

LSVD: Dawn Cavanagh, a warm welcome to you to Germany and to the Berlin office of the LSVD. We are really glad to have you here and that you were able to stop by on your way to Geneva. Thank you for having this interview with us. I would like to introduce you to my new colleague Judith, our translator for this interview. And she also would like to ask you some questions. So I would like to ask Judith to start.

Dawn Cavanagh: Thank you. Thanks for the welcome. It's wonderful to be here. Absolutely wonderful. Both. At the LSVD, but also in this lovely city. I love the city. I love Berlin, I really like it.

LSVD: You are the director of CAL, can you tell us something about it and what you do?

Cavanagh: The Coalition of African Lesbians is coalition, a network. It's membership-based. We have members in 19 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, so about 30 organizational members and our main aim is to be activists. We're feminists. And so it's taking feminist activism into our work, which is mainly focused on advocacy. We're wanting to see changes in policies, in laws, in strategies and in the practice of human rights for all people in all countries on the African continent. But, obviously, because we're women, we are really passionate in that advocacy. We're really passionate to focus on women's rights and you can't do women's rights, if you don't do sexual and reproductive rights. So sexuality and gender is a really important part of the advocacy work that we do.

We work at intergovernmental forums like the United Nations, advocating. And we also work at the African Commission on Human and People's rights to get them to recognize the kinds of rights that seem to be really hard for many of these policy-makers to accept as human rights.

LSVD: How long has this coalition existed?

Cavanagh: Oh, we were ten years at the end of 2014. We'll be going into our teenage years soon.

LSVD: In South Africa, gay and lesbians actually do have equal rights, which is a difference to Germany. What do these rights that have been established mean to you?

Cavanagh: Look, I mean, the challenge is there's a big difference between the standards that are set for rights and the actual implementation of those standards. So in South Africa, yes, we have this wonderful constitution with the wonderful equality clause and the amazing bill of rights and every single law that discriminates based on sexual orientation and gender identity has been removed from the statutes. But the fact is that in real life not much has changed. Or it has changed for the worse because, in spite of the progressive legal framework, the levels of violence against a range of people and, in this case I'm focusing a little bit on lesbian women, are high. Physical violence, sexual violence, rape and murder.

So I'm not sure when you say what does it mean for us, I think maybe one of the lessons is that we shouldn't be focusing on the law. The law cannot change, the law doesn't change people. We don't need to ignore the law—we need to make sure that the legal frameworks are progressive—but we really do need to invest in social change. Changing attitudes and the mindsets of people.

LSVD: What does it mean being a lesbian in South Africa? You kind of mentioned that there is a lot of violence involved.

Cavanagh: Yeah there is, but it's not all about violence. I mean, I wouldn't want there to be this sense that we're just a bunch of victims because I think part of what sustains or enables us to sustain our activism is that we have a lot of joy in our lives. There is a lot to celebrate in terms of our own courage and our own resilience and our resistance to those who seek to oppress us. I think that's amazing stuff and must be named. We have joy and we have pleasure. We have full lives. We're not just lesbians, we're people just doing ordinary things, waking up and having breakfast—for those of us who are lucky enough to have breakfast. Going off and doing our jobs, doing our activism and meeting friends. You know, so I think what does it mean to be a lesbian? Lesbians are human beings with rights and that increasingly we are taking the space and taking those rights. Sometimes gently and sometimes not so gently. Sometimes, you know, forcing governments to respect our rights.

At the same time it also means hardship for many people. Some of us are protected by class. People like me, who have a job, an income and a safe home with good security can meet our needs. I can meet my basic needs and I can go over and above meeting my basic needs. I have what many people regard as luxuries in my life. So, for me it might not be as threatening, but for very many lesbian women in South Africa and elsewhere in the continent, there's lots of hardship. Economic hardship and so on.

Often young lesbian women who come out are forced out of school. The teachers don't know how to deal with them. Peers don't know how to deal with them. Peers often mock them or are even violent towards them while they're walking from their home to school. They are harassed sexually, sometimes raped, and often it becomes impossible for them to remain in school. And if you don't remain in school, you don't have an education, you don't have skills, you're not going to get a job. So it's a bit of a vicious cycle of what we see as the creation of poverty based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Often these young women are forced out of their homes, have nowhere to live, go to live with whoever is willing to open their doors, sometimes there's more abuse in those homes. Sometimes they don't have anywhere to stay and so they're living out on the streets. So, it's a mixed bag. There's joy, there's pleasure, there's friendship, there's solidarity, there's connection with other people who understand freedom and there's also a lot of hardship involved for many.

LSVD: Is there any difference in the way that you can be out and lesbian in South Africa and Zimbabwe?

