

VOCA

'young people's
voices on
human rights
issues'

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Reshaping the African SOGI narrative

It is not often that we hear about positive experiences of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) diverse people. In looking at the current focus of civil society, SOGI issues are streamlined into HIV/AIDS, stigma and discrimination and unfavourable legislative reform. Our research as Success Capital has found all these are considered as negative aspects of being a part of the SOGI community.

Our network of youth volunteers and beneficiaries believe there is more to us as people. We never truly understand ambitions and worries that dictate a young person's day to day life. For instance; we rarely see professional development as a part of civil society work or emotional intelligence training for the workplace and navigating life. These are examples that support a community to thrive. As Success Capital we want to support our people in the best way we can by using our own experiences, diverse pool of skills and the safety of having someone relate to you in a way no mainstream teacher, mentor or curriculum can.

We believe there is value in sharing positive stories of SOGI persons without undermining or devaluing the more unfortunate experiences of violence and discrimination. This showcases that SOGI persons are value-adding members of society with dreams, talents and triumphs that any other person can have. This is a start to reshaping how young SOGI persons are and can be understood.

VOCA recognises the value of diversity. This special issue reveals the aspirations, experiences and journeys of various youth with non-conforming sexual orientation in this increasingly complex and changing world, starting with our very own SOGI Lead volunteer. These are untold narrations among many other who do not have the platform or the courage to share their stories. This is one way in which we work towards fulfilling our strategic vision in being a leading source for young people's information needs.

- Sharon Tsayang, *Treasurer*

Reflections from student to employment

I found myself a statistic when I completed school in June 2015. Moving around trying to figure out what best I should do with a piece of paper in hand that couldn't demonstrate to potential employers why I deserve a job more than others. By the grace of God, I found myself a job in December. For me, it felt like transitioning from that 'gay fabulous' self of expression to the world to bein-

g more corporate and politically correct. When looking to fit this new 'role' I was to act out daily: I found myself looking for clothes at the men's section for the first time ever. Growing up without a dad clearly did not help. I needed to teach myself how 'to be a man'. Earlier this year, I recall feeling the need to 'come out' to my boss. I felt trapped. I was living a lie I could not contin-

ue to stomach. Despite a few homophobic comments she made, I was glad she was an understanding leader. I have since been confident enough to be me freely and carry out my work diligently. This experience has taught me that we must be accepting of ourselves first before the world is accepting of us.

- Thulani Saone, *SOGI Lead*

'We can no longer afford to have a hand full of familiar faces seem to own the copyright to SOGI human rights work as has been done over the last two decades.'



Who owns the SOGI movement?

A quick review of media and civil society reports reveals three key aspects of SOGI NGO work. 1) Young people are more often excluded in the design, development and implementation of human rights work, 2) There is a gap between what SOGI NGOs provide and the needs of SOGI persons and 3)

Established relationships impede the growth of new initiatives. I shall tackle each one respectively.

My first observation reveals that there are too few opportunities for youth to be involved in civil society work. When we first started out with a self-funded social entrepreneurship competition in 2013; youth participants lamented the lack of progressive spaces for youth engagement or those where they could be [mentored](#). It seems there are no readily available and funded SOGI NGO fellowships, internships or graduate opportunities in Southern Africa to ensure a pipeline of talent for future SOGI work. In addition there is a lack of meaningful incentives where young people might have opportunities to contribute.

The second observation reveals the complex dynamics of donor funding priorities and SOGI NGO beneficiaries' needs. Too often grant writing exercises require forgoing certain beneficiary interests to ensure an NGO can secure funding. 'Interests' being the key word as needs are not sufficient for human rights work. We have found young SOGI persons to be interested in professional development, cultivating personal interests and networking for exploring ideas for collaborative work with peers. The parameters of grant writing encourage innovation yet simultaneously impede this by dictating the terms in which it is to occur.

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A young Motswana living in South Africa

Botswana's population is relatively small when compared to South Africa. So, you can imagine an even smaller pool of potential partners for some of us. Having studied in South Africa; I can express myself more freely there because of the enabling environment and because I am away from family. SOGI specific sexual health products and information are more readily available in South Africa compared to Botswana, where only a hand full of Non-governmental Organisations provide. The variety of nude bars, sex shops and SOGI specific social environments make it ideal for one to fully explore certain aspects of who they are. This not only influences one's confidence in some way, but you learn a lot more from exposure than from just being limited to discrimination - even within the SOGI community.

I have learned to better understand my likes, needs and desires because of a more enabling environment. This means I can be comfortable in my own skin, I can make better decisions and still be responsible. It is dream many of us have, but only a few can get to experience when given the chance.



- Thuto Rammoge, *SOGI Activist & lead litigant in the T Rammoge & others v Attorney General [2014] MAHGB-000175-13 landmark case*

Dear Diary

As a proud lesbian woman who had just come out of an abusive relationship, I had been left broken and bitter. I remember thinking how moving to China would be the perfect opportunity to start afresh; run away from all that was wrong with my life, reinvent myself and who knows... maybe even find cross-continental love.

Wuxi is a small developing city not far from Shanghai in the Jiangsu Province. With an estimated population of 7 million, I hoped to make new friends and immerse myself in the culture and society, more especially the LGBTIQ community. Coming from South Africa where people, especially black lesbians, are not shy to be activists; none of my expectations were realised. My year in Wuxi taught me that China is very traditional in thinking and ways of life despite rapid development and Westernisation.

