liberal, and ours was a fun household. On Sundays, my mum would send me to buy drinks for her and she would openly drink her alcohol. She did not want me to be naïve about reality. We were also allowed to relax and have fun over the weekends. My dad used to work on the night shift, so he was not home much during the night but he would often bring me French fries and chicken.

I grew up in an estate with a whole lot of other children, and also spent a lot of time with my cousins where we would visit each other's' homes during the holidays. My childhood was rather uneventful.

I have two half-sisters, but I grew up with just my dad and mum. My parents have always been open-minded towards sex. By the time I was 12, I was already staying up late, watching Sex and the City and they didn't have a problem with that.

The Discovery

I got my first mobile phone when I was 12-years-old, this was fairly uncommon for kids our age. By the time I was 13, I had a phone that could access the internet and I started watching pornography. It was not the first time I had watched porn. I had watched some with some boys in my estate. Back then, I would access the porn through a site called **Waptrick**. I was in an upper-class multiracial school, which was liberal and where certain conversations like sex and parents who drink were not uncommon. I am therefore not surprised I got my introduction to pornography fairly early in life. Porn exposed me to various types of sex and it wasn't long before I discovered masturbation. One night, when I was masturbating, my cousin asked me what I was doing. I had to lie and told them that I was scratching myself.

There was another time when this know-it-all, high-and-mighty cousin, went into my phone's browser history and found all the pornography that I had viewed and during a family gathering she told all the other cousins that she had found porn links on my phone. Obviously, I denied everything and chose to shift the blame onto people in my neighbour who had access to my phone. My parents at that time had not yet grasped the concept of the internet and therefore didn't think much of what had been revealed. This was not the first time my porn viewing habits had been exposed though. There was another time a friend found a somewhat pornographic clip that I had downloaded onto my phone.

I had another cousin in her 20's who was slightly mentally challenged but was a fully functional individual. We are both very curious and often left to our own devices. We would therefore get movies that were very sexually explicit; she kept reassuring me that a girl can comfortably have sex with another girl, and there nothing was wrong with that.

Things in our family took a turn when my mum fell seriously ill while I was in high school. I therefore had to move to a school that was nearby home. This school happened to be a staunchly religious Islamic school where we had to pray five times a day. Us girls were constantly reminded to always cover our hair, and

weren't allowed to talk to boys. Girls and boys were not allowed to socialise, we even had different schedules for either sex. This separation of genders was also extended to the teachers, with each gender having their own staff rooms. Most of my fellow students were from conservative homes. By this time, I had discovered erotic literature which I used to read when I was not in a position to access by phone for porn.

The First Moment

While in primary school, I loved touching other girls' breasts but that did not mean anything much since we were all girls.

I had my first boyfriend when I was 13 and he was 16. Even though I was very sexually aware, I found myself holding back from going all the way with him.

My first interaction with someone else sexually was virtual. She was an Indian girl and we had virtual sex thanks to an erotic chat room. This happened during one of my school holidays. It was a fun experience and thanks to that, I started spending time in a number of erotic chat rooms.

By the time I was in high school, I knew that I was definitely attracted to women. During the week, we would be told about sin and yet on Saturday, there I would be reading my erotic novels while pleasuring myself.

I was 16 by the time I was in Form Four and in my final year of high school, when I got close to one of my friends. We got cosy but not in a sexual way, though we would kiss and share beds. I would constantly be reported to the school authorities for sharing a bed with my friend or for kissing. I almost got expelled as I was accused of being a lesbian. Fortunately, this did not happen because I was in an exam year. However, it was rough for my girlfriend who was a year behind me. She was forced to undergo therapy and other things, where even her family got involved. My main concern especially during this time was for my friend. I was worried what her predicament would be.

Sadly, there was no one I could talk to about what I felt. In school, we were being constantly reminded that homosexuality is a sin. Therefore, I had to find things out on my own. There had been

rumours already going around about me because I was the bold, loud, feminist and liberal. I was already going to nightclubs, and fortunately, my dad also liked clubbing so no one could call me out. I really didn't care about what people said, until they started reporting me to the authorities in school.

Finding the Self

There were no questions around my gender identity growing up or within our home, as I pretty feminine presenting. It was just the usual comments like "you will not get a husband with that opinion" especially because I was loud with a care-free attitude. When I took up my law degree, my mum mentioned that most lawyers are lesbians. My mum is open minded and is very supportive of the American trans personality Caitlyn Jenner but she would add the phrase "just not in her house".

I only put a name to my feelings when I got to university. I always knew about gay men because my dad had gay friends, but I did not know lesbians existed. Even when I watched female to female pornography, it was purely a sexual experience. I thought only men could love other men, but not women.

I made peace with my bisexuality while here at Moi University. I remember I was very keen to have sex with my other female friend after she told me she had slept with another girl. My curiosity was heightened, as I wanted to know how that felt like. After our first encounter, I was all in but it was not until my second year that I realised it was not just casual sex but who I really was.

This caused some conflict within me though. However, I was lucky because it was around the same time when Q-Initiative's activities were gaining momentum on campus. I was able to be in a space where I could share my feelings and interact with people.

I still have to deal with a lot of internal conflict and turmoil because of my cultural background and family. My parents albeit being liberal, will not be accepting of me and I am still somewhat dependent on them financially. I don't think my sexuality will go down well with them. I still wonder whether I would be able to date men. It's always an option for me, but I fear getting emotionally entangled.



Advice to my younger self

Treat people that you will have relationships with well, more so that person that you will have your first sexual experience with. Don't worry about whether you should or should not come out to the parents. Don't get caught up praying, fasting or looking at conversion therapy material. Instead, explore more and love yourself like crazy.



The Backstory

I am a 30-year-old, queer man and gender fluid. I was an obedient, boring and annoying child.

I spent the early part of my childhood in Nakuru. My dad was a pastor and my mum a teacher and thanks to my dad's work, we lived on a church compound until I was five years old. I am the second born and have four siblings. I had a very religious upbringing. Every evening we had bible study devotions as a family. My father's idea of discipline was reading the Bible to you before beating you. My mum on the other hand, used emotional manipulation as her preferred form of discipline. My parents were good to you as long as you were good to them, and agreed with their opinions. Otherwise, they would start treating you funny.

In 1996, we moved out of the church compound to a regular neighbourhood where there were drunkards and other 'immorals' according to my father.

My siblings believed that I was my parents' favourite child which was true. I always wanted to be in their good books therefore I never questioned what they told me. I was an ideal child and I went out of my way

to please my parents especially my mum who I was fairly close to. My dad and I did not have much of a relationship. People adored my dad; he wore glasses, had a tall and towering frame and came across as the ideal father figure. He loved singing, was affectionate and would occasionally cook for us.

In 1997, my dad quit his job to go become a missionary and went into the forested parts of Uganda. That meant we now solely relied on my mum's income and she became the 'head' of the house. During this period my mum and I became very close. My day was once away for a year and half and when he was back, the only conversations we were able to have with him revolved around the bible. There was this time my dad mentioned that he had a dream about my future and he warned me that if I did not change, then my future would be sad. I was shocked by this. In Class Six he warned me against looking at girls lustfully because that was already considered a sexual sin according to the bible. There was always a sense of guilt and cautiousness when my dad was around. Due to all that, I tried to be my mum's best friend which also did not work because she was equally very religious.

Before my other younger siblings were born when it was just my elder sister and my younger brother, I always admired my sister who was responsible and very sociable. I would always try and bond with her friends. There was a time in primary school, when my sister found out that I was being bullied. She got to know which pupil it was and she proceeded to put him in his place. From that time on, no one ever bullied me in school again because she was fiercely protective. My sister still remains to be a source of inspiration and a motivator in my life.

My brother unlike me was a very playful boy, while I was keen on things related to beauty and tidiness. Our mum would buy both of us identical boy clothes and toys, but for me, gifts were things you preserved and cherished and were not to be played with. My brother would therefore always take my toys or wear my clothes once his were either spoilt or worn out. This brought a lot of tension between us and so we avoided sharing similar play space.

In Class Seven, at the age of 12, as my male friends were being drawn to girls and would go crazy over them, I realised I had a

crush on a boy though this was something I could not tell anyone. I also loved watching a Mexican soap opera called ***Maria De Los Angeles*** and some boys in my school referred to me as Maria after a female actress on the show. I used to pretend that I was mad by their teasing but deep inside, I found the comparison rather affirming. At around this time, my best friend was a girl which made my mum uneasy as she kept bringing up issues of pregnancy. I had assumed that she would have been happy that my best friend was a female. Her reaction made me distance my attachment to her. I also became very 'churchy' in order to cope with what I was feeling and also to avoid peer pressure. I realised that once someone says they are Christian they can get away with a lot.

I loved beautiful things, and picked up sketching designs when I was a pre-teen. I particularly loved sketching dresses. When I was 13, my mum bought me fabric for the very first time and this gave me an opportunity to design my own outfits. I chose a Chinese collared shirt which I deeply adored and by the time I was in high school, I realised I wanted to be a designer.

Losing our parents young though at separate times was traumatic and forced maturity onto me at a very young age, had a huge impact on us as children. I found myself gravitating more towards my sister, whereas my brother gravitated more towards the younger siblings. Interestingly, my relationship with my siblings made me realise I was different. Unlike my siblings who made many friends easily, it took me a while to make friends, and once I did, I would be greatly possessive of them.

The Discovery

My first attraction to a guy occurred when I was around 13, though I did not act on what I felt. I spent a lot of time suppressing my feelings and because of this started avoiding hanging out with friends whom I was attracted to. I had so many random crushes.

I'd heard my dad use the word 'sodomites' which was the first word I was aware of that was used to refer to same-sex attraction. This was taken from the book of Leviticus, in the Bible. I kept hoping there was a less brutal name because I had not acted on my feelings by then, it was simply attraction.

I came out first to my desk-mate when I was 14. My best friend in primary school was also a safe space for me to share 'my secret'. I would share all my fears with her and it was pretty reassuring knowing she would always be there.

By the time I joined high school, I knew I harboured different feelings for other guys. Therefore, I quickly joined the Christian Union (CU) so that no one would ask me anything about being queer. I was a born-again Christian at this time and I began playing an active role as a member of the praise and worship team. However, this did not make things easier for me. Back then, I was unable to reconcile my religion and my queerness. I had such disturbing inner turmoil that I was sad and horrible. When I was 17, I put myself through some form of conversion therapy. I would constantly be fasting. I went into a very dark place and I shut everyone out including my desk-mate with whom I had a closeness. Additionally, I would journal a lot especially on what I thought was 'healthy queerness'. I was able to dream and imagine a life with money, away from Nakuru, with a partner, an adopted child living a quiet life as I built a career for myself as either an interior or fashion designer. Unfortunately, Christian guilt would condemn me, and I would tear up those pages.

The First Moment

I was in Form Two and he was a school prefect in Form Four. He used to play rugby and I wasn't interested in sports. He was muscular where I wasn't. We could not have been further apart, but he used to come and linger around our bunk bed in the dorms. My bunk-mate used to be a friend of his, but he never really seemed to be in a hurry once they had finished their conversations. Whenever he meted out punishments, I always ended up doing mine alone and with him supervising. My classmates thought it was unfair that he kept picking on me. Furthermore, even though we were familiar with one another, he would only talk to me casually within our dorms but never in public.

