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Experiences and Perceptions of Social Constraints and Social Change among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons in Lesotho

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexually and gender diverse persons negotiate for their identities, create communities and advocate for their rights throughout the world. However, there are limited data about the perceptions of social change among sexually and gender diverse persons in contexts where same-sex sexual practices have been recently decriminalised, such as in Lesotho in 2010. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with sexually and gender diverse persons (n=46) and six key informants. Findings were analysed using Social Worlds Theory. Participants discussed social constraints and marginalisation across *structural* (legal systems, employment, education), *community* (beliefs that sexual and gender diversity are incongruent with Basotho culture; stigma), and *familial* (tensions with religion and cultural gendered economic traditions) dimensions. The narratives also revealed perceived change across structural (changing norms in legal, employment and education spheres), community (larger community and LGBT community change), familial (negotiating acceptance), and internal (active resistance) domains. The findings reported here can inform multi-faceted programmes to challenge stigma, violence and gender inequity; build social capital; and address the health and human rights priorities of sexually and gender diverse persons in Lesotho.

Keywords

Sexual and gender diversity; human rights; LGBT; social change; transgender; Lesotho

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Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexually and gender diverse persons are defining and redefining identities, forming social networks and politically advocating for rights and needs globally (Kollman and Waites 2009; Wolf 2009). These ongoing global movements have been conceptualised in terms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender emancipation (Jivraj and Jong 2011; Santos 2004). A relatively recent part of this process has been the articulation and measurement of the effects of human rights violations on public health — producing greater understanding of the health risks associated with social exclusion (Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy 2015; Smith 2015). Perceptions of change in societal norms, values and attitudes regarding sexually and gender diverse persons are not yet sufficiently documented or theorised in contexts where same sex practices were criminalised and subsequently decriminalised (Armstrong 2002; Tremblay and Paternotte 2015; Vaid 2015; Wolf 2009). This is true for the Kingdom of Lesotho in Southern Africa (Currier 2011; Kollman and Waites 2009; Swiebel 2009; Waites 2009).

In 2010, Section 185(5) of Lesotho's 1939 Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act removed consensual same sex practices between men as a punishable offence; this legal change came into effect in 2012 (Carroll and Mendos 2017). Although same sex practices between women were never formally criminalised, lesbians and bisexual women in Lesotho widely perceive their rights as compromised due to the criminalisation of men's consensual same sex practices (Poteat et al. 2014; Poteat et al. 2015). Despite decriminalisation, there is no legislation to prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of sexually and gender diverse persons in Lesotho (Carroll and Mendos 2017). In fact, South Africa is the only African nation to explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Carroll and Mendos 2017).

The Kingdom of Lesotho is a low-income country in Southern Africa, with a population of approximately 2,175,000 people (United Nations Populations Division 2017) and a national HIV prevalence of 23.4% — among the highest in the world (UNAIDS 2016). Due to its geographic location, Lesotho is influenced by the culture, politics, and economics of South Africa (Muzenda and Kessman 2017). Historically, there was little visibility and awareness of Basotho sexual minorities (Epprecht 2002). Basotho men's economic migration from Lesotho to work in South African mines involved many engaging in same sex sexual relationships at the mines, known as 'mine marriages' or *inkotshane* (*bokonchana* in Sesotho), as well as same-sex marriage ceremonies and public cross-dressing (Coplan 1994; Epprecht 2002). The widespread practice of same-sex relationships between adolescent girls in Lesotho, known as 'mummy-baby' relationships, may occur in place of, or concurrent with, heterosexual relationships before marriage (Gay 1986; Kendall 1998). Recent studies in Lesotho have characterised and measured the impact of human rights abuses and social exclusion among sexually and gender diverse persons, including gay and bisexual men (Baral et al., 2011; Stahlman, Grosso, et al., 2015; Stahlman, Bechtold, et al., 2015) and lesbian and bisexual women (Poteat et al. 2014; Poteat et al. 2015) on increased vulnerability to HIV infection and poorer mental health. Studies with women have highlighted social and structural factors that compromised sexual health and elevated HIV vulnerabilities, including hegemonic gender norms, mistreatment in healthcare settings