Cavanagh: Again it does depend on class. On some level in South Africa we have moved somewhere since 1996 with the new constitution. There has been some sort of progress since 1996—there must be. I'm saying this with a lot of hope, I suppose. Even though people's attitudes haven't shifted, if you know that the law is on your side you may be willing to take a few more risks and when people violate you, you do have the law on your side so you can report it to the police. Theoretically, of course. Because practically, when you go and report it to the police, you get more of the same. This is the challenge. The work has not been done.

The police themselves are homophobic. Even though the law is on your side, you still have to get through this police person, who's got to agree that your rights have been violated and that an unlawful act has been performed. If you're a married woman, reporting rape it's like the police

don't understand. For the most part. There are exceptions, I'm generalizing. Not every single policeman is homophobic or misogynistic or hating of women. But for the most part, if you're a married woman and want to report that you're husband has raped you, it's just like you're out of your mind for many people and police are microcosm of what goes on in society.

So theoretically, in South Africa, yes it's easier because we have the law on our side, but practically it's still a challenge. The difference between the situation in South Africa and Zimbabwe, or one of the differences, must be the fact that in Zimbabwe, it is the state itself that is attacking women and activists because there is a serious problem with democracy. Well, in South Africa we also have a serious problem with democracy, but it is a different story. There is a serious problem in terms of democracy in Zimbabwe. The state itself is turning on its own people, attacking and violating people's rights and I think that might be the big difference.

We do have situations in South Africa where individuals within different state institutions are out of line. We've had the president of South Africa make terrible remarks about women, women's rights, and the rights of lesbians and gay people, trans-diverse people. So you have very senior, high-level politicians and government officials often making completely outlandish, just crazy, remarks, but it's not the state's position, right? It's that individual who's not in tune with the standards that his own government has set. That again would be a little bit different to the situation in Zimbabwe.

LSVD: Could you quote one of those remarks that you are thinking of?

Cavanagh: The one time I can't even remember what the context was, but the president made a statement something to the effect that when he was a young man, if another young man kind of came onto him, he basically would have attacked that person. I can't remember the exact words. But that was kind of the thing, if anybody did come onto him he would not have wasted time and he would have attacked that person. So it's homophobia. It's very, very clearly homophobia. He's been a problem on a number of levels because he was also charged with rape in late 2005. He was then the president of the ANC, wasn't yet the president of the country, and he was charged with rape of a lesbian woman. He was acquitted in May 2006, but some of the statements that he made in that process were completely off the wall. That this young woman who he had raped, she came to his house with a skirt on and therefore she must have wanted sex.

And we have other politicians, one of the leaders, who is now in the opposition party called the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) Julius Malena. He used to be in the ANC and he also used to make remarks, also about the same woman, basically shoring up the president's remarks and kind of showing solidarity with the president. We have a problem with patriarchy and how it manifests itself in South Africa. It's a major problem for all women and for lesbian women as well.

LSVD: Coming to the MASAKHANE project, CAL is managing the biggest project for LGBTI human rights defenders that the LSVD, at least, ever implemented and also the biggest project ever financed by the German government and by filia. It is a three- year project and it's including the countries Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Namibia. Could you tell us what it is about and what it means to you?

Cavanagh: Masakhane is a beautiful word, a beautiful name for the project because it's kind of like an invitation, or words of encouragement. In very simple way, it means "build", actually inviting "come let us build together". So it's a really lovely expression.

This project is really exciting and it's really important for us at CAL because for most of our ten years of existence we have focused on advocacy. A lot of our work has been focused at the United Nations, the Commission of the Status of Women in New York, at the Human Rights Council, in particular, and also at the African Commission on the Human and People's rights. And it needed to be like that because one of our aims was visibility. We were being told that this whole LGBTI thing is unafrikan, but even within that, often, women as sexual beings is not understood by many people. As soon as you say "two women having sex" it's like "how is this even possible", "what is it that you're doing?"

This whole kind of patriarchal understanding of what sexual pleasure is, how it looks, how you get it and how you give it. That's a problem. And so women's sexuality is often invisibilized. We want to be visible. We wanted to say that we are here. Even though we might not even necessarily agree with the language of "lesbian". For us, it was an assertion that we are women who insist on making our choices about our bodies and our lives. Regardless of what men or women say.

So the focus was on this visibility. We were doing a lot of work at the international level and the regional level. A lot of focus on speaking to governments and speaking to policy makers, decision makers and people who could influence them. But not much work in countries with our members. So, this project, the Masakhane project, has enabled us to doing that in a very serious way. We've done it in the past, but, if there is money, we're going to Malawi, if there's money we'll go into a particular country needing our immediate help. But we haven't really been able to be proactive and say "Okay in the next four years we are focusing on these five countries and in these five countries we are going to work out what the needs are and then we can support in meeting those needs". We haven't. We haven't had the money, we haven't had the staff, we haven't had the people to be able to do that kind of work. Often, even the members invite us, the secretariat or the office, to come and do something: "We'll be having our strategic planning, please can you come and join us?" "Can your resource person help us and do a session on feminism?" and so on. And often we can't go because there's nobody to go.