There are significant language barriers. I found it difficult to make friends. The simplicity of giving a →

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The third observation reveals that long serving activists dominate and enjoy certain relationships with 'the powers that be' in resourcing human rights work. At times these relations go beyond professional; leaving little room for the young vibrant and passionate activists that do not understand these dynamics. This is like a job vacancy that is earmarked for a foreign national or someone who previously worked as a consultant or contractor. How can a graduate filled with hope and armed with an education compete against someone who has the advantage of established relations with the advertising organisation? A lot of new SOGI NGOs are established by youth who decided to create their own space to contribute in the best way they know how to; without the limitations of being dictated to or forgoing the interests of peers by merely focusing on predetermined 'needs'. This is seen in Botswana, Mauritius, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

I highlight these three aspects because they are all interrelated. Young people comprise of over 60% of Sub-Saharan Africa and Botswana's populations. Unemployment, inequality and the three above forms of exclusion interplay in the experiences of young SOGI activists. We can no longer afford to have a hand full of familiar faces seem to own the copyright to SOGI human rights work as has been done over the last two decades. Evidence of this is in the regurgitating of projects, increasingly evolving ways of inequality and [lack of long-term change](#) for SOGI persons. The very systems they challenge in government and society are replicated within civil society. There is a need to understand the value in having more voices owning and working towards the wider vision of equality and justice than having a seasoned few.

- Dumiso Gatsha, *Editor*

←compliment or receiving gifts is warped in Chinese culture. I found myself befriending other expatriates. Keeping up appearances is highly regarded. I learned of the marriage of convenience; where a gay man marries a lesbian woman and they lead separate lives with their respective same-sex partners. They only ever interact when there are family gatherings. This is similar back home where many prefer to keep their sexuality separate from the construct of family. Family is highly regarded in China. Getting married and having children are paramount goals parents have for their offspring.

Having come out to my mother, I could somewhat relate because she never understood my sexuality until recently. Her concerns were on what other people would think or say. I had decided to live my life fully and China was to be that platform. Little did I know that my 'gaydar' would be off, the way people dressed and how they held hands confused me further. Overall, I learned a lot more about myself, the world and the East. This is the reason why I decided to return. I now get to be in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province. Here's to another year for finding myself and the elusive LGBTIQ community.

- Loane Ledwaba, *LGBTIQ activist*



How I understand activism

Activism is the ability to stand up firmly and advocate for any living organism's rights. It could be animals, humans, the environment. I focus on human rights. The level of activism in Botswana is still low given the daily violation of human rights, on particularly LGBT people. A lot of people see violations but they are too reluctant to stand up and advocate for others or even for themselves.

Young people are still held back by how other people surrounding them would react seeing them lobbying for other people's rights especially marginalized groups such as LGBT, sex workers, PLHIV and so forth. Young people should be an active part of human rights defending organizations in Botswana, including taking part in workshops and getting to learn more about rights. These are gaps that need to be inclusive and encouraging for the participation of young people.

Some young people are hindered by obstacles of possible perceptions or reactions of when they are seen advocating for gay rights. Competing interests also lead to reluctance to take part in social movements. Many of us are too reluctant to stand up and advocate even for ourselves as individuals. I think a lack of motivation plays a part in this. I see myself in future actively participating in lobbying for people's rights and educating young people like myself on human rights issues.

- Odirile Letsatsi, *Success Capital* volunteer & litigant in *T Rammoge & others v Attorney General* [2014] MAHGB-000175-13; see [our previous blog](#) for firsthand accounts.

My childhood was a cheque

Can you believe that it shouldn't take a lot of years for HIV to be visible, especially for infant infection? In my case it took ten years for it to be noticed. I remember those ten years as stress free with no worries. I never thought that life will change within the blink of an eye and it will all go down the drain.

The life of a pill now became my story. I began writing tear filled chapters of my life. The fact that I was HIV+ enraged me every day. The idea of the life before me made me so afraid that I didn't know what to do or how to go about it. I broke more and more as years went on. I lost my way.

People can only ever understand of paper and not what one goes through. I pose questions that cannot be answered, face fears some cannot even imagine. When a cry becomes your best friend, danger is upon you. I cried all my strength away. The more tears down my cheeks, the more the road became dark.

I could only blame and never get an explanation for why I must bear this burden. At the age of ten I had to transform into a woman. My childhood was a cheque that had to be withdrawn. It could not be returned to its rightful owner and it was never mine to own in the first place.

- Masedi Thata Kewamodimo, *Coordinator - Feminist Collective, a group within Success Capital*

Success Capital



With just over 3 years in existence; we have learned and succeeded in understanding what works for the many vulnerable of persons in society. We pride ourselves in having young people that can shape the future they want through intellectual capital, peer engagement & focusing on the quality of experiences. Our mission is clear; we build knowledge on human rights; share this knowledge and empower young people for civic action in its variant forms. This includes Art, Dialogues, Poetry, Social Media, Research, Engaging Policy Makers and our newly established *VOCA*. Learn more about our philosophy & history: <https://www.successcapitalngo.com/>. If you'd like to contribute, contact coordinator@successcapitalngo.com.