



**DEPUTY MINISTER IN THE PRESIDENCY FOR WOMEN, YOUTH
AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

DRAFT KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY

MS MMAPASEKA STEVE LETSIKE, MP

AT THE

LAGABIBO HIGH-LEVEL LGBTI ROUNDTABLE

ON

25 MAY 2026 | GABARONE | 09:00



**women, youth &
persons with disabilities**
Department:
Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Thank you Programme Director;

Our gracious hosts, Ms Nozizwe Ntesang, the CEO of LEGABIBO and your entire team;

Honourable Members of Parliament, Activists, Community Leaders and Friends,

I greet you in the spirit of pride, love and solidarity, as we meet in Botswana, a country whose recent legal victories for the LGBTI community remind the continent that the arc of justice can bend toward freedom and equality for all in our diversity.

Programme Director, we are not assembled in abstraction, but in a city with streets, sidewalks and markets that carry the stories of experience by each person who walks here.

With this understanding in mind, I would like to invite all of us to think for a moment of a young queer person walking through Gaborone's Main Mall or the winding lanes of Lobatse. Every decision about their presence in daily life becomes a calculation of survival.

That young person does not simply choose a route, they trace a mental map of hostility, wondering which alley will turn into a gauntlet of stares or slurs. A taxi door is not just a means of transport; it is a doorway into potential humiliation, where a driver's attitude can make them feel like a stranger in their own country. A clinic reception desk feels like a courtroom when a nurse misgenders them, stripping away their sense of self with a

single word. Even the simple act of walking down a street becomes fraught with the fear that one's presence is seen as an intrusion.

This is what erasure feels like: to be forced to shrink yourself, to ask whether you are allowed to exist openly in the spaces everyone else takes for granted, and to live in constant negotiation for the right to exist.

This lived reality of many queer persons is a daily reminder that certain identities are not included in the city's social architecture, and their right to the city is limited by fear. Ours is therefore to ask the necessary question on the true measure of our democracy, which is: ***can those at the margins occupy public space without shame, and can they help shape that space for all?***

Programme Director, French urban philosopher Henri Lefebvre wrote about the “*right to the city*” as a measure of democracy in urban spaces that demands inclusivity, accessibility and the experience of democracy for all in urban spaces. He argued that cities should not be controlled by markets alone but should be shaped by the citizens who inhabit them.

Today, this right remains a rallying cry for social justice movements across the world. As David Harvey reminds us, justice must always be spatial; the right to the city is the right to shape, belong to and thrive in the spaces we inhabit.

This is why pride marches down in spaces that are often deemed “conservative” matter so much, and I think specifically about South Africa's pride march in Vilakazi Street, Soweto. In that township scarred by poverty and apartheid planning, queer people reclaim space and assert

that freedom must be for all or it is not freedom at all. Our challenge is to bring the same spirit of spatial reclamation to every street, village, town and city in our region, the continent and ultimately the world.

Botswana's courts have opened doors.

In 2019, the High Court struck down laws criminalising consensual same-sex intimacy, recognising that such laws violate rights to dignity, privacy and equality; the Court of Appeal affirmed that decision in 2021. The courts ordered that organisations like LEGABIBO may register freely, extended employment protections to workers irrespective of sexual orientation, and recognised the right of transgender people to amend their gender markers. These are powerful affirmations that dignity is an African value.

We commend these milestones, yet we acutely acknowledge that legal victories are foundations, not destinations.

A court judgment can remove a chain, but it does not build a bridge. For LGBTI persons, the law must follow them home, accompany them to the clinic, protect them at school and open the door to employment. Implementation cannot hinge on a single courageous litigant or a sympathetic judge; it must be mainstreamed across government.

Botswana has the opportunity to craft a comprehensive policy framework that integrates LGBTI inclusion into health, education, policing, housing, economic development and social protection. Budgets must allocate resources for safe shelters, gender-affirming care, community education and hate-crime prevention. Public servants require training, data must be

collected and monitored, and accountability mechanisms must ensure that discrimination has consequences.

