



Interview with Mathlogonolo Samsam, topic and context: Lesbian Visibility Day in Botswana

By Rita Schäfer

Published in the German "Gender Blog" April 23, 2024 [Sichtbarkeit lesbischer Menschenrechtsarbeit: Lesbian Visibility Day in Botswana \(gender-blog.de\)](https://gender-blog.de/Sichtbarkeit-lesbischer-Menschenrechtsarbeit-Lesbian-Visibility-Day-in-Botswana)

What are your plans for the Lesbian Visibility Day 2024? What did you do during the last years?

This year, we have not yet had the opportunity to discuss as a team what our plans are, but what we normally do because we don't have a lot of funding, especially for commemorative dates. Usually, we do social media activations, where we stand in solidarity with lesbian activists across the world and celebrate each other's achievements. We organize small social media campaigns just to have an appreciation of the different work that has been done originally. This year, there will definitely be social media activations again. I'm hoping, funds will allow us that we can have small group discussions. We have seen that there is still a lot of work that needs to be done in the ground. We see the anti-gender, anti-rights movement is moving fast and it's very well-funded. It's threatening to take away the human rights gains that we have made so far. We also don't want to be too comfortable, and we want to already be thinking about the strategies that we can use in our advocacy work to make sure that there's a visibility of our identities that are not necessarily just linked to our sexual orientation.

Please tell us more about Black Queer DocX and what your activities are.

Black Queer DocX, like the name says, we are a group of Black and queer activists who are interested in doing documentation work because we realized that even within the brother LGBT movement, there isn't a lot of documentation of the work that lesbian women are doing, the work that bisexual women are doing. Also, originally, there isn't a lot of research. Even when we're doing advocacy work, sometimes it becomes a little difficult to bring written documents, to bring research that show the violations that we go through, materials that show the victories that we

have made as an LBQ movement. We thought that documentation would be very important. That's part of the work that we do to make sure that LGBTQ, LBQ, rather, identities are visible and documented, and that there's a cross-sharing of stories, cross-sharing of advocacy strategies.

In Botswana our constitution is old. We've been using the same constitution since we got independence. And recently, there are processes to make constitutional amendments. But our laws are not that good when it comes to protecting LBQ women. And then there is still a lot of patriarchy and heteronormativity.

It plays out in different situations, where we find ourselves in. The work that we do is trying to mobilize queer women to ensure that we engage around a collective agenda of social, economic, and political transformation to talk about how are we challenging the different systems, be it the policies, be it the laws, be it the healthcare services that continue to oppress us, that continue to exclude us from society. We are making sure that queer women have a voice, that they are able to speak out for themselves about the needs that they have and how the people in power should be accountable.

Then we also try to work with organizations that are not necessarily LBQ, just because we realize that apart from our sexual orientation and our gender identities, we are also part of a bigger world. We make sure that we are not working in isolation and having our conversations happening on the side, but that we included in the larger women's rights movement, for example. Just so that there is visibility of the work that we are doing and there is allyship. Of course, it has been very difficult because as queer women, when we are talking about feminism, for example, we are always there and visible in the broader women's rights movement. But when it comes to issues that are specific to us, like the gross indecency laws in Botswana, we see the other movements being silent on us and we have to advocate for ourselves. A lot of the work that we are doing is trying to build that community and movement, and creating spaces for conversations, spaces for well-being, spaces for our healing justice work, and doing the statements like we did the UPR statement.

There's still a lot of work to do, especially because we are such a small organization. A lot of the time the work that we do is voluntary, we have to do it along with the other work that we're getting paid for. We still also have challenges around capacity because sometimes maybe I have to travel for work, but Black Queer DocX wants to do something. We don't have enough capacity because we don't have enough funding to have someone on a full-time position that we could pay for to do the work. There are always those challenges.

Maybe we could continue with the other organization you are working for, iranti.

Iranti is an LBQT organization. We work with lesbian, bisexual women, we work with trans people, we work with intersex persons. A lot of the work that we do is documentation work. We document the human rights violations. We document the experiences of organizations working in the Southern African region, and we showcase that work through our media platforms. We also have an archive where we put the information and we are able to use the one that is not too sensitive for advocacy and also as evidence, when we are engaging with members and government, for example.

I work as the LBQ officer. My job is basically to help iranti envision how it wants to work with LBQ organizations in South Africa, in the SADC region, basically, and how we are centering inclusive feminism as a process of how we do our work and how we are engaging with organizations. A lot of the time in the movement we talk about how donors set the agenda because they have the money and they be like: "We want to do this work. So here it is, how we do this". The way in which we approach our partnerships is that we engage with different communities and find out what work priorities they have, what their advocacy priorities are. And when we have funds, we see how we can support them with the funds to implement the work that is a priority to them, that is an urgent need for them.

