Dialogue

QUEER ETHIOPIA

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"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.

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From the Editors

For us queer people who have made their homes on the borderlands of this homophobic society, our queer community is our lifeline. Our communities offer us safe spaces where we can be our authentic selves; they offer us places of solidarity where we can feel supported and loved; and they provide us with crucial resources and information specific to navigating life in a homophobic environment. There is so much laughter, love, joy, and peace that comes from being a part of this beautiful and resilient community.

However, while our queer community is incredible, we also recognize that our community comes with its share of complexities. And, sadly, these complications can be heartbreaking. Some of the ones you will find in this tenth issue of Nisnis include:

Body shaming: "'Why don't you work out?' You have to lose weight so we can spend time like them too!'" This was said to a woman by her girlfriend.

Intimate partner violence: "She suspects that I am cheating on her with every single person. She just loved picking fights with me. At one point, she even threatened me with a knife," writes another queer woman.

Threatening people with outings: "Being threatened with outings to the family is also common. ... I have recently received a comment like this. They told me, 'I have compromising pictures of you, and I know exactly what I will do with them.' It's also common to hear, 'I will come to your workplace; I will out you to your colleagues and ruin your life.' It also wasn't just talk because she would come to my workplace." Gloria recounts remembering past relationships.

Ethnocentrism: "For example, when being set up on a blind date, when someone tells them that there's a cool girl they will hit it off with, they would agree only if she's Amhara, Oromo, Tigrayan, or whatever ethnicity they are from. I've even been rejected because I am not of the ethnicity that she wanted," Hibist says.

Gatekeeping: "Even during queer gatherings or parties, we are not likely to be invited. People simply don't remember to invite us because they don't really think of us [bisexual or pan people] as being a part of the queer community," a pansexual woman adds.

Gossip: "When you share your concerns and insecurities with them, they do not keep your secret but rather rush to pass on your news or concerns to other people," adds yet another lesbian.

The list of toxicities present in our community seems never-ending. While our community offers safe spaces for self-expression and self-acceptance, it can also harbor unexamined biases and toxic elements that must be addressed.

This issue of Nisnis enables us to rigorously interrogate ourselves as a community. What are the places that we need to examine? How do we make this community safe for all of us? How do we navigate and confront toxicity within our community?

We don't have all the answers. But we have taken it upon ourselves as a community to take the crucial step of starting the conversation. A dialogue for us, with us, and by us.

Thank you to everyone involved in the production of this magazine. Thank you to all of you for taking part in this, we hope, continuous dialogue.

Dialogue: Examining toxicity, biases in our queer communities

For a lot of us LGBTQ+ people, the queer community is often our chosen family. It is where we feel at ease. It is where we can be our authentic selves. It is the one place where we are almost certain that we will not be shunned for being queer. This is important for any queer community, but this sense of community is vital when we live in Ethiopia, a country where virulent homophobia is the norm. Thus, given the importance of queer communities for our survival, it is crucial that we are able to interrogate our failings.

Five queer women discuss the unexamined biases and toxic elements that need to be addressed within our community. The conversation has been edited for space and clarity.

Nisnis: Are there toxic behaviors or things you have encountered in the queer community? If so, what are they?

Yohana: Although it is not something that I have personally experienced, discrimination and gossip exist within our community, as it exists in any other society.

Hibist: One of the most toxic things I've ever experienced is gossip and rumors. When I was in a relationship, I used to struggle with rumors. When you first join social media, you get a lot of attention. Everyone sends you friend requests. They want to talk to you and befriend you. In this process, there's a lot you hear about. You might even be gossiped about. Another toxic thing we have is only classifying queer women as "masculine" or "feminine". When we hang out, we try to list out who's butch and who's not. There's a lot of pressure on feminine queer women. When you do what works for you, you're pressured into conforming to one.

X: In my last relationship, she knew a lot of personal information about me and used to threaten outing me to my family. I was mentally preparing myself for her to go through with it. It's so stressful to have someone you trust threaten to out you. This intimidation of outing is one example of the toxicity that exists in our community.

Maraki: When it comes to gossip, there is something that happens to butch women. A lot of people in our community think that butch women want to be dominant and bullies. I think being toxic or a bully is a problematic personality trait, regardless of whether someone is butch or femme, not just something reserved for butch women. And because they think butch women are bullies, they come up with unnecessary names for you. There was also something toxic with my ex-girlfriend whom I had been with for a long time. There was a lot of defaming gossip, where she accused me of being a bully. These rumors would make their way back to me and some just spread rumors

without even knowing you. That's something that hurt me a lot at the time. Some people have a certain perception about butch women, and so it's enough to have a butch presentation for people to not even have to think twice about saying something negative about you whether it is true or not.

Gloria: I have also experienced a lot of toxic behaviors. The thing I'm really struggling with now is stalking. It is common to try to contact someone with different phone numbers and different accounts. Being threatened with outings to the family is also common. I have recently received a comment like this. They told me "I have compromising pictures of you, and I know exactly what I will do with them." It's also common to hear "I will come to your workplace, I will out you to your colleagues and ruin your life." It also wasn't just talk because she would come to my workplace. I'd get pretty scared about what she might do, so to avoid any workplace drama, I'd agree to meet up with her, give her a quick hug, and then walk away. You can't wear a crop top or a dress, you need to constantly conform your outfit to what she wants you to dress like. When it comes to money and finances, there is an assumption that men should be in charge of the finances, so because she's masculine she wants to keep the money with her. The surprising thing is, in that time, you end up just accepting it and living with it.

Hibist: There is a lot you accept when it comes from the person you love. But the expectation is also harder on butch women. There is the assumption that butch women should be bold and make the first move, and they also should have money. If a femme woman wants to do the same, the butch woman may not like it. Some femme women want other femme women. But when you're around our community, there are expectations.

Maraki: You are expected to be confident. They expect you to go along with it and handle the situation, but when you take a sense of

responsibility and try to help out, you end up being gossiped about, labeled as controlling.

Nisnis: What does our interaction and relationship on social media look like?

Gloria: Something that annoys me about our community is that people don't talk to each other. For example, if someone messages Maraki and she responds fast, they would think she's not cool. It's uncool to be friendly on social media. If we can't communicate, someone can come and say something to me about someone else, but I can't go to the person and confirm if it's true because I won't get a response from this person. We don't really communicate.

Hibist: People in the queer community aren't friendly to other queer people in the community. What excites them is new people. Unless it's someone new, they are not willing to talk to someone they know. If you say you are on social media to make friends, no one will respond to you.

Maraki: If you say "I only want to make friends", no one will respond to you. You only get engagement if you want other types of relationships.

Yohana: There are also men who pretend to be women online. Back when I started, I made this mistake. Even when we spoke on the phone, I thought I was talking to a woman. But when I went to meet in person, he was a man. I was new to the city back then, I didn't know Addis Ababa very well. I was so scared but also heart broken. I just went back home. The guy didn't do anything to me, but he could have if he wanted to because he had my voice recordings and pictures. Another issue was that when I first started using social media, I met a woman who threatened to release

my pictures. Mostly, though, it wasn't the queer community that hurt me, but my ignorance of social media.

Gloria: I have also experienced threats. In fact, my old girlfriend not only threatened me but also gave my phone number to queer people without my permission and told them to mediate between us. And many men and women have my phone number without my permission. In addition to my fake account, my real account, and full home and work address was also given out.

Nisnis: Are there other toxic practices in this society around issues such as ethnicity and religion?

Gloria: They wouldn't flat out tell you "My ethnicity is better than yours", but they would say "Where I am from is better than where you are from." I have had someone openly tell me "The city I am from is far better than the city you are from." For example, when I say, "The war on Tigray sucks and needs to be stopped," I have been told that I am ethnocentric. It's nice to meet someone who speaks your language because you have something in common with that person. When we spoke excitedly and cheerfully in our own language, we were told that we were changing our language because we were ethnocentric. But when she finds someone who speaks her own language, she is happy and talks excitedly as if there is no one else but the two of them. There's definitely an unreasonable double standard.

Hibist: Even when dating, there's a tendency to select based on ethnicity. There are many people who say, "I will not date if she's not from my own ethnicity." For example, when being set up on a blind date, when someone tells them that there's a cool girl they will hit it off with, they would agree only if she's Amhara, Oromo, Tigrayan, or whatever ethnicity they are from. I've even been rejected because I am not from the ethnicity that she wanted.