(Poteat et al. 2014), and stigma in familial relationships, community norms, religious and police institutions (Poteat et al. 2015). Among gay and bisexual men, human rights abuses were common, including rape, blackmail, healthcare and police mistreatment, and verbal and physical violence (Baral et al., 2011). These studies also revealed how community agencies provided social support and solidarity for gay and bisexual men (Stahlman, Grosso, et al., 2015; Stahlman, Bechtold, et al., 2015) and lesbian and bisexual women (Poteat et al., 2015). Less is known about experiences of transgender persons in Lesotho. Limited research has explored and theorised the perceptions of social change — and constraints to social change — in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights in Lesotho.

Social Worlds Theory

Social Worlds Theory offers a framework for understanding multi-level social change (Strauss 1978; Tovey and Adams 2001). Originally conceptualised by Strauss (1978), Social Worlds Theory explores the role of social action in contributing to social change, and the ways in which persons are both shaped by, and shape, their *social worlds*. Social worlds are theorised as complex, evolving and fluid, and may be formed by sexual, political, and/or geographic communities with shared activities to establish and manage social lives (Strauss 1978).

Key to social change in a particular *arena*—an issue or area of interest—is the intersection and interpenetration of social worlds, particularly social worlds with competing interests (Tovey and Adams 2001). Other social world processes salient to understanding the arena of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender emancipation in the context of Lesotho include: a) how marginalised groups negotiate for legitimacy and authenticity, and the role of boundary setting in these processes; b) the transmission of knowledge when social worlds intersect (Strauss 1978; Tovey and Adams 2001).

Persons in social worlds with increased power shape who and what is perceived as authentic, and allocate resources based on perceptions of authenticity (Strauss 1978); conversely Strauss described processes of ‘nonauthenticating’ that involves discounting, violence, force and excommunicating. Social constraints and limitations, including these nonauthenticating processes, are regarded as spaces for potential social action (Strauss 1978).

In this study, we explored the lived experiences of sexually and gender diverse persons in Lesotho, with a focus on understanding experiences and perceptions of social constraints and social change. We pay particular attention to perceptions of social constraints, and ways in which sexually and gender diverse communities negotiate constraining contexts.

Methods

Data Collection

We conducted a community-based research project in partnership with Matrix Support Group, Lesotho’s first lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender organisation. Founded in 2008 as a discussion group among 10 gay identified friends, the Matrix Support Group supports and advocates for sexually and gender diverse persons. In 2010, Matrix registered with the Lesotho Law Office as a national non-profit organisation. It provides outreach, advocacy,

psychosocial and other support, and discussion groups for sexually and gender diverse persons across Lesotho with the objective to reduce stigma and discrimination and promote human rights. We worked closely with the Matrix Support Group in all study related activities from planning the study to data collection and interpretation, sharing the findings with Matrix, and including Matrix members as co-authors in dissemination publications.

We conducted 46 semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kvale 2008) with sexually and gender diverse persons, and an additional 6 key informant interviews with persons working on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues in Lesotho at health care facilities and services, human rights, government, and non-governmental organisations. We used theoretical sampling to recruit participants with diverse lived experiences of the phenomenon being investigated to better understand social processes (Starks and Trinidad 2007). We hired sexually and gender diverse peer researchers to recruit participants. We aimed to recruit 10 lesbians/bisexual women, 10 gay/bisexual men, and 10 transgender persons; 10 being the minimum suggested sample size to reach theoretical saturation (Starks and Trinidad 2007).

Interviews were approximately 60 minutes long and included questions such as: “how are sexually and gender diverse persons treated in Lesotho? Probe: by family, church, healthcare workers, friends, classmates, persons at work” and “what do sexually and gender diverse persons need to know to grow up well here?”, and “what do you do when you face difficulties in your life?” The study received research ethics approval from the University of Toronto Ethics Research Board and the Lesotho Ministry of Health.

