

Disclosure, Outing and Family Reactions: Experiences of Gender and Sexuality Diverse Individuals in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Nelson Muparamoto^{ab}

Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa^a; Zimbabwe Technical Assistance, Training and Education Center for Health, Harare, Zimbabwe^b

Email: nmuparamoto@gmail.com

Abstract

Extensive research on the process of 'coming out' underscores the significance of disclosing one's sexual orientation and gender identity for personal development and self-expression. However, sharing this information with family members can be difficult, particularly in Zimbabwe where broader social and cultural forces pose significant challenges to 'coming out', and gender and/or sexuality diversity is strongly reacted against. This paper explores the experiences of gender and sexuality diverse persons in Harare as they came out to their families, or were 'outed' by others. The study involved semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and focus group discussions with 31 gender and sexuality diverse individuals aged between 18-31 years. The participants revealed the different ways in which their families became aware of their sexual orientation. These pathways included planned disclosure, outing through extortion, blackmail, and other incidents. The narratives shared by participants varied significantly, encompassing a spectrum from overtly negative or positive responses to more complex reactions from families regarding their child or siblings' gender and sexuality diversity.

Keywords: coming out, gender and sexual diversity, family reactions, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The paper examines the experiences of gender and sexuality diverse persons in Harare, regarding coming out and being outed by their families. Disclosing one's sexual orientation to one's family is a complex process, commonly known as "coming out of the closet". Coming out describes the process of recognising and accepting one's gender and/or sexuality diversity and disclosing to others, including family, friends, co-workers, and broader communities (Achar and Gopal 2023; Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull 2019). While disclosure can be a choice, it also may be forced, accidental, or occur through 'outing', when someone reveals an individual's sexual orientation, forcing them out of the closet.

Coming out is considered a significant event in the construction and integration of a gender or sexuality minority identity (Švab and Kuhar 2015; Martins et al. 2024). While in some contexts coming out provides access to family support (Taube and Mussap 2024), in other contexts it leads to harm. Research has shown that receiving support from parents, siblings and peers is associated with greater wellbeing. (Martins

et al. 2024; Taube and Mussap 2024; Pistella, Caricato and Baiocco 2020). This can lead to resilience and the reduced impact of minority stress. However, on the other hand, coming out to the family may be constructed as challenging gender roles that are considered fundamental to family relations. This can lead to family conflict, withdrawal of support from the family and social rejection, and in some cases victimisation (Pistella Caricato and Baiocco 2020). Lack of parental support or outright rejection has been associated with an increased risk of mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and internalised stigma (Martins et al. 2024).

In some Western contexts, the act of coming out is seen as a way of accepting and acknowledging one's sexual orientation to oneself and others, which indicates that identity development has taken place (Morrow 2000; Švab and Kuhar 2014). It is important to ask whether verbal disclosure, or coming out, is universally beneficial beyond Western cultures. While in some contexts, coming out is linked to an improvement in self-esteem and general well-being, Epprecht (2013) notes that many same-sex practising people in Africa may choose to keep a low profile to avoid attention, which can contribute to estrangement and discrimination. For example, Mashumba (2019) has shown that in Botswana, gay and bisexual sex workers were rejected by their families upon accidental discovery by parents, or when they voluntarily disclosed or came out to their families. In Ghana, some men who have sex with other men expressed concern about potential physical harm from their family and relatives if their sexual orientation or behaviour were ever disclosed. (Shamrock et al. 2023). Similarly, fears of negative family reactions are experienced among South African young gender and sexuality diverse people despite the inclusive legislation that is in place (Mayeza 2021)

In Zimbabwe, gender and sexuality diversity is fraught with contestation. Gender and sexuality diverse persons and advocates for 'gay rights' have been castigated and denounced on multiple fronts (Evans and Mawere 2022; Youde 2017). It is thus of import to explore how coming out, or the absence thereof, is experienced by gender and sexuality diverse persons in the country. The paper firstly, explores disclosure or forced disclosure pathways and secondly, the resultant family reactions to the disclosure of a same-sex attracted or practising sexual orientation and gender identity.