Nisnis: Have you ever been told that the queer community doesn't include you, so you're not invited here?

Hibist: I have many bisexual friends and my

"If you say "I only want to make friends", no one will respond to you. You only get engagement if you want other types of relationships."
Maraki

"Something that annoys me about our community is that people don't talk to each other." Gloria

friends rarely get invited to queer gatherings. They use the excuse that where their hearts lie isn't clear. They are also suspected of potentially outing us. There's a misconception that bisexual or bicurious people are not as hidden as lesbians; because they don't care if people find out about them or not. So when there is a queer gathering, there is a habit of not including them.

Yohana: I think people assume that bisexual women are safer from the straight community. If something bad happens, they can just start dating men and get out of the bad situation. Once one of my bicurious friends said, "They're disgusting! But why are men gay?" If she said this about the men today, I wondered what she would say next about us women. But this is not because she is bicurious, but because she hates herself. This kind of thing doesn't usually come from a person who has self-acceptance. This thought was not from hating them, but from fear instead.

Gloria: We also have different groups in our community. There's this concept of "X's group and Y's group". When there is a queer community gathering or party, people are invited based on their group. Maraki invites her own group, and Yohana invites her own group. Like, if you just go alone, you will be lonely because you won't even find anyone to talk to. One group does not mix with another group. When some people try to exclude you or make you lose friends, they will go as far as asking you "Choose between me or your best friend".

Yohana: Speaking of toxicity, a friend of mine once joined a new group and in that group, there was a girl who wanted to date her, but my friend wasn't interested. And because of that, they excluded her from the group.

Maraki: The community isn't a dating site. Sometimes it doesn't mean that we only want each other for dating. Even without any romantic connections, we can still get together and have a great time. The gatherings often look like they were planned for dating. If we go somewhere and we see that it's not the greatest spot for meeting girls, we don't want to go there again. This isn't a good way to think about community, and we need to work to change it.

Hibist: Sometimes when a group drinks, for example, they draw too much attention. Another group may drink and have fun more subtly so you go to them instead. It's different depending on the gathering. But I also used to wonder why the groups didn't mix when I first joined the community.

Gloria: On top of that, when there's gossip, the whole group talks about it. So sometimes when you join a group, and they are gossiping about something, just from the way they talk about it, sometimes it'll get you to the point where you will regret why you went there.

Nisnis: Why don't these groups mix?

Gloria: This is mostly because they believe that their group is better. I think they think they are the cool ones.

Hibist: Some groups think they are peaceful because they are cool. Some think they don't have drama.

Maraki: But there are really groups like that. There are great groups, but there are also groups that get drunk and become messy. Even if it sucks to say that out loud, there are groups like that. So running away from them is for my own safety and no other reason. But maybe those people can be thought to be more like you. We have some obviously shitty people. Just like we spent this time talking about toxicity. Even for myself, if I hear

"It's so stressful to have someone you trust threaten to out you. ... outing is one example of the toxicity that exists in our community." X

that there are certain people, there are situations where I choose not to go. I don't want to go because I can't prevent the drama that I think might happen there and I don't think it's a place that makes me feel comfortable. Since this is done for safety, I don't see the harm in it.

Nisnis: What does the ideal queer community look like?

X: For one thing, I've never been heavily involved in this community. I often don't believe it's a safe space so I choose to isolate myself from it. But I might become closer to the community if we worked a little more on communication and mutual understanding. When I talk to Maraki, she really understands me. Now if there were three or four more people like Maraki, someone like me who's been hiding from this community would come out without fear. If the situation isn't great, I will keep isolating myself even more. So I think it's better if there are people who can have an open discussion in this community.

Yohana: For example, when you message someone on Facebook looking for friendship, it would be great if more people were responsive because most people are active on Facebook. If nothing, they at least have fake accounts. For example, we had a group on Telegram and it

was great. We might also have problems of our own, but when we got together, we had interesting discussions about the queer community. It wasn't even only about queer things, I have seen long-lasting friendships come out of that. That group has been deactivated but I would be happy to see more groups like that. We used to have a lot more parties and gatherings, but not as much anymore. Especially after the homophobic movement, there aren't many. I think if we had more of those spaces, people would become tighter-knit. I feel lost when I don't gather with the community like this. I feel like coming out to my straight friends. It feels like I am suffocated.

Nisnis: How can we establish a community free from all these toxic habits?

Gloria: We all need to build ourselves up first. We must work to change our mentality. These things can only change when healthy conversations happen. Another is the need to communicate openly. A lot of toxic things happen in romantic relationships. Therefore, when a person breaks up or enters into a new relationship, it is necessary to talk about everything openly.

Hibist: Just as we are kind to ourselves, we need to be the same for others. If we are as understanding and forgiving to others as we are to ourselves, we can change the community. Just like we came together during the homophobic movement, we can create a great community.

Maraki: If we closely discuss and gather toxic people, we can teach them to avoid these things. We are all capable of being toxic when we feel broken. We all have hidden behaviors, so when things like this happen, the solution shouldn't be to isolate but to create a healthy community that can make space for these people. These gatherings are useful because they bring together toxic and so-called healthy people, they can also pick up healthier patterns. Not to say that I don't have problems, but we can learn from each other better through these gatherings. Someone with toxic thoughts or in a toxic relationship can look at what healthy friendships look like and learn from that. We have so many different behaviors. The pains we experience are different, and so are our backgrounds and the mental health we come with. No one should be shunned. Behaviors can change

with time so we should work on that.

X: Education is also sometimes important in our community. I believe that lack of education sometimes has this effect. A lot of gossip and rumors are created because most people rely on assumptions. We are a bit behind on sharing information and reasoning. When you go to economically developed countries, because they read and are informed, they can be a strong backbone for their communities. When someone is in need, they help out, but we don't have that in our community. Therefore, I believe that if we learn and exchange information when we meet, we can show better progress.

Gloria: We need to stop gossiping.

Yohana: If more people who are older, have more experience in the community, and are respected are included in this community, it will create a safer situation for all of us.

"We are all capable of being toxic when we feel broken. ... the solution shouldn't be to isolate but to create a healthy community that can make space for these people."
Maraki

A Call for dialogue and self-reflection

Transphobia, bi/pan-erasure, substance abuse, gender-based violence, internalized homophobia, outings, and an overemphasis on dating during social gatherings were some of the toxic elements in the queer community that were identified by the queer individuals that we interviewed within the LBQ community.

Oxford dictionary defines the word lesbian as "A woman who engages in sexual activity with other women; a woman who is sexually or romantically attracted (esp. wholly or largely) to other women"'. Given this basic definition, Selam finds it odd that people in the queer community cannot make sense of her desire for butch women.

For Selam, a self-identified butch woman, this aversion to butch-on-butch dating is just one example of the toxicity within the Ethiopian queer community.

In homophobic countries such as Ethiopia, LGBTQ+ communities provide spaces where people can find acceptance, understanding, and guidance. These communities also foster resilience and empower individuals and provide queer individuals rare opportunities to be themselves.

While community is important, Maraki a lesbian who resides in Addis Ababa, insists an honest reflection of the toxic elements within the LGBTQ+ community is vital to build a stronger and healthier queer community.

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Selam said the toxicity in the community can be divided into two. One is toxicity on an individual level and the other is as a community. At the personal level, she identifies at least three elements of toxicity: the sharing of stories without consent, a tendency to blackmail in hopes of getting what one wants, and the sense of being superior due to class, attractiveness, education, and ethnicity.

At the community level, she is concerned by the level of substance abuse.

"While it is concerning that substance abuse has become synonymous with "queer community" and contributes to the bad image we have from the larger Ethiopian community, it really affects the younger generation and robs them of a vision for their future," Selam said.

Another major toxicity at the community level is the gatekeeping of queer spaces. There is a tendency to think of trans and bisexual people as not belonging within the queer community. In fact, at times this thinking extends to some in the community being "disgusted" by some identities.

Neila sees internalized homophobia as a major issue within the community.

"For example, when you ask an older queer couple who have long accepted their queerness about their lives or relationship, they paint it in such a negative light," Neila said.

The lack of positive narratives in this aspect makes it harder for younger queer people to accept themselves and imagine a future where their lives will be more meaningful. Role models are crucial for the younger generation so that they learn to accept themselves and enable them to

work through internalized homophobia.