Data Analysis

All the interviews were conducted in Sesotho, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, translated into English and entered into QSR NVivo 11 (Burlington, MA, USA) qualitative analysis software. Our analysis was informed by established grounded theory techniques such as the constant comparative method; open, selective and theoretical coding; and memoing (Glaser and Strauss 1999). Data were initially coded using in vivo codes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This allowed us to ground the emerging analysis in the participants’ first-person narratives, acknowledging the inherent limitation of this being an in vivo coding of a translation of the participants’ own language. A Sesotho native speaker reviewed the codes to control for distortions and biases of the translations. The data was coded by two separate coders (JA, MG), and their work was compared and synthesised by the primary researcher (CL). Member checking was conducted by the lead author (CL) with Basotho research team members, including from Matrix Support Group (TM). The research team included persons with lived experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues and/or experience conducting research with sexually and gender diverse persons in Sub-Saharan Africa (CL, JA, AG, MG, TM, SB).

Findings

Participants were asked to identify their sexual orientation and gender identity. Their sexual orientations were as follows: lesbian (n=15), gay man (n=12), bisexual man (n=2), and bisexual woman (n=1). Participants who identified as transgender reported identifying as:

transgender, with no gender specified (n=11), transgender women (n=2), and transgender men (n=3).

Although asked to report both, persons tended to describe either their sexual orientation or gender identity. Reviewing these findings with Basotho team members, who include the paper's co-authors, we discovered this finding is reflective of experiences in Lesotho where study participants challenging to disentangle gender binaries and distinguish between gender and sexuality (Poteat et al. 2014).

Social constraints and marginalisation

Participant discussed constraints and marginalisation in *structural* (legal systems, employment, education), *community* (beliefs that sexually and gender diverse persons are incongruent with Basotho culture, and violence), and *familial* domains of life.

Structural: lack of human rights protections in legal systems—Interviewees discussed the obstacles faced in legal and governmental settings. John, a key informant (all interviewees' names are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality) described a time in which the participant approached a government ministry on behalf of a LGBT civil society organisation in order to seek partnership:

They just told me that they will not work with a civil society organisation if ever it has a LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person]. 'LGBT is not recognised in our country, and you will be expecting us to include you in our memorandum of understanding? We are not signing that.' Secondly, they indicated that they are not taking LGBT issues, but gender issues. (John, key informant)

Dimo, a gay man interviewee, specified the need for laws protecting sexually and gender diverse persons, a stage beyond decriminalisation: "My aspiration is to have protection and to have associations that can advocate for our rights to the government in order to amend some of the laws that are supposed to protect us in areas such as human rights and protection from police." This theme was echoed by Jakobo, a key informant from a civil society organisation, who argued that public opinion reacts to changes in legislation:

Individuals rely on society's opinion and that prolongs the time it takes for the general public to understand and accept LGBT issues. Also, there haven't been any laws which protect LGBT people. Having laws which protect LGBT people can help improve the issue of acceptance. (Jakobo, key informant)

Participants reported a wide range of experiences with police. For example, Bokang, a transgender interviewee, said:

Most of the time when you get mugged or attacked for your phone in street, you go to the police; though they are afraid to go to the police because when you get there, you get asked forceful, intruding questions such as, 'Actually are you a woman, or are you a man?' Now those are some of the questions that do not affect us well, because really can you imagine having to keep on answering the same questions each and every day, about whether you are a man or a woman? Most of the time when you need service from the police, you first have to pass such series of

questions. Why don't you just service someone without asking such questions?
(Bokang, transgender interviewee)

The civil society organisation key informant acknowledged some progress had been made within the government, but they focus on gay and bisexual men and exclude sexually and gender diverse women:

Another issue is that, I understand that [government ministry] has opened doors for us, but they are focusing more to men having sex with other men than LGBT. Every time when they present their issue, they say 'MSM' [men who have sex with men]. And I like fighting for LGBT to be presented because when transgender persons need services or if a woman is having unprotected sex with other women; we're saying we want to reduce the spread of HIV in a country though other people are excluded and that is a very big challenge. (Jakobo, key informant)

Structural: educational harassment—Participants discussed how sexually and gender diverse persons were harassed at school by other students, but particularly by teachers.

