

**Of bravery and invisibility: Black lesbian activism in South Africa between 1980 and 2016**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the experiences of Black lesbian activists in South Africa between 1980 and 2016. The study asks where does Black lesbian activism fit in the history of the broader struggle for political liberation, and in particular in the struggle for gay and lesbian rights, in South Africa. Secondly it asks whether there has been any change in how the intersecting challenges of race, class and gender have impacted this group of women. Thirdly, it asks what is the future of this type of activism. Participants revealed that the similar issues that plagued the gay and lesbian movement in the early 1980s still beset the movement post-apartheid. Newer issues concern a lack of opportunity for new voices in the movement, a lack of skills development, and a narrow understanding of the issues that affect Black lesbians. The legal victories won for gay and lesbian people in the early years of democracy remain inaccessible to some Black lesbians, because they are still vulnerable to various forms of violence and abuse. It is with these findings that the study argues that Black lesbian activism, as a unique form of activism with a particular agenda, existed during the 1980s in South Africa, however invisible and small in scale. Continued activism is necessary for the realization of the rights of marginalized Black lesbian women, however it needs to become more inclusive and dynamic. It must devise and commit to new and innovative strategies of organizing, not just on the frontlines, but across a range of sectors and spaces of influence.

## **1. Introduction**

Where are Black lesbian activists in South Africa's rich history of resistance and activism? The contribution and work of individuals and organisations in shaping the state of the country over many decades, is well documented. However there is a gap in what is known about Black lesbian activism. This group of activists and their work in the years pre-democracy, up until the early 1990s, is non-existent in recorded history. It is implausible to consider that there may not have been several or any Black lesbian activists to speak of, write about and archive their stories. One has to imagine Black lesbian activists into recorded history pre-1990s, and go on to infer their existence in, and contribution towards the struggle against colonialism and apartheid. It is from as late as the early 1990s that alternative identities and voices to hegemonic heteronormativity within the struggle for liberation and the collective work towards building a post-apartheid democratic state become visible. Even then, Black lesbian activists in literature on feminism and women's studies in the South African context in particular, are insufficiently explored.

There is a distance between legislated rights and lived reality in South Africa. The promise of a new dawn post-apartheid should have meant that prejudice in the form of racism, sexism and homophobia would be intolerable and sanctioned through various means through out the country. However, these forms of prejudice, still exist, and the most marginalised in society are at the receiving end of the prejudice enacted in the worst ways against them. Among the most marginalised are Black lesbian women. They are an example of how laws alone are no guarantors of freedom and security, nor do they change attitudes and behaviour. The invisibility of marginalized groups such as Black lesbian identifying women in documented history, mainstream politics and media has contributed to the pervasive unchanged attitudes towards women who identify as lesbian. By documenting the experiences of people who have been left out of dominant social narratives, prejudice is called out and hopefully shamed, what is believed to be true is challenged, and so called peripheral issues are brought to

the fore. Thereafter, one expects that requisite action will be taken to ensure that all people and their rights are protected. The limited knowledge on Black lesbian activism in apartheid South Africa, and the limited knowledge about this form of activism post-apartheid, I argue, has resulted in the continued violence and marginalization of predominantly poor Black lesbian-identifying women.

This study explores the lives of Black lesbian activists in South Africa, in the period between 1980 and 2016. This period is broken up into three epochs; pre-democracy 1980 – 1994; the early years of democratic South Africa 1994 – 2006; and contemporary South Africa 2006 – 2016. All three epochs are characterized by particular political conditions that spurred organizing as a response to the state and the government of the time. Black lesbian women were a part of organising in all three eras. Through the personal accounts of life as Black lesbian-identifying activists in pre- and post apartheid, this work seeks to illuminate the gaps that exist in what is known about activism of this nature. This is a study of the politics of sexualities, gender and activism against injustice in a South African context. It places Black women at the centre of the political, cultural and economic injustices of patriarchy, apartheid and colonialism. In establishing the activist agenda, the analysis of the study focuses on identity politics, as well as the contextual reality shaped by intersecting economic and political forces that Black lesbian activists find themselves in Bennett (2011, p. 96).

The study focuses on the experiences of Black lesbian activists, in the broader context of Black lesbian, Black women and women identity; and the social realities associated with these identities. These social realities are layered and intersectional. There is a multiplicity of issues, such as economic, political and social factors, to deal with at once. No Black lesbian is a woman sometimes, a lesbian only on weekends, and Black when they feel like it. They are all of these identities, all of the time. Thus oppression based on all of these identities and how they relate to each other must be addressed, at the same time. There also cannot be a hierarchy of importance regarding various forms of oppression that Black women and people of colour are subjected to (Crenshaw 2000). To do so is

anti-feminist because no form of injustice should be viewed as worse than another. It is this kind of thinking that led to women being left behind because the race struggle was prioritized over other struggles by liberation movements. This study also attempts to gauge to what extent other issues and struggles could have been prioritised and waged with the same focus and support as the struggle for liberation was fought. Activists who have to deal with multiple struggles at once have to continuously employ different strategies for different economic, historical and cultural contexts, not as a function of lesser or greater importance of issues, but rather as result of what is possible at a given time in a particular context Bennett (2011, p. 5).

Why experience as a tool for understanding? Marginalised groups experience the world differently, and have their own understanding of their own oppression. They articulate these views differently to how those in dominant positions do. The everyday acts of resistance by Black women challenge two approaches to studying the consciousness of oppressed groups: the approach that sees 'any independent consciousness expressed by the oppressed as being inferior to the perspective of the dominant group'; and the approach that suggests that 'oppressed groups lack the motivation for political activism because of their flawed consciousness of their own subordination' Collins (2000, p. 184). This study adopts standpoint feminism as an approach, as it takes the experiences of women as fundamental and critical to knowledge of power and political relations between men and women (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Black women's standpoint articulates their experiences and perceptions through their own accounts. They provide a different perspective to social thought from their marginalized position. The Black lesbian activists in this study do exactly that.

There is no singular Black lesbian experience. The study does not claim to represent the breadth and depth of Black lesbian activist experiences. What it does attempt to do is locate Black lesbian activists in the history of resistance and organising in the country; and unpack the structural conditions that have dictated and continue to dictate the type of visibility and bravery possible for activism of this nature.

## **2. Literature Review**

This section looks at aspects of the history of gay and lesbian, and women's organizing in South Africa, and the invisibility of Black lesbian activists in that history. The existence of Black lesbian activists is inferred in the emergence of Black-led political movements where women were present and active. Among those women in the struggle for liberation are Black lesbian activists.

Invisibility in this study does not mean non-existence. It refers to the erasure of existence indicative in the inability to clearly identify or make reference to Black lesbian activists in existing literature. It is unclear if the erasure is because Black lesbians were inaccessible, or the choice to exclude them is deliberate.

Invisibility is also reference to the marginalization of Black women in various forms of political or social organizing in the early 1990s when there was greater integration of races. Multiracial organizing, as a response to state control of sexual activity, emerges in the early 1980s (Hoad 2005) however Black lesbians are visible only in the early 1990s. This visibility is largely as a result of the political transition in the country when different voices had the opportunity to place their issues amongst other issues in the process of creating a new South Africa. This study begins to look for the representation of Black lesbian activists in what is known about Black, women, and gay and lesbian led organizing in South Africa from 1980. By understanding the origins of invisibility, one can explain the challenge of organizing beyond segregation, when part of the fight is to be seen.

### **2.1 In the throes of oppression 1980 -1994**

#### **2.1.1 Political environment and lesbian organising in South Africa**

Legislation to control sexual behaviour can be traced to as early as the 1927 Immorality Act, preventing any sexual activity between different race groups. State control over sexual activity continued under the leadership of the National Party during apartheid, which began in 1948 (Hoad 2005). Gay and lesbian led



resistance against the apartheid government became more visible during the 1960s and 1970s. It was white led and dominated, due to the segregation of races at the time. The organisations operated at a relatively small scale compared to the scale and reach that organisations that operated in the 1980s enjoyed. Organising emerged from the social spaces that white gays and lesbians created in other major cities like Johannesburg and Durban. Cities as spaces of convergence were as a result of an influx of whites and Black migrant labour for economic activity. In his exploration of gay and lesbian subcultures in the 1950s and 1960s, Mark Gevisser (1995) describes how a gay subculture was facilitated by the economic pull of urbanization in cities, making these breeding grounds for men who left their families behind to participate in this subculture, voluntarily or circumstantially. Public spaces such as bars were available for men to meet. This was not the case for lesbian women. Women did not have the freedom to meet in public spaces as men. "Lesbian social life at the time revolved around private parties in flats" and cliques involved women of particular professions and social standing, making the need for hiding far greater (p. 2) - for white women that is. Gevisser (1995) notes the invisibility of Black women and says if there was 'a black working-class lesbian subculture in the 1950s and 1960s, it remains inaccessible' to his study (p. 29).

An exploration of the working conditions of Black women, the impact of urbanizing cities on their lives, and the spaces Black women created for themselves could have perhaps led to the discovery of some sort of a Black working-class lesbian subculture to speak of. As early as the 1920s there is data, however scant, of Black women moving out of their 'Native reserves' Walker (1991, p. 13) as a result of migrant labour, changing African family structures and changing responsibility in the home. Black women worked predominantly in domestic work in urban areas, and had very close proximity to white men and women in whose homes they worked (p. 15). Relationships developed in those conditions. By the 1960s and 1970s Black women would have created spaces for themselves, resulting in a subculture. These experiences could have yielded data around their behaviour and the relationships they formed.

In the 1980s, political organising by women and the lesbian and gay sector takes place at a time of mass resistance and immense state repression in South Africa. Increased anti-apartheid protests were changing the landscape of the country, and organisations and movements to fight the Nationalist Party government were formed. The Mass Democratic Movement was formed in 1988. It was an alliance that comprised of anti-apartheid organisations such as the United Democratic Front (UDF), which was formed in 1983; as well as other political formations that identified with the African National Congress (ANC). The movement was closely linked to the labour federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which was formed in 1985. The landscape was fertile for activism for various interests and for the lobbying of the ANC as a strategy to ensure that issues would be addressed under a democratic government. Gay and lesbian organisations had to leverage the opportunities presented by the change that resistance was creating.

Though constrained, different versions of national multiracial lesbian and gay organisations emerged over the years, seizing political opportunities to lobby for rights. However, some were dismantled because of the complexity of organizing and of finding appropriate strategies to further any one cause, and still remain adequately visible to the public (Currier 2012). As apartheid received increased global criticism and condemnation, white middle-class gay men and lesbians had to choose whether they publicly and visibly oppose the apartheid government, which was already oppressive towards them as gay and lesbian people. The choice by some to be apolitical is symbolic of the dominance of race in the formation of white South African identities. It was also a refusal by white gay and lesbian organisations to acknowledge and understand that the fight against discrimination based on sexual orientation was no different to the fight against racial oppression. This shows that it was always going to be more difficult for Black women to exist in these gay and lesbian organisations, as it was difficult for Black activist gay men.

GASA, the Gay Association of South Africa, was formed in 1982. It became a national movement for the gay community Gevisser (1995, p. 48). The

organization was white and male led, which displayed an inability to align with the struggle for liberation led by Black political activists. Members were attracted to it because of the social elements and for its apolitical stance – an unwillingness to play in the political arena (p. 50). In a time of resistance as a response to a repressive government, to choose to remain apolitical was a missed opportunity to foster solidarity among LGBTI identifying activists. This stance made the organization inaccessible and unwelcoming to Black people and activists who were particularly involved in the struggle for liberation. A prominent figure in gay activism and the struggle for liberation, Simon Nkoli, was a member of GASA. His participation in the struggle for liberation placed GASA in a difficult position when it was unable to meet the expectation of the public, and support him when he was arrested. This had far reaching implications for GASA.

In 1986, the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), an international organization that GASA was a member of, investigated the Nkoli matter and why GASA failed to support him Rydstrom (2005, p. 36). Members of ILGA believed that inaction by GASA went against the anti-apartheid statement that GASA signed upon joining ILGA (p. 36). GASA's membership was suspended a year later in 1987 as a result of pressure domestically and internationally for GASA to not be linked to or collaborate with an oppressive government, and to be active in defending activists of all races. This is an example of the challenges of organizing in a politically tumultuous time in the country, and the difficult decisions that were required to be taken, but weren't, for the benefit of the movement and the sustainability of the organisation well into a democratic South Africa. Further analysis cites other issues in how the GASA matter was handled both domestically and internationally. It set the tone for how the process of inclusion of gay rights in the constitution would go (p. 46). The collapse of GASA and a changing political landscape led to the formation of gay and lesbian organisations that reflected greater diversity than what GASA could.

