

**ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY**  
**SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES**  
**INSTITUTE OF GENDER STUDIES**

**BRIDGING WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS:**  
**A CASE STUDY OF FIVE ETHIOPIAN LESBIANS**

**BY: BETELHEM EPHREM**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE OF GENDER STUDIES IN**  
**PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE**  
**DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN GENDER STUDIES**

**May, 2010**

**Addis Ababa**

## ***Acknowledgement***

*My sincere gratitude goes to my thesis advisor Dr. Aaronnet White for valuable and unlimited comments that enriched this thesis throughout the study. The successful completion of this thesis would have been impossible without her help and contribution.*

*My special gratitude goes to my unbelievably humble and loving husband, Messay Aherham for moral and financial support that he provided me wholeheartedly.*

*I would like to pass my heartfelt thanks to all members of my family because they always believed in me.*

*Finally, I feel so honored to pass on my deepest gratitude to my friends: Abinet Tasew, Adolis Teferi, Ekram Mohammed, Behailu Abera, Selamawit Adugna, Lekiber G/tsadik, Beza Negewo, Helen Hailu, Haregewoin Assefa, Aynie Habtamu, Dr. Dagnachew Assefa, and Dr. Binyam Sisay for all the encouragement and support they gave me while I was conducting this study.*

## **Acronyms**

|      |  |
|------|--|
| AIDS | Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome      |
| CSA  | Central Statistics Agency                |
| GALA | Gay And Lesbian Archive                  |
| HIV  | Human Immune Deficiency Virus            |
| LGBT | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered |

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## ***Abstract***

*In Ethiopian society same-sex sexuality is seen as a disease or as a deviant behavior which exists irrespective of the natural. This research is intended to answer four basic questions: How do Ethiopian women who engage in same-sex sexual activity perceive themselves and their sexuality? Do they perceive any relation between gender equality and same-sex sexuality despite state-sanctioned homophobia? What social, psychological, and physical threats, if any, do Ethiopian lesbians face? How do they cope with state-sanctioned homophobia?*

*In order to answer the above research questions an online semi-structured and self-administered questionnaire, relying mainly on open-ended questions, was utilized to better understand the lives of Ethiopian lesbians and to ensure privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. By employing purposive sampling, the present study recruited Ethiopian lesbians who are members of the Queer Abesha Women's Yahoo Group listserv.*

*Three major themes emerged from an analysis of the content of five Ethiopian lesbian cases. The first theme reflected the negative impact of Ethiopian laws on the personal lives of Ethiopian lesbians. The second theme revealed sexual agency among the women despite political, cultural and religious repression. The third theme reflected the dynamic nature of Ethiopian women's sexuality as well as their sexual fluidity.*

*Despite the challenges Ethiopian lesbians experience from fundamentalist religious beliefs, repressive laws and societal norms, all five women perceive themselves as healthy sexual human beings.*

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**DECLARATION**

## **Declaration**

I, the undersigned, declare that the thesis is my original work, has not been presented for a degree in any other university. All references used for this thesis have been duly acknowledged.

Declared by:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Human rights are "basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). The major categories of rights and freedoms which have come to be commonly thought of as human rights include civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights. People commonly referred to as "homosexual" are human, and thus eligible to receive these rights.

Human rights scholars and activists internationally, including Africa, believe that the recognition of sexual minorities and the acknowledgement of their human rights strengthen a nation's tolerance and acceptance of human diversity within that society (Cornwall, Correa & Jolly, 2008). A human rights culture highlights the ethics of recognizing the humanity in others and promotes the value of co-existing with human differences whether those differences include religion, ethnicity, language, and sexual orientation and preference (Schaffer & Smith, 2004).

The government is the primary responsible agent for granting and protecting the human rights of its citizens. Moreover, the protection of human rights has become the measurement of a democratic system. Thus, it is in Ethiopia's interest, as an emerging democratic country, to place a high priority on cultivating a human rights culture and human rights protection as part of its democratic goals.

Women's rights have been conceptualized by many scholars as human rights and women's sexuality is intimately tied to gender equality and their rights as human beings. As Ugandan feminist legal scholar Sylvia Tamale states:

*It is important for us to understand that our sexuality has a whole lot to do with women's oppression. We can see it in ideologies such as heteronormativity, marriagenormativity, and mothernormativity. This means that attempts to liberate women must address the crucial issue of sexuality* (Tamale, 2006, p. 40).

Therefore, the rights of women who are referred to as "homosexuals" and "lesbians" are issues linked to both the women's rights and human rights movements. This research, as a result of this link, focuses on women's sexuality because most social science research focuses on men's sexuality. In particular, the study of homosexuality has emphasized the sexuality of gay men, rather than lesbian or gay women. These biases in the literature may be because of the assumption held by researchers that the sexuality of men and women is identical. Recent research on women's sexuality, however, suggests that women's sexuality is far more complex than previously thought and actually very different from men's sexuality (Diamond, 2008).

Thus, the present study addresses same-sex sexuality among women in Ethiopia in order to explore the complexities of "homosexual" rights and experiences as they relate to African women. By doing so, the research provides a significant contribution to the scholarly literature as well as public policy debates regarding women's rights, particularly the rights of lesbians, in African democracy.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Little is known about same-sex sexuality in Ethiopia because of the culture that assumes sexuality to be a secretive or personal issue in general, homosexuality to be unnatural, and the lesbian, gays, bisexual, and transgendered movement to be an anti-religious movement in particular (Abba, 2007).

Individuals like the former Kenyan president Daniel Arap Moi, as cited in Dunton and Palmberg (1996), use the language discourse argument to justify the un-Africanness of same-sex sexuality. For example, he has been quoted as saying “*Words like lesbianism and homosexuality do not exist in African languages...*” the assumption being that if no word exists, then the behavior and identity cannot exist. However, language specialists have noted how many cultures deliberately avoid naming certain practices that are considered taboo or evil as a way to silence and deny the complexities of human behavior and as a way of avoiding public discussion of topics that are not well understood (Bakar-Yusef, 2004). Thus, researchers must sometimes also analyze what is done or practiced in cultures that remain largely *unspoken* (Bakare-Yusef, 2004).

In Ethiopia, words used to explain homosexuality are usually pejorative. For instance, homosexuality in Amharic language literally refers to “the act of sodomy” and a homosexual is “a person who commits the act of sodomy.” This term is pejorative in the very first meaning it connotes as well as denotes. However, the very existence of this pejorative term used to explain homosexuality/same-sex sexuality by itself proof that the practice exists. In addition, these terms are derogatory because they reflect the

limited understanding that people have regarding same-sex sexuality and the homophobic societal attitudes and beliefs that are the result of misinformation. Thus, in Ethiopia, same-sex sexuality is not seen as an identity but as a misbehavior and unnatural and unhealthy practice (Abba, 2007).

In Ethiopian society same-sex sexuality is also seen as a disease or as a deviant behavior which exists irrespective of the natural (Abba, 2007). The Ethiopian Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Committee with 604 members was established in 2007 with the aim of demanding & safeguarding sexual freedom in Ethiopia (Globalgayz, 2007). However, same-sex sexuality is still a challenging phenomenon for Ethiopian gays and lesbians because they are continuously threatened by the government and religious clerics.

*In Ethiopia this moment many gays and lesbians are living with intimidation and harassment under state, religious, and tribal law. So, some of them cannot explore their sexual orientation freely and openly (Globalgayz, 2007, p.4).*

Given the challenges noted by Ethiopian LGBT Committee, the following major questions are raised in this research to investigate the lives of Ethiopian lesbian women.

- How do Ethiopian women who engage in same-sex sexual activity perceive themselves and their sexuality?
- Do they perceive any relation between gender equality and same-sex sexuality despite state-sanctioned homophobia?
- What social, psychological, and physical threats, if any, do Ethiopian lesbians face?
- How do they cope with state-sanctioned homophobia?

## **1.3 Objective of the Study**

### **1.3.1 General Objective**

The general objective of the study is to understand the lives of Ethiopian lesbians from their perspectives and to analyze their responses from radical African feminist and social constructionist perspectives.

### **1.3.2 Specific Objectives**

- To explore how Ethiopian lesbians perceive their lives and redefine what it means to be women in positive terms, despite state-sanctioned repression.
- To identify the obstacles Ethiopian lesbians face knowing that their country criminalizes their sexual expression and how they cope with them.
- To discover how Ethiopian lesbians perceive sex, their sexual partners, and their romantic relationships in general.

## **1.4 Significance of the Study**

Women who engage in same-sex sexuality are part and parcel of the Ethiopian society. Whatever affects them in turn affects the overall development of the country. This research is important for the following reasons:

- It provides important information for society in general and for policy makers in particular by sensitizing them to ongoing human rights violations that LGBT people in Ethiopia experience (and why some leave the country) as well as recommendations as to how to rectify this abuse.

- It specifically links the lives of lesbians in particular, and women's sexuality in general, to both women's rights and human rights issues.
- It contributes to a virtually nonexistent scholarly literature on Ethiopian same-sex sexuality, building on a small but growing literature among radical African feminists, thereby serving as a starting point for future research and the continued development of these ideas.
- It provides a new and important direction for feminist activists of Ethiopia in fighting gender inequality and the subordination of all women.

### **1.5 Delimitation of the Study**

The study only recruited Ethiopian lesbians who are members of an international Ethiopian lesbian listserv. Using the listserv introduces a potential class bias because the listserv is conducted in English, thus participants likely have a higher level of education. Also, the listserv is for Ethiopian lesbians in Ethiopia as well as abroad. Therefore, the dual citizenship nature of the membership introduces additional cultural influences that may not fully represent the lives of Ethiopian lesbians currently in the country. However, the unique exploration of this under-researched topic will provide invaluable data for future, larger studies.

## 1.6 Definition of Terms

**Homosexuality** as defined by the American Psychological Association (2007) is a romantic or sexual attraction or behavior among members of the same sex, situationally or as an enduring disposition. Its clinical origin makes the term misleading even though it is no longer considered a clinical illness. Therefore, the term same-sex sexuality is preferred in this research and same-sex sexuality is used synonymously with homosexuality.

