A conceptual framework for the involvement of parents and families in advocacy for LGBTI equality and freedom in Southern Africa – based on real-life experience
This publication is called Roots because of the powerful comments from some of the parents of LGBTI people who participated in producing the publication that their LGBTI children are “from the same tree branch” as them, and that the involvement of families can enable LGBTI people to find an authentic “sense of belonging that is true to their roots”.

This paper is dedicated to the late Mally Simelane, who paved the way for parent advocates through love and faith, showing others they too can speak out in support of their child.
roots - the involvement of parents and families in advocacy for LGBTI equality and freedom in Southern Africa

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Wendy Kessman

Wendy Kessman is an activist, researcher, and writer who has worked with non-governmental organizations and LGBTIQ communities for the past 12 years. Their work aims to promote research at the community-level to build evidence that supports understanding and advocacy. They write on queerness in many things including family, love, and economies, and have their Master’s of Science in Global Health from the University of California, San Francisco. They are home in Johannesburg, California, and eSwatini.

Tahila Pimental

Tahila is a researcher and writer from Mozambique. Her research interests range from human rights, gender rights, women’s rights, social justice and LGBTI rights. She has an MPhil in African and Gender Studies from the University of Cape Town (UCT), and her background is Sociology and Gender Studies. Her research, writing and editing experience involves a broad range of regional and International NGOs and Foundations based in Southern Africa and the Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

a. Family Identity 7
b. This Study 9

CHAPTER 1: PARENTS, FAMILIES, & LGBTI CHILDREN

a. Values 11
b. Family Values and the State 11
c. (De)Criminalization 12
d. Gender Recognition 13
e. Health Care 14
f. Schooling 14
g. Family Relationships 16
h. The Role of the Community 19
i. Hopes, Fears, and Expectations 20
   i. Gender 20
   ii. Family Finances 21
   iii. Religion 22
   iv. Rites of Passage 24
   v. Violence, Rejection and Resistance 25
   vi. Love 26
j. Communication and Disclosure 29
   i. Language 30
   ii. Silence 30
   iii. Learning and Adjusting 32

CHAPTER 2: APPROACHES TO FAMILY ADVOCACY

a. Family Networks 35
b. The Role of Allies in the Family 39
c. Working with Allies Outside Families 41
d. Role of the Media 43
e. Parents and Families as Advocates 45
   i. Opening the Home: Parenting the LGBTI Community 45
   ii. Going Public 45
   iii. Backlash and Resistance 46
   iv. Relations with Activists 47
   f. Recommendations 48

contents
Family Identity

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people in Southern Africa, family has never been limited to blood relations and in-laws. Partly by necessity, partly by choice, our LGBTI families have always been more inclusive. They have incorporated not just partners and close friends but supportive members of the larger community such as neighbours who provide safe spaces or other support.

Creating a new family after being rejected by one’s own can be liberating and empowering, but being accepted can heal and restore. In either case, whether existing families adapt or new families are created, the relationships change. There is no single definition of family: “It is not about having a father or a mother … but about how you are supported in the structure that you have.”

Because LGBTI identities and relationships can appear to differ so much from “traditional” ones, the families of sexual and gender minorities have to adapt more than many other families. As LGBTI people try to live their identities and shape their narratives, they are confronted with the often-opposing hopes and dreams of parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family, and the wider community.

Family dynamics are never simple or fixed. They adapt to new information all the time and are capable of accepting all kinds of novel situations and relationships. Even initially hostile family members can grow to accept their LGBTI children, grandchildren, siblings, and cousins, but the process takes time, emotional labour, vulnerability, and the courage to break silences.

Introduction
This Study

The stories shared in this paper by parents, siblings, other family members, and community organizers provide insights into what LGBTI family advocacy in Southern Africa is now, where we want it to be in the future, and how to get there. In the past, LGBTI activism in Southern Africa has focused mainly on mobilizing the LGBTI community and lobbying governments for legal and policy reforms. The role that families play has not received the attention it deserves. Yet rejection in the family is often the most painful, damaging homophobia, interphobia or transphobia that an LGBTI person experiences while being accepted by family is the best support.²

This paper reports on the experiences of LGBTI people and their families in five southern African countries—South Africa, Mozambique, Mauritius, Zimbabwe, and Botswana—and suggests ways to empower families to promote LGBTI acceptance in their homes, communities, and nations. We begin with the relationships between LGBTI “children” and their families, focusing on the key family dynamics revealed in interviews with family members. We then map the main challenges to family-based activism in southern Africa and discuss the importance of using messages in local languages and in forms that align with families’ and communities’ religious and cultural values. We conclude with a discussion of backlash and ways to resist it, and a final section makes recommendations based on what family members told us about their struggles and needs.

This paper is not meant to be the “last word” on the role of the family in LGBTI life in southern Africa. The topic is too varied to be exhausted in one study. Above all, the ability of families to provide refuge, acceptance, support, and love to their LGBTI members is immense and immeasurable.

² Although only one parent of a minor child was interviewed for this report, for convenience we use the terms parent and child to denote filial relationship regardless of age.
Values

What are the essential “family values”? The families we interviewed responded in various ways to this question. For Florah, a mother in Molepolole, Botswana, “what’s important is unity and for me to love them and them to love me.” For Sphasing Ngobese, a South African father, the key is “respect in terms of Zulu culture as the cornerstone of every successful family or child.”

Abel Gaobuse, another South African father, told us family was all about “living together, working together, helping each other and never looking down upon another family member.” Mosadithe Keanyama in Botswana proposed a memorable image, saying, “I want me and my children to be united and be the same tree branch.”

Equality is particularly important. LGBTI family members need to feel that their sexual or gender identity does not change how they are viewed or treated in the family. As a Zimbabwean parent explained, “what is important is … for [my LGBTI child] to feel free to be themselves … with us. They must feel like they are treated just like all the other children ….”

Family Values and the State

Family relations are complicated. Values are one thing. Reality is another. As a Zimbabwean parent told us, “some of the values [we want to live by] do not tally with the reality that is on the ground.” As this parent knew well from the reality in Zimbabwe, one factor that can affect how fully families live the values they profess is the state.

How governments view and treat LGBTI people can have a profound influence on relationships within families. For example, the criminalization of same-sex relations in Zimbabwe is a key factor in the rejection of LGBTI children by many families there. Conversely, in neighbour- ing Botswana, the 2019 ruling that its colonial-era sodomy laws were unconstitutional has removed the legal stigma there and, over time, will enable greater acceptance.

Accepting families understand the barriers posed by homophobic and transphobic states. At the same time, they know that abolishing a stigmatizing law or adopting a more accepting healthcare policy means little unless families take the initiative. Legal and policy reforms, as a Botswana activist commented, are “just a piece of paper.”

I want me and my children to be united and be the same tree branch.™

1 Interview with Flora Thebe, Botswana
2 Interview with Sphasing Ngobese, South Africa
3 Interview with Abel Gaobuse, South Africa
4 Interview with Gudzile Moyo, Zimbabwe
5 Interview with T.N., Zimbabwe
6 Interview with Urbens Kgapane, Botswana
7 Interview with Duduzile Moyo, Zimbabwe
8 Interview with Urbenia Kgwarae, Botswana

parents, families and LGBTI children

“LGBTI family members need to feel their sexual or gender identity does not change how they are viewed or treated in the family.”
When parents and families speak out against anti-LGBTI laws and policies, they show that these “pieces of paper” affect not only the targeted individuals but all those who love them. Parents understand at an intimate level how state power promotes either hatred or acceptance through criminalization, legal gender recognition, family law, marriage law, health policies, and education policies. Their experience within these systems has been deeply shaped by the state’s view of their child.

When parents accept a child’s gender identity, wanting the state to acknowledge it is a natural next step. Melinda Swift, a parent with Matimba.Org, a trans youth organization in South Africa, underlined the need for parents to support their child through this process: “We have an obligation to make sure our kids have those things in place so [that] when they want to move on with their lives they are set up and ready to roll.”

Gender Recognition

Through birth certificates, passports, and identity cards, the state also plays a fundamental role in affirming or denying citizens’ gender. When parents accept a child’s gender identity, wanting the state to acknowledge that identity is a natural next step. Melinda Swift, a parent with Matimba.Org, a trans youth organization in South Africa, underlined the need for parents to support their child through this process: “We have an obligation to make sure our kids have those things in place ”

Of the five countries, only Botswana and South Africa allow for gender to be altered on official documents, and the structural and financial barriers are formidable. As one South African parent told us, “we are very supportive [but] the only thing is that we don’t have money. If I had money, I was going to help her throughout the way.”

Most accepting parents of a trans child expressed the same desire to help. A key part of this sense of obligation is fear for the child’s safety, especially where gender diversity is illegal or gender-affirming healthcare inaccessible. A Zimbabwean sister explained, “I’m afraid that she might get arrested [when] she’s at the airport or something. When they see the passport [and] she looks it’s a female passport [yet] she looks like a man, what’s going to happen?”

Ultimately all law springs from family values. When parents and families speak out against anti-LGBTI laws and policies, they show that these “pieces of paper” affect not only the targeted individuals but all those who love them. Parents understand at an intimate level how state power promotes either hatred or acceptance through criminalization, legal gender recognition, family law, marriage law, health policies, and education policies. Their experience within these systems has been deeply shaped by the state’s view of their child.

(De)Criminalization

Criminalization tries to make families betray one of the most basic family values, protecting a child’s safety and well-being. If families stand by their values and offer support to an LGBTI member, they are made to feel “criminal” themselves, yet for accepting families, this is better than betraying their own, as the Zimbabwean sibling of a young gay man explained:

“I’m afraid that she might get arrested [when] she’s at the airport or something. When they see the passport [and] she looks it’s a female passport [yet] she looks like a man, what’s going to happen?”