Organisations that formed included the Black-led gay and lesbian Rand Gay Organisation (RGO), which was founded by Alfred Machela in 1986 Gevisser

(1995, p. 57). The Lesbian and Gays against Oppression (LAGO) was also formed in Cape Town in 1986, and lasted for just over a year (p. 58). It was replaced by the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA), which was formed by former members of LAGO (Currier 2012). Both LAGO and OLGA comprised of majority white members who were formerly with GASA. LAGO set up links with a pre-dominantly male township based African Gays Association (AGA) but experienced difficulty due to the Group Areas Act that separated races Nicol (2005, p. 75). OLGA joined the UDF, which led to the important inclusion of gay rights in the draft constitution.

Racial politics shaped activism in the 1980s. The fact that these gay and lesbian organisations did not last for a long time, suggests that they didn't adequately deal with the challenges and opportunities presented by a changing South Africa. This does not mean that they were not impactful, as the involvement of OLGA in the inclusion of gay rights in the constitution shows. The role of or even the existence of Black lesbian activists in these early gay and lesbian organisations is unclear. The assertion this study makes is that where there are women and men, among those are lesbian women and gay men. Where there are women activists, Black lesbian activists are also there. Can Black lesbian activists be located in and are they visible in broader women's organizing in South Africa?

### 2.1.2 Anti-apartheid women's organising

The 1980s were a significant time in South African politics as resistance forced a shift in power that saw the beginning of the end of apartheid. Civic organizations in townships emerged and large numbers of women were drawn into activism Hassim (2006, p. 47) to participate in realizing this shift. Women in South Africa "transformed the politics of their public presence to become active participants in the definition of the moment of transition to post-coloniality, within their respective societies as well as in their personal relationship with men, families, communities, and the emerging nation-states" Turshen (2010, p. 27). Different women participated in the transition from an oppressive system of governance to a democratic system of governance. Thus it is important to illuminate the

diversity in positionalities of women in the movement, in order to understand what they wanted to achieve and through what means.

Attempts to define a women's agenda to fight injustice and oppression in the country were explicit during this period. The idea of Black women being subjected to the 'triple oppression' of gender, race and class oppression, highlighting how the systems of patriarchy, racism and apartheid compound their oppression, developed during this period (Hassim 2006,). Black lesbians are better placed in a women's 'movement' that speaks to multiple forms of oppression, in ways that gay and lesbian organizations of the time were unable or perhaps unwilling to do.

Developing definitions of a women's agenda however did not explicitly include sexual orientation as a cause to champion. This may be due to the closeness of women's organizing to the national liberation movement as a framework that 'may offer better possibilities in different historical cases' Hassim (2006, p. 45). National liberation politics provided a useful vehicle for Black lesbian activism because of the numbers of people behind it. Black lesbians as women subjected to gender roles, as workers, as mothers, as organisers around everyday struggles, benefited from this approach. However, the lack of an explicit mention of sexual orientation as an important right to protect means that it may have been treated as a peripheral issue with the risk of being forgotten, and Black lesbian-identifying women having no voice. It is not helpful if there is ambiguity around what issues are championed and which issues are left behind.

Local activism was a 'political force' that Black lesbians were a part of after being 'involved in community organisations and trade unions' (p. 55). This political participation provided an opportunity for activism that had no place in white gay and lesbian organisations because those organisations were removed from the lived realities of the Black majority, as a result of the separation of the races, and in examples such as GASA, the choice to be apolitical kept those organisations removed from the issues of the Black majority. As a result, Black lesbian women's day-to-day issues could not be addressed by the existing gay and

lesbian organisations. The only option was to associate themselves with grass-root organisations that focused on solving the problems of oppressed people, including women (p. 59). Black lesbian women can be placed in broader local activism.

Urbanisation forced more people out of 'native reserves' Walker (1991, p. 69), as it became increasingly difficult to self-sustain a subsistence economy when the majority of men and women who were required to do the work were now working in the city. The influx of people in the cities put pressure on government to provide housing and other resources (p. 70). A shortage of resources pushed up prices of food and basic needs and created inequality, as the wages could not keep up with the cost of living. The high levels of poverty among predominantly Black people were a result of this (p. 71). These conditions fuelled the activism for better living conditions, removal of barriers for women to access better working conditions. The activism of women living in townships was limited to a local level because of provincial and national restrictions to their movement (p. 75). Walker cites Alexandra Township in Johannesburg, and Crossroads squatter camp outside Cape Town as examples of communities of women in 'grassroot resistance movements' (p. 76). In Alexandra women participated in boycotts and were instrumental in the Rand, and women in Crossroads were well organized and active in the community (p. 76).

The fight against the high cost of food led to the establishment of the People's Food Council, which started after the highly publicized bus boycott in Alexandra. The fight against high food prices had the support to the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), with women leaders in the party leading the effort. The issue seemingly united activists, white women were involved in the work, but were unable to identify with other issues that Black women raised and protested over (p. 79). The Women's Food Committee in Cape Town was also an effective grassroots organization led by women (p. 81). Local activism formed the foundation for the 'anti-pass campaign of African women in the 1950s' (p. 84).

The formation of the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) in the early 1950s provided the shift from local activism to national women's activism. The FSAW comprised of women from trade unions and political organisations. Membership was organisation based and their objective was to improve the conditions under which women lived in South Africa at a national level (Meintjies 1996). The FSAW, from inception, dedicated its 'energies almost entirely to the anti-pass campaigns' Meintjies (1996, p. 54) as the government wanted to limit urbanisation by further limiting the mobility of women. In 1955, the FSAW had the opportunity to participate along with other organisations in the Congress of the People in Kliptown, where the Freedom Charter was drafted. They ensured women's issues are represented in the Charter (Meintjies 1996). The FSAW created the space for other organisations to collaborate and focus on a range of other issues.

In the early 1980s the Black Sash formed the Transvaal Rural Action Committee (TRAC), which assisted people who were under threat of removals. In 1985 the TRAC 'joined up with similar organisations from other regions to form the National Land Committee. During the late-1980s and early-1990s women's issues became an issue in the organisation as a new generation of younger women informed by feminist concerns became active members' Meintjies (1996, p. 55). The work of the TRAC also led to the formation of the Rural Women's Movement, that has given voice to rural Black Women, and advocating for their rights regarding land ownership and inheritance (Meintjies 1996). It took a united multi organisational effort to create the resistance necessary to change the lived experiences of women in South Africa. The inclusion of the rights of Black lesbian women is included in the overall objective to improve the lives and protect the rights of all women in South Africa. Black lesbian women are a part of this group.

#### ***A country in transition: 1990-1994***

The period between 1990 and 1994 is a significant period of transition in South Africa from an oppressive apartheid system to a democratic system of

governance. Nelson Mandela was released from prison on 11 February 1990 and political exiles were allowed to return to the country. These events came after the then president, and last president of apartheid South Africa, FW de Klerk unbanned liberation organisations such as the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Negotiations leading up to the first democratic elections began in the early 1990s through the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). The country was preparing for change during an uncertain and difficult time. The Women's National Coalition was formed in 'April 1992 comprised of four regional coalitions and approximately 60 national organisations. Its objective was to ensure equality for women in the new constitutional dispensation, which was in the process of being negotiated by the country's political parties and political liberation movements' Meintjies (1996, p. 47). Lesbian and gay activists were also a part of the process of change and needed to be strategic in how they further ensure the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

A new politics emerged for gay and lesbian organisations in the early 1990s, driven by members of OLGA in the Western Cape. They positioned and aligned themselves with the ANC, as this was the best way to ensure recognition for gay and lesbian rights, given the ANCs likelihood to lead the new government after the first democratic elections. This shift saw Black gays and lesbians identify more with the movement, and the emergence of new Black organisations (Gevisser 1995). Struggle activist Simon Nkoli is a founding member of the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW), in 1988. The Association of Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians (ABIGALE), was formed in 1992 in the Western Cape (p. 63). GLOW organized the first Pride march in Johannesburg in 1990. The march was historic and important for visibility of the movement, but also for the work of activists in lobbying the ANC to include gay rights in the constitution. GLOW drafted a manifesto for the pride march calling on South Africans to unite in the fight for the recognition of gay rights, for gay and lesbian people to be equal to all people before the law, and for political organisations to embrace the gay and lesbian struggle as a part of the broader struggle against oppression (p. 74).



The strategy to lobby the ANC was successful. OLGA's affiliation to the UDF, Simon Nkoli's coming out as an openly gay struggle activist during the Delmas trial (p. 75), and the subsequent support from other prominent ANC members and activists led to the inclusion of gay rights in the constitution of the ANC. The National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) was formed in 1994 with a mandate to ensure the inclusion of gay rights in the country's constitution, which they achieved successfully. The inclusion of sexual orientation in the Equality Clause of the Constitution of 1996 is a result of the work for the inclusion of gay rights in the constitution of the ANC in 1991 (Dirsuweit 2006). Other legal victories took place once the Constitution was adopted in 1996, to ensure that legislation is in line with the Equality Clause. These are mentioned under the 1994-2006 epoch.

## **2.2 Can we come out yet? 1994 - 2006**

### **2.2.1 Negotiating the promise of freedom**

A new political dispensation in South Africa presented possibilities and challenges for marginalized groups who were fighting for equality and recognition. Political activists called for greater gender representation in government leadership. They achieved this after 1994, as more women made it to policy-making positions and became members of the executive and parliament or senior public servants in post-apartheid South Africa. According to Thoreson (2008, p. 680) by becoming decision makers and attaining a level of political power, activists have effectively become the elite, and are unable to always be 'for the people'. This 'insider' strategy is not entirely flawed because there is value in it, and there isn't always a guarantee that insider status makes one part of the political elite. Simon Nkoli's role in gay and lesbian activism, and him maintaining connections with comrades as a struggle activist within the ANC is an example of effective 'insider' status. He contributed to changing perceptions about homosexuality within the ANC and bridged the gaps within anti-apartheid organizing Currier (2012, p. 34). Nkoli being openly out has however not

inspired many other prominent political figures, prominent ANC members of parliament or public servants in other structures in government to come out. One can infer that this is because it is still taboo in mainstream politics to be openly out as gay or lesbian.

The National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) was a diverse coalition for gay and lesbian organisations across the country, with the objective to lobby and build a strong lesbian and gay political movement and ensure that that sexual orientation in the Equality clause in the interim Constitution, is retained in the final Constitution Hoad, Martin & Reid (2005, p. 212). More than 70 organisations were a part of the NCGLE. Together they pursued a litigation strategy, developed by now Justice Edwin Cameron, to realize the rights afforded to gays and lesbians by the Equality clause that would culminate in same-sex marriage Berger (2008, p. 18). The list started with the repeal of the sodomy law that criminalized consenting sex between adults, equalizing the age of consent of heterosexual and homosexual sexual acts, free speech association and conduct, and the legal recognition of domestic partnerships which would include benefits such as inheritance (p. 18). Later in 1998, immigration rights were won for citizens and permanent resident same-sex partners and children were to be granted permits. It was upon the immigration case upon which the right for domestic partnerships to be recognized and benefits conferred upon same-sex partners was fought and won (p. 22). The courts were stretched and tested in the nine years long period of important cases pertaining to the rights of people in same-sex relationships. The right was won to jointly adopt and what rights parents have, in not so straightforward cases, where the child was conceived in-vitro was clarified (p. 23).

Arguably the most notable and historic achievement is the right to same sex marriage, the Civil Union Act of 2006, the first on the African continent, and the fifth country to do so globally. The Civil Union Act affords same sex couples and opposite sex couples equal legal rights to a civil union or a marriage, whichever they may choose (Judge, Manion and De Waal 2008). Even in the face of political and religious opposition to same sex marriage, this right was won for all who

wish to give their relationship legal and social recognition that was previously not possible.

These legal victories in the highest court in the land, the Constitutional Court, did not and have not ensured complete acceptance of same sex couples from society. The fight for same sex marriage was a cultural and traditional fight over the meaning of sexuality and how it should be expressed. It was also a battle for recognition of a human right to choose how one lives and with whom. Those in opposition believed that it was a threat to their value, cultures and religious beliefs. The Pan Africanist Congress called same-sex marriage 'repugnant...only those who sold their souls to cultural imperialism will support this obscenity' Judge et al. (2008, p. 140). Throughout the various stages of the campaign, activists had to deal with abusive opposition and homophobia.