The term **lesbian**, in this context, is used to connote a woman whose primary emotional, affectional and sexual relationships are with women whereas the term **lesbianism** denotes same-sex sexual affection, desire and behavior between women (Bennett, 1992).

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender movement (hereafter LGBT) refers to the human rights activism of people who consider themselves sexual minorities and their heterosexual allies (Bennett, 1992).

According to Lovaas and Mercilee (2006) **Heteronormativity**, **compulsory heterosexuality**, and **heterosexism** are terms used to describe the belief that people fall into only one of two distinct and complementary sexes (male and female) with each having certain natural roles in life. It is an assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation, thus making sexual and marital relations appropriate only between members of the opposite sex (Weiss, 2001).

The 2008 online edition of Webster dictionary defines **homophobia** as an "irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality, homosexuals, or individuals perceived to be homosexual"; it is also defined as "unreasoning fear of or antipathy toward homosexuals and homosexuality".

**Sexual orientation** in this context denotes "a consistent, enduring pattern of sexual desires for individuals of the same-sex, the other-sex, or both sexes, regardless of whether this pattern of desire is manifested in sexual behavior" (Diamond, 2008, p. 12).

**Sexual identity** is used here to refer to "a culturally organized conception of the self, usually, "lesbian/gay," "bisexual" or "heterosexual." A person's sexual identity may or may not correspond with patterns of behavior or desire. Sexual identities represent self-concepts and depend on an individual's own notion of the most important aspect of her or his sexual self (Diamond, 2008, p. 12).

According to psychologist Roy Baumeister (2001), **sexual desire** refers to "situation specific feelings of sexual arousal and wanting to engage in particular acts with particular partner/s," whereas he referred to **sexual behavior** as "what the person actually does, such as physically engaging in particular sex acts" (p. 348).

## **1.7 Theoretical Framework**

This study is built on two separate but related theoretical frameworks regarding sexuality: radical feminist theoretical perspectives and social constructionist theoretical perspectives.

### **1.7.1 Radical Feminist Perspectives on Sexuality**

This research incorporates radical feminist theoretical frameworks that African women have developed, thereby intentionally highlighting the intellectual and empirical work of African feminist scholar-activists. Radical feminists, in general, believe patriarchal society projects heterosexuality as the norm, and the term heteronormativity is used to convey this concept (McFadden, 2004; Potgieter, 1997; Rich, 1980; Tamale, 2003; Vance, 1997). Such thinking stigmatizes sexual minorities like lesbians and gays by stipulating privileges for heterosexuals. Radical African feminists like Zimbabwean social scientist Patricia McFadden, Ugandan legal scholar Sylvia Tamale, and South African psychologist Cheryl Potgieter, have discussed women's sexuality within the African context, particularly African lesbian sexuality.

Born in Swaziland and based in Zimbabwe, African scholar Patricia McFadden (2004) in her writings on women's sexuality stated "the fundamental premise of patriarchal power and impunity to be the denial and suppression of women's naming and controlling their bodies for their own joy and nurturing" (p. 2). The systematic suppression of women's sexual and erotic inclinations has led to the conflation of sexuality and reproduction within a heteronormativity cultural and social matrix (McFadden, 2004). Controlling women's sexuality is a political tool used by social

institutions (e.g., the government, the church, and local communities) to invoke “sanctified beliefs, values and practices in order to demonize all that is perceived as different and difficult” (2004, p. 3). McFadden adds that human rights and women’s rights discourses “have neither properly addressed fundamental issues of abortion, sexual orientation and pleasure; nor have they been seen to encompass freedom from coercion, violence or punishment as means of sexual surveillance” (2004, p. 4).

Ugandan legal scholar Sylvia Tamale (2003) in her groundbreaking work “Out of the Closet: Unveiling Sexuality Discourse in Uganda” stated that “the dominant phallogentric culture maintains the stereotype of women as the passive recipients of penetrative male pleasure; sex that is not penetrative does not count as ‘real’ sex.” As a result, “homosexuality presents a challenge to the deep-seated masculine power within African sexual relations and disrupts the core of the heterosexist social order by disempowering the patriarchal strategy of perpetuating women’s subordination through motherhood and reproduction” (Tamale, 2003, p. 2-3).

Black South African psychologist Cheryl Potgieter (1997) argues how difficult it is to label homosexuals, especially lesbians in a particular way because of the controversial issues of self-identification in African contexts where same-sex sexuality is often illegal. She has explained the problematic relationship that exists between sexual behavior and sexual identity which she thinks is variable and fluid. For example, some women who engage in same-sex sexual activity label themselves lesbians while others do not. Potgieter’s in-depth study of Black South African lesbians concludes:

*Two things are clear: the question ‘who is lesbian?’ is not one that can be resolved in absolute terms (especially from a social constructionist point of view), and feminists have not achieved consensus on the issue (Potgieter, 1997, p.37).*

Despite the lack of consensus among radical feminists as to “who is lesbian,” most radical feminists would agree that feminists must address “sexuality as a site of oppression, not only the oppression of male violence, brutality, and coercion which it has already spoken about eloquently and effectively, but also the repression of female desire that comes from ignorance, invisibility, and fear” (Vance, 1997). In addition, feminists are making efforts to discuss women’s sexuality beyond women’s victimization and are underscoring women’s sexual agency and women’s sexual pleasure as a form of empowerment (Arnfred, 2004; Machera, 2004; McFadden, 2004; Vance, 1997).

### **1.7.2 Social Constructionist Theoretical Perspectives**

Social constructionists believe that sexuality (and other terms like race and gender) is a social construct, which suggests that understanding of sexuality (and other terms assumed to be biological) has changed over time. Accordingly, social constructionists view sexuality as produced and mediated by cultural interpretations. Most important, an essentialist notion of sexuality or viewing sexuality as an “essence” or something that is “natural” is what social constructionist theories move away from in their various perspectives.

Social constructionist perspectives, contrary to essentialist theoretical perspectives, believe that human sexual desire is shaped extensively by culture and socialization. The social construction theorists use cross-cultural variation in the understanding of human sexuality to argue for cultural relativity as opposed to being biologically fixed (Baumeister, 2001).

Scholars who espouse the social constructionist viewpoint have documented how the sexual understanding of people in ancient, medieval and contemporary periods is different, thus, sexuality is not “fixed” or “natural,” but cultural (see Potgieter, 1997, for an overview of these perspectives). According to them, one is not born heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual; rather one is socialized into believing that some sexual expressions and behaviors are more appropriate than others depending on the cultural, historical and socio-political context in which one is born.

*In general, the social constructionist view on sexuality maintains that sexuality is a social construct. Sexuality is not an independent category, objectively definable in every cultural and historical context (Potgieter, 1997, p.21).*

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter has three sections in which different aspects of same-sex sexuality are discussed. The first section deals with how homosexuality as perceived by medical and psychology researchers of the West, and how recent studies suggest that women's sexuality is in many ways distinct from men's sexuality. The second section emphasizes research on the experiences of lesbians in different Africa countries in order to contextualize same-sex sexuality on the continent. The literature review attempts to move beyond a dialogue that merely compares (and dichotomizes) Western thought with African thought to an analysis of research on African lesbians by mainly African researchers. The third section addresses the issue of same-sex sexuality in Ethiopia.

#### **2.1 Social Science and Medical Research on Same-Sex Sexual Activity**

Same-sex sexuality gained the attention of psychologists and scientists during the 1800s, but it was first considered a deviant behavior, and a disease.

*In 1886 noted sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing listed homosexuality along with 200 other case studies of deviant sexual practices in his definitive work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Krafft-Ebing proposed that homosexuality was caused by either "congenital [during birth] inversion" or an "acquired inversion" (Kraft-Ebing, 1882, p.7).*

However, pioneering research by psychologist Evelyn Hooker (1957) led medical scientists to conclude that homosexuality is not a mental illness or unstable sexuality; rather it is a clearly defined and relatively stable sexual orientation. A turning point was

reached in 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, thus negating its previous definition of homosexuality as a clinical mental disorder (American Psychological Association, 2010). Consequently, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) movements have received much attention. These movements emphasize their right to live openly regarding their various sexualities—free of discrimination—and, these rights have gained consideration in judicial systems internationally.

Recent research also suggests that the sexuality of women differs significantly from that of men. Psychologist Lisa Diamond's (2008) recent publication by Harvard University Press summarizes this research, and she concludes, "Although scientists continue to disagree about various biological influences on same-sex sexuality, they do agree on one thing: the developmental pathways that operate for men are probably different from those that operate in women" (p. 17-18).

Psychologist Roy Baumeister (2001) published a review of the extensive psychological, historical, and sociological evidence suggesting that women's sexuality is more "plastic" than men's. His notion of "plasticity" includes not just same-sex and heterosexual activity but also overall sex drive, desired partner characteristics, preferred sexual practices, and consistency between attitudes and behaviors" (cited in Diamond, 2008, p. 8). Diamond concludes that Baumeister's work and her longitudinal study on female sexuality provide critical support for the notion of clear gender differences

between women and men in their capacity for sexual variability or “sexual fluidity” (Diamond, 2008, p. 8).

A closer reading of Baumeister (2001) additionally suggests that female sexuality is more responsive to culture, learning, and social circumstances; therefore, it is more malleable and mutable in character than male sexuality which appears to be relatively constant, and rigid or unchanging. Baumeister also concludes that there is a greater probability for the female sexuality to be influenced by dominant socialization agents such as the family, school, and church. Finally, Baumeister suggests that if women’s sexuality is malleable in response to situational and social factors, then as a woman moves from one situation to another, her sexual desires and behaviors may be subject to change (Baumeister, 2001).

As research on female sexuality increases, differences between men and women are accumulating. Given these recent findings and the fact that the sexuality of women, particularly lesbian women is under-researched, and most of this research has been conducted on European and White American women, the present study focuses solely on the same-sex sexuality of Ethiopian women.

