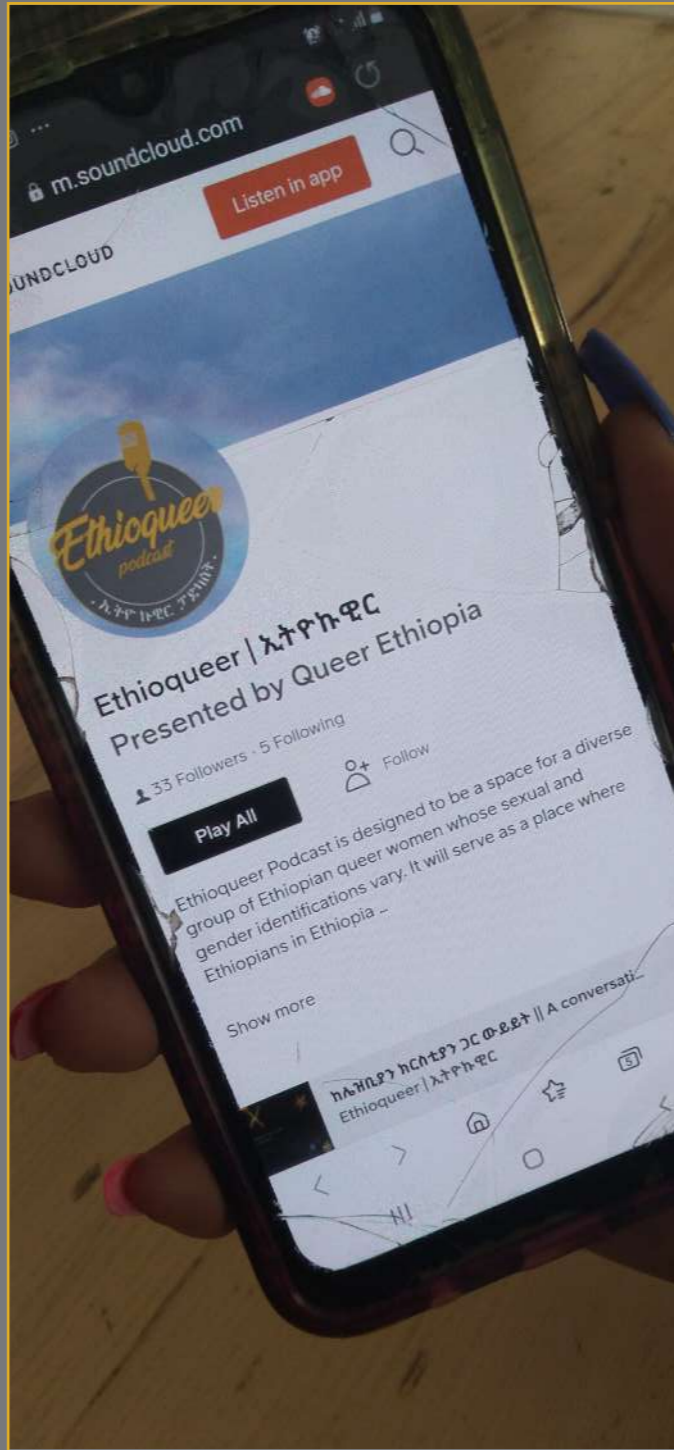


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Nisnis - quarterly magazine focusing on LGBT

Our bodies



Hear yourself reflected

www.soundcloud.com/ethioqueer



Volume 2, Issue 3

Nisnis a quarterly magazine that focuses on the issues of LBQ Ethiopians in Ethiopia and in the diaspora.

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QUEER ETHIOPIA

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

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from the editors

“I am biologically male, and the people that I am dealing with would say, ‘What is this? If he is a man, he can only be a man. Why would I be with a man who is feminine? I might as well be with a woman,’” Boney said as they explained their challenges of being a femme within the LGBTQ+ community.

Our interview with Boney, conducted for the sixth issue of Nisnis, was inspiring both for the strength that they exhibited as they described the way that they walk through life and for their demand for more openness in our communities.

In this issue, we tackle body image issues in the LBQ community. We examine what body image means to those of us in the Ethiopian LBQ community, how we learn to overcome our challenges and change the narrative of what is acceptable and “right”, as well as what impact our gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations have on our self-acceptance with regard to our body image.

One of our contributors, a non-binary Ethiopian, describes their struggles with eating disorders, which began, in part, when they started to question their gender and sexual identity. “I wanted to get skinnier so I didn’t have any ass, and I didn’t want my titties to be visible. I wanted to look more androgynous,” they write when detailing their effort to fit a certain type of body that they felt was desirable by community standards.

The narrow beauty standards in society impact people in the LBQ community in a unique manner given that we are already marginalized. People in the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to suffer from mental illness due to experiencing greater stress caused by stigma and prejudice, and they are more likely to doubt themselves.

An example of that doubt is articulated by Alex who said, “Dating is a bit difficult, mainly because I have internalized a lot of fatphobia, and it’s hard for me to think I’m attractive.” She further discussed how she uses hypersexuality as a way of “proving” her queerness, given her femme presentation.

Another contributor details her journey of learning to love her body - “I grew to love my body by slowly shedding what I had learned and internalized about my own” - reminding us that we need to unlearn so much. The journey is never easy, but she makes us believe that it is possible.

Yet another contributor forces us to re-examine butchness as a rebellion against traditional female roles. “For me, being butch isn’t about trying to be like a man. It is a lifestyle; a way for LBQ women to express themselves.” There is power and liberation in the rejection of roles that do not work for us.

As always, this issue of Nisnis was a joy to put together. The experiences reflected in these pages are bound to make us go through a gamut of emotions: from the teenager who struggled with eating disorders, to the teenager in an Australian town who struggled to accept her queerness, to the woman who learned, to love her body to the non-binary teenager who found her way to self-acceptance.

We hope, in the words of one of our contributors, that we continue the “long process of learning and unlearning and understanding what it means to [us] on a deeper level, shedding and mourning parts of [our] previous identity as [we] discover who [we are].”

We would like to thank all those who were involved in the production of this magazine. Thank you for sharing your stories, for your artwork, for reading us, and for editing and translating.



queering our bodies



Because I thought that women would be very familiar with beauty standards, I was worried that they might hate me, so I used to push my [queer] identity to the back.

Betselot

Betselot would spend hours on Facebook talking to LBQ women. The conversations would go well and eventually, the question of meeting in person comes up. She was excited by the idea of meeting more queer women because even if it didn't evolve into a relationship, she would still be connected with more queer women in the LBQ community. She would make sure that they were actually queer then they would talk about the details of how they would meet. Then at the last minute, she would often find herself backing out.

"I was very ashamed of my body. I had a fat body and I would be really scared of what women in our [LBQ] community would say when they saw me. I would be terrified that they would not like me or would isolate me. Because I didn't love myself, I would isolate myself [from the community]" Betselot, a lesbian who grew up in a regional town articulates her fears.

In the instances where she did bravely meet some women, she would make sure to wear clothing that would hide her belly because she was concerned that these women would hate her body.

The narrow beauty standards that are prevalent in our society have an impact on the body image of LBQ people, and people are taught from an early age that they must fit into a certain body type to be considered attractive.

"For most of my teenage years, I had what is stereotypically described as the ideal female body" Alex, a

bisexual woman who lives in Addis Ababa said. "Around my early 20s, however, I was massively depressed and gained a lot of weight. My whole self-worth plummeted after that, and I lost my sense of self. I no longer feel as confident, driven, or worthy."

Alex is cognizant of the fact that fitting into societal standards of what is attractive makes life easier, and she sees that reflected in the way that people generally treat her when she has lost weight. She said even her loved ones, those who should be seeing her for the person that she is, tend to treat her differently when she loses weight, which confirms her worst fears that people do see her as less than because [she is] overweight.

This type of messaging from society has a huge impact on how LBQ people accept their sexual orientation or make sense of it.

"Because I thought that women would be very familiar with beauty standards, I was worried that they might hate me, so I used to push my [queer] identity to the back," Betselot said. "Most of the time, the fact that you're a woman is enough for men. Because they only want you for that specific activity, they would adorn you with appreciation like 'wow! You are so beautiful!'. So instead of doing what I really wanted to do, I instead went to men for compliments because I would tell myself that he at least loves me, but she would judge me. And because I had these views, I wasn't able to fully accept myself and live my life in confidence."

For some, such as Rahel, who is a queer woman based in Addis Ababa, accepting their bodies as they are, opens the door to self-acceptance in regard to their sexual orientation.

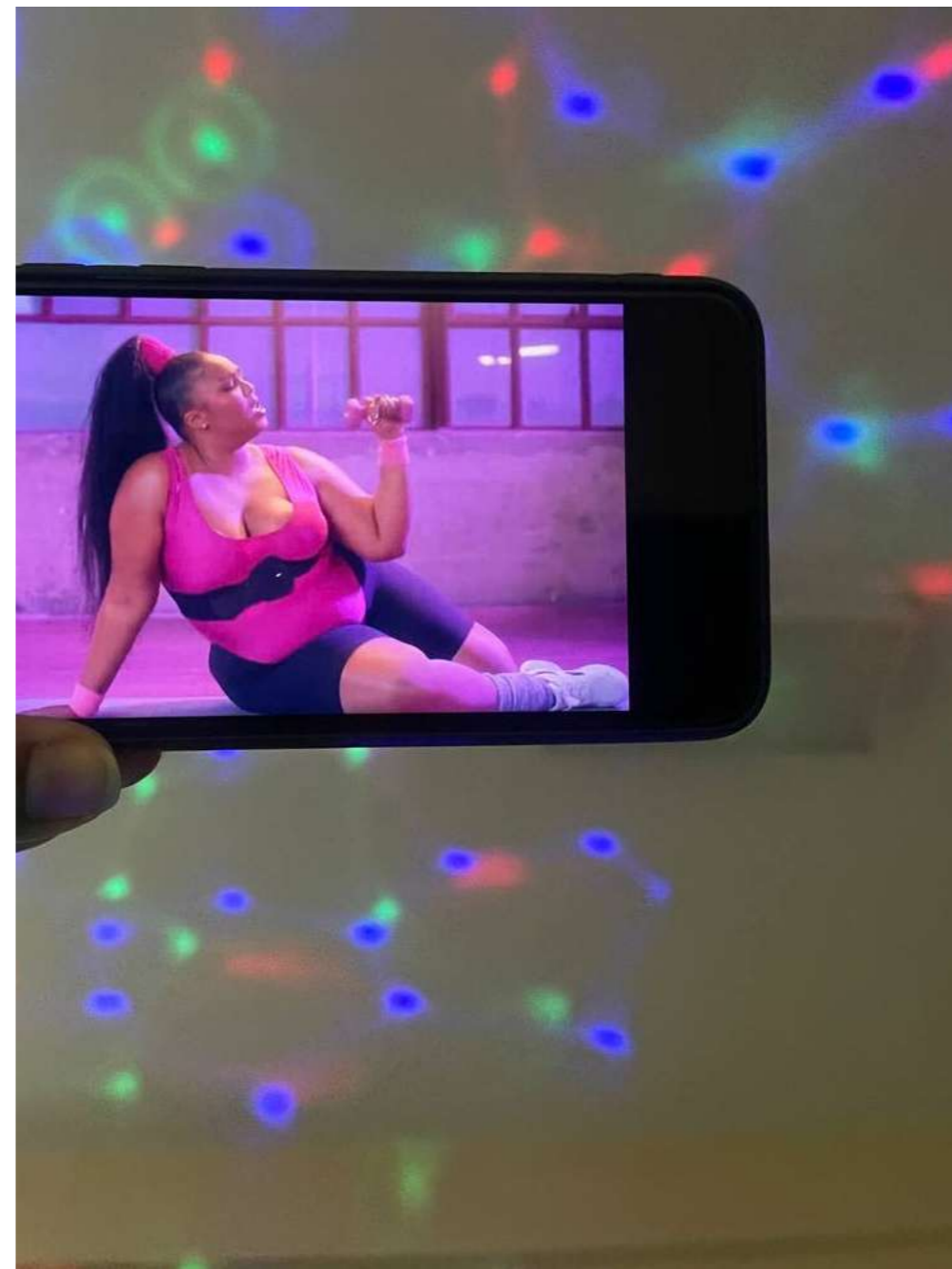
She wanted to "have the same body as some [that are] considered normal or sexy" during her adolescence before she had already come to terms with her body dissatisfaction near the end of high school. This meant that in this regard at least, her coming out was not impacted by body dissatisfaction.