Context

Zimbabwe has a protracted history of marginalisation of gender and sexuality diverse persons. Political homophobia has been repeatedly fuelled by political leaders, political party supporters, religious clerics, musicians and pressure group leaders, among others (Evans and Mawere 2022; Muparamoto 2021; Epprecht 2018). Zimbabwean former and current political leaders have been at the forefront of cultivating hate against gender and sexuality diverse persons by using state apparatus such as the media, educational institutions, religion and the security forces to reinforce heteronormative practices. Some of these leaders have castigated any attempt to ensure the inclusion of gender and sexuality diverse persons in the Zimbabwean citizenry. The former president, Robert Mugabe's strong stance against the LGBTQ+ community is well-documented. He used various platforms, including UN General Assembly meetings, public events, and national holidays in Zimbabwe, to express his criticism of gender and sexuality diverse people and their rights. Mugabe notoriously dismissed sexual minority rights for over two decades claiming they were 'foreign' to Africa (Epprecht 2018).

In February 2024, GALZ¹ advertised a scholarship known as Munhu Munhu² aimed at providing equal access to university education for LGBTQ+ students. In response to the advert, the Vice President of Zimbabwe, Retired General Constantino Chiwenga, issued a press statement on February 15, 2024, criticising the scholarship programme. He described the scholarship as a direct challenge to government authority and a serious violation of national values and morals. This rhetoric is reminiscent of the tactics earlier used by Robert Mugabe and his followers, accusing LGBTQ+ civil society organisations of advancing Western interests and using money to influence young people to become LGBTQ+. In support of Chiwenga's position, a shadowy group calling itself #Students 4ED³ released a press statement. The press release claimed that "the students' sector strongly and passionately rebuke LGBTQ's attempts to lure and recruit vulnerable and intellectually gifted youths through devious and serpentine scholarship offers".

Surprisingly, the utterances by the vice president took place in a context where there has been a gradual shift towards mainstreaming key and vulnerable populations as part of health programming. There are national policy documents and guidelines prioritising work with men who have sex with men and transgender women in addressing HIV. Mkhizhe and Mthembu (2023, 378) aptly capture this contradiction when they write, "while the region has seen a gradually changing landscape with regard to the rights of queer people there are ongoing heteronormative practices that suppress the expression of non-normative sexualities and gender identities".

In 2017, the 37-year rule of Robert Mugabe came to an end, when he was succeeded by his former deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa. Zimbabwe post-2017 exemplifies a failed state (Vambe 2023) with shrinking democratic spaces, widespread human rights violations, pervasive corruption, and the gross exploitation of national resources for personal gain. Helliker and Murisa (2020) have described the post-November 2017 Zimbabwe economic landscape as characterised by shortages of fuel and power cuts; incoherent currency management practices; high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality; as well as deindustrialisation and company closures. The social and cultural context remains heavily influenced by hetero-patriarchal attitudes and structures.

¹ GALZ is an Association of LGBTI people in Zimbabwe. Constantine Chiwenga responded to the advert by attacking gender and sexuality diversity. For more information, see: <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/abominable-and-devilish-offers-vp-chiwenga-blasts>

² The Munhu Munhu scholarship, is part of an All-Access initiative programme targeting marginalised LGBTI+ students enrolled in state universities in Zimbabwe. The scholarship covers full tuition, stationary and accommodation expenses, as well as mentorship. The scholarship programme has been running for over 5 years.

³ This was a group of university students (Varsity students 4ED) who pledged to support the president of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Dambudzo Munangagwa. Several additional groups (e.g. Teachers 4ED, Young Women 4ED, Pastors 4ED) have been formed from ZANU PF political wings, claiming allegiance to the incumbent.

'Border wars'

In popular discourse, borders are used to delineate what lies inside and outside, depending on the socio-cultural context. Halberstam's concept of "border wars" addresses the intricate dynamics and conflicts that arose between lesbian feminists and transgender men, specifically those transitioning from female to male (FTM), in the USA in the 1990s. This framework allowed Halberstam to analyse the identity negotiation processes both groups underwent, as well as the social constructs that shaped and often complicated their experiences and perceptions in relation to gender identity and expression.

In this paper, a "border wars" framework is deployed to understand how gender and sexuality diversity can be negotiated amidst broader cultural narratives. Halberstam (1998, 304) points out that the construction of gender and sexuality [diversity] occurs in a range of different places, such as the doctor's office, the operating theatre, the sex club, the bedroom, and the bathroom. In each and every one of these diverse settings, including the family, discussions on gender and sexuality [diversity] are continuously evolving, with boundaries and borders constantly being established and re-negotiated. The decision to disclose is mediated by anticipated reaction or stigma based on the socially constructed borders.