There was this time we were about to start our mid-term break and he asked me to linger around and not leave immediately after assembly. It happened that the rugby team was staying behind in school for training. So he asked me to meet up at his cubicle. We

were talking at the entrance of his cubicle and he started talking about how well-endowed he was. He then took my hand and placed it on his crotch! Next thing I knew, he pulled me into the cubicle and we started making out. I came in seconds! It was a mixture of many emotions as I ran out of the room. Later that day on the way home, I felt so guilty and kept on wondering what my punishment was going to be for my depravity. I didn't speak to him for two weeks after we got back to school from our break, until he reached out to me and suggested we talk about what happened. We then started meeting up on Saturdays to make out. I like the fact that he didn't pressure me to go all the way with him. We had a relationship until the end of the year when he left school.

After the Moment

It was around this time that my dad passed away and once this happened I threw caution to the wind. I would hear other students say, "He is a Christian, but he is a 'faggot'." My relationship with the rugby player wasn't public, but people could not understand how this guy and I were friends since we were so different. However, he used to make sure that I was on the rugby trips even though I didn't care for the sport nor was I involved with it in any shape or form. I coped by ensuring a lot of secrecy around my life. I would do all the good and nice things to overcompensate for my 'sins' and fell into the trap of believing that love was conditional.

Around the year 2006-07, I came across an article of some two queer people in Pulse magazine and it was quite reassuring to know there were queer people in Kenya, though the story was presented in a manner to suggest one could only be queer with white people.

Coming out.

After my mum died in 2008, I abandoned religion. That was when I publicly came out to myself and chose to live my authentic life. I was 18 when this happened. I was always very afraid of what people would say. However, at some point I just totally stopped caring about public shame because I was gradually detaching myself from people who I didn't think were authentic. It took

another three years for me to start officially come to other people. It took me three years from the time of acceptance to coming out because I needed to stabilise my life.

Interestingly, my brother is the first person I came out to among my siblings. My sister struggled and continues to struggle with accepting who I am.



Advice to my younger self

Tell mum about your sexuality, identity and feel free to tell her how you want to express yourself. She might just have all the information that you'd need and that will help you understand yourself. Don't let anyone question you and how you choose to express yourself. Be free to be yourself.



The Backstory

I am a 24-year-old gender non-conforming person. As a child, I was shy and very reserved. I did not fancy talking to people and kept a lot of my thoughts to myself.

I was born in a family of six where I am the last born of two girls and three boys. We initially lived in Mombasa until I was six and then my parents, sister and I relocated to Kitale. My other siblings were away pursuing their studies in different towns. Therefore, the four of us lived together for a while up until 2006 when my dad passed away. This was a hard time for us, learning to cope with this new turn of events. Things became even more difficult for us after my dad's family abandoned my mum and she lost her job around this time. It was a tough time struggling to survive.

It was in Kitale that my identity began being questioned with people poking fun at me and asking me confusing and hurtful questions with statements like, "Why do you talk like a girl? Go play with your fellow girls." Any time I tried to engage or explain something, they would counter it with something negative and make me feel like I was not a 'boy enough' even though I saw myself as a regular boy.

I preferred being home to school. When I was home, I was with my sisters and occasionally, with my cousins. Mum was at work most of the time. As a child, I always loved fitting into my mum's clothes and heels. I would also sneak into my sister's closet and secretly apply her make-up which made me feel great and it felt so right. My sister would reprimand me whenever she caught me, but she didn't make me feel unwanted. Fortunately, my mum never questioned my actions. However, my sister and my cousins would occasionally ask why I was acting like a "girl not a boy". I really appreciate that my mum did not castigate me like everyone else did. She remained quiet about everything I was doing that looked different.

Our family was a religious family and my mum was a church leader. We were made to believe in the religious doctrine that man is man and woman is woman and anything outside of that was a sin. This confused me greatly. Plus, everyone would tell me that since I had a penis, I had to act like a man. I was therefore constantly trying to fit in; to be acceptable in society's eyes, even though it was such a struggle for me. No matter how hard I tried it never seemed to be enough. There was always something about how I talked, walked, behaved, looked or just how I did things. That made me question if God made a mistake in creating me the way he did. I was beginning to doubt myself and questioned my identity. I never came to a place of self-acceptance as a child. I was worried about what other people said about me. I became a people pleaser. All these struggles were the genesis of my entire trauma. My mum never said anything about the way I was, even though I would have liked her to say something.

Within my neighbourhood, it was the girls who were more accepting of me and would always allow me to play with them, which felt good and gratifying. However, whenever I tried to hangout or play with other boys in school, they would tell me I was not doing things right saying I wasn't masculine enough and I liked feminine things like dresses or playing with dolls. They would always tell me God made a mistake with me and misgendered me. I therefore became careful who I would interact with and would often be by myself.

I was twelve years old and in Class Six when I made a friend in school who was interested in being around me and we spent a lot of time together. This friend defended me from bullies and was very protective of me. This gave me the courage to join the different extra curricula activities like the choir. I was a lot more confident now, because I knew someone was looking out for me and for the first time, someone in school treated me like a normal human being. He was encouraging about my experiences and affirmed who I was at that time. I felt good in his company and most times I would confide in him about my feelings.

I remember one time in Class Eight, our mathematics teacher asked me a question and after I gave the answer, they then proceeded to mock and humiliate me. They said I spoke like a woman and pointed out that I had feminine behaviour. The whole class laughed at me. I took all this in and kept it to myself. I wish I had the courage to make the teacher apologise for what they did.

The Discovery

I went to Siaya County for high school and it was while there that I started discovering who I was, and began accepting myself. The turning point was in Form Three. From then on, I was ready to defend myself against anybody that came at me regarding my gender identity and sexual orientation.

I still kept questioning why God made me this way--a mistake. I was not man enough according to society so I accepted the fact that I was not the 'expected man'. I was also clearly not a woman because evidently, I had male genitalia. This bothered me greatly in my childhood and I was oblivious to the existence of any information about my identity.

My time in high school was largely uneventful. I managed to have a rather low-key existence. Being a school prefect also made it easier for me, and I never experienced any bullying though there was this time a teacher ridiculed me for being feminine. Unlike the last time in primary school, this time I went and reported the teacher. They were made to apologise for their statements. Fortunately for me there was another prefect who was just like me and we struck a close friendship. We would talk about our

sexuality, identity and all things feminine. We were called girls by other students but we didn't find this teasing offensive. Since we were in Form Three, we started learning more about the human body and its behaviour. This new knowledge started making me come alive even though our studies never explicitly explained gender identity or expression. I also started acknowledging others in school who were like me. They behaved, walked, and talked the same way I did. That gave me a lot of peace of mind. By this time, I had accepted that I was attracted and had strong feelings towards other men. However, I felt my feelings were wrong and I would eventually receive God's punishment.

The First Moment

I began noticing my attraction towards men while watching soap operas on TV. I used to get very strong sexual feelings. However, the first time I was attracted to a real person was when I was in Class Six, and it happened to be that 'friend' of mine. We engaged in sexual activities until Class Eight when we parted ways.

Our primary was a day school and therefore we were only able to engage in sexual activities during the music and drama festivals. We didn't dare do anything outside of this time.

The first time we had an encounter was during a music festival. I must say, I was a good dancer and despite being very shy, one teacher would always ensure I was one of the frontline dancers. Anyway, this one time during the music festival in Kisumu, we were accommodated at Chavakali High School and that evening, my friend came over and asked to share the bed with me. I didn't think anything of it and thought we'd just have our normal conversations. Initially there was an awkwardness in the air, and then he started touching me. I felt good and gave in even if all we did was make out. When we were back in school after the music festival, we became desk mates and spent most of our time together. Our homes were a distance apart and therefore school was the only place that we could meet. I have a recollection of us wanking in class.

Sadly, there was no one or a safe space for me to turn to, apart from this friend. Furthermore, we rarely talked about our feelings

because of all the stigma that we knew existed around the word 'shoga' or what we were doing. We were just good friends who were there for each other, not judging or asking each other questions.

Acknowledging Gender Identity

It was during my time in university that I became aware of matters around gender identity. I was in my early 20's at this time. I joined Facebook and began connecting with different people online and I was excited about meeting queer people, and seeing other men who also loved men.

During my second year, I received a call from an unknown person who knew about me and my queer social circles, and they had information about an organization that we would be interested in. We attended a meeting at this organisation and I quickly found myself involved in its activities. It was during a one of training sessions that I learnt about the difference between sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. I went on to do my own research online and began to question whether I was transgender or just a man. I discovered that there was a term for who I wanted to identify as, 'gender non- conforming'. Finally, I felt like I was now in my happy place and there no one was questioning me about how I identified.



Advice to my younger self.

Be ready to have difficult conversations with mum. Even though she may want you to have a husband, even though she will want to see four beautiful daughters, remind her that you are also still beautiful and that you don't want to live your life behind a mask.



The Backstory

I am a lesbian and as a child, I was a quiet, obedient, and my siblings and cousins looked up to me.

I am the eldest of five children. My childhood experience was rather uneventful. I was raised by my mum and stepdad who I only came to realise was my step dad after high school. However, he did not discriminate against me in any way until after I realised he wasn't my real dad. Only then did some things start to make sense. For instance, when growing up, it was only my younger siblings who would have birthday parties thrown for them, while I would always just receive a gift on my birthday. He still doesn't know that I've discovered he is not my biological father.

My family was not really conservative, though my dad did not like his daughters wearing trousers. But when I was around Class Three/Four my mum bought all of us trousers, he seemed to be ok with us wearing trousers as girls. My dad is spiritual but never went to church, however, we occasionally prayed together as a family at the end of the day. We were just a regular family. Nevertheless, it was not the same story with my paternal or maternal grandparents who were both very religious and active church members.

I was in boarding school throughout my primary and secondary education and I had the privilege of studying in a school owned by my grandfather so I did not have much contact with my parents who were in Kitale whereas I was in Nairobi.

My parents were very strict with us when it came to our education and we would be disciplined over very minor issues. We had to ensure that we brought good grades home. We didn't receive lots of pocket money so that we could focus on our academics, and so there was little access to any technological stuff or involvement in any extra-curricular activities. Our academics had to be our primary focus. I was to focus on books alone. I did not have friends outside of school, therefore during school holidays I would borrow my grandmother's phone to keep in touch with my school friends.

The Discovery

During the school holidays, we would visit our grandparents and reunite with cousins and aunties. There was this particular female cousin of mine, with whom we would enjoy afternoon naps in the same room. While in the room, we found ourselves trying out silly things, like kissing. We did not particularly find anything wrong with it because we thought, if adults could do it then, why not us? We enjoyed those moments until we joined high school and then drifted apart. After that, going for holiday visits in the village was no longer fun.

I had my first sexual encounter when I was during Class Four, in 2005. This was with an aunt (my step-dad's cousin) of mine. There was an eight year difference between us. I was eleven years old at that time. The first time I had the feelings towards someone who was not a family member was in Class Six, in 2007. Interestingly, there was no internal conflict because I had been intimate with my aunt.