During public hearings and engaging the public over same-sex marriage, activists had to employ different strategies. One of those was to build relationships with the media fraternity, as the dominant view in the public domain was that homosexuality is unAfrican and unnatural (Vilakazi 2008). This would contribute to changing perceptions to some extent as many people engaged same sex debates and campaigns through the media. However public hearings conducted by the Department of Home Affairs became a 'pulpit for people who quoted verses in the bible to condemn homosexuality as sin' Vilakazi (2008, p. 93). The public hearings revealed ignorance regarding the Constitution, and the depth of homophobia that needed to be eradicated in the country (p. 95). Even after legal and constitutional victory, many challenges still exist for Black lesbians in the public domain and in activism specifically.

Existing LGBTI organisations during this period were still not entirely 'Black lesbian friendly' as Black lesbians were not well represented on boards of organisations, and they felt powerless in the movement Dirisuweit (2006, p. 335) Even with legal victories to celebrate, the violence against Black lesbians from townships was rife and the term '*corrective rape*' was used in the early 2000s to describe the targeted rapes. This frustration and feeling invisible in the LGBTI

movement saw the emergence of the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) in 2002, which focused on issues of Black lesbians from disadvantaged communities in particular (p. 335), as a vulnerable group to being violated, raped and killed because of their economic status and lack of access to adequate protection and freedom to access the benefits of the legal victories for LGBTI people. The right to marry your same-sex partner means nothing if you're dead. FEW set out to fight the circumstances of Black lesbians that prevented them from enjoying their freedoms in a democratic South Africa.

### **2.3 Not yet *uhuru*, the struggle continues: 2006 – 2016**

#### **2.3.1 Existing challenges for Black lesbians and activists**

Black lesbians and activists still face a multitude of challenges in the LGBTI sector and in society in general. Twenty-two years into a democratic country, and sexual, racial and class prejudice continue. Black lesbian activists still function in a difficult context, both within and outside of the broader LGBTI community regarding the multiple forms of oppression that they face. Through the establishment of Black lesbian organisations and greater visibility through public protests and putting pressure on government to convene a task team to address homophobic violence, activists are addressing existing challenges and are attempting to take control of what the narrative is regarding the experiences of these women in the country.

Homophobic violence against Black lesbians, exacerbated by socio-economic conditions, is of great concern for activists. Many of these women are exposed to the possibility of attack because they do not have the kind of security that wealth and privilege afford. Litigation victories do not guarantee tolerance and protection from violence. Prosecution should be a deterrent, however the number of cases of murder and rape of lesbian women suggests otherwise. How has the gay and lesbian community responded to these worrying trends? By the mid-2000s the most recognizable and vocal 'sector of the LGBTI community was arguably still white and predominantly male, many of whom were well

positioned in the workplace and affluent in comparison to other sectors' Nel (2005, p. 288). This is changing as activists championing the Black lesbian cause are fighting invisibility and challenging white and male led activism in the sector.

Black led lesbian organisations have emerged over the years to address the issues of this constituency. Organisations such as the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL), the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW), the One in Nine campaign, Free Gender, and other community based lesbian feminist organisations emerged because the sector does not adequately reflect who they are, and it is believed there is insufficient commitment to work towards addressing the experiences of Black lesbians. They exist to do this work and establish a strong Black lesbian activist voice. These organisations face funding gaps that hit the non-governmental sector from the final days of the NGCLE Dirsuweit (2006, p. 330). Issues associated with Black lesbian experience, such as '*corrective rape*', unemployment and domestic violence, are under resourced. This affirms the view that Black women need to be more visible and their voices amplified in the broader LGBTI community.

Discourses on Black lesbian identity in South Africa must be developed to include all experiences and narratives as told by Black lesbians themselves. Critical questions exploring how lesbianism in the Black community is viewed as a threat to masculinity and patriarchy, and how is homophobia used against women in their communities Potgieter (2005, p. 188), illuminate the realities created by the situatedness of these women. Black lesbians are always confronted by cultural values that may be contradictory to what they identify as. How do they navigate and negotiate agency in communities where they violate norms (p. 191)? This calls for greater investigation into how these women live and see the world, how they relate to men and other women in the community, and their general sense of safety. All of these matters ought to be explored extensively for greater understanding of Black lesbian identity. It is yet to be done at any great length, even after 40 years of recorded LGBTI activism.

### **3. Research methodology**

### 3.1 Introduction

This study is a qualitative study on Black lesbian activism using feminist research methods. It prioritises the voices of a marginalized group of women, in order to call out existing race, gender and class inequality. An understanding of the relationship between power and politics is important to understand how the gendered, unfavourable, oppressive and discriminatory social realities that Black lesbian women face came about, how they are maintained, and what is being done to minimize the impact of this injustice.

The study is shaped by feminist theory, ethics and politics, and a critique of existing western and patriarchal methods of research methodology. The same issues regarding questions of ontology and epistemology exist for feminist researchers, as they do for any other researcher Ramazanoglu and Holland (2007, p. 18). It is through the interrogation of how what is known is known, that deep-seated unequal power relations are challenged. Feminist research advocates for a feminist value position and perspective, and research that seeks to facilitate personal and societal change Neuman (2011, p. 114). Feminist research takes into consideration how relations of power and gender exist in social life, and through the use of a range of research techniques, and the reflection of the researcher's personal feelings and experience, produce work that challenges existing patriarchal ideas about the social world (p. 114).

This study aims to produce knowledge that recognizes the impact of intersecting experiences of gender, race, class and sexuality on participants, in the contexts they find themselves in Schrock (2013, p. 49). Throughout the research the relationship the researcher has with participants and the impact of the natural setting of the research will be interrogated and reflected upon.

### 3.2 Research design

Qualitative research emphasizes processes and meanings that are not measured in terms of quantity. It is value-laden inquiry. Researchers study how social experiences are created and what meaning is ascribed to them Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p. 8). Qualitative research allows for the investigation of a problem from the perspectives of participants affected by the problem researched. Experience as a measure of intersecting issues, is best measured through an interpretive research process that places the researcher and participants in the same context socially, culturally and politically Creswell (2007, p. 36). In contrast, quantitative research emphasizes 'the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p. 8). Quantitative research aims to produce neutral and objective research that can be applied in different contexts, without including the experiences of the researcher. It excludes meaning that participants place on social phenomena. The exclusion of meaning, and the stripping of the context by focusing on selected subset variables, and not factoring other variables that may alter findings, creates an imbalance in contextual information that qualitative research addresses Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 106). Context is of great importance in this study.

Qualitative research, located in the field, in the natural setting of the problem and where participants are situated in order for the researcher to observe behaviours, reactions and establish patterns from a series of responses, achieves relevance and greater understanding of experience. The research is flexible and emergent, meaning the findings cannot be predicted and data collection can change as the research progresses Creswell (2007, p. 36) whereas a focus on quantity limits the possibility for nuance and an alternative 'truth'. The disadvantage of qualitative research is that there are as many accounts and perspectives on the same social phenomena as there are individuals experiencing the same phenomena. To produce insight from the findings, identifying a pattern or a thread that connects the perspectives can address the problem of multiple and different perspectives which may make the study meaningless.

The main source of information is the participants. The study may also reference existing data on lesbian women in South Africa from archived material from the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, previously known as Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA). This approach involves continuous interaction between the researcher and the participants, reducing distance between the two. Prolonged observation of an individual or specific group of people makes it challenging to generalize and use results as measure of collective experience Gobo (2011, p. 29).

The purpose of this study however is not about generalizing experiences and perspectives, because there are as many experiences of Black lesbian activists as there are activists. Any attempt to generalize and universalize experience contradicts the objective of listening to the voice of Black lesbian women who, as argued in the study, who have been rendered invisible by experiences of oppression.

### 3.3 Data collection methods

Feminist oriented studies must ensure that the manner through which the voices are represented doesn't 'other' participants, nor are they seen as of lesser importance to the researcher. The researcher must be aware of and acknowledge her beliefs and how they are involved in the research process McNamara (2009, p. 165). Feminist study must be exemplary in ensuring that the voice of the participants is unfiltered by the presence and privileged position of the researcher, who will have control over how narratives are interpreted and how findings are derived.

The main form of data collection was through individual in-depth interviews with Black lesbian activists. A sample of 11 participants was selected across three epochs: the 1980s, the transition period between 1990 and 1994, and contemporary South Africa. Sampling is necessary because one cannot examine every Black lesbian activists experience in detail. The selected participants are by no means an accurate reproduction of the group of women being researched.



Participants are selected based on their relevance to the study, and not on their representativeness of the larger population Neuman (2011, p. 241). In qualitative research, sampling is used to 'deepen understanding about a larger process, relationship or social scene' (p. 241)

Two non-probability sampling techniques were used: purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is used in exploratory research to get possible cases that fit specific criteria. It uses expert judgment to locate and select the most informative cases, which are challenging to reach (p. 268). It was expected that the women who were identified for this study would be potentially difficult to reach because of their public profiles, and their departure from active LGBTI politics and organizations. Purposive sampling solved this challenge.

The second technique used is snowball sampling. It is a non-random sample in which cases are selected based on the information and connections with the first case. The researcher begins with one case and gets referrals to others cases (p. 268). Referrals from the participants are important, as they will speak directly to the study conducted. For this study participants were required to represent the three epochs in the study. Participants from epochs one and two were able to refer names of activists they believed could contribute to the study because they had worked closely with them previously. They were unable to readily identify younger activists for the third epoch, but they found no difficulty finding someone who could reach them, because the community is relatively small.

Interviews were semi-structured, in-depth and face-to-face. They took place at the social location of the participant, where it was possible to do so. The social context is important in the interpretation of meaning (p. 451). Field interviews differ from surveys in their structure, tone and how they are conducted. Field interviews are tailored to the interviewee and questions are not asked sequentially, whereas surveys are the same for all respondents, and asked in the same sequence. This doesn't allow for probing, conversational exchange and unexpected responses, which make exploratory research dynamic, providing greater opportunity for new insights (p. 451). The semi-structured interview,

using open-ended questions, allows for the participant to include information that the researcher may not have asked or considered.

The sample included participants who have not moved and changed locations as their involvement in the struggle changed. Their activism and experiences are trans-locational, thus no need to solve for geographical concerns, save for being unable to conduct face-to-face interviews in the event that the participant is travelling. One in-depth interview was conducted with each participant because of time-constraints. The interviews were adequately thorough the first time around. The interviews were recorded using a recording device, and they were later transcribed.

### 3.4 Analysis of data

Narrative analysis was used to analyse the data gathered from interviews and existing knowledge. Narrative analysis is used to make sense of narrative data. It looks at the stories that participants tell about themselves or about an issue during an interview and other forms of qualitative methodology to generate data. The researcher analyses what connections the participant makes, what themes they highlight, key words used, and how they understand their position or role in relation to the issues being studied Kawulich and Holland (2012, p. 229). Key concepts and beliefs of participants are emphasized in narrative analysis. The researcher must assess how the story is told, what words or phrases are used, and how these stories connect with and fit in with broader society.

Narrative analysis is informed by narrative theory and has three types of analysis, which are the life story method, which retells the participant's story, as they tell it, in their chosen words. The second type of analysis is the analysis of what the core narratives in the interview are, and thirdly the metaphors used to assist in the interpretation of meaning. The final report from these tools of analysis includes the voice or presence of the researcher, with the participant continuously clarifying matters, and elaborating on various issues (p. 229).

Final analysis using narrative analysis involves the interpretation of the narrative by the researcher, and the participant assists with interpretation by clarifying points during the interview, ensuring that they are not misunderstood. How much of the researchers' experience and subjectivity should come through the analysis, is a question of what is intended from the study. Too much of the researcher raises questions about whose experience and narrative is being told. A balance is important. As much of the participants understanding and point of reference is ideal, without overwhelming interference from the researcher. Narrative analysis must be supported by other forms of data, such as textual analysis, that will account for what the participant does not say. This will inform good analysis on the context of the issue, and establish to what extent the participant is aware of other factors at play in the creation of their own story (p. 230).

#### **4. Analysis and findings**

The previous chapters addressed how organizing was greatly influenced by the political landscape of the country. It dictated how class, race and gender determined what role people could play in gay and lesbian organizing. The invisibility of Black women in the early years is a function of the marginalization of Black women and their positioning in poor communities, the limited space that Black people had to exist because of oppressive governments and the backlash against alternative sexual orientations within the liberation movement specifically, and society in general. In this chapter, the eleven activists who represent the three epochs covered in this study share their experiences working in LGBTI activism. They unpack what the challenges of working in the sector were, and what can be learned about fighting for the realization of basic human rights.

