



# SHIFTING GROUNDS: CREATING SPACES



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Nisnis - A quarterly magazine  
published by Queer Ethiopia  
focusing on LBQ issues



“Queer Ethiopia” is an alternative space created by a group of queer Ethiopian women. It is designed to be a space for a diverse group of Ethiopian queer women whose sexual and gender identifications vary. It includes cis and trans women who may be lesbian, bisexual or asexual. This is a space where the experiences of queer people takes center stage. We hope to include personal experiences from our daily lives as queer people, various stories, interviews, original artwork and poetry. We hope it will also serve as a place where Ethiopians in Ethiopia and Ethiopians in the diaspora come as themselves to explore and create an online community.

 [queerethiopia.com](http://queerethiopia.com)    [ethioqueer](http://ethioqueer)      [QueerEthiopia](https://www.facebook.com/QueerEthiopia)

 [etqueerfamily@gmail.com](mailto:etqueerfamily@gmail.com)    [t.me/queeret](https://t.me/queeret)

*We would like to dedicate this issue to all of us LBQs in Ethiopia: Past, present and future. We are resilient, resourceful and will always find a way to exist.*

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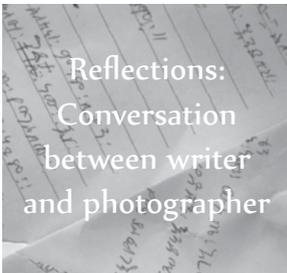
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# From the Editors

“Is it OK to say that?” asked one of our participants with a hint of uncertainty while responding to one of our prompts. This was just one example of the hesitancy we encountered when doing this project. Often, when we conducted interviews and took photographs for this project, we had to remind our participants — and ourselves — that there are no rules when it comes to speaking about our experiences as queer people in Ethiopia.

This project, *Shifting Grounds: Creating Spaces*, captures the Ethiopian LBQ community in all its diversity and complexity. The featured individuals have a wide variety of experiences and life narratives that are simultaneously unique and linked to the stories of so many other LBQ people. Each person has a powerful story to tell. From the Muslim lesbian proud to wear her hijab during queer events to the butch woman who feels constantly judged at work due to her gender expression to the person whose sense of isolation was markedly improved after finding an Ethiopian queer community online, this project created a space for LBQ Ethiopians living in Ethiopia.

Queer lives in Ethiopia are lived in the shadows, on the margins, and in the dark due to criminalization, stigma, and discrimination. When our stories are told, it is often by a hostile public that twists them to fit their preconceived notions of what being queer means.

This project has allowed us to be the authors of our own narratives instead of allowing others from outside the community to do so. This is important because personal stories have the capacity to be transformative, and our stories and voices can serve as a vehicle for acceptance, understanding, and community building. For example, one of our participants spoke about the power of connecting with others in the community, in effect demonstrating how finding an online Ethiopian community made them see themselves as “possible”.

We also hope this project will help us challenge the narrative that being a gender or sexual minority is “un-African”. We hope the stories and the accompanying images will also have the power to provide our community with the hope that comes from realizing that the lives of LBQ people are full and complex and that it is possible to live our lives with some semblance of authenticity. We hope it leads more of us to share our stories. We hope it will offer future generations a glimpse of our realities since documentation is key

to our refusal to be erased and rendered invisible. It simply says that we LBQ Ethiopians were here.

The ground always has the possibility of shifting on us since we exist in a homophobic and transphobic society, but we are daring and brave and choose to share our stories on our own terms.

We are in awe of our participants for taking part in this risky project and for actively shaping how their stories have been told. As we reflect on their stories, we hope we have awakened an urge in everyone to refuse to be silenced and to speak, in whatever way is safe.

Thank you to all of you. None of us can be named—participants, photographer, writer, translator, and the many others who have helped make this project a possibility. We know who we are, and we will all get to a time and place when we no longer have to live in the shadows. Together, we will continue to create spaces on these shifting grounds.

# #1

I don't think there was a moment where I realized I was queer. I know that there were moments when I felt shame because I was queer - I feel like queerness is a state of mind that I was always in. What I do remember is becoming aware of it in a way that made me feel subconscious, that made me feel different, and that made me feel bad.