Another element of the queer community that Neila takes issue with is the way that most introductions are eventually expected to lead to dating. She underlined the importance of friendships and the role that they play in sustaining a community.

Selam identifies dialogue as being an essential ingredient to tackling toxicity in the queer community. Queer gatherings where meaningful discussions are held with members of the community are key. Honest conversations that are meant to deepen understanding can serve a place of learning and consciousness raising.

"Watching documentaries and deepening our understanding of queerness and the diversity within the community can also have an impact", Selam said.

At its simplest, though, Selam says: "What I think is the simplest thing, but that we find the hardest is, to just be able to realize that we are the ones who are there for each other and we have to care for each other".

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Misunderstandings around butch/butch attractions

- Bisrat -

"Of course we don't think anything is going on with you two. That would be like two men together. Why would you want that?" The comment about "two men together" elicited laughter, but I was astonished to hear this statement from a queer woman while we were hanging out with a group of about five queer individuals.

This remark was made in response to a joke from a masculine-presenting woman who playfully insisted that she likes another masculine-presenting woman, but only as a "sister." It struck me as odd and troubling. Who determines that two butch women should not date? Who decides that two men should not date? Who has the authority to dictate who can be in a relationship with whom? Moreover, how is it that two self-identifying masculine-presenting women are automatically perceived as men simply because they choose to date each other?

Even though I didn't join in the laughter, I deeply regret not speaking up and challenging these assumptions. It is essential to question and confront such biases within our own community to create a more inclusive environment.

- Selam -

For me, the fact that butch-on-butch relationships are widely regarded as unhealthy amongst the LBQ community has left a negative impact on me. As much as there are those who comfortably give their unsolicited opinions when I occasionally mention that butch women are my type, there are also those who questions me in disbelief claiming "is she serious?"

For myself, I know there is no way I will change my type even if it's seen as a "miracle", or worse as "shameful" because it's not even something I will change. In fact, what we should consider working on is to change the mentality of people who think like that. Because, until the individual or community that thinks "love doesn't have gender" realizes that turning around and saying "it makes me sick if love isn't wearing a pair of pants and a dress" is both shameful and ignorant (I hope it doesn't look like I'm angry about it), we need to keep reminding them.

Unmasking Harm: Addressing ke

1

HOMOPHOBIC SLURS
Using derogatory language or slurs that target individuals based on their sexual orientation, perpetuating harm and discrimination.

2

TRANSPHOBIC MISGENDERING
Intentionally using incorrect pronouns or refusing to acknowledge an individual's affirmed gender identity, invalidating their experience.

3

BODY SHAMING COMMENTS
Making negative or judgmental remarks about someone's body size, shape, or appearance, contributing to body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem.

4

EXCLUSIONARY LANGUAGE
Using language that excludes or erases certain identities within the queer community, reinforcing marginalization and division.

5

CYBERBULLYING AND DOXXING
Engaging in online harassment, spreading rumors, sharing private information without consent, or engaging in personal attacks and threats against individuals within the queer community, causing emotional harm.

6

BI-ERASURE
Dismissing or denying the existence and validity of bisexuality or other non-monosexual identities, erasing their experiences, and perpetuating stigma.

7

ETHNOCENTRISM AND ETHNIC MICROAGGRESSIONS
Making derogatory comments or engaging in discriminatory actions towards individuals based on their ethnicity, perpetuating systemic oppression.

8

HETERONORMATIVE ASSUMPTIONS
Assuming that everyone within the queer community conforms to heteronormative expectations, disregarding diverse expressions of gender and sexuality.

9

LACK OF ALLYSHIP
Failing to support and stand up for marginalized individuals within the queer community, perpetuating a culture of indifference or apathy.

10

GATEKEEPING QUEER SPACES
Imposing strict criteria or judgment on who is allowed or welcomed in queer spaces, excluding or alienating those who don't meet certain standards.

Escaping the toxicity: A journey of survival and self-reflection

She just loved
picking fights with
me. At one point,
she even threatened
me with a knife.

We had a relationship that lasted two years. The sad part is that, out of these two long years, I spent a year and a half in what felt like hellish living conditions. We argued morning and night. We fought over every little thing. I didn't have any peace because I was crying so much to the point that my face was perpetually swollen because of all the crying. There were so many things I can't forget. After spending the entire day at work, I would come home only to be expected to spend the night talking to her on the phone. If only I were so lucky that we spoke about love or our future plans. She'd constantly pick fights with me, claiming, "You did this" or "You said that." I would spend the night crying and then go to work the next morning without getting any sleep.

The cause of all of this was my ex-girlfriend. She had a very violent and toxic personality. She tries to control me. She doesn't want me meeting or talking to anyone else. She suspects that I am cheating on her with every single person. She just loved picking fights with me. At one point, she even threatened me with a knife.

Our relationship was risky even for my life, but I still stayed with her, hoping that she would become a better person sooner or later. I struggled so hard to get used to her personality. I did and said things that I really shouldn't, just so I wouldn't piss her off or lose her. I was convinced that my love was enough for her to see things my way. In fact, her extremist behaviors had me thinking that she might be struggling with mental health issues. If she was in good mental health, why else could she not understand the love I have for her and the sacrifices I am making to keep us together? With this in mind, I used to travel back and forth from where I was every three months so I could see her. But what's the point? We wouldn't have more than two days of love. On the second day, she would find a reason to pick a fight, and we would both find ourselves in an unhappy situation. I kept hoping for things to be different; she kept picking at things. Even through all of this, though, I was still making future plans for her and me together.

Because all I had was love for her, I assumed all she had was also love for me. But things kept getting progressively worse over the months. For example, when we spoke about living together, I thought it would be better for us to plan and prepare for it. Yet that was held as proof of the fact that I am a bad partner, with her claiming that unless I moved in with her, she would take steps to ensure I paid for it. The first three months of us being together were okay, but the following year and a half were so stressful for me. I wasn't with her because I truly wanted to be, but because I was scared to leave her.

When I get to the point where I have had enough and I no longer want to be with her, she starts threatening me. I was terrified that she would call and out me to my family at any moment. Back when things were good between us, I introduced her to my family as my good friend. If she were to call them and say, "Your daughter is queer," I would be done for it. They would readily believe anything she told them about me because, in their eyes, she was my trusted best friend who knew the ins and outs of my daily life. Sometimes I wonder how we will ever separate. I shudder to think about what I've gotten myself into. There was nothing I wouldn't say to get out of this relationship; sometimes I would tell her, "I am not actually into women," just so she'd leave me. She still kept threatening me.

It was difficult for me to continue in this situation, but I was confused about the way out. Being stressed became my daily fate. One day, lost in my thoughts about the situation, I mistakenly thought I was driving forward, but instead ended up driving my car in reverse into a power pole. Before I was done processing what happened, I had another life-threatening car accident. When I

had to drive away, I stood still in the middle of the road. I wasn't listening to anything because I was not myself in that situation. A speeding car that was unable to stop in time ended up hitting me. It was such a bad accident. I think it took a miracle for me to get out of it alive. Even though the accident was life-threatening, I think it was a good moment of reckoning for me to reflect back on my life. What it openly showed me was just how bad my anxiety had gotten. Realizing the life-threatening impact of my anxiety, I reached a point where I knew I had to stay calm and face whatever challenges came my way. Nothing is more precious than my life, so I decided it was better to speak than die.

She was not happy when I told her my decision. When she resorted to her usual threats, I told her that I couldn't handle any more of this and blocked her on all my social media accounts. She retaliated by sending one of our videos that was taken while we were on vacation to one of my friends. My friend, who was also a lesbian, forwarded the video to me and warned me, "If she is capable of sending this video to me, what guarantee do you have that she won't do the same to someone else?" But at this point, I was so done with being scared and anxious that I told my ex, "Do whatever you want. It's okay; tell my parents. If you give them a hint, I will take it from there and fully explain everything to them.". I started preparing myself for what my parents would do because they are very conservative. I was so sure they would kick me out, but I was fully prepared to make it out on my own. When she saw that her threats wouldn't bring me back, she left me alone.

Until about five months ago, when I got the courage to walk away from her, my life was hell on earth. I got to the point where I wasn't even myself. Despite my family's perception of me as hardworking and regarding me highly, I reached a point where I was so consumed by my thoughts that I had my hands on the wheel but completely forgot everything. I couldn't understand how someone I love could be so evil. It's very painful to be betrayed by someone you love. I couldn't even imagine how I could potentially get close to someone new to start another relationship. But now that I think about it, I think she did me a favor.