I think at education we still have challenges because some children are being bullied either by teacher or principals, even from the students, so it depends on what the ministry of education says about the bullying that happens. Some of the students at (name of a school) were expelled because they were lesbians and they were asked to put up their dresses in front of teachers and they were wearing the boxer shorts and that was sexual harassment. There are many people who are being harassed at schools, so educate kids about LGBT so that they can know it. They will be able to understand their diversity, and this will help us to have a community that understand and doesn't have conflicts. (Tsepo, lesbian interviewee)

The above narrative highlights the need to educate students to create greater community acceptance of sexually and gender diverse persons. Lerako, a lesbian interviewee, described harassment by students when conducting outreach, and similarly stressed the importance of educating children to change community norms:

My duty is to go out to schools to mentor children about HIV and AIDS and we work in groups. They will be criticising me saying 'your voice is low; are you *stabane* [Sesotho derogatory term for lesbian]?' I once raised it with them and they said they do not know who had been saying but when I smile to my colleague they ask: 'why are you smiling, are you lesbian?' and that makes me feel somehow. Truly there is a lot of discrimination out there; people don't have to be discriminating because they work with children. So, we go to high schools and to the villages working with different children, so that is where I see community's weakness of discrimination.

Structural: employment discrimination—Participants discussed struggles to find employment or remain employed, especially in the public sector. Diboko, a lesbian interviewee, explained that this problem is especially prominent in government workplaces:

I know of someone older, who lost their job as a soldier because they were female, wearing trousers, and dating other women. She is not the only person. Most of the

LGBT people no longer work. This is because as soon as people take a notice of one's sexuality, they begin to tell management about it. I do not know how people take it really, because work is work, and what matters is competency.

Even when employed, navigating and negotiating sexual and gender identities at the workplace can be a struggle. Estere, a transgender woman interviewee, said:

There are obstacles at work. You do not get called by your name anymore; people address you as 'that lesbian.' Sometimes a person will just come to you wanting to prove a point to others that they know who you are, yet maybe you don't like it to be like that. If you work at public service, people tell your clients who come from afar; 'in there you will be helped by such and such a woman,' and it is not pleasing.

Community: beliefs that sexually and gender diverse persons are incongruent with Basotho culture—

Participants described pervasive community beliefs that sexually and gender diverse persons are not congruent with Basotho culture. Stigma in Lesotho was exacerbated by local beliefs that sexual and gender diversity was a foreign influence. Hlompho, a transgender man interviewee, explained that: "[That] is what makes Lesotho to be behind because they think we adapted this [LGBT identities] from the whites. They believe that we get all this from the social networks, televisions and radios."

Ezekiele, a gay male interviewee, discussed how the introduction of modern schools in Lesotho was initially perceived as incongruent with Basotho culture as it disrupted gendered socio-economic roles of boys for herding. He described that the socio-cultural change in acceptance of schools may also occur over time towards sexual and gender diversity:

For example, when the concept of school first came to Lesotho, it was not accepted because the parents' concern was that nobody would go herding because all the boys would be in school. They really queried it, and the same goes with the churches. But look at them now; they play such a big role in our daily lives! So even with this [LGBT rights], maybe once it's taught about some more, then people can accept that they may also have a child who is LGBT.

Other interviewees discussed the perception that sexually and gender diverse persons experienced more rights and freedom in South Africa: "by right we must live the way we want in this country, just like in South Africa. They have freedom and if the government can legalise it just like in South Africa it would help a lot" (Thabo, gay man interviewee). Another participant discussed the perceived freedom for sexually and gender diverse persons in South Africa could be due to its larger size and diversity: "Lesotho is still behind, and in South Africa it is rare where you can find that LGBT are stigmatised. It is a diverse country that has a large population unlike Lesotho...we relate with immediate people and are close, so in South Africa everyone lives according to what he wants" (Neo, lesbian interviewee).