Between class six and eight, I had several sexual encounters. I leveraged on the fact that my grandfather owned the school and so had several 'friends' around me. At one point I had a sexual relationship with the school's head girl and this encounter exempted me from manual work.

However, my high school years were uneventful, since I did not want to get into any trouble. When I was in Form Four though, I started loosening up and being rebellious. There was another student whom I became very close to, and other students started suspecting us of being lesbians because she was more masculine presenting. We had this habit of greeting each other with a peck, but the other girls in my class wouldn't do that to my friend hence the accusations of us being lesbians. I was in great denial about my sexuality and would find these accusations very hurtful.

Turning Point

It was only after completing high school in 2013 that I started having internal conflict. You see, my friends from high school would invite me for various parties and while there, they would always ask whether I had a boyfriend, since every other girl at the party had one with them. At that point, I realised that I was not attracted to any boy or man and furthermore, I just couldn't bring myself to having one. However, I could not talk about this to anyone because I feared the judgement. Plus, I thought my feelings were wrong and they would have been against the religious teachings held by my mum. Unfortunately due to peer pressure, I eventually got myself a boyfriend just to make my friends happy, but I was deeply disturbed and conflicted. I ended up having two boyfriends but none of them lasted more than a month. I felt really alone. I even pushed away the girl 'friend' from high school because I didn't want to be called a lesbian. For the next two years, I lived in denial until late 2015 when I made peace and accepted myself. I decided to get in touch with the girl from high school and we started a long distance relationship. As I was already in university, I didn't feel the social pressure as much. When people asked if I had a boyfriend, I would simply say yes, since they had no way to verify this information and so, I was free of pressure. As my girlfriend was masculine presenting, when I posted her photos, people assumed she was male.

In 2017, I once took my then girlfriend home for a week-long sleep over. This wasn't an issue for my parents as I would often invite my friend's home. Things changed though towards the end of that week when my grandmother came over for a visit. She

started asking why my friend/girlfriend was dressed like man and stated that she must be a lesbian. After that, everything changed within my family, and my mum started looking at me differently. I have not yet come out to my family. I've even heard my mother, deliberately praying loudly for God's intervention so as to stop me drifting away.

I have come out to that aunt that I used to have fun with when I was young. Surprisingly, she started blaming herself for making me queer when I was a child. Even though we had a 'fling' as adults, she started asking me how I ended up queer, yet our family is very strongly religious. Though she admitted that what we did was fun, she stated she could not see herself as a lesbian because of all the social stigma surrounding homosexuality. I had this best friend in primary school. We had a relationship that I cannot quite describe. However, we would engage in best friends' conversations. She was very close to me.

Apart from this aunt, I have never shared that part of my life with anyone in my family. Once upon a time, I would have shared everything else about my life with my grandmother because I looked up to her and I would also share a lot with my aunt. However, all that I shared would make its way to my mum and after realizing they would do that, I stopped confiding in them.

“ I am a 32-year-old trans man and I am the second born of nine children. As children we weren't allowed to interact with our cousins. ”

The Backstory

We were raised in military camps in Isiolo and Eldoret. It was not easy growing up in my family because my dad was a drunkard and very authoritarian, while my mother was an alpha woman. They quarrelled a lot and my mom would more often than not, pack up and go, leaving us behind with our dad. Consequently, our dad would often keep my brother and I locked-up in the house and would only let us out for meals at the military mess once a day. We would have to eat really fast so that he could proceed to the bar after we'd eaten. Life then would go back to normal when mum returned home, but this only lasted until the next argument and the cycle would continue.

My father didn't distinguish between my brother and I as he made sure that we were treated as equals. This always felt okay until when my mum came back and I would have to be a girl. I therefore knew in my mind that I was a boy. I was very attached to my elder brother who was literally my best friend at this time.

There was a period when my mother walked out for four years, and when she returned with a new child, our third born, life changed completely for me. The realisation that I was a girl came to light. That was also the year that I was to join nursery school. That year, everything was going fast! I was also in a state of shock wondering about the third child, where they had come from and how we were to live with them as we had gotten used to being just being the two of us. We weren't allowed to ask any questions in our home

or else you'd get a beating from dad. I chose to remain silent in order to avoid this.

I didn't enjoy school as it meant that I would be separated from my brother and without him being around to protect me, bullies found their way to me and would beat me. I would however defend myself. Whenever I reported these incidents to my parents, I would be blamed for some reason, and then get beaten at home too. At times, my dad would take me back to school, and berate me in front of others urging the teachers to discipline me even more. My dad had little faith in me and that affected my self-esteem. I really didn't want to be in school. My brother would occasionally sneak me into his class just to protect me and that is how I managed to skip the 2 classes of nursery school. We were therefore at the same level in school because of this.

This went on unnoticed by our dad until we were both in Class Four. One day he came to school and he saw my brother and me playing together. Upon inquiry, he found out that we were both in the same class. What followed was another beating and I was then forced to repeat that year and my brother proceeded to the next year. Yet again, that incident had a huge impact on my life.

Around this time, another child was born. My responsibilities changed from being a first born 'girl' to being a house-help/nanny. I did not spend much time in school during my upper primary level, as I was always at home babysitting the children who were constantly being born. I had to endure the load of chores at home and was still being bullied in school.

While I was in Class Five, my breasts started developing. I wondered why the same wasn't happening to my brother. Out of my ignorance, I thought the change was because I was working more than my brother. By class six, my body was fully mature and I started having my periods. My mum had not told me about what changes that I would go through and I was afraid to ask because of the fear of being beaten. One day during morning preps, my menses began. I did not understand what was happening, I went to the bathroom to clean myself and then went back to class. During assembly that morning, other students noticed that uniform was soiled and they started laughing at me. Fortunately, one girl told

me to tie my sweater around my waist to cover the soiled part of my uniform. In class that morning, I did not understand why the class monitor was asking me to stay seated during the lessons and I could not help crying. Unfortunately, everyone else in school but me knew what was happening to my body. By the end of the day, my sweater was also bloodied. I cried all the way home fearful of what my mum would do to me after seeing the state that I was in. Once home, my mum asked me to take clean-up and she proceeded to show me how to use the big sized maternity pads that she had given me. However, this incident severely affected my mental health. It was around this time I began having suicidal thoughts.

When I was 14 years-old and in Class Seven, my mum was pregnant again. This was in 2002. Around the same time one of my younger sisters was diagnosed with a hole in her heart and required open-heart surgery. Since my mum had just given birth, she was not allowed in the hospital. I stayed in the hospital looking after my sister for the next five months. During the whole period that we were in Nairobi, I didn't hear a single word from my mother. All she did was have sanitary pads sent to me. From then on, I became my sister's primary carer. My mother used to blackmail me into doing tasks or disciplining me by threatening not to buy me sanitary pads. There were times I would go without and had to improvise by using pieces of cloth. I had to repeat that class because I was away from school for so long. Despite the bullying in school and hardships at home, thanks to my sheer determination only was I able to finish primary school.

More babies were being born and my father was still physically abusing my brother and I. My brother got to resent us, his family, and would often runaway to my grandmother's place to escape the beatings. With him away, I had to do his chores as well as mine. Because of the abuse we experienced at home, my brother developed epileptic seizures. My father and his brother would not relent with their abuse even though my brother was ill. Sadly, my brother died while he was in high school and I still miss him to this day as he was my safe space.

High school for me was no easier. I moved around schools, was

withdrawn and so had few friends. I dropped out eventually, stayed home and looked after the last born who was born in 2008. Some people even thought that the last born was my child. My dad eventually agreed to send me back to school. My new school was an all-girls boarding school and this was when things changed in terms of my sexuality.

It was while in that school that I started having sexual encounters and relationships and expressing my feelings. Other students described me as weird looking and queer though. I did not know what being queer was, but all I knew was I hated being a girl and always wished I was a boy.

The Discovery

Having feelings for girls was something that I was aware of from a very early age. When playing games, I would take on the masculine role. My parents must have felt I was different because they would always force me to wear girls' clothes. Despite dressing in a feminine way, I would still be masculine presenting and somehow, I earned the respect of the boys whilst attracted to girls.

There was this time in primary school I remember telling my friend who was a girl that I had feelings for girls though at the time I did not have a name for it. Strangely enough, she told me she felt the same way too. It was not until I was in Class Seven that I had my first crush and it was on a Muslim girl. We had a thing, though in my mind at that point I did not consider it anything serious. It is only later in life that I realised the importance of the feelings that I experienced.

When I was in Form Three, I met a girl and we were drawn to each other. We were both 'boyish' though I was more submissive and less masculine presenting compared to her. As a matter of fact, my first penetration happened with her. She had a stronger say in the relationship, though in private I started having fantasies of having sex with a feminine presenting person. We dated for two years until one day when my partner, my desk-mate and I were summoned by the deputy principal and accused of having a sexual relationship. I neither denied nor confirmed those allegations. Somehow we were neither suspended nor expelled

but were only punished instead. This incident made me bolder and I made a promise to myself that I would stand-up for myself when I went back home to my parents.

After High School

After high school I was still curious about what was happening to me because I had not been with a boyfriend and I had a growing desire to be in a relationship with a man. This was proving to be difficult though because I was masculine presenting. However, I did have sex with a boy from one of my high schools. We were both 'virgins', at least I had never been with a boy. He had heard rumours that I was a lesbian which I denied. The sex was awkward as we were both inexperienced. That was the first and last time we had sex with each other.

I met my first girlfriend after high school when I was 21. She used to work at the cybercafé at Moi University. She treated me well and for the first time in a long time, I felt like I was a priority to someone. However, I've cut off any and all communication or bond with my family, whom I don't miss as they had started mistreating me.

KISUMU
(Odhumo)

*Advice to my younger self*

Take the time to understand who you really are because there's a lot to learn about your journey.

**The Backstory**

I am a 29-year-old trans man. I grew up in the village in Ugenya constituency and was raised by my mum after my dad died when I was very young.

Life wasn't easy growing up as my family comes from a very humble background. They were many times that my mum could not afford to pay my school fees while I was in primary school. I really loved playing football and thanks to this, I was the only the girl in the boys' team while in primary school. It was thanks to football that I was able to cover my high school tuition fees.

The Discovery

I started feeling different from the age of ten but I had no one to share with or ask what I was going through because I was afraid that I would be judged or told that something was wrong with me. I discovered I loved being involved in boys' stuff a lot and I was always hanging out with them. I was made a prefect in Class Three and back then this was a role that was believed to be only for boys.

While in high school, I accepted the fact that I was attracted to women. I was around 14 when this happened, but still I kept what I was feeling to myself. Then, I met this new girl who joined the school from a previous school where she had been expelled. We automatically had a connection and that's when I started knowing myself. It was a natural attraction and we liked each other. For obvious reasons, we kept our relationship secret. It didn't last very long though,

since we split up due to a misunderstanding. Within two weeks after our break-up, she and her new girl were caught having sex and were outed in front of the whole school. Thank God, we weren't caught when we were together. Following that I kept my dealings very secret.

Just before sitting for my KCSE exams, someone outed me to the football coach and I was suspended from school. I never disclosed the reason for my suspension to my mum.