The metaphor of a border war in relation to gender and/or sexuality helps us understand not only how individuals with same-sex attractions and behaviours may come to be marginalised but also how they resist the process of boundary making. The concept of a border war suggests the idea of defending territories, holding or losing ground, and protecting against permeability. It also implies that a border is, at best, slippery and porous (Halberstam 1998, 304).

Methods

I conducted qualitative research as part of a doctoral study to investigate the experiences of gender and sexually diverse individuals in Harare. Over a period of four years between 2013- 2016, I interacted with over 200 people, and 31 participants were selected using both snowball sampling and purposive sampling. Snowball sampling involved leveraging the social networks of initial participants to identify additional contacts, while purposive sampling helped to diversify the participant networks and avoid recruiting individuals with similar experiences.

I collected data on the experiences of same sex attracted men and women through participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. I interacted with participants during various events and activities such as Pride Week, workshops, drag pageants organised by GALZ. I also met some participants at entertainment events, parties, church gatherings, netball sporting activities, and funerals. Altogether, 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted in English, Shona or Ndebele depending on the preference of the participant. The interviews were conducted in spaces that the participants found safe and convenient in Harare. The venues were agreed upon between the researcher and the potential participants in advance. Two focus group discussions were also conducted to allow participants to express themselves and converse with others who related to similar experiences. The focus group discussions took place at the GALZ office in Harare, which

served as a Drop-in Centre (DIC). Although there had been incidents there in the past, the facility was widely regarded as a safe space for members of the LGBTQ+ community in Zimbabwe.

All Interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated into English. The transcripts were collated and coded using thematic analysis. During data analysis, as a cisgender man, I benefited from numerous discussions with 'insiders' to better understand the terminology used in the community and other pertinent issues to the LGBTQ+ community in Harare.

Ethics

The Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe approved the study protocol (MRCZ/A/2204). Participants gave verbal consent before taking part in the interviews, and participants received US\$ 5 for transport reimbursement and refreshments. All the data collected were stored securely on a cloud-based system, and all electronic documents were protected with strong passwords. The audio recordings made were immediately destroyed after transcription. To protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Findings

Participant characteristics

The 31 participants in the study identified as gay, lesbian, gender non-conforming, or simply different. Their ages ranged from 18 to 31, with an average age of 23.5. Most participants had completed Ordinary Level education, which qualified them for employment and further study in Zimbabwe. Some were enrolled in tertiary institutions, a few had graduated, and a few were employed. However, like many young adults, most participants were unemployed due to the struggling economy and the social stigma associated with being part of a sexual and/or gender minority.

Pathways to disclosure

Strategic Disclosure

Some participants described coming out to family members as an act of being true to themselves, which had taken place in the hope of establishing better communication with their families and avoiding any expectations of heterosexual marriages. During a conversation, Chibaba Ryan (who defined themselves as different) talked about their experience of coming out to their father.

Chibaba Ryan: Well, I guess a lot of things have changed because when I went home I decided I should come out to tell my dad because part of my maternal relatives knew, so I had to tell my dad so that he won't be in the dark as it were, so that if he gets to know it (through other sources) he won't be in a shock. So, I guess he is okay with it. Though I know he is hurting a lil (little) bit.

NM: Okay how did the disclosure go? How did you tell him, was it oh dad I'm like this...

Chibaba Ryan: (laughs). It was like, when I was at school at UZ (University of Zimbabwe) it happened like those days I had to put a profile picture of my friend, my friend. My good friend, so he was like who is this, and I was like okay dad I have to tell you something, but I will do it in person when I come home. Because I can't live a life where I can keep things to myself, I will tell you a lot about me because I don't wanna (want to) live a lie. So, when I went home he was waiting for me obviously. So, I wasn't so sure ... I was terrified so he was like pushing me you should tell me so I just had to say I'm different. That's the word I used, so he was like how different are you? So, I had to say I'm different in a way I can't explain in words and I'm scared that I will hurt you if I tell you the truth of what I am. So, he actually pushed it on me; I had to tell him, Dad, I am homosexual.

In the excerpt above, Chibaba Ryan came out to their father in a thoughtful way, aiming to exert control over how and when their father found out about their sexual orientation. They carefully chose their words and the time and place to deliver the message, emphasizing the need to be honest about their sexual orientation. Gender and sexuality diverse persons can experience a sense of self-acceptance, relief, pride, and liberation, especially after coming out to their parents (Achar and Gopal 2023). In a similar way, Madzimai Quality's (a lesbian) disclosure to an immediate sister was strategically designed to build trust.

