

Using edutainment to reach sexual minority people

HIV and rights awareness for the LGBT community in South Africa

Tonya Graham



Focus group discussion at OUT LGBT Well-being outreach centre in Mamelodi township

South Africa is the only country on the African continent to explicitly offer legal protection for sexual minorities like lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Constitutionally, it is one of the most progressive countries in the world; one of the few that have gone as far as amending marriage laws to include same-sex unions. As such, it has become a destination for lesbians and gay men from other African countries, many of whom are fleeing persecution from their own governments or communities. There is, however, a vast discrepancy between what laws exist on paper and how they are implemented or being understood. Despite the relative freedom that sexual minorities in South Africa enjoy, there remains a great deal of socialized and institutionalized homophobia.

Hate crimes against sexual minority people are common, and range from verbal assault to rape and even murder. Physical and sexual assault is of particular concern for young LGBT people living in townships – sprawling, often low-income suburbs – or rural areas where there is little or no support for them. In February 2006, a 19-year old woman was beaten to death outside her home by a mob of youth simply because she was known to be a lesbian. Systemic homophobia often discourages LGBT people from accessing health, social and legal services. Police and health workers frequently ridicule, blame, or refuse to properly treat rape or assault survivors once their sexual orientation becomes known. As a result many LGBT people do not report such crimes.

Unacknowledged pandemic

South Africa has one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in the world and although there are widespread campaigns, programmes and organizations that work to raise awareness and reduce stigma, there are very few initiatives that target the LGBT community. Lack of HIV/AIDS information, counselling and services specifically targeting sexual minorities, coupled with high levels of discrimination from health and social workers, make it extremely difficult for the community to adequately respond to the pandemic.

More than half of black lesbians and gay men surveyed were too afraid to go for an HIV test, according to a 2004 study conducted by the NGO OUT LGBT Well-being in Gauteng province. In addition, a number of respondents who went for testing did not fetch or understand their results.¹

Fortunately, organizations working for and within the LGBT community are responding with increasingly creative and innovative strategies. The Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa (GALA) and Community Media for Development/CMFD Productions, both based in Johannesburg, have recently initiated two multi-disciplinary communications projects that are raising awareness and discussion around LGBT rights, health and HIV/AIDS.

‘Coming Out Again’

Coming Out Again, initiated by GALA, began as a participatory theatre production focusing on disclosure and stigma within the LGBT community, and has grown to include two comic books and a radio adaptation. The play uses the actors’ own stories and experiences of the pandemic to raise awareness and provide role models of young people who are living positively, regardless of their HIV status. The play also deals with homosexuality, HIV and disability via a hearing-impaired actor, and each performance is South African Sign Language (SASL) interpreted for both deaf and hearing audiences. From September 2005 to April 2006, the play toured across South Africa. The producers worked with other LGBT organizations to make certain that as many people as possible would be able to attend.

A facilitated post-performance discussion ensured that audiences could ask questions and talk to the actors. These discussions indicated that this was the first time that many audiences had heard other LGBT people speak so openly about their status. After the play was completed, a radio adaptation was recorded in order to reach a wider audience. It was distributed to radio stations across the country in July 2006, along with several interviews with cast, crew and audience members.

Based on the issues raised in the play and post-performance discussions, two comic books were developed to promote discussion around HIV and rights within the LGBT community and the Deaf community. The LGBT-focused comic book entitled *Eyes Wide Open* uses stories and experiences from the community to create a book that is both entertaining and informative. It was published and distributed in May 2006. Initial response from the LGBT community has been overwhelmingly positive.