After finishing high school, I moved to Kisumu from the village. Once in the city, I joined a football club where I started noticing there were other players similar to me. Seeing people like me was such a relief, because I knew that I was not alone and there was nothing wrong with me. However, this did not make things any easier for me as I was kicked out of several teams once they discovered that I was queer. Fortunately, other players who were like me would advise me on what to do in order to keep playing.

There was even a time our team was disbanded because of allegations that it was becoming a lesbian team! The heterosexual team mates formed their own team and abandoned those of us who were queer. I eventually quit football because I needed to find a reliable way of earning an income. As I was transitioning away from football, I heard about organisations like NYARWEK and I started attending meetings and even participated in several trainings for LGBTQI+ members.

The Transition.

I realised I am a transman when I started attending these queer meetings, and it was during this time that I learnt about different sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. I had begun to feel more and more like a man and this realisation and new knowledge made me feel good. However, it was not easy especially for my friends to come to terms with this. I was a stud lesbian and had entrenched myself in lesbian organising. Some people even doubted me, accusing me of becoming trans so that I could get access to more funds. Personally, this new realisation gave me peace as I felt that I was now free to be me.

I am still facing challenges trying to get the proper documentation to reflect who I am now. This has made it hard for me to get employed, but I still continue giving my time as a human rights defender and trans activist.

I am not ready to come out to my mum yet, though I have come out to my friends. I'm lucky that there isn't a lot of family pressure for me to be married, even though my Luo culture dictates that I am at the stage in life where dowry should be making its way home.



Advice to my younger self.

Don't do anything differently about who you are. Continue being true to yourself and doing the things that make you happy.



The Backstory.

I am 33 years old and gender non-conforming. I have felt different all my entire life.

I am the third born in a family of five kids. I have always been boyish ever since I was young. My family is very supportive of who I am, and I thank God for that. My mum mentions that when she was pregnant with me, she thought she was going to give birth to a boy, but she got me.

Growing up, my sister always wondered why I was different because I was unlike her who enjoyed staying in the house. As we grew up, I realised that I was always physically stronger and different from my sister. Furthermore, I loved playing outside with my brothers till late into the evening. Sometimes, we played really rough games and I'd end up twisting or breaking my hand, but that never stopped me from playing with them. Even the way I dressed was different as I preferred trousers to skirts.

I started my formal education in Nakuru before my family moved to Kisumu where I continued with school. When we moved to Kisumu, I experienced culture shock especially because in Nakuru we went to school only over the weekdays. However, in Kisumu, we would go to school on Saturdays and were allowed to go in our home clothes. So during my first weekend when I went to school in a pair of trousers, the head teacher sent me back home because I was not wearing a dress or skirt. I had to borrow one of my sister's dresses to be

allowed back. I was really embarrassed that I had to wear a dress.

In Class Seven, I realised I had an unusual liking for the Kiswahili subject only to realise that my liking for the subject was because I loved the female Swahili teacher. That made me start wondering and questioning why I loved a lady teacher but that was still unclear to me.

There were also the times I used to get teased and would be called 'wanja kihii' (A Kikuyu word for tomboy) This would get to me though, but fortunately, I didn't get bullied in high school.

The Discovery

In high school, one day a girl kissed me good night and that was the best feeling ever. At that point my love for my primary school Kiswahili teacher made sense and that kiss confirmed everything about my attraction to girls. I never went beyond kissing and only started dating after finishing high school.

I would always freak out when lesbians were being suspended in high school. Thankfully, my name never made it to any of the lists. I was once summoned to the principal's office to find out if I was having a relationship with any girl in school. I flat out denied it and remember being cautioned to stay away from the lesbians by all means.

I am not and I have never been feminine. I do not wear dresses, skirts or heels. I do not cook. I hate things that girls/ women love. On the other hand, I love masculine jobs that require a lot of strength. For instance, when I was a teen and we would go to the village, I would be the one drawing water from the borehole and other physically demanding tasks.

After the Discovery

While in college, a lecturer once asked a friend of mine to stay away from me because I was ill-mannered. In a veiled way, they were referring to my gender expression. I was unbothered by what anyone thought about me, and I have always lived my life and done things that make me happy.

On the home front, my family is amazing as no one forces anyone to do anything. I had mentioned to my mum once that I am not

thinking of having kids because I have no maternal instincts and there was no pressure from her. Even on the issue of marriage, my parents are happy with my stance. A section of my family knows I am queer like my three younger siblings who managed to read my diary at some point when I was away in high school. However, I am not sure whether my mum knows about me nor have we spoken about it. She's never seen me with a man, as I am always with girls. We live by the mantra, 'don't ask, don't tell'. My dad has also been very supportive and has never forced me into anything that I don't want to do. He does not criticise me on how I choose to dress and has protected me from nosy relatives. One time, an uncle asked him why I am always wearing trousers and he just brushed him off by telling him that they are better because they ensure I don't get bitten by mosquitoes in the evening.

My elder brother I believe is still in the dark, though I know he is homophobic. I know this because he once outright stated that he hated this female personality who identifies as a lesbian. So, I am never coming out to him unless someone outs me to him.

There was one time I was living with my sister and we had an argument and she started calling me a 'lesbian' and 'homosexual'. I moved out and went back home to my mum who wanted to know why I was back. I told her what had happened and what my sister said, and my mum was furious wondering why my sister would call me such 'devilish' names. I wanted to use this conversation as a test to see whether I could come out to my mum, only to realise she was far from ready.

Overall, my three younger siblings are ok with me being queer, if anything our last born has been very supportive. There was this time I dated a girl who hated cooking as much as I did, and they happily cooked for us.

Navigating Spaces

It has always not been easy being a gender non-conforming person. There are challenges when it comes to getting interviews, accessing public toilets and public spaces, and where I have to think of my safety. Safety is always a big thing for me. I have serious considerations on where I live, how I commute and socialise. My

faith as a Christian is an important part of my life, so when I attend church I ensure that I sit by the aisle and place my Bible on the seat next to me so as to avoid engaging with anyone during the service.

Looking back at my childhood, I know for certain I would not change anything about it.



Advice to my younger self.

Do not rush into coming out without looking at the pros and cons and factor in how that will be received by those around you, also consider your safety and the impact of coming out on your life.



Nothing but Drama

The Backstory

I identify as a gay man. I had a pretty ordinary existence while in primary school. My parents are very staunch Christians. I was very religious, especially because my parents are very religious. We would go to church every Sunday and sometimes even host church functions at home.

The Journey to Discovery

I started getting into puberty towards the end of my primary schooling, and that was when I started feeling some sense of attraction towards other guys. I was very concerned about this and immediately went into denial and suppressed what I felt. I believed these new feelings would either break me, subject me to some violence or rejection from my family. Therefore, I became a recluse choosing to avoid playing with other boys and resorted to spending most of my time studying. As I came from a religious family, I felt that these new feelings would want to make me drift from my faith.

I only gave myself the liberty to express what I felt when I was high school. For example, when we would have any games and if I made any physical contact with a boy, my heart would skip a beat.

While in high school, I joined the drama club and our patron was a queer person who was very supportive of

other queer persons. We got to find out that he was queer from a former student who would come back to help the patron with the club. We also had our suspicions because all the plays that he scripted seemed to have some gay scenes. This opened my eyes. We had the freedom to be ourselves during our rehearsals and performances. It is at this point that I came out, though, not to everyone just only to those who were close to me. We were able to understand more of what we were feeling because we would have conversations about what we felt and we shared our experiences. We were careful not to share our journeys outside of the close group we had created. Being able to be a in a space like this was wonderful and made me extremely happy, because a door had finally been opened and I no longer felt trapped or suffocated. I was utterly devoted to the club until my final year of high school, when I pulled back so that I could prepare for my KCSE exams.

Even though the drama club offered me the relative safety to be myself, I lived in constant fear that I would be exposed and be reported to the school authorities. There were cases of people being reported for their sexuality and this made me scared to which I made the decision to have a low key existence outside of the club.

The First Moment

I got my first boyfriend when I was in high school and I was around 14. This was thanks to the drama club. He was also the first person I had sex with. I remember we got intimate after a drama performance and we somehow found ourselves a little tipsy and one thing led to another. He was in the class ahead of me, though this relationship only lasted a few months.

After School.

The first person I came out to was a former schoolmate and I must say that feeling was awesome owing to the fact that he accepted me and was willing to support me. Initially, it was difficult to replicate a space that was similar to that of the drama club in high school. It was only until I joined the local LGBTQI+ group MAAYGO. I also got involved with drama groups that would perform for NGO

groups. I'm grateful that a good number of the other members were from our community. On the social front, we were able to identify safe spaces within Kisumu where we could meet.

On Coming Out

I am still not confident enough to come out to my family because I am worried about how they will perceive me and what they will tell others about me. I feel my coming out to them will affect my reputation within society.

Through the grapevine, my parents have heard that I am part of the queer community. My mum actually confronted me on this in a friendly way, by asking me for information on the LGBTQI+ community. The conversation made me quite uneasy and I denied knowing anything. This episode motivated me to move out of home so as to avoid future discussions on the matter. However, they have been supportive of me as their child but have remained very silent on issues around my sexuality.

Even though, I am fearful of being rejected by family and the wider society because of my sexuality, I am proud of who I am and I feel good about my life. I have no regrets. I am especially indebted to my high school drama club patron who created the space for me to be free and to accept myself.



Advice to my younger self

Have no fear and be rest assured that you are on the right track. You will inspire many like you because you are being yourself and have come to accept who you are.



The Backstory

I am a 25-year-old gender non-conforming person and as a child, I loved dressing up and putting on make-up.

I am the last born in the family and growing up for me was not as easy because I had a lot of feminine energy and people were uncomfortable with my feminine behaviour. I loved associating with girls. When my mum was pregnant with me, she was hoping for a girl. Along the way, she would be dress me up in girls' clothes and apply make-up on me. I'm grateful that I had my family who always protected me from other people.

Having to run a boutique and a salon as an adult doesn't come as a surprise to me. As a kid, I used to admire seeing my mum applying make-up and she inspired me to make this line of work my career.

The Discovery

I started getting 'strange feelings' when I was round 15 and this was around 2005. Interestingly, these feelings made me feel good about myself because like I'd said, I never liked girls. Having already been given the freedom to express myself freely from an early age, it prepared my mind and encouraged me, and I knew that what I felt and did was true to my nature. My dad used my sexuality as a reason to walk out on my mum. Unfortunately, other relatives ostracised my mum and we her children. They didn't like the fact that my

mum had accepted me the way I am. They accused her of having given birth to a curse and an outcast. Sadly, when she passed on, my relatives from my dad's side disinherited her and refused to bury her in my father's home as culture dictates citing me as the reason. By this point I had already come out to my family. I had figured out by now that the more I hid my sexuality, the harder it would be for me. I didn't care what the extended family thought. I had my immediate family that accepted, loved and protected me.

The First Time

My first sexual experience was when I was in Form One. He was a classmate, a close friend and we had been eyeing one another for a while. I didn't know what his sexual orientation was until he came out to me. And by the way, we were also in the same dormitory.