The interviewees are all still active activists. The experiences of activists of the first epoch overlap with later epochs. Equally true for the activists in the second epoch, their experiences overlap with the final epoch. Participants are divided

into the three epochs based on when their activism began. The end of the epoch does not indicate the end of their activism.

#### 4.1 1980 – 1994: National politics inextricably linked to identity politics

##### ***'Nga xoshwa ekhaya because bekuthiwa I was a lesbian'<sup>1</sup>***

Interviewee A identifies as an academic or an intellectual activist, as she currently works in academia, based in Durban. Activism, she says, has always been a part of her life, and cannot remember a time when she was not an activist. She grew up in Soweto, and was introduced to political activism as a teenager in the early 80s in Soweto. She was still in high school at the time, and through the struggle for liberation, was instrumental in protest action in the township. She was a member of the South African Civil Organisation (SANCO). They 'organized formations in the township, sat in street committees' (Interviewee A 2017). She was also a part of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), a national student organization formed in June 1979 that promoted the interest of Black students (sahistoryonline 2017). They participated in the struggle against Afrikaans in schools, which extended well beyond the 1976 student uprising. The students were aware of the political climate in the country, the need for and importance of resistance action and the important role they played as students in Soweto in the resistance movement. 'We were all members of the ANC at the time. It was clear in our heads of what was happening in the country, very conscious, completely involved in activism' (Interviewee A 2017). Actions they participated in included Wednesday school boycotts, under the slogan 'Liberation now, Education later' (sahistoryonline 2017). The boycotts rendered the school system ungovernable and saw COSAS banned under the apartheid government in 1985, during the state of emergency in the country. By that time, COSAS boasted more than 3 million members across the country (sahistory 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> I was chased away from home because they said I was a lesbian

Interviewee A is unable to clearly separate struggles in the earlier years as a young student activist. The political struggle was the focal point for students in the uprising. However, pointing toward a struggle for gay and lesbian rights is difficult because in the 1980s, coming out and protesting over gay and lesbian rights was not common nor was it safe to do. It was not possible for Interviewee A to be more aware of her sexuality pre-1990, and to channel her activism to focus more on lesbian activism.

She first heard the term 'lesbian' in the early 1990s. A term that refers to relationships she grew up seeing in Soweto. Women in same sex relationships were known in the community, but they were not very visible to the community. The environment was also not entirely hostile, perhaps as a result of the lack of visibility. In the early 1980s, she was aware of relationships between women. These women would create safe spaces for other lesbian women to get together and meet. She refers to a practice called 'mummy-baby' relationships between lesbians. She describes 'mummy-baby' relationships as arrangements or love affairs between older and younger women that were erotic and sexual in nature. 'Mummy-baby' relationships have been documented between Black women from the as early as the 1950s. The relationships would form part of a culture between women, and the level of intimacy between the women would vary (Van Zyl 2015). Interviewee A believes these were real relationships between women, and not a cover of sorts. The term 'mummy-baby' was a way to express 'the feeling one has for this woman without necessarily having a name for it. It's just always been that *kuno muntu omdala*<sup>2</sup> – mummy and baby because there is one younger woman. The mummy-baby was not a frame for hiding it, because everything else we did was in the streets it was visible... we held hands in the streets, we kissed in the streets, we held hands everybody knew we were sexually involved but in the name of mummy-baby' (Interviewee A 2017).

These relationships were love affairs. When the language around same-sex relationship changed, the phrase 'mummy-baby' also disappeared. It disappeared 'with the legislation of sexual orientation... when sexual orientation

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<sup>2</sup> There is an older person

started to surface and the language started to surface, people would say ‘oh so this is what is happening with those mummy things... these people are lesbians...instead of calling yourself this mummy or baby. It became clearer that this was a lesbian relationship’ (Interviewee A 2017).

These relationships were frowned upon in the community. The introduction to lesbianism for Interviewee A was also an introduction to homophobia-motivated violence. ‘I was severely punished for it. *Bengi’shay’wa kahulu ekhaya*<sup>3</sup>, people looked at us like sluts. When someone looks at a phenomenon you cannot explain, you see a woman doing something that is outside what women are expected to do sexually...touching, kissing... people would frown and ask what are you guys doing? You guys are crazy. My uncle used to come and pull me away from that woman’s place and say I must go home. I would get beaten everyday’ (Interviewee A 2017). There was a cost to living openly in the 1980s.

In the late 1980s, early 1990s, the connections between the different struggles and an expanded understanding of social justice became clearer for Interviewee A. In meetings, ‘discussions were happening around the Free Nelson Mandela campaign... what we were calling for freedom from apartheid in the form of racism has always related to other forms of freedoms including sexual orientation’ (Interviewee A 2017). The shift in awareness of her sexuality started along with the free Mandela campaign. She then began to locate her sexuality in what she calls the broader political spectrum.

*‘iVibe<sup>4</sup> was such that we were talking the liberation language, we are talking freedom... the country is going through a transition and that time the negotiations of sexual orientation as a clause in our constitution became of paramount importance. So, the whole issue of sexual orientation became not just a personal question, it became a question of national interest... it was part and parcel of what activists have been fighting for at that time when we are talking about freedoms, all types of freedoms, and that included sexual orientation’* (Interviewee A 2017).

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<sup>3</sup> At home I was beaten up a lot

<sup>4</sup> The vibe/mood

This greater awareness in the early 1990s is aligned with the shift that was happening in the country at the time. Discussions about the inclusion of gay and lesbian rights was as a result of lobbying and mobilizing ahead of the transition and the unbanning of political organisations. Her awareness of the need for an intersectional struggle revealed to her how hostile and homophobic her political homes actually were. 'All the kinds of activisms I was involved in and also the spaces that were previously free for me became violent spaces; from home, to SANCO to the ANC. I felt something else was missing, something that would depict me in my wholeness. Everything was fine except my sexual orientation within those spaces' (Interviewee A 2017). Her activism was acceptable for as long as it was about the broader political agenda. Fellow activists did not have to reveal their homophobia until individuals came out within the movement. This motivated her to continue in the fight for gay and lesbian rights. Joining the NCGLE, which was based in Yeoville at the time, was the first step in that journey.

***'If you're a Black woman, why are you not an activist...?'***

Interviewee B also grew up in Soweto and defines activism as being active, and speaking out against injustice. However in the 70s and 80s, speaking out against injustice was not always easy because, as she recounts, '...in apartheid South Africa sexual violence could not be reported because you don't want to throw your brothers in prison' (Interviewee B 2017). Loyalty to comrades was expected because the common enemy was apartheid and racial oppression. Other struggles were secondary. Her activism began in the 70s when as a young pre-teen, and in the early 80s, she asked uncomfortable questions about sexual abuse, gender dynamics and race relations within the home and in the streets of the community. She had to constantly negotiate between what society expects her to be, and who she chooses to be with. This negotiation shaped the politics and activism she would later adopt. Her involvement in formal politics was in high school in the student representative council (SRC). She was also part of COSAS. She recalls growing up and being part of groups of children that would throw bricks at Casspirs when they moved through the township. Her activism in

the early years was also social in terms of the visibility of gender non-conforming young people in the community. An example of this is when she and a group of friends, which included gay boys and girls, all teenagers, would dress flamboyantly and march up and down a street. This was frowned upon and often brought on the ire of some bystanders. They would be called names and fought with, but they would fight back. They lived activism and believed in visibility to rally people around a cause. She believes in multiple forms of activism, however being visible on the streets was critical.

*'...Even those who were writers ended up on the streets somewhere...activism is about interacting with people because in order to rally people against injustice you need to be visible otherwise you're alone'* (Interviewee B 2017).

Interviewee B was more conscious about her sexuality, how it is perceived and the fight she would have to wage to be herself in her earlier years, than Interviewee A was. During her upbringing, Interviewee B had to deal with other issues of identity in addition to sexual orientation and the political struggle. She speaks about colourism in the family. Her grandfather is a white man, her grandmother a Black woman. Due to segregation and the Immorality Act of 1950, one of her grandmothers had to abandon her kids because they were much lighter than she was. She was treated differently to her sister because her sister is darker than she is. She also had to negotiate what it meant to be Coloured in a house that identified as Black in Soweto, living among Black people.

*'...there was a state of emergency and Botha is wagging his finger and telling us that we are too much you know the Tricameral parliament and now I'm told that your Coloured cousins can vote, but we still cannot. And I was like but we are also Coloured and I was told no we identify as black in this household. I had to find my own meanings'* (Interviewee B 2017).

She encountered sexism within the political struggle from fellow comrades. 'I would listen to all these boys say when we get our freedom we are going to take our women back because we have been emasculated for too long. *Sizobuyela*



*kusintu*<sup>5</sup> where I can marry all the women I want and she cannot say anything because also remember feminism was rearing its head here and all those boys were like what the fuck is this foreign concept? This is not Europe, this is Africa you know... realizing that I do not belong here' (Interviewee B 2017).

Interviewee B never joined any political party beyond her student activism days. She says she never 'found a political organisation that I felt like I could call a home that I could feel welcome enough to be a card-carrying member. I am much more of Steve Biko's child than I am Mandela's child...

*'...My fury with him (Mandela) when he said forgive and forget, even today I cannot forgive that. I believe that that one statement is the one that led all the fuckers to be doing what they are doing to us and get away with telling us that apartheid is over because they were told that they did not do anything. So we are the ones begging to be friends. I have also been Biko's child and I have always thought that I do not want them in my place and if you are here as an ally, and I have a lot of non-Black allies, people who are great and beautiful, but as a collective... as a collective the world over, it is evil. I make no bones about that. But I never found a political organisation that sees me as human first and not as a woman who is supposed to be XY, who then sees my dubious gender expression and tries to put a box on it'* (Interviewee B 2017).

This quote is an example of how inextricable identity politics was from politics in South Africa pre- 1994, and remained the case post democracy, as it is later shown. Interviewee B was politically conscious but never found a political organisation that would adequately represent her intersectional struggles of being Black, female and queer in South Africa. Gay and lesbian organisations were more accepting, but they too had their own challenges.

***'It's either I die quietly, or I have to leave a message in my life'***

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<sup>5</sup> We will return to our culture

Interviewee C was born and bred in Khayelitsha, and started her activist journey as a member of the ANC Youth League and the ANC in the late 70s. Her involvement in LGBTI activism began in the late 80s. It was around this time that she made the decision to come out to her comrades about her sexuality. Her many years in the struggle taught her that the struggle for freedom would be prioritized ahead of other issues. Sexuality was not a cause she could fight for. However she never believed that her own comrades would discriminate against her. There weren't a lot of lesbian women who were out and visible in the movement. She remembers one other out lesbian who was a member of the SACP. They met in 1993. When men in her community and movement started expressing discomfort around her, she started to retreat and not be as 'out' as she previously was.

'...in the early 80s was the time when I started to see, I mean because my coming out to my comrades was before 1994, from 1990 I started now to pull away from it because the environment with the comrades... they made me uncomfortable sometimes because they were not comfortable around me and their attitudes were bad' (Interviewee C 2017).

She experienced incidents of violence. The impact thereof pulled her away from the political activism. The first incident of violence she experienced was in 1993 when she was stabbed at a petrol station. Her attackers were after the woman she was with and they stabbed her when she tried to rescue the woman from the boys. She spent some time in ICU, but survived the ordeal.

*'I think for me I undermined the issue of ignorance from people and it was then that I became like conscious that some people can push it so far, their hatred for someone'* (Interviewee C 2017).

Her second and life changing encounter with violence was in 1995, when one evening on her way to meet friends, coming from a World Aids day event, she encountered four men along the open field she was required to cross to get to her destination. The open field was not well lit, but she knew her way around

and trusted that she could outrun the men if she needed to. They unfortunately caught her, with one of the men say 'ja we told you we'd get you one day'. Unable to fight, she was gang raped at knife and gunpoint. She got away and went to report the case at the police station. There was one police station in Khayelitsha at the time. She had to report the rape in full view of other people in the station. She was told there isn't a police van at the station to take her to the hospital. Eventually she was taken to the hospital only to be told that she needed to go back to the police station. She walked back to the station at around 11 pm to report the case again. She recounts how she was ridiculed because of how she looked.