## **2.2 State-Sanctioned Homophobia in Africa**

South Africa was the first African country to legalize the act of homosexuality (Potgieter, 1997). In fact, South Africa by far has the most liberal attitude toward gays and lesbians, with a constitution guaranteeing gay and lesbian rights and legalizing same-sex marriage. In addition to constitutionally guaranteed rights, the Gays and

Lesbian Archives (GALA) were established in 1997 by South African lesbians and gays with the aim to preserve, recover, and document their own history of same-sex sexuality (Morgan, 2005). Additionally, in countries like Côte d'Ivoire and Burundi homosexuality is legal. However, in 38 African countries including Ethiopia, homosexuality is illegal and a punishable crime whereas in countries like Mauritania, Sudan, and Northern Nigeria, homosexuality can be punishable by death (Ottosson, 2008).

### **2.3 The Popular Belief that Homosexuality is Un-African**

As Ugandan feminist legal scholar Sylvia Tamale (2003) notes:

*One of the most efficient ways that patriarchy uses sexuality as a tool to create and sustain gender hierarchy in African societies is by enshrouding it in secrecy and taboos. Another option is to use the law to prohibit all “sex outlaws” in the social ghettos of society....By maintaining a tight grip on certain activities, and silencing the voices of those individuals and groups that engage in them, the patriarchal state makes it extremely difficult for these individuals and groups to organize and fight for their human rights (p. 2).*

As a result of secrecy, silence, and prohibitive laws, until recently, same-sex sexuality was viewed as non-existent in Africa and is still popularly viewed as sinful and imposed on Africa from outside (mainly Western, European) influences. Nonetheless, despite popular beliefs, and thanks to a growing body of scholarly literature, same-sex practices have been documented as existing in Africa and have existed across Africa for quite

some time; however, these practices were not necessarily accompanied by the internalization of sexual identities (Blackwood & Wieringa, 1999; Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Murray & Roscoe, 1998; Tamale, 2003). Murray and Roscoe (1998) compiled one of the earliest groundbreaking collections demonstrating the remarkable quantity and diversity of same-sex practices across Africa. As Signe Arnfred (2004), a Swedish scholar specializing in African Studies, notes in her recently edited collection on African sexualities:

*Murray and Roscoe have done an admirable job of collecting data material from old anthropological pieces and writings by travelers, as far back as 1732, supplemented with new research. The evidence is overwhelming (p. 21).*

Despite such overwhelming evidence, the belief persists that homosexuality is un-African and a Western import and prominent African leaders such as Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe and former Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi (quoted in Dunton & Palmberg, 1996, p. 6 and p. 24) and former Namibian President Sam Nujoma and his staff (quoted in Frank, 2000 and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 2001) have denounced homosexuality in ways that promote violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people. Such comments create a hostile environment for LGBT people and force many to live closeted lives.

Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa (2005) note in their book *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same Sex-Practice in Africa*, that the homophobia in many post-colonial African states has resulted in same-sex identified women feeling

alienated from participating in the nation building in their countries. In most cases women migrate to places where they are better accepted (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005).

The following studies reveal the degree to which lesbians are rendered invisible, even in a country like South Africa. For example, although homosexuality is no longer officially criminalized in South Africa, homosexuals continue to live under hostile conditions due to the cruel, homophobic attitudes and responses of the majority of South Africans. Black lesbians are threatened more than Black gay men because their sexuality challenges the patriarchal social structure that defines woman as mother and wife and the one who preserves traditional notions of the family (Potgieter, 2003). Currently, Black South African lesbians are being raped by Black South African men who erroneously believe that by raping lesbians (referred to as “corrective rape”), they will cure or fix these “sick” women of their “un-African” ways (Kelly, 2009).

A South African lesbian *sangoma* (traditional healer) called Nkunzi Nkabinde in collaboration with a South African anthropologist Ruth Morgan challenged the dominant view that “same-sex sexuality is un-African” through an extensive research project conducted in Soweto, a traditionally patriarchal township outside of Johannesburg (Nkabinde, 2005). Sangomas are individuals of both genders who are respected and feared by the society because of the healing power they receive from their ancestors. Their study concluded that although same-sex relationships within ancestral marriage between women are supposed to be taboo, some modern sangomas are using these marriages to have secret sexual relationships in rural areas. This secrecy, and thus

invisibility, contributes to the widely held African notion that same-sex sexuality is un-African. In urban areas some lesbian sangomas are coming out to the public in order to break the silence surrounding same-sex sexuality despite the risk of homophobic violence (Nkabinde, 2005).

A study conducted by Ugandan social worker Marie Nagadya in collaboration with Ruth Morgan revealed that none of the different ethnic groups that exist in Uganda accept same-sex sexuality (Nagadya, 2005). Same-sex sexuality is considered to be un-African, and homosexuals are considered to be the importers of bad influences from Western cultures. Ugandan researcher Sylvia Tamale (2003), however, met many Ugandan gays and lesbians in her research who had never interacted directly or indirectly with European people. She also discovered Ugandan organizations such as the Gays and Lesbians Alliance (GALA) who have members throughout rural Uganda, members who are non-literate and semi-literate who have been isolated from urban and otherwise extremely Western influences.

Tamale concluded that it is the dominant Judeo-Christian and Arabic religions that are foreign imports and these foreign imports are shaping most African anti-homosexuality sentiment. As a result of political, cultural and religious fundamentalisms, Ugandans who are engaged in same-sex relations are interpreted as destroying the cultural and religious values of the family and marriage between a man and a woman (Nagadya, 2005; Tamale, 2003).

## **2.4 Popular Beliefs that “Real” Sex is Penetrative, Procreative and Primarily for Men’s Pleasure**

Sylvia Tamale (2003) summarizes what many researchers who study African lesbianism and African women’s sexuality in general have found:

*The dominant phallogentric culture maintains the stereotype of women as the passive recipients of penetrative male pleasure; sex that is not penetrative does not count as ‘real’ sex. In fact, Ugandan women’s sexuality is often reduced to their conventional mothering role, and conflated with their reproductive capacities. What is therefore particularly threatening to patriarchy is the idea of intimate same-sex relationships where a dominating male is absent and where women’s sexuality can be defined without reference to reproduction (p. 2).*

Consistent with Tamale and other African feminists’ findings, Dutch feminist scholar-activist Saskia Wieringa (2005) concludes that what leads most African societies to assume lesbianism as nonexistent is their perception that sex is penetrative; as a result, sex between women is impossible in the minds of many Africans because it doesn’t involve penetration. Empirical research supports this notion. For example, Kathryn Kendall (1998) found that in Lesotho, close and sexually intimate relationships between married women, locally called *mpho*-relationships, were not conceived as ‘sexual’ since no penis was involved, despite the presence of sexual activity in such relationships.

African feminist Patricia McFadden notes that it is the emphasis on sex-for-procreation rather than sex-for-pleasure in many African societies and the emphasis on men's pleasure and women as sexual providers of men's pleasure that marginalizes women's sexual freedom and agency regardless of sexual orientation and preference (McFadden, 2004).

In the Malian society, due emphasis is given to "social sex", in which the final goal is procreation, as opposed to "personal sex" that focuses on self-gratification. Malian women's sexuality is about giving and pleasing, whereas Malian men's sexuality emphasizes experience and power. Men have greater sexual freedom due to more tolerance for their misbehavior, and the fact that they are permanently on the marriage market due to the option of polygamous marriage in Mali. Women have limited power regarding sexual negotiation and are pressured to conform to social values of submission, patience and endurance—values that characterize ideal femininity in Malian society (Diallo, 2004).

Female genital cutting becomes easily justified in societies that uphold such rigid sexuality norms for African men and African women. Feminist writers and activists often emphasize how genital cutting is an expression of women's sexuality being repressed on behalf of men in patriarchal societies (Diallo, 2004).

Most importantly, in most African societies the childhood and adolescent socialization of women does not include teaching girls how to embrace the pleasurable aspects of sex. Girls are socialized to believe that their sole sexual responsibility is to satisfy the

sexual desire of their partner who, in most cases should be their husband, with a total disregard for their sexual needs. Such societal expectations show the extent to which women are detached from their sexuality (Machera, 2006). As a result, lesbianism potentially extricates women from their “responsibility,” and becomes a concept too threatening to be tolerated or even acknowledged.

## **2.5 Sexual Behavior versus Sexual Identity: The Complexities**

Black South African psychologist Cheryl Potgieter (1997) concluded how difficult it is to find African women who label themselves lesbians, despite the fact that they engage in sexual relationships with women. Lesbian self-identification in African contexts is controversial and there is the tendency to dissociate from the terms where same-sex sexuality is often illegal. Thus, her 1997 groundbreaking dissertation on Black South African lesbians found that some women who engage in same-sex sexual activity label themselves lesbians while others do not. Her findings regarding the lack of self-identification as “lesbian” (therefore, internalizing a lesbian identity) despite engaging in lesbian sexual behavior has been supported by other researchers. Also, like Potgieter (1997), researchers found women who engage in same-sex practices sometimes engage in sexual relationships with men as well in order to appear heterosexual. However, some of these women identify as “bisexual” and are genuinely attracted to both sexes.

Namibian researchers Madelene Isaacks and Elizabeth Khaxas (2005) found that in Namibia, women who are engaged in same-sex relations don’t want to be labeled as lesbian as a result of the derogatory connotation it affirms. However, different ethnic groups in Namibia display different degrees of acceptance regarding same-sex

sexuality. In Ovambo society same-sexuality is very intolerable whereas in the Damaran society same-sex identified women are out of the closet to the extent of attending and serving in the church (Isaacks & Khaxas, 2005).

Tanzanian researcher Sophia Musa Mohamed (2005) found that lesbians live a closeted life due to the threat they face from the public as well as from government agents. Some lesbian informants who participated in the research were married to men due to pressures to conform to heterosexist norms and the pressure to demonstrate to the public that they are not different from heterosexual women. In addition, some lesbians were forced to get married to a man by their families when their same-sex behavior was discovered (Mohamed, 2005).