So I just liked girls from, I think, grade 7 onwards, and then I started reading about it, I had to, actually. I told my sister, the one in America. I was like, "You know what, sisi T..... of course I've dated a guy and everything but *hazvisikunatsoita* (it aint working), it's not. I don't know, but I really want to explore my sexuality," and my sister, she is the only person I could actually come out to.

Morrow (2001) has pointed out that coming out to families is a consequential life event for lesbian and gay people, which can result in greater closeness with their families or in the complete dissolution of family ties. While some participants were aware that their immediate family might not be affirming of their sexual identity, they found it necessary to exploit the permeability of sexual borders.

Other narratives reflected how some participants strategically deferred coming out to their families until they were financially stable to manage should the family cut ties and all forms of support. Not only was financial stability a determinant of coming out, but age was also considered. For example, Mhazha (a gay man) said, 'When I get to 30 (years), I will be in a position to tell them, even my mother, that don't force me, I will not marry, I am gay'.

Raids and 'outing'

Before 2017, when Robert Mugabe was in power, it was commonplace for the LGBTQ+ community to be raided (Muparamoto and Moen 2022). These raids occurred at the

GALZ offices, and in hotels or venues booked for LGBTQ+ community activities. Some of these incidents resulted in outing individuals' sexual orientation. While experiences of outing varied among participants, some made reference to the infamous raid on 11th August 2012, at the GALZ office in Harare, when 42 people were arrested, and detained. During the raid, the police profiled everyone which involved recording their details, including their residential addresses. As part of an intimidation exercise, the police used these details to follow up on the detained people. They would visit the given address and request to see the person, but in the process, they would explain the purpose of their visit to the parents, guardian, or any family member available at that particular time. The explanations were couched in such a way as to present the individual as a shameful outcast who had been 'recruited' to evil things. The idea was to re-emphasise the border between what was desirable and what exists on the margins of society. Max (a gay man) recalled,

When we were arrested, our details were taken and follow-up visits to our places of residence were made. The police distorted everything to my stepmother and gave the impression that I had gone to GALZ to look for men to sleep with me. *Mwana wenyu akaenda kuGALZ kundorarwa nevamwe varume* (your son was at GALZ to be bedded/fucked by other men).

Chibaba Tindo (a lesbian) shared how she had been outed after the raid.

So we gave them our details, our contact details, and then I gave them my brother's address so they went to the house and they found my sister-in-law there, and they told her we had been arrested. So that's how she got to know about it. But then I am very grateful to her she didn't freak out and she promised she wasn't going to tell my brothers or anyone in my family because she knew what that meant [to me]

Raids created dramatic ways of outing, which made it impossible for participants to exert control over the process.

Blackmail and extortion

Philips (2009) has described how in Zimbabwe the frequent use of derogatory language by politicians against 'homosexuality' provided a pretext for acts of extortion driven by avarice and opportunism. Gender and sexuality diverse people were especially vulnerable to blackmail and extortion because they were considered to be on the margins of society, and hence 'trumped up charges' were likely to stick. Ricky (a gay man) shared how someone close to him 'outed' him in a bid to extort money.

There was an incident where there was a friend of mine who thought 'Maybe I could make money out of this guy, let me create a story', and he said this guy had raped me. Then they were like we have to prove it. I actually went to jail (remand). To prove it you must go for tests (medical examination), then this guy changed the story. He says he attempted to rape me and then it ended up in a

whole of a mess. Then you know what? He was just like I just want money can you give me about \$1000, well he wanted \$2000+ at first and we were phew we don't have such kind of money. the \$2000 became a \$1000. and a thousand became \$600, the \$400 and then \$200. What he wanted was only money, well we had been friends before. Actually, we were best of friends before, and he knew my secrets. Then he turned around and used my secrets against me, and I think we kind of dated without knowing that we were dating, and we had known each other for 2 years, and the 3rd year is when sex happened.

Homophobic utterances at the political level give a vantage point to those who want to blackmail and extort money from their victims despite blackmail also being an offence.

Incidents at school

Some participants were 'outed' because of incidents involving same-sex acts at school or incidents where a family member intruded on their privacy (phones or bags) and found gay-themed material. For example, Clarity (a gay man) described an incident that happened at school.