## #2

To be honest, I am living with the acceptance that it is a sin. It's quite clear that the Quran forbids it, and because I don't want to lie to myself, I know that it's my sin. Despite the fact that it's a sin, this is the feeling I was born with; this is how my god created me. Since I can't change it or switch it out, I have decided to live and continue my life as it is.

I cannot hide what I feel!

I accept that it is a sin, regardless of what happens, it is my obligation to come back to God to pray and worship. I think that this fear doesn't hold me back. But even if I'm not scared, I don't go to the mosque and stuff. The reason I don't go is not because I am scared, but because I am not used to it. In fact, it is said that women should pray in the back, and make sure to cover up so men don't get tempted. And so I pray and worship in my bedroom. I strengthen my connection with God by praying "My lord, you created me this way, so please get me somewhere better, and give me something better".

I am very proud of my identity. To begin with, my religion is non-negotiable. My religion has given me the most peace. I go everywhere with my hijab on. In fact, I get a lot of praise for it. Surprisingly, there are not many people who come with their hijabs. When the queer community events are being held, they come with their hijabs off. This is how scared they are; but I am not afraid.







# #3

I am more than my being a lesbian. I want people to understand that. I don't want them to judge me as only just that. I have a lot of things. I have a mom and a dad; I am a sister; I am a student; I am a daughter; I am also an Orthodox Christian as well. And I try to balance everything. Like everyone else, I would like to be seen and accepted for my humanity.

I never thought that God would not accept me. Early on, yes, I was very afraid that I would go to hell. I don't have those thoughts anymore. I don't know, when I think about it, I believe he will accept me as I am. Why did he create me like this? I know I didn't choose this. In fact, I get very angry when some people in the queer community say that it is a choice. I mean, would I want to be like this? If everything was great, we would all happily be queer. But with our current circumstances, it is really hard being like us.

I reconciled the issue of religion with myself with the idea that God loves me no matter what people say. I used to be involved in many things, including church service, but now I am withdrawing myself. Now that I think about it, I am giving up my involvement in the church because around church, one after the other says that our queer family is Satan. I pray and fast on my own, but for the rest, it's especially hard to go there and partake.

As a lesbian, I think God hears me when I pray. I have never been denied anything I have prayed for.





# #4

After I discovered myself, my life and livelihood have been being a chef. I have a lot of families that I support, I had even become an immigrant in order to work. I also have a lot going on in my life. I think being a chef is a great experience for me; it's also my passion. I love trying out new things. Everyone has things they are passionate about, skilled at, interested in, and a lot more. For me, there is nothing that gives me greater joy than a kitchen; especially when I'm cooking in it.







# #5

Figuring out sexuality and gender came consecutively for me. Coming to terms with my sexuality also helped my thoughts on gender evolve through time. Opening myself up to being queer and being more comfortable in my sexuality helped me deconstruct some core heteronormative constructs and helped me figure out gender and where I lie in that spectrum. Gender, sexuality, and queerness are all social constructs. My identity is intertwined with these concepts because I too am a product of my society. If we were allowed to exist as we are, we wouldn't be expected to single ourselves out.

I have realized that I don't fit into standards that are based on the binary. The fact that I am queer has given me the chance to be comfortable in my own body.









# #6

I get bullied not because I'm queer, but because of how I dress. I studied engineering and the biggest problem is that no one will trust you and hire you if you dress like this. I don't think my queerness and gender expression are related. The way someone dresses doesn't necessarily define queerness. Queerness is an identity, no matter how much you try, it will not change. There are feminine women that are queer. There are also women who dress masculine but aren't queer. If someone is interested, they can change the way they dress; but they can't change their identities.







# #7

I think being masculine presenting and being into sports has made things easier for me. My life in sports has made me the strong and confident person I am today. Growing up in sports, I met a lot of people and I've been to a lot of places. There are some lesbians out there who play football but are afraid to come out.

Being butch is freedom. Many butch women live in freedom. It's not just because they're queer, even when they are straight and masculine presenting, they show confidence in themselves. But that doesn't mean I want to be a man. I'm not the type to think I'm the head of the household. I love that I think like that.







# #8

There is biphobia and panphobia in the queer community. If anyone is attracted to multiple genders or to gender-diverse people, they are considered to be players, and people think they are incapable of love. And this is very disgusting. Dating someone who is bisexual or pansexual can only be scary if you're a person with trust issues, and it's not fair to think like that. I would be happier if they waited to get to know someone before saying these things.