Yet all law ultimately springs from family values. In Botswana, the court took family acceptance into account in overturning the sodomy law there, noting in its ruling that "whilst growing up, [the litigant on whose behalf the case was argued] knew that he was different and such difference has long been recognised by his parents." With decriminalization in Mozambique in 2015 and Botswana in 2019, and with a ruling in Mauritius expected in 2020, there is growing momentum for decriminalization in the region. As this trend opens space for greater social acceptance, it will be vital for courts, other state organs, media narratives, and community conversations to listen carefully to the impact that oppressive state laws and policies have on families with LGBTI members. Families exist within state structures, and legislation can either support LGBTI-friendly family values or undermine them.

Gender Recognition

Through birth certificates, passports, and identity cards, the state also plays a fundamental role in affirming or denying citizens’ gender. When parents accept a child’s gender identity, wanting the state to acknowledge that identity is a natural next step. Melinda Swift, a parent with Matimba.Org, a trans youth organization in South Africa, underlined the need for parents to support their child through this process: “We have an obligation to make sure our kids have those things in place so [that] when they want to move on with their lives they are set up and ready to roll.”

Of the five countries, only Botswana and South Africa allow for gender to be altered on official documents, and the structural and financial barriers are formidable. As one South African parent told us, “we are very supportive [but] the only thing is that we don’t have money. If I had money, I was going to help her throughout the way.”

Most accepting parents of a transgender child expressed the same desire to help. A key part of this sense of obligation is fear for the child’s safety, especially where gender diversity is illegal or gender-affirming healthcare inaccessible. A Zimbabwean sister explained, “I’m afraid that she might get arrested [when] she’s at the airport or something. When they see the passport [and] she looks it’s a female passport [yet] she looks like a man, what’s going to happen?”

Ultimately all law springs from family values. When parents and families speak out against anti-LGBTI laws and policies, they show that these “pieces of paper” affect not only the targeted individuals but all those who love them. Parents understand at an intimate level how state power promotes either hatred or acceptance through criminalization, legal gender recognition, family law, marriage law, health policies, and education policies. Their experience within these systems has been deeply shaped by the state’s view of their child.

(De)Criminalization

Criminalization tries to make families betray one of the most basic family values, protecting a child’s safety and well-being. If families stand by their values and offer support to an LGBTI member, they are made to feel “criminal” themselves, yet for accepting families, this is better than betraying their own, as the Zimbabwean sibling of a young gay man explained:

“I’m afraid that she might get arrested [when] she’s at the airport or something. When they see the passport [and] she looks it’s a female passport [yet] she looks like a man, what’s going to happen?”

Yet all law ultimately springs from family values. In Botswana, the court took family acceptance into account in overturning the sodomy law there, noting in its ruling that "whilst growing up, [the litigant on whose behalf the case was argued] knew that he was different and such difference has long been recognised by his parents." With decriminalization in Mozambique in 2015 and Botswana in 2019, and with a ruling in Mauritius expected in 2020, there is growing momentum for decriminalization in the region. As this trend opens space for greater social acceptance, it will be vital for courts, other state organs, media narratives, and community conversations to listen carefully to the impact that oppressive state laws and policies have on families with LGBTI members. Families exist within state structures, and legislation can either support LGBTI-friendly family values or undermine them.

Gender Recognition

Through birth certificates, passports, and identity cards, the state also plays a fundamental role in affirming or denying citizens’ gender. When parents accept a child’s gender identity, wanting the state to acknowledge that identity is a natural next step. Melinda Swift, a parent with Matimba.Org, a trans youth organization in South Africa, underlined the need for parents to support their child through this process: “We have an obligation to make sure our kids have those things in place so [that] when they want to move on with their lives they are set up and ready to roll.”

Of the five countries, only Botswana and South Africa allow for gender to be altered on official documents, and the structural and financial barriers are formidable. As one South African parent told us, “we are very supportive [but] the only thing is that we don’t have money. If I had money, I was going to help her throughout the way.”

Most accepting parents of a transgender child expressed the same desire to help. A key part of this sense of obligation is fear for the child’s safety, especially where gender diversity is illegal or gender-affirming healthcare inaccessible. A Zimbabwean sister explained, “I’m afraid that she might get arrested [when] she’s at the airport or something. When they see the passport [and] she looks it’s a female passport [yet] she looks like a man, what’s going to happen?”

Ultimately all law springs from family values. When parents and families speak out against anti-LGBTI laws and policies, they show that these “pieces of paper” affect not only the targeted individuals but all those who love them. Parents understand at an intimate level how state power promotes either hatred or acceptance through criminalization, legal gender recognition, family law, marriage law, health policies, and education policies. Their experience within these systems has been deeply shaped by the state’s view of their child.

(De)Criminalization

Criminalization tries to make families betray one of the most basic family values, protecting a child’s safety and well-being. If families stand by their values and offer support to an LGBTI member, they are made to feel “criminal” themselves, yet for accepting families, this is better than betraying their own, as the Zimbabwean sibling of a young gay man explained:

“I’m afraid that she might get arrested [when] she’s at the airport or something. When they see the passport [and] she looks it’s a female passport [yet] she looks like a man, what’s going to happen?”

Yet all law ultimately springs from family values. In Botswana, the court took family acceptance into account in overturning the sodomy law there, noting in its ruling that "whilst growing up, [the litigant on whose behalf the case was argued] knew that he was different and such difference has long been recognised by his parents." With decriminalization in Mozambique in 2015 and Botswana in 2019, and with a ruling in Mauritius expected in 2020, there is growing momentum for decriminalization in the region. As this trend opens space for greater social acceptance, it will be vital for courts, other state organs, media narratives, and community conversations to listen carefully to the impact that oppressive state laws and policies have on families with LGBTI members. Families exist within state structures, and legislation can either support LGBTI-friendly family values or undermine them.

Gender Recognition

Through birth certificates, passports, and identity cards, the state also plays a fundamental role in affirming or denying citizens’ gender. When parents accept a child’s gender identity, wanting the state to acknowledge that identity is a natural next step. Melinda Swift, a parent with Matimba.Org, a trans youth organization in South Africa, underlined the need for parents to support their child through this process: “We have an obligation to make sure our kids have those things in place so [that] when they want to move on with their lives they are set up and ready to roll.”

Of the five countries, only Botswana and South Africa allow for gender to be altered on official documents, and the structural and financial barriers are formidable. As one South African parent told us, “we are very supportive [but] the only thing is that we don’t have money. If I had money, I was going to help her throughout the way.”

Most accepting parents of a transgender child expressed the same desire to help. A key part of this sense of obligation is fear for the child’s safety, especially where gender diversity is illegal or gender-affirming healthcare inaccessible. A Zimbabwean sister explained, “I’m afraid that she might get arrested [when] she’s at the airport or something. When they see the passport [and] she looks it’s a female passport [yet] she looks like a man, what’s going to happen?”
Supporting an LGBTI child means demanding health care that affirms the child’s identity.

Health care

Accepting parents often have a contentious relationship with their children’s healthcare providers. One parent spoke feelingly to us about her frustration with the numerous surgeries doctors told her were best for her intersex son. She had known little when her son was young and had trusted healthcare providers to do the right thing. Now she bitterly regrets this trust and believes her son is owed reparations for the damage caused by genital mutilation: “I want the doctors … to pay so he can use the money to make something of himself.”

Supporting an LGBTI child means demanding health care that affirms the child’s identity. Parents can challenge harmful medical interventions and ensure proper care when they understand this, but their ability to assist their children is often limited to primary care. Expensive, specialized health care such as gender-affirming procedures remains inaccessible to most.

Schooling

Schools are sites where the needs and motivations of parents, children, communities, and various levels of the state intersect—and often collide. Outside the home, there is probably no other place where parents and families have as much say in shaping their children’s lives, but the emotional weight of bullying and abuse (whether from teachers, administrators, or other students) can be felt almost as much by parents as by their children. Support or rejection at school can have a profound impact on both children and parents, and fighting mistreatment is a powerful motivation for family members who want to support an LGBTI child. It can be the moment when they first realize the depth of structural homophobia and transphobia in society.

When schools query parents about a child’s sexuality or gender, this can be the first time parents are confronted with how the larger world views their child’s difference. It can even be the first time any difference is brought to their attention. As a Zimbabwean parent told us, “the headmistress, it’s like she noticed before I did.” Such “interrogations,” as the same parent called them, can be jarring, especially as parents are often told that their child needs to be referred to an “expert” for counselling. So we went there [but] they locked me outside. I didn’t know what they were talking about. Afterward the counsellor gave me a letter I had to take … to the mental hospital, I bring her to the mental hospital, [and] they locked me out again. I was trying to ask the doctor, “Can you enlighten me what you are talking about? What is going on here? You lock yourself inside the office with my daughter. You don’t tell me anything. [Though] I’m the guardian here.” He refused to tell me what he was talking about: “No, I want my patient to trust me.” I said, “To trust you? To talk with your trust?” I didn’t take her there again. Then they wrote a letter to the school, I still don’t know the contents of that letter.”

In asking parents about their child’s sexual orientation or gender identity, teachers and school administrators need not have bad intentions. Sometimes they sincerely want to help the child. Another Botswana parent explained that “teachers called me and said instead of wearing a skirt to school he is allowed to wear slacks because people need to get used to” the fact that he is a boy.”

These examples show that parents can help create an empowering environment for sexual and gender diversity in schools, but the opposite can also occur. In September 2018, the school administration supported him, but “parents threatened to sue if he were not dismissed [and] in the face of death threats, [he] resigned.”

In Botswana, for example, when a trans gender youth was expelled from school because he refused to wear the girls’ uniform, his mother championed the child’s right to education and, in the end, succeeded. In South Africa, after a campaign by parents and activists, the Western Cape Education Department amended their code of conduct and students now wear the uniform they are most comfortable in.

A Botswana parent related a typical story of frustration, “I bring her to the mental hospital, [and] they lock me out again. I was trying to ask the doctor, ‘Can you enlighten me what you are talking about? What is going on here? You lock yourself inside the office with my daughter. You don’t tell me anything. [Though] I’m the guardian here.’ He refused to tell me what he was talking about: ‘No, I want my patient to trust me.’ I said, ‘To trust you? To talk with your trust?’ I didn’t take her there again. Then they wrote a letter to the school, I still don’t know the contents of that letter.”