Khumalo, an African researcher of same-sex practices in Swaziland, faced difficulty in accessing women involved in same-sex relationships due to the repressive culture of silence and denial regarding sexuality issues. The research revealed that the majority of the women engaged in same-sex practices used to have heterosexual relations with men but left those relationships due to domestic and sexual violence as well as lack of sexual fulfillment. She concluded that the silence protects them from homophobic responses from others, but it also isolates and marginalizes those women from other lesbians (Khumalo, 2005).

Tamale (2003) reminds researchers who study African lesbians and gays that “the repressive conditions of state-and religious-inspired homophobia” make it difficult for

most lesbians and gays to live openly regarding their sexual orientation and practices.

*Most blend within the wider society and even live under the cover of heterosexual relationships while maintaining their homosexual relationships underground. The tendency is to construct 'comfort zones' where they complacently live a different and segregated lifestyle (p. 3).*

To summarize, in most African societies sexuality is a critical site for maintaining patriarchy and women's oppression, hetero-normative attitudes are sustained by political, cultural, and religious dogmatism. As a result, any variation in sexual activity and sexual patterns from heteronormativity is considered 'pathological,' 'deviant,' 'unnatural,' and, most importantly, 'un-African' (Tamale, 2003). African women's sexuality is viewed largely from the prism of women's reproductive roles and the pleasure of men is highlighted at the expense of women's sexual pleasure and agency (Arnfred, 2004; Machera, 2004; McFadden, 2004; Tamale, 2003). Such extremely hostile environments make it difficult for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people to identify with same-sex labels and this lack of identification makes it difficult to organize and demand their basic human rights.

## **2.4 State-Sanctioned Homophobia in Ethiopia**

Little can be said about homosexual experiences in Ethiopia because Ethiopia is among the African countries where homosexuality is illegal. Due to the silencing effects of state-sanctioned homophobia, one rarely hears about Ethiopian lesbians. The criminal code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (2004), Proclamation

No.414/2004 Article 629 made homosexuality an indecent and illegal act. “Whoever performs with another person of the same sex a homosexual act, or any other indecent act, is punishable with simple imprisonment.” It also states other extensions of the code in article 630 which clarifies the general aggravation to the Crime as follows:

1. The punishment shall be simple imprisonment for not less than one year, or, in grave cases, rigorous imprisonment not exceeding ten years, where the criminal:

A. Takes unfair advantage of the material or mental distress of another or of the authority he exercises over another by virtue of his position, office or capacity as guardian, tutor, protector, teacher, master or employer, or by virtue of any other like relationship, to cause such other person to perform or to submit to such an act; or

B. Makes a profession of such activities within the meaning of the law (Art. 92).

2. The punishment shall be rigorous imprisonment from three years to fifteen years, where:

A. The criminal uses violence, intimidation or coercion, trickery or fraud, or takes unfair advantage of the victim's inability to offer resistance or to defend himself or of his feeble-mindedness, or unconsciousness; or

B. The criminal subjects his victim to acts of cruelty or sadism, or transmits to him a venereal disease with which he knows himself to be infected; or

C. The victim is driven to suicide by distress, shame or despair.

In 2007 the Ethiopian Gays, Lesbians, Bisexual and Transgender Committee was established in order to safeguard sexual freedom in Ethiopia. The committee has asked

the government for license and acknowledgment but the government's response has been discouraging and threatening (Globalgayz, 2007). What made the lives of LGBT people worse in Ethiopia was an event on December 22, 2008 in the United Nations conference hall when Ethiopian clerics sought a constitutional ban on homosexuality and came up with a declaration of intention consisting of ten points. (Hailegiorgis Mamo, 2001E.C).

*The Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches in Ethiopia have gathered to formally call on their government to enact a constitutional ban on homosexuality. Being gay is already illegal in Ethiopia with prison sentences of up to five years! (Hailegiorgis, 2001E.C. p.3).*

One must consider the role of the state and religion in the Ethiopian context when analyzing why and how sexual diversity is suppressed. In Ethiopia, culture and religion are practically inseparable.

Published empirical research on Ethiopian lesbians at the time of this writing is nonexistent and the few studies that have addressed homosexuality in Ethiopia emphasize same-sex relations and HIV/AIDS in the context of public health issues as opposed and emphasis on same-sex relations as they relate to sexual and human rights issues (e.g., Gebreyesus & Mariam, 2009). Nonetheless, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has forced the public to address sexuality issues, including the myths about 'African sexuality' and various secret relationships and diverse sexual identities that have been silenced by political, cultural, and religious institutions for years. The present study is the first empirical investigation that focuses exclusively on Ethiopian lesbians.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Study Design**

This research adopted the case study approach. The distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2003). Moreover, the case study method is particularly favored by feminist researchers, as feminist sociologist Shulamit Reinharz states, “Feminist interest in case studies stems from the desire to document aspects of women’s lives and achievements for future secondary analysis and future action on behalf of women” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 171). She adds, “The case study is a tool for feminist research that...defies the social science convention of seeking generalization by looking instead for specificity, exceptions and completeness” (1992, p. 174).

Within this adopted approach, an online semi-structured and self-administered questionnaire was utilized to better understand the lives of Ethiopian lesbians and to insure privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaire relied mainly on open-ended questions so as to better represent the voices of lesbian whose lives have been stigmatized and rendered invisible.

#### **3.2 Data Sources**

This research utilized both primary and secondary data to better understand the lives of Ethiopian lesbians. Primary data sources included the emailed questionnaire responses of five case studies who are members of Queer Abesha Women’s Yahoo Group listserv.

Although descriptive statistics are used to summarize responses, the purpose of this research is not to generalize the findings to other lesbians, but to deeply analyze the life experiences of these particular cases in order to generate hypotheses and recommendations for future research. This research is not intended to provide significance testing. However, descriptive statistical summaries are gathered to increase our understanding of the life experiences of lesbians that require attention in public policy debates. Secondary data were collected from previously published and unpublished materials on African lesbians such as books, magazines, archival documents on the internet and reports.

### **3.3 Sample Population and Recruitment**

The target population of this research included Ethiopian lesbians who live in Ethiopia as well as abroad. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the fact that same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Ethiopia, Ethiopian lesbians are considered a clandestine or difficult to recruit sample. As a result, by employing purposive sampling, the present study relied on the internet for recruiting a select sample of Ethiopian lesbians who are members of the Queer Abesha Women's Yahoo Group listserv. Access to the listserv was possible by having personal contact with the listserv owner.

The listserv owner recommended an online questionnaire rather than face-to-face interview as a medium of communicating with the participants. Given the listserv's international Ethiopian membership, the online questionnaire allowed the recruitment of

Ethiopians who were currently living in Ethiopia as well as those who had left Ethiopia.

As Markham (2004) stated:

*The internet provides new channels for people to communicate with each other, new channel for researcher to communicate with participants, and new venues for conducting research... We can disregard location and distance to communicate instantaneously and inexpensively with people. Logistically, the distance-collapsing capacity of the internet allows the researcher to connect to participants around the globe (p.101).*

Therefore, the present study recruited participants from the listserv given the reluctance of Ethiopian lesbians, particularly Ethiopian lesbians living in Addis Ababa, to engage in face-to-face interviews. However, in addition to the reluctance of Ethiopian lesbians to engage in face-to-face interviews, listserv members also stated their reluctance to participate in a study connected to Addis Ababa University. As a result, of the fifty (50) members of the listserv, only five of them volunteered to complete the questionnaire. Therefore, the present study used the five participants' responses as case studies yielding preliminary information about Ethiopian lesbians for subsequent studies.

### **3.4 Organizational Profile of the Yahoo Group Listserv**

The Queer Abesha Listserv was founded in Summer 2005. Members were solicited from a larger gay Ethiopian website to create a safe space for queer women of Ethiopian descent. Currently membership was approved for fifty (50) women by the listserv owner. Contact with the listserv owner resulted in permission to recruit participants for

this study. A description of the purpose of the website and rules for joining the listserv follows:

*This is a safe space for queer Abesha women. This site is dedicated to promote the free exchange of ideas, thoughts, and emotions without prejudice or judgment. For our other queer brethren and or straight allies, kindly find another space to dialogue or email the moderator directly for suggestions of other internet spaces. Members of this space require a Q&A format over email or online messaging. Please do not post real names, phone numbers, gay spots or hangouts in Addis or other parts of Ethiopia.*

### **3.5 Data Collection Process**

The questionnaire was posted on the listserv by the listserv owner as an attachment for all members to download and complete. Members could send their responses, as an attachment, to the listserv owner or to the author using their listserv pseudonyms. Members were given a two month period to complete the questionnaire. For additional verification, the listserv owner checked all email addresses and pseudonyms to ensure that attachments were sent to her and the author from registered members of the listserv.

#### **3.5.1 The Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was divided into four parts and addressed the specific objectives of the study. The first part of the questionnaire contained questions that asked how the women described their sexual behavior and whether they defined themselves using a sexually-identified label. The second part asked questions that dealt with past and current romantic relationships. The third part of the questionnaire contained questions about the coming out process, and the fourth part dealt with demographic information

(e.g., age, education, marital status, and other descriptors). The Amharic version of the questionnaire was made available for those who preferred it. However, none of the informants made use of it.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

Descriptive summaries (frequencies) were calculated for discrete questions, and open-ended questionnaire responses were analyzed by content. Open-ended responses to questions were coded and analyzed by categorizing them into themes that addressed the various objectives of the study.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

To additionally secure the identity and protect the anonymity of the informants, rather than using the listserv pseudonyms, the researcher created new pseudonyms for the five informants. These are: case one, Tsion; case two, Mahlet; case three, Aster; case four, Lemlem; and case five, Meron.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter analyses data obtained from the questionnaire and discusses the combined responses from the five case studies from social constructionist and African radical feminist theoretical viewpoints. The first section of this chapter describes the background of respondents and presents biographical sketches of each case highlighting what the cases have in common as well as how each case is unique. The second, third, and fourth sections address major themes that emerged from questionnaire responses. The second section addresses the negative impact of Ethiopian laws on the life experiences of Ethiopian lesbians. The third section discusses issues of sexual agency despite political, cultural and religious repression. The last section compares current research on the dynamic nature of women's sexuality with the apparent sexual fluidity of Ethiopian lesbians.