By coming out, I found my freedom. I got inner peace. Before that, I wasn't feeling great. Just like how your stomach would hurt if you ate something bad. But as soon as it was out there, I realized this was the thing I needed.







# #9

It was terrifying to accept myself. I knew nothing at the time. All the information I got was from movies or the internet. I had no one to reach out to or to tell me “Oh, this is ok!” I used to be terrified thinking “How am I going to do this? How can I live in this country? Will it all be ok?” There was just a lot of hopelessness.

I just kept on researching though. I found other people on YouTube that left this country and were actually living their lives. I especially benefited from them being Habesha, because they had faced the same things I was facing. I felt personally connected to them. As soon as I saw the queer community online, I felt some relief. Even if I couldn't connect with them as much as I wanted, seeing them and knowing they existed really helped.







# #10

Activism is very important to me. We need to be able to build a queer community. And when we build the community, it needs to be not only with the idea of eating and drinking together but by examining the questions “What are our individual stories? Who are we? What do we value?” so that we are able to be someone else’s light. If we want to make a difference together, we all have to work together.

My sense of unease with darkness as it relates to our rights has pushed me to become an activist. Even when I know activism can cost me my life, I still can’t sleep ignoring all the injustice. Activism is not about writing with a pen or shouting through a microphone. Activism is life; activism is not being apologetic for your identity; it is being able to accept yourself.







# Reflections: Conversation between writer and photographer

## *How did you come up with the idea of doing the photography project?*

**Writer:** Both through Queer Ethiopia, and as individuals, we often express ourselves via writing, podcasts, and other forms. But artistic visual images are very powerful. This is not to say that written or spoken words are powerless, but that we often live our identities in a hidden way. Even when we look at the photos of queer people posted on social media, they are covering their faces, hiding behind flags, or in the dark. So, when I sat down and thought about it, I thought that we needed something that could let us express ourselves in a certain way and be evidence of contemporary queer life in Ethiopia for anyone that might ask about us 10 or 20 years from now. We also have queer creatives working in a variety of fields such as writing, drawing, and photography; so, we can collaborate with them to express ourselves and show our lives even more.