Community: stigma, misinformation and violence—Participants described a range of experiences rooted in stigma: from feelings of community non-acceptance to verbal harassment, to threats of sexual violence. Participants described these community level experiences as rooted in a lack of knowledge and understanding of sexual and gender diversity: "There are people who accept and there are those who do not; it is not that all of

the general public will accept. There are those who are disgusted” (Estere, transgender woman interviewee).

Several participants described young men accusing lesbians and transgender men of ‘taking our girls.’ Itumeleng, a lesbian interviewee, recounted, “All I get is random calls in the streets, ‘Hey you *stabane* [Sesotho derogatory term for gay], you are going to take girlfriends from us?’” Participants also reported instances of physical and sexual violence. Multiple participants explicitly mentioned the threat and fear of rape that they have experienced and described how this has affected them. Jobo, a transgender interviewee, said:

In the neighbourhood in which I live in, there are some boys who once said they are plotting me, saying they were going to elope with me [abduct/kidnap for marriage]. And it made me to be careful about my safety; like I have to arrive home early while it is still light.

Kabelo, a lesbian interviewee, provided an example of sexual violence targeting her because of her relationships with women:

Who do you think you are, making yourself a man?’ [I hear] from my uncles. Others say, ‘we are dating our girlfriends, but you take them from us.’ Besides that, it is rape. Oh my, I have been raped in my life (sigh)! Oh, I have been raped. They would be saying, ‘We want to see this masculinity of yours. Every woman, when we ask her out, she is dating you – so show us then, this masculinity of yours.

Lerato, a lesbian interviewee, suggested that, although people living in urban areas are more familiar with gender and sexual minority identities, sexual violence still occurs:

I think the difference is minimal; in the urban [area], a lot of people are able to [accept] that LGTBI are there even if they don’t like them. But I think people in the urban are using their knowledge wrongly. For example, I can’t walk at night when I have gone to a party because I fear that guys who know my sexuality can rape me, ‘correctional rape’. Even in the rural [area] LGTBI are still ill-treated. They are sometime taken to initiation schools to be corrected or beaten, the same thing happens to gays in the urban [area] – straight men beat them.

Interviewees and stakeholders attributed hostility and disapproval toward LGBT people to ignorance: “What makes people to discriminate or stigmatise LGBT even though they have learnt the facts from school or society? I think people lack understanding” (Mareka, gay man interviewee). Another interviewee discussed the impact of literacy on discrimination against sexually and gender diverse persons:

According to my understanding I think it’s all about literacy. If you are not educated, you will ill treat people somehow. When you have gone to school, you will learn that if you are a boy you might have different feelings due to genes. Illiteracy can cause people not to understand. Although our country is trying; most people did not attend school. (Amose, gay man interviewee).

Family: tensions with religion and cultural gendered economic traditions—

Many participants described living in fear of disclosure of their sexual and/or gender

identities. Lack of acceptance among family members was often described as being rooted in religious beliefs, and at times resulted in sexually and gender diverse persons moving away from home. Dintle, a lesbian interviewee, described that: “Indeed, discrimination of LGBT people starts in the family because if you observe, most of the LGBT people live by themselves away from their families.” Itumeleng, a transgender interviewee, recounted: “I hear a lot of people saying, ‘If I were to have a child like this, I would kill them.’ People need to understand that they do not choose their children; God gives children to them.” Fear of family rejection caused participants to hide their sexuality from family members: “Freedom is something that we really do not have. Inside my home I am scared of my father finding out.” (Naledi, lesbian interviewee)

Liboko, a lesbian interviewee, described that despite growing representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in popular culture, many families maintain negative perceptions of sexually and gender diverse persons:

I think nowadays more LGBT have come out of the closet but there are still some that still fear to disclose their sexuality, I remember I used to have girlfriend whom her parents thought we were just friends because her parents were very homophobic about LGBT; it depends on the support you get from your family. When you’re watching ‘Generations’ [South African television show] and Zenzo and Jason [gay characters] appear, then you hear remarks from your parents saying that they hate homosexuals and they are diabolic and that if they found out one of their children was like that they would chase him out of their house. Now you will not disclose since you know that you will be chased away.