Some of the work that we have done for the UPR process is the engagement with the Botswana Collectives. It was a collective of LBQ women, a trans organization, an organization working with gay men, and another one working in the broader women's rights movement. They brought together their issues. There were issues around abortion, GBV, and legal gender recognition. And there were issues about repealing Section 167 of the Penal Code in Botswana which talks about gross indecency laws. It says a person who does anything that is considered gross indecency is liable for a criminal offense and may go to jail. We know that the context for us is that if I am a lesbian woman and I'm with my lesbian partner and we kiss and somebody decides that is gross to them, we could possibly be taken to jail for that act. We realized that as sexual minorities, such punitive laws affect us more than the broader spaces *[society/movements?]*.

We brought all those issues together. We got evidence on the work that has been done by advocacy groups and the work that has been done by government, and we saw where the limitations are, and we had recommendations to the government of Botswana. We shared the reports with as many countries as we were able to. Some of them did make recommendations to Botswana, like the gross indecency laws and the legal gender recognition. Our plan now is following Botswana's review, ensuring that we keep that relationship with government, and there's continuous advocacy until the next cycle. So in iranti and the organizations in Botswana there has been conversation about what advocacy strategies would be next and how we break down the UPR processes to other activists on the ground who may not understand the very technical knowledge that is in the report and how we make sure that also we share the information with other activists so that they can also be able to get to a level where they're able to do and submit reports and make sure that their voices are also being heard. That is the work that iranti does and the approach that we use when we are engaging with communities.

Something cool that we also did recently is the Namibian Lesbian Festival. We brought activists that we work with across the region - from South Africa and Botswana, and we took them to participate in the advocacy work of the Namibian Lesbian Festival. It was in Windhoek. There were conversations around healing and movement building, and then there were also artistic expressions. We did T-shirt paintings just to show that even if you don't have a formal employment, there's a skill that you can learn from others to have a small business and make money for yourself. The festival was a space for that. Iranti supported the different activists from the SADC region to be in that particular space and to ensure that the festival happens because also last year, the team in Namibia did not have the funding to do the work because they've

been working with OSF, and now OSF was not funding Namibia anymore. Then it was like: "Oh, it's not going to happen". But we were like: "But this is very important work, that needs to happen because it's building up the LBQ movement. It's creating a space for cross-advocacy and joint advocacy initiatives".

We supported that process for the festival to go on. Then some of the work that we do also is monitoring human rights violations and using those to engage with government to say: "Look, there are people who live in your country who experience such and such violations. The Constitution says: 'You should be protecting people'. As the government, how are you going to be doing that?"

The work has been really good in South Africa. There was a project called VUGA Youth, where young people were engaged in documenting the violations and learning also how to do advocacy work. So, the plan is to also roll out the work at all other regional countries, because we do realize that documentation of our experiences is not always reflected.

Maybe we could continue with the Masakhane project. How were you involved in the Masakhana project, and what were your main lessons learned?

During the Masakhane project I was still working with the LEGABIBO. I got engaged in the process and I was being the LBQ lead to co-implement with other organizations. There was Higher Heights for Girls Organization, which worked with adolescent girls and young women. Then there was Health Empowerment Rights. We also worked with trans and intersex persons. The work that we did was around movement building, especially in Botswana, because we realized that the LBQ movement is still at a very infant stage. There were no opportunities for us to advance LBQ priorities. The work that we have always been doing is pushing the broader LGBTI, which tend to be very male-focused. The Autonomy Project was basically around pushing women's rights issues. We had conversations around body autonomy, about my right to make decisions for myself and be in spaces where these decisions concerning that would be made, the right to occupy such spaces. I know even prior to me joining, there were also learning exchanges. A couple of people from Botswana went to Germany to have knowledge exchange sessions. I think that's very important because, if I work in Botswana, sometimes I see things from only one perspective.

But when I get to be in [other] spaces, I can have conversations with people who see things from a different perspective, and we can learn from each other's movements. What have you done to do your advocacy work that has worked? How can I take it back to Botswana and do the same thing, but contextualizing it for Botswana and making sure that I try different advocacy processes out. The work has been traumatic at times because we get to see the violations that people go through on a daily basis. One lesson came out is the need also for documentation of LBQ work. We realized that the work, even if we are doing such amazing work, it is not documented, it is not reflected, so we are not able to share it with other people to say: "Hey, this is the work that we are doing. This is why we believe it's important, and this is where you can see it." There's still a lot of capacity that is needed in order to self-document our stories and our work, to make sure that our knowledge is also being protected and it's available to be shared with the generations of activists that will come after us.

