

In Burkina Faso, being transgender means living in the shadows

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Amidst roars of laughter, Naomi takes out her phone and shows us photos of herself, having fun with a friend, posing for the camera, both in high heels and sequined dresses. Naomi is a 26-year-old transgender woman, and in her country, Burkina Faso, there are very few places where she is able to assume her identity.

“I never dress like that to go out,” says Naomi, who refers to her feminine clothes as a “disguise worn from time to time” in her room or when visiting friends who know her. We meet her on a February morning in Bobo-Dioulasso, the second largest city in this landlocked west African country. She is at REVS PLUS, an association fighting HIV/AIDS, which offers discussion spaces for all those that Burkinabé society refuses to accept: sex workers, members of the LGBTI community, drug users. Here they have a place where they can talk to their peers, share their experiences and ask for advice, in a safe and caring environment.

Sitting on a low wall within the perimeter of the discreet premises located a few blocks from the city centre, Naomi tells Equal Times: “My parents are Muslim. For them, I am really the shame of the family [...]. They all, except my sister who supports me, detest the fact that I am homosexual. And they totally refuse to accept the fact that I’m a transgender woman,” she tells us.

Her new name, she explains, is a tribute to the British model of Jamaican descent, Naomi Campbell. “She is so beautiful. She’s my idol,” she sighs, shaking her feet resting on the red earth.

When asked whether Burkina Faso has any role models like [the French actor Océan](#), who came out as a trans man in 2018, the response is immediate: “If only! In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, they’re lucky. They have [Barbara](#) [editor’s note: the president of an association based in Abidjan that fights for the recognition of the rights of transgender people]. But here, trans people have to hide away. They are discriminated against by everyone, even the rest of the LGBT community,” she laments.

A place to chat and exchange experiences

Fortunately, thanks to the internet, Naomi has access to sites and forums offering a much broader outlook. That was, for example, how she discovered *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, an Australian film from 1994, written and directed by Stephan Elliott, telling the story of two drag queens and a trans performer. The film marked a turning point in Naomi’s life, having made her realise the extent to which her femininity had always been suppressed.

But online resources are no longer enough. “I don’t want people like me to have to hide behind a computer any more to find solace. That’s why, a year ago, I set up the first transgender association in Burkina,” she says, squeezed into a t-shirt and trousers that are tight-fitting but not too feminine, so as not to raise too much suspicion.

“There is nowhere for us to go, out there. It’s too dangerous. When you’re different, or you get together with other marginalised people, you risk being beaten up,” she explains. The idea behind the association is to provide a meeting place where people can talk with others, like themselves, who have questions about who they are, and where support is given “to those in need of help when they are thrown out of their homes.”

Setting up *Transgenre Burkina Faso*, which now has around 50 members, was not without its challenges. “Authorisation from the governor has to be requested to set up an association. But when we said that we wanted to defend the rights of transgender people, he rejected our application. We had to change a few words in the statutes filed, to make it look like we were just a gay support group, but we kept the name, and it was approved as it was,” says Naomi, with a smile. The association has already managed to raise 1.2 million CFA francs (around €1,800) in funding. All it needs now is a premise of its own, where it can hold its activities and discussions groups.

“Everything started with these ‘chats’. In the beginning, I used to talk at the MSM chats (for ‘Men who have Sex with Men’). But I soon realised that we didn’t have the same problems,” says Naomi, who started to reflect more deeply about her identity thanks to these discussions. “That’s how I came to realise that I wasn’t simply gay. I also feel that I’m a woman.” She says that she is now ready “to take on the leadership of a movement, with an association that really changes things,” thanks to REVS PLUS, which is helping her to set up her own structure.

Online dates turned into extortion

At lunchtime, we go to eat at a restaurant, in the centre, where the walls are covered in portraits of African leaders. As we sit over a dish of attiéké and plantain bananas, at the back of a ventilated room, the discussion turns to places where it is safe to go. “There are hardly any. It’s not like in Bamako where people go out to party and are able to find safe places. Here, you really have to hide your identity if you don’t want to be attacked,” says Naomi, who avoids looking too feminine. “Trans women are rebuked; people think they want to sell their bodies. They are very much frowned upon, even by gay men and lesbians.”

There are a few safe *maquis* (as they are called in Burkina Faso) serving drinks or food, where you cannot be seen from the street. Places without signage. Virtually clandestine, as they are rarely declared and often known thanks to word of mouth, such bars have also become meeting points for certain communities: “My friends and I go out sometimes and meet there. But, even there, we remain discreet.” Would Naomi have a more exciting nightlife if she lived in the capital, Ouagadougou? “It’s not something that really appeals to me. Surprisingly, there are actually more places in Bobo-Dioulasso! There is more nightlife here,” she says.

And what about finding romance? “It’s not easy to meet people here,” says Naomi, who is in a relationship with “a Westerner” that she met at an evening with expats and tourists from Europe. “I don’t see him very often, but we talk a lot when he comes to see me in Bobo-Dioulasso and he really makes me reflect,” she says, somewhat wistfully. “One day, I will go and see him where he lives,” she says, with an air of determination.

How, indeed, is it possible to find a partner in a country where one constantly has to live in the shadows?

Given the social stigma, many members of the LGBTI community use Facebook to meet people online and arrange a date. The problem is that certain men pass themselves off as members of the LGBTI community, to extort their victims, who think they are on a date but find that they have been filmed without their knowledge, and are threatened with the possibility that the video revealing their

sexual identity will be published on social media if they do not pay up. In some cases, they also receive a beating.

“By far, trans people suffer the greatest discrimination and stigmatisation,” [said Pierre Meyer](#), legal advisor at the Queer African Youth Network, back in 2015. Four years on and very little has change. Naomi is not able to contemplate transitioning or dressing as she would like to, but she does hope that she will at least see a gradual change in attitudes. In the meantime, the associations within Burkina Faso are looking to set up an observatory, to document the attacks on LGBTI people. “Security, that’s the first step,” says a hopeful Naomi. “Then, when we are no longer afraid, we will be able to be our real selves.”

This story has been translated from French.

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