Several participants discussed how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender lifestyles are not compatible with certain family traditions. Several participants pointed out that a daughter identifying as a lesbian or transgender will spell the loss of the *bohali* (the bride price) their father was expecting to receive upon their marriage. Letsie, a gay male interviewee, articulated: “People expect that their girl child will get married and that they will get *bohali* and also get grand-children. The first-born grandchild is usually named after their ancestors. That means [the] *bataung* (a clan) will continue and will not die out.”

Deborah, a key informant, described traditional gender roles in Lesotho, often represented by clothing and activities that reproduce masculine dominance:

That is why you may hear a Mosotho [Basotho ethnicity] man saying to a woman, when he is angry at her; ‘You think that you are a man, because of these trousers!’ I struggle to understand a Mosotho’s key points in describing a man. They see how you are dressed and the activities that you do to be what differentiates you from a woman, as a man, and that is how it must remain. Even when they are educated, they are still chauvinist, adamant about enforcing their leadership; really, they are problematic.

Perceptions of change

Participant narratives also revealed perceptions of change spanning structural, community, family and intrapersonal domains.

Structural: changing norms in legal, employment and education spheres—

Most participant narratives highlighted marginalisation in legal, employment and education spheres. Yet participants also discussed instances of acceptance in interactions within these institutions that suggest the beginning of changing norms and practices. Participants explained that, although the police have been discriminatory in the past, they are becoming more helpful and receptive to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. For instance, Limpho a gay man interviewee, said: “When we go there [to the police], we find the service to be better.”

With regards to employment, Jakobo, a key informant, discussed the private sector was more inclusive than the public sector: “They know that when seeking employment, the private sector does not extremely reject them because the sector primarily needs a person who is productive.”

Finally, a participant discussed their experiences at post-secondary school being more affirming than in secondary school:

With schools it is different; I happen to attend a school whereby there aren't any of those issues. I attend school with White kids, Chinese kids, and all others. So really, I feel there is no stigmatisation or calling of names. They will just come and ask me politely, just genuinely wanting to know, ‘hey, how are you? Are you gay?’ ‘No, I am transgender; I am a real transgender woman.’ And they pass. (Bohlokoa, transgender interviewee)

Community: larger community and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community change—

Participants perceived changes in the larger community as well as the local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Many interviewees saw the media as a powerful force in effecting change in the larger community. Dikeledi, a lesbian interviewee, described their feelings about increased representation of sexual and gender diversity on television shows: “I become pleasantly surprised when watching television... For example, gay and lesbian people are now being incorporated into the scripts of famous soaps or shows.... So much effort is being made to bring information to the public.” Ata, a gay male interviewee, suggested that the media could serve to educate the public and reduce discrimination: “There could be educational programmes that disseminate information/ education through the newspapers, or even public gatherings. If people are educated, there will be no discrimination and we will all be united.”

Interviewees discussed the growth of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and the comradery and connection that they find in these spaces. Jonase, a gay male interviewee, described the emergence of the bustling lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender scene in Maseru, Lesotho's capital city:

There are a lot of parties, a lot of sit-ins. Or one can say, ‘let's contribute and go and chill at so-and-so's place.’ We meet often. Sometimes after work I know that if I drop in somewhere at a drinking place, I'll find around 50. So, what more during the weekend? They become very many. Even during the Ms. Gay event, people were many indeed. Some people were saying, ‘Why didn't you tell us? Next time,

you should tell us!’ That is what gave us the clue that people now have understanding.