I think that one of the key lessons is that need for documentation of the work and need for more research. There isn't a lot of research. We know that when you engage with government, research is very, very important because it shows that you did an extensive process of seeing what challenges people are experiencing and how the government can then intervene to make the challenges go away. There's still a lot of need for research. Research that can be led by the people on the ground who do the work. Masakhane was very important in highlighting those needs.

But also, I remember when COVID started, when there were lockdowns, it also showed that we had people out unemployed who couldn't afford basic groceries. We were used to having conversations where we can talk about our illness, but then we were not allowed to meet. That's when Zoom became famous. Then we saw that even with online platforms, it's difficult to have a sense of community because people don't even have smartphones or laptops to be able to connect. But we are grateful because through the Masakhane Project, we were able to provide food hampers and facilities to our colleagues who found themselves unemployed and were not able to find basic necessities. I know sometimes it looks like a small thing, but it's a little relief for someone who's living maybe with the homophobic family and they're struggling with everything. Now, having to worry about food is added stress. If we're able to at least take one small thing from that stress, it does make a difference, and people do appreciate those processes.

Maybe you could share a little bit what the partnership program with FLiP means for you and what partnership work is already done?

This might be the most important partner we have because as Black Queer DocX our feminist stand was that we are not going to register because we did not want to subject ourselves to the oppressive systems that the country has against people like us. For us, it was a feminism of saying: "We're not going to go through this process". Unfortunately for us, it means that we are not able to receive funding from a lot of donors because they require you to be registered so that you can also have your own bank account. Our relationship with FLiP has been important because they recognize our feminist point of view, and they work with us in ways that make sense for us. It's not a dictating type of organization and grassroots organization level. They were able to support the work that we do.

We received the funds from them, most recently to help with our registration case because for us to register, we had to convene a meeting of 20 plus people and have a meeting and take minutes from that meeting and submit it to the Register of Society so that they can see there's an intention to open a society. Because we don't have any funding, it's really difficult to bring people together because you have to think about transport, meals, and things like that. A lot of the communities that we work with are people who are employed in the informal sector, so their salaries are not very good for them to be able to contribute something. We were able to get funds from FLiP to do that type of work. It's helped because now we're at the next level. We've been also to draft the Constitution, and we've submitted everything to government. Even now, they're now being shady and saying we are illegal, but they're not also being very forthcoming with information. They're trying to delay or frustrates us into not registering. It's very

disheartening. But knowing that organization which support our work is very, very important, and seeing the interest in not just being an organization that's saying: "I'm going to give you funds for you to do this work", but somebody who's coming and say: "Oh, I think you are doing important work. I don't have a lot of money to give to you to continue that work, but here is something to contribute to doing that work."

That has been the basis of our relationship with FLiP. Because they have a broader network of LBQ organizations that they work with.

We've been having monthly partnership meetings where we are able to understand where other LBQ movements in the region are at, the work that they're working on and how we can support them. It has created that platform where we know that this is how we reach out to other organizations that are not in Botswana but are working in doing the similar type of work that we are doing. It has been very important in terms of building up the LBQ movement, and especially after the Masakhane project, because it was the formal structure that had the finances to keep the work going. But after that, it was very important that the work continues to be done, that the relationships continue to be there.

We have a nice, cute little library. FLiP supported us to buy books. We got a lot of feminist books, so other people are also able to borrow the books and read. Sometimes when you just need to get away from your head, it's cool to just grab your book, read, put it back, and you a lot of things at your own time.

That has been also something that we really appreciate. I know Cornelia and colleagues are coming to Botswana soon, where we're going to also engage about the advocacy work that we want to do in the future and the way we see our partnership with them working out and how we can better it if there are any challenges and stuff like that. I believe that the constant check-ins are very important when we came with other people.

How important is it to meet in person or to exchange virtually on digital platforms?

I'm definitely thankful for technology because it means that we are able to reach spaces that we might not necessarily reach. It means that in cases where we don't have the resources to physically meet, we are still able to meet virtually. We have conversations and exchange information, share skills, share priorities. We are also, in case of emergencies, able to promptly reach out to people who could possibly support us. I believe that media is very, very important in terms of making the work visible, reaching out to our partners in different places, and doing joint advocacy work, and having messages of solidarity when others are probably going through a hard time and we don't have the financial means to support them. But it's always nice to know that this person in Germany stands in solidarity. I'm not alone in this situation. The world can see what we are going through and the world is speaking up against the different violations that we face. But then it also comes with the issues like access. When we are working with maybe people who are living in the rural areas, Internet is very hard to get. It's expensive. Other people that we went to work with are excluded from such particular spaces, and they may not have the information that we are privy to.