*'I'm trying to whisper to this guy that I have been raped on my way home and he asks what is my name? ... I say Ja, that is my name and he leaves me there and goes to the other side to meet another police and another one comes and asks my name and I told him my name and he did not say anything. He goes back and I can hear them and they are laughing and I can see that this is a joke. People are going to make fun of me here... I decided to sleep outside the police station and the next day I went home' (Interviewee C 2017).*

She went to Rape Crisis and received a bit of help there, after going through a destructive period of alcohol abuse and being abusive to her girlfriend at the time. She no longer trusted political spaces because they were male dominated. She had little trust in men in her life and in general. She joined the Women's Movement in Cape Town which she describes as a space where women 'can talk about the pain they have been through in relationships or anywhere and they cry and I joined that space and I think that space assist me to carry on like I am carrying on today' (Interviewee C 2017).

### ***'The political space was a violent space'***

All three interviewees from the first epoch had a connection to a political organization where they were relatively safe because they shared a common struggle with comrades, however their sexual orientation became an issue for

comrades and family alike, making continued political membership or affiliation difficult. This compelled them to seek assistance from organisations that work particularly with gay and lesbian rights. The early 1990s provided an opportunity for other issues to be addressed, as the struggle for political liberation was drawing close to an end. This push for other forms of prejudice to be considered and addressed, led to discrimination against these women within the political movement they served in. The discrimination was unexpected because it came from people who were fellow comrades. It was a form of rejection. It spurred on the venturing into organisations that addressed that homophobia, sexual inequality and violence against Gay and lesbian people in the country.

For Interviewee A, the National Coalition for Gays and Lesbians (NCGLE) was a place to be a part of the fight against discrimination against LGBTI people. It provided assistance she needed after her family chased her away from home because of her sexuality. She found a political home of a different kind, after the organisations she was a part of; COSAS, South African Students Congress (SASCO), South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) and the ANC became violent and hostile with regards to her sexuality and gay and lesbian rights broadly.

*'...the struggle in terms of sexual orientation is not a struggle that was fought by all of the people...it divided the members of the ANC in terms of positionality, whether sexual orientation should even be in the constitution. For instance, if we didn't have people like Simon Nkoli in the ANC, people like Beverly Ditsie who pioneered the struggle on sexual orientation I do not think it would have been part of the agenda. There was a lot of violence in the ANC, which is why I have personally shifted in terms of my politics over the years'* (Interviewee A 2017).

Within the struggle for political liberation was a women's movement. However, the broader political women's movement was not a lesbian friendly space. It was progressive in terms of the fight for women's rights and the recognition of the role that women played in the struggle, however it remained largely hostile for

'women who sleep with women'. Interviewee A states that where some organisations did pick up on lesbian issues, it was because a lesbian woman was leading the organization at the time. When that individual left, the focus also waned. The focus was personality driven more than being driven by a commitment to objectives to addressing the plight of lesbian women.

*'There are a few organisations I can think of within the women's movement that embraced the struggle of lesbian women. I can think of POWA (People Opposing Women Abuse), which came out strongly, but at different stages, because it was led by lesbian women during some parts of the early 90s. I would also perhaps call Tshwaranang, in one way or another they did representation of lesbian women cases when we deal with violence. They did recognize that lesbian women's cases matter when we speak about sexual diversity, domestic violence, especially with the domestic violence act being amended to recognize violence in same sex relationships'* (Interviewee A 2017)

Political organisations such as the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL), or gender desks in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) do not talk about issues of sexuality enough. This deepens the invisibility of LGBTI people in the workplace and society broadly. The lack of a women's movement post-1994 she believes contributes to the lack of prominence of gender issues in mainstream politics and organizing. In the NGO sector, there are a few feminist collectives that address lesbian issues, however funding issues having limited what is possible for these organisations.

*'Funding also played a fundamental role to ensure whether women's movements pick up on lesbian issues or not. Post-apartheid there is a lot of money that came from former colonisers. This is money that says we still want to control you and these are our values. Some of the funders would clearly say that they are not funding LGBTI issues. If you are talking gender, talk gender in terms of heteronormativity but not in terms of sexual orientation'* (Interviewee A 2017)

***'LGBTI sector also violent to Black women'***

From attending the meetings that took place in the NCGLE, Interviewee A became a part of the debates that were happening across the country on sexual orientation as a right, and particularly on Sodomy which was still a crime at the time. She stayed with the NCGLE until it changed and became the Equality Project. She moved on to joining the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW), OUT LGBT in Pretoria, then the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL). Her activism took root in the broader political struggle in South Africa, however it became specific in LGBTI issues, and was further narrowed down and targeted to Black lesbian activism. The narrowing of the activism in the LGBTI sector is indicative of the dynamics within the sector that were unfavourable to Black women. In the same way the broader struggle for liberation pushed her away and towards gay and lesbian rights, the LGBTI sector pushed her away and towards Black lesbian activism.

*'Once you are in that space, then the struggle changes. It now became a struggle of race rather than sexual orientation because now you are in a movement that accommodates your sexual orientation but you realize that your race is still a problem because I cannot leave my Blackness at the door. We are talking in the early 90s when the movement was still led by white gay men, so they took the forefront. Lesbian women were not visible regardless of race. Women were not part of the movement in terms of visibility, in terms of voice, in terms of organizing. So everyone who thought gay, thought it was only for gay men. Gay men within the movement did not represent the needs and aspirations of Black women'* (Interviewee A 2017).

*'One had to connect the struggles when we talk about activism. How do you separate me? I'm a lesbian and I am Black.'* (Interviewee B 2017)

GLOW was the chosen activist home for interviewee B. She expressed that she is disappointed by how Black gay men would treat black lesbians within the organization.

*'I had my own disappointment the Black man, gay as he is, how he started treating us. We still need political education even among ourselves... Like all things that I noted about Black men or gay men is that it is easier for them to choose who they engage with. Go to a gay club it is just them. We do not have that luxury as lesbian women. What that means for me is how other gay men are very ignorant around women and women's issues' (Interviewee B 2017).*

Both sexism and racism necessitated the establishment of organisations that would focus on Black lesbian issues in particular. It took resilience to stay in a racist environment. Upon joining LGBTI activism, Interviewee A had already endured a lot of racism under the apartheid government, thus she made the decision to refuse to be excluded from work that addresses how she is discriminated as a lesbian identifying woman because of racism. She believed in being a change agent in the spaces she finds herself in. The emergence of Black lesbian organisations was an opportunity to address the problems that existed in the white run organisations. FEW was a response to that,

*'...to say we appear as Black lesbian women, we are visible, we exist, we love and we enjoy pleasurable sex with one another...we wanted to make sure that we are living our lives and we want to make that voice our voice' (Interviewee A 2017).*

Visibility in the form of a Black lesbian organization was a response to racism and to the high rates of violent crime against Black lesbians in townships. Gay men did not lead the fight against the violence against Black lesbians because 'misogyny was very big' and 'hatred against women was deep even amongst gay men'. A safe space for women was not just for counseling after being violated, but a 'safe space where one can articulate and voice our own language and not being represented by a white man' (Interviewee A 2017). CAL was formed because of the recognition that the struggle was pan-African. Even at international conferences and gatherings it would be white gay men who are leading the discussion. In 2003, activists decided to organize to strengthen the Black lesbian voice through CAL, and fight patriarchy in terms of positionality

and the politics of representation within the LGBTI movement. They challenged the role that gender plays in the LGBTI movement, which had gone unchallenged for a long time.

Interviewee B criticizes the NCGLE of being an elitist organization that 'fought for the freedom of white men to pursue their hobbies' (Interviewee B 2017). She says she was branded a racist for expressing this view, but she feels that as the biggest beneficiary of the status quo, white men have no reason to want to change the status quo. She says the problem with white gay men is that they '... are already white and male and able bodied, the only problem is that you are not given freedom because of your orientation' (Interviewee B 2017). She remembers training sessions where the white gay male experience was centred and no other category was included. It was a policing training for the police and the examples made were about 'cruising at Zoo Lake', an experience that Black lesbian women are unlikely to be familiar with. They are being attacked at taxi ranks, in the townships, train stations, not at Zoo Lake. She says her experience with the Equality Project was not of an organization that cared about Black lesbians. Her critique recognizes the efforts of, but also criticizes, Black lesbian activists such as Phumi Mthethwa and Wendy Isaacs who were instrumental in the Equality Project. She says they 'were fighting a lonely battle' there. While they were drafting legal papers for the many legislative victories for LGBTI people, Black lesbians were being killed and raped (Interviewee B 2017).

Organisations such as FEW have been beset with their own problems, in their quest to organize with a Black woman's voice, and centring the experiences of Black women. The problems faced by the organisation include the mismanagement of the organization, limited staff to carry out the work and a lack of support for the people running the organization. These problems have limited the impact the organisation can have on the women they work with.

In Cape Town, the dominance of white voices is stark. Interviewee C believes that the racial division in Cape Town has become worse over the years. Fast forward to 2015, she makes reference to the battle of the Pride marches in Cape Town



that are separate. There is the Cape Town Pride march, which is run by white people, gets plenty support from provincial leadership, because the march is believed to promote tourism in the city. The march also gets sponsorship from corporates. The Khumbulani Pride march is Black run and is poorly resourced. Activists have to put together money from their own pockets to host the march. It doesn't attract the numbers the Cape Town march attracts, however,

*'... there are some organisations like the Triangle Project, some white people participating and white families, lesbians and some participate some of the time in the programmes we organise, including the Khumbulani Pride'* (Interviewee C 2017).

### ***'So many gains, but...'***

Being at the forefront of key legal victories and a shift in the LGBTI movement, acknowledging that there is still a long way to go before there is a shift for Black lesbians was not easy to admit for Interviewee A.

*'It's hard for me to respond like this because I was in the forefront of the same sex campaign [referring to campaign for marriage equality campaign]. My bias is violence. If there continues to be violence I do not feel that anything has shifted. Yes we can get married, for those who want to be married. There are many things we can do that are provided for by the law. Black lesbian women continue to be raped and killed, perhaps more today than they were in the past. Because of that I do not think the struggle is over. Personally I want to admit that I think that particularly as activists that emerged in the 80s and 90s, we have not gotten deeper into finding solutions that end violence. The fight is about violence coming to an end until then Uhuru has not occurred. That continues to be the struggle of the time'* (Interviewee A 2017)

Interviewee C shares the same view that there is change in terms of legislation that has changed in favour of LGBTI people. However Black lesbians are still not safe.

*'As long as the issue of patriarchy is still alive, lesbians are still going to be in trouble.'* (Interviewee C 2017)

She speaks of patriarchy and homophobia seen in leadership structures and important institutions such as the police service and health facilities. It leads to a lack of resources being allocated or used for the protection of lesbians. It leads to negative attitudes and perceptions towards lesbians persisting.

*'The President of CONTRALESA (Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa) [Patekile] Holomisa, is very well resourced, he is everything, but he is not comfortable about lesbians. Chief [Xolile] Ndevu in the Eastern Cape too, because the reaction of what they are saying is what makes an ordinary person in the crowd to be mad because they believe what they are saying. Holomisa, when there was reviewing of the Constitution, the only thing they focused on is to take out the sexual orientation clause from the Constitution. They started to be homophobic and when you look at the cases, 2012 was very bad, lesbians were killed the most and that was during the time of talks of changing the Constitution and everyone was talking about bashing the lesbians... I mean the policemen in the charge office, those guys are working but they are homophobic. Those nurses are working but they are so homophobic so for me we can change the conditions but the attitudes of people will be a let down'* (Interviewee C 2017).

## Summary

The experiences of the activists in this epoch have shown that gay and lesbian activism broadly, and Black lesbian activism in particular, was difficult during the 1980s. Activists were aware of their sexuality and the risks involved in being openly lesbian or gay. Where there are examples of people taking the risk and gathering because of their sexuality, there was a cost to the association and visibility. Interviewee A would be beaten up for associating herself with women who were known as lesbians. If activism is understood as fighting for a cause one believes in, regardless of the risk, the rebellion to be as oneself during a time

when it was taboo to living as a lesbian, then Interviewee A's rebellion qualifies as a form of activism.

All three participants were associated with a political movement prior to choosing to work in the LGBT sector, when the space opened up to do so in the early 1990s. This is because the priority of the time was the fight for political liberation. The focus on the fight for liberation prevented the homophobia in the liberation movement from being exposed because sexuality was not a cause or issue that was raised to be fought for. When sexuality was raised, the activists expressed a sense of rejection within the movement, as fellow comrades were not wholly accepting of their sexuality. This pushed them out of those organisations and they joined gay and lesbian rights organisations. They consciously chose to wage the struggle for gay and lesbian rights elsewhere. They later chose to form Black lesbian organisations specifically as a response to the misogyny that they experienced from gay men. This was another form of rejection from the gay and lesbian organisations. This is a distinguishing feature of Black lesbians from this epoch and it was critical in shaping the direction that Black lesbian organisations would take because they understood and experienced the multiple forms of oppression of being Black, female, lesbian and economically disadvantaged. They were able to move away from white and male dominated organisations that they felt did not adequately address the challenges faced by Black lesbian women.