David, a key informant, described the vitality of the emerging lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, as seen in the first local Pride march in 2013:

I don’t know whether some of the general public did understand exactly what the march meant, but it was something different; it was very colourful, you had the flags, you had people dressed in different gender clothes, and I think that that exposure is very positive, and it seems to get people’s reaction. I think more of that will actually bring more acceptance and more awareness of these issues maybe.

Leseli, a key informant, described her impression that sexually and gender diverse people are becoming increasingly accepted in Lesotho:

At the beginning of my work with them, I took it that they are not accepted in the public. However lately, I think that they are accepted. For example, there is a gay brother who works in town who used to get verbally harassed in town. I like him because he has a [market] stand. I think he has played a huge role in influencing the others to be the same. However, lately I do not hear of others being harassed like that. Also, if it is done, it is not done so overtly offensively that even a straight person could feel hurt.

Family: negotiating acceptance—While most participant narratives mentioned fears of family rejection, some participants described how certain family members accept their children’s gender and sexual diversity and negotiate for their acceptance. For example, Liboko, a transgender interviewee, described how their mother defended them:

I think she has accepted me because there are people who asked her what she is expecting to happen of me and my demeanour, which is not like other females in the family. She says she explained to them that; ‘You should know that this is my child and I have known her since she was born and I have to accept her like this; if I do not accept her, who will?’ So since then really, things have been fine.

Others described how rural families traditionally rely on boy children for herding, a highly gendered economic activity that is perceived as incompatible with having a transgender son or daughter. Nthabi, a transgender interviewee, provided an example of how their role at home and their relationship with parents was affected by their gender transition:

We had animals at home and when I wasn’t at school it was my father’s desire that I go herding, and that is not something that I liked. I would not feel satisfied with that because my thinking was, ‘Oh, how can I go herding, yet I feel this way? Will I go herding wearing dresses like this?’ Then my mother would say to him, ‘Yes, you can hear what the child is saying. How will he go herding there dressed like this? What will those boys end up doing to him there?’ That is where the arguments would start: ‘You are allowing this child of mine to do bad things. Why are you allowing him to do this and this and this and this?’

This same narrative also demonstrates the mother negotiating with the father about their child breaking from traditional gender norms in order to protect their child’s safety. Ramatla,

a gay male interviewee, spoke of his experience developing positive family relations by helping with household tasks and taking part in activities that earned him respect:

When you take care of yourself, behave, and show you have responsibility by, for instance, if they have left you with granny and you clean the house also; if they ask you to help out with fixing things around the house and you do so; they respect you. They even give you affectionate nicknames and the nieces and nephews are fond of me. They never see you as useless.

Intrapersonal: active resistance—Although many interviewees discussed experiences of stigma, they also described wellness, flourishing and fulfilment. Participants described journeys towards peace and being able to engage in satisfying intimate partnerships:

Since I realised my sexuality, accepted, and become open with my status, my life has changed. I used to have stress and ended up having heart attack due to that, I was short-tempered and when people talk about that I became angry. So, I am strong now and I never get angry easily. I managed to satisfy my soul and my heart when I want to be in love I do that, when I feel like having sex, I do it. I am very satisfied because some of the friends support us and the parents of our friends also support us. (Thabo, gay man interviewee)

The peace that I have each day. Wow! Every day I feel new. I have peace. It has happened that I have a partner who has also accepted herself. Wow, I am so, so very well. I even feel free in doing my work; I am no longer afraid of what other will say. I am able to accept, but mostly, the peace. Oh, the peace that I have. (Kabelo, lesbian interviewee)

Participants discussed how they reframed the meaning of religion in order to accept themselves and find meaning:

My faith is that God does not judge people. Yes, He made man and woman. However, my faith tells me that he already knew how our lives would turn out. He knows why He created us, and for what purpose, right? (Lehlohonolo, lesbian interviewee)

I tell myself that, because I am not sick, and I know that I did not bring myself into this world, God made me this way – well – and I shall live until God's purpose is fulfilled. No one can harass me into living the life that they want; this is the life that God has given me. (Kabelo, lesbian interviewee).