#### 4.1 The General Background of the Respondents

Table 1. Background Information of the Respondents

| Cases  | Age | Sexual Identity    | Country of origin | First language | Marital status | No. of children | Working status | Level of education |
|--------|-----|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Tsion  | 31  | Lesbian & Bisexual | Ethiopia          | Amharic        | Not married    | none            | working        | Master's Degree    |
| Mahlet | 40  | Lesbian            | Ethiopia          | Amharic        | Not married    | none            | working        | College Degree     |
| Aster  | 24  | Lesbian & Bisexual | Ethiopia          | Amharic        | Not married    | none            | working        | Master's Degree    |

|        |    |         |          |                   |             |      |             |                |
|--------|----|---------|----------|-------------------|-------------|------|-------------|----------------|
| Lemlem | 24 | Lesbian | Ethiopia | Amharic & Italian | Not married | none | Not working | Some College   |
| Meron  | 28 | Lesbian | Ethiopia | Amharic & English | Not married | none | working     | College Degree |

As the above table indicates, all five women were born in Ethiopia and at least one of their first languages is Amharic. Their ages ranged from 24 to 40. Three were currently living in Ethiopia, one was living in France, and another was living in the United States. All had experienced some level of university education and none had children or had been legally married. Four of them were working and one was not. Although all identified as lesbians, two women also identified as bisexual because they have sex with men as well as women. The reality that lesbian-identified women can also engage in bisexual behavior is addressed in detail in the fourth section on sexual fluidity.

#### **4.1.1 Biographical sketches of the respondents**

##### **4.1.1.1 Case one: Tsion**

Tsion is a 31 year-old woman born in Ethiopia, but raised in both Ethiopia and the United States. Her parents divorced, therefore she spent part of her childhood in Ethiopia with her father, part in the United States with her mother, and most summers in Ethiopia with her father. She has her master’s degree and works in the private sector. Tsion recently returned to work in Ethiopia after living and working in the United States. Although she describes herself as lesbian and bisexual, she is currently in a romantic relationship with a woman. She shared the following regarding her current

relationship: *“I love how we communicate. I love the sexual and emotional part of our relationship. I hate that we can’t tell her parents yet but I am willing to wait.”*

#### **4.1.1.2 Case two: Mahlet**

Mahlet is a 40 year-old woman born and raised in Ethiopia. She is currently living in the United States. She went to the United States for educational purposes and after completing her college degree began to work in the banking industry. She was raised by her mother. She said, *“I connect better emotionally with women”* when she explains the emotional intimacy she experiences with women. Mahlet is not currently in a romantic relationship with anyone. However, despite her single status, she makes perfectly clear: *“I like my sexuality; it’s other people’s reaction to it that I don’t like!”*

#### **4.1.1.3 Case three: Aster**

Aster is a 24 year-old woman who was born in Ethiopia. She was raised by both parents until she was seven, then she was brought up by her mother outside of Ethiopia in a French-speaking African country. She recently earned her master’s degree and is currently working in the field of communication in France. She has lived in France for the past five years. Although she describes herself as both lesbian and bisexual, she is currently romantically involved with a woman. She said: *“I trust women more than I trust men. I am currently involved with an Ethiopian-American woman. I love the deep feelings of mutual respect and the sex. I don’t like the fact that we are in a long distance relationship.”*

#### **4.1.1.4 Case four: Lemlem**

Lemlem is a 24 year-old woman who was born and raised in Ethiopia. Her first languages are Amharic and Italian. She was raised by her father. Lemlem attended college but did not complete her degree. She still lives in Ethiopia but is not currently working and is not currently in a romantic relationship. She said the following when she explained her past romantic experience with a woman she truly loved: “[...] *It was wonderful and exciting, it was dangerous and terrifying, and it grabbed me in the pit of my stomach and buckled my knees. But I guess the way to love anything is to realize that it might be lost.*”

#### **4.1.1.5 Case five: Meron**

Meron is a 28 year-old woman who was born and raised in Ethiopia in a very religious family. Her first languages are Amharic and English. She lived with both parents until age 15, and then she lived with an aunt. She has a college degree and specializes in information technology. Meron is still in Ethiopia. She became involved romantically with a woman six months ago. She describes her relationship as follows: “[...] *We love and care for each other. We even moved in together. What I like about this relationship is that, it made me feel that I have a family, someone who takes care of me.*”

These descriptions offer a foundation for understanding the five Ethiopian lesbian case studies. Subsequent sections demonstrate similarities across the cases, despite the individual differences in their backgrounds.

## **4.2 Negative Effects of Ethiopia’s Repressive Laws**

The criminal code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation number 414/2004 Article 629 made homosexuality an indecent act and illegal. One major theme that emerged from the responses of Ethiopian lesbians indicates that the criminal code has negatively affected their personal lives and these effects have profound political implications for not only their lives, but also the lives of other Ethiopian lesbians. Subthemes demonstrated concerns about living in Ethiopia and concerns about coming out and being open about their sexuality.

### **4.2.1 To Live or Not to Live in Ethiopia—An Ongoing Issue**

Tsion, Lemlem and Meron are currently living in Ethiopia whereas Mahlet is living in the United States, and Aster lives in France. Their responses indicate all of the five women have internalized deep fear regarding openly expressing their sexuality and experience a lack of freedom in their country of origin due to repressive laws sanctioned by the state as well as religious institutions in Ethiopia. The fact that homosexuality is illegal also affects how their families, friends, and relatives respond to same-sex practices and the pressure to remain closeted is very great due to pervasive intolerance for sexual diversity.

Respondents were asked if they had the choice, would they prefer to live in Ethiopia with their same-sex partner, and their answers were very indicative of the degree to which Ethiopian lesbians don’t feel their basic human rights are respected. Mahlet, who lives in the United States, confirmed that under no circumstances would she live in

Ethiopia with her same-sex partner because she “*does not feel free there.*” Two others, Tsion and Aster, said they would live in Ethiopia with their same-sex partner, but not on a permanent basis. Aster, who is currently living in France, noted: “*Why not? But for a limited period of time, the pressure (work, family and relatives) would be too much*”.

Both Lemlem and Meron would prefer to live in Ethiopia with their same-sex partners because, as lesbians currently living in Ethiopia, they have no plan to leave. Most surprisingly, when the five respondents were asked if the laws were changed in Ethiopian respecting the human rights of LGBT people, would they live openly regarding their same-sex practices, three answered “no” (Mahlet, Tsion, and Aster) and only two, Lemlem and Meron answered “yes.” The three who replied, “No,” indicated they would still have difficulty trusting the political system to enforce the law, moreover, the everyday (homophobic) responses of Ethiopians would still be a deterrent; thus, they would still not feel free.

Another related question was posed for the respondents of the research that if they had the choice, in which country would they prefer to live in and two of them (Mahlet and Tsion) said they would prefer to live in the United States for the reason that sexual freedom has received broad public attention. Aster responded that she would prefer to live in France where she is currently living and working. Lemlem and Meron would prefer to live in Ethiopia and look forward to the day when they are not pressurized by the government and other Ethiopians to hide their sexuality.

As result of homosexuality being illegal in Ethiopia, two of the respondents don't want to return to Ethiopia (Mahlet and Aster), and the other three don't know whether they can remain in the country. In particular, those respondents who have experienced living abroad (Mahlet, Aster, and Tsion) are most reluctant to grapple with the level of repression against lesbians in Ethiopia. Even though Tsion is currently living in Ethiopia, she expects that she will return to the USA at some point and made clear the following: *"I lack faith in the people and the political system because of the lack of respect for women's rights"*.

When respondents were asked, "If they had the choice and if they want to have children, where would they prefer to raise them," not one of the five respondents would choose to raise their children in Ethiopia. A lesbian who has and want children is not uncommon (see Potgieter, 2003 and Lewin, 1993). However, Aster was the only women who emphatically stated that she did not want to have children because she thinks *"the vibe would be bad and too much for the children who don't choose this life."*

Together, these findings support previous findings by Morgan and Wieringa (2005) who found that the homophobia in many African states results in same-sex identified women feeling alienated from participating in the nation building of their countries. In most cases women migrate to places where they are better accepted (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005).

### **4.2.2 Coming Out to Whom and for What?**

The phrase “coming out of the closet” or simply, “coming out,” as used by psychologists, refers to “the process by which individuals come to realize, act on, and privately accept their same-sex orientation, even if they do not necessarily disclose it to others (Diamond, 2008, p. 46). It is also a figure of speech commonly used by LGBT people when they choose to disclose their sexual orientation or sexual identity to others.

Coming out is not a single action; it is a process of coming to terms with being LGBT and coming to terms with sexual feelings. This process can take a long time, especially if there is confusion about one’s identity and little support for sorting out questions about one’s feelings and sexual attractions (Grov et al., 2006). Furthermore, coming out can have both positive and negative effects on many aspects of a person's life, including family, school and/or work relationships. Many LGBT people fear negative reactions, rejection and upsetting people they consider close. As a result, many LGBT people don't come out until later in life or only come out to other LGBT people (Grov et al., 2006).

In addition to a person’s own fears about the negative reactions of family and friends, the laws and general attitudes toward LGBT people in a country will influence a person’s decision about whether they are able to come out, and who they choose to come out to at any given point in time. State laws that make homosexuality illegal make it extremely difficult for LGBT people to “come out” or to be open to others about their sexual orientation (Ottosson, 2008). Coming out to the wrong person could

lead to homophobic violence, imprisonment, loss of a job, and being ostracized by certain friends and family members. Therefore, coming out does not mean that the person tells everybody. Many LGBT people chose to come out first to people who they think are more likely to react positively. This not only helps them get an idea of how people may react, but often means that they will have someone to support them when they come out to others.