Perhaps a larger study on this subject may uncover other forms of Black lesbian organizing and activism pre-1990. What is clear is that even though these activists were not first and foremost lesbian activists, their activism is not removed from the struggle for gay and lesbian rights, even though, by their own admission, they were only moved to fight for LGBT rights after the struggle for political liberation was won, in the early 1990s.

#### 4.2 1994 – 2006: Multiple struggles to fight at once

***'My activism is based on social justice'***

Interviewee D marks the start of her activism in 1994 as a student activist at the University of the Witwatersrand, and locates herself in the second epoch of this study. Growing up she was involved in the ANC. She participated in protest action against apartheid like other members of her community. However, it was when she was only when she was on campus that she was more deliberate about the causes she wanted to champion. The fight on campus was over outsourcing of staff and the privatization of facilities. Her activism outside of campus was community based and included a range of issues such as gender, socio-economic rights, media rights, literacy and working with the elderly in townships. Exposure to institutions of higher learning meant that she was exposed to international initiatives that informed and educated activists about what human rights are about, including rights to preferred sexual orientation.

*'My philosophy was that all my struggles are equal... my activism is based on social justice which includes a number of issues'* (Interviewee D 2017).

She grew up in a poor and conservative home. She struggled with her sexuality growing up, and did not know of any gay and lesbian organisations she could turn to. She would attend Pride marches, but she still did not know what organisations were available for her. This made the process of discovering herself through her sexuality difficult. She believes that LGBTI movement missed an opportunity by not working with or 'linking up with the emerging social movements in the different communities' that were engaging a range of issues in the early years of democracy (Interviewee D 2017). The expertise of someone in the LGBTI sector would have infiltrated areas that both the student and the community movements, were unable to reach.

The community based activism afforded a unique perspective on how ordinary people were benefiting from the transition. Interviewee D characterizes the period of after the transition as a time when there was a 'lull in activism' and some of them as activists understood that the transition was not real. It did not

address issues that affect people's lives. She says people sat back, forgot about the issues and the real politics, and were loyal to the political party, the ANC. The broader political agenda also required activists to tread carefully about their activism because 'if you go to communities and say beware this government is not real, no one is going to listen to you' (Interviewee D 2017). In order to have impact, strategies for activism in a changing South Africa needed to change and adapt to new dynamics. They tailored their approach as such.

*'You needed to come up with an issue that affects a particular community at that point, for instance, you go to Soweto and talk about access to water, there was a cholera outbreak at the time, concentrate on that and make the linkages to the broader political context. We developed a strategy of how to revive activism without having to, you know, burst people's bubbles'* (Interviewee D 2017).

Here one begins to see a significant shift from a focus on the broad political liberation struggle, to the pursuit of a specific issue-driven agenda. The space had opened up in the 90s for the elevation of other struggles in ways that were previously not possible. This reinforces the idea from Interviewee B, that all struggles mattered. Black women live intersectional lives, thus one cannot address one aspect without addressing the other. However Interviewee D describes the activist spaces she operated in to have displayed similar issues as in the liberation movement. These spaces were not entirely safe because

*'...you are with different people from different walks of life and do different politics. And mostly, the spaces are saturated with men, and the women that are there...do not have time to empower ourselves mentally because we have a lot of responsibilities. You are a woman, you want to be a part of this movement that is important but you have other pressures at home. You hold back, you cannot be fully participating and active like men do because also even attending meetings you have to be conscious you have kids, you have to go cook. The manner in which these organisations are run is not considering that there are women in this movement and that women's lives are more demanding than men's lives'* (Interviewee D 2017).

Other dynamics she cites are how women who are vocal are targeted by the men in the movement, as a means to derail or distract them from the work.

*'If you are a woman with a voice, there are men that would act like they are interested in you. I do not know whether they do it consciously, but once they show you the interest, you concentrate on that and you lose focus. I could see how some of the women we were working with, how they then fall through the cracks because when comrade A is done with you he can go to the next one and you find that women are fighting amongst themselves and the man is there watching like a spectator or a hero. That has an impact on how the organisation is run and how we relate as women'* (Interviewee D 2017).

The race dynamics in the some of the issue-driven movements she served in manifested in progressive ways. She worked closely with white people who in some instances had more experience than her, enjoyed more privilege than she did and did not have the same socio-economic circumstances she had. She used these relationships in the movement as an opportunity to learn, access information and leverage the privilege of the white comrades to the benefit of the cause.

*'They were white people who were willing to impart information. They had all the resources. They had computers and cars and could be in meetings... This is also what becomes my struggle, as much as I understand that they are privileged because of their background, of who they are, I also thought that it was important I had to use those resources for my benefit. There were also like a lot of issues within the organisation...how we cannot be led by white people and stuff...As much as I understand issues of race and inequality around race, I also think that we somehow then miss the point of using the opportunity of gaining from these people. They have it, it is theirs, we cannot take it away. How do we use their privilege to our benefit? That is how I dealt with it...constantly reminding them that this is our movement, you have water, you have money to pay for water and electricity, you have a house, this is our movement and take that position'* (Interviewee D: 2017).

This is an important passage to highlight the importance of how racial dynamics are understood by some activists. Interviewee D chose the opportunity presented by the presence of people who have a willingness to work in the interest of furthering a cause. The racial tension needn't be a problem if the cause is foremost for all involved and there is an appreciation of the political history of the country and the need to change the face of leadership in organisations and the social justice movement broadly.

Interviewee E was exposed to politics through the debate society at her Catholic school and her involvement with child rights with community organisations. She was not prepared for gender activism, and not LGBTI activism in particular, as sex and sexuality were never mentioned in her home or school. Her political consciousness was built on the exposure to a range of societal issues that she had to be aware of as a result of her participation in the last few years of secondary school and involvement in student activism at the University of Durban, which is now known as the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN). At university she was involved in ensuring that the rights of LGBTI people were visible on campus. Activism on campus was structured, safe and diverse. The demographics of the members of the LGBTI society were predominantly white, but this changed as the institution's demographics changed. The agenda was about visibility. Race and other issues were secondary in the first few years of the organizing on campus. She left student activism and worked in 'the outside world' from 2001, still in LGBTI activism based in in KZN and the Eastern Cape, but operating at a national level. Leading at a national level, the dynamics were different from the diverse and representative dynamics at university.

*'...When asked to head an organization and you sit with people that are your peers, in a meeting you have a point to raise, their response to the point you are making compared to others is not the same but you realize the facilitators response is very much a 'noted', but when the very same point is made by your white counterpart suddenly it is an important point' (Interviewee E 2017).*

The issues discussed and debated do not represent Black lesbian women who are being killed. She says, in meetings with other organisations, people would be sitting talking about housing benefits and pensions, and 'you are saying we see the pensions but can we make sure the lesbians in townships are seen as a priority too' (Interviewee E 2017). The agenda was anti-Black and anti-poor in mainstream LGBTI organizing. Voice is found in alliance with organisations and activists who have the same agenda. She argues that the LGBTI movement has been weakened by the apathy to the lived realities of largely Black and poor LGBTI members who are yet to experience fully the benefits of the legislative victories.

*'We are saying we are going into the township, we are looking to understand this from a cultural perspective that thina isi affecta kanjani<sup>6</sup>, so let's talk about it, but the white guys could not be bothered about lobola practices and you are like eyi kuyonakala<sup>7</sup>. We are supposed to be in in the struggle together but other issues are more important than others' (Interviewee E 2017).*

The above is an example of unwillingness by some organisations to be inclusive and represent the diversity of struggles that are faced by people in the sector.

*'...you are in a space where in 2004 we were saying that the grooming of Black lesbians is necessary and important because the organisations that were leading were white. And the response was aaaahh, that a critical issue? and you are like...I guess it is important, the numbers are not even. But you realize that the people you work with are not with you' (Interviewee E 2017).*

Interviewee E had to align with organisations such as FEW in order to prioritise the issues that mattered to her and her organisation – issues affecting Black lesbians from townships. It is telling that the same conditions that necessitated the establishment of Black woman led organisations were still in place in ten

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<sup>6</sup> How does it affect us

<sup>7</sup> Things are getting bad



years post-apartheid. The sector has not managed to become more integrated, inclusive and diverse. It is still a divided sector.

Interviewee F has been in activism since 2001, and she started working in HIV/AIDS activism. She was inspired to get involved by the stigma around the disease and the discrimination against emaciated people who would be assumed positively infected with the HI virus because of their weight. She volunteered at an organization that worked with pregnant women who had tested positive. They supported the women through counselling them about living with the disease. This work then led her to work that involved helping LGBTI organisations in the field of HIV/AIDS. This is how she got into LGBTI activism.

She was also close to the LGBTI movement after a friend of hers and her friend's partner were murdered in a hate crime. A Triple 7 campaign was started after those murders to look at how to address hate crimes. Through this she became involved with FEW. After more than 10 years of LGBTI activism, the greatest reward she says, is working with young women, and seeing their lives change slowly after being discriminated against, and could not access opportunities because they 'choose to love same'

*'...we work with a lot with young people who most of the time come into the space feeling insecure, lacking confidence, some of them do not feel like they could be something better than the daily violence and intimidations they experience in their communities... that things could be different. In working with them through our projects, you see the change... For me it's the change, it's the joy that I see in the transformation of the people I see, in the people that we continue to work with'* (Interviewee F 2017).

She says the joy of doing this work is made difficult by a number of challenges in the sector. A major one for FEW and other organisations is funding. In her experience women's work generally is not funded, 'let alone lesbian work, feminist work funding is shrinking and it's getting worse over time' (Interviewee F 2017). The influence of donors also dictates which focus areas get support.

Donors also want to see results, and with activist work, results sometimes take years. Donors are not always ready to wait long for measurable results. Some communities that are yet to receive support for LGBTI rights work are in a way disadvantaged by the progress South Africa has made. The perception is that the country is doing well on fighting hate crimes, which it is, so donors can go elsewhere. However, the success is uneven, and the donor support is still needed.

*'...In South Africa around LGBTI there is the assumption there that things are great because of the constitution that we have, so a lot of donors have shifted from funding South Africa, they have shifted to Africa because that is the international perception' (Interviewee F 2017).*

Organising has become harder. Skilled people leave the sector to pursue other opportunities, which weakens the sector. 'Back in the day when we started the Joint Working Group (JWG) which was a coalition of LGBTI groups, it was a collective voice.' The environment is harsh to lesbians, 'the hate crimes reported in the media are evidence that we still live in a country that is very discriminatory and not accepting of people and their rights and choices'.

Organisations are unable to come up with new strategies to reach the masses, hog headlines and keep people talking about hate crimes. Referencing an interview with an activist on one of the many hate crimes:

*'I was listening to that interview. Those things have been tried. Going to malls and doing dramas to educate people, doing dialogues in communities and speaking to people in taverns have been done. What could be different this time is if we access the communities through them maybe we will have an impact...'* (Interviewee F 2017)

Interviewee F believes that the same methods of protesting are not going to be successful any longer. Organising and mobilizing must keep up with where the audiences and the masses are in order to get their attention.

***'If any activist doesn't look at their personal development then we are fooling ourselves...you talk about changing lives but your life isn't changing'***

For Interviewee G, a strategy for sustainable Black lesbian activism is prioritizing personal development so as to contribute beyond marching and protesting in the streets. She bemoans the fact that many activists have been in the sector many years, some three decades, however their lives have not changed or their role hasn't elevated to new levels that would afford them opportunities to lobby and engage differently with government, potential donors and activists in other sectors.

As an ANC member who has worked in regional party politics in the ANC Youth League, she has always advocated for LGBTI issues even though it was not always accepted. Community based organizing was important for both the ANC and for the LGBTI organization she worked for. Belonging to both organisations meant she is able to reach a constituency base that would otherwise be difficult to reach. Her activism has not been without threats to her wellbeing. Home, church and the very community she served were hostile. She retreated for a period, but has since returned to do work for the ANC at the branch level, while pursuing her own entrepreneurial work and still advocating for the rights of LGBTI people. Her entire life is no longer just about being an activist.

Activists of this epoch in this study have a broader set of issues they advocate for as activists. They embody the idea of intersectionality in ways that older activists from the first epoch were restricted in doing. One can argue that it is as a result of the work of the more experienced activists that relatively younger activists are able to address a multiplicity of issues at the same time. Even with the persisting challenges of racism, lack of funding and resources and violence against women in townships, the space has opened up. It has by no means become easier to be an activist. The imperative to address several issues at once has posed a greater challenge for activists.