In asking parents about their child’s sexual orientation or gender identity, teachers and school administrators need not have bad intentions. Sometimes they sincerely want to help the child. Another Botswana parent explained that “teachers called me and said instead of wearing a skirt to school he is allowed to wear slacks because people need to get used to” the fact that he is a boy.”

As this experience suggests, school dress codes are often the first point of contention for gender-diverse youth and their parents. Many accepting parents first learn to advocate for gender-diverse identities this way. In Botswana, for example, when a trans gender youth was expelled from school because he refused to wear the girls’ uniform, his mother championed the child’s right to education and, in the end, succeeded. In South Africa, after a campaign by parents and activists, the Western Cape Education Department amended their code of conduct and students now wear the uniform they are most comfortable in.

The emotional weight of bullying and abuse at school is felt almost as much by parents as their children. Parents can challenge harmful medical interventions and ensure proper care when they understand this, but their ability to assist their children is often limited to primary care. Expensive, specialized health care such as gender-affirming procedures remains inaccessible to most. Accepting parents often have a contentious relationship with their children’s healthcare providers. One parent spoke feelingly to us about her frustration with the numerous surgeries doctors told her were best for her intersex son. She had known little when her son was young and had trusted healthcare providers to do the right thing. Now she bitterly regrets this trust and believes her son is owed reparations for the damage caused by genital mutilation: “I want the doctors … to pay so he can use the money to make something of himself.”

Supporting an LGBTI child means demanding health care that affirms the child’s identity. Par-ents can challenge harmful medical interventions and ensure proper care when they under-stand this, but their ability to assist their children is often limited to primary care. Expensive, specialized health care such as gender-affirming procedures remains inaccessible to most.

Schooling

Schools are sites where the needs and motivations of parents, children, communities, and various levels of the state intersect—and often collide. Outside the home, there is probably no other place where parents and families have as much say in shaping their children’s lives, but the emotional weight of bullying and abuse (whether from teachers, administrators, or other students) can be felt almost as much by parents as by their children. Support or rejection at school can have a profound impact on both children and parents, and fighting mistreatment is a powerful motivation for family members who want to support an LGBTI child. It can be the moment when they first realize the depth of structural homophobia and transphobia in society.

When schools query parents about a child’s sexuality or gender, this can be the first time parents are confronted with how the larger world views their child’s difference. It can even be the first time any difference is brought to their attention. As a Zimbabwean parent told us, “the headmistress, it’s like she noticed before I did.” Such “interrogations,” as the same parent called them, can be jarring, especially as parents are often told that their child needs to be referred to an “expert” for counselling. So we went there [but] they locked me outside. I didn’t know what they were talking about. Afterward the counsellor gave me a letter I had to take … to the mental hospital, I bring her to the mental hospital, [and] they locked me out again. I was trying to ask the doctor, “Can you enlighten me what you are talking about? What is going on here? You lock yourself inside the office with my daughter. You don’t tell me anything. [Though] I’m the guardian here.” He refused to tell me what he was talking about: “No, I want my patient to trust me.” I said, “To trust you? To talk with your trust?” I didn’t take her there again. Then they wrote a letter to the school, I still don’t know the contents of that letter.”

In asking parents about their child’s sexual orientation or gender identity, teachers and school administrators need not have bad intentions. Sometimes they sincerely want to help the child. Another Botswana parent explained that “teachers called me and said instead of wearing a skirt to school he is allowed to wear slacks because people need to get used to” (the fact) that he is a boy.” As this experience suggests, school dress codes are often the first point of contention for gender-diverse youth and their parents. Many accepting parents first learn to advocate for gender-diverse identities this way. In Botswana, for example, when a trans gender youth was expelled from school because he refused to wear the girls’ uniform, his mother championed the child’s right to education and, in the end, succeeded. In South Africa, after a campaign by parents and activists, the Western Cape Education Department amended their code of conduct and students now wear the uniform they are most comfortable in.

The emotional weight of bullying and abuse at school is felt almost as much by parents as their children. Parents can challenge harmful medical interventions and ensure proper care when they understand this, but their ability to assist their children is often limited to primary care. Expensive, specialized health care such as gender-affirming procedures remains inaccessible to most. Accepting parents often have a contentious relationship with their children’s healthcare providers. One parent spoke feelingly to us about her frustration with the numerous surgeries doctors told her were best for her intersex son. She had known little when her son was young and had trusted healthcare providers to do the right thing. Now she bitterly regrets this trust and believes her son is owed reparations for the damage caused by genital mutilation: “I want the doctors … to pay so he can use the money to make something of himself.”

Supporting an LGBTI child means demanding health care that affirms the child’s identity. Parents can challenge harmful medical interventions and ensure proper care when they understand this, but their ability to assist their children is often limited to primary care. Expensive, specialized health care such as gender-affirming procedures remains inaccessible to most.
Family Relationships

LGBTI children gravitate toward the family relationships that feel safest, so they may come out to one parent and not the other if the bond with one is stronger. Even when a child is open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, family members can respond very differently. As a young Mauritian told a journalist there, “When I came out as lesbian, my mum already knew, but [my] dad took it very badly. He took me to see a priest and then a doctor, and then stopped talking to me for three months. Mum was saying, ‘She’s still your daughter.’”

One accepting parent can serve as a mediator with the other, but this depends on the power dynamics in the couple’s relationship. Not every partner feels able to advocate for their child to the other. Instead, the supportive parent may keep their child’s secret and just try to steer conversations away from “dangerous territory.”

Felicia Pona and Florah Thebeyakgosi, mothers and parent advocates in Botswana, tell a different story. They describe how being open with their partners helped build understanding and inclusion. Florah told us, “Their father said, ‘When will we get [a] son-in-law?’ I said ‘No, you won’t get [a] son-in-law. You will have a child-in-law.’” Then he asked me, “Why? There won’t be a husband?” I said, “He is a husband, he will have a wife.”

Relationships with siblings in particular can be valuable in supporting coming out. Growing up together, siblings usually look out for one another, so LGBTI children often come out to a sibling first. Older siblings in particular can help strategize a coming out conversation with parents and give moral support when the time comes. One sister in Mauritius explained that her sister “wasn’t quite ready to tell my parents, but when she does, she needs me to be present … [to give her] more courage.” Siblings can advocate for a brother or sister without as much personal risk, and their support can be vital when broaching a subject like sexual orientation or gender identity. Their support helps “normalize” the other identity.

Kutume in South Africa told us that his bond with his gay brother has strengthened relationships in the whole family. Supporting his younger brother comes naturally: “It is not about him being gay or me being straight. It’s just that he is a brother of mine and I treat him as such.”

Siblings often grow up with an “us against the world” mentality and develop deep feelings of support for one another. Such feelings can have a powerful role to play in broader LGBTI advocacy. In Harare, Ryan Musonza is used to standing up for his transgender sister, even through just walking home together can be a challenge. They are regularly harassed, but Ryan’s rule is “Don’t think about what people say, what people do, what people gossip, because people talk a lot of things and will always gossip and mock others.” Ryan’s support for his sister relies on clear boundaries with friends and even with clients of his tattoo business. They sometimes ask him why he stands by her, but Ryan just says, “I don’t care what people say.”

Rejection by a sibling can be just as painful as rejection by a parent. An unsupportive sibling can disrupt confidence, create feelings of betrayal, and make coming out to parents and other family members even more challenging, as a Mozambican respondent confirmed: “I tried talking to [my] sister because I thought we were friends … but she had a huge drama. She was horrible. She completely changed and told me that this wasn’t right. After a while, I found out that everyone in the house knew.”

Relationships with partners may connect two families with distinct dynamics and histories. For one thing, it connects two families with distinct dynamics and histories, and partners often view their LGBTI child’s partner as a negative influence and even blame the partner for “converting” their child. As a Motswana parent told us, “I don’t know where this relationship is taking [my daughter].” … That [other] girl is older … and she already has a lot. I think she is misleading my daughter.”

When a same-sex or gender-diverse couple splits up or one partner dies, the relationship with in-laws can become incendiary. Josiha from Maputo described a not uncommon, if extreme, reaction from parents after the death of their lesbian daughter:

On the same day she died, her parents went to their daughter’s home and took everything, including cred cards and even the keys to the house, telling her partner “You taught my daughter all of these dirty things and now see how it has ended.”

“Family Relationships”

“Growing up together, siblings look out for one another, so LGBTI children often come out to a sibling first.”

“It’s not about being gay or me being straight. It’s just that he is a brother of mine and I treat him as such.”

“Parents often view their LGBTI child’s partner as a negative influence and even blame the partner for ‘converting’ their child.”

“You taught my daughter all of these dirty things and now we see how it has ended.”

16 “It is not about him being gay or me being straight. It’s just that he is a brother of mine and I treat him as such.”

26 Interview with Kutume Phalakatshela, South Africa
24 Interview with Kanyisa, South Africa
22 City Press (20 February 2017) No paradise for Mauritian queers
23 Interview with L.L., Mauritius
25 Interview with Matshwenyego Maotshe, Botswana
27 Interview with Ryan Musonza, Zimbabwe
28 Interview with Ryan Musonza, Zimbabwe
30 Interview with Mabezono Rebeca, Mozambique
31 Interview with Ryan Musonza, Zimbabwe
32 Interview with Participant, Mozambique
33 Interview with Mabuwo Mabulo, Botswana
Maria Judith Meru Chirwane (2016) Sexual rights activism in Mozambique: A qualitative case study of civil society organizations and experiences of ‘lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons’ (Ghent University)
Some parents not only accept but are grateful for their child’s partner. They appreciate their commitment and may even credit the partner for positive changes in their child’s life that come with “settling down.” In South Africa, Blessing Ngobese told us how “there were changes in [my daughter’s] life, positive attributes that we recognized as a family, that maybe this partner has influenced in these changes that we noticed in Thandeka, and so we appreci- ated her in that role.”

The most supportive parents are often those who most value monogamy and maturity in relationships in general. As a Zimbabwean parent said to her daughter, “What I want for you is to have one partner that you are serious about.” When parents encourage healthy, loving relationships regardless of sexuality or gender, they strengthen all bonds in the family.