However, even if

coming out is not impacted by body dissatisfaction, it often shapes how we interact with others in the community.

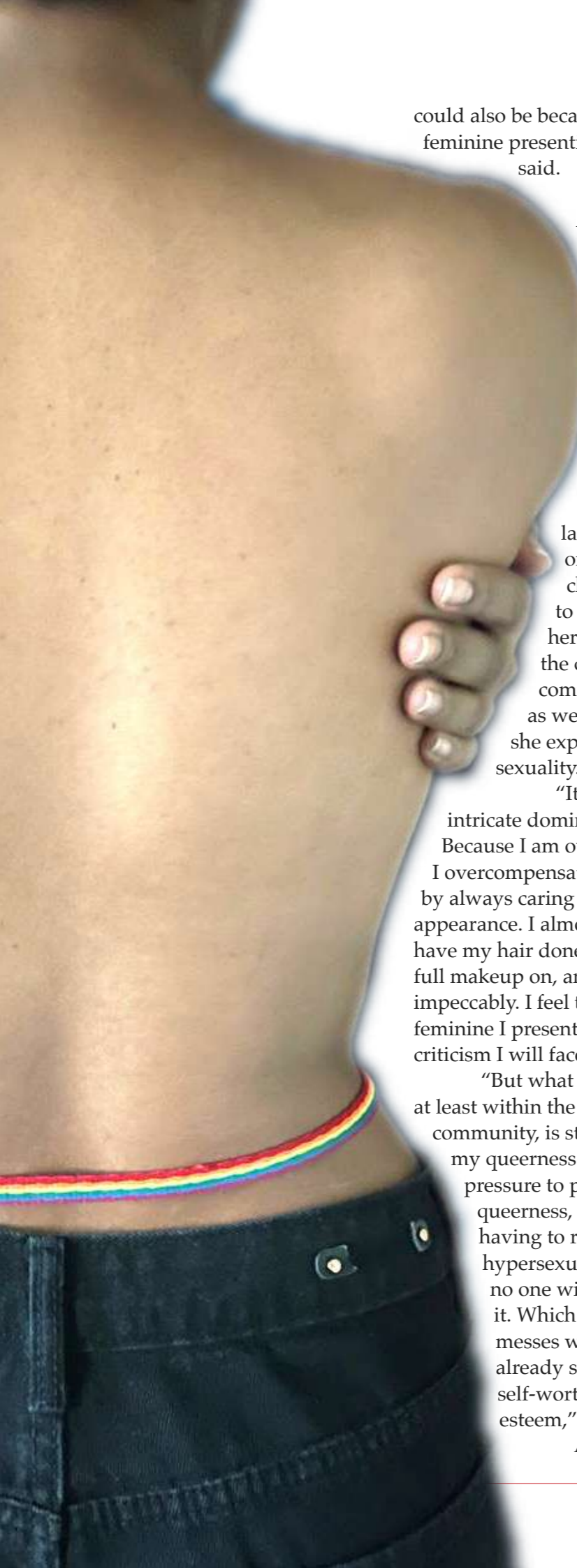
"My body image hasn't affected my sexual orientation or my coming to terms with it. Thin or fat, I'm still queer. Coming out wasn't really hard either.

"Dating is a bit difficult, mainly because I have internalized a lot of fatphobia, and it's hard for me to think I'm attractive. That's sometimes reinforced by the fact that unless I make the first move, most women would likely friendzone me. But that



I often feel pressure to prove my queerness, sometimes having to resort to hypersexuality just so no one will question it.

Alex



could also be because I'm feminine presenting," Alex said.

For Alex, the expectation of having to meet societal standards of beauty when it comes to her body size has had a lasting impact on how she chooses to present herself within the queer community as well as how she expresses her sexuality.

"It's an intricate domino effect. Because I am overweight, I overcompensate for it by always caring for my appearance. I almost always have my hair done, have full makeup on, and dress impeccably. I feel that the more feminine I present, the less criticism I will face.

"But what that does, at least within the LBQ community, is strip me of my queerness. I often feel pressure to prove my queerness, sometimes having to resort to hypersexuality just so no one will question it. Which really messes with my already struggling self-worth and self-esteem," she said.

Although

the LBQ community and the larger Ethiopian society need to create spaces for people to accept their bodies as they are, some LBQ individuals have made progress in accepting their bodies as they are.

Rahel achieved this by focusing on what makes her feel good regardless of others' views and by learning to love her body, including the parts that she felt had flaws.

"I started giving attention to every part that is beautiful and one with flaws and instead of fixing those I started to create their own aesthetic out of them," Rahel said.

Betselot was encouraged by the acceptance of the gay men around her, who not only pushed her to accept her body but also led by example by being comfortable and confident in their bodies.

Alex reminds us that body acceptance is not a neat package but a journey that we must constantly work towards.

"I don't think I have accepted myself yet. It constantly feels like I take two steps forward but one step back. Sometimes I look in the mirror and I am not disgusted by my sagging boobs, bulging belly, and ridge-like stretch marks. "Other times, I can barely look at myself without wanting to take a butcher's knife and cut everything off. Some days I even sit and fantasize about what it would feel like to have an eating disorder or some sort of gastric disease that would forbid me from eating. I try to be patient with myself and hope that in time, things will fall into place," Alex said.



What brings you joy about your body?

Anne

My body gives me joy by allowing me to live a healthy, active, and balanced life. It makes me happy when I can stretch it the way I want to (even though I cannot do splits) and gets me up a big mountain (even though it is not Mount Everest). It tells me when I am full and when I am hungry and allows me to enjoy chocolates as well as fruit salads. My shorter length means I fit into airplanes easily, and my smallish boobs mean I never have back pain or issues when working out. With additional years of my life, comes additional gratitude for all the things my body is able to do. With time passing, so passes my focus of me on all my imperfections.

Dominique

I have never thought of it to be honest, but now that it's being asked, I just think that the fact that I'm blessed to have all the parts of my body fully healthy and functional is enough to bring me joy about my body.

Jo

I love that my body lets me go places and do (almost) all the things I want to do. It makes me feel strong and gives me agency.

Tsion

What really intrigues me about my body (or bodies in general) is that I always feel like my body is its own entity. Sometimes we are on the same wavelength and other times not. You think you are together but then it surprises you. It could be with accidents or illness, but these moments made me respect, try to understand, and love my body. The times I am absorbed with my body the most right after recovering from an illness: the feeling of relief, nothing hurting, just silence and being energetic. This amazes me. The fact that my body heals. It hurt and it restored itself. It's always changing; nothing is static when it comes to the body. What I appreciate about my body is that I feel my body and get to use it.



REFLECTIONS

EMBRACING MYSELF

“Once I accepted myself, I actually started liking dressing up at private parties and putting on wigs. I really started liking myself. So, accepting your sexuality makes accepting your gender identity and expression much easier.”





I was bullied and I experienced a lot of hate in elementary and high school, and I worried so much that I sometimes didn't even want to go to school.

Boney is a non-binary person who lives in Addis Ababa and prefers they/them pronouns. Nisnis conducted an interview with them to gain insight into the experience of a non-binary femme person and how this experience affects their sense of self both physically and psychologically. We also explore ways that the LGBTQ+ community can offer more support to non-binary people. The interview has been slightly edited for clarity.

Nisnis: Thank you for coming, Boney. What pronouns do you prefer to use?

Boney: It can be they / them in English, and I prefer “anchi” (she) when it is in Amharic. I like “anchi”.

Nisnis: What has your gender journey been like?

Boney: My gender journey was undoubtedly difficult. Although my situation is better now, it had a lot of challenges. I was bullied and I experienced a lot of hate in elementary and high school, and I worried so much that I sometimes didn't even want to go to school. [People at school] used to point at me and chant “girl, girl”.

I am biologically male, but my mannerisms were more like a female's, and I don't enjoy what other boys / men enjoyed. I hated playing football. I am afraid of the ball hitting me. I didn't know how to handle some things with other kids in school. I was really stressed. I used to feel sad, and there were times I used to cry. I went through all that stuff [when I was younger].

When you come to a work setting, people are less likely to directly harass you because they are grown up, and the chances of confrontation, bullying, and harassment are minimized. However, the sense of being terrified is worse now. Most of the people I work with are either my age or older, and I worry about what they might be thinking about me and what adverse effects they could bring to my life and my work situation. This is a cause for constant stress. This has been my journey.

Nisnis: Is part of what worries you about what your co-workers might do if they found out about you?

Boney: I'm not worried that they'll find out about my sexual orientation. What scares me is my gender expression. I try to imitate how men walk and talk, but I'm not always successful. I pay attention to my hand movements and my overall behavior but you can't always fight against your nature or what comes naturally to you. Especially when I'm laughing, angry or emotional, how I express that is much like how a woman would express it. It's very hard to control your expressions when you are emotional. I worry that if they are paying attention, they might figure things out about me.

Nisnis: What impact does the way you walk, or dress have on your day-to-day life?

Boney: I don't wear anything out of the ordinary since I have to survive, unless

I am at home or in a safe and private place. My workplace has a dress code, even straight, masculine men have to dress accordingly. So, I dress like the other men. But there is a lot that can't be masked by what I wear – how I laugh, talk, move my hands, or the way I sit. I could be sitting with my legs crossed like I am now. I think people notice these things. Sometimes I think they don't bring it up because they don't understand, are being nice, or just waiting to gather enough information to cause me problems. I don't take risks with how I dress. Unless it's in a private place where I can safely express myself, I don't take such risks.