I don't necessarily think my next relationship will be bad. But my last one taught me a lot of lessons. Before starting a relationship, I want to thoroughly get to know the person, understand their maturity level, and learn how they handle difficult situations. I don't want to fall head over heels in love first. I couldn't even if I wanted to because the lessons I have learned are more than enough. I also want to work on myself before starting a new relationship. I am looking for ways to improve my financial situation and to stand on my own two feet, so I am not dependent on someone else.

I also want to work on myself before starting a new relationship.

Challenging body shaming and embracing self-love in the LBQ community
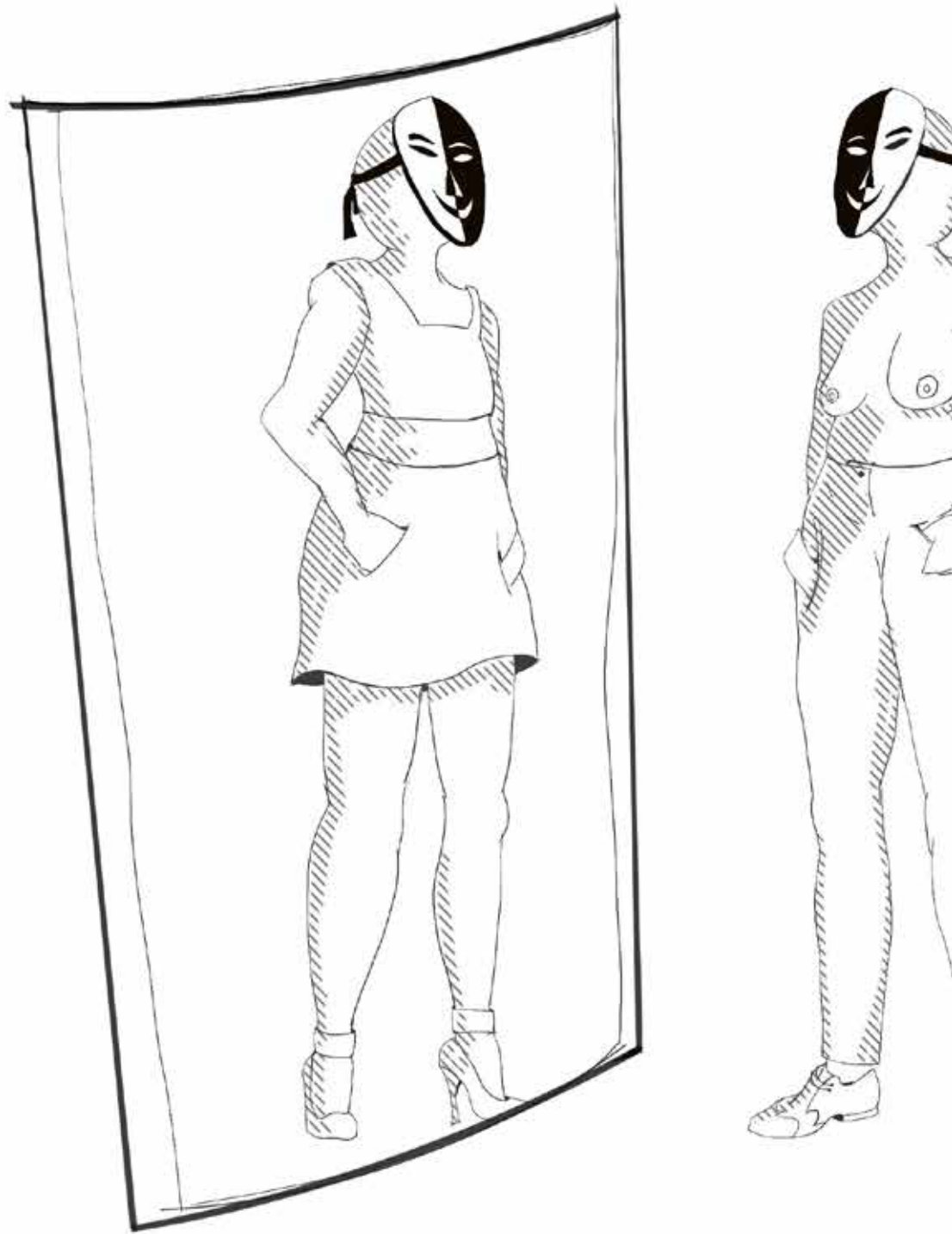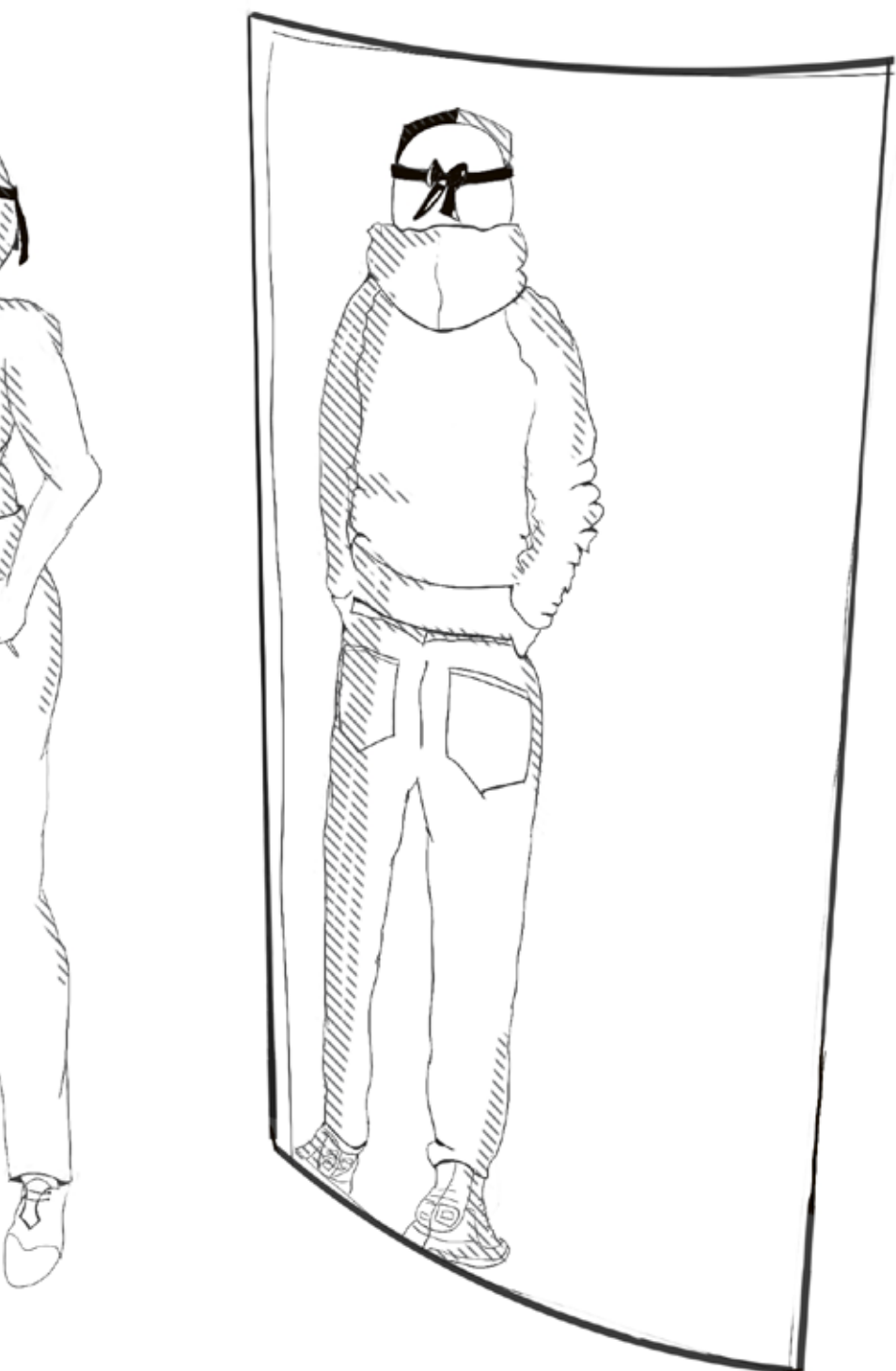
A while back, my girlfriend and I went on a double date with another couple. The couple with us looked so fun! They were laughing and being playful with each other; one of them would even pick the other up and spin her around. Every time they hugged and playfully carried each other, my girlfriend would turn around and look me in the eye. Because I have a larger build, my girlfriend can't toss me around like she just saw them do today. Every time she'd turn around and look at me, I would die in my seat. She continued, "Why don't you work out?" You have to lose weight so we can spend time like them too!" Can you believe her? What the hell is the point of a "love" like this?