Even for accepting parents, one issue remains. They often expect one day to have grand- children to dote on. As a Zimbabwean activist explained, “My mother’s biggest worry is that I will not give her grandchildren. Even if I did not get married but had a child, she would be happy. My sexuality … stands between her and a grandchild.” For parents, the importance of grandchildren is not just about family lineage. They also see grandchildren as part of the “complete picture” of a traditional family, so once LGBTI couples are in a stable relationship and able to support children, children are expected.

Some parents know that grandchildren are still possible, but the financial and other chal- lenges of in vitro and surrogacy are daunting. Parents who accept their child’s same-sex or gender-diverse relationship usually also accept adopted grandchildren, especially if the appropriate ceremonies are performed. Blessing Ngobese explained that his family would welcome an adopted grandchild into the family with traditional ceremonies:

We agreed that if you adopt a child you are allowed to slaughter anything … [The child] can be your sister’s child, [or] it can come from a different family altogether. Our culture embraces as long as there will be ceremonies … because, at the end of the day, we need accountability.

The question of grandchildren, and the discussions and explorations it provokes, can help parents grow in their understanding of same-sex and gender-diverse identities. They learn that having children can be as important to their LGBTI child as having grandchildren is to them. They also learn to embrace more flexible ideas about family. As a Botswana grand- mother explained,

Parents who accept their child’s same- sex or gender-diverse relationship usually also accept adopted grandchildren, especially if appropriate ceremonies are performed.

You do not transition alone but with the family and community you live in.

When LGBTI children come out in the community, their families may go into the closet.

Parents who accept their child’s same-sex or gender-diverse relationship usually also accept adopted grandchildren, especially if appropriate ceremonies are performed.

Parents who accept their child’s same-sex or gender-diverse relationship usually also accept adopted grandchildren, especially if appropriate ceremonies are performed.

Parents who accept their child’s same-sex or gender-diverse relationship usually also accept adopted grandchildren, especially if appropriate ceremonies are performed.
When LGBTI people challenge heteronormative gender roles in homophobic and transphobic environments, they are usually met with anger and often with violence, usually from men.

The first thing you see is just a child. They tell you it’s a boy or it’s a girl, but whatever you see, it’s a child. You don’t see a gender.

When LGBTI people challenge heteronormative gender roles in homophobic and transphobic environments, they are met with anger and often with violence, usually from men. In patriarchal societies, to be a “proper” man is to valorize aggression. So after disowning and brutally beating his gay son, a Zimbabwean man justified himself by stating: “I did not raise my son to be gay. I raised him to be a man. I expected him to chase skirts like other boys.”

When parents recognize that these expectations are unfair to everyone, not just the LGBTI minority, they can find comfort in seeing their child as a whole person regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity:

The first thing you see is just a child. They tell you it’s a boy or it’s a girl, but whatever you see, it’s a child. You don’t see a gender. So every parent must be thankful just to have a healthy child.

I was afraid to live openly because my father threatened to stop paying my tuition fees.
ROOTS - the involvement of parents and families in advocacy for LGBT equality and freedom in Southern Africa

Religious spaces can either promote inclusion or exclusion.

iii. Religion

Religious spaces can promote either exclusion or inclusion of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. In the past, they have mostly promoted exclusion, but this is changing because LGBTI-friendly parents and families are demanding that their churches, mosques, and temples live up to the “Golden Rule” that all major religions share: “do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

Unfortunately, too many denominations still cling to narrow homophobic and transphobic interpretations of their scriptures. We repeatedly heard complaints like this:

“My religion doesn’t allow this. It has a really heavy law; they dissociate you from the family if you are gay. They will never talk to you again. You have to leave the family house, and they will not let you in church anymore.”

Some churches see LGBTI identities as forms of demonic possession and talk parents into violent exorcisms. The inevitable failure of such “cures” is usually blamed on the child, with parents saying, “You had an opportunity to get prayed for, but the pastor says you like your demon so much that you are not fighting it hard enough.”

Not all parents take unquestioned direction from pastors, and sometimes the failure to “cast out the demons” backfires: “It becomes an aha moment, like we have tried everything, but our child is still the way they were so maybe we should try to understand them a little more.”

Rejection by religious authorities can be a catalyst that forces family to ask questions and seek better guidance.

In South Africa, the late Mami M’ally Simelane (“Mother of Prayer”) worked with mothers in the advocacy group Parents, Families, and Friends of South African Queers (PFSAQ) to create a safe, welcoming religious space for LGBTI children. Some of the mothers know the pain and unspeakable loss of burying a child killed by homophobic violence. M’ally Mally was one of these, and she channelled her own grief for her daughter into helping other parents accept their children’s sexual orientation or gender identity: “Doing this is how I heal myself. It is like Eudly is refusing to die. She is waking us up. She might be sleeping, but she is waking us up.”

Mami Simelane’s church women provide a sense of security, welcome, and righteous advocacy for sexual and gender minorities, and they have captured the attention not just of the general public but of church leadership. In June 2017, after one of the mother’s made a passionate plea for her lesbian child, the South African Council of Churches passed this historic resolution.

As the Church of Christ, we will pause to pray against the wanton killings of lesbians, people living with albinism, and women. What is the current church rhetoric on these issues when God’s heart bleeds?

The statement acknowledged that acceptance of LGBTI family members is an obligation to God. Backing this up, a recent survey of South African attitudes found that “moderately religious” people are more likely to accept sexual and gender minorities. All religions see children as a gift from God, and as a South African father told us, “there is no way that we can suppress what God has given us.”

---

1 Maria Judite Mario Chipenembe (2018) Sexual rights activism in Mozambique: A qualitative case study of civil society organisations and experiences of “lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons” Ghent University
2 Interview with Urbenia Kawarau, Botswana
3 Interview with Brian & Maxwell, South Africa
4 Interview with Jade Madingwane, South Africa
5 Participant 6, Mozambique
6 Interview with Chantell Fortuin, Botswana
7 The Other Foundation (December 2017) Umuntu: Mothers in the Churches stand with their LGBTI Children
8 Interview with Lilianeta Kavwawa, Botswana
9 Interview with Jude Madzyapepe, South Africa
10 Participant 6, Mozambique
11 Interview with Chantell Fortuin, Botswana

There is no way we can suppress what God has given us.
LGBTI children are sometimes confined at home to keep them away from “queer influences.”

iv. Rites of Passage

Parents and family elders look to the gatekeepers of traditional culture for guidance and validation in all kinds of questions about family relationships. When these gatekeepers deny the legitimacy of sexual and gender minorities, parents must either follow their lead or defy tradition. But traditional culture is often falsified by those in authority for their own interests. When parents do their own research, they discover that their real traditions are quite different.

In Zimbabwe, when male elders refused to accept a transgender family member, citing Ndebele “tradition,” other family members, led by the child’s brother, looked into the question themselves, with very different results.

Our grandparents, our fathers, those are the people who have challenged, saying “No, we cannot live with a gay in my house, we cannot live with a lesbian, no its not normal, let’s go to the sangoma, the traditional healer.” That’s when we did the research and we see now that there’s nothing bad. There’s no need for a traditional healer.67

Despite attempts by some gatekeepers of tradition to erase LGBTI families from customary practices, parents and siblings of LGBTI family members are increasingly doing their own research or interpreting their traditions more sensibly. This is evident in the growing number of weddings of same-sex couples that proudly incorporate African traditions, as in the wedding of Brian and Maxwell in 2017. Another couple expressed their joy with supportive family from both sides, the couple “wore traditional regalia [and] asked their ancestors for blessing … A cow was slaughtered [and in line with tradition] … gifts were presented to the parents of both sides, the couple “wore traditional regalia [and] asked their ancestors for blessing … A cow was slaughtered [and in line with tradition] … gifts were presented to the parents of both men as thanks for raising them.”68

Same-sex traditional marriage ceremonies are often the first time that families formally and publicly accept LGBTI identities. For families, the important thing is that well-loved customs are not abandoned. When they adapt traditional rites in ways that work for them, they create an authentic pathway to their culture and their authentic selves while also uniting the family.69

v. Violence, Rejection and Resistance

The number of accepting families is growing in all parts of the region, but the home remains a place of homophobic and transphobic violence in far too many places. Mistreatment may fall short of outright physical violence or exile from the home yet still be extremely harmful. For instance, LGBTI children are sometimes confined at home to keep them away from “queer influences.” The experience of twenty-year-old Shalima in Mauritius, imprisoned by her parents to “protect” her from her lesbian partner, is not unusual. Nor is the fact that when this abduction was reported to the police, it was dismissed as an exercise of “parental rights.”70

Rejection or persecution by family is probably the most painful emotion an LGBTI child can experience, yet homophobic and transphobic violence “occurs most frequently in the institution of the family itself.”71 No wonder survivors often react with despair, like the South African youth who told the Mail and Guardian newspaper, “I sometimes think it must be better to be dead than having to struggle [with my family] as much as I am. I mean, how can it be worse?”72

In a 2017 survey in Mozambique, 25% of parents in Bairro, 25% in Maputo, and 21% in Namibe said they would physically assault an LGBTI child. Only 24% of respondents in Maputo and 18% in Sofala said they would accept their child. Not surprisingly, forced marriages initiated by parents have been widely reported in Mozambique. This story from a 2018 study of LGBTI lives in the country is an all-too-common ordinar of young LGBTI women throughout the region:

In the course of the next two weeks, they brought an old man to marry me as his second wife. The ceremony of nikhai was organized quickly because that man was wealthy. My father said to me: “From now on, your husband will take care of you. He will pay the fees at your school; please stop doing these shameful things.”73

In Zimbabwe, a young gay man told a newspaper, “I was forced into an arranged marriage — twice — thinking that it would change [me].”74 This kind of coercion is often the first response to coming out. In their rush to erase sexual or gender diversity in a child, the parents see marriage as a “quick fix.”
Family love reassures LGBTI children that they belong in the world like anyone else.