Nisnis: I know that you have already touched upon it, but could you tell me more about the physical and psychological impacts of not being able to express your gender in the way that you want?

Boney: It has a profound psychological effect on me. A person who cannot be themselves looks for places to hide because they can only find themselves when they are alone. The more time you spend on your own, the more likely you are to lose touch with people, which leads to loneliness. Human interaction is important to people. This lack of interaction can lead to depression and substance abuse.

Although it is not very frequent, there are times when I feel depressed, and I try to make myself feel better. Hope is good. I also don't believe that everyone hates people



Wearing certain things or presenting in a certain manner may not make me comfortable, but I live in a society that is not yet accepting and tolerant, so I have to do what I need to survive.

who have different gender expressions.

There are a select few who are supportive, and I try to find them and create connections to ease the pain. Thinking that everyone hates you is challenging, and it might lead you to depression. When I talk about the hate that I receive, I am also talking about those in the queer community who do not

accept and like people with [different gender identities and expressions]. Those who accept people like me are the exception. It is confusing for people because they think a man should only be masculine. As a man, they think, he should take part in “masculine” activities such as going to the gym, building his muscles, and playing football. So, the fact that queer people mirror this thinking leads to more depression and loneliness.

Your romantic relationships keep failing, and so many other things keep not working out. It is very challenging, but I am trying to live with hope and good intentions.

Nisnis: Is there a difference in terms of how rejection and judgment affect you depending on whether they come from the straight or queer community?

Boney: It does have a difference. Your physical well-being can be threatened, and you may actually be physically harmed. These attacks might even lead to death. I try to manage that by not wearing things that could make me a target. But I am not always 100% successful. Wearing certain things or presenting in a certain manner may not make me comfortable, but I live in a society that is not yet accepting and tolerant, so I have to do what I need to survive.

Bad things happen when those of us in the queer community go to straight clubs fully knowing that we cannot be ourselves, but



we go because we need to breathe. We have to be very careful because any effort to be ourselves may result in an attempt to cause us serious physical harm and abuse.

When you come to the queer community, you are faced with mental or psychological abuse. Most

people might not try to hit you for being feminine, but they will still bully you. What is especially saddening is that most people in our community speak positively about masculinity, as in “he is such a man,” and masculinity is equated with mental strength and bravery. This is not true.

When you come to people like me who are femme, we are not wanted. Only a few people are interested in us, and that interest is only sexual. They don't come to us for a committed relationship and the chances of us finding that type of relationship is very rare. This really hurts us psychologically. People are also afraid to be seen with us publicly, which I understand to a certain extent, but still [it hurts].

I recently had a shocking experience that involved someone from the lesbian community whom I consider a friend. I hang out with some people in the lesbian community, and I didn't expect that I would face this in that community in general and with her in particular. Some of them make fun of femme-identifying AMAB (assigned male at birth) people. They make fun of how femme people act or what they wear. They make fun of femmes as a way of getting more Facebook followers.

You find it shocking when their true thoughts and behaviors slip out because you have shared food and drinks with them and thought you were friends with them. And when you ask them why they make fun of femme people, they will tell you that they are not talking about you. I don't expect them to call me names as they mock us, but I do judge their attitudes based on what they say about people who express gender differently. This makes me sad.

You become close with someone based on the

assumption that since they are a part of the queer community, they will make more space for you. You share a certain closeness because you are both in the community, but it is strange to find them targeting you in some way. It makes me feel like they were not their most genuine selves with me, that they were uncomfortable with me the whole time, and that they were just pretending. That's heartbreaking.

Nisnis: Are they concerned about the impact of being seen with you?

Boney: Yes, and in some way, I understand them. They are concerned about the harm that will come to them if they are seen or associated with us. I think their reaction is a reflection of what is going on in our country. Other than that, the majority would say that they are attracted to a “masculine” people.

For example, I am biologically male, and the people that I am dealing with would say, “What is this? If he is a man, he can only be a man. Why would I be with a feminine man? I might as well be with a woman.” There isn't a lot of awareness about gender expression and that has a negative impact on our health.

People leave you, and because we are humans, we want to experience love like everyone else because it is natural. Some people even start a relationship with you and then change their minds, which makes you think things like, “It is the fact that I am feminine that makes people hate me and discourages them

from creating a place for me in their hearts.”. This impacts my mental well-being. So, those in the queer community may not try to cause you physical harm, but they can hurt you with words. They can hurt you by making you feel that you are not wanted, which causes you mental anguish.

Nisnis: In what ways do you take care of your mental health?

Boney: I try in the best way that I know how and that is what gives me hope. I think the fact that I have a job really helps because I keep myself busy and don't dwell on things as much. It helps that I am physically active, and that keeps me from always thinking about my difficulties, such as the harm that can be directed against me.

I think I have managed to support my mental well-being by being busy at work. This has helped me even more than the support that I receive from friends. There are some people in the community who consider suicide because of the pain that they suffer. So, the fact that I am busy prevents me from feeling lonely. I am so exhausted from my day that I barely have time to think about all the pain. This, however, is not enough, so I also try to spend time with people who are like me and who at least won't make fun of me.

It is hard to find people who are open, given our religion and culture, but there are a few supportive people. Growing up in a religious household has made me suffer and I have had to struggle to

come to terms with myself. So, I understand that people need to process in their own time, but I try to surround myself with people who are open and accepting.

Nisnis: What has the journey been in regard to accepting your sexuality and gender identity?

Boney: It is very challenging. Being feminine by itself has a lot of challenges. Some AMAB (assigned male at birth) femmes accept sexual activities they do not want because of pressure from their sexual partners and a desire to feel wanted. Other people like me who are submissive, try to be dominant or a top to please



I should not wait until others' experiences make sense to me. ... I just need to accept myself and everyone else as they are.

their sexual partners, which actually ends up disappointing them. I would never do that. It is not in my nature to accept that.

Nisnis: Has your gender presentation and identity made it more difficult to accept your sexuality? How has this influenced your acceptance of your body and your body image?

Boney: I accepted my sexuality first, and I think this is because of a lack of awareness about gender. It is after you convince yourself and accept yourself as part of the LGBTQ community that you start thinking about your body. Once I accepted my sexuality, the gender issue was not difficult to accept because being gay is hated in this country due to religion and our culture. After I managed to accept my sexuality, the rest was easier. Being able to say, "This is what I am," to thank the Creator for creating you this way, and to reconcile your religion with your sexuality is

the big step. Accepting gender expression becomes easier because it is natural. Once I accepted myself, I actually started liking dressing up at private parties and putting on wigs. I really started liking myself. So, accepting your sexuality makes accepting your gender identity and expression much easier.

Nisnis: Is there anything you would like to add?

Boney: The one thing I want to say is that the LGBTQ community here should make an effort to be open-minded. I mean, I want there to be awareness. Some people create further divisions and groups based on religion or ethnicity saying, "I am Tigrayan, Oromo or Amhara". What we must remember is that if people discover our true identities – that we are gay, bisexual, or transgender, no one will protect us because we are a member of their ethnic group. I am sure the majority will stone us, so we should

not create divisions amongst ourselves.

Other than that, people have their own expression and identity. I have gay and lesbian friends, and I like them even if I don't have any sexual attraction to them. Just because I am not attracted to them does not mean that I should try to bully them or make fun of them. I also don't believe that everyone should like what I like. I am attracted to alpha men, but this does not mean that I should think less of femmes, trans people, or lesbians.

I have gay male friends who say being a lesbian does not make sense to them. I challenge them by saying, "How does having anal sex make sense to you?" If we are looking at other people's experiences through only our lens, then no other experience will make sense to us, and it will feel like a sin. They view our sexual lives and our lives as sinful because they are not willing to consider our experiences. I should not wait until others' experiences make sense to me. I just need to accept myself and everyone else as they are.

If someone tells me they like something, I should just accept it and be friends with them. We should be careful and live in a place of love. We live in a society that is vengeful and that has a mob justice mentality, and this is reflected in our queer community. We should be accepting. The division is a big problem, in fact, I think it is the lack of acceptance that leads to suicide and other issues.



What brings you joy about your body?

Hayat

I love playing with my tummy. It's soft and round, kind of like play-dough. Particularly after I have eaten a big meal. My mom once thought that I was pregnant because of how I cuddle it when I sleep. It's also small enough that I can suck it in when I dress up.

Yode

My boobs give me the most joy! They are squishy when I feel them and I love how they look when I see myself in the mirror. Plus it's a wonderful way to increase my arousal, and the intensity of my orgasms.

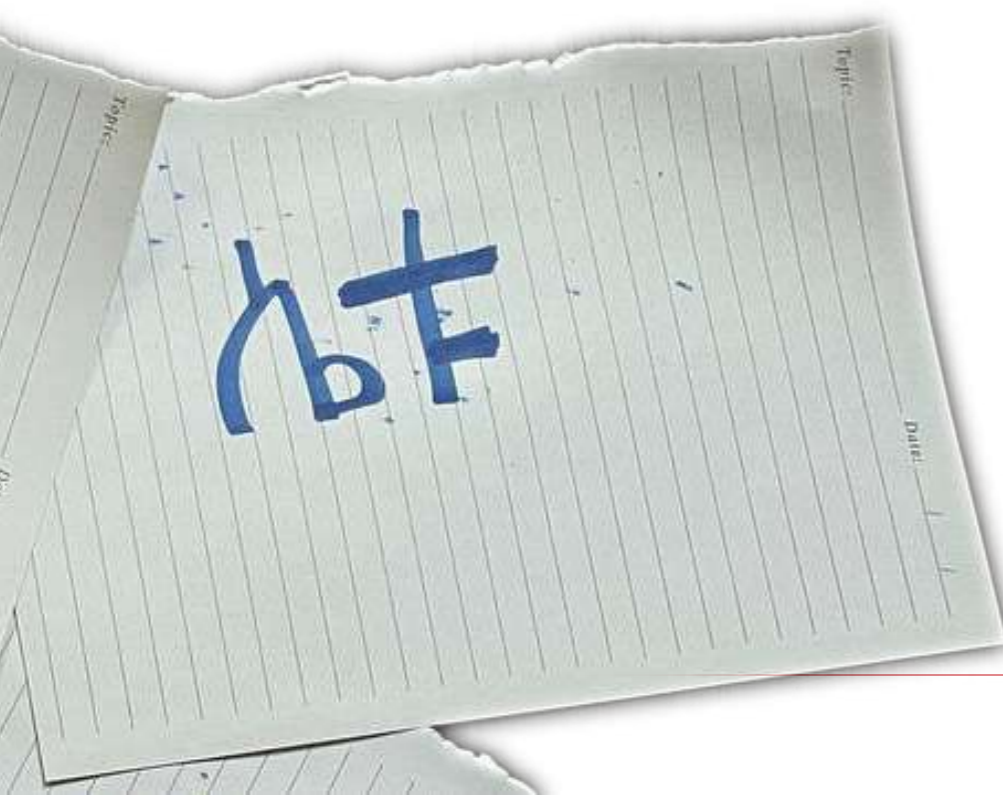
Abyssinia

I see myself as an attractive person generally but to dive into the details I love my eyes as I experience everything through them without physically touching anything. I have also been told that I have a very seductive look when I look into the eyes of people I am interested in.

