I am a lesbian. These are powerful words for any woman to speak, let alone a young female who is living her truth in a country like South Africa, where a woman is attacked, beaten, raped or worse killed every 3 hours. Gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) is a profound and widespread problem, which impacts almost every aspect of life and sector of society. For those in the LGBTQI community it is even more pronounced and insidious. “There is no doubt, of the connection between GBVF and the unequal power relationships between males and females. In the LGBTQI community, we are harassed by straight males who are constantly trying to ‘correct’ a lesbian or LGBTQI person to show them that they are not gay or lesbian- it’s all violence.”

At 25 years, Tshiamo Mmatli is proud in pride, using her voice and experiences to ensure that other young women and men are able to freely live their truths without stigma or fear. “I knew from an early age that I was different and that my path towards adulthood would be a difficult one, where I would have to face up to my fears and anxiety, battling with my true self versus the self that others wanted me to be.” Recalling her one of first jobs, Tshiamo describes how she was discriminated against, facing daily belittling taunts and harassment for the way she dressed and for attempting to be true to herself. With only straight female colleagues, she was told in no uncertain terms how she was expected to dress and act in order to represent the brand of the company where she was employed. Tshiamo was conflicted, as is the case with so many young black women in South Africa, she was desperate to earn an income and saw this as her only option. “I was scared and embarrassed to go home and tell my family that I had failed, but I could not handle being someone that I was not. I only lasted for one week. After that I went home and made up an excuse that the company had decided not to continue with my employment. This was my turning point, my moment of clarity and I knew that I had to take control of my future.”

Tshiamo is a not your typical youth activist, she does not see herself as a firebrand or a crusader, preferring rather to help others find peace, love and acceptance. “I am blessed because I am living my purpose. When you know your purpose, you find peace and with peace there is love, and with love there is unity.”

This is the approach that she uses in her role as a peer educator at Access Chapter 2, a local NGO located in Mamelodi, Pretoria. Serving the needs of the LGBTQI community in Mamelodi for the last five years, the organisation aims to equalise equality in the community by engaging in awareness and education campaigns about the rights and equal value of the LGBTQI community.

The recent violent deaths of women in South Africa has once again brought into sharp focus just how dangerous it is being a female in South Africa.
Women are being harassed, degraded and trampled on, ostensibly for the way that they dress or behave or look, and it goes back to power and belief systems on the role and rights of men vs women. “As a lesbian I am very comfortable wearing men’s clothes and I date females. Yet when a man sees me with a beautiful women, he feels that I am trying to steal that women from him and as a man he has to assert his power over us by showing us what he will do with us. It all comes down to power.”

But power does not have to be a show of force. Education, equality, love, honour and kindness are all powerful forces that can be used toward creating a mindset shift and change in the power dynamic. Aspiring to a society that does not see gender roles, where love has no gender and people are able to live freely, Tshiamo wants to play a part in helping to bring about this change.

“We need to educate and retrain the mindsets’ of our brothers – especially adolescent boys, as they are the next generation. If we can channel their minds on the right path, I believe that within the next 10 years we will see a sharp decline, maybe even an end to violence, street crime and rape. It starts with the men. It starts with us.”

Still on her own journey of self-discovery and making her own changes, Tshiamo encourages others to be themselves and to not try and fit into someone else’s idea of who they should be, but rather to follow their own path and be their authentic self.

Follow Tshiamo @tshiamo.mmatli

#WEBELONG   #TOGETHERINPRIDE   #SAT4YOUTH

ABOUT ACCESS CHAPTER 2

Access Chapter 2 is a local NGO that has been serving the needs of the LGTBQI community in Mamelodi for the last five years. The organisation aims to equalise equality in the community by engaging in awareness and education campaigns about the rights and equal value of the LGTBQI community.

If you or someone you know needs assistance or access to SRHR services or HIV screening and services, please contact Access Chapter 2 on our Facebook page @AccessChapter2. Look out for the #WeBelong campaign to be launched soon.