It is not uncommon for a parent to disown their LGBTI child. Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) reports that 64 percent of gay men and 27 percent of lesbians there have been disowned.75 “As far as I am concerned, I do not have a son anymore,” one father said. Disowning may not be physically violent, but it damages self-worth and is painfully dehumanizing.76 Home and family are an individual’s main psychological anchor. Even after being forced into homelessness after relentless physical and verbal abuse by her family, South African Mpho Okaleba still says “there is no place like home.”77

vi. Love

The oppression of sexual and gender minorities is multidirectional, but it can be overcome when love is unconditional. Parents who affirm through love empower their LGBTI children to persevere. Family love is the best way to enable LGBTI youth to cope with hostility outside the home.

The experience of South African father, Abel Gaobuse, is instructive. Abel says he has known his son was gay since the boy was small. There was never a “coming out” conversation, and his son’s sexuality was always accepted with love. Abel has also been a consistent advocate for other LGBTI youth, and in his work with PFSAQ he speaks with other parents about the benefits of unconditional love and support for their LGBTI children.

When your child is gay and not treated properly in the community, you have to stand up for them. You have to defend your child. Where will they run if you can’t accept them?78

Abel is proud of the confidence and resilience his son has gained by being loved and supported unconditionally: “He can defend himself now.”79

A young Motswana told us he resisted harassment at school mainly thanks to his mother’s loving acceptance: “She has always told me not to pay any attention to what other people think of me and not to be demoralized by their petty issues.”80 Family love, after all, is the basis of the southern African philosophy of botho that “demands of us to treat each other with love, respect and dignity” as if the whole community is one family.81

Family love is the best way to enable LGBTI youth to cope with hostility outside the home.

Love provides the armour that helps family members defend their LGBTI kin as whole beings and not solely as sexual and gender minorities. As a Mauritian mother told her gay son: “You are an artist, you are a student, you are a person who does many great things. You have friends who know you not as a gay friend but as a friend.”82 A South African mother, speaking about her transgender daughter, made the same point: “I have always told her she is the perfect way she is. I did not ask God for a girl or a boy. I asked for a child.”83

Parents do not always start from a place of acceptance, but they can find their way there by recognizing the harm in their old view of things. As Rachel, the mother of a gay son in South Africa, said, “I wasn’t okay with him at first. Then I realized that I’m oppressing my own child, yet, as his mother, I want him to live a full life like other children, so I started accepting him.”84

As this suggests, family love reassures LGBTI children that they belong in the world like anyone else. Then they are free to develop and become their best selves:

*The danger of not accepting our children in whatever situation they find themselves in is that you participate in blocking their natural gifts. We are all born with gifts from God. Imagine if, by rejecting my child, I suppress a future president of the country?”85

Family love reassures LGBTI children that they belong in the world like anyone else.
Communication and Disclosure

Communication and Disclosure

Communicating around non-normative sexual orientations or gender identities may start with disclosure. LGBTI children usually hesitate to disclose, often for years. Some never do. Even in the most loving families, they may not feel sure of acceptance. Yet a secret is a heavy burden in the intimate environment of family, and most LGBTI children reach a place, like Junayd in Mozambique, “where I was finally looking for acceptance instead of just hiding.”

Disclosure is not always a matter of choice, however, especially with gender non-conforming children whose “visibility” raises questions from an early age. In other cases, the child may be discovered in a same-sex relationship or betrayed by a nosy neighbour. An LGBTI child’s failure to marry by a certain age is often enough to make tongues wag.

Whether disclosure is initiated by the child or happens by accident, parents often experience something like the five stages of grief when they learn about a child’s sexual or gender diversity: shock, denial, sadness, anger, and eventual acceptance. Whether disclosure is initiated by the child or happens by accident, parents often experience something like the five stages of grief when they learn about a child’s sexual or gender diversity: shock, denial, sadness, anger, and eventual acceptance. Whether disclosure is initiated by the child or happens by accident, parents often experience something like the five stages of grief when they learn about a child’s sexual or gender diversity: shock, denial, sadness, anger, and eventual acceptance. Whether disclosure is initiated by the child or happens by accident, parents often experience something like the five stages of grief when they learn about a child’s sexual or gender diversity: shock, denial, sadness, anger, and eventual acceptance.

The relief that comes with honesty is the light at the end of the tunnel. As Adelle, a South African transgender woman, told us, “My mother] said I’ve known something has been worrying you for years. This is obviously it.” When love and gratitude take over, a re-evaluation of priorities occurs naturally. “It made it easier for me to accept because he [finally] looked happier” is a typical parental response.

After disclosure, parents have questions that do not have easy answers. These are questions LGBTI people ask themselves too. When answers are offered, they can feel incomplete. Parents often run through many possible answers, finding new ways to understand or new points of reference each time. Parents of intersex children can have some of the most difficult questions, especially when they feel misled by doctors into agreeing to damaging “fixes” for their baby. The search for answers leads some parents into public advocacy. They direct their questions at those in power, recognizing that structural inequities and oppressive systems are responsible for the fear and discrimination their children face.

86 Interview with Junayd, Mozambique
88 Interview with Adelle, South Africa
“People don’t have the right words. That’s the biggest problem.”

i. Language

In both public advocacy and private family communication, finding appropriate language is a persistent barrier. Parents and other family members usually have some knowledge of words used to describe LGBTI persons, but the local, colloquial terminology can vary greatly in meaning and is often derogatory. This South African’s perplexity is typical.

“We grew up with that word moffie [meaning Afrikaans slang for a gay man] so when my brother came out as gay, we thought, oh my goodness, he is a moffie. That’s the biggest problem in our small towns here. People don’t have the right words.”

Words can hurt. They have long been used to abuse LGBTI Africans, although this is not always how they are used. Parents and family sometimes mean well when they use such words, and LGBTI persons can recognize this.

“The names they have we find insulting. But you can find that it is not an insult but is the only way to explain so they can understand. They call us unilingual [unnecessary] because you cannot see the gender of that animal unless you look closer and then you see a male or female. So do we take it as an insult or do we embrace that word and use it in our own way for them to understand us better?”

Derogatory slang can sometimes be reclaimed in ways that provide the familiar contexts that help build understanding and acceptance. This can be better than insisting on the formal English, Portuguese, or French terms that can be used to promote the myth that LGBTI identities are “un-African.” In either case there is a need to ensure that the language used is inclusive, flexible, and adapted to the target audience while acknowledging that it is always going to be inadequate to describe the full spectrum of human sexuality and gender.

ii. Silence

Communication, however limited, is always a step forward. Silence never helps, but it does not necessarily endorse violence or deny LGBTI legitimacy. It may simply be a sign that family members find it too difficult to start conversations on a subject they lack the right words for.

People may be well intentioned, but silence prevents the reality from being acknowledged and dealt with.

“Why do you have to shout it everywhere?” is a question activists often hear from embarrassed families.

LGBTI children have to balance various considerations when it comes to disclosure and visibility in the family. In Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, GALZ activist Teddy is upfront about the barriers to conversation: “The percentage of LGBTI people who are comfortable with their whole families is very small.” Some parents and family members told us they would like to advocate publicly but were held back by their LGBTI child’s unwillingness to be so visible.

Accepting parents know the gossip, harassment, and possible violence their child faces outside the family. In Zimbabwe, Nomia constantly reminds her son to be aware of his surroundings:

“I always say to Philip [that] if you have to go out please don’t go out on your own with people you don’t know. Don’t get picked up in a bar by people you don’t know. Just make sure you hang out with your friends.”
I’d rather have that son than not have a son at all just because I can’t accept their situation.

### ii. Learning and Adjusting

Coming to terms with a family member’s sexual orientation or gender identity involves constant negotiations. It is a continuous process of articulating needs and resolving conflicts, sometimes through compromises that may be uncomfortable or incomplete. For the LGBTI child, it can be difficult to accept inclusion that comes with conditions attached. Admonitions such as “we are not chasing you away, so obey and be grateful” are common.102

Once LGBTI identity is disclosed, there is a learning curve. Parents are confronted with the fact that the world was not built for their child and that their own values may not align with the child’s identity. One parent in Zimbabwe spoke about being hesitant to use accept to describe how they viewed their child’s LGBTI identity. "Whether good or bad, you have to accommodate, but when it comes to accepting, it’s like you have agreed to everything whether you like it or not.”103 Nevertheless, as another Zimbabwean parent told us, “I’d rather have that son than not have a son at all just because I can’t accept their situation.”104

The question of why always remains. Families find various ways of answering it and go through stages to come to terms with a family member’s sexual orientation or gender identity. They ask questions, find language that works for them, learn more about being LGBTI from whatever sources of information they can find, and hold on to the messages that make the most sense to them. Some find the evidence of sexual and gender diversity in nature to justify their child’s reality, others the belief that God does not make mistakes: “I was shocked and scared at first. I did not know that a child can be born that way, but I then accepted because what other choice did I have? Because he was given to me [like this] by God.”100

When parents see early on that their child is “different,” they are usually better prepared for conversations down the line. A South African father explained:

> His sexual orientation was never really a worry for his mother and me. He was just a playful child who loved girlish things, and we did not see any taboo in this. We knew he was different, so it was not such a big shock later [when he told us].101

The more exposure people have had to diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, whether in the community or the media, the more easily they accept an LGBTI child. A South African mother explained her accepting attitude in this way: "I came in contact with many transgender or homosexual people at a very early age, about 16 or 17, so I understood it very well.”105

Friendships with LGBTI co-workers or neighbours can open the door to acceptance. These friends can help guide families through the adjustment process or act as sounding boards for concerns people may not want to raise within the family. Nora explained that it was easier for her to accept her child because “I [already] had LGBTI friends in the community, like my hairdresser and others, so we would sit and talk about it.”106

Having gay friends or family members helps parents see that their own child is not so different and that the whole family is “from the same tree branch.” For example, a Motsawana mother explained, “There was a man we lived with who was a relative, and people said he was both a man and a woman, so I realized that maybe Rasego took after that relative.”104

When people look into their family history and see a likeness to their child, they find a sense of belonging that is true to their roots and authentic selves.
Family Networks

In all five countries, family networks provide opportunities for parents to have transformative conversations on LGBTI identities, family love, and the place of kinship in LGBTI lives. These conversations provide relief from toxic homophobic and transphobic narratives, facilitate learning, and create allies in activism. They are safe spaces that allow mistakes and misunderstandings to be explored and addressed. As a South African participant explained: “I’m pretty open-minded, but it took me a while to get my head around things, and I still sometimes slip up, but you know what, hoy, one is learning, and so we keep going.”