I love my teeth and smile as a whole. I'm not entirely sure why but when I laugh it just lights up my whole mood reminding me of the happiness I feel. Plus, my beautiful teeth alignment makes me very confident to laugh.

I love my ass and my boobs because they are a perfect size and shape for me which makes me love dressing in a way that is appealing to me.

I love my body from top to bottom from the softness of my skin to every inch of my tiger stripes that make me feel like a woman growing and glowing in every part of my life plus my girlfriend loves and caresses my whole figure and it makes me love it even more.





Doing gender on our terms

"I would wear tights underneath my oversized jeans so my curves wouldn't show. I would make my own DIY breast binders from bandanas, bandages, and shapewear. I would turn a shapewear upside down, cut a hole to fit my head, and wear it as a top. It's made from a really tough fabric, so it really held everything tightly," Melat recalls the experiences of her younger self.

Melat, who prefers they / them pronouns, experienced gender dysphoria in their younger days. Gender dysphoria is defined as a mismatch and a sense of disconnect between gender identity and one's assigned sex at birth.

Melat describes how they felt they needed to "hide" their curves from a young age because they wanted to present as androgynous and not as a girl. This led to several body image issues, including an eating disorder.

"I struggled with body image issues as they related to my gender and sexual identity," they said. "Figuring out my gender was a whole question of its own. And when I started questioning, I experienced a lot of gender dysphoria. I didn't want my titties and ass to be seen."

Research shows that people in the LGBTQ+ community experience and confront unique and complex relationships with their bodies. Non-binary and trans folks in particular face more body dissatisfaction than others. They are also made to question their expressions and presentations.



Figuring out my gender was a whole question of its own. And when I started questioning, I experienced a lot of gender dysphoria. I didn't want my titties and ass to be seen.

Melat

Boney, who prefers they / them or she / her pronouns, says their gender journey was made difficult because they did not present in a manner that aligned with societal expectations.

"I am biologically male, but my mannerisms were more like a female, and I did not enjoy what other boys or men enjoyed," Boney said. "I was bullied, and I experienced a lot of hate in elementary and high school, and I worried so much that I sometimes didn't even want to go to school".

A community-led study done in Ethiopia in 2016 found that "LGBTI people showed higher levels of mental health problems, experienced higher levels of violence, and more barriers when accessing healthcare services."

According to the study, there is also a growing awareness of the wide-ranging negative consequences of stigma, marginalization, and discrimination on the health of people who identify as or are perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or gender diverse.

Boney developed mild depression as a result of the stress of being forced to conform to Ethiopian society's expectations of gender identity and expression. The inability to express their gender as they would like, from what to wear to how to laugh and express anger, had a negative impact on their mental health. The fact that they were not able to approach anyone to seek help exacerbated their mental health issues. It was

not until they finished school and entered the workforce that they felt a bit more equipped to handle the pressures of being constantly bullied.

"It has a profound psychological effect on me. A person who cannot be themselves looks for places to hide because they can only find themselves when they are alone. The more time you spend on your own, the more likely you are to lose touch with people, which leads to loneliness."

"This lack of interaction can lead to depression, substance abuse, and substance dependence. Although it is not very frequent, there are times when I feel depressed, and I try to make myself feel better,"

Boney said.

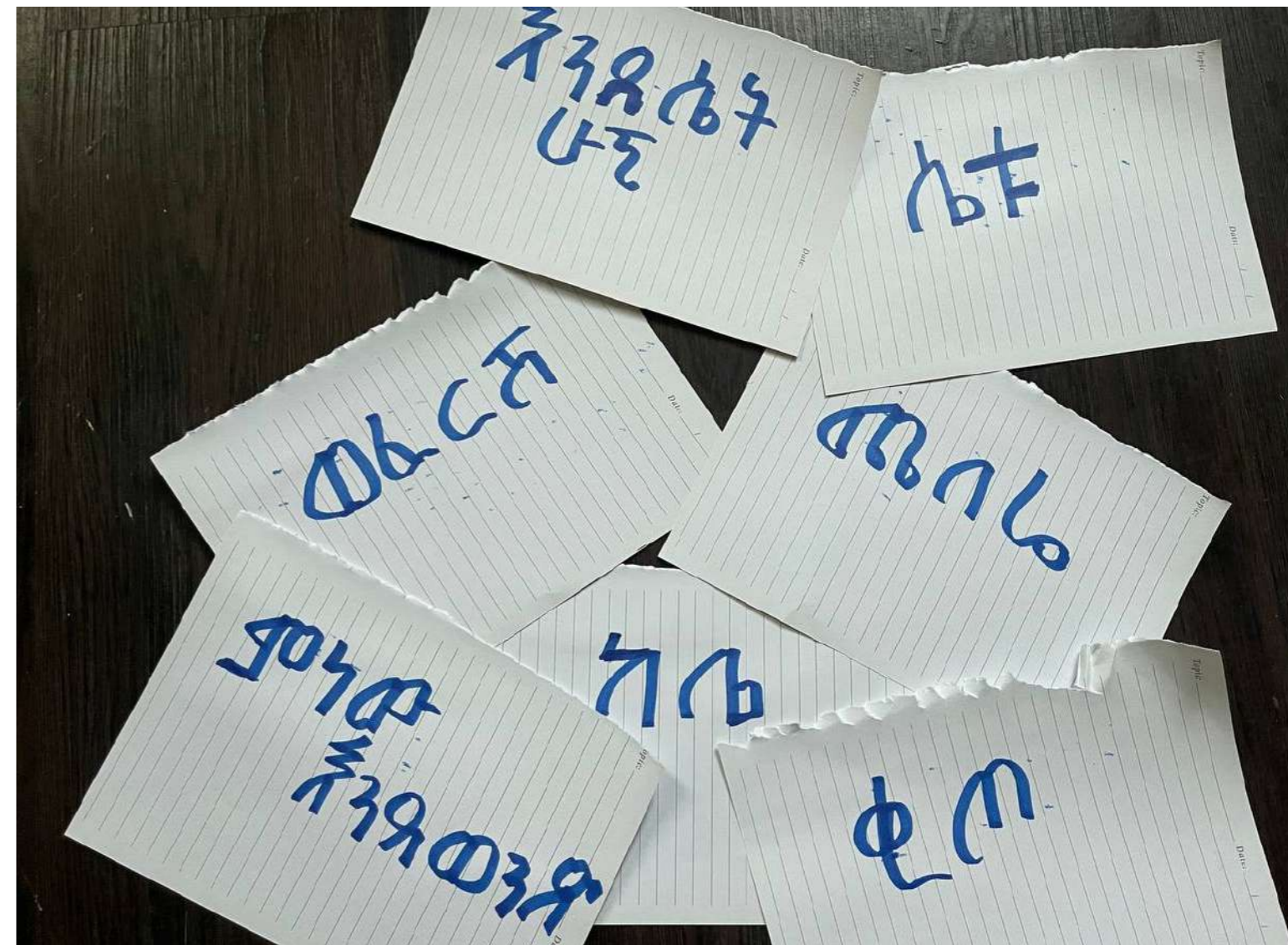
Melat developed eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia, but they did not seek professional help or speak to their loved ones about it. They had to look within themselves to answer their own questions and issues surrounding their gender identity and expression.

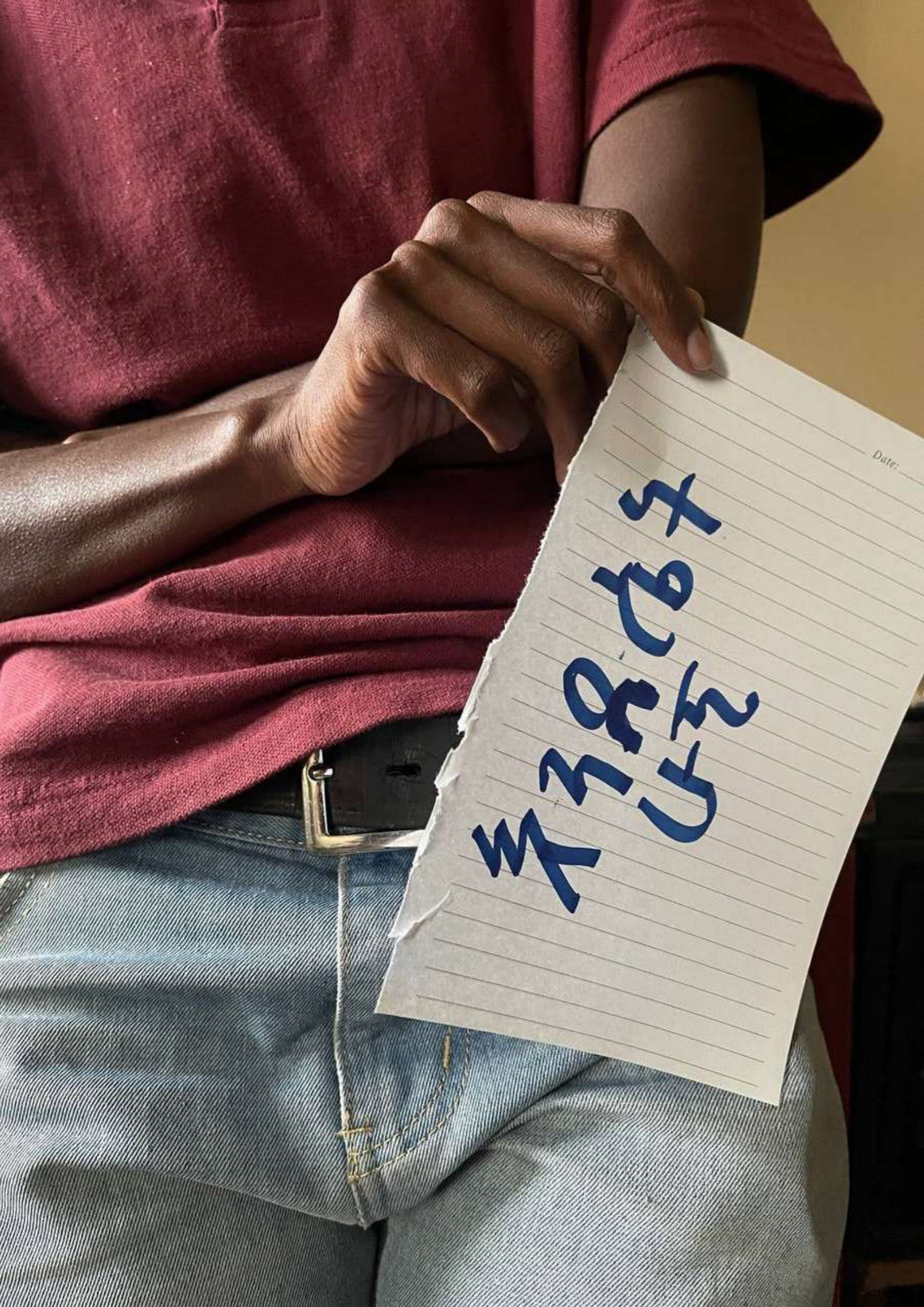
Melat had tried to deal with their gender dysphoria by using various means of trying to appear less "feminine." The homemade accessories that they used had real-life consequences that were not only uncomfortable but also compromised their health and quality of life. They would be wearing binders that were so tight that they would feel close to fainting, even



I found a gender identity that worked for me, so I didn't have to wear binders to present only as masc. or hide my curves anymore.