Despite the variety of obstacles that Ethiopian LGBT people face, all five Ethiopian lesbians have come out to either a best friend or family members. In fact, four of the women first came out to their best friends, and one, Aster first came out to her brother. All of the women first came out to people who they felt would not judge them for being lesbian. Lemlem explained it precisely as follows: *“I came out first to my closest friends because we went through a lot together for the past few years and thought it wouldn’t be a big deal, since good friends are those who accept you and love you for who you are”*.

Tsion and Mahlet said that when they first told their friends about their sexuality their friends didn’t react strongly against it. However, Lemlem, Meron and Aster received some unexpected responses. For instance, Lemlem is no longer on good terms with her friends due to what she described as an unpleasant experience. In her words, *“I don’t talk to them anymore.”* Aster’s brother was shocked, therefore she felt compelled to tell her brother that she is a bisexual. She explained the situation as follows: *“He got*

*relieved when I told him that I considered myself as bisexual: I could still go out with men and even get married if I wanted to”.*

Even though none of the respondents faced any physical threats from people because of their sexuality, the psychological harm they are often subjected to when they attempt to come out cannot be underestimated. Four of the five women have only come out to a few friends and one or two family members over the course of their lives. Only Meron came out to most of her friends, most of her family, and to her previous co-workers. She described her experiences of coming out as traumatic and shared these details:

*I told my families and friends about my sexuality because I was a kind of open and transparent person that I didn't care about what other people think of me, and they were very much shocked. It was a challenging experience that I have ever faced because they are the ones whom I care a lot about.... I also told my work mates that I'm a lesbian and then everybody started to see me with suspicion and curiosity, especially the women. But when the pressure was too much, I had to leave the job and find another one. In my office [today], no one knows about my sexuality, I don't want to tell them because I have learnt the lesson while I was in the previous office.*

Like Meron (but also Lemlem), many LGBT people have to cope with negative reactions when they come out. These reactions are particularly painful when those reacting negatively are people the person truly cares about and trusts. It takes an inordinate amount of courage to risk rejection from loved ones. These five women

demonstrate, through their coming out efforts, the degree to which being lesbian is African and Ethiopian. Tsion was the only respondent who made a point to mention how she came out to herself first, and this was especially difficult because of her “strong Ethiopian identity” which included very homophobic ideas about how Ethiopian women are not lesbians. Although she was determined to return to Ethiopia after working for a number of years in the United States, the fact that lesbian practices are taboo, illegal and erroneously believed to be “un-African” in Ethiopia has led her to isolate herself from many social activities. She described the obstacles she had experienced within the last two years since her return:

*The main obstacle I feel is the fact that I can't be completely free about my sexuality, that I have to hide it at work or among peers or in various social settings. So I find it tiresome to always be closeted at work and or to have to edit what I say depending on my audience....*

The major obstacle these women experienced were linked to the limitation they experienced as a result of being closeted due to widespread homophobia. However, because most of the women are not “out” to many people, no one reported direct experiences of discrimination. Lemlem’s statement seems to represent the overall sentiment of the group, “*I just keep my distance.*” The distance implied is both emotional and physical given the lack of safety one experiences when one’s country of origin continues to sanction homophobia through repressive laws.

### 4.3 Women's Sexual Agency

Radical African feminist scholar-activist Patricia McFadden (2004) has emphasized how current sexual debates limit African women's sexuality to their reproductive roles as mothers and wives. According to her, the issue of 'choice' and 'pleasure' regarding African women's sexuality is not well acknowledged or discussed:

*Considering the life threats that many women face in dominant hetero-normative sexual relationships, discourses on sexuality in most activist arenas remain largely tied to reproduction and barely interrogated or deconstructed notions of rights (McFadden, 2004, p. 7).*

In relation to the above concept, another theme that emerged from the findings of the present study revealed that all five respondents comfortably view themselves as sexual beings who have the right to enjoy the pleasurable aspects of their sexuality with their same-sex partners. Tsion explained the misperceptions she encounters when African women's sexuality is discussed among some of her acquaintances:

*The common misperceptions here is that women are not sexual creatures so why would two women want to have sex with each other anyway or when they do have sex since, there is no penis, it's not really sex. Some other misperceptions are that I have penis envy or want to be a man.*

Lemlem experienced a very significant relationship with a woman with whom she fell in love. She explained in great detail what the experience was like for her:

*My second relationship was with a woman at the age of 21 and at the time it was exactly everything everyone said it would be, but only more. It was*

*physical, wobbly knees, sudden plummeting sensation from head to toe. A constant smile, which some people call it silly but I didn't care less. A forgetfulness, an inertia that left me sitting, staring into space, a tremendous appetite or none at all. It was mental, I wasn't in the here or now, I was in a beautiful fantasy land, everything looked perfect, even the colors were muted, soft, rainbow like. It was spiritual; I was sure of that, that was the person in the entire world who was meant for me and me for that person...and I assumed that since God gave all of us the capacity to feel things deeply; my emotions had some worthwhile purpose.*

The above finding is consistent with what Patricia McFadden states on how African women's choices concerning sexual freedom need to move beyond simply "safeguarding ourselves against sexually transmitted diseases...and demands for safety and protection from sexualized violation in the private and public spheres" (2004, p. 4). She continues by saying:

*It has to be everything that we have not yet begun to say and do as women who know that our lives can be different, if we only have the courage to step out of the cages of cultural practices and values that not only oppress us, but also presume to dictate the terms of our 'freedom'.*

All five women described their relationships with women as pleasurable and empowering, without apology. Respondent's answers suggest they perceive themselves as sexual beings and sexual actors (as opposed to passive beings who exist only for the pleasure of others) when asked what they liked about their sexuality. All responded in ways that conveyed extreme satisfaction with their same-sex sexuality emphasizing

both the physical and emotional connections with women sexual partners. Mahlet described her most important relationship with a woman as one where she experienced “unconditional love.” Aster described her same-sex relationship as not only a physical act but also an emotional and spiritual connection.

*I like the fact that I could totally feel connected to her, emotionally. It was the first time homosexuality became a reality and I could feel it in every inch of my skin...I like how sex is almost a religious communion with my partner.*

When asked what they did not like about their sexuality, all of the respondents made a distinction between their sexuality and other people’s reactions to their sexuality by generally indicating that they liked the fact that they are able to have a fulfilling and liberating emotional, sexual, and spiritual relationships, but disliked only the homophobic reactions to it. In addition, all of the women said that they hate the secretive nature of their romantic relationships with women. Meron said:

*I don’t like the fact that I am not able to express my emotions and feelings in public for the woman I like. It made me curious and conscious about others. Sometimes I get jealous of heterosexual people. It is very depressing.*

Being closeted to most family members and work colleagues is a strategic practice by all five women given the prevalence of homophobia in their cultural environments. However, all have made efforts to come out to more than one person, either a close friend or family member. These attempts to come out demonstrate their desire to

express their sexuality openly and honestly. However, after having experienced homophobia; all concluded that it was generally not safe to be out.

Although intimidation and fear characterize the lives of the lesbians, lack of society-induced shame about their same-sex sexuality and clear signs of “lesbian/gay pride” was evidenced when they answered a question asking if they could change their sexuality, would they do it—all emphatically concluded that they would not! Tsion explained her strong belief in her sexuality as follows:

*NO I would not change my sexuality. I love who I am. I love that my world is not black and white nor do I have to choose this or that based on gender. Rather I am free to be with people, I am free to freely feel attractions to people void of dogmatic rules and senseless guilt that we have been socialized into blindly accepting.*

In a similar vein with McFadden and Tamale, Carol Vance (1997) in her article, “Pleasure and Danger: Towards the Politics of Sexuality,” explores the juxtaposition of sexual pleasure and danger that surrounds women’s lives. According to her, in a patriarchal social structure women’s sexuality has both a pleasurable and dangerous aspect characterized by sexual agency and choice as well as sexual violence and oppression respectively. With the influence of internal and/or external factors, a woman may experience either of the two sides of her sexuality.

*To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women’s experience with sexual agency and choice*

*and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live (Vance, 1986/1977, p.327).*

Despite the fact that the state and broader society refuse to accept, tolerate or even treat them with basic human respect, all five women are persistent in accepting who they are. As Lemlem states: *“Saying that I am lesbian gives me the satisfaction of knowing my true identity”*. Perhaps their ability to be so forthright in claiming their same-sex identities is related to the finding that four of the five women identified themselves as feminists (one person, Lemlem, left the answer blank when asked if she identified with the term). Tsion expressed the strongest feminist sentiment throughout her responses and said: *“I wholeheartedly believe in a world based on social equality for all sexes. I aspire to have a world that is free from subjugation and oppression; where power doesn’t have to be gained by oppressing someone else.”*

#### **4.4 Sexual Fluidity and Diversity among Lesbians**

Researchers now openly acknowledge that despite significant advances in the science of sexuality over the past twenty years, female sexual orientation is, for the time being, poorly understood (Diamond, 2008). According to psychologist Lisa Diamond (2008), *“This sexual flexibility or “sexual fluidity” makes it possible for some women to experience desires for either men or women under certain circumstances, regardless of their overall sexual orientations”* (p. 3).

Diamond further explains that “the sexual fluidity of women makes women of all orientations experience variation in their erotic and affectional feelings as they encounter different situations, relationships and life stages” (p.3). This, in part, is why most lesbian women experience sex with men at some points in their lives. However, the ongoing pressure to be heterosexual also explains some of this fluidity and why some lesbians occasionally have sex with men. Nonetheless, some women are truly bisexual (attracted to both sexes sexually), while others have a more exclusive sexual orientation that is either same-sex (lesbian) or other-sex (heterosexual). Furthermore, some individuals have a capacity to be more sexually flexible than others regarding their attractions, desires, and sexual behaviors (Diamond, 2008).