There was this day we went for a Science Congress event and I wore a very long tie and a white shirt that was different from what other boys had worn. This friend of mine was so fascinated by my tie and wanted to know where I had bought it from, and that is how the conversation started and we spoke for the whole duration of the trip. That evening when we came back to school, I told him about these strange feelings that I had. He responded by winking at me and telling me that he liked me. That night, he snuck into my bed. I was uncomfortable with that since other students were around us in the dorm even though asleep. He on the other hand, didn't seem bothered by this. Next thing I knew we were touching one another. We didn't go beyond that and he went back to his bed. The following night, he returned at the same time and he confessed that he had strong feelings for me and wanted us to have sex. I was unsure about this, as I was still a virgin. We got really intimate and sensual and I ended up losing my virginity that night. No one realised what we did, and since we were school officials, maybe they were too scared to report us. This led to more intimate nights though we became a lot more cautious about when, where and how we would have sex. During our half-time break, I invited him home where we were able to continue with 'our business'. He was curious to know how the experience was for me. I was candid about the first experience

and told him that it had been painful for me. Following that, he got us condoms and lubricant. This replaced the Vaseline Petroleum Jelly that we had been using. He was already connected to some organisations in town and we were able to access information on sexual health.

I am grateful that I came to be at peace with myself at an early age, and so I am able to navigate as an adult fairly easily. I have surrounded myself with the right company who are also from our community.



Advice to my younger self.

Follow your heart because you know what you want and know what you are feel.



It Started with a Kiss

The Backstory

I am a 28-year-old lesbian and from the age of ten, I started dressing like a boy. I was born in the a neighbourhood called Manyatta.

The Journey to Discovery

Between the ages of 10-12, I started dressing up like a boy and used to play with boys a lot. At some point my mother started asking me why that was so. Honestly I just did not enjoy playing with girls. Her questioning would offend me but it didn't stop me from playing with boys, and I would often sneak away and go and play with them when she wasn't around.

From a young age, I realised that I did not have any sexual feelings for boys. When I first kissed a girl in Class Six, it confirmed what I had sensed, even though it was just a peck. It was really nice, a little weird but it was something I'd want to do and share with someone. I just knew that I loved girls.

When I was in Form One, I started developing strong romantic feelings for a girl, but due to the strict nature of the school, we had to keep the relationship a secret. The following year, I had sex for the first time. I was not sure about it, and thought I was just experimenting, but it turned out to be an amazing experience for me.

Throughout high school, I dated different girls and was almost suspended for being a lesbian, but the teachers had no tangible evidence of this. However, there was a time I was caught kissing a girl in class when I was in Form Four. Fortunately, the teacher who caught us was

my sister. She chose to take no action against us and warned me to conduct our activities within the dormitory. She never spoke of this incident to anyone.

We formed a secret group for lesbians while in school. This was obviously a secret group and so we devised our own codes to communicate so as to identify each other. We would have 'fun' during the entertainment evenings by having sex in the dormitories when the other girls weren't around.

School's Out

After completing high school, I joined a group called KISLEB, where I learnt a lot on our LGBTQ+ realities and how to get by as we live our queer lives. I took to the club scene, since it gave me the space to be free, and I really enjoyed going out. I also had a serious relationship for a couple of years.

I had not yet come out to my family, but they kept on saying they were hearing several rumours about me being a lesbian and that I was misbehaving with girls in the nightclubs. On several occasions, my parents would call me home and interrogate me about these rumours and I would constantly dismiss them. They even alleged that there was a story in the newspapers about me. My dad struggled to believe me no matter how often I refuted the allegations. I was 24 around this time.

There was this time, I was summoned home once again, but in addition to the questions, I was also given a thorough beating. I contacted a gay friend of mine, who came to my rescue and took me to a safe house, where I took shelter for a fortnight. During this time, my parents tried to look for me or make contact but I was not allowed to pick their calls or respond to their messages. They finally managed to contact me through my sister. They pleaded with me to return home, promising they would not lay a finger on me. I declined any offers to mend fences telling them that I would only return home if they accepted me the way I was.

It took another two years of begging before I stepped back into the family home and this was thanks to my sister who acted as the mediator during this standoff. By the time I stepped back home, I was back staying with my sister following the end of a two-year

relationship. They seemed content that I was staying with my sibling but they never asked me about my sexuality. There was an uneasy peace until I started dating again and was living with my current girlfriend. The questions on who I was staying with and where resurfaced. I was a lot more fearless when they confronted me about my living situation and even though I couldn't tell them the truth about being a lesbian, I told them that I was going to live wherever I wanted to. Unlike my parents, my siblings are supportive and have accepted me the way I am.

LODWAR

“

Advice to my younger self

Be you, be happy and if you ever find yourself in a hostile environment, move away and seek peace with yourself.

”

The Backstory

I am a 25-year-old gay man. As a child I enjoyed hanging out with my parents, especially when I was younger. I liked going out to the river to swim, harvesting wild fruits, watching films and studying.

I have three sisters and five brothers. I was born and raised in Lodwar, a region is steeped in cultural practises and beliefs. I am a loner, do my own thing and have a normal relationship with my siblings and we seem to live and respect others personal views and beliefs.

The Discovery

I remember having two same-sex encounters while in primary school and they involved touching, kissing and masturbation. The first one happened when I was in Class Four and the second in Class Eight. By the time I got to Class Eight, I had a strong urge to sleep with someone. My desk mate and I used to sleep together in the same bed often, so one day things just happened and we had non-penetrative sex. We didn't discuss what we did nor did we do it again.

While in secondary school, I tried to understand the feelings that I had and so I would spend a lot of time alone. However, it was also at this time that I started meeting people like me on Facebook. Here we could chat, connect and interact. One day a group of us who shared similar views on sexuality and LGBTQI+ persons

decided to meet up. The motive behind our first meet-up was to find a way of creating a social place where we could be ourselves freely and support one another.

The region where I come from is predominantly pastoralist and we are very traditional. Our culture does not allow for sexual relations between same sexes. There are milestones or rites that have to be fulfilled by everyone. I find myself in a dilemma, wondering how I will navigate my way through the culture obligations considering I am not attracted to women. I know I only have feelings for men. Therefore, I am in a constant state of worry not knowing what will happen when I get to the age when I am expected to get a wife. This explains why I am a loner.

Another important milestone in our culture is that of initiation into manhood. I have not done that yet but because I'm a loner, there isn't much peer pressure or parental pressure for now. I am basically living my life and keep to the same daily routine. I spend most of the day at work and get home at around nine or ten in the evening. By this time there is hardly anyone awake for me to have any conversation with. I'm living in the moment and content with that. I'm mentally preparing myself for that discussion when it comes around.

I know a time will come, when I will be expected to get married to a woman, just like the other members of the family who have done so. These are some issues in my culture where the family has the overall say and not the individual. If one goes against the family, then they risk being disinherited and banished from the family home. I am afraid that if I do come out to my family, I will be victimized, maybe assaulted, and treated like an outcast.

There is no one within my family that I can speak to. However, I have other friends who are LGBTQ+ who I socialise with.

The closest I have come to even talking about this was with my father. There was a group from Asia visiting our area and I was teaching them our local language. We would go to the church together, carry out community work and hang out together. There was one evening I was not able to go back home and I slept at their place. When I went back home the following morning, my dad had a barrage of questions, wondering where I had spent the

night and why I had spent the night with. You know, he has such a traditional mind-set, he even went to the extent of saying, “Unajua hawa wazungu wanalala na watoto (you know these white people sleep with children).”

The First Moment

I had my first sexual experience in 2004. There was a boy we used to play hide and seek with. It happened in the bush. We tried to have penetrative sex but it didn't happen so we just masturbated. This made us happy and relaxed. I was very green then, but thankfully I've learnt a lot from the internet. My second encounter happened in 2008.



Advice to my younger self.

Being an LGBT person is not a choice. It's just who you are.



The Backstory

I am a 23 years-old gay man and I was born in Lodwar town. I am my parents' only child as I was conceived while they were still in high school.

My maternal grandmother brought me up for the first nine years of my life, so that my mum could finish with her education. My mum came for me and I lived with her for the next four years. Along the way, she introduced me to my biological father. I was moved to live with him so that my mum could proceed to university. My father took me to his village where I lived with my paternal grandmother and it was while here I started my school. My dad had gotten married by this time.

It was challenging living in that household, and since paying my school fees was always an issue and I used to do a lot of the chores at home, it was not easy getting through to finishing my primary education. When I was in my first year of high school, my mum showed up again. She had now finished with university. On realising the challenges I was going through in the hands of my step-mother, she took me back and I went to live with her again. She too had started her own family and this also posed fresh challenges, but I kept pushing to complete my studies.

It took a while for me to get into university because mum was taken ill and whatever funds that were available were used on her care. Unfortunately, the sickness got the better of her. Life got so tough for us during this time. I found myself getting involved in dubious activities so that I could get by. Fortunately, a good Samaritan came to my rescue and I was able to start my university education.

The Discovery

When I was in Form Two, I started having strange feelings that I thought were different from other people. I had a very close friend and one evening after prep, they asked me why he had never seen me with a girl in all the time that we had been in high school. Since I felt that I could trust him, I opened up to him and told him I did not have feelings for women, instead my feelings were for men. He accepted me, did not judge me and reassured me that I was not the only one.

When I got to Form Three, I made the decision to live my authentic life and not worry about what others thought. I had been living in fear and trying to live for other people. I accepted myself but vowed to never come out to anyone else except that friend of mine whom I'd confided in. My time in high school was rather uneventful, the most exciting thing I would do was steal glances at the guys as we were showering.

I think my family may suspect the truth about me because whenever we have family events, I always show up alone. I don't think they are brave enough to ask me. I will let them find out for themselves and will not tell them. They do not treat me any differently, but there is a sense of awkwardness when I am around them.

Our county, Turkana is very remote and many still live by age old practises and beliefs, so there is little to no knowledge of LGBT realities. If people get wind of one being gay, there is the potential of physical assault or possibly death. Therefore, one has to live their truth in secret.



Advice to my younger self.

Living a double life is hard work.
However, come out when you are ready.



The Backstory

I am a gay man from northern Kenya and as a child I was very reserved.

My mother was one of four wives, though she was the first wife. I am the sixth born of eight children and come from a polygamous home in a pastoralist community. By the time I was born, my five sisters had already gotten married. Being a pastoralist family as well, I was tending to our cattle while my two brothers were taken to school. My dad got killed when I was six years old during a cattle raid. We lost him and a lot of cattle were stolen. Following this, my mum then shipped me to my grandparents who lived in a town. They raised me and provided for my needs and it was while staying with them that I was taken to school. I skipped all the lower classes when I joined school and went straight to Class Four, though I repeated this class four times and then jumped to Class Eight. I finished primary school when I was fifteen.

The Discovery

I started getting feelings towards men when I was in Form Three. During a drama club session one of my teachers started talking about how one 'becomes' gay. There was also discussion around this with other students, primarily because there was a lot of gossip going around about who was gay in school. This was all new to me. You see, my family was not that kind of family that had received any exposure to matters around sexuality, plus, with my mum being a staunch Christian she shielded us from being exposed to LGBT issues.

After I completed high school I joined the Kenya Medical Training College (KMTTC) in Nakuru to study nursing. I shared a room with another student from the north eastern region. We got on really well and were comfortable with one another though he was a lot more at ease with himself than I was. For instance, after showering, he would oil himself fully naked in front of me. I was a lot more reserved. This 'show' from him made me desire for him. By this time, I had also come to terms with my attraction to men. One rainy evening after we were done for the day, we got back to our room from our lectures only to find that there had been a leak in our room, which left his bed totally drenched. We shared the same bed that night. I slept soundly but I could feel him being restless, tossing and even touching me. I did not understand what was happening with him.