I would have been lucky if this was the only time someone tried to body shame me. I didn't used to have a lot of confidence. When I meet a new woman and even the thought of meeting up in person comes up, I would be drenched in sweat. I would be overcome by the thought that she would hate me because I would look nothing like what she imagined. I used to feel ashamed of my body and how I presented myself because I bought into the belief that a feminine woman should possess a stunning figure, characterized by a slim waist, voluptuous hips, well-shaped lips, expressive doe eyes, manicured nails, styled hair, and an overall sassy demeanor. I wouldn't even try to make a little effort to dress up because I had already convinced myself that the girl I was meant to meet would hate me at first sight. My fear was not in vain. Some wouldn't say anything, but I can see their faces changing. Others would say, "You were not the kind of woman I was expecting," right to my face. And the comments others made about me would reach me through the grapevine. They would gossip, "Have you seen her size? Who does she think she is, being so confident?"

I think how we meet each other in the LBQ [Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women] community paves the way for such opportunities. Because we don't have the opportunity to meet each other in person from the get-go, we often rely on meeting through social media, where our identities are hidden. We then need to build trust before we send pictures or meet each other, so we really get to know each other through text. We end up talking about everything and getting closer. And so, before we actually meet in person, some of us fall deeply in love with each other solely based on how we think and sound through text. And we start to create an image of what this person would look like. The fact that I'm cool and understanding doesn't mean I look like a model, though. When we meet, she's disappointed that I look nothing like what she pictured, and so she never wants to see me or hear from me again. Based on this fear alone, how many others rely on using other people's pictures just so they can keep talking to someone? Being ghosted by someone you spent so much time laughing and sharing yourself with is such a heartbreaker. Especially when you were hoping that you would get to keep building something great after you meet in person. It makes you feel like you are not enough, and something is wrong with you.

The fact that this type of thinking is prevalent in the LBQ community is even more surprising. Among heterosexual couples, he and she won't understand things from the same perspective, so I wouldn't be surprised if situations like this came up. But when we are both women, when we both know the way our society treats us, when we have both gone through the ups and downs of accepting ourselves for who we are, how can we then turn around and shame someone for their physical body?

It's also not just about being fat or thin. In our community, it's almost like we have set standards for how a "femme" and "butch" queer women should dress, talk, and behave. We point and laugh at anyone who stray from that fixed standard. We gossip, saying, "How can she have hips and an ass when she's butch? How can we see her boobs over her t-shirt?" She might dress and behave in a manner we traditionally associate with men, but that doesn't take away from her womanness. Where the hell should she put the rest of her body? Our close friend is often a victim of this mentality. Because she usually has a masculine presentation,

The practice of body shaming is so strong that we can't even fully be comfortable with those we should be most vulnerable with.

for whatever reason, like spending time with family or going to church, she puts on a dress, and our community gossips about her. They claim, "She's way too feminine to be a hard stud!" The larger Ethiopian community limits the LGBTQIA+ community, claiming that it goes against their religious and cultural values. The irony is that we turn around and do the same to one another based on our body types and gender presentation.

The practice of body shaming is so strong that we can't even fully be comfortable with those we should be most vulnerable with. Sometimes when the relationships we have invested in don't work out, without any regard for our comfort, our exes tell their friends, "She's like this… she likes that… she has this on her body." Being naked in front of someone is such an intimate process that requires a lot of trust. So just because the relationship didn't work out, I don't think this kind of backstabbing is necessary.

When I see something like this, I don't keep silent. I go all out, arguing against it. A person should be judged based on their thinking and their actions, not their body type. We all have a variety of bodies—some are short, others are tall, some are thin, and others might be fat—yet still, some have a lighter complexion while others have dark ones. We are all beautiful in our own ways. There is also not only one way to be queer. As long as we are comfortable, we should all be able to present ourselves how we prefer. We should also have the expansive thinking to accept others in how they choose to present themselves, even if it isn't what we are usually used to.

Today, I don't care if people say what they want about my body because I have developed self-love. The level of knowledge and exposure today isn't the same as it was years ago. I love my body now! And thank God I was able to change my mind because I am able to do what I can to look my best. But I want everyone to feel the same level of freedom I feel, so I will go to the end of the world to make my point.

Breaking the silence: Challenging hate against gender non-conforming individuals

... deliberately getting my pronouns wrong, even though I repeatedly stated that my pronouns are "she/her", I have faced rejection and arguments.

I have personally experienced a lot of hate. ...
I have faced a lot of hate from the community.

I joined social media many years ago. Although there were many before me, I joined eight years ago. At the time, the person who helped me realize my identity introduced me to social media. He was already meeting other people in the community that way, so I joined following what he showed me to meet other people. The most common platform back then was Facebook. Without using my government name, I picked a name I thought represented me and created an account using a profile picture without showing my face. I started meeting people on there.

We can use social media for many different things, for good and bad. As a country, we say that it has a culture of love and respect, but it is also a country where a lot of attitudes based on hatred are reflected. Ethiopians have a society that tends to comment on people's identity. I love being an Ethiopian, and I am proud of it too. But I also don't want to hide the facts. Ethiopians have made unsolicited comments on people's body shape (fatness and skinniness), we judge people en masse, we judge people on things they have chosen for themselves (for example, we consider people with dreadlocks to be thugs based on their hairstyle), we make fun of ethnic minorities, and we attack communities that are marginalized from political participation. There is just a lot of hate on social media.

Although we are rejected by society, I think because we have come up through this system and grew up seeing it, we don't show anything better than this for ourselves. We only want to see what we want and what we are used to, and we are not ready to accept anything else. For example, in the queer community, people who dress differently, people who don't fit the "average" physical build, or older people may be ridiculed or discriminated against for one reason or another. The queer community is a community that has a host of diverse sexual and gender identities. There could be people who identify as non-binary and queer, cross-dressers, or transgender. The hatred towards these people is not trivial. There is a lot of hate in our society, which harms our self-confidence, self-love, and dignity. Denigration and misogyny are very common. I know this kind of hatred has made many of us depressed. I do not doubt that it may also lead to suicide.

I have personally experienced a lot of hate. Not only on social media but also in person, I have faced a lot of hate from the community. I am more "feminine" presenting, and at various times, I have come across people who say, "I want a man. If I wanted someone feminine, wouldn't I have gone to women?" Or deliberately getting my pronouns wrong, even though I

repeatedly stated that my pronouns are "she/her", I have faced rejection and arguments. Although I don't expect everyone to be attracted by me, I expect everyone from the community to respect me and not look down on me. I don't think that everyone who sees me is going to fall in love with me or be sexually attracted to me, but the queer community's judgment of me when they first see me is unfair. When I argue for or try to explain that mocking on social media is not right, the response I get is, "It's a joke; why are you being so lame?" Why would anyone joke about this?

No one wants to be hated or discriminated against; everyone wants to be respected. I can't explain the feelings created by hate and rejection. Sometimes I stumble upon a post they made as a joke, and it keeps replaying in my mind all day, messing with my head and driving me crazy. What makes it even more difficult is my community. It is hatred from the community that I claim represents me.

As a non-binary queer person who has dealt with so much hate, I tell myself that I am not the kind of person who will change themselves. I accept myself; I love myself. I think building my self-esteem helped me deal with the pressures from the queer community and otherwise. I also try to understand that some of the hate comes from fear. The country we live in doesn't allow us to express ourselves to the fullest. As a feminine presenting person, I cannot walk with another queer person. So other people don't want to meet me because they are afraid to be seen with me or others like me. As a piece of advice, we also need to be careful here. We shouldn't deny our identities, but we need to adapt our expression to the place and circumstances and be smart about it. But I know that most people in society are prejudiced. The number of people in our community who say, "If you're a man, be like a man; if you're a woman, act like a woman" or "Gender is only male and female," using religion and culture as a cover to hate on us. I maintain my sanity by avoiding these types of people and by not viewing their posts. My only option since I can't change their minds is to drop them.