## *What was the planning process like?*

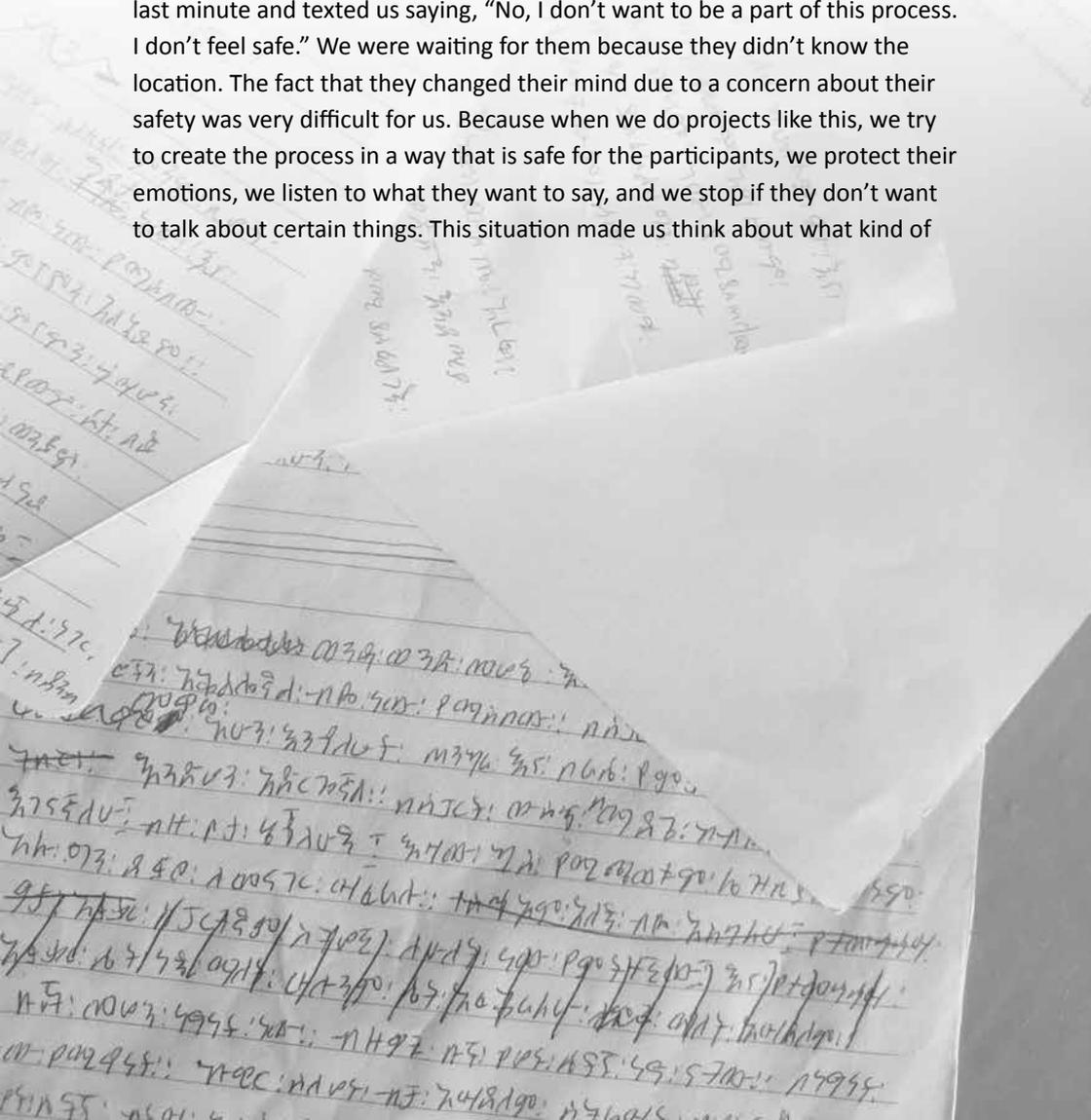
**Photographer:** As you said, the photos we see are mostly choppy and stressful. Everyone is, of course, doing what they can, considering the country and the situation we live in. The oppression has many layers; we cannot live and express ourselves as we wish. And because photos convey deep emotions, this anxiety is reflected in these photos. That's why I happily accepted this idea when it came up. We had to think about how to show these images without showing the faces and identities of the participants, and without creating that feeling of anxiety. We had to think of what else to show. We express many emotions in our faces, especially our eyes. And if we couldn't show those features, we had to figure out what we could show instead, and that made this project challenging. The interviews can be shared in their written form, but when photos are also there, it adds another layer. It also opens the way for us to understand things in different ways. That's why art is very important.

## *What was the interview process like?*

**Photographer:** I saw attending the interviews as a great opportunity. It is not easy for queer people to willingly open up about their stories, experiences, and processes to a new person. Although we all go through different challenges,

it takes courage to talk about them. On the surface, our experiences look the same, but they have different layers to them. The ways in which the participants found out about themselves, the challenges they faced, and the ways they overcame them differ. And listening to what they had to say and thinking about how we could express it visually was a very interesting and challenging process for me.

**Writer:** Speaking of interviews, we usually send out invitations for people to come and share their stories. I understood the difficulty of this process when, if you remember, someone we had scheduled to interview changed their mind last minute and texted us saying, "No, I don't want to be a part of this process. I don't feel safe." We were waiting for them because they didn't know the location. The fact that they changed their mind due to a concern about their safety was very difficult for us. Because when we do projects like this, we try to create the process in a way that is safe for the participants, we protect their emotions, we listen to what they want to say, and we stop if they don't want to talk about certain things. This situation made us think about what kind of





situation we have created for them, where this gap was created, why they may not feel safe, and how we can fix it moving forward. In our community, we are connected through trust and recommendations from friends because it's not like we have a roster of queer individuals. Therefore, sometimes we sit with a stranger for hours and talk and joke about many personal and intimate topics. Our life experiences are unique on the one hand, but on the other hand, they have similarities that bind us together. And we all share and publish these conversations with the notion that the path someone has taken can benefit and teach someone else in the community. I would also like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the participants; it made me see how projects like these can open many doors.

### ***How about the photography process?***

**Photographer:** The photography process had many limitations. Space was limited in the sense that we couldn't just take pictures anywhere. There were also limitations on how we could shoot the photos; we couldn't pick any pose or style we wanted. We started planning with these things in mind, but they completely changed as the work progressed. We had to change our approach while looking at the existing situation and seeing what people wanted and were comfortable with.