Melat





having to run to the bathroom to take the binders off, which rushed back the gender dysphoria they experienced. Having to regularly choose between validating their gender and their physical health was like being stuck between a rock and a hard place for Melat.

Boney adds that some of the expectations and demands to abide by the heteronormative gender expressions and identities come from the queer community, which makes finding solace and a safe space very difficult.

“When I started going to places where queer people gathered, they would call me “anchi” [“she” in Amharic], and it used to make me uncomfortable because I thought it was a sin. It took me some time to be comfortable with the terminology. Now I prefer to be called that,” Boney said.

While Boney came to like that pronoun, it was not something that Boney indicated that they preferred. Boney did not have a conversation about their preferred pronoun, but rather, the pronoun was used due to the community’s understanding of Boney’s gender expression as “feminine.”

This was reminiscent of their experience in elementary and high school, when students would follow them, pointing at them and chanting “girl, girl.”

Some of the other experiences in the community included expectations related to sexual activities, Boney



Once I accepted myself, I actually started liking dressing up at private parties and putting on wig. I really started liking myself.

Boney

said. Femme-presenting folks in the gay community are expected to “accept sexual activities they do not want because of pressure from their sexual partners and a desire to feel wanted. These expectations from within the community force some to lead lives that are not authentic and that result in adverse effects on their mental health”, they said.

Despite the challenges, the road to self-acceptance was made easier after they came to terms with their sexuality. Coming out as gay made accepting their gender expression and their gender

identity paramount to giving them the strength to live their lives with more openness in the safe spaces that they created.

“Once I accepted myself [in terms of my sexual orientation], I actually started liking dressing up at private parties and putting on wig. I really started liking myself,” Boney said.

Melat had a similar experience in regard to accepting themselves.

They finally accepted who they are after being able to make space for themselves and what felt authentic in terms of gender expression and identity. Accepting themselves made their body shape a non-issue. The comfort that they felt was hard-earned and required unlearning so much of the gender expectations placed on them by society.

“I now identify as queer and non-binary. I found a gender identity that worked for me, so I didn’t have to wear binders to present only as masc. or hide my curves anymore. Although I mostly present as androgynous, I don’t conform to the gender binary, so depending on the day, I am fluid with my gender presentation.

“There is something liberating about fully accepting yourself for the first time. You feel so empowered, and all you want to do is run to the rooftops to shout, ‘I’m gay!!’ Realizing that this is who I am now, gave me the confidence to start being me and appreciating myself. I started living my life thinking, ‘Fuck it!’” Melat explained.

A letter to my young self



“Although
you were
alone, you
weren’t the
only one.”

Hi, mini-teenage me! How are you doing? Hanging in there? Who am I kidding, I know you're having a shitty time when it comes to accepting your queerness. What is queerness even? I forgot the concept of queerness doesn't exist in your country town in the 2000s. There are gay men (also a common insult which you should really stop using) or lesbians who are fat shorthaired dykes who are the most undesirable people imaginable according to small town aesthetics so you sure as hell aren't one of them. Eww gross! There's hardly any positive representation of queer people and if there is, it's men in drag being 'fabulous' and definitely no teenager lesbians successfully negotiating the minefield of high school politics remaining unscathed.

Growing up in rural Australia in the 90's and 00's your experience is similar to so many, and the tragic thing is you're all doing it alone. Positive representation of kids like you just doesn't exist yet and your country is still quite hostile to you. This will change. In inner cities nowadays being queer is all the rage and none of the kids in school care. I know this doesn't help you now and it's unfair that you're growing up in an environment where you can't create a positive image of your same sex attracted self but take comfort in this changing for the next generation.

Unfortunately, no advice I send from the future can change this lonesome experience. That's just



Yes, you have a girlfriend! Isn't that exciting? And you doubted that would ever happen. You've been together for over nine years now; doesn't that blow your little baby gay mind?

something you're going to go through and apart from the internalised homophobia which you're only starting to unpack in your 30's, it's an experience which builds who you are – resilient, passionate for social justice, empathetic, understanding, an alluring mix of arrogant yet self-

deprecating. So, although I can't make the experience any less difficult or lonesome or alienating, here are some realisations and spoilers from the future which might make it easier.

Firstly, why are you worried about your parents finding out that you like girls?! Both your parents are lefty activists who fight for social justice, and you have a pair of lesbians living just up the road who are good family friends! By the way those lesbians totally guessed you were a baby gay from the start. Why do you think your parents are going to reject you? They support you no matter what. You are so lucky to have them and I'm pretty sure they like you're partner more than you, she's pretty great.

Yes, you have a girlfriend! Isn't that exciting? And you doubted that would ever happen. You've been together for over nine years now; doesn't that blow your little baby gay mind? She's amazing, successful and super-hot, you're definitely punching above your weight – well done! She has taken you across the world and now you currently live in Ethiopia with house spouse duties while you study your Masters – life is pretty sweet.

Mini me, I know that people liking you is a cornerstone of your personality right now and you will do anything for the approval and attention of others, but you really have to let go of this because pleasing others is exhausting and ultimately unfulfilling. Your worth isn't measured in what

you do for others or how others see you, it's something you build for yourself, and I understand it's so hard to build that self-worth when you don't believe you're worthy, but you'll learn to slowly. And once you realise this it's quite liberating. Yes, you lose the pressing external motivation which has gotten you and your ambition far but what's the point if you're doing it for others and not yourself?

Your need for approval and in turn the drive to conform is unfortunately a necessary safety mechanism in high school. You already draw enough attention to yourself, and I don't know if you could take the additional level of othering that coming out and being proud of it would create. Your peers just really suck and that's how it is. This might help you though, out of your school year where no one was queer, now two of your good friends have come out and quite a few others have too! They were also afraid in high school. Although you are alone, you weren't the only one.

Unfortunately, the perceived pressure to conform for safety sake sticks around for a long time. You know how you really wanted short hair from when you were ten and after getting a haircut that made you look like a fat page boy you never did it again? Girl! Why did you wait till you were 32? You have the shortest and most masculine of hair-cuts and you love it! It looks super queer, and you stick out like a gay confession stand. You're proud in your



Your worth isn't measured in what you do for others or how others see you, it's something you build for yourself ...

queerness and this lets others be comfortable in theirs but prepare yourself for the well meaning 'I love gay people' drunk monologues of cis-het people. "Yes lady, I do sympathise that both your sons are too boring to be gay, but thank you as yes indeed, my female partner and I are the cutest couple here."

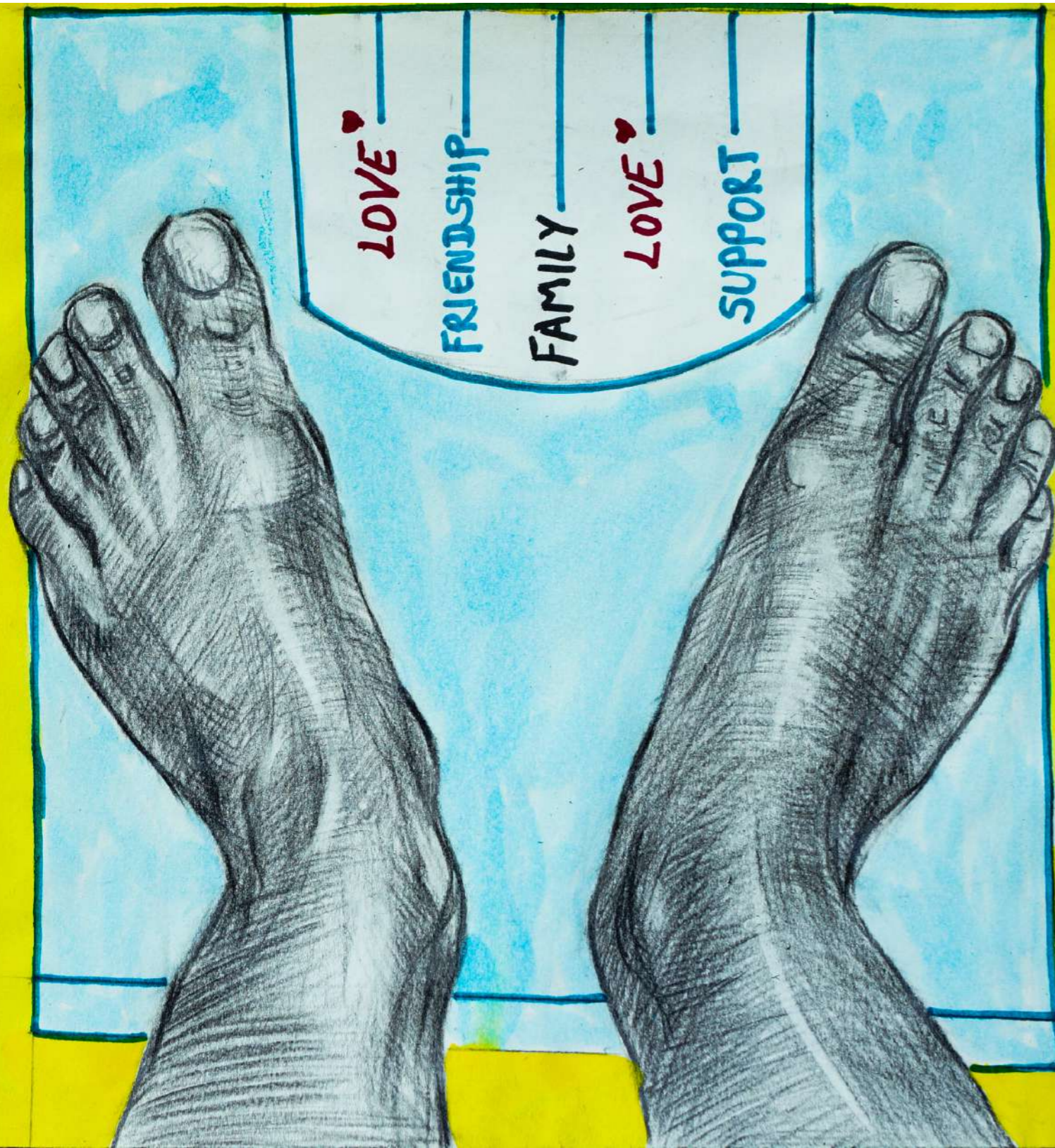
The last thing I want to tell you is STOP HOOKING UP WITH BOYS! I know you desperately want someone but seriously stop it. That poor sweet boy you'll date for two weeks with exactly one kiss and then you'll dump him just after Valentine's Day because you are totally not into him in any shape or form. I know you can't stop yet, and you'll keep trying to feel loved and wanted in whichever boy will give it – the smell of bourbon and coke infused breath forever linked to pash rash, hickies and dissatisfaction.