In families struggling to understand or accept an LGBTI member, sharing stories opens lines of communication, raises awareness of the variety of ways families operate, and provides models of resilience. Such stories enable families to redefine their relationships while reinforcing core values of companionship, love, and support. As parents become comfortable sharing with each other, they often become interested in public advocacy.

The impact of parent networks on advocacy is felt through two main ways: outreach programs and counseling services. Botswana has strong PFLAG groups (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) in Mochudi just outside the capital, Gaborone, and in Francistown, the country’s second largest city. Since 2014, they have reached out to nurses, police officers, religious leaders, and teachers, building community networks and providing safe spaces to build relationships between parents, LGBTI community members, and service providers. Some service providers have even become active members of PFLAG.

In the process, some parents have developed into highly effective activists and organizers, bringing new members and starting ground-breaking conversations. PFLAG members have learned how to spread messages of acceptance in the greater community even in the face of initial resistance. As one parent told us, “I’ve learned that when a person is [unreceptive at first], I have to socialize with them, sit with them and share.”

Outreach work often begins with other parents. Accepting parents know that when parents learn they have an LGBTI child they are often not ready to reach out. They also know how challenging it can be to reach out to families who may not want to acknowledge that they need help. As one Motswana mother explained, “[S]ome have suggested that we identify these people and go house-to-house, go to their homes, and sensitize their families. I am hoping this will work [but] … to go into somebody’s house they have to welcome you.”

To go into somebody’s house they have to welcome you.
In South Africa, PFSAQ has played an important outreach role in the lives of families that have lost a child to hate crimes. Members attend funerals and support the bereaved in many other ways. An August 2019 workshop with parents from Gauteng and Free State focused on healing, solidarity, and collective mourning for those who have lost LGBTI loved ones to violence. A PFSAQ organizer explained, “We decided to create that space for parents to have a conversation but also as a healing space where we tried to get them through those traumatic experiences. I say ‘try’ because you can’t really erase that memory.”

In some countries, safety is a major concern. In Zimbabwe, parents and family members meet each other at sports and games events organized by GALZ. This strategy is helpful in a context where security concerns can be paramount, although much work remains to be done to strengthen these emerging networks. Other initiatives with similarly “specialized” approaches include a network of mothers’ groups in KwaThema, South Africa, that focuses on fighting homophobic and transphobic narratives from religious leaders and counsels families who have experienced violence as a result of this propaganda. Counselling services are a vital aspect of family networks. In Mozambique, Lambda offers free psychosocial support and also sensitizes providers on LGBTI issues through a free course, “Tackling human psychology and sexuality.” In Mauritius, Young Queer Alliance (YQA) has had difficulty involving families in counselling and support groups and focuses for now on providing tools to help LGBTI people talk to their families, but if requested, can provide one-on-one support in critical times of conflict. A YQA director explained, “We do not want to barge in and possibly make things worse. We work to give LGBTI people self-confidence and advice, and we are in a position, if they ask us, to talk with their parents and provide support. We do not have group counselling and things like that because the culture of ‘What will others say?’ and ‘What will neighbours say?’ is so strongly rooted in Mauritian society.”

In South Africa, the Matimba organization supports transgender and gender-variant youth and uses psychologist-led support groups to help parents understand their children. The mother of a transgender son told us how important the counselling had been for her and her partner, citing the importance of “being able to speak openly without the kids listening to us. They don’t need to deal with our baggage.”

In Botswana, RIA engages with parents on an individual level, offering counselling and information when requested. One intersex Motswana told us how the service helped them, “Rainbow Identity has helped me and counselled me from here to there. I was really going through a lot, and it was affecting my health, [but] now I am much better after getting psychosocial support and information and knowing that I am not alone.”

As individuals come to terms with their lives in this way, a powerful network of allies and advocates is being built. Funding, however, remains a key challenge. Parents and activists alike told us about their frustration with the lack of funds. “The biggest problem,” a Motswana PFLAG member told us, “is funding to enable us to go to different places and teach people in dikgotla [traditional community meetings presided over by chiefs].” Even where support groups are well-established, “sometimes you’ll have an activity you want to do and be told there are no funds.” Such constraints weigh especially heavily on parents who are already under financial pressure. As a Zimbabwean parent explained, “We can’t expect somebody else to create a support group. We have to do it ourselves, but the main issue is resources.”

Interview with Jade Madingwane, South Africa
Interview with P.R., Zimbabwe
The Other Foundation Parents Convening Report
Interview with L., Mauritius
Interview with Melinda Swift, South Africa
Interview with Flora Thebeyakgosi, Botswana
Interview with Sadi Mabulana, Botswana
Interview with Tebogo Monowe, Botswana
Interview with Nomia Phiri-Velaphi, Zimbabwe
Interview with Nona Phele-Velaphi, Zimbabwe
The Role of Allies in the Family

Supportive siblings can be a vital entry point for opening productive conversations within families. In Mauritius, Mozambique, and South Africa, they have been instrumental in resolving family tensions. Organizations in Zimbabwe have engaged with siblings as a way of getting around the difficulty of engaging directly with parents. One young South African man told us about how he and his sister helped their mother come to terms with their brother’s sexuality. She had been refusing to talk to her gay son until the siblings intervened:

“We helped lay the foundation for that conversation. Between me and my sister, it’s been a task to try and help [our mother] understand her son, to understand what he is going through.”

Siblings can also be powerful public advocates. Farren Watt, a master’s student at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, started to speak out after witnessing her gay brother being harassed in their hometown:

“I saw the hurt my brother goes through every day here in Springbok and that just motivated me more and more. I’m a very vocal person, and I’m well known around here, so I realized I can use my voice to influence people every day.”

Farren has been an especially bold advocate in the Dutch Reformed Church:

“I took the decision to stand with my brother and others like him in solidarity. Because how are we going to preach on Sundays about inclusivity and everybody being granted mercy, but that mercy is really only for certain people?”

Farren was so determined to promote a more welcoming environment in the church that she started an organization, #WhyDiscriminate, with two other students whose LGBTI family members were also stigmatized by the church.

Although her brother’s experience guided her toward activism, Farren’s advocacy transcends family ties.

118 Interview with Teddy, Zimbabwe
119 Interview with Kutume Phalakatshela, South Africa.
120 Interview with Farren Watt, South Africa
121 Mail & Guardian (10 August 2018) Theology students back queer rights
Advocacy that starts in the family has a way of radiating out to the rest of the community.

As Famen’s journey into activism suggests, advocacy that starts in the family has a way of radiating out to the rest of the community. The LGBTI community faces a lot of stigma and discrimination from society, so having the family next to them whilst facing the world also has an impact on society. It helps change the perception of LGBTI people within the community when people see that their family supports them.122

Public advocacy by family members is especially important in cultures where traditional kinship ties play a strong role in community solidarity. In such places, the example of supportive siblings and parents can powerfully affect community perceptions. In rural areas in particular, family support groups have been able to create safe spaces where elders can interact with the younger generation to share knowledge about LGBTI issues and visibility. As Urbania with RIA in Botswana says, “It takes an elder to convince an elder in our African culture.”123

Young LGBTI activists are often surprised at elders’ empathy despite the stereotype of older people being “stuck in their ways.” “Funny enough,” a South African activist told us, “we thought the challenge would be for them to understand what it means to be a trans person, but they understood at once. They were happy and wanted to have follow-ups.”124 Elders know that sexual and gender diversity have always been part of African cultures even if the language and cultural interpretations around them have changed with time.

Engaging with male family members remains difficult. Women are almost always more willing. Engaging with male family members remains difficult. Women are almost always more willing to seek advice, but when they try to share information with their husbands, they can be ignored. In Botswana, LEGABIBO uses male religious leaders to persuade fathers and uncles to come to PFLAG meetings and has found that men who overcome their reluctance are likely to become advocates themselves and bring other fathers to participate.

Muslims have also responded well to advocacy by religious leaders. In Cape Town, since Imam Muhsin Hendricks disclosed his sexuality and launched a foundation for LGBTI Muslims and their families, “80% of calls from the Muslim community [to the foundation’s hotline] have been positive and supportive.”129

In areas where traditional cultures are strong, chiefs and similar leaders have an essential role in promoting acceptance and family reconciliation. In Botswana, where the kgotla tradition remains a key part of community life, especially in rural areas and smaller towns, LEGABIBO works closely with village chiefs and ward headmen to sensitize parents, community members, police, and local officials. When parents lead these conversations, they are especially effective.
Chief can show the community that LGBTI issues are part of the natural fabric of the society.

Also in Botswana, IRA has adopted an ingenious strategy to open conversations with traditional leaders. As Skepner, the founder of the organization, explains,

"A lot of traditional leaders say they do not want to deal with issues of same sex [relationships]. But when we approach them and tell them we are about gender, they show interest in working with us ... because some see our issues as issues of disability. This is something that we are still interfacing, however. Is it wise to be seen as people with a disability?"

Despite this risk, the strategy has succeeded in opening doors, and IRA hopes further conversations will lead to a more accurate and nuanced understanding of trans identities.

Operating out of Port Shepstone in South Africa, Lower South Coast Rural LGBTI has formed relationships with traditional leaders in their communities as its point of entry into community dialogues. After some initial pushback, the organization has been able to train ten local induna (chiefs) on sexual and gender diversity, and, together with them, mediate disputes between LGBTI community members and their families. Zinhle Ndimeni, one of the activists, told us,

"Now if there is a problem in one of the places, "Hey, just call Zinhle to come and help us, there is another person like her now here." And then I sit around the table with them, and so bit by bit, I explain. Imagine if I had a negative attitude toward the chief, I wouldn't have that opportunity.

When traditional leaders recognize LGBTI persons, they create a platform that encourages learning and supports family and community acceptance. By participating in well-informed mediation with activists and families, chiefs show the community that LGBTI issues are part of the natural fabric of the society.