This is only to say that these toxic experiences will hold our community back, but I want to highlight that there are a lot of people within the community who respect people's choices and uphold their rights.
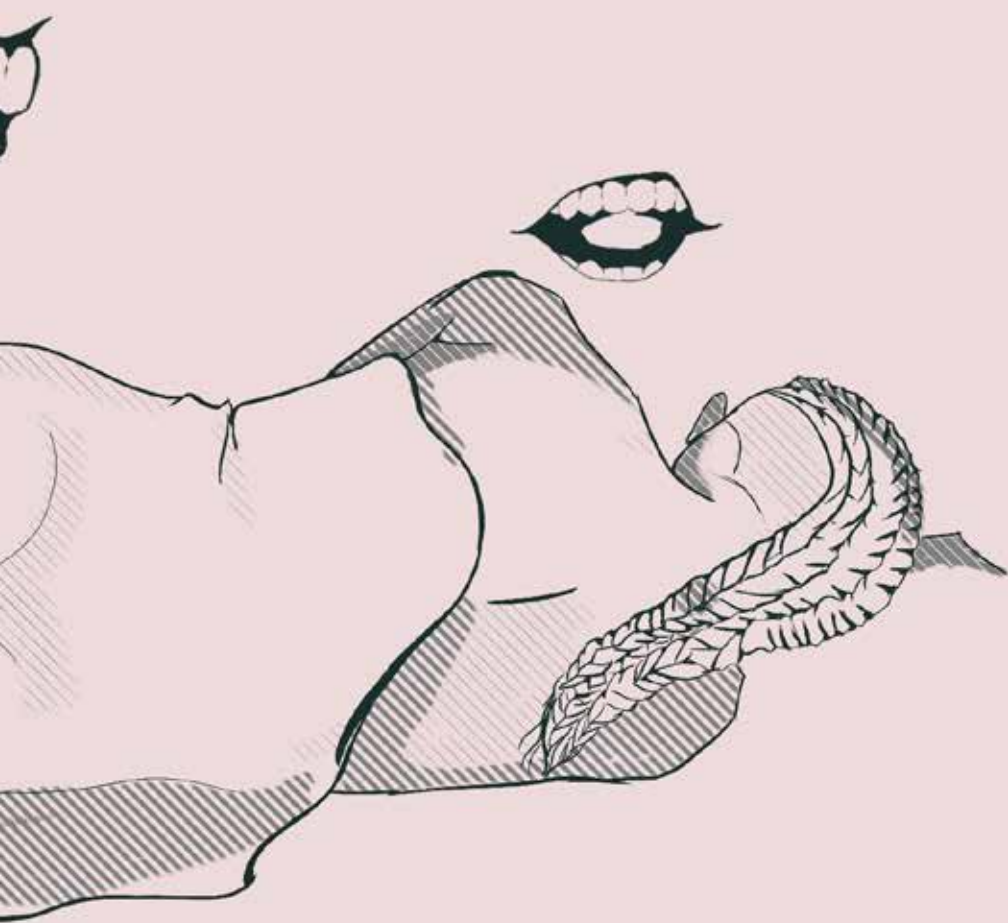
May God multiply those who support and encourage us, because we really need them.

I wish us all a positive outlook!

Addressing rumors, gossip, and toxicity in the queer community
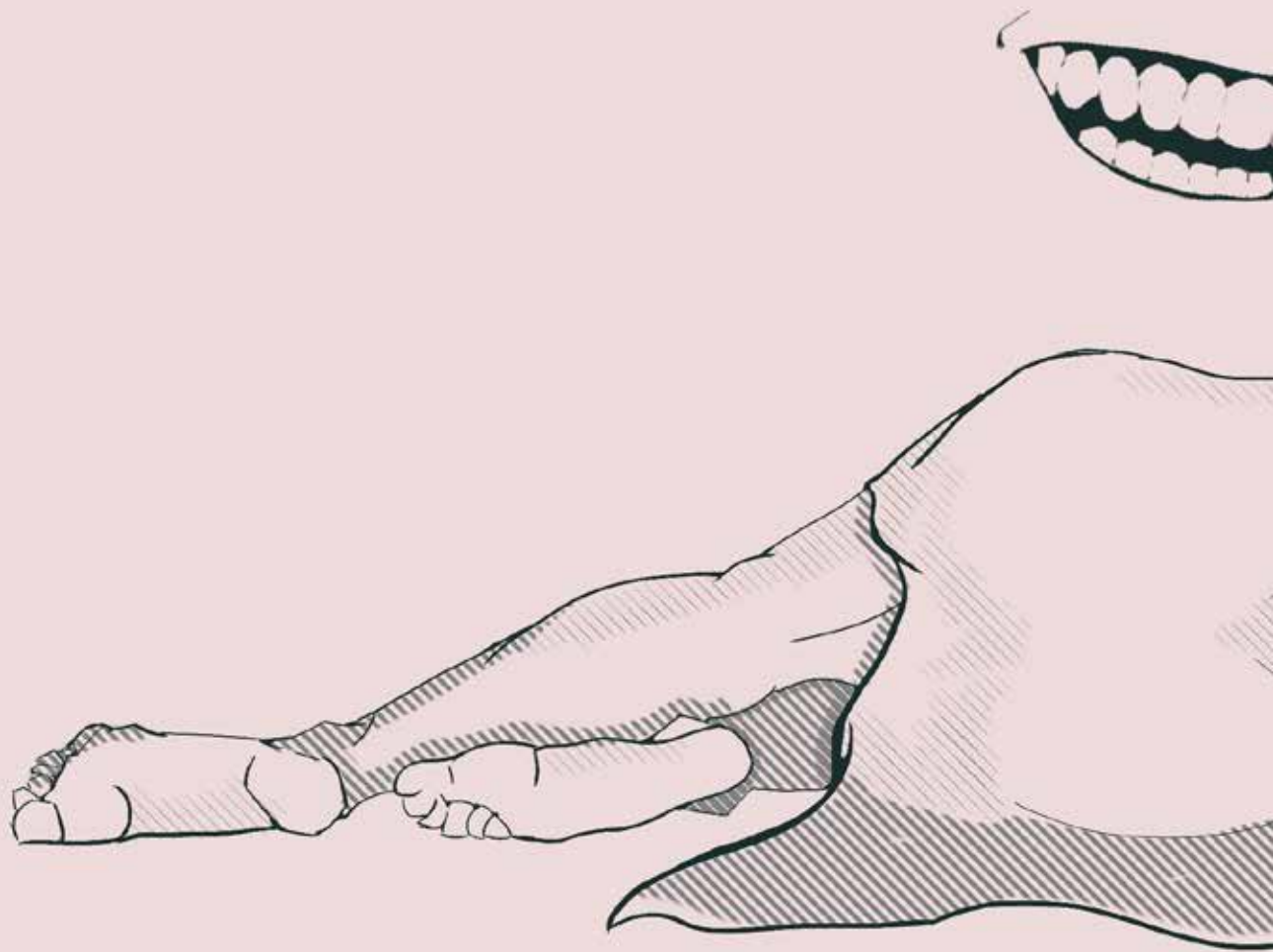
My ex-girlfriend started spreading rumors about me within the community. While it didn't bother me at first, the speed at which the rumor spread was concerning.

One of the biggest reasons for the problems between my ex-girlfriend and me was the fact that her circle of friends was very large. Whenever there was a problem between us, she would leave the house for a few days, and on the days that she was absent, I would receive all kinds of abuse and insults from her friends.

I shouldn't have forgiven her the first time she did that because all the times I forgave her resulted in more disrespect. I don't fully blame her friends. If she doesn't respect me, why would her friends respect me? At the same time, they should also not have interfered. They repeatedly added gas to the fire that was burning between my ex and me. Besides interfering, they were also instrumental in spreading the rumors that she fabricated.

Luckily, I do not care much about gossip, and I really do not care about people's opinions of me or what they say about me. And I thank God for this blessing. If I wasn't like that, I would have been imprisoned by what they said. While I can't talk in detail about the rumors that were spread about me, they had the power to break me.

Despite all these, we tried to discuss ways to solve the problems between us, but our conversation did not result in anything meaningful. A conversation without understanding means nothing. For example, if you ask her why she wore the red jacket, she would start her response by talking about how the color is not red but brown. She always blamed my reaction instead of improving her behavior. So, the discussions between us were useless, and many times I preferred to forgive her instead of having discussions, but this caused resentment on my side, and it sometimes felt like I got angry over trivial things.