From where I stand as Deputy Minister in the Presidency responsible for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, we have learnt that inclusion cannot survive as a side programme. It must be built into the machinery of the state. It must sit in planning, budgeting, monitoring, training, procurement, service delivery and accountability. A coordinating department may not run every clinic, school or police station, but it must ensure that every clinic, school and police station understands that equality is not optional.

This is not about importing foreign values. It is about realising the promises of Botswana's own Constitution and ensuring that law becomes life.

In our quest to always frame the fight for LGBTI inclusion, we must constantly remind ourselves that there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.

In Botswana and across our region, a lesbian woman is not only navigating homophobia; she is also confronting unemployment, poverty and gender-based violence. A transgender man is not only battling transphobia; he is wrestling with a health system that denies him care. A queer person with a disability faces not only stigma but inaccessible schools and workplaces. As Audre Lorde warned, we must resist the temptation to isolate issues because oppression intersects and multiplies.

Intersectionality therefore is not a slogan we invoke for intellectual elegance; it is a policy discipline.

It asks government to see people in the fullness of their lives, and not as fragments of identity placed into separate administrative boxes. It reminds us that when a queer young person is poor, rural, disabled, unemployed, living with HIV, displaced from family support, or denied documentation that reflects who they are, their exclusion is not caused by one system alone.

We must appreciate that intersectionality is produced by many systems failing at once. Its policy relevance is that it forces the state to design differently: to ensure that health policy speaks to identity and dignity; that education policy speaks to safety and belonging; that employment policy speaks to discrimination and economic access; that disability policy includes queer persons with disabilities; and that GBVF responses recognise the violence experienced by lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and gender-diverse persons. It moves us from symbolic inclusion to practical mainstreaming, from treating LGBTI persons as an “add-on” to placing them within the centre of planning, budgeting, service delivery, monitoring and accountability.

We must also name violence in order to dismantle it. Hate crimes, homophobic killings and transphobic attacks are not isolated incidents; they are part of an architecture of oppression. Families disown queer children; pulpits preach hate; politicians remain silent. These acts are sometimes dressed up as culture or tradition, but they are violence, nothing more.

And yet within this bleak picture of exclusion and erasure, voices of courage rise.

We honour activists like Imam Muhsin Hendricks, one of the first openly gay imams in the world, who teaches that faith and queerness are not enemies. We honour photographers like Zanele Muholi who remind us that ***“If I wait for someone else to validate my existence, it will mean that I’m shortchanging myself”***. We honour pioneers like Simon Nkoli, who stood at Africa’s first pride march and declared, ***“I am black and I am gay. I cannot separate the two parts of me into secondary and primary struggles... when I fight for my freedom, I must fight for both oppression”***. These words should be our compass.

Fellow Activists, while we advance, a global backlash that is anti-gender, anti-human rights and anti-democracy gathers.

UN Women warns that anti-rights movements are on the rise as transnational networks that exploit instability to bring reactionary beliefs into the mainstream and reverse gains for marginalised groups under the guise of culture, religion and morality.

These movements frame equality for women and LGBTI people as threats to “traditional” values and push for discriminatory policies and even criminalisation. These actors engineer moral panics, accusing LGBTI movements of indoctrinating youth. They are well funded, receiving more financial support than LGBTI organisations, and their campaigns are transnational.

Our response cannot be neutral.

The attack on LGBTI rights is not only an attack on LGBTI persons; it is an assault on democracy itself. When we normalise state control over personal dignity, we open the door to repression of all differences. Solidarity must therefore be local and global, national and regional, continental and international.

As Southern African states, we should collaborate on reforming laws, protecting human-rights defenders, sharing best practices and resisting imported hate. Our continental bodies must speak with one voice in defence of human rights. International partners must fund our movements, not our oppressors.