Working through and with government institutions and other NGOs also opens doors. In Mauritius, LGBTI activists partner with the Mauritius Parental Protection and Welfare Association, and in Mozambique, they have worked with the Ministry of Women and the Ministry of Health. Same Love Toll in South Africa works in schools throughout Kwazulu-Natal and has also partnered with a safe house for survivors of intimate-partner violence in Amasibe. Other organizations in South Africa work with police and clinics. The South African LGBTI Parents Forum, for example, focuses on helping police improve the reporting process for hate crimes.

The range of institutions and state services that affect the lives of LGBTI people and families with LGBTI members is huge, and the problems can seem intimidating. Activists and families need to target those services that affect them the most, identify local officials who are able and willing to help, and work with them to create change.

Role of the Media

Normalizing representations of LGBTI people and their relationships not only encourages acceptance, it also gives families with LGBTI members a sense of pride and belonging. Better media representation can also have an effect on public policy. The successful campaigns in Botswana to register LEGABIBO in 2016 and to decriminalize same-sex relations in 2019 owed a great deal to the good relations the organization had fostered with the media.

This began with a series of workshops in previous years that sensitized journalists to LGBTI issues and enhanced the accuracy of reporting. LEGABIBO also maintains active Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook accounts where parents can get information and contact the organization for individualized feedback, including private meetings. This is a way of reaching out to parents who do not feel ready to attend meetings or come forward publicly in other ways.

In places where mainstream media remains hostile, social media opens new avenues of communication and advocacy that anyone with a smartphone can participate in. GALZ in Zimbabwe is very active on social media, sharing stories of families and parents, including videos. In Mozambique, even though there are no social media or mainstream media programs targeted specifically to families, Lambda uses its very active and engaging Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp accounts, along with texts and e-mails, to keep LGBTI issues in public view and to share information Mozambicans would not otherwise see.

Billboard advertising has been used to good effect in Mauritius, South Africa, and Botswana to make same-sex love more visible and initiate conversations around LGBTI issues, while Iranti’s Safety, Dignity, Freedom campaign disseminates positive messaging in various media formats across several countries in the region.

Abel Gazuva, a parent advocate in Malawi in North West province, South Africa, explains the link between media representations and personal activism succinctly: "It’s not that we live only in a community. We also live in a society. The media gets us used to our differences."
Parents and Families as Advocates

i. Opening the Home: Parenting the LGBTI Community

Accepting parents often want to protect and nurture LGBTI children beyond their biological offspring, so they provide guidance, support, and often physical refuge to children in their community who have unaccepting parents. They may even become surrogate parents. "I just feel like a mother to all of them," a South African parent said. "Any child that comes into our home is a child of mine." Another told us, "Those children who come to my home, I consider them as my own family. They are all my children."

When parents are open about their acceptance, their example can be invaluable in helping other LGBTI children open up to their families, and they can mediate in other families if conflicts arise. Eventually, an openly accepting parent can have a major impact in their community. The conversations they provoke or initiate in other families and the efforts they make to talk to, guide, defend, and shelter others’ children can make a big difference, especially in small, tight-knit communities.

As parents grow into advocates, not all the work they do is visible. Advocacy does not always take place from a podium. Some of the deepest and most lasting impact comes through private conversations with friends, neighbours, co-workers, and members of their church, sometimes even in a hushed chat with a stranger who has heard about them through the village grapevine. It also happens in quiet actions that speak more loudly than words.

ii. Going Public

Sometimes going public is an emotional and moral imperative for parents. In a 2018 radio interview, the late Mally Simelane said this about her role as publicly advocate for her child Eudy:

"You get insulted from here to hell and back, but you just have to take it as it comes and remain calm. If you start shouting back you will achieve nothing."

Parents cannot always be around to keep a child safe, but they can help create a world that will accept their child the way they do.

Parents and families in advocacy for LGBTI equality and freedom in Southern Africa

Any child that comes into our home is a child of mine.

Any child that comes into our home is a child of mine.140

Parents and Families as Advocates

Participating in media activism is also a big confidence booster. In Botswana, Flora said this about her first experience on television sharing her story as the mother of an intersex child: "It was nerve-wracking, but I feel really good now as it has taught me that I can speak in public."136

Radio remains an important and powerful tool for advocacy, especially in rural areas and in low-income communities where access to the internet and television is limited. LGBTI family issues, as a Motswana mother told us, "should be spoken about on radio," but until recently, they were rarely mentioned137. Then, in 2018, Young Heroes in South Africa partnered with the Anova Health Institute to run a series of radio adverts featuring the voices of supportive parents. In one, a mother movingly shared the positive story her LGBTI child’s coming out.

"My son is my hero because he had the courage to tell me that he is gay. Oh, I was so proud of Tshepo when he sat me down and told me about himself. I knew this moment was important, because he made me a cup of tea and had bought biscuits with his own money. I love my child unconditionally because I know that love is love, and now we are closer than ever. We all deserve love and acceptance no matter our sexual preference or gender identity."139

Because of its accessibility and the large number of stations, radio is an especially good way for parents of LGBTI people to target specific demographics with stories about people like themselves told in their own languages. This is why Nirupa Maharaj in South Africa decided to go first to her local Hindi-language radio station to advocate for families with LGBTI members.

"I love my child unconditionally. We all deserve love and acceptance no matter our sexual preference or gender identity."141

Parents cannot always be around to keep a child safe, but they can help create a world that will accept their child the way they do.

"Any child that comes into our home is a child of mine."142

136 Interview with Flora Thebeyakgosi, Botswana
137 Transcript from Anova Health Institute Radio Ad
138 Transcript from Anova Health Institute Radio Ad
139 Interview with Nirupa Maharaj, South Africa
140 Interview with Melinda Swift, South Africa
141 Interview with Rachel Jason, South Africa
142 Interview with Rachel Jason, South Africa
143 Interview with Rachel Jason, South Africa
144 Interview with Rachel Jason, South Africa
145 Interview with Rachel Jason, South Africa
146 BBC Heart and Soul (9 December 2018) Fighting Prejudice in Eudy’s Name: Interview with Mally Simelane
147 Interview with Nirupa Maharaj, South Africa
148 Interview with Nirupa Maharaj, South Africa
Mam’ Simelane was determinedly visible for years after her child’s murder. Her public presence acknowledged the need to be loud when life and death are at stake. All parents know that, at some point, their child’s life may be in the hands of others. They cannot always be around to keep the child safe, but they can help create a world that will accept their child the way they do.

A number of parents told us they had been emboldened to go public by their LGBTI children. Flora’s story from Botswana was typical: “I was inspired by [my son’s] openness and freedom about his identity so I asked if he is okay with me going public, and he gave me the go-ahead.”143

Many parents and other family members who have not yet spoken publicly told us they would be willing to do so with the right support. In Zimbabwe, Duduzile was unhesitant: “I would. That’s why I am here,” she responded.144 Doreen in Botswana was even more eager.

“Yah! I would definitely do that. Even on the radio, man, I can do that [and] I think that it could help. The world will be listening, and really, really listen. They will understand what I’m talking about.”

Fear of backlash holds back many parents who might otherwise speak out, but most of the parents we interviewed said it had not stopped them147. A Zimbabwean mother said, “You get insulted from here to hell and back, but you just have to take it as it comes and try and remain calm. If you start shouting back you will achieve nothing.”148

Regardless of the reparcussions, more and more parents are speaking out. Love for their children overcomes initial reluctance to go public. They know their responsibility as parents does not change because of the risks. “A mother must be strong no matter what!” one simply told us.149 Another was more expansive, though just as blunt, while also acknowledging the importance of support from activists and allies.

People talk behind my back and gossip, but now I am free even when they talk. I really do not have a care in the world. RIA has helped me accept my child and my situation. I have no problems. When people see me on television, some tell me they are happy and proud of me for speaking out, and that what I shared was informative, so even if others go around talking, it doesn’t matter anymore.”150

iv. Relations with Activists

Family advocates not only daily backlash from the community. They also criticize LGBTI organizations they feel have let them down. Parents are especially sensitive about not being listened to. Many activists know this. A Botswana activist acknowledged that,

“We have gone about it wrong. We went to the children before we went to the parents, forgetting or neglecting the fact that all these children come from families. They have parents [who] want to know [and] are mad that we engaged with their children before we engaged with them, yet they are their children’s caretakers [and] guardians.”

When LGBTI organizations reach out to families, they open the door to wider conversations, learn how families actually feel and what they need, and above all, whilst the love, resilience, and sense of responsibility that parents, siblings and other family members have for their LGBTI offspring and kin. These feelings are potentially the most powerful drivers of LGBTI advocacy imaginable.

All parents want their children to live freely and thrive. Once parents and other family members understand that sexual and gender identity are essential parts of a child’s true self, they will fight tooth and nail for LGBTI acceptance in the wider community. Parents are very aware of the weight of stigma and exclusion an LGBTI child carries. Helping their child deal with this shows parents that they, too, can deal constructively with any stigma and exclusion that come their way when they speak out for their child and other LGBTI people.
Our key finding is that families with LGBTI members want to be listened to. In that spirit, our recommendations come straight from what family members, especially those closest to an LGBTI child—the parents and siblings—have told us about their struggles and needs.

In the following recommendations, the quoted testimonies of those who have learned to accept their LGBTI kin represent only the most memorable of numerous statements we heard expressing the same ideas. Here the term activists includes parents, siblings, elders, and other family members who have become public advocates for their LGBTI kinfolk. These vital allies, mainly working in their local communities through family support groups—but increasingly speaking out more publicly through the media or at workshops and conferences—are some of the strongest and most effective advocates for LGBTI equality. They provide examples of acceptance, often after a long struggle and learning curve, that any family can relate to. While defending their children, they have built groups and networks that have opened their communities to new ideas, improved the lives of LGBTI people, influenced laws and policies, and taught professional activists invaluable lessons in community mobilization and messaging.