While I am somewhat anti-social by nature and always try to keep my circle of friends small, the rumors that were spread about me made me alienate myself even more from this community.

I think the main reason for the start of rumors and gossip is that the person who starts them is immature. While the person shares the blame for starting and spreading rumors and gossip, the main reason for the immaturity in our community is partly the lack of platforms for meaningful discussions concerned with building interpersonal relationships and ways to resolve conflicts.

Sometimes misunderstandings and lack of discussion create a major rift in relationships, and this misunderstanding can at times turn into gossip.

Also, not being selective about your friends circle can help the
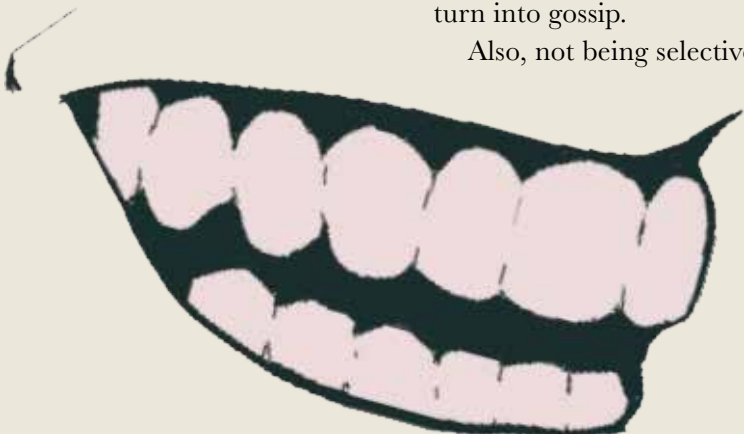
spread of gossip within the community. When you share your concerns and insecurities with them, they do not keep your secret but rather rush to pass on your news or concerns to other people.

The fact that our community itself is small adds more fire. People are set in their ways and only hang out with their friend groups. I think the clustering of people into groups is the strongest factor in spreading rumors quickly in our community.

Also, in most queer relationships, especially among lesbians, there is a strange kind of attachment as well as a fear of losing our partner. Most of the time, you find us allowing them to do whatever they want and continually forgiving them. This creates unhealthy dynamics that allow partners to disrespect each other. Rumors, gossip, disrespect, and other toxic elements then find a way to embed themselves into our interactions.

Our friend circles can only add fuel to the fire because they don't know any better and lack the tools to support us. They cannot help promote healthy and respectful ways of dealing with others in the community because they themselves have not developed them. Which, sadly, means that the vicious cycle of toxicity continues in our community.

Our friend circles can only add fuel to the fire because they don't know any better and lack the tools to support us.

Conversations around bi- and pan-erasure

One of the biggest challenges bisexual or pansexual people face is lack of trust. Those in the larger Ethiopian society and even those within the queer community don't think we can be in a committed relationship. They don't think that we can be trusted, they don't believe we are capable of having deep emotions and can be hurt. Most of us are looked at as swingers, poly or just as curious people who are going through a phase. If you're a bi or pan woman, they think you will eventually go back to being straight and if you are a bi or pan man that you are just afraid of accepting your gay identity.

I experience a lot of bi/pan-erasure and bi/pan-phobia in the queer community. As a pansexual, I think, most people in the community think it's far fetched and not a real identity. They don't really understand what it means to be bi or pan and they don't try to validate our identities.

They also see bi and pan people as someone to have fun with and have casual flings with and not as people with whom you can have a committed relationship. So, those in the queer community play along with bi and pan people just to get what they want both sexually and even in platonic relationships. Even on social media where most people in the queer community meet, the minute someone knows my pansexuality, I start being treated like a very sexually active person and as someone who is unstable. People become defensive and avoid anything intimate with me to avoid getting hurt because they think being pan or bi is just about sleeping with everyone. They think being pan or bi is about being unable to choose an identity.

Even during queer gatherings or parties, we are not likely to be invited. People simply don't remember to invite us because they don't really think of us as being a part of the queer community. During parties for queer women, it seems only lesbians are invited. In the rare cases that we are invited, people at the party are not likely to hang out with us as much as they would with other lesbians or gay men because they don't want to waste time.

This makes me feel insecure and alone and further drives me to isolate myself. I do feel like I belong in the community regardless of how bad it gets. I see it as me looking from inside the community and not as me looking

> As a pansexual, I think, most people in the community think it's far fetched and not a real identity.

... the minute someone knows my pansexuality, I start being treated like a very sexually active person and as someone who is unstable.

in from the outside. I do see toxic things happening in the community such as biphobia and panphobia and it has an adverse effect but I try to not let it get under my skin. I do try to understand the community's toxic dismissal of our identity and experience comes from a lack of exposure to different identities and experience and not out of malice.

It also helps that I had interaction with the community after I had come out to myself and after I had already accepted myself. While having community is a good thing, I am certain that anything that happens is just a bump in the road. The essential thing was accepting myself and thus I have learned to come to the community with all my diversity. I don't deny my pansexuality, even if it may offer me a better sense of community. I, however, sometimes hesitate to bring it up just to make things easier and just so I don't constantly have to explain myself as well as to avoid judgment.

However comfortable I am in my sexuality, this forced erasure has an effect on my mental wellbeing. I sometimes feel so depressed that I don't even want to talk to people and I also experience high social anxiety. I am always also overthinking everything and focus on not saying the wrong things when I am with other queer people. I worry about people's perception and sometimes choose to avoid the queer community and stop myself from reaching out to people in the community to save myself from mental exhaustion.

This interaction sometimes feels no different from my experience of engaging with the larger Ethiopian society. Our society already thinks being queer is a "white people import" meaning that they think we become queer from exposure to Western LGBTQ+ representation in films, music and other media. They think being queer is not part of our culture. For the queer community, being bi or pan is at best a joke or a phase. So, it feels like our identity receives invalidation from everyone.

I would really like the queer community to be more understanding and get to know bi and pan individuals before making any assumptions. I would

like them to erase their misperceptions about who we are and work to make sense of things in terms of their own life principles.

If everyone works to understand one another and if all of us leave our insecurities or fear of abandonment, the toxic interactions among us will disappear. We won't need to force acceptance or to force others to create spaces for us because, I think, it will come organically once we deal with the deeper issues.

Navigating the shadows: Toxicity on social media

Social media is like being behind a wall; you don't know who the person on the other side is, and many use this anonymity to do things that are inappropriate.

My ex contacted me on my fake account on Facebook with a fake account that I didn't know about.

Being behind a wall of anonymity has consequences. I wasn't much of a social media user because I was already in a long-term relationship when queer people started using social media more widely to connect with each other. But I also used to see my friends using social media, so it was not that new to me.

I think this is why I was cautious when I joined social media after my long-term relationship ended. When I say this, I am not suggesting that I have not made a mistake while hiding behind the wall of anonymity. I've looked up people's profiles to learn what I could about them, and I've ghosted a few people too. When I think about it now, the things I did were a waste of time. I believe they were unnecessary and harmful.

There are many toxic things on social media. Especially on Facebook, many of us queer people who live in a homophobic society open accounts with fake names to hide who we are. The anonymity creates a space for us to speak our minds and meet others without risking being outed. But you never know who you're actually talking to behind the wall because no one will reveal their real name. So it causes a bit of anxiety because things aren't fully clear and open.

Sometimes the people you are talking to may be people who are not members of the community or who are "experimenting." In fact, I have personally heard of situations where a straight guy pretended to be a lesbian to meet women in our community. It happened to my friend as well. So it's scary. You can't truly feel free or make meaningful connections without risk. After you meet on Facebook, sending photos, talking on the phone, and giving out phone numbers can be terrifying.

Given how small the community is, we mostly know each other. Even after knowing that the person you are talking to is in the community, and even after talking on the phone, it is very difficult to share your full information. You are afraid that they might do something to hurt you. On top of that, it is impossible to know if the individual you are talking to is a good person without getting to know them in person. When you assume you have met a good person and share your personal information, and if they turn out not to be so great, it brings about fear and insecurity because the consequences could be dire.

If you and I have dated the same person, we don't feel comfortable talking to each other because we are afraid that there will be gossip or rumors that say, "Your lover said this to me in an attempt to flirt with me." We might talk about things on the surface, but it won't be in depth and personal. You are a little cautious because you are afraid. Also, your own ex-girlfriend might contact you using another fake account, and you might talk to her without knowing it is her, which is just uncomfortable.