Sexual fluidity and diversity were apparent in some of the responses of the participants in the present study. For example, although all five women describe their sexual identity as lesbian and/or same-gender loving, two (Tzion and Aster) described their sexual behavior and desire as bisexual because they also have sex with men. Both of these women, however, felt emotionally more connected to women despite their sexual activities with men. Tzion explains: *“At times I find myself more physically attracted to men and at other times I find myself more physically attracted to women. So far I have always been more emotionally attracted to other women.”*

Consistent with current research on female sexuality and how it differs from male sexuality, the women in this study made a distinction between emotional and physical sexual attraction. Researchers have gathered considerable evidence regarding the

greater role women grant to emotional versus sexual factors in their same-sex attractions. In fact, many women report feeling emotionally attracted to other women *before* being physically attracted to them (Diamond, 2008). The following findings of the current study provide empirical evidence for this difference in female sexuality.

For example, the women were asked to rate to what degree they were attracted to women physically and emotionally. The data demonstrate the sexual diversity among lesbians. On the one hand, when asked what percent were they *physically* attracted to women, Tsion and Aster, the two women who engage in bisexual behavior, said 50% and 75%, respectively; whereas, Mahlet, Lemlem and Meron said they were 100% physically attracted to women. On the other hand, when asked what percent were they *emotionally* attracted to women Tsion and Aster said 70% and 80% respectively; Mahlet, Lemlem and Meron said they were 100% emotionally attracted to women. These findings support the complexities of female sexuality and attraction that researchers continue to explore and delineate.

Additional sexual diversity, fluidity, and complexity were noted among the five women when they described whether their first sexual encounter was with a male or female: three (Tsion, Mahlet, and Lemlem) had their first sexual experience with a male and the other two (Aster and Meron) had sex first with a female. Even though sex with men was described in different ways by the three women whose first sexual experiences were with men (e.g., “it was later enjoyable with some men,” “it was okay, I was not thrilled nor was it awful,” and “it was something to do at the time when I was struggling

emotionally, physically, and sexually”), all three ultimately found themselves attracted to women sexually and emotionally. Aster is the only woman in the study who had her first sexual encounter with a woman, then found herself sexually attracted to men later in her sexual development. Meron is the only woman in the study who did not mention any adult sexual activity with men. These findings demonstrate the degree to which lesbians are a diverse group, just like heterosexuals are a diverse group, and one should be careful not to generalize about lesbian desire, lesbian attraction, and lesbian sexual behavior.

Despite the diversity among the women regarding their first sexual experiences and their current sexual behavior, all five of the women are comfortable being referred to as “lesbian”.

These findings support social constructionist assumptions of sexuality. The social constructionist model of sexuality posits that sexual identities do not necessarily exist as fixed types but are created and given meaning through social interactions and cultural ideologies (Diamond, 2008, p.5). These five women have given their sexual experiences meaning, based upon their understanding of lesbianism. Unlike most findings in the African lesbian literature (Isaacks & Khaxas, 2005; Khumalo, 2005; Potgieter, 1997), the women were comfortable with the behavior and the identity. Although they are not a representative sample of all Ethiopian lesbians, they demonstrate that some lesbians are comfortable with the label. Perhaps, their acceptance of the feminist label (and, thus a feminist identity) also enables them to accept the lesbian label and identity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Conclusion

Recently, many researches have pointed out that same-sex sexuality is prevalent in African societies and has existed in remarkable quantity and diversity (e.g. Arnfred, 2004; Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Murray & Roscoe, 1998; Potgieter, 1997; Tamale, 2003). Nonetheless, everyday African men and women still insist that homosexuality is un-African as well as unnatural and definitely not a part of African culture. Culture is not static and rigid; it is always subject to change and influence. Hence, the dynamic and changing feature of culture has led to people's understanding of different issues, like homosexuality, over time as additional information is made available. Feminist legal scholar Sylvia Tamale states:

*Trends both in the present and the past reveal that it is time for Africans to bury the tired myth that homosexuality is unAfrican*  
(Tamale, 2003, p. 2).

The findings of the present study provide some evidence that homosexuality, in general, and lesbianism, in particular, is existent in Ethiopia. Even though only informal and pejorative words for same-sex sexuality exist in Ethiopian languages, same-sex sexual behavior has been, and still continues to exist among Ethiopians in and outside of Ethiopia. Language, as a part of culture, is also dynamic and no culture remains pure across time without paradigm shifts in collective self-understanding. In addition, language specialists have come to understand that rather than concentrating totally on language and what is said, we must also analyze what is practiced yet remains unspoken

(Bakare-Yusef, 2004). Therefore, by exploring what is considered “secret”, “taboo” and “unspeakable” in the lives of African women, the present research gave Ethiopian lesbians a voice. Furthermore, by documenting their life stories, this research acknowledged the existence they are often denied.

Based on the five case studies analyzed in this research, the Ethiopian criminal code that makes same-sex practices illegal has affected the lives of Ethiopian lesbian identified women in at least two major ways. First, it made Ethiopian lesbians ambivalent about living in Ethiopia, even if the laws change in the future. All of the women expressed some doubts about living in Ethiopia given the culturally-ingrained homophobia in the average person’s understanding of same-sex sexuality.

Such state-sanctioned homophobia has a “brain drain” effect that must be acknowledged. Ethiopia is losing skilled and educated citizens as a result of its repressive laws. How many other skilled LGBT Ethiopians have left the country in the interest of having their basic human rights respected? Most of the respondents are highly educated and skilled, yet they do not feel safe and free in their country of origin. When women and sexual minorities don’t feel safe, and have the means to find safer geographical locations, they migrate to other places taking their skills and other valuable resources with them. Accordingly, the women who live abroad don’t have plans to return to Ethiopia, and those who live in Ethiopia constantly think about settling in a place where they can experience their sexuality legally.

Second, state-sanctioned homophobia—due to laws making homosexuality illegal—force Ethiopian lesbians to remain silent about their sexuality. The fear of rejection and the experience of painful and often bitter responses from family members, friends and colleagues in the past, has resulted in decisions by all of the women to remain closeted except to a few family members and friends in order to maintain their safety and security. Even though none of these women reported being subjected to physical abuse, they have experienced social and psychological abuses from homophobic friends and relatives who they thought they could trust. Thus, most of the participants are forced to alienate themselves from their friends, families and workmates, and this alienation and fear of discrimination are perceived as social and psychologically abusive.

Two of the women who participated in this research described their sexual identities as lesbian, yet their sexual behavior was described as also including sexual relations with men. However, the other three identified themselves with an exclusive lesbian sexual identity. This preliminary research finding supports earlier research (see Diamond, 2008) and clearly demonstrates not only the diversity exhibited among lesbian-identified women, but also how fluid and flexible sexual behavior is for some women. There is no “one particular kind” of lesbian just as there is “no one particular kind” of heterosexual. Therefore, one should be very careful in making generalizations about the sexual as well as emotional attractions, desires and behavior of Ethiopian lesbians.

Also, consistent with previous research (e.g. Diamond, 2008), all respondents of the research made a clear distinction between their emotional and physical attractions to persons of the same-sex or the other-sex. These findings demonstrate the complexity, diversity, and fluidity of women's sexual behavior and desire and how Ethiopian lesbians, like lesbians in a longitudinal study conducted by psychologist Lisa Diamond (2008), place greater emphasis on emotional attraction than sexual or physical attraction. This finding has not been confirmed by research on gay men and highlights a distinct difference between same-sex attractions of women versus men (Diamond, 2008).

Most importantly, despite the challenges Ethiopian lesbians experience from fundamentalist religious beliefs, repressive laws and societal norms, all five women perceive themselves as healthy sexual human beings. Their responses overwhelmingly reflect their courage to express their emotional as well as physical attractions and desires for women. None of the participants of the study considered themselves as "deviant" or "abnormal." In fact, they appear to be comfortable with their sexuality and view it as normal for them just as heterosexuals view their sexuality as normal to their personal make-up. Their comfort with discussing the pleasurable aspects of their sexuality and their emphasis on pleasure as an empowering aspect of their relationships with women might serve as an important lesson for any woman who feels pressured to link sex only with men's pleasure and procreation. What may be liberating about some lesbian relationships is the freedom to explore pleasure and sexual gratification without concerns about reproductive obligations.

Another overwhelming finding of this study is the feminist attitude that these women possess. Four of the five women identify themselves with the label “feminist.” Perhaps their familiarity with feminist perspectives assisted them in understanding the politics of gender and sexuality and understanding the politics also helped them accept their sexuality as healthy and normal. Moreover, their acceptance of a feminist identity might be related to their acceptance of lesbianism as a practice as well as an identity. They are also highly educated and their educational experiences may also explain the relative ease with which they accept a feminist identity and a lesbian identity. These findings—their acceptance of a feminist identity and a lesbian identity—are the only findings that are not consistent with previous research on African women who engage in same-sex practices. Therefore, another limitation of this study is the high level of education that all five women had that separates them from most of the previous research conducted on African lesbians.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

### **Human Rights, Women’s Rights, and Lesbian Rights**

Human rights scholars and activists in Africa and abroad believe that the recognition of sexual minorities and the acknowledgement of their human rights strengthen a nation’s tolerance and acceptance of human diversity within that society (Cornwall, Correa, & Jolly, 2008). Moreover, the protection of human rights has become the measurement of a democratic system. Thus, it is in Ethiopia’s interest, as an emerging democratic country, to place a high priority on cultivating a human rights culture and human rights protection as part of its democratic goals. Women’s rights have been conceptualized by

many scholars as human rights and women's sexuality is intimately tied to gender equality and their rights as human beings.

The government is the primary responsible agent for granting and protecting the human rights of its citizens. However, considering the deep rooted beliefs, value systems and religious dogmas of the society, it might appear challenging for the government of Ethiopia to guarantee women's sexual rights over night. However, arguments to fight for women's human and sexual rights should incorporate some basic components of human rights: (1) the right to privacy, (2) the right to be free from discrimination, and (3) the right to association in order to feel safe and secure if one is to live in Ethiopia. The protection and respect of these basic human rights suggest that lesbianism should be legalized in Ethiopia.