Families’ ability to speak out publicly depends to a very large extent on the availability of platforms, the security of safe spaces, and financial support from LGBTI organizations and donors. It is largely up to donors, LGBTI organizations, activists, and researchers to avail these resources and ensure families have the opportunities they need to maximize their impact. The recommendations below are all directed toward this goal.

- Activists must be patient and tactful when working with families. Families need time to come to terms with a child coming out as LGBTI.

  “It’s not a process you can rush. It’s a journey and you have to be patient on a journey.”

  “This is not a one-day thing. You are not able to grasp all of this in one day. You need to take one day at a time.”

- Family reactions to learning that a child is LGBTI are diverse and complex, but even those who are initially hostile can become more accepting if they interact with others who have been through the same thing.

Interview with Farren Watt, South Africa
Interview with Memory, Zimbabwe

Parents want to be listened to.

recommendations

roots - the involvement of parents and families in advocacy for LGBTI equality and freedom in Southern Africa

49

roots
“It helps change the perception of LGBTI people within the community when people see that their family supports them.

“I had different feelings at first but when I came here [to GALZ] I saw many of them and I started to get into it. Learning more about it - that’s when I started to accommodate her.”

“I wasn’t okay at first but when I realized that I was opposing my child, and I wanted him to live like any other children, I started accepting him.”

• Activists should be facilitators and mentors, not lecturers. Families need to feel they have done the work themselves in a process that they own and that everyone has had a say in.

“We must sit down as a family, consult within the family, discuss the matter, accommodate each and every view from the family members, identify areas of conflict, isolate those areas, and identify areas that may bring the family together.”

“I say listen, talk more, keep an open mind, and if your struggling and can’t accept, go get educated, ask [people who know]. There are people that will help you.”

• Activists should start from the premise that families struggling to make sense of a child coming out as LGBTI are motivated by love and concern for their child’s well-being and, with the right information and support, will learn to accept the child even if this goes against their own values or interests.

“What’s important is for me to love them and them to love me.”

“I want me and my children to be united and be the same tree branch and be living and peaceful to people we live with so that they can respect and know us.”

• Parents and families need to be included in Pride celebrations, community dialogues, film screenings, Facebook and WhatsApp groups, and any other events or platforms. They are the strongest allies LGBTI people can have, and their potential should never be neglected.

“When your child is gay and is not treated well in the community, you have to stand up as a parent. You have to defend your child. Where will your child run to if you cannot accept and learn to live with the situation?”

“My grandfather told me there have always been gays in the rural areas.”

• Parents want the best for their children. But the best for their children is not necessarily the best for the parent. And when it’s different, the parents need to learn to let go.”

154 Interview with P.R., Zimbabwe
155 Interview with Rachel Jasson, South Africa
156 Interview with Blessing Ngobese, South Africa
157 Interview with Babuva Balana, South Africa
158 Interview with Flora Thebeyakgosi, Botswana
159 Interview with Mosadithebe Kanyama, Botswana
160 Interview with Abel Gaobuse, South Africa
161 Interview with Najeeb Foxkeerbux, Mauritius
162 Interview with Mosadithebe Kanyama, Botswana
163 Mamba Online (9 June 2017) Ancestors approve of gay traditional healers
164 Interview with Able Gaobuse, South Africa
165 Interview with Felicia Pona, Botswana
166 Interview with Bradley Fortuin, Botswana
167 Interview with Rachel Jasson, South Africa
168 Interview with Flora Thebeyakgosi, Botswana

• Siblings and elders must not be overlooked. The siblings of LGBTI children are often the best entry points for talking with parents and other family members, while family and community elders are the best witnesses to the fact that LGBTI people have always existed. Outreach programs should target supportive siblings and knowledgeable, sympathetic elders, especially community leaders and respected figures in the extended family.

“We know that youth culture is more supportive of LGBTI [people], and, in families the parents don’t often want to lose their child. Siblings have spoken with parents. [They] are our entry point to bring people to services and counseling”

“Growing up, I was told [by elders] that there were always people like that, and they told me that I have to accept my child as she is, so I learned to accept her.”

“My grandfather told me there have always been gays in the rural areas.”

• Parents and families need to be included in Pride celebrations, community dialogues, film screenings, Facebook and WhatsApp groups, and any other events or platforms. They are the strongest allies LGBTI people can have, and their potential should never be neglected.

“When your child is gay and is not treated well in the community, you have to stand up as a parent. You have to defend your child. Where will your child run to if you cannot accept and learn to live with the situation?”

“I say listen, talk more, keep an open mind, and if your struggling and can’t accept, go get educated, ask [people who know]. There are people that will help you.”

• Activists should start from the premise that families struggling to make sense of a child coming out as LGBTI are motivated by love and concern for their child’s well-being and, with the right information and support, will learn to accept the child even if this goes against their own values or interests.

“What’s important is for me to love them and them to love me.”

“I want me and my children to be united and be the same tree branch and be living and peaceful to people we live with so that they can respect and know us.”

• Parents want the best for their children. But the best for their children is not necessarily the best for the parent. And when it’s different, the parents need to learn to let go.”

164 Interview with Able Gaobuse, South Africa
165 Interview with Felicia Pona, Botswana
166 Interview with Bradley Fortuin, Botswana
167 Interview with Rachel Jasson, South Africa
168 Interview with Flora Thebeyakgosi, Botswana

154 Interview with P.R., Zimbabwe
155 Interview with Rachel Jasson, South Africa
156 Interview with Blessing Ngobese, South Africa
157 Interview with Babuva Balana, South Africa
158 Interview with Flora Thebeyakgosi, Botswana
159 Interview with Mosadithebe Kanyama, Botswana
160 Interview with Abel Gaobuse, South Africa
161 Interview with Najeeb Foxkeerbux, Mauritius
162 Interview with Mosadithebe Kanyama, Botswana
163 Mamba Online (9 June 2017) Ancestors approve of gay traditional healers
164 Interview with Able Gaobuse, South Africa
165 Interview with Felicia Pona, Botswana
166 Interview with Bradley Fortuin, Botswana
167 Interview with Rachel Jasson, South Africa
168 Interview with Flora Thebeyakgosi, Botswana

154 Interview with P.R., Zimbabwe
155 Interview with Rachel Jasson, South Africa
156 Interview with Blessing Ngobese, South Africa
157 Interview with Babuva Balana, South Africa
158 Interview with Flora Thebeyakgosi, Botswana
159 Interview with Mosadithebe Kanyama, Botswana
160 Interview with Abel Gaobuse, South Africa
161 Interview with Najeeb Foxkeerbux, Mauritius
162 Interview with Mosadithebe Kanyama, Botswana
163 Mamba Online (9 June 2017) Ancestors approve of gay traditional healers
164 Interview with Able Gaobuse, South Africa
165 Interview with Felicia Pona, Botswana
166 Interview with Bradley Fortuin, Botswana
167 Interview with Rachel Jasson, South Africa
168 Interview with Flora Thebeyakgosi, Botswana
• Messages targeting families should use accessible terminology, be available on as many platforms as possible (including social media, television, and radio), be culturally appropriate, and wherever possible, align with the values and customs families already follow.

“[We need an article in a magazine every week, or every month. We need to have more stories on same-sex relationships and how they’ve blossomed, or the struggles they’ve gone through].”  

“We should try anything that we can do culturally that can reconcile the family.”

“We need to feel like he can sit around the fire like us and have a normal conversation.”

• The science that supports the intrinsic nature of sexuality and gender identity should be emphasized in messaging for parents whenever appropriate. Parents are much more likely to accept an LGBTI child when they see sexual and gender diversity as innate rather than as a choice.

“[When we have the healing space, we get to know each other].”

“There is always going to be something in [a parent’s] story that resonates with another person. And that is really helpful to realise you are not alone.”

• Activists should do everything they can to ensure that families have accurate information about all aspects of sexual and gender diversity, state laws and policies, psychosocial and cultural factors, available resources, ongoing and planned activities, and anything else to help support their LGBTI kinfolk and promote acceptance in their communities.

“It’s hard for us to just wait along with what they tell us not knowing if what they were saying was accurate.”

• With church-going families, the message that sexuality and gender are God-given and that God does not make mistakes should also be emphasized.

“I think they have to educate the parents first. They have to. Not to equip them without us. [Otherwise] we are in the darkness. We don’t know what is going on.”

“We have to do it ourselves [but] the main issue is resources.”

• Strategic funding is needed to enable successful family-based initiatives to refine their methods and expand their activities, especially into underserved rural areas.

“Sometimes you’ll have an activity that you want to do, and you’ll be told there are no funds.”

“The biggest thing is funds so that we can be able to go to different places and reach people in villages.”

• Online platforms that can enhance communication among parents and between parents, activists, and experts should be a priority. Social media can provide safe spaces for parents and family members to ask questions they might otherwise be afraid to ask. They are especially important for those who are not ready to participate in groups or join organizations. Care should be taken to maintain a non-judgmental atmosphere that enables all questions to be valued and addressed.

“Sometimes you’ll have an activity that you want to do, and you’ll be told there are no funds.”

“We have to do it ourselves [but] the main issue is resources.”

“[We need an article in a magazine every week, or every month. We need to have more stories on same-sex relationships and how they’ve blossomed, or the struggles they’ve gone through].”

“We should try anything that we can do culturally that can reconcile the family.”

“We need to feel like he can sit around the fire like us and have a normal conversation.”

“The science that supports the intrinsic nature of sexuality and gender identity should be emphasized in messaging for parents whenever appropriate. Parents are much more likely to accept an LGBTI child when they see sexual and gender diversity as innate rather than as a choice.”

“We need to feel like he can sit around the fire like us and have a normal conversation.”

“The science that supports the intrinsic nature of sexuality and gender identity should be emphasized in messaging for parents whenever appropriate. Parents are much more likely to accept an LGBTI child when they see sexual and gender diversity as innate rather than as a choice.”

“[When we have the healing space, we get to know each other].”

“There is always going to be something in [a parent’s] story that resonates with another person. And that is really helpful to realise you are not alone.”

“We have to do it ourselves [but] the main issue is resources.”
roots - the involvement of parents and families in advocacy for LGBTI equality and freedom in Southern Africa