You're just going to have to wait until you're 20 and in university. You were 100% correct that once you get to uni it'll be better. You can actually say it's cool to be gay there (and cool to be smart too), and although this is when you start to be open about yourself and some might say be aggressively proud of who you are, it is going to take years to heal your internalised homophobia etched into your psyche during your high school experience. I don't know if it'll ever heal but it does get better, I promise.

So mini me, just hang in there and remember to love yourself a little more and better things are coming your way.

OVERCOMING

Eating disorder and body dysmorphia



I was already struggling with depression, anxiety, and self-esteem issues before it all started. Especially when I started questioning my gender and sexual identity, I started also experiencing issues with my body image.

I haven't been officially diagnosed with any of these because I've never really opened up to my parents about it. I have never seen a therapist, but from my experience based on the research I've done on my own, I would say I have struggled with anorexia and bulimia – more so Bulimia than Anorexia. I would not eat as much as I could and find ways to suppress my appetite. When questions were raised, As much as I could, I would not eat or eat a little bit, then I would go to the bathroom and purge (which is when you make yourself throw up after you've eaten). I would do it because I felt lighter, and I really didn't want to gain weight.

I was already struggling with depression, anxiety, and self-esteem issues before it all started. Especially when I started questioning my gender and sexual identity, I started also experiencing issues with my body image. I really took it out on myself when I thought the solution was to be perfect; perfect, in my definition at that time, being skinny and light. I wanted to get skinnier so I didn't have any ass, and I didn't want my titties to be visible. I wanted to look more androgynous. When I wore clothing, I wanted it to go straight down; I didn't want bumps and curves. I started wearing loose-fitting stuff because I was all out disgusted with myself and how I looked.

It was also around the time when I was beginning to explore my sexual identity. I was still messing around with men, and just starting to explore being with women,



A few bites and I am done. I would start to feel nauseated and really heavy so I would find a way to go to the bathroom and puke it out.

which was a very confusing time for me. With men, I felt I had to present more feminine, soft, skinny, and easy to throw around, because that's what I thought they wanted. And with women, I wanted to be laid back and masculine presenting, so there was a lot of confusion. This is where the brainwashing comes in. In all the movies and videos, we see masc lesbians that are tall, skinny, and sexy. I wanted to become that. All these thoughts and feelings kept feeding off each other and it made things

even harder.

I was already not a morning person, so skipping breakfast was easy. I would just have tea/coffee with cigarettes. I smoked a lot of cigarettes to help curb my appetite. I also used to take a pharmaceutical pill that had suppressed appetite and nausea as its side effects. I mostly didn't feel hungry, actually. I would just feel really tired when I didn't eat. If it was too much, I would maybe snack on small amounts of peanuts or SunChips so I would feel better. Lunch was the hardest part because everyone expects you to eat with them. I would either pretend to eat or eat a little bit. A few bites and I am done. I would start to feel nauseated and really heavy so I would find a way to go to the bathroom and puke it out. Whatever was left of that was what would sustain me through the day.

I think a lot of people in my life noticed, but they didn't have the understanding that this was a disorder that needed treatment. I hadn't even realized it for myself, and I didn't expect them to understand something I myself didn't understand. My family just thought I didn't have an appetite. They would nag me about why I don't eat and tell me that it's not healthy. Sometimes they would ask me what I want to have, and I would say "Pizza!" and they would get excited. I would have a few slices then go purge that too. My friends would sometimes comment saying "Oh! You've gotten so skinny!" often with a positive

tone to it. It actually felt good to hear that. Some speculated that it might be because I was smoking too much and suggested that I cut back on it. But overall, there wasn't a lot of awareness on their part. I think as a culture, we don't really put effort into understanding things for what they are. So, I never got treatment or therapy for it.

I used to be an average of 55-58 kilograms before my struggle with eating disorders began. I drastically dropped around 10 kilograms in about three months, then an additional 5 kilograms in the following months until I was about 30-something kilograms. Things got really bad for me then. I had zero energy to do anything. I would just stay in bed all day. I think that's what got me through those times. I would also easily get really sick. A common cold would have me incapacitated in bed for two weeks or so. It was terrifying. The one thing that I could do to make myself feel better about my body was also the thing that was damaging my body. But I was willing to keep struggling through it so I wouldn't feel the body dysmorphia. At the time, it was the lesser of two evils for me, so I forced myself to keep doing it. Overall, It was just a really tough time.

It's funny now but it was a silly college crush that really changed things for me. I fell for my best friend in college. I started questioning a lot of things after falling for her. I started looking for answers to some of the questions I had. I wanted to understand myself, how I felt

about her, and how I wanted to present myself to her; I wanted to experiment with her. As soon as I was able to find answers, something just clicked. It was all in my mind all along, and once my mind was freed, the way I looked at everything just changed, and it became easier after that. I started embracing myself for who I am and loving my body.

Accepting my queerness and exploring my relationship with women was very liberating. I didn't feel the pressure to present as anything else but me – whatever was comfortable. In heterosexual relationships as a whole, there are a lot of set standards: how he should look, how she should look, how their relationship should be. The expectation is that the woman should be shorter, skinnier, fit and easy to handle. However, with women, it was a whole new field for me so there was a lot of space to explore and give it meaning by myself. So that's just what I did.

I now identify as non-binary and queer, although I'm not too pressed about the labels. I mostly present androgynous, but I am very fluid with my gender presentation – it all depends on how the wind blows. I think I still have a long way to go, but I am on a good track. I try to listen to what my body tells me, on when to eat and when to rest. I haven't gotten back to my previous weight, but I try to eat at least two meals a day and focus on having nutritious food. I don't take any pills either. I am feeding my mind as well, and it shows.



Accepting my queerness and exploring my relationship with women was very liberating. I didn't feel the pressure to present as anything else but me – whatever was comfortable.

If you're struggling with something similar, it's easy to get stuck in the riptide and just go with the flow, but it's absolutely important to always, always get help. Find someone that you can talk to, anyone that's easier for you to open up to, but please get help. You can also do your own research to understand things about yourself better. There are always answers for everything, you just have to look for them.

conforming

exploring & expressing

“ ... I began to grow very estranged from my physical body”

Growing up I never really rejected or felt a dissonance with the gender I was assigned at birth because there is a level of freedom that comes with being a pre-pubescent female, in the sense that nothing is quite expected of you yet. So, I did not pick up on the box that was around

me. My family was quite accommodating in that sense. I remember wanting to get unisex denim shorts and a t-shirt and my family being completely fine with it. I was free to play with whichever toys I liked – I had Barbie dolls, stuffed animals, trucks, and guns. I played football with my cousins, but I also made mud cakes and play food. But the situation definitely evolved with my coming of age. That's when I started to feel heavily gendered. I didn't really see the limits of what it was to be a woman until I was forced to become one, post-puberty.

Actually, before I felt gendered, I felt bodied. Many of the growths and changes that I began to experience in puberty started shoving me into a readymade box that had a roadmap already authored by others. I started to grow boobs and my body started evolving into effeminate features. With that came an unwanted shift of attention to my body which was a female, from the person I thought and felt I was. That is the thing that separated me from myself. I had to view myself from the outside because of what was expected of me. I didn't like that about girlhood.

I began to grow very estranged from my physical body. I felt very sexualized at a very young age. I began to experience

gender dysphoria because of the social expectations of what I was supposed to look like. I started to feel wrong for the permutations that my identity had that didn't fit the category of 'woman'. I felt as though regardless of who I am as a person, I'd always end up having to be an object of desirability and that made me feel less of a person.

There's also my worth being tied to my biology. That I must wed, birth, give, and never receive or dare to give myself any more space than I give other people. I felt as though there was something that was missing because it felt like I was performing womanhood as opposed to feeling it. That also made me feel as though male attention is the only thing that was worth seeking, which in turn led to a lot of self-torture with regard to desirability and feeling worthless whenever I was not perceived. This made me go through a phase of compulsory heterosexuality and hyper-femininity, further disconnecting me from my body and all the flaws I saw in it.

I wouldn't say I've ever wanted to be a man, but I definitely experienced a lot of gender envy. I always wanted to be a tall and lanky boy that can wear whatever he wants without feeling surveilled. I identify as non-



binary. My preferred use of pronouns are 'they / them', but I accommodate 'she / her' for the general (conservative) public. To an extent, it is obvious, that I, and every other queer person, have to interact directly or indirectly with the public that has no space to accommodate us. So, in order to stay covert and not out of preference, I need to use 'she / her' pronouns.

I started growing more into my gender nonconformity after I started figuring out my sexuality over time. My growth as a person made space for me to explore my sexuality. With self-acceptance came more space to define my identity according to my will. Figuring that brought more space to be creative and break down a lot of barriers to self-expression for me. With it, came a lot of understanding about societal issues, like internalized misogyny and homophobia, and how much of these things that I passively adhered to affect my life, and my perception and understanding of myself. I was able to explore who I was beyond these identities that were pushed onto me, and that I performed, thereby becoming.

I had never really felt seen by the men that I had been engaging with in the past. I felt as though none of them understood the nuances that made me myself. I definitely felt more acknowledged and appreciated by the people I've interacted with after coming out (friends, dates, situationships) – like I had an identity that wasn't tied to my sex, or to the social binary after I started coming to terms

with being queer. My people understand the seamlessness of gender and the space that is required for exploring one's own way of expressing their identity to the same extent that I have, which is liberating.

I still do feel heavily gendered in certain situations and places. There are still expectations from family and strangers. There's an ebb and flow to gender dysphoria. I still find myself in the deep separation that I used to have before all of this. It's hard to separate yourself from the past, or the reality you exist in. But I feel way less haunted by it because of the tiny little reality that I can make for myself among the people that do see me. Community IS transformative, however little.

I dress in ways that make me feel like myself. I expose myself to people that are more like me because there is comfort and validation that comes with sharing problems, coexisting, and feeling happy with people that get it. I also feel like using they / them pronouns also helps affirm my gender, in the sense that it provides room for other aspects of my personality to be highlighted, as opposed to me being a girl / boy. I affirm my gender by embracing the things that I enjoy doing regardless of their social / gendered implications.