Black lesbian activists must consider new forms of collaboration with each other, other LGBTI organisations and organisations in other sectors for sustainability. It is calling for a broader embrace of social justice issues, and not working in relative isolation. Interviewee D showed that if the cause is foremost and unifying, the achievement of goals in fighting the cause is possible, regardless of the people who are involved in achieving the purpose. The politics must be delicately managed in order to avoid the alienation of one group over another. Race remains a barrier to collaboration. It is unclear what it will take to overcome it. It remains a wider South African problem.

Interview G is still involved in politics and this involvement has, not without issues, been useful for both her entrepreneurial aspirations and her activist work. Perhaps a return of sorts to mainstream party politics may facilitate the process of creating and accessing new environments to drive the LGBTI agenda.

#### 4.3 2006 – 2016: New activists, old issues?

Younger activists are encountering similar issues of homophobia, racism and classism in the LGBTI sector as older activists experienced. They are also experiencing difficulty finding full expression within the LGBTI sector because of the inability of the sector to work differently and for new voices to emerge.

#### ***'Am I actually an activist...?'***

Activists are generally in agreement as to the definition of what an activist is. A person who recognizes injustice or a cause they are passionate about, work towards championing that cause and advocating for justice. There is no prescribed way for an activist goes about doing the work. However, many Black lesbian activists in South Africa have used and still use publicly occupying space, pickets, marches, attending of court cases for hate crimes and other forms of disruption of public events, as methods for their activism. Younger activists do not readily follow this way of protesting or being activists in the sector. One of the reasons for this is that some activists join the LGBTI rights movement

through professional avenues. Interviewee H says she joined the movement by default and even though she has worked in the sector since 2005, she doesn't readily claim the title activist. In her mind, when she thinks about activists she thinks about the radical type people who have dedicated their entire lives to a cause or a movement. She is a medical doctor, and was approached by FEW to assist with a medical opinion, regarding a lesbian woman who was raped and went through the public health system. There was an issue with how she was treated and they requested her assistance. Upon assessing the woman, she found that there was indeed poor management of a patient by the medical facility and she made it her task to try and deal with the consequences thereof. After that one case, more cases of rape were referred to her.

*'I remember there was some time where they would call me to see some lesbians who had skipped their countries, when they would call me to see them or lesbians who were detained and were badly beaten and discharged and I had to provide medical care to these lesbians. After doing a few of those kinds of cases I really started to get interested in what the movement was about and what the struggles were and how I could learn more to be able to contribute to the movement'* (Interviewee H 2017).

She went on to do a Master's in Public Health, looking particularly at the health needs of Black lesbians. In addition to the study, the consultations she also joined the board of FEW. As a result she had access to many lesbians who needed assistance and support. Some she assisted to the extent of bringing them into her home. The issues in the organization and in their movement took their toll.

*'I felt so helpless I literally had a breakdown. I ended up going to into hospital and that is where I stepped away and consciously became less active'* (Interviewee H 2017).

As a relative outsider to the movement, understanding the tensions, the baggage of the divided movement, working in the sector was taxing and her health was compromised. She says she was disheartened by what felt like people taking

advantage of her. She expected a safer space, where those who are better privileged assist those who are struggling. This she says didn't prove to be the case, not at an individual level nor at an organizational level. She has learned that being emotionally attached and wanting to help an individual, when the real intention is to solve the bigger problem, is unsustainable.

Entering the movement without the 'preparation' for the emotional toil working in the sector can have, can be damaging and taxing as Interviewee H learned. The need she tried to solve for was great.

In terms of new strategies of organizing, she believes that even after more than 10 years of the existence of some Black lesbian organisations, lesbians still organize in old school ways and this has contributed to Black lesbian organisations and the movement broadly being unable to be as impactful as they could be.

*'FEW really struggled to appeal to lesbian populations who are the haves within the community, those who have status, privilege, education etc. I think the difference between how we organize as lesbians and how the gay community organizes is that the money and power points have a lot of impetus within how they organize as gays. In the gay world, it's almost like a top down approach of organizing whereas in the lesbian community it is a down up approach... not to say it should change, its that people at the bottom don't necessarily have the skills or resources to mobilise properly'* (Interviewee H 2017).

She argues that within privileged, white gay communities, the driving force behind the organizing comes from gays or organisers with money, power and influence. She believes there could be greater impact if privileged Black lesbians were mobilized to drive programmes, fundraising and lobbying of influencers. She does acknowledge that more privileged Black lesbian women are comfortable in their day to day lives, where they can afford to be open and out about their sexuality without as much fear as poorer woman have, because they are protected, they live in gated communities, or they can afford to not be out

and still live freely with their partners without the threat of someone beating you up or taking your life because they don't like how you dress. She believes women in those positions, if they believe in the cause and are inclined to social justice, should play a bigger role than what they are currently doing. This will be a new form of activism that can be impactful in ways that pickets and marches are unable to be.

***'Not all of us can afford to put out bodies on the line in the same ways...'***

Interviewee I lives in Soweto and studies in Johannesburg. She says claiming the title activist has been a struggle because of how it has been defined, and how it is represented by prominent activists in the movement.

*'...when you say activist, an image or scenario comes to mind: you need to attend the marches and barricade spaces. I would not quite qualify as that type of activist, however if we were to look at policy and advocacy behind closed doors and fight injustices within school areas or the workplace or home, then I would consider myself an activist in that regard'* (Interviewee I 2017).

She believes her activism in academia is seen as a lesser form of activism. It has led to her feeling as though older activists do not welcome people in the movement who do not subscribe to the picketing and protesting philosophy of activism, or to people who are not affiliated to organisations such as CAL and FEW, and newer organisations such as the 1 in 9 campaign. She has felt alienated by activists who frown upon younger activists who also want to have fun while in solidarity.

*'I went to Joburg People's Pride, which was supposed to be a safe space... the lady who was leading the march would ask why are some of you asking about after parties. I was like hawu, just because people are dying does this mean we cannot have a nice time? The type of activism where your whole life should be about suffering, I do not enjoy it, because it is unfair to say just because I am a queer*

*woman I must represent radicalism, I must not know what joy and happiness is because someone has died in Khayelitsha'* (Interviewee I 2017).

Interviewee I expresses frustration with the idea that being a Black lesbian activist is not a holistic experience of being a lesbian woman who also uses the moments of solidarity and advocacy, for fun and connectivity with other activists. This suggests that younger activists do not feel as though the spaces to connect for reasons other than protesting do not exist for them. Interviewee A spoke about the meet ups that would be arranged in the 1980s, under the *mummy-baby* practice. Even though frowned upon, there were opportunities for the expression of ones sexuality. Better off Black lesbians referred to by Interviewee G, are likely to create those kinds of gatherings for themselves because they can afford to not just be activists, but friends and partners among other lesbians. For younger and poorer activists, there are no options.

Growing up Interviewee I stayed indoors, shielded to an extent from homophobia that would occasionally present itself. As a masculine-presenting woman, she was highly visible and that posed a threat to those who are not as accepting. As someone who relies on public transport, she has to be cautious about her movements because she has been a victim of homophobic violence. Three men at the Bree taxi rank attacked her on her way from home. She could disclose to her family why she was attacked because she was closeted. She had to make up a story about falling on her way home, so as to not have to explain that she just suffered a hate crime to her family. As to why she hasn't told her family, she says:

*'I have just had a traumatic experience outside; I do not need that endlini<sup>8</sup>. I just need someone kind and loving and cuddle to make me feel better with this situation instead of asking me to wear a dress or do my hair or not be rude or whatever I do not need that because that would also mean that we need to talk about my identity which is unfair because if my little brother or my sister came home with the same story it would just be a mugging or a weird interaction with people. They would not*

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<sup>8</sup> At home



*be asked vele<sup>9</sup> why do you identify as straight, let's start there vele, and for me that would feel like a weird and unfair interaction to have'* (Interviewee I 2017).

This account shows that even the home remains a relatively unsafe space for lesbian identifying women. This is a reminder that basic freedoms and legal victories have yet to permeate the lives and homes of people marginalized by class, race and gender. Even in 2016, it seems very few things protect one against the violence experienced as a result of being a Black, lesbian and poor. These constraints have made it difficult to be as visible as traditional forms of protest, such as marches and pickets, require.

### ***'We can't all afford to march'***

*'I could never subject myself to a march in a taxi rank because I use it everyday. I do not drive. You can drive your car and park it on Constitution Hill and march to Hillbrow. Those people will not see you again because you use your car, but I use these taxis every single day, in fact after the march, I will have to use a taxi to go home... There isn't that consideration with the older and most radical activists to say that not all of us can afford to put our bodies on the line in the same ways'* (Interviewee I 2017).

She believes that a lack of innovation and creativity limits the potential of Black lesbian activism. There is a resistance to change by older activists. They do not allow for a diversity of newer voices to emerge and lead. She also claims that because of the politics of funding and the need to be sustainable, there are some older activists who are manipulated by funders to push a particular agenda. An agenda that younger voices would not support and they are kept at a distance.

*'... What our older generation of queer women faced, is probably way different from the challenges we face. In as much as this space is harsh and there are harsh realities but it really needs innovation and creativity around how we do things.'*

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<sup>9</sup> Actually

*Like the Arab Spring for example, it was facilitated by social media' (Interviewee I 2017).*

On how she experiences the movement currently, she says it is no different from any other political movement. There are internal issues that threaten to divide the movement however there is a silencing and an overlooking of the issues in protection of each other. When one is seen as corrupt, the fear is that all Black lesbians will also be seen as such. She vaguely refers to a known case of a prominent activist who gets a lot of funding for her work, but the conditions the lesbians she is meant to help is dire. But no one calls her out on it, for the sake of protecting the movement. She believes that perhaps there should be greater checks and balances in the NGO sector to ensure that people do not get away with not fulfilling what they say they do for disadvantaged people.

She believes there is a greater recognition of the struggles of other marginalized groups in the movement and in society in general. Black lesbians in her view are not the most marginalized because there are trans and disabled people who are poor in the movement, and they have their own challenges because of these factors. In relation to gay men, lesbians are marginalised, but in relation to trans and disabled people, she argues Black lesbians are privileged in terms of visibility and ability to mobilise and organize over issues.

*'That is not to say that the privilege takes away from that the fact that we continue to be killed, but we are at least getting the attention that other people are not getting. I feel like the organisations that will survive are ones that try and again here is the term, to be intersectional in their activism. So if you exist right now and all you are is just about Black lesbians in a certain form, you probably will not last long because also the face of what a Black lesbian is changing and we need to be adaptable to be those changes. What Black women want in society also changes and if you are not moving with the changes to the nuances there is literally no future for you' (Interviewee I 2017).*

Interviewee I acknowledges that Black lesbians and their plight are visible and more people are aware of their struggle than they are of transgender people, or queer people living with disability. This indicates a shift from the invisibility that characterises the 1980s, to greater visibility in the 2000s, as a result of the work done by activists throughout the 2000s.

For interviewee J who joined the movement aged 16 in 2010, through her English teacher at her school who identified as lesbian, her experience of activism has always been an awareness of a multiplicity of issues at the same time. She understands activism to mean not only speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves, but it is fighting for access to water, electricity and basic human rights broadly. Her teacher invited to a Facebook group to participate in conversations about LGBTI rights and know about social spaces where LGBTI people would meet. She never needed to come out because growing up in the Vaal, she dressed like a boy, has a gay father who would bring boyfriends to their home and there were openly out lesbian women in the community. Save for being forced to leave the school she attended in Grade 8 for not dressing like the girls, she says the discrimination she experienced for being a different girl was spared because of the visibility of lesbian and gay people in her community, and her home. This is indicative of the freedom that she has as an activist in the third epoch. This is significantly different compared to activists from the first epoch where visibility in the community was non-existent.

Now living with her girlfriend in Sebokeng, and is known as an LGBTI activist in the Vaal, fear of homophobic violence is greater. She fears that people who know her work in the Vaal may find her in Sebokeng and attack her there.

*'Sometimes you feel like going to that shop to buy two beers or something, or maybe just chill... You cannot just do that because people will ask, are you a girl or a boy? It becomes a problem when they realize you live alone and do not conform. When the dogs start barking you just go eish, are they coming? ... even walking*

*eJozi<sup>10</sup>, it's like eish, phela people do not know that you are an activist and you are constantly a victim' (Interviewee J 2017).*

But she continues with the work because she believes it is important. She laments the fact that her peers do not appreciate the need for the activism and they are not as involved in the movement. They would rather focus on their on personal development, get jobs and only participate if there is an event or a funeral of a LGBTI person in their area. She also laments the lack of seriousness of some of her peers. Some would come to meetings drunk, feeding negative stereotypes. She emphasizes balance mentioned by interviewee 9, about the need for the creation of safe spaces in activism that are also fun and pleasant. Pride is one of those spaces.