**Writer:** Yes, what surprised me was that when we took a photo of a participant who said, "I really enjoy cooking in the kitchen," we ended up going to the store, shuffling through their produce, and choosing, for example, mangoes that worked for the photos. We were making suggestions and improving the ideas that you had come up with. We also got blessed with free bananas and pineapples! We don't joke when it comes to food!

The support from the participants was also amazing! I remember two people we were shooting on the same day, and after we finished taking pictures of the first one, she helped us with props for the pictures of the other person. We claim we were in charge of coordinating the project, but it really belonged to all of us. There were people who offered their homes for conducting interviews or taking pictures; there were people who lent us props; and there were those who helped us with ideas. Living in a country like this, it is amazing how happy we are to tell our own stories. By the time the project was over, most of us had gotten much closer to each other than before. This is how we build community. So we weren't just documenting history, we were making history right there. At times,

when we thanked the participants for taking part, they would respond, “No, I am grateful too! I have never thought of these questions in this way myself; You made me sit down and think a lot”. In that way, I think the project has gone further than you and I had imagined.

### ***How did you feel when the project was finished?***

**Photographer:** When it comes to projects that involve a lot of people, there is a big chance that the way the project is implemented is very different from the original idea because of the ideas and inputs of the people involved. That’s the beauty of it; it’s how the project thrives. Each person’s way of participating is different, depending on who they are. Some just do what you request, while others actively give input. Watching the participants get progressively more comfortable and let loose filled me with joy. I was able to do a better job by accepting what the participants suggested without saying, “No, this is how I thought about it; therefore, this is how it should be!” I am very pleased with the result. We were able to tell their stories in a balanced way without the participants looking like they were hiding because their faces were not visible.

**Writer:** The thing I really loved is that when we were in the process of creating the project, such as selecting sections of the interview and editing the photos, we were so focused on the minute details that we couldn’t take a step back to see the whole of the project. After we completed the project and when we went back and saw the results, I truly understood the power of their words and photos and the strength and courage of the participants. The courage is needed not only because the project is being shared but also because it takes courage to talk about your identity and story. In fact, it was a very emotional time for some.

Another thing that I think is crucial is the fact that the collaboration was with someone who is queer. And that is by design. It’s not only enough that they are queer, but their mindset plays a role too. It’s hard to collaborate with someone who decides that queerness is only X, Y, and Z. So, it is important for us to see not only that one can do the job but also what their values are. Those we collaborate with must be able to give each participant the space they need, look at queerness in an expansive way, and be inclusive. As one participant said, “Being queer is a state of mind,” and we need to embrace the diversity of identities and stories in queerness without discrimination or denying their freedom.

# Reflections: Thoughts from participants

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I was not excited at first; The situation was scary. The idea was cool, but I didn't want to be filmed. It was only because I trusted you that I told myself that it was safe and joined the project. But when I saw the project finished, I was proud. It is amazing! I am very happy I was a part of it. When I saw the end result, it was very exciting. Both the pictures and the writing are beautiful. It was worth it. I said to myself "It's great that I participated!" I'm very happy I was able to help, be myself and express myself.

“

It was my first time participating in a project like this. I am so glad I gave myself the opportunity to participate. Given that I am not very good at expressing myself, I would have hesitated to participate had this not been a project related to being queer. I was happy to participate in this project and share my story.

“

The interview process is very cool. The questions that were asked gave me the opportunity to talk through many things that I wanted to clarify. In terms of my profession, my stance, my outward expression, and the way I dress, it is often complicated. And it gave me the opportunity to explain that my identity and presentation has nothing to do with my profession.

I'm glad that your time with me has helped me to clarify a lot of things and to set the record straight on many people's understanding that my profession is not related to my sexuality and identity. I loved the project. It has introduced me to great people. It was great because the topics should be discussed by everyone; it opened the opportunity for me to discuss a lot of things. It was very good.

“

It was a very good project. I think it is very useful for those who have not yet accepted themselves. In addition, it also reiterates that who we are is not in any way influenced by what we are trained to do in our jobs, and this project teaches us to accept ourselves. Thus, I want this project to continue and to reach the community. I am grateful that I got to participate.