My gender nonconformity isn't necessarily rejecting femininity or masculinity. It is about being able to frame your own identity based on what masculinity or femininity, or their absence, means to you. It's not me realizing that I

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I don't feel any correspondence to the gender I was assigned at birth, nor do I feel an affinity to the binaries that exist.

wasn't male or female but realizing that I didn't want to be limited to whatever my biology implied in a societal context. I don't feel any correspondence to the gender I was assigned at birth, nor do I feel an affinity to the binaries that exist.

Although I'm grateful for the chance to explore and express my identity, there are a lot of things that I am yet to frame into words to explain my experience with gender nonconformity, because it's a long process of learning and unlearning, and understanding what it means to me on a deeper level, shedding and mourning parts of my previous identity as I discover who I am. I believe that my identity is not biological and doesn't necessarily require a biological reason to exist, because it exists without.

Lifeline

lessons on supporting



“It’s not just about one person, it’s about thousands of people. It’s not just about me, it’s about all of us accepting one another. We’re all different.” — Caitlyn Jenner

It is crucial that the queer community supports one another and upholds body acceptance, self-love and inclusiveness in order to guarantee that every individual is proud of who they are on the inside and out. The idea that the LGBTQ community should be appreciated and embraced stems from the fact that they confront body positivity issues on an equal footing, if not sometimes more so, than heterosexuals.

It can be challenging to grow up queer in a society that typically only accepts males and females and frequently challenges the physical appearance of cis people. It is also quite tough when even your parents don’t respect your body. It is important to realize that elderly people would likely find it even harder to comprehend notions like gender mismatch and multiple identities than our generation does.

Numerous health disparities affect LGBTQ people. Although family and friends have a big impact on adolescent health, little is known about how this influence affects LGBTQ youth specifically. LGBTQ people frequently have a negative relationship with their families as a result of rejection, discrimination, or a lack of understanding, as well as shame due to their

sexual orientation and/or gender identity. For some LGBTQ individuals, friends and society may not even constitute a form of support. The development and prevention of negative health impacts, therefore, depend greatly on the home environment.

Families and friends can educate one another about gender identity and sexual orientation early on in a child’s life. It is crucial that parents, family members, friends, and loved ones react appropriately because, upon coming out, the LGBTQ person obviously has a lot at stake, including the future of maintaining a relationship with them. These challenges should be communicated to parents, loved ones, and relatives.

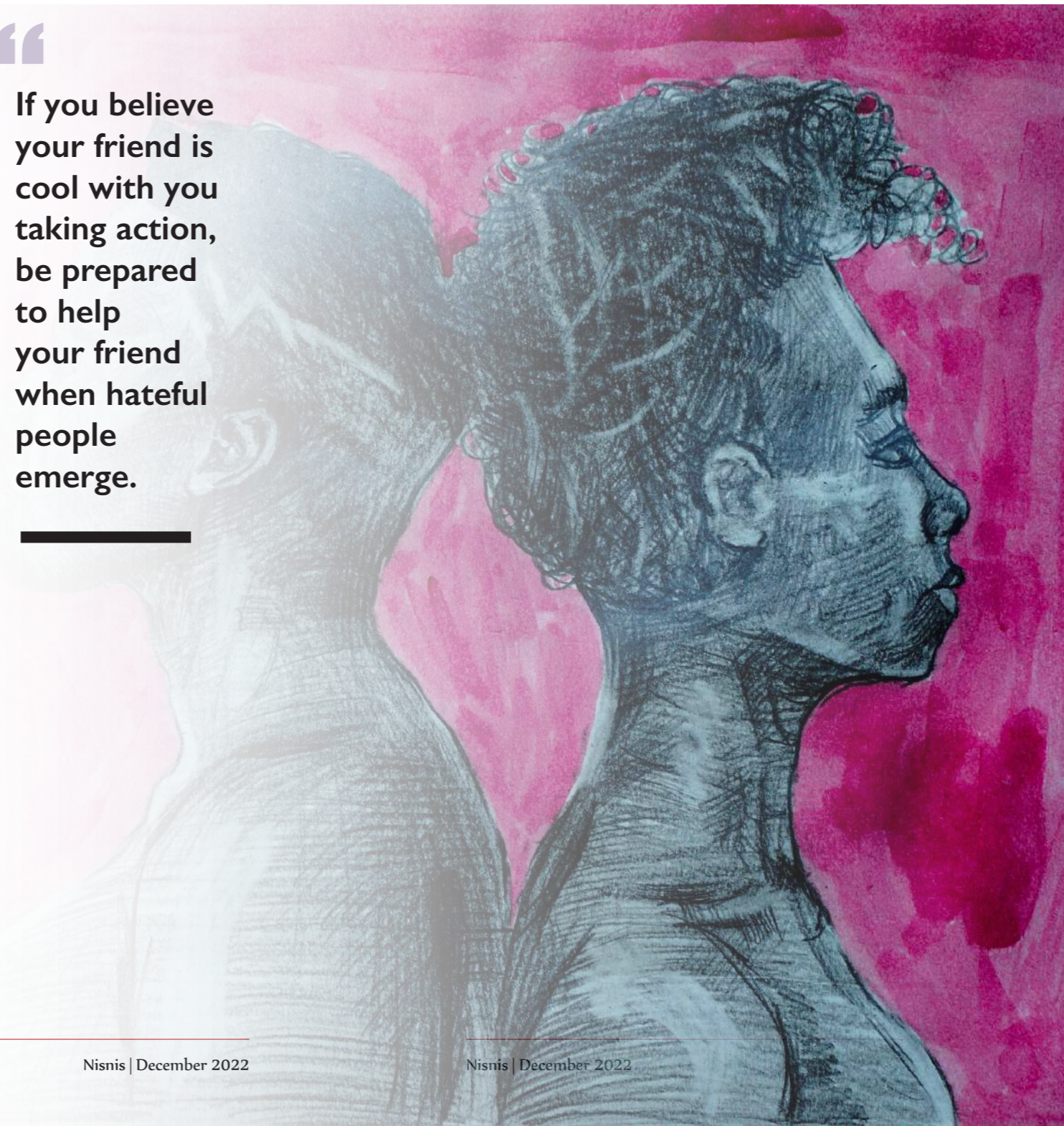
You can commend a person’s appearance, attire, or makeup as long as they are at ease with it. Given that they may be viewed as unconventional or disruptive, it may seem more comfortable for everyone to disregard the person’s gender-nonconforming or transgender style preferences. However, this isn’t always the case. Depending on the circumstance, pronouns and gender representation of the individual are not always well welcomed by everyone present. If they are honest about themselves or wish to dress in a specific manner, try not to stop them from living an honest life. Let other people’s perspectives settle, make sure they have an ally who can be physically present for them in dangerous situations loosen a bit, and let them flourish



... it’s important to realize that the key to positive body image and self-love is, above all else, self-acceptance.



If you believe your friend is cool with you taking action, be prepared to help your friend when hateful people emerge.



however they like.

One of the most crucial friendship and body positivity skills is being non-judgmental. And in order to accomplish that, it’s essential to comprehend your friend’s particular experiences with and difficulties with their body while acknowledging that these struggles are wholly distinct from your own. It can be much harder to learn to embrace your body if your pals couldn’t handle the speed and complexity of your journey. So be grateful for your privilege and assist in spreading daily acts of love that are motivated by a body-confidence mindset.

If you believe your friend is cool with you taking action, be prepared to help your friend when hateful people emerge. This should at the very least give your friend the confidence to feel more comfortable safeguarding their own physique. At the very least, this will convey to your friend how much you value their body and their emotions. When an individual is a bully, knowing that you have an ally who appreciates and supports you may suffice to make you feel better.

Finally, it’s important to realize that the key to positive body image and self-love is, above all else, self-acceptance. You won’t be able to feel confident about yourself without that. All that will happen if you strive for the ideal body or punish yourself for not having one is that you will sink into depression and disdain for yourself. Embrace your innate value and magnificence.

BUTCHNESS



My identity was my shelter while growing up, even when I couldn't understand it beyond knowing that what I was feeling wasn't "right" and that I shouldn't be feeling it. It was my strength, even before my youthful mind was able to withstand external pressures. I love my butchness!

I am the kind of woman that can be described as "masculine presenting", even though I don't like the word. I feel more like myself when I have a short haircut and wear loose clothing designed for men. However, in the society that we live in where the majority are conservative, it's difficult to dress in what makes you comfortable and expresses your true self. One of the things that make it difficult is the expectation placed on us by our society to partake in traditionally feminine fashion, behaviors, and overall presentation. Even if we reject these voluntary obligations that our society places on us, we can't escape the internal struggles to accept ourselves.

In my early days, I defined "masculine presentation" only as copying our society's traditionally male behaviors – not expressing your feelings, not crying, making hard physical tasks look easy, and overall coming off as physically and emotionally strong. However, a lot of these traditionally masculine behaviors are really bad for men themselves, let alone for us. It is communicated that that men don't show their feelings, don't act like this, don't be like that. Trying to copy that



.. being butch isn't about trying to be like a man. It is a lifestyle; a way for LBQ women to express themselves.

into our lifestyles does more damage than good. In addition to that, the fact that our society associates being female with weakness, inferiority, and subservience further pushes us from our female identities.

Furthermore, we try hard to hide our feminine body parts. Our curves don't easily fit the masculine clothes we want to wear. Beyond wanting to hide our bodies, the fact that the kinds of clothes we want to wear are made for lean, broad-shouldered men, not women with boobs, hips, and asses plays a big role.

For me, being butch isn't about trying to be like a man. It is a lifestyle; a way for LBQ women to express themselves. The way I dress, my haircut, and my overall presentation might look like that of a man but that doesn't deny my femaleness. I also see butchness as a form of rebellion. We are rejecting our society's arbitrary definitions of what it means to be a woman by expressing

ourselves through what feels comfortable for us. Butch women are fighting tooth and nail with our society in an effort to express our true selves. Having gone through all that, then turning around and trying to be like someone else defeats the whole purpose.

While confused by the things I wanted, and in my struggle to understand and accept myself, I thought about giving myself over to society's unwritten rules to satisfy my loved ones and the people around me. However, your true self will always find a way to shine, and here I still am, expressing my authentic self. Two things helped me understand and accept my butchness; the first was understanding things for what they are, and the second was accepting reality. When I accepted myself, I tried to understand the kind of woman I am and continued to express myself in the way that was most comfortable for me. This helped me live a life of my own, and not play pretend. This means I cry when I need to, I express my emotions like anybody else, and if I can't do something on my own, I am happy to ask for help. Accepting yourself and living your truth gives you a whole different kind of peace.

At this moment, I understand that the way someone dresses and their external appearance is only an expression and doesn't tell the full story. I don't stress so much about how I dress, or what the people around me think about me. I dress as I please and love my identity – especially my butchness!