The deaf-focused comic book was developed with the particular needs of the Deaf community in mind. It uses very little text, relying instead on strong visual images, many of which incorporate SASL. Experienced hearing comic artists worked with a deaf artist who was commissioned to do the artwork. This booklet, entitled *Are your rights respected?* was published at the end of July 2006. Two main social problems, non-consensual sex and harassment of LGBT people, are addressed in the comic. Also, information on HIV/STIs and condom use is given. Throughout the development of both comics, drafts were taken back to the target audiences via focus groups to ensure they accurately captured the experiences, language and culture of those communities.²

‘Outside the Lines’ pilot project

CMFD Productions is developing an innovative serial radio drama that deals with LGBT rights, health and wellbeing and aims to provide positive role models as well as information to the LGBT community. Listening audiences learn about sexual health, dealing with discrimination and supporting one another through the lives and experiences of the main characters (see also the box). The drama is set in a semi-rural area, as formative research revealed

that this community, being much more isolated than urban LGBT communities, receives very few, if any, positive messages, and very little support.

‘Outside the Lines’ uses participatory techniques to ensure full participation from the LGBT community at every stage of production. The storyline for the pilot episode was developed using GALA’s LGBT-focused comic book, and as such the two can be used as complementary materials for educational programmes or group discussions. Before stepping into the CMFD recording studio, the script was taken to several focus groups where the voice actors held staged readings and test audiences were asked for input. Focus group discussions revealed that there is a strong need for positive messages and role models. One person noted a scene in the pilot episode where a young gay man tries to insist that his new boyfriend uses a condom. He said, *“I liked that part. I can relate, because as a young person we face that very challenge and lose.”*

‘Outside the Lines’ also uses strategic partnerships to bring organizations working within the LGBT community together. As there are relatively few LGBT organizations operating in South Africa, and because they are working so hard in their own communities across the country, it can be difficult to find ways to strengthen each other’s work. The project incorporates and complements some of the ongoing projects of other organizations, for example LGBT help lines, in order to create a stronger, more unified LGBT presence in the media. The project is currently in the pilot stages. It is the first drama in South Africa to focus on the LGBT community, and to have the lives and experiences of sexual minority people as the central thrust of the story. It is expected to be launched late in 2007.

Outside the Lines

The Outside the Lines radio drama will consist of a series of thirteen episodes of 15 minutes that explore lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender life in South Africa. The drama focuses on a core group of five or six friends, who are young people between 16-29 years old, living in a peri-urban community. Most of the characters will belong to sexual minorities and the dialogue, the language, the jokes and so on will take this for granted. The story lines deal with relationships, exploration of sexuality, friendships, life-plans and so on. Through dramatic situations the characters confront and wrestle with important social issues such as rape, sexual abuse, condom use, and discrimination of all forms. At the same time, the series is lively and entertaining, combining both drama and comedy.

The producers believe that the radio drama will provide gays and lesbians across South Africa with positive, affirming images in the media. It may help gays and lesbians in smaller towns or rural areas feel less isolated and more connected with the broader LGBT community. It will also serve as an educational tool for sexual minority people as well as for the broader community, and support the work of ongoing projects and organizations.

More information: <http://www.cmfd.org/cmfdprojects/lgbtdrama.html>

Initiatives like Coming Out Again and Outside the Lines operate in a climate where the media essentially ignores LGBT people, unless it is to ridicule or stereotype them. Feedback from both projects has shown that these initiatives are giving the community hope that this climate is changing. However, more communication projects like this are needed in order to encourage more people to come out, speak up, and help the LGBT community face their challenges and overcome them. ■

Tonya Graham

Project Coordinator, CMFD Productions, Johannesburg, South Africa

Correspondence:

PO Box 66193, Broadway, Bez Valley, 2020 South Africa

Tel: +27 83 273 9302, Fax: +27 11 614 6903

E-mail: tonya@cmfd.org, Web: <http://www.cmfd.org>

1. H. Wells & L. Polders, *Levels of empowerment among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender [LGBT] people in Gauteng, South Africa*. OUT, 2004: [http://www.out.org.za/Documentation/Gauteng Report.pdf](http://www.out.org.za/Documentation/Gauteng%20Report.pdf)

2. More information on Coming Out Again: http://www.wits.ac.za/gala/culture_outagain.htm