On the third night of us sharing my bed, he told me that it was time for me to show him my penis as I had been hiding mine and I had already seen his. I hesitated but eventually showed him my penis and this led to our first sexual encounter. This went on until we finished college. I was around 23 when this happened.

My second experience happened during my industrial attachment. This was with a clinical officer whom I'd befriend and we became close friends. One evening he invited me over to his place for a visit. That night it rained and I was unable to go back to my place and had to spend the night at his and we ended up having sex.

It is during that time that I reconnected with an old friend from high school who invited me to a meeting. He cautioned me not to be alarmed by the discussions that I was going to sit in on. He reminded me of some two boys who were expelled after being suspected to be gay while we were in high school and he told me the conversation will be around sexuality. There were several young people at the meeting and I must say I was confused by what they were talking about. It was a lot to take in. My friend told me that the meeting was a space given to people who felt they were different and were given the opportunity to talk about their experiences as LGBTQI+ individuals. From that time on, I would attend those meetings regularly. It offered me a lot of support, safety and validation about my sexuality.

Coming Out

I have not yet come out to my family, even though I have a feeling there are suspicious of my sexuality. Now that I am working, it is expected of me to introduce a woman to the family.

I would especially like to come out to one of my brothers with whom I have a close relationship but I'm afraid that he won't understand. I am also not comfortable coming out to my other siblings. If and when it does happen, I really hope I will have people around me for support.

Like everybody else I am trying to lead a normal life, even though there are ups and downs. I am still trying to figure out where I am and I hope by the end of this year, I will be one step closer to understanding myself better.



Advice to my younger self

Don't be shy nor judge yourself, or let others judge you. Live your life the way you want to and live positively.

Also accept and love yourself first because that is the only way the other people will learn to love you. Finally, make strong relationships with like minded people and be on a journey of discovery by asking questions.



The Backstory

I am a 25-year-old lesbian. As a child I was boyish and disliked boys preferring to hang out with girls. I had four brothers and was the only girl and we were brought up as Christians.

The Discovery and After

Whenever I was around girls, somehow I felt like a king even though my attraction to girls would become apparent when I joined high school. My appearance as a tom-boy did not go down well with the boys in our neighbourhood. They would gang-up against me for being a tom-boy and especially when I would hang out with the other girls, they would beat me. Sadly, there was no one I could report these boys to.

There was this beautiful girl who I would always hang around with. I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world. It wasn't long before I realised I had developed strong feelings for her. Even at that age, I held the belief that women were better than men, though I was ignorant of my feelings.

One day, this girl and I hugged and in the process, I found myself kissing her and it was wonderful. She did not resist and after that we started dating. Our

relationship grew stronger but we kept it very secret considering the strict rules in school. After sometime, she moved from her hostel to mine and we started sharing a bed. Unfortunately, we were caught in the act by the school matron. She reported us to the principal and we were promptly expelled from school. We lost touch after that.

I've never known what her fate was after the expulsion. When I got home I handed over the expulsion to my dad who went into shock and didn't speak to me for a few days. When he finally did, his first question to me was to know what was really wrong with me and I responded with an "I do not know". This made him white with rage and I was severely beaten that day. I was beaten so badly that I went to seek refuge at a cousin's place.

I stayed with her for a year and along the way, I started developing feelings for her. This made me very uneasy and scared, but one day I decided to tell her what I felt for her. She told me she had heard of people like me. I then asked her for help to get rid of the feelings that I had, to which she kindly told me that she was unsure that there was any way of stopping them. She also told me that as cousins it would be unacceptable to be dating. I heeded her advice and gradually lost interest in her until I met another girl.

This other girl was also a lesbian and we started dating and life became very interesting with her. I was 16 and in Form Two at this time. My dad disowned me and refused to support my education. Somehow, I was ok with that and took my education into my own hands. I approached a local politician and lied to that I was an orphan and had no one to pay my school fees. He bought my story and agreed to pay for all of my secondary education. He also agreed to support all my other costs while I was in school and he even gave me pocket money.

My brothers still deeply loved me as their only sister, and even though they had been instructed by our father not to be seen anywhere near me, we would secretly meet and catch up on each other's lives. My mother was equally upset by the way things had turned out, but could do nothing since my dad told her that she was free to join me wherever I was but there was no way I was to go back home. However, she would call me occasionally to find out about my wellbeing and also visit me occasionally.

Being disowned by my dad had a huge impact on me and I lost a sense of belonging at a very tender age. After some time, he became curious and wanted to find out how I managed to continue and finish my high school education. Two years after finishing high school, he reached out to me through one of my brothers and invited me back home for Christmas. I was still harbouring a lot of anger towards him that I declined his invitation. Two months later, dad personally paid me a visit at home and went as far as asking me forgiveness and he even allowed me to live my life the way I deemed fit as I was now an adult.

I asked him for time to consider his plea because of the deep resentment that I had towards him. A couple of months later, we made peace. From then on, I was welcome back home and this made my mum very happy. Even though I am welcome back into the family, I know something has changed in the way I relate with people at home.

Building Community

After completing secondary school, a very close friend of mine who worked for a human rights organisation and with whom we shared a lot of things about our lives, had a feeling that I was a lesbian. But he kept this to himself until one day he asked me if I'd be interested in a group of people whom he thought would give me a sense of belonging. I agreed. He then introduced me to the coordinator who happened to be a gay man who then went on to introduce me to an LBQ space. It was great to be with other people like me who embraced me, encouraged me, validated me and indeed gave me a sense of community. Additionally, they introduced me to other LBQ spaces where I would attend training and meetings. In such spaces I met other LBQ members with whom we shared stories that always left me strengthened and encouraged and with a great sense of belonging. My life changed for the better as they have always been there for me, offering me support including financial assistance and indirectly got me a job as part of the security personnel for a human rights organisation.

I have a strong belief that God created me this way for a reason and no one has the ability to change me into someone that I am not. This mind-set has helped me as I've grown through life.

Furthermore, I don't take my sexuality for granted, and have fully embraced and accepted myself for who I am.



Advice to my younger self

We are okay with ourselves from the inside; it is just the external pressures that are increasingly becoming difficult to deal with.



The Backstory

I am 23-year- old lesbian from a family of four girls and three boys, I am the second born.

I was born in Kakuma town and moved to Lodwar town as an adult. All my education took place in Kakuma. My time in school was pretty uneventful. Interestingly, while in high school, I was so naïve about anything relating to LGBT persons. In fact, whenever any girls were accused of being queer, we considered them scary and kept away from them. Little did I know that I was also one of them.

The Discovery

The following year after finishing high school, I started feeling different and awkward. This was also the year, I got pregnant and gave birth to my baby girl. After she was born, the baby daddy started harassing and mistreating me, and eventually sending me away from his house. I went back to my mum's house, where I just got by with my life. My mum and I, have a rocky relationship.

I was 21 years old in 2017. After my failed relationship, I felt all men were the same and believed it would be better for me to relate with women. My mum and the rest of the extended family have completely distanced themselves from me, with some believing that I have been cursed.

With all these new developments in my life, it wasn't easy trying to further my education. My parents had refused to pay for any further tuition fees because of my sexuality. But because I had gotten good grades, I got a scholarship to go and study sign language at Thika Technical College. All was proceeding well until, the organisation discovered that I was a lesbian and I was withdrawn from the scholarship programme. I have not been able to continue with my education since.

No one has ever bothered to find out I am doing. There are no phone calls or messages and they do not care whether we are dead or alive. I have not been able to go back home since.

Finding Community

A gay friend of mine introduced me to organisations that support LGBTQ persons in the area. URM was one of those organisations. Thanks to joining them, I have found solace and a place to distract myself and forget about all my problems. In 2018, February, URM organised a trip for us to Mombasa and while there, I was able to connect and network with other LBQ women.

| **NAIROBI**
| (Nai)

*Advice to my younger self*

Relax. Just learn how to breathe and trust that you are making the right choices. You are doing your best and you are fine! Everything that looks confusing, messy and problematic right now will turn out to be your best qualities and they will draw people to you and build you up. It is not going to be easy but look forward to growing older. Trust in yourself a little bit more because you are good and you got this.

**The Backstory**

I am a lesbian. My mum says as a child, I was bossy and domineering even when playing with other children.

I am a firstborn of two biological siblings, but there are four of us when my step-siblings are included. My mum had me when she was young and my father left us soon after I was born. I grew up with my grandmother until I was 11-years-old and then moved to live with my mum in Nairobi. My mum's family is close-knit, so her sisters and my grandmother all played a role in bringing me up. They are some of the strongest women I know and I have learnt invaluable lessons from each one of them and I consider all of them to be my mums. Because I was born when my mum and her siblings were young, I have grown with them and I've seen them go to hell and back. I am a product of their collective care and I would not trade any of my experiences for anything.

Looking back at my childhood now, I believe I had to do a lot of growing up before my time. When I joined school, I used to speak only in my mother tongue until my teacher castigated me telling me that it was bad

thing to do. So I stopped and since then, I have never spoken or been able to speak in my mother tongue.

In spite of being 'weird' and strong-willed, I was often picked on due to my small stature. I hated going to the salon and especially sitting under the blow-dryer but I loved how my hair looked when I had beads added to my hair extensions. At some point, my grandmother got exhausted with all the pleading she had to do to get me to sit still when I used to get my hair done, that she decided to have it shaved off by a barber. The following day, when I went to school my classmates teased me about my bald head while chanting the song 'kipara ngoto' (bald head).

You would assume that my mum living in Nairobi gave me bragging rights in school, but as life would have it, mean kids made fun of this and I'd always have to explain why I was fatherless or without siblings (initially), why I was bald and why I lived away from my mother. Those were complex questions that I had no answers to at the time. In order to cope, I detached from the hurtful things said to me and distanced myself, which has resulted in what is now described as a quirky personality.

With all of this happening, I was desperate to go to a boarding school and I begged my grandmother to transfer me. We made a deal, she promised to find me a boarding school if I became the top student in my class. I accepted the challenge and did exactly that. My grandmother true to her word also fulfilled her end of the bargain and got me into a boarding school, but before that academic year began, my mum came home and gave me an option of either proceeding to boarding school or moving to Nairobi with her. For an 11-year-old, this was a no-brainer. The opportunity to live in Nairobi was the best news and I abandoned the boarding school idea and chose to move to Nairobi with my mum. It is worthwhile to note my mum always encouraged me to make my own choices and finding a new school was a decision she let me make.

The Nairobi Experience

My new school in Nairobi was a public school and I picked it because it was huge, had an electric bell and the uniform was

pink, which was my favourite colour at that time. It was in the Eastlands area of the city. Culture shock set in quickly. You see, back at my old school, we would take packed lunch and a flask of tea for our morning break, but there I was in this public school, and the only child in my class carrying a tea flask to school. I tried to convince my mother that carrying the tea flask attracted unnecessary stares from other students, but my mum would not have it. I took matters into my own hands and intentionally broke the flask.