One of the most insidious myths used by anti-rights actors is that queerness and trans identity are “un-African.” This claim erases our histories. Anthropological records reveal that long before colonialism, many African societies recognised diverse gender expressions and same-sex relationships.

Among the Langi of northern Uganda, *mudoko dako*—effeminate males—were treated as women and could marry men. Among the Ila people of Zambia, *Mwami* prophets were men who dressed as women and performed women’s work. The Lugbara people recognised transgender mediums called *okule* and *agule*, who served as messengers between worlds. In Angola, *chibados* were male diviners who channelled feminine spirits by acting like women.

These examples, documented by historians and scholars, show that gender fluidity and same-sex relationships existed in African societies

long before European colonisers imposed rigid binaries and criminalised difference. As scholar Chantal Zabus reminds us, ***“The African continent has always been more queer than generally acknowledged”***.

To defend LGBTI rights is not to import foreign ideas; it is to reclaim suppressed traditions and assert that erasure is un-African.

Botswana does not have to build this architecture from nothing. It can domesticate and operationalise the international, continental and regional commitments that already provide a rights-based foundation for inclusion.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, CEDAW, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights all affirm, in different ways, the indivisibility of dignity, equality, non-discrimination, bodily integrity, participation and access to justice. Botswana has ratified several of these core treaties, including ICCPR, CEDAW, CRC and CRPD.

At regional level, the SADC Strategy for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in the SADC Region 2019–2030 provides a policy and programming framework for Member States to improve SRHR for all people in the region and to meet SDG-related commitments. Botswana can also draw on the SADC Regional Strategy for HIV and SRHR among Key Populations 2024–2030, which calls for targeted, evidence-based and rights-driven interventions for key populations, not merely as a health-sector matter but as a human rights and development agenda.

These instruments should be domesticated into ordinary governance: clinic protocols, school safety policies, police standing orders, labour protections, identity documentation systems, public procurement, municipal planning, data collection and budget frameworks. That is how international commitments cease to be documents signed in conference rooms and become protection felt in daily life.

Programme Director, Democracy is not only about casting ballots; it is about the everyday experience of belonging. If queer people cannot walk freely in our cities and villages, our democracy is incomplete. The right to the city compels us to ask who is excluded from urban life and why. It demands that we imagine cities and towns where everyone can access housing, public services, cultural life and economic opportunities.

We must be unapologetic to state that the inclusion of LGBTI persons makes our democracies stronger.

It challenges patriarchal norms that harm women, youth and persons with disabilities. It builds inclusive economies where queer entrepreneurs can flourish. It creates schools where children learn that diversity is a strength. And it deepens our understanding that oppression is interconnected—racial injustice, gender inequality, disability discrimination, class exploitation and queerphobia all share roots and must be uprooted together.

UN Women notes that working for LGBTI rights is inseparable from working for women's rights and gender equality and that building coalitions among those facing anti-rights pushback is crucial. We continue to subscribe to that thinking.

As I prepare to take leave of the platform, I urge us to return to our young person walking through the streets of Gaborone and Lobatse.

In the Botswana we are building, they will no longer calculate danger before imagining their dreams. They will not have to choose between family and freedom, employment and authenticity, healthcare and humiliation. They will walk down any street without fear, knowing that the Constitution follows them there.

To reach this future, we must believe that dignity is indivisible, that democracy is weakened when any group lives in fear, and that African societies are strong enough to love all their children in their diversity. We must practise solidarity that crosses borders and builds bridges struggles. We must demand that budgets match rhetoric, that training matches policy and that justice is spatial.

May this roundtable not be remembered as a mere meeting, but as a turning point where Southern Africa chose courage over fear, solidarity over silence and lived freedom over paper rights. This is our collective struggle.

May we leave Gaborone resolved that no Constitution is complete within the SADC region until the most excluded person can feel its protection in the ordinary places where life happens—on buses and trains, in clinics and schools, in markets and workplaces, and in the quiet dignity of being called by their name.

I thank you!