*'I do not think we fully understand what the purpose of Pride is and as much as we try to have awareness it is still going to happen that people are drunk. On the other side we cannot blame them because I feel like it's a safe space for us even if we are so drunk that we take off our shirts. It is a safe space because most of the time when we are in spaces where there are not only LGBTI people, you get judged most of the time and uphuza uthukile<sup>11</sup> that eish, I must not get too drunk because they will take me and rape me' (Interviewee J 2017).*

On how accessible older activists are and the type of relationships younger activists have with them, Interviewee J feels that older activists think that younger activists are disrespectful. She believes that some older activists are co-opted by government, and sees this as betraying the movement. She feels used by some organisations that older activists have started or are affiliated with. When there are projects that require numbers of people for visibility and to meet targets, they call the younger activists from townships like Vaal.

*'Nothing further happens to say ok this is where they can recommend you get a job. They will use you and you will leave and they want you to make a noise. And they*

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<sup>10</sup> in Johannesburg

<sup>11</sup> You drink in fear

*will tell you after two years that the project is over, after two years what did you get after that? Nothing' (Interviewee J 2017)*

She says there is no development of younger activists and this discourages people from continuing with the work. Even though the work is about belief in a cause, the expectation from younger activists is that they can develop skills sets that will assist them later on in life. Other issues within the LGBTI sector that she feels hampers the potential impact organisations can have are in fighting, race and misalignment of what can assist lesbians in their lives. She says sometimes, due to the politics of funding and organisations such as FEW, CAL or Iranti who do similar work, and work with similar constituencies, where there are tensions and conflict, they get caught up in all of it because they are associated with all of these organisations. In terms of race, even though she has not worked with white led organisations, she has heard from peers that it is difficult because Black people are treated as less than their peers with the same qualifications.

In terms of the needs of young Black lesbians, she believes young Black lesbian activists are in need of academic support, safe spaces to gather and in some instances live, and access to opportunities beyond the work on ground that many of them are currently involved in. Personal growth and development is an important focus area for Interviewee J.

Interviewee K has been able to ply her trade within the movement as a financial manager who has worked for various organisations. She didn't identify as an activist, and wasn't seen as one, because of the support function role. However she believes that keeping organisations afloat and looking after the books is doing important work. She came into the LGBTI sector in 2012 when there were a high number of reports on the killings of lesbian women. She knew she wants to get involved in the movement, but was uncertain as to how she can do so because it was taboo to be lesbian and visible in her community. Growing up in the Free State, there were no out lesbian or gay people. This she believes contributed to her feeling as though she cannot be on the frontline, and visible. Her consciousness was raised upon moving to Soweto and seeing more people

who she identified with. She says that because of the dominance of older activists in the movement, there isn't enough space for new voices to emerge.

*'... it feels like activism is a card-carrying membership organized space and sometimes it feels like spaces are owned by particular people as a result of people who have been doing it for longer possibly feel much more comfortable and when you are young and coming into the space and are insecure you might be intimidated... Sometimes I feel like in a way older activists do not feel like they can trust the younger ones enough to just run with things'* (Interviewee K 2017).

Like other participants in this epoch, Interviewee K highlights the need for innovation and the creation of opportunities for younger activists that will develop their skills and enable them to work in other sectors as well. She believes the movement has stagnated because the people driving them have had limited exposure to other spaces of influence, such as institutions of higher learning, government development agencies and corporates.

*'I feel like the sector could learn from other mainstream entities... looking out for how internship programmes are run in corporate SA. Just because someone is queer it does not mean that they are not affected by education etcetera. there needs to be a dedicated effort to saying let us have a model such as the NYDA (National Youth Development Agency) that is replicated within the sector and makes sure it speaks to our intersectional politics'* (Interviewee K 2017).

She listed as key issues facing the movement currently, a lack of personal and professional development and a lack of focus on the families of lesbians who in some cases have proven to pose a greater danger to them when they do not accept them for being homosexual. She believes safer homes, will mean safer communities and a safer country eventually. This means the future of Black lesbian activism in her view will fundamentally be about changing attitudes that will change the behaviour of people who live alongside queer people, who are the greatest threat to their well being. It also means due to the slow progress of transformation, creation of employment and opportunities for poor Black people

in South Africa, Black lesbian activism will have to ensure that even with the use of modern day digital and technological development, the poorest of women are not left behind because they haven't access to these advancements.

*'Everyone needs to be able to say I am safe in my hood because there will be acceptance in families that will spread out. But how many of us can say I am safe in my hood?'* (Interviewee K 2017)

The creation of safe spaces and communities continues to be a challenge that is yet to be addressed even after more than 20 years of activism of this nature. It will take new ways of changing individual beliefs to improve the lived reality of Black lesbians.

## 5. Conclusion

In order to understand Black lesbian activism in South Africa between 1980 and 2006, the study located this form of activism in the broader struggle for political liberation, in the broader women's movement and in gay and lesbian rights activism. The struggle to exist in these movements is a common theme expressed by activists who were active in key political structures and gay and lesbian rights organisations. They expressed how other issues were placed ahead of the realities of Black lesbian women.

Activists from the first epoch were not immediately aware that their sexuality was an issue in their respective political movements. Upon realising this, they moved away to join lesbian and gay rights organisations. The privileging of race in the struggle for political liberation covered up homophobia and sexism in the political movement. This limited the potential for activism that addressed lesbian and gay rights for activists from the first epoch. It contributed to the erasure of these women in the history of the LGBT movement.

Activists from the second epoch expressed a greater awareness of their sexuality and how it was perceived in the political movements they belonged to. Their

activism began when gay and lesbian organisations were known more, than was the case for activists in the first epoch, until the 1990s. Activists from the second epoch were exposed to gains won for gays and lesbians, and the dynamics of belonging to multi-racial LGBTI organisations. This added a race dynamic that inspired the formation of specifically Black lesbian organisations to address issues that were not addressed in white and male dominated organisations. The birth of organisations that focus on Black lesbian identity and experience in South Africa, was as a result of this invisibility and erasure.

Activists from the third epoch do not have the pressure to belong to a specific political organisation, because the space has opened up for them to access different spaces of influence, they have access to new opportunities and aspirations that inform how they understand what being an activist is about. This freedom is a result of the changed political landscape in South Africa, changed largely by the work done by older activists in changing the experiences of Black lesbians.

Older activists are critical of themselves for the inability to take Black lesbian organising to another level, beyond the struggle for political liberation. They believe that Black lesbians remain oppressed and marginalised even though there has been progress. Younger activists are saying that older activists are politically exclusionary and this has hampered potential progress for Black lesbian activists in the LGBT movement. Older activists employed similar strategies for organising as the political organisations they worked with, would use. Strategies such as protest marches, pickets and public disruptions to get attention. The effectiveness of these strategies has waned over the years, and more so post the 2000s. New strategies of organizing and the creation of new spaces of influence can take place if activists pursue other ventures, work in other sectors and out of traditional activist environments to extend their networks.

None of the older activists spoke about the reasons behind the inability to move with where the country was and create new forms of visibility and influence in



innovative ways. One can infer that the numerous challenges that Black lesbian activists faced on a personal level, and at an organizational level resulted in the inability to develop the movement. Participants spoke about being rejected by family and the community. This difficulty has contributed greatly to limiting their own potential in general, and in the LGBT movement. For the organisations, structural challenges and funding shortages have prevented them from reaching and working with larger groups of people. LGBTI organisations must work towards becoming environments for activists to do the difficult work of fighting for justice and equality, but to also get support for their own trauma and mental wellbeing.

The older activists are accused of, and in part admit to the lack of the creation of space for younger and different voices to lead or bring in ideas that may bridge the gaps older activists continue to struggle with. Relationships built over the years with political parties and other organisations, coupled with new ideas and strategies for organising led by younger activists, can work towards moving the movement forward and keeping up with changes in society.

Activists from the second epoch spoke less about their own proximity to political parties and more about social justice and broadening the focus of issues to address. However, they could not avoid party politics because most issues were linked to the political conditions and developments of the time. This made it difficult to fully construct a politics that could address broader social justice issues. Issues such as education and unemployment, a lack of access to opportunities, and the fight for the delivery of basic services were some of the issues that were focused on, but the focus was limited.

The violence distinguishes this form of activism, as noted by Interviewee A, who stated that her bias is violence, and that until violence has been resolved it will be difficult to see progress in the movement. Younger activists are saying they want to focus on other issues that affect them as human beings who live intersectional lives. How does one move to fight other evils, when the largest threat to this group of people remains, and that threat is violence? One achieves

this within the movement by ensuring that it is not an 'either, or' approach, but rather a 'together, and' approach. Meaning, other issues should be included as focus areas, without disregarding the continuous fight against violence.

There was no clear view on whether different organisations that do similar work, should come together, pool resources and be targeted in their work, so as to not continue dividing the Black lesbian movement. This approach would be borrowing from 1980s liberation struggle strategy when organisations formed a collective in order to achieve greater impact. The UDF was successful at doing this, so was the LGBTI movement through the NCGLE, and the women's movement through the Women's National Coalition. This strategy could be successful, however the politics of funding and funders wanting to have a say on what work matters and how they should be addressed could make it challenging.

The suggestion by Interviewee H that Black lesbian women in professional spaces, those who are doing well professionally, should be brought in to play a more significant role in the movement is worth implementing. They should be brought in to help fundraise, lead initiatives and expose other Black lesbians to opportunities that would allow them to contribute in a different way than what they have been doing. The possibility of success from this approach can be compared to the success of other entities that have come together on the basis of a shared identity. Whether it is professional bodies or solidarity groups, the strategy can be effective. What is clear from all participants is that the broader LGBTI movement is not a viable option for the complete transformation of the lives of Black lesbians, because of the persisting racism within the movement.

#### Assessment on the approach to the study:

The approach of the study was to create an opportunity for the participants to reflect on and relay their experience in a frank and open manner, thus the decision to keep the participants anonymous. Most of the participants did not mind being mentioned by name because visibility has been a key part of their lives as activists. All the participants from the first two epochs expressed that

they did not mind being identified. I do not believe that the frankness and openness of the interviews would have been compromised if anonymity was not guaranteed. The anonymity may have limited aspects of the analysis because some anecdotes and events are closely linked to prominent activists. Anonymity has ensured that the issues and themes that emerged can be used to point towards piecing together and understanding what the movement is about and how Black lesbian activists experience it, and not merely focus on the personality of the participants in the study.

The individual interviews, with the same line of questions and conversation revealed the similarities and familiarity of experience across the three different epochs and across the different participants. Some of the participants experienced difficulty at home because of their sexuality. Some were rejected and chased away from home, and others expressed continuous discomfort and a lack of acceptance. At least one expressed inclusion in both the family and community. Those who were rejected sought a different and more welcoming home in the LGBTI organisations. Many of them experienced disappointment at issues such as racism and inequality in the LGBT movement. This motivated them to create organisations that would address needs specific to them. Younger activists not only joined the movement because they rejected from home and their communities, but they do so seeking and expecting professional opportunities in the movement.

The differences that emerged are equally telling and informative. Participants differed on how the struggle should be fought, what issues the movement should prioritize, who should lead and what the movement should represent. These differences have weakened the movement and dwarfed the potential impact the movement can have. This explains in part why after more than two decades of the existence of the LGBTI movement in the country, there remains a lot more progress still to be achieved.

The assumptions made upon embarking on the study, that the experience of Black lesbian activists has been and continues to be challenging due to the

intersecting prejudices and marginalization associated with race, gender and class, holds. However, this is not the end and be all of the experience, it is nuanced and largely a function of the period activists began their activism in. The study achieved what it sought to achieve, which was to locate Black lesbian activism in broader liberation struggle activism. It identifies and explains how the challenges faced by older activists have persisted over the years. The study finds that the persisting issues are broader than just structural issues of race, class and gender. The issues include the need for the movement to innovate, and keep up with a changing society. It finds that a lack of opportunity for younger activists to lead in the movement, develop skills and access employment opportunities, weakens this form of activism and pushes younger activists out. This betrays the very motivation that pushed older activists out of political organisations they were a part of because of their discriminatory and exclusionary nature.

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