Examining butchness



I was born and raised to middle-class parents in Addis Ababa. Personally, I have never felt uncomfortable in my body. As luck would have it, I guess if one calls it that, the way that I presented was never scrutinized because everyone in the area I was raised and around my school knew that I was born into a family that had a lot of boys. They saw me as a girl who was shaped by being born into a family of males and not as a “male” myself. I think the fact that I grew up around a lot of boys made it easier for me to accept that I am the girl/woman that I wanted to be, and this has been a constant since when I was a child.

My being raised around so many boys and my playing football, in particular, made it easier for my parents to accept the way that I dressed and the way that I am. Generally speaking, there was nothing that made it hard

for me to present the way that I wanted. As I have already articulated, the way that I spent so much time playing with boys, the way that I was raised, and my parents not pressuring me have helped contribute to me presenting in a way that I wanted and in being the person that I am. At most, my parents have sometimes suggested something like “You know this might look better, try it”. I don’t remember my aunts, uncles, and others around me openly commenting on my presentation. I assume the fact that my parents gave me the freedom to be who I am kept others from saying anything.

In the city where I live, it is common to hear women who dress like me and who cut their hair referred to as “Kebe” by young people. I have not escaped this fate, but I don’t mind being called this because they usually call you Kebe when they want to say hello or when they want to express their admiration. I respond by saying “Yes” and then move on. I am myself filled with a lot of respect and admiration for women who share my “style”. I don’t understand why but I really like seeing them.

I was introduced to the queer community via Facebook. I was at first very excited to meet people in the community, but I started getting to a point where I did not want to reach out or meet with them. This was primarily because I started feeling and thinking like they did not have the ability to strive for a life of accomplishment and purpose in the way that straight people

did. I eventually realized that this came about as a result of not having enough time and space to understand the community. I have now learned from my mistake. I have learned that there are people in the community who share my goals and who have a lot of respect for themselves and that I just needed to keep searching until I found them. I have certainly now met people who have a lot of respect for themselves and for others.

I believe that other than wearing masculine clothes and having short hair, I essentially am like other women. This also means that my gender expression - in a similar manner to feminine straight women - has not had an influence on my sexuality.

How I present is very much a part of who I am. It is a part of my identity in the same way that my other characteristics are. I have not missed out on a date with someone because of how I present; I have never said “I would have been with her if I had not looked this way”.

I know that the first person I dated liked women whose presentation looked like mine, so I had already checked that box. The second person I dated and with whom I am still together actually did not want to date a masculine-presenting person. She now says, “Your outward presentation is masculine but when I got close to you, I saw that your manners and characters are very different from other “butch” women”. In general, the people in our queer community see my masculine presentation and



... my gender expression ... has not had an influence on my sexuality.

define and see me as “butch”.

There is no question that the fact that we cannot authentically live our lives is very trying. However, we must persevere with hope until a better day comes. And I must continue to interact with the larger community even as I know that there is something missing.

Still, when I am met with a homophobic person or in a group of homophobic people, I am able to defend the human rights of people without naming myself as part of the LGBTQ+ community. The fact that I have been a strong advocate for women’s rights all my life has meant that I can advocate for the rights of everyone. I know what I am, and they can give me whatever label they want based on my presentation, but I still enjoy the freedom to say what I believe.

While the oppressive laws of the land force me to show only a part of myself and not my fully authentic self, I use every opportunity that comes my way to live as authentically as I can.



Love note:

How I grew to love my body

When I first sat with the topic for this piece, “How I Grew to Love My Body”, the loudest voice in my head was saying, “I’m not sure that I love my body.”

I was tempted to shove that voice into a corner and forge ahead with listing the various ways in which I love my body — after all, I exercise; I do my best to eat right; I try to minimize my destructive addictions, and I have long since given up putting my body in situations of dubious consent. I even try to look at myself in the mirror and give words of affirmation and appreciation. But that would have been a disservice to the reality of the full picture; this story of love is more complex and deserves an honest portrayal.

So, I brought that voice back and paid attention. Here is what it had to say:

The narratives I have encountered about loving one’s body have been of the zeitgeist-approved, cookie-cutter variety. They told me to love my body but not how to love a body toward which I had only learned to feel shame and resentment or at best, indifference. They did not tell me how to love a body against whom the mind rages – neurodivergent, often disembodied, weighed down by unacknowledged trauma, a body that has indiscriminately consumed and has been consumed without its consent.

A part of me often felt ashamed when encountering these narratives, even the most uplifting ones, because I felt unable to access the love that appeared so readily felt

by others who just needed encouragement.

In resistance, I often asked, “Why love the body, anyway? Why gym, why groom, why fret about what is consumed?”

Only after I listened to this voice could I hear another — a soft and fragile sapling of a voice that had slowly emerged over years of painful blunders, grueling introspection, and often reluctant and inconsistent praxis. It had been watered into germination by an inherent and inextinguishable desire to live fully and beautifully, a vision I could not realize without metabolizing my experience of and in my body. And this voice is the part of me that has learned to practice love with my body, and transfigure a relationship originally fraught with internalized shame, insecurity, and self-rejection.

I grew to love my body because it was crying out for love. It needed healing, attention, and support only I could give it, and I had to rise to the task.

I grew to love my body because I am nostalgic for the promised possibility of harmony and euphoria that lies on the other side of choosing to love one’s body.

I grew to love my body because I am seduced by the question, “What is on the other side of the tiny, gigantic revolution in which we move from loathing to loving our own skins?” (Cheryl Strayed, *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar*)

I grew to love my body

by slowly shedding what I had learned and internalized about my own. In the empty spaces left behind, I started to fit in questions about how, and in what ecosystem of body politics, bodies, including mine, are conditioned to exist.

I grew to love my body by learning to actively resist a reality in which bodies are transmuted into objects for consumption; in which they barter, often unfairly, for their right to exist; in which the bodies of black folks, especially black womxn are dehumanized; in which queer bodies are simultaneously demonized and fetishized; in which aging bodies, especially womxn’s, are callously discarded.

I grew to love my body through my encounters with the fierce, touching stories of those who dare to imagine what would happen when we give ourselves permission to love, sex, move, and make a mark with our (im)perfect, differently abled, fluid, (un)gendered, othered, subaltern bodies.

Like me, maybe you will find it helpful to engage with why and how we grow to love our bodies instead of being bombarded by the fact that we should.

Every journey to discover the answer to those two questions is invariably different; for me, it has helped to think of love not as an emotion with a binary presence or absence, but as an act and a commitment that is consciously and continuously chosen.

The act of loving my body is the act of paying

attention to it.

To pay attention is to uncloud the senses and encounter ‘what is’ without judgment. Though this had always seemed to me discomfitingly similar to resignation, in reality, it opened up a portal of possibilities. Paradoxically, awareness of ‘what is’ allows ‘what could be’ to happen.

Paying attention to my body meant agreeing to encounter it in neutral territory, unencumbered by my misconceptions and judgments. As a consistent practice, it means actively listening to what my body wants, being aware of what it consumes, what it consents to, what it rejects, its needs, dreams, and hurts. It also means deeply feeling its impermanence, its strange beauty, its strength, and its fragility.

This practice of love has not put an end to my lived experience of recurring disembodiment. I still wonder what it means to have or be a body (am I a body or do I have one?). I still often face a jarring discrepancy between how I am perceived through my body and its idiosyncrasies and how I feel as the self-inhabiting it. In my most difficult moments, I feel trapped within its confines.

Yet, even in these moments, I have found many ways to practice love. I can honor the fact that my body, even when estranged, is the medium through which I get to interact with the living world; it allows me to experience what it is to be alive. I can appreciate its

“
They told me to love my body but not how to love a body toward which I had only learned to feel shame and resentment or at best, indifference.

“
I grew to love my body because it was crying out for love. It needed healing, attention, and support only I could give it, and I had to rise to the task.

elemental part in the complex symbiosis out of which my consciousness has emerged. I can commit to giving my body the experiences it needs and craves; I can choose to handle it with care, treat it with tenderness, and be an agent for its pleasure, movement, exhilaration, and well-being.

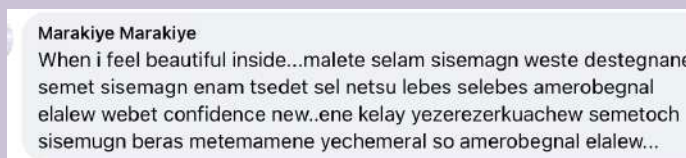
I can choose to pave the way for its euphoria, which, after all, is also mine.

When do you feel your best?

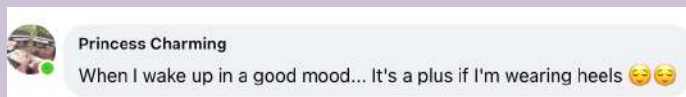
These are samples of responses from a questionnaire that was posted on a Facebook page ...



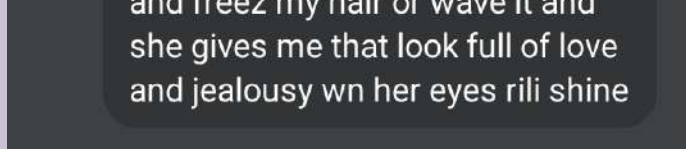
Thank the lord! Since I was old enough to remember things, I went to a school that taught us about the world above to the same degree as the worldly education. And I was raised being told that the Creator has created me in His image and to be absolutely perfect, so I always believe that I am a beautiful and wonderful creation of my God. It may not go well with the statement "I am beautiful!" but if it's based on what is seen from above, I feel light and happy when I am in my sweat pants and with my hair in natural curls.



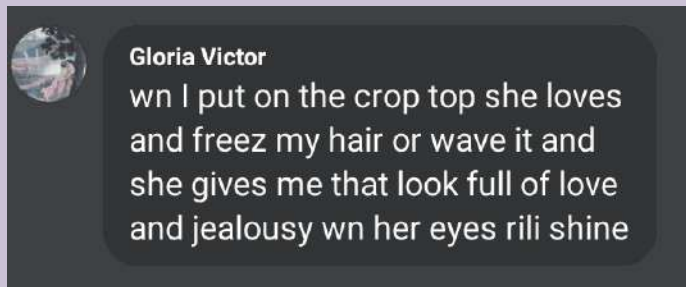
Marakiye Marakiye
When i feel beautiful inside...malete selam sisemagn weste destegnanet semet sisemagn enam tsedet sel netsu lebes selebes amerobegnal elalew webet confidence new..ene kelay yezerezerkuachew semetoch sisemugn beras metemamene yechemeral so amerobegnal elalew...



Ruta Leul
When I shower and when I feel at peace inside. I am like Wow I am pretty 😊. And when people give me compliments.



Princess Charming
When I wake up in a good mood... It's a plus if I'm wearing heels 😊😊



Gloria Victor
wn I put on the crop top she loves and freez my hair or wave it and she gives me that look full of love and jealousy wn her eyes rili shine