There are those challenges. Then also there are concerns around digital safety, the work our organization as grassroots activists knowing how to safely use social media to do advocacy

work, or are there things that we are doing that may put us at risk at some point in the future? We have not had any type of trainings, but it's something that we are also interested in. It is work that Iranti will be doing in the future to get activists from the region, the small partners that we work with, to one space where we can have security and security training for activists who do that work digitally. Because also sometimes me being an activist, even my personal account where I'm not doing advocacy work with, can be used to target me as a person. Making sure that people know that there are those concerns. As they're doing the work, you don't put the communities that you work with in danger by maybe posting their pictures without consent. Having conversations around that. Media has, I think in that way, both good and bad, and we just have to find a nice balance of how to make it work.

What your hopes and wishes are for lesbian and queer visibility in future? Not only on Lesbian Visibility Day, but in general?

I would like to see a lot of our beautiful work being reflected. I think a lot of the times we complain that our voices are not being visible. Be misrepresented. When people talk about us, like LBQ people, it tends to be sexualized in the African context. I would like to see our narratives, our stories told from a positive point of view, from a beautiful point of view, because even with the different challenges, we are still doing good at other things. Look at us, small organization like Queer DocX, being able to speak in a UN space, that's a very big achievement, and that's work that needs to be reflected in the media. We don't always have to be stories about somebody being beaten up. It doesn't have to be gruesome and bad all the time. There's still some beautiful movement work that has been done, and I would like to see that highlighted and celebrated.



Matlhogonolo Samsam

Matlhogonolo Samsam, Gaborone, Botswana, ist studierte Medienwissenschaftlerin mit einer Zusatzausbildung in Journalismus und LBQ-Beauftragte in der Organisation Iranti. Zwischen 2021 und 2023 arbeitete sie als Bildungs-, Awareness- und Kommunikationsmanagerin für die Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals of Botswana (LEGABIBO). Sie ist ehrenamtliche Media and Community Liaison Lead bei Black Queer DocX.



Dr. Rita Schäfer

Rita Schäfer ist freiberufliche Afrika-Wissenschaftlerin, Dozentin und Gutachterin für Entwicklungsorganisationen. Ihr regionaler Schwerpunkt ist das südliche Afrika. Sie forscht über Frauenrechtsorganisationen, geschlechtsspezifische Gewalt, Maskulinitäten in Post-Konfliktgesellschaften und LSBTIQ. Buchpublikation u. a.: Migration und Neuanfang in Südafrika (2019). Webprojekt: gender-africa.org

Literature

Amnesty International (2024). We are facing extinction, Escalating Anti-LGBTI sentiment, the weaponization of law and their human rights implications in selected African countries, Amnesty International, Index AFR 01/7533/2024. Zugriff am 22.04.2024

unter https://www.queeramnesty.de/fileadmin/user_upload/medien/aktionen-berichte/Afrika/Amnesty-Bericht-Afrika-LGBTI-Diskriminierende-Gesetze-Unterdrueckung-Januar-2024.pdf.

Bradley Fortuin and Matlhogonolo Samsam (2023). Botswana religious groups threaten rule of law and refuse LGBTQ rights. Zugriff am 22.04.2024

unter <https://www.southernafricalitigationcentre.org/2023/08/14/botswana-religious-groups-threaten-rule-of-law-and-refuse-lgbtq-rights/>.

FLiP e.V. – FrauenLiebe im Pott / Cornelia Sperling (Hrsg.) (2020). We build partnerships, Dokumentation des Projekts "Partnerschaften zwischen zivilgesellschaftlichen lesbischen Gruppen in NRW und Afrika" 2018-2020. Zugriff am 22.04.2024 unter https://www.flip-ruhr.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Dokumentation_2018-2020_Partnerschaften.pdf.

FLiP e.V. – FrauenLiebe im Pott. Partnerschaft Afrika. Zugriff am 22.04.2024 unter <https://www.flip-ruhr.de/partnerschaft-afrika/>.

Taboon Media (Hrsg.) (2021). Hopes and Dreams That Sound Like Yours, MaThoko's Books, GALA (Johannesburg, May 2021). Zugriff am 22.04.2024 <https://gala.co.za/books-and-resources/publications-and-publishing/mathokos-books/hopes-and-dreams/>.

Taboon Media (Hrsg.) (2022). Courage to Share, MaThoko's Books, GALA (Johannesburg, August 2022). Zugriff am 22.04.2024 <https://gala.co.za/books-and-resources/publications-and-publishing/mathokos-books/courage-to-share/>.

Taboon Media (Hrsg.) (2023). Whispers and Shouts, MaThoko's Books, GALA (Johannesburg, Mai 2023). Zugriff am 22.04.2024 unter <https://gala.co.za/books-and-resources/publications-and-publishing/mathokos-books/whispers-and-shouts/>.