Discussion

The findings presented here align with findings from prior research on experiences of stigma, exclusion and violence affecting gay and bisexual men (Baral et al. 2011) and lesbians and bisexual women (Poteat et al. 2014) in Lesotho. Similar to prior work, we found that gendered norms regarding dress and role expectations contributed to stress within the family, but that social support and solidarity played a role in mitigating this stress (Poteat et al. 2014). We explored perceptions and experiences of social constraints and social change

among sexually and gender diverse persons in Lesotho across structural, community, family and intrapersonal domains.

At the structural level, sexually and gender diverse persons' lack of human rights protection facilitates employment and educational discrimination. Community norms that construct sexual and gender diversity as 'non-Basotho' intersect with hegemonic masculinities to produce stigma and violence targeting sexually and gender diverse persons. Within families, conservative religious beliefs intersected with traditional gender norms and roles that were perceived as incongruent with sexual and gender diversity. Yet there was perceived change. Some family members—particularly mothers—negotiated for the acceptance and safety of their sexually and gender diverse children to larger family networks. Finally, self-acceptance in the face of discrimination suggests a degree of active engagement and resistance.

These findings demonstrate the potential of Social Worlds Theory (Strauss 1978; Tovey and Adams 2001) to better understand both the complexity of change as perceived by sexually and gender diverse persons in Lesotho as well as the various sites important to their everyday lived experiences. Lack of protection from discrimination—despite the decriminalisation of same-sex practices—suggests a legal site in which sexually and gender diverse persons in Lesotho remain marginalised. The intersection and 'impingement' of other life domains (structural, community) contributed to sexually and gender diverse persons' struggles for authenticity and legitimacy. For instance, gender policing in schools represents a 'nonauthenticating process' (Strauss 1978) that discounts gender non-conformity as a non-authentic expression. Sexually and gender diverse persons navigated these constraints through developing and connecting with a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sub-world that provided "new universes of discourse" (Strauss 1978, 123). This growing sub-world also provided support and legitimacy for sexually and gender diverse persons, including in community spaces through events such as gay pride and Ms. Gay. The perceived reduction in overt discrimination in public spaces suggests that these community strategies—in tandem with increased media representation—may contribute to growing acceptance of sexually and gender diverse persons in Lesotho.

Participants reclaimed authenticity and legitimacy through self-acceptance, forming relationships with other sexual and gender diverse persons, and reframing religious beliefs. Their reframing of God as accepting as compared to judgemental can also be understood as a 'rhetorical tool' (Tovey and Adams 2001) to persuade themselves and others of their legitimacy to practise their faith. Finally, a key component of Social Worlds Theory is the transmission of knowledge when social worlds intersect (Strauss 1978; Tovey and Adams 2001). For instance, the media was perceived as raising awareness of sexual and gender diversity in communities and families. Interaction with other sexually and gender diverse persons enhanced self-acceptance. Participants also discussed knowledge transmission within social worlds, for example between family members (e.g. parent→ parent, child→ parent, parent→ other family members) and between sexually and gender diverse persons.

Despite the limitations of a cross-sectional design, this study contributes to the nascent literature by including the perspectives of transgender persons in Lesotho, and focusing on perceptions of change in the context of social constraints. Findings have implications for

advancing health and human rights in Lesotho as well as in other similar contexts. First, Lesotho has seen a burgeoning lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community with Pride and other events resulting in increased visibility. Future research and programming can focus on community empowerment strategies (Kerrigan et al. 2015) to build and sustain social capital among sexually and gender diverse communities in Lesotho. Second, community-based and culturally grounded intersectional stigma reduction strategies may be developed to address sexual stigma as well as inequitable gender norms and compulsory heterosexuality across structural, community and family social worlds (Logie et al. 2018). Third, the centrality of traditional gender roles (e.g. herding and *bohali*) to the economic survival of families in Lesotho creates a tension between lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender emancipation and financial viability of family structures. Research and programmes may lead to the development of gender transformative approaches that are culturally congruent and address alternative means of economic sustainability for family systems.

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