Having done away with the flask, it wasn't long before the teasing which I thought I'd left upcountry followed me to this new school. There was a boy who used to bully me a lot because of the way I spoke Kiswahili, and because I wasn't able to speak the Eastlands slang. Because of his actions, my personality took another huge blow and turned me into the person I became when I went to high school.

The Discovery

I started realizing that I was different because I could not understand why other girls were so keen to get noticed by the boys, when weirdly enough, that behaviour would piss me off most times. I turned my attention to playing and wanted to maximise my play time while still in primary school, because my aunt had told me that in high school, our breaks would be spent basking in the sun not playing.

Different things and situations stand out as significant now but back then I had no way of processing it to a concrete thought. The earliest memory I have of kissing a girl is distant. I remember there was a group of us playing and someone pushed one of the younger girls. I called out the person who had pushed her as she in turn ran away and went to the dormitory to hide under her bed. I ran after her and found myself under the bed with her. While consoling her, I found myself kissing her. I didn't think much of it; it was just something I did to express how sorry I was for how she was feeling.

When I got to upper primary, while other students were experimenting with each other, I was indifferent to the search for

attention. To me, boys were high energy and too self-centred so I struggled to understand them. I was more concerned about how my body wasn't blooming in the same way as the other girls. I would find myself questioning if I was really a girl or if anything was wrong with me. The delayed arrival of my periods did not make the situation any better. Little did I know I was to wait until the end of my second year of high school and by the time they showed up, I had asked myself so many questions, all mostly around my gender. I wondered whether my mother had forgotten to tell me something about myself.

High school went by without anything unconventional happening though I would often wonder why I was uninterested in anything to do with boys like the other girls. However, there is a memory that stands out for me. It involved this beautiful girl who was older than me, with a deep crusty voice and I would be so smitten every time she spoke to me. That feeling was surreal, but I would quickly move on to other things and I never tried to make sense of the way her voice would really affect me.

After finishing high school, my aunt gifted me a smartphone for performing well in my exams. Having a phone opened up a whole new world for me and thanks to Google, I was able to get answers to all the questions that I had about myself. One day, I came across a girl's coming out story, which I found intense and heavy to digest. I started my quest into finding out how someone knew they were gay. The answers I found were interesting and relatable and looking back, those were very telling signs.

With high school now behind me, I was keen to make up for the things that I missed out on while in school. I met my first 'boyfriend' while I was waiting to join college. He wore a ring which he said was worn by atheists. Even though he said it as a joke, I was already questioning the existence of God. I liked our connection because we were able to have conversations about religion and spirituality. The first time he kissed me I remember feeling like I had done something wrong. So, I quickly excused myself and went home. I broke up with him immediately after that.

While in university, I met boyfriend number two. He was a tall, handsome, light-skinned man, who played the guitar and was

very eloquent, though he constantly kept correcting my grammar. Anyway, at the time, my major concern was losing my virginity, as it seemed I was the only one in the group without any interesting sexual experiences to share. This fact bothered me and after talking through it with one of my friends, she encouraged and convinced me to go have sex with him. I made plans to get 'it' done and so one evening after night out, I ended up at his place and we had sex.

Interesting thing is, the girl friend who encouraged me to have sex with my then boyfriend is the first woman I had sex with. When it happened, I was in shock but strangely the experience felt right, different and much better than how I had ever felt with a man. Every time we had sex though, I was left with confusing questions. Unfortunately, she was not interested in helping me get answers. It quickly became obvious that she was playing with my feelings, and so I decided to move on.

After the Moment

My journey after that episode was never really linear. That first encounter with a woman left me messed up and I went back to sleeping with men just to prove to myself that sleeping with her was nothing. Funny thing is all the men I slept with were feminine presenting. In my muddle about my identity, I went from saying I was bisexual to queer. I found it hard to identify as a lesbian because the word felt permanent or something that came with shame.

As I continued to try to figure my identity out, I turned to the internet and began looking for an online community and I was determined to find individuals with whom I could identify locally. After countless Google searches, I landed on AFRA-Kenya. Thanks to them, I got to attend my first LBQ event and for the very first time, I met lesbians who were proud of who they are. I was still not as confident as them, but the event left an impression on me.

After some time, I met the first woman with who I ever got into a serious relationship after attending an LBQ event. Our relationship was rocky, but that experience galvanized my reality as a lesbian. Seeing how open and fearless she was and how she stood for

her truth encouraged me to work towards accepting myself fully. I still feel like I am a work in progress. I am proud of who I am as a woman and my mothers are everything to me. Everything that I am is thanks to them.



Advice to my younger self.

Well done for being the curious person that you are and continue being hungry for information. That knowledge will get you far. And forgive yourself for the mistakes that you will make.



The Backstory

I am 25-years-old and I was a joker as a child and a girly girl. I identify as a non- binary queer person.

I am the third born in a family of seven. I was a girls' girl in our village as most other girls were tom boys, climbing trees and taking care of animals. I on the other hand, preferred to stay at home with my doll which I had until Class Eight. I was a bit of a book-worm.

My family were 'kind of' liberal in the beginning, and we were encouraged to be free spirited. Before my brother was born, we the four girls were allowed to dress in whatever made one comfortable and even helped our father with his carpentry work. This liberalism lasted only until my brother tried to wear a dress which resulted in him getting a severe beating.

Religion.

When I was in Class Six, my family became very religious and we started attending Prophet Owuor's Ministry of Repentance and Holiness church. A lot of things changed in our lives and we were forced to wear long dresses and think a lot about the end times.

I was part of the worship team in the church. There were rules on how to dress, long periods of fasting, and numerous crusades. If one wanted to get married they would have to pray and fast, and then approach the pastor who would then pick the right fiancée for the individual. Even after you were engaged, you weren't

allowed to be alone together unless there was a chaperon, otherwise that would have been termed as fornication and the engagement would be called off.

There was a time when the ‘prophet’ prophesied on a tsunami that would hit the Caribbean region because they were condoning homosexuality. The tsunami did happen and the rejoicing that took place in the church, in spite of the death and destruction, left me wondering why people would celebrate the suffering of others, their sexual orientation notwithstanding!

What finally pushed me to rebel and leave was the gender biases in the church. The women were being expected to be the ones cooking as the men attended the services. Women were not allowed to ride on boda-bodas because the sitting position ‘would expose them’. I began to question why women seemed a lot more oppressed in this church compared to the other religions.

I started distancing myself from the church when I was in high school. Initially, I was not very open about my move away from the church to my mum. In order to get away from the church and home, I turned my attention to my studies with the aim of getting into university. My plan worked out in the end to a point, but whenever I visited them I had to attend church and bible study was mandatory whenever my mum was around.

I got very mixed reactions from my parents when I announced that I was leaving the church. I told them that I wanted to follow my own path with God by myself. My dad apologised for making me feel coerced into attending church or for imposing their religious views on me while my mum was adamant stating that she had chosen the right path for me.

The Discovery.

My high school period was the beginning of my attraction to other girls. I was in a boarding school outside of Eldoret town and there was this girl from Nairobi, in Form Four, who continuously stood out for me during entertainment sessions. I would get this desire to make contact with her and for her to be my friend, I just could not understand--why? She finished school without me ever speaking to her. Then there was another girl Form Three who

was very introverted and mysterious, but I found her interesting and yet again, I had a yearning to have her as a friend.

I cannot quite remember when I first found out my identity because that memory is clouded with a lot of trauma. I was around 17 and in an abusive relationship with a man who was older than me. I know I was living in fear while we were together. After attending the **Out Film Festival** of either 2014 or 2015, I broke up with him and also came out to him as bisexual. My sister was the second person that I came out to. I'm grateful that she has been very supportive of me because she is also queer.

It was around this time I was invited to the Solace Project where I came out as a bisexual woman. My sister accompanied me to this first meeting. Unfortunately, after I came out there were some individuals who were hostile to me and other bisexuals stating that we were lying about our sexuality. I found that quite odd. Anyway, a few months later, I started dating a non-cis person who initially identified as lesbian, then non- binary. Few months after that I started identifying as a lesbian after realising having slept with a cis-gender man before did not negate my identity. I have continuously come out to my friends, some have left, some have stayed after that, but such is life.

I have not yet come out to my parents, though all my female siblings know, even though I am not sure what my last-born brother feels what queerness but he doesn't seem to care. Interestingly, I can have a conversation with the parents about my movement work.

Thirst for Knowledge

Fortunately, I was able to find most of my information online which precipitated me beginning to question who I really was. While at one of the Solace Project meetings, someone identified themselves as non-binary and I did not know what that was. It was thanks to my research on gender identities that I was able to uncover a lot. I stumbled upon information on gender fluidity and for a moment, I thought that described me. It was only until much later though that I came out as non-binary because I did not feel androgynous enough at the beginning to identify as non- binary.

Only after I came across the works of Audrey Lorde and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie did I make the transition to a more androgynous presentation. I had come across a notion that looked down on femininity and portrayed it as weakness for anyone who identified as non-binary.

While at university I joined K-CLA and during a needs assessment exercise, I identified as non-binary on the form. I did not even think anyone would have noticed but I got invited to join a support group run by Jinsiangu the following year.

Being part of this support group made me feel affirmed and fulfilled. Initially, my intention was to go to the meeting to prove a point. So I decided to be present as feminine, dressed in a jump suit as I went for the session just to see how I would be received. Even though I presented myself in this way, I did not have the right language to describe my experiences nor explain myself. However, I have grown and learnt a lot since that meeting.

I have only come out to a few people in the community about being non-binary, though sadly I've not received much validation which is quite unsettling.

*Advice to my younger self.*

Forget about religion and start experimenting sexually early in life. This will save you a lot of drama. Don't hold back and don't worry about mum and her Christian views. Be true to yourself and don't worry about trying to fit in.

**The Backstory**

I identify as a transgender man. I was a know-it-all, rebellious, stubborn, naughty but funny kid. In school, I was liked by teachers because I was smart.

I grew up in a single parent home. My dad walked out on us when I was four years old so it was just my mum, my sister and I. As my mum was working most times, my sister and I spent a lot of time together. We lived and went to school in the Kibra slums during our younger years.

My first trans moment happened when I was a child. I was in Class One and six years old. I was

playing football would always remove my clothes at some point while playing and just play in my boxers. This is a habit that has stuck with me and still happens when I am working out, where I shed a lot of my clothes. So, this time I was playing football in my boxers which I had stolen from another student in school, when one of the kids asked me why I was wearing boxers. They proceeded to start picking on me. I was embarrassed, offended, stopped playing, picked my clothes and went home. I never really understood what that was about until later on when I realised that girls are not supposed to wear boxers. That incident made me start asking questions as to whether I was truly a girl.

I went to three different schools. The first one was all girls, the second and third were both co-educational

schools, though the second was very strict and there was limited interaction between the sexes, while the third was liberal. The schools varied and gave me a sense of diversity of how genders existed. For instance, in the all-girls' school, girls didn't give as much attention to their looks as compared to the mixed schools.

From the age of 11-12, I was bussed off to boarding school and it was a huge culture shock for me having come from a small household like ours. I was used to a small space with few people then there was boarding life, where we were sleeping in crowded dormitories. I also started noticing older girls with weird features like big breasts. I also fell victim to teasing –bullying. I was picked on because of my hair, braces, or weight. All this taunting really got to me. High school, turned out to be a really weird space for me. I was constantly observing people's behaviour, their actions, and how they interacted with one another. I actually doubt that many people would remember me from then.