When I went to a boys high school [single sex school], that's when I noticed I am so different and otherwise so different [because of] the comments they (other students) were throwing upon me. And then I met this guy he proposed to me, and then we started hanging out and then one day we were caught in an intimate act. The issue was taken up, and when they were deciding our fate, my mum was called, and they said that, *hungochani* [homosexuality] is what your son is doing here.

Invasion of privacy leading to outing

Whilst Clarity and other participants were outed to their families through incidents at school, Mhazha was outed through his mobile phone pictures and messages.

My uncle's wife knows. She saw my phone and went through my WhatsApp messages. I had not put my password on, so she checked my messages. She then went to my Facebook inbox and read different conversations. Then they started discussing with my aunt [mother's sister], and she said that my mother should never get to know this, *vachiti havangazvigone kuzvitambira, vangafa* (she won't be able to accept it, she might die).

Outcomes of 'coming out' or being 'outed' to family

Research suggests that parental responses to a learning of a child's sexuality or gender diversity can take two extreme forms (Švab and Kuhar 2014; Schroeder 2015; Gorman-Murray 2008). The first is to see their children/relatives as social misfits, and reject them for falling beyond the borders of normality. However, Švab and Kuhar (2014) describe second more positive kind of response when they write: "on the other hand, there are

feelings of affection and parental love.” Schroeder (2015) offers a critique of this binary categorisation of home (family) experiences by stressing variation and fluidity, as displayed in the following accounts.

Falling-out, silence and being disowned

The family members of some participants severed ties with them after learning about their sexual orientation for bringing shame not only on themselves but also on the family. Chibaba Runyararo (a lesbian) became estranged from most family members after they found out about her sexuality:

The first person to find out was my twin sister, then she said it was fine. Then someone told my mum, she was just suspecting, even my dressing. She was saying we have never seen your boyfriend here. When she knew, my mum stopped calling, and after six months, she called to discuss, but I tried to defend but, anyway she just knew it. Then my dad, that one, it seems he disowned me. Of which I don't even know what he really thinks, he was not there when the family knew about it. All I can say is that all the relatives on my mother's side (maternal) just don't care about me, even about how I am surviving. They abandoned me. I don't even go there. My brother just accepted, maybe he already knew because I was always with him.

In the above narrative, even though Chibaba Runyararo became estranged from her parents and extended family, her siblings (brother and sister) did not show hostility towards her, though they did not openly support her. Other participants experienced similar problems. Mario (a gay man) explained:

When they discovered, it was very difficult, they nearly denied [disowned] me, and it took a very long time for them to accept the situation. I still remember there were days I could lock myself in the bedroom, the only time I could get out was when I was going to the toilet or going to have dinner with the family. So it was like that, they were trying to isolate me, they were saying if you do not change then you will not be part of this family so you have to go and choose your own family. So it was a very difficult time. I still remember my brother wrote me a letter, six (6) pages long, he is in Botswana, and he was quoting verses from the Bible. We are still not on talking terms, he does not talk to me

However, while there was a fall-out with the other family members, Mario's father accommodated him.

He called me and asked me about it, he sort of was understanding because he thought there was something wrong in the family. He said his brother was like that. Up to now he is not married so you may have inherited something from your uncle [he said]. We heard he had an encounter with a man, so maybe it's some evil spirit. So, he said I was supposed to stop it because it is bad, maybe someone is influencing me. So, I agreed with him that I would stop.

Blame-Game: 'You were too lenient'

Disclosure could precipitate a painful family crisis with parents blaming each other for the child's same-sex attraction. Blaming one another reflects deep-seated beliefs that being gender and sexuality diverse is a failure and deviant. Heteronormativity reinforces the idea assumption that a properly socialised being will not become gender and sexually diverse because to become so challenges societal norms and values. After learning about Remy's sexuality, his mother and father began blaming one another for having contributed to their son becoming gay:

Oh, okay, my dad was blaming my mum for being too, like what can I say? Lenient on us, yeah, that's the right word; lenient on me in that I had adopted this whole thing because she was just being too lenient. She allowed me to do whatever I wanted. My mum was blaming my dad for the fact that he had relatives who invited gay people when I was around, so that kind of like exposed me to the whole thing, and I probably liked it. (Remy, a gay man)

The excerpt illustrates how parents can engage in defensive mechanisms, blaming each other for bad parenting, looking for external causes and viewing sexuality diversity as deviant and contagious.

