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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“COMING OUT IN MALAWI” BY OTOLI MUNDO

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



My mother cried when I told her but said nothing and life went on as normal. I live in Area 24, a bustling neighborhood in Lilongwe, Malawi’s capital. I’ve graduated in hospitality business and I make a living as a health worker. I was a young woman among others until the day my photo ran on front page of the Malawi Daily Times, the country’s largest newspaper.

That morning, I became homophobic Malawi's First National Public Coming Out. On the photograph I sit on a bench wearing my Denim skirt and pink jersey, the caption that runs along my body reads: "I am a lesbian."

The letters so bold and fat you could read them from a great distance.

The previous afternoon, I had a desperate talk with Jacob, a photo reporter for the newspaper. I told him I didn't want to be forced to marry someone. This is what happened to every single homosexual in the country, from the beginning of times I suppose. Jacob didn't know the article would run on the front page either.

From one day to the next, I became a criminal of sorts, going into hiding and escaping threats. I was dragged to an exorcism ceremony and my father disowned me.

At the Presbyterian Church, they sprayed anointed water on me. I was told to kneel as people formed a circle around me, chanting Holy Ghost fire prayers. They said I should repent. I had tried that too but had come out just the same, once again. I too used to believe that my sexual choice was evil, and I tried to kill myself over it. And I am still no less of a lesbian for it.

There are others like me, impossible to say how many. But we're starting to have one another, although most are unlikely to go public. Through phone calls and Facebook messages, I have met 45 lesbians in Lilongwe alone. Some wrote from across the country to thank me and I hope I have helped them feel more at ease with themselves. Meanwhile, I try and remind folks that I am a woman like any other with ambitions, hopes and dreams. I eat, I sleep, I love fashion, I fall in love, I get heartbroken... It's just that my inspiration is female.

Statistics on LGBTQ+ Rights in Malawi

– The nation criminalizes same-sex conduct. Its penal code expressly criminalizes same-sex relations as an “unnatural offence,” punishable by up to 14 years in prison.

– Police often physically assault, arbitrarily arrest and detain them, for simply exercising basic rights, including seeking treatment in health institutions.

.- But the trend is highly conflictive feelings. Last year, a first of its kind nation-wide survey found that 87 percent of people there support constitutional protection of LGBTQ+ people and human rights.

– Yet, 90 percent say they could not accept a gay or lesbian in their own family and almost one in four declared themselves ready to use violence against gender non-conforming people.