The right to privacy enables same-sex identified women to stay in peace at their home without being subject to physical, social, and psychological abuse from government agents as well as from the public. This right would minimize the level of fear and intimidation that Ethiopian lesbians experience. The right to be free from discrimination should be guaranteed to Ethiopian lesbians in order to allow them access to public services and resources without being subject to any discrimination and stigmatization as a result of their sexuality.

In 2007, an Ethiopian gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered association was established with 604 members, although the government of Ethiopia refused to acknowledge and give license to the association. As a result, Ethiopian LGBT people

were forced to establish informal associations through the internet and other social networks (Globalgayz, 2007). However, the right to association is a basic human right that the government of Ethiopia should guarantee to all people of same-sex sexualities, particularly Ethiopian lesbians. This particular right would help lesbians to associate by establishing a physical location and a formal network in order to organize and fight for their rights in one voice. Lesbians in other African countries are beginning to organize and provide helpful role models to Ethiopian lesbians who are ready and willing to take the next step in demanding their rights.

For example, despite the repression of Tanzanian lesbians, in 1999 some twenty lesbian activists in Dare es Salaam decided to set up an informal lesbian association (Mohamed, 2005). The objective was to build a democratic and accountable association that strives to remove all forms of discrimination in all aspects of life for lesbians in Tanzania. The objective was also to educate, inform and counsel the members in matters relating to their health and well-being. The association has been a great support for lesbians and has created a comfort and safety zone (Wieringa, 2005).

In 1996, a nongovernmental local organization called The Rainbow Project was formulated by Namibian gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals with the aim of promoting their full human rights in Namibia through leadership development, public education, institutional and law reform (Khaxas, 2005).

A similar lesbian association might emerge in Ethiopia if the government is willing to give them license and recognition. These lesbian associations might help Ethiopian

lesbian women feel safe, secure and comfortable in being open about their sexuality, and also serve as a buffer given the physical, social and psychological abuse lesbians are subject to by others. Although most of the women in this study did not experience direct discrimination and physical abuse, the fear of such abuse is very real and the indirect social and psychological abuses that include alienation from friends and family ,due to the pressures to remain closeted, should not be ignored or downplayed.

### **5.3 Future Research Recommendations**

One of the difficulties the researcher of this study faced was establishing trust with the Ethiopian lesbian community due to their fears about being “outed” by someone outside the community because of stereotypes about homosexuality and the criminal codes making homosexuality illegal. Being outed could result in imprisonment. As a result of this very understandable and realistic fear, Ethiopian lesbians are a very closeted and dispersed community and difficult to research. Therefore, future researchers must first establish trust with this community if they expect Ethiopian lesbians to disclose their private lives to them under such repressive conditions.

Another important issue that requires attention for prospective researchers involves methods. Future researchers should remain flexible regarding methods due to the sensitive nature of the issues discussed when asking Ethiopian lesbians about their lives and the fact that the community is at high risk for state repression. Face-to-face interviews were the desired method, however, Ethiopian lesbians were not comfortable with this method and a semi-structured questionnaire was designed as an alternative. Also, Ethiopian lesbians were not comfortable completing the questionnaire in person;

therefore, the questionnaire was sent via the Internet as an attachment to an Ethiopian lesbian listserv. This flexibility resulted in the five case studies because the researcher was flexible enough to guarantee the comfort, anonymity, confidentiality as well as safety of the community.

Future researchers should resist stereotyping African women as only victims of men's sexual violence and, instead, give due emphasis on women's sexual agency. African women's sexuality as healthy and liberating, irrespective of the sex of the person they are associated with, is an extremely under-researched topic. New ways of understanding African women, their sexuality, and gender relations should be the topic of future scholarly research.

Future researchers, who accept the scholar-activist tradition associated with feminist research, should also attempt to educate the public about sexual diversity and sexual complexities in order to promote a human rights culture that leaves room for tolerance and acceptance of difference. This research is a step in that direction.

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## **Annex I**

### **Questionnaire to be filled out by the Ethiopian lesbian women who are members of the Queer Abesha yahoo group listserv.**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This study is for partial fulfillment of the master's degree in Gender Studies at Addis Ababa University. The purpose of the study is to understand the lives of Ethiopian women who have same-sex romantic attractions in order to help policy makers respect and protect the human rights of women. We are focusing on Ethiopian laws in our study and anyone who identifies with this context and has been affected by these laws is welcomed to participate. The study will compare your responses to the responses of other African women from previous research who consider themselves lesbians, bisexuals, questioning their sexuality, and, otherwise, nonheterosexuals. We are primarily using frameworks and studies by African feminists on sexuality to analyze the findings (see selected references listed below). The voices of African women who are NOT heterosexuals are not well represented in research. Your participation is needed and highly appreciated. Please make a sincere effort to answer every question. However, if you encounter any question that you think is too personal or if there is any reason that you do not want to answer a particular question, please feel free to skip it.

Given the level of repression and state-sanctioned homophobia in most African countries, your anonymity will be protected and your responses will be kept confidential. Please use the pseudonyms you use on the listserv (or some other pseudonym of your choosing). Only the master's student listed below and her advisor will view the actual responses. However, if you are not comfortable emailing your

responses directly to the student or her advisor, you may email your responses to the listserv manager. An Amharic version of this survey will be made available for those who prefer it. Your comfort and safety are our greatest concerns, hence the different options. The final report of the findings will be made available on the listserv.

If you have individual questions regarding the purpose of the study, the survey, or would like to speak to us, you may contact us in the following ways:

*Betlehem Ephrem, Master's candidate*

*University of Addis Ababa*

*Institute of Gender Studies*

*Betlehem\_zeleke@yahoo.co.uk*

*Dr. Aaronette M. White, thesis advisor*

*Visiting Professor, Institute of Gender Studies,*

*University of Addis Ababa*

*Associate Professor, Department of Psychology,*

*University of California-Santa Cruz*

*aaronette.white@gmail.com*

## **References**

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## **I. Sexuality**

1. How would you describe your sexuality?
2. How do you identify yourself? (You can choose more than one by typing an X after the label and any comments you may have).

Queer

Lesbian

Bisexual

Gay

Same-sex loving / Transgender

Same-gender loving X

Multi-sexual/ Open relationship

Other label (please specify)

I do not prefer or like any label

3. Do you have early memories of same-sex attraction? If yes, could you give an example of one?
4. Do you remember when (at what age) you first questioned your sexuality? If so, what age?
5. Did you experience any difficulties in accepting your sexuality? If so, describe the difficulties and how you coped with them.
6. Do you experience any obstacles and/or threat from other people because of your sexuality, and if so, how do you cope with them?
7. Do you think you were born with your sexuality?
8. Do you think choice played any role in your sexuality?

9. Do you feel that certain things in your environment played a role in your sexuality?
10. Has your sexuality changed over time? If yes, how?
11. What do you like most about your sexuality?
12. What do you least like about it?
13. What are the common misperceptions about your sexuality?
14. Are there any advantages to having same-sex sexuality as a woman?
15. Do you feel that your sexuality frees you in some ways from certain difficulties with men? In other words, do you feel more liberated in some ways as a woman because of your sexuality and the fact that your partners are women?
16. With 0 percent representing exclusive attraction to men, 50 percent representing equal attractions to men and women, and 100 percent representing exclusive attraction to women, provide **any** percentage that describes where you fall regarding your daily **physical** attractions. \_\_\_\_%
17. With 0 percent representing exclusive attraction to men, 50 percent representing equal attractions to men and women, and 100 percent representing exclusive attraction to women, provide **any** percentage that describes where you fall regarding your daily **emotional** attractions. \_\_\_\_%
18. Imagine your ideal sexual partner, someone who possesses all of the qualities you find arousing. List these qualities, order is not important.

## **II. Romantic Relationships**

1. Describe your first romantic relationship? Was it with a man or a woman? What did you like? What did you dislike? How did it end?
2. Please describe all of your other romantic relationships, the sex of the person, what you liked and didn't like about the relationship and how the relationship ended.
3. Are you currently in a romantic relationship? What is the sex of the person? What do you like most about it? What do you like least about it?

## **III. Being Out**

1. Who knows about your sexuality?
2. Who did you come out to first and why that person?
3. What was the reaction of that person?

## **IV. Background Information**

1. What year were you born, the month, and the day?
2. How old are you?
3. In what country were you born?
4. If currently living in another country, which country and for how long?
5. What is your first language?
6. What level did you complete in school?
7. Are you currently working? If yes, what type of work do you do?
8. Did you grow up with both parents? If not, which one did you grow up with or did another person raise you? (Specify the relationship if the person was not your parent).
9. Did you grow up in a religious home? If yes, which religion?
10. Are you legally married? If yes, what is the sex of your spouse?

11. Do you have children? If yes, how many and specify whether male or female.
12. If not living in Ethiopia, why did you leave, and do you plan to return?
13. If you had the choice, what country would you prefer to live in? Why?
14. If you had the choice, would you live in Ethiopia with your same sex partner? Why or Why not?
15. If you had the choice AND if you want children, where would you choose to raise them? Why?
16. If the laws in Ethiopia included protections and respect for the human rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered, and queer-identified people, would you be willing to live **openly** with a same-sex partner in the country?
17. If you had the choice, would you change your sexuality? Why or why not?
18. Do you identify with the term feminist? Why or why not?
19. If there is a question that you feel that we should have asked or missed, could you please ask it AND also answer it!

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THE QUESTIONAIR!!! PLEASE EMAIL  
YOUR RESPONSES AS AN ATTACHMENT AND SEND TO EITHER:

betelhem\_zeleke@yahoo.co.uk

aaronette.white@gmail.com

IF YOU PREFER, YOU MAY ALSO SEND TO THE LIST SERV MANAGER