The Discovery

Growing up, I did not think much on what was for boys or girls. However, as I kept growing, I realised that the things I would do and how I would do them, would be considered or termed 'boyish'. I realised I did not like the same things that girls liked. Plus, my mum used to dress me up like a boy anyway, since she equally as "tom- boyish" in the way she dressed since she liked wearing sportswear. There were other events that occurred to me as I was growing up that I consider interesting. When I was in Class Four, my teacher called me aside and asked me to start wearing a bra. Fortunately, my aunt gifted me with two sports bras which I wore for the next ten years. Then in Class Six when my breasts started showing, I was in great denial and all I thought was that I had grown fat. I tried to work out targeting my abdomen but that still did not work, when I got my period couple of years later, the truth hit me.

It was a bit of shock for me when I experienced my first period. It was the second term of the school year and I was in Class Seven and it happened on a Sunday. We were playing football with my friends and when I told them I had received my periods they didn't believe me. I had to go show them how my underwear was soiled

in blood in the toilet. I remember we locked ourselves in one of the cubicles and they confirmed that I was experiencing my periods. This was a super weird moment for me because growing up, I never thought I would ever get periods since I'd always felt like a boy. I was astonished by this turn of events.

Looking back, I must have always known I was different because, when I was in Class Two, I once told my mum I liked another girl in a "boy way". My mum pushed back the thought and asked me to never play with the girl again. I was around seven – eight years old. Then again in Class Six, when I told my mum yet again that I liked another girl, she changed my school citing that the boarding school experience was making me think that way. I was in my pre-teen years at this time. Yet again, when I was around 15-16, I told my mum the same thing and she acted the same way, by moving me to another school.

By this time, I accepted that I was a girl who liked girls. Thankfully, I knew what a lesbian was, though I was not too familiar with the concept of being transgender. I remember that my first sexual fantasies were with women.

I opened a Twitter account when I was in my first year of high school. Having this account gave me the opportunity to fully express myself. I found an open interactive community on Twitter that I enjoyed connecting with.

The First Moment

While in Form Three, my sexual urges started getting stronger and I started approaching other girls. However, it took a year before I got my first kiss. I was still very closeted when all this was taking place. My first kiss, earned me my first girlfriend. She was two years older and our relationship was both chaotic and romantic. Sadly, this love affair ended in tears after I discovered she started a new relationship with a guy while she was in university.

Coming Out

I came out to my mum after completing high school, and she promptly kicked me out. After being kicked out, I started living my reality which was such fun! Sadly, my mum died soon after I finished high school, but we were able to talk about my sexuality.

She struggled to make peace with it, was not happy and so we agreed there was nothing that could be done but love and support one another.

After high school all I wanted to do was to live out my desires, so for about three to four years, my life was fun but messy. Though something told me that I needed to slow down and seek help. I was able to use the services of a therapist and having a stable job, helped me to start getting things into perspective. I also began appreciating my body.

Trans Acceptance

I first came out to my partner at that time. We talked about it first and we tried to solve this 'problem' together but that failed miserably. Then I spoke to my therapist.

Transitioning is currently my next big move and I deeply desire to be a Leo man, therefore I am only waiting for July or August to get my first shot of testosterone or T-shot which I have been saving up for for close to two years now. I am not rushing this process and therefore I'm enjoying every step and process of my journey. I continue loving myself daily and I'm also supported by members of the trans community, which is such a diverse community and I'm able to learn from different people and their journeys. That is always a beautiful experience.



Advice to my younger self.

Be gracious to yourself and the family as you go in this journey of healing. Don't take yourself too seriously and be kind to yourself as you get to discover you. Things are going to be ok and you'll do a fine job. Take your studies seriously and it will make a huge difference in the long-run. You will turn out well.



The Backstory

I am a bisexual woman and I was a quiet, mysterious and very rebellious child.

We were three siblings initially, though my brother passed on. I am an orphan and was raised by my adopted family. We were an average family and lived a decent life and lacked for nothing.

I had a strained relationship with my biological mum before she passed on and unfortunately I was not able to mend this relationship. We used to fight a lot and I think that was caused by my abandonment issues which showed in me running away from home or spending time away from home. I became my own person early in life and I believe this sense of independence was a struggle for my mum and my siblings.

Even though I lived a fairly normal life, I remember this one day at home, my step-dad was having an argument with someone and the next thing I remember, I was flung across a field. I don't know why this happened but that is a memory that has stuck with me over the years. I however harbour no bitterness or need to revenge for such hurtful things that were done to me as a child. Looking back now, I wonder how I survived that experience.

The Discovery

When I was in my first year of high school, I experienced a different and strange feeling, and it was towards another girl who was in form 3. This was literally a week after I joined the school and the feeling left me bewildered. The feelings were so strong and every time I would see the girl, I would literally tremble. Furthermore, she was the head of entertainment and this was an area that I had a great interest in as well. I did not understand my feelings or have a name for them. I did not have feel any need to act on it as I thought maybe it was just a crush that would pass with time. I kept having the same feelings for this girl until she left school a year later. There were rumours of girls being lesbians and lots of denials and counter denials. This was during my first two years of high school.

I had expected these feelings would disappear over time. There was one time an attack was being planned on two girls who were rumoured to be lesbians. The instigator of this attack happened to be my bunkmate. When I discovered this plan, I called her out on this by pointing out her own weaknesses. Fortunately, this dissuaded her and the plan was abandoned. I did this because not only was it wrong, but also because my best friend and I would spend Saturday nights together, and I didn't want something so innocent to be turned into a witch hunt just because we were two girls sharing a bed. After thwarting my bunkmate's plans, she held a grudge against me, and she started spreading rumours about me saying that I was a sleepwalker and was involved in demonic practices.

I did not even know when I got to identify as bi, for during my whole high school years, I never dated or had feelings for guys.

However, there was a girl who joined our school for one year and it happened that my friend and I both had a crush on this girl. My friend approached this new girl before I did and that bothered me and when I confronted my friend, she admitted that she too was attracted to this girl. We both decide that we will befriend her. We eventually became close friends, sharing our snacks, fetching water for one another, and looking out for each other. When the crush left school, she distributed some of her stuff between the

two of us. Fortunately, I was never accused of being a lesbian or anything like that while in high school, something I am grateful for.

Coming Out

When I started dating after high school, it was mostly men, but when I was between, 22 or 23 years my feelings for girls/ women and other genders returned. I was in denial and convinced myself that it was a phase that I had passed. However, I realized that what I was feeling was not just a phase but was real and I could not try fighting it.

The first time I was asked about my sexuality I casually said I am bi without understanding the baggage that comes with identifying as a bisexual woman within the community. What followed were several instances of being misunderstood and being judged as a confused person trying to experiment. I had to keep affirming myself that this was how I was most comfortable and there was no need to carry any shame with my identity and so I started embracing my bisexuality at the age of 23.

My family thought it was one of my many crazy episodes when I came out to them. I was already considered the black sheep of the family and so they were dismissive of me.

The Journey So Far

My advice to anyone on this journey is to be honest with yourself and your identity. On dating men—my experience with them has been interesting. I'm confronted with invitations to threesomes from straight men and it makes me wonder how people perceive me. I've also learned to master the art of dating and sifting carefully the men I date because dating men can be so taxing at times. I am not attracted to excessively masculine men and therefore, prefer them tender, soft and respectful. I'm at that age where I can choose whom I want to be with. I prefer dating queer men and stay away from heterosexual men.

My first experience while dating a woman was different especially the sex part. I was so vulnerable and confused and didn't know what to do with myself. I have been left an emotional wreck after dating women, which doesn't happen after I've split up with guys.

Maybe it is because I have zero expectations from men since at the back of my mind, I believe that they will disappoint.

Biphobia Experience

I once dated a lesbian who was constantly trying to change me because she was uncomfortable with me dating men. She was manipulative and emotionally abusive. She didn't even take the time to understand what bisexuality was about, even though I embraced her for who they were. She really got me to the point I started doubting my own sexual identity. I eventually called it quits and decided that I will not get entangled with anyone who isn't comfortable with my bisexuality or isn't out of the closet. I have been a lot happier since I made that decision.



Throwback

If I could go back in time, I would give my younger self a lot of hugs, back rubs and attention. My childhood was not the best and I am now dealing with lots of trauma and hurt from that period.



The Backstory

I'm a 28-year-old gay man and I was generally a happy but introverted child.

I come from a middle-class family, with both my parents working in the armed forces. I have a younger sibling and Nairobi is my home town. I loved watching TV, playing though I didn't like sports, and loved being creative especially with arts and crafts. I went to Sunday school and was very good at school. Our home was tense because my dad was very abusive towards my brother and me, and our parents argued a lot. My dad was transferred around the country a lot too, which I liked because I didn't like the way he treated us.

THE DISCOVERY

I began realising that I was more feminine than other boys when I was as young as eight or nine years old. I preferred sitting quietly during our break time or being in the library reading a book rather than being outdoors. This was unlike most boys my age that played sports mostly football and other physical games. I found such activities too intense.

I was maybe 10 or 11 when I started experimenting with same-sex attractions. It felt pretty innocuous when it happened. I was attracted to friends but didn't know exactly what to do with these feelings. I was easily drawn to guys who were kind, open and affectionate. I wanted them to be my boyfriend so that we could be even closer.

I didn't know how to describe what I felt nor was I aware of the terminology, but because my feminine characteristics were apparent, I got called a 'dame-chali' which is sheng for 'girl-boy' and other nicknames. I didn't know what gay was until my adolescent years.

Being too scared to act on what I desired, I didn't engage in masturbation or any form of intimacy, nor did I venture online to find out more information. I feared that once I acted on it, it would be too late to 'correct' myself and become gay.

I didn't have anyone that I could confide in. Not a one. I was afraid my parents would be very upset if there was even a hint that I was gay. It was only until I was in high school that I made friends with people who were like me and even then, we never really had a conversation about 'our thing'. But as I got older and my own sexuality/ sexual orientation crystalized, I made the choice to become really religious, hoping that my feelings and the attractions would disappear on their own. No matter how religious I became or acted, nothing changed. I therefore started accepting my 'dirty little secret'.

After the discovery

After my first sexual experience I knew there was no going back. It felt great being able to express myself and so I sought out more encounters. I made my peace with being gay and accepted myself for whom I am. It was a highly cathartic experience and it felt as if a heavy burden was taken off my shoulders.

When I left high school, I made more friends with gay/ queer people on social media (especially Facebook) and became active in LGBTQ organising. Coming out to myself and learning to accept me changed my life for the better. I decided that I was not going to hide my sexuality by dating girls or saying that I was going to marry a woman. Embracing myself is one of the best things I ever did.

This collection of stories portrays different aspects of the LGBTQ+ experiences, their childhood struggles in understanding sex, gender roles, sexuality and gender identity.

In these deeply moving and empowering stories of LGBTQ+ persons in Kenya, readers will understand the lives of LGBTQ+ people growing up, from the beginning of their childhood experience to their young adult lives they tell these remarkable and under-told stories.



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