Correctional Attempts

When families learned about their child's gender and sexuality diversity, they often choose to think that it is just a temporary aberration. Families may seek remedies from within the family, but if not successful, external help may be engaged from medical experts, traditional and/or faith healers. Mario explained:

It was very difficult for them to accept, because what they thought was that maybe I was trying to do [it] for money or maybe I was possessed by evil spirits. I still remember that the next day they took me to a prophet. Then the prophet tried to pray for me and he was pointing out that it was being caused by someone who was against us, one of our family members in our clan who was against us. So they tried a lot to make me change to the extent that they went to one doctor who is in Masvingo (Dr X), thinking that if it was in my blood an operation could be done so that I won't have any feelings for men, but the doctor suggested that it's not something that I choose deliberately to love men. Still, up to now, they are trying to change me (Mario).

How families react to gender and sexuality diversity reveals their attitudes towards it. Despite receiving medical professional advice, Mario's family remained hostile towards him, hoping he would change. They even monitored his whereabouts and friends, and tried to find him a female partner. The efforts made by Mario's family show how they attempted to use all available resources to defend the sexual boundary and protect their family name from the perceived 'shame' associated with his sexual orientation.

Fluid family relations

While some participants in the study recounted undesirable experiences with their families, others shared feelings of acceptance and support. Some managed to strengthen their relationships with parents and siblings, despite these family members still harbouring the hopes that things might change. Before her son came out, Nyasha's mother was strongly prejudiced against sexual and gender minorities. However, she subsequently softened her stance and now tolerated her son.

I have an aunt who is married to a prominent person in a neighbouring country. She comes and visits the whole family, then she visits me one day and she is so nice to me. The moment she goes back, she calls my mother, *nhaiwe urikuziva kuti ndozvakaita mwana wako* (are you aware of what your son is doing?). My mother just freaks out and she is like, *“iwe siyana nemwana wangu”* (hey, leave my child alone). My sister phones me and says do you know what she is saying to mum about you right now? She is on the phone and I have just gone to the bathroom to call you. My mother knew but she was more in denial than anything else. She knew, she refused to accept it, but could see it from the early days (Nyasha, a gay man).

While not directly verbally condoning their children, parents can sympathise with their children's struggles in trans- and homophobic spaces. Tariro (who self-identified as a transwoman) describes how their mother challenged a group of people who attacked them because of their gender identity and sexuality.

One day there was a group of youths outside our fence who were shouting, *pasi nengochani, buda ngochani tipedzerane* (down with ngochani, come out ngochani we want to deal with you). I don't know what happened to my mother, she took a kitchen knife and went outside to deal with them. She dared them to come any closer. She said to them *siyanai nemwana wangu, ehe ingochani asi ingochani yangu* (leave my son alone, he is a homosexual, but he is still my son).

However, despite tolerance by certain family members, others continued to disapprove. At the time of interview, Mario was not on talking terms with his brother in Botswana, who had cut ties with him because of his sexual attraction to men. However, the twin sister and other sisters had accepted him, but still wanted him to get married in a heterosexual way. They believed that a heterosexual marriage would change him.

Family expectations about marriage

Despite the varied experiences that participants had, and regardless of the tolerance that some families showed, families still acted in ways to reinforce heterosexual practices. Participants who were still closeted were still expected by their families to date and marry a heterosexual partner. Not having a partner of the opposite sex raised suspicion among siblings or parents. Terry (a gay man) who was still in the closet to his family, described how his sister expected him to marry and brought a present for the girlfriend she did not know but was anticipating to be there. He said,

My sister came from the United Kingdom and when she was about to leave she said I never got to meet your girlfriend but I know she is there so may you give her these presents. She gave me a necklace and earrings.

Thus, without having discussed the topic with Terry, the sister had expectations that at his age he would be dating a girl in preparation for marriage. She inferred from the society she had been brought up in that a young man, once financially stable, should prepare for marriage. Thus, in anticipating that her brother would not deviate from the norm, 'feminine' presents were brought to give to the anticipated sister-in-law. In Zimbabwe today, compulsory heterosexuality strongly influences the perception and expectations of family members.

Mhazha's significant family members tried to hook him up with a church girl in an attempt to persuade him to conform to heterosexual norms. Clarity (a gay man) who had come out to his family was still being expected to get married heterosexually. Despite the family having made various attempts to change him, none of which brought the results they were expecting, the family still anticipated that he would one day become heterosexual.