Social media is like being behind a wall; you don't know who the person on the other side is, and many use this anonymity to do things that are inappropriate. It

is common to send nude photos and videos, pornographic images, audio, and text without asking for permission. With all these things, you are confused about who to trust and what to talk about. You become confused even about how to start a conversation. In the past, we used to get to know each other in person, so people didn't just jump into something. It takes time for people to get to know each other. People also understand that saying inappropriate things will reflect badly on them. Even if it is not related to saying inappropriate things, toxicity is challenging.
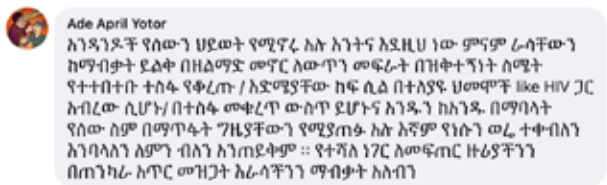
Some of the things I mentioned above have happened to me too. For example, my ex contacted me on my fake account on Facebook with a fake account that I didn't know about. She also sent me another person's photo. I didn't know it was her account, so her intention was to see what I would say and to check on me behind my back. Other people who know her have also used fake accounts to talk to me, and they have then gone to her to tell her what I supposedly said. She has also jokingly told me that she has heard what I said from them. Gossip and rumors are rampant. I have come across a lot of rumors claiming she has said this or that. Everyone will easily know your personal business.

Another thing I have experienced is that after talking to you through a fake account on Facebook and having repeated interactions online, they might ask you out, and when you say you are not interested, they will find your real account and try to threaten you using the photo you exchanged. What is even more unfortunate is that it is people in our community who are doing this. I don't know how someone can be a part of this community and do this to another person. In fact, I caught a friend doing this, and we had a huge fight. She constantly uses pictures or voice recordings as a threat. Sometimes, even if you don't talk about anything personal or send anything personal using your fake account because you don't trust them, they will look for your real account to find photos, and then they will expose you. I know a girl to whom they did this, and they really messed up her life.

I will never trust or give my personal information to someone I don't know in person to protect myself from a similar situation happening to me. Unless it's someone I know personally, I don't give out any personal information other than my Telegram username. In fact, even then, I delete my voice, photos, and videos before giving my Telegram username to someone I don't know in person.

Personally, I have been forced to stay away from Facebook and other social media because there are too many unnecessary things there. In the past, Facebook was an important way to meet people and create community with the queer community. I met one of my ex-girlfriends on Facebook. We were together for a long time.

But the current situation has completely changed, so much so that as much as I trusted Facebook and as much as I met so many people through it, now I don't trust it. In fact, I fear it.

What have been your experiences with toxic behaviors within the Ethiopian LGBTQ+ community and how can we create a culture of respect and inclusivity?

These are selected responses from a questionnaire
that was posted on a Facebook page ...

Ade April Yotor
አንዳንዶች የሰውን ህይወት የሚኖሩ አሉ አንትና እደዚህ ነው ምናም ራሳቸውን ከማብቃት ይልቅ በዘልማዳዊ መኖር ለውጥን መፍራት በዝቅተኛነት ሰሜት የተተበተቡ ተስፋ የቆረጡ / እድሜያቸው ከፍ ሲል በተለያዩ ህመሞች like HIV ጋር አብረው ሲሆኑ/ በተስፋ መቁረጥ ውስጥ ይሆኑና አንጹን ከአንጹ በማ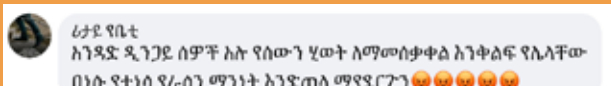ባላት የሰው ሰም በማጥፋት ግዜያቸውን የሚያጠፉ አሉ እኛም የነሱን ወሬ ተቀብለን እንባላለን ልምን ብለን አንጠይቀዎም ፡፡ የተሻለ ነገር ለመፍጠር ዙሪያችንን በጠንካራ አጥር መዝጋት እራሳችንን ማብቃት አለብን

Ade April Yotor
There are some who live for others. Instead of working to better themselves, they are scared of change and get caught up with ways of living life that are backward and lack hope. When they get older, they also start getting sick with many diseases and start spreading rumors and gossip because they have lost hope and have nothing better to do. And instead of asking questions, we get caught up in the rumors they start and waste precious time. We need to work harder to build ourselves up.
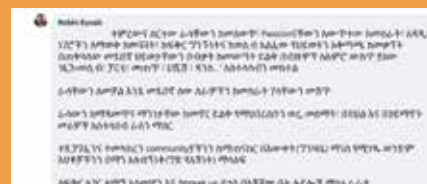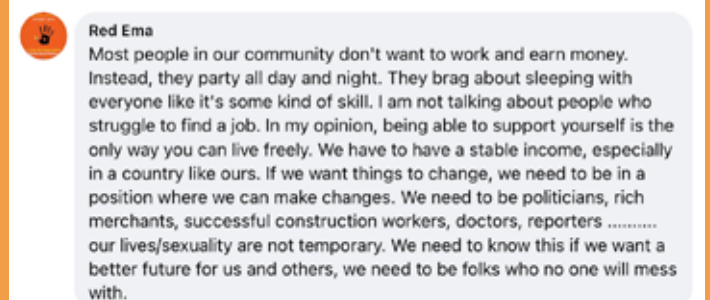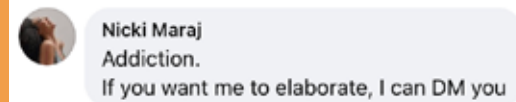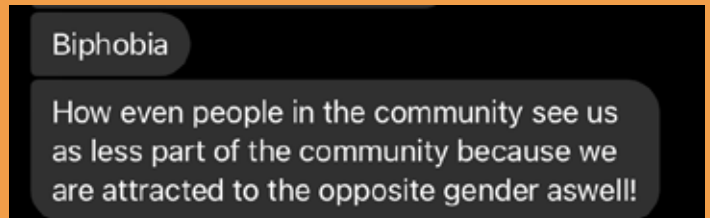
Marcella Oscar
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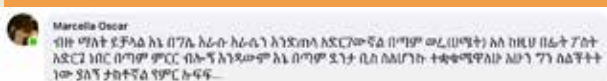
Marcella Oscar
One can say a lot. Personally, there have been times when I have hated myself. There is a lot of rumor and gossip. I have posted about this before because I was just sick of it. I am actually somewhat easygoing, so I have been able to not be as bothered by it, but these days I have truly had enough of it.

Ritay yeBetty
አንዳድ ዲንጋይ ሰዎች አሉ የሰውን ሄወት ለማመሰቃቀል እንቅልፍ የሌላቸው በነሱ የተነሳ ፀራ...ን ማንነት እንድንጠላ ሚያደርጉን😡😡😡😡😡

Ritay yeBetty
There are some knuckleheads who lose sleep to mess up other people's lives. We start hating ourselves because of them.

Biphobia

How even people in the community see us as less part of the community because we are attracted to the opposite gender aswell!

Nicki Maraj
Addiction.
If you want me to elaborate, I can DM you

Red Ema
Most people in our community don't want to work and earn money. Instead, they party all day and night. They brag about sleeping with everyone like it's some kind of skill. I am not talking about people who struggle to find a job. In my opinion, being able to support yourself is the only way you can live freely. We have to have a stable income, especially in a country like ours. If we want things to change, we need to be in a position where we can make changes. We need to be politicians, rich merchants, successful construction workers, doctors, reporters .... our lives/sexuality are not temporary. We need to know this if we want a better future for us and others, we need to be folks who no one will mess with.

Robin Eyoab
Instead of educating and changing themselves, following their passion, learning new things, moving away from relationships and sex, and thinking about how to improve their lives, what is on the minds of most is: Queer (zega) = sex, party, alcohol, hashish, dancing

Not supporting themselves, and instead of working on other things, focusing on selling their bodies

Instead of taking time to listen to themselves and living their authentic lives, listening to what society says and imprisoning oneself with the ideas of religious and cultural leaders

Instead of supporting each other to create a stronger community, ignore the plight of those in the community who may not have as many resources.

Being unfaithful to our partners and turning to threats with outings after a breakup