They try to force things. When I was in South Africa, she [my mother] would send me messages warning me to be careful around South African women, because she did not want a daughter in-law from South Africa. And I was like oh my God these people. Even my brother's wife was also saying be careful around 'loose' women who are there. But they know, instead, they should be telling me to be careful around men, not women.(Clarity)

The warnings given about South African women derive from Zimbabweans tendency to perceive themselves as more conservative compared to those living in South Africa.

Discussion

The narratives shared by participants in this study reveal that intentional disclosures of identity were relatively rare, and most participants were forced to disclose or were 'outed' involuntarily. While 'coming out' is celebrated and central to the formation of 'gay identity' in other contexts, in Zimbabwe many participants preferred remaining 'closeted'. Msibi (2013, 2019) and Epprecht (2013) describe how many same-sex practising people in Africa remain 'closeted' to avoid attention, but which can also lead to enacted stigma. Msibi (2013) argues that while remaining 'closeted' limits the options available to men who engage in same-sex relations, it also allows men greater freedom and respect within the community. In this study too by remaining discrete (through careful impression management), some participants safely navigated the home space without attracting undesirable attention from significant others.

The study goes beyond a binary understanding of family reactions to their child or siblings' 'outing' in either negative or positive terms. While some narratives described rejection and acceptance by the family, others' responses were more nuanced. In Zimbabwe, the family is an institution that perpetuates gender and sexual normativity, and it is within this strongly heterosexual context that gender and sexuality diverse

people undergo their gender and sexuality identity development. In this study, clear evidence was found for what Švab and Kuhar (2014) describe as “individual narratives of coming out to one’s family of origin [...] permeated by a mixture of negative and positive reactions [signalling] the complexities of family relationships”.

Parents have the potential to avoid adopting negative reactions towards their child when they learn that he or she is gender and sexuality diverse. Despite a lack of overt support, in this study some parents did not react negatively. They tried to find out and ‘explain’ what could have contributed to their son or daughter’s sexual attraction to people of the same sex. In a rather different context, Gorman-Murray (2008) notes that just as gender and sexuality diverse participants may choose to come out against the ‘heteronorm’, parents too possess a degree of agency. In this study, this agency was shown by parents who did not condemn their children for being gender and sexuality diverse, and who offered them (albeit often limited) support, demonstrating how sexual boundaries are negotiated and renegotiated even within a heteronormative context.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of coming out and forced disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity in Harare, it is important to note some limitations. The study primarily focused on young urban participants, thus potentially overlooking the experiences of middle-aged and older individuals. Additionally, it did not capture the perspectives of family members directly but relied solely on self-reported data provided by participants. Both of these issues should be addressed in future research.

Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest that the process of coming out as a gender and sexuality diverse person in Zimbabwe is complex as it is in many other African contexts. Some participants had made the decision to disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation to their families or to specific individuals, while others had had their identities revealed involuntarily. The stories shared by the participants reflected a wide range of experiences, including rejection, conditional acceptance, and a strengthening of relationships with certain family members and other people. The reaction of families to learning about their child or sibling's gender and sexual identity was strongly influenced by societal norms and religious beliefs, and family members employed various methods to try to change what they perceived as “abnormal” gender and sexual diversity.

The study carries a number of implications for future research, policy and practice. Further research is needed to investigate the cultural, religious, and societal factors that shape family responses to gender and sexual diversity in Zimbabwe and in other related African contexts. Examining the experiences of families who support their gender and sexuality diverse members could offer deeper insights into strategies that foster acceptance and understanding. Policy initiatives to promote inclusivity should consider culturally specific approaches to addressing stigma and fostering supportive environments for individuals and families navigating these issues.

In practice, there is a need for community-based organisations and other bodies to provide resources to support the management of disclosure. Spaces and places are

needed in which individuals can explore how, when and to whom to disclose, in ways tailored to their unique circumstances. Similarly, initiatives such as those undertaken by Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) have a role to play in expanding parental understanding of gender and sexuality diversity, potentially mitigating stigma and enhancing family relationships. GALZ has in the past implemented PFLAG initiatives, though limited. Ultimately, culturally sensitive approaches to education, advocacy and family engagement may together work to improve the mental well-being of gender and sexuality diverse individuals by strengthening the different forms of support they receive.

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