The Masakhane project with the support of the German government through LSVD and filia has enabled us to do this and to be more deliberate. More proactive. Not waiting for the crisis and then we run to Uganda. It's working in a more proactive and strategic way and saying "okay which are the countries". We first tried to do all ten countries. We were so ambitious. We thought we'll do all ten countries in three years and then we realized "okay, no." So we also learned. It's a learning process even for us at the secretariat. How do you do this? What are you capable of doing in one year? So we're also learning. Sometimes it's a painful learning process. We thought we could do ten and then we reduced it to six and then we said okay not even six countries are possible. If we're going to work deep and sustain work with organizations over time then we need to focus on four. So this is a big learning process for us, as well as our members. How do we do this? How do we find out what the needs are? How do we prioritize? Because there is thirty needs and we've only resources for three needs so which are those three. What is most strategic? Do we try to train people in how to set up a board? How to write a grant? Because people need everything, right? Name a skill and people need it. Name an area of knowledge and people need it. And getting to the point and saying "No no no no no we're not going to try and do all of them. We are going to focus on advocacy. Because that's the capabilities that we are needing right now." There is no point in advocating up here and it's disconnected from advocacy on the ground. So how do we make sure that all this wonderful work that we're doing at the regional

level and that national level is connected with the advocacy of the work into governments in countries? If that doesn't change, this is useless. That's what Masakhane is doing.

It's strengthening confidence, first. Sometimes it's just confidence--people just haven't had opportunities and exposure. Providing the opportunities for exposure to policy makers, to learning what is advocacy, what has been learned over the last movements and how to advocate.

What is the best way to do this in different circumstances? Working with the media is an important part of that. How do you do that? How do you write a press statement? How do you have an interview with the media for a magazine or a newspaper? How do you manage that? How do you package a message? That was how we decided to focus the attention.

The other issue is sustainability of organizations. Often it's really hard to find the right kind of funding. Often the kind of funding that people are getting is small tiny little bits of money to have one activity on, for example women's day. You have your events and then it's all over and there's no money to continue. That's not how change happens. So one of the important pieces of work of Masakhane is to strengthen the capabilities to be able to raise the right kind of funding, using the right strategies, and looking, for example, what are the trends in funding? Because there is money available, but a lot of it is for multi countries. And so you've got to work together. You can't just send an application in for South Africa. I can tell you right now, they're going to say no or they might give you 500 US dollars for all your efforts of writing this big proposal. So understanding what are the trends in funding? What are donors interested in funding? And how is that funding being done? If multi countries is a trend, let three of us, three countries, come together and write one proposal to submit that together. That's an important part of the Masakhane project as well.

LSVD: Coming back to your international work, you did some standard setting international work with CAL. Could you tell us something about it? First, I would like to mention, of course, the just achieved observer status for the African Commission of Human Rights. Congratulations to this! That's so great!

Cavanagh: Our understanding of how change happens is that it happens through the kind of change we're interested in, which is deep social change that gets to patriarchy and systems of male domination and power is that it can only happen through movements, not through one little person, one little organization floating or in a corner. We really work as part of movements. When we're claiming success and change for us, it's not just CAL, it is the movements and the networks that we are a part of.

At the international level, I'll just mention one at the human rights council in June of 2011. The first resolution on sexual orientation and gender identity was adopted by the human rights council and we together with many other movements were instrumental in pushing South Africa to table their resolution. In fact, South Africa was anti. They were trying to stop a statement. There was a statement that had been drafted, but South Africa was trying to get the organizers of that resolution to withdraw it. It was very late in the session, late in the third week, but for some reason some of us were still there and we found out what South Africa was doing. And then we took them on. I'm South African, so that helps because if you're from South Africa, you can say: "You're my government and I know you're doing this. What is going on? Why are you doing this? Back at home we have this progressive constitution, how can you come here and try and stop it? People are dying." So we did this work. A couple of us were there. We pressured them, we shouted, we told the people at home to make noise. We kept on feeding them with information. They got it into the media. They marched. We just created major, major noise and many governments don't

really want to be embarrassed. That's the power of us, to embarrass them or threaten to embarrass them. And so they backed down and they signed that statement. What they did also was to try and counter what the other states were doing. They drafted a resolution with the most shocking language. Basically trying to stop the initiative, it was just terrible.

So they withdrew. They withdrew the resolution and they signed that statement. And then in June they brought a resolution. After the session, between March and June, we put them under the most tremendous pressure because we happened to be based in South Africa. We called them to meetings, we reported them to the South African Human rights commission. The commission then called them and asked them what is going on. We basically forced them through various means. We wrote a new resolution and we said that's what you need to table in June. And of course they didn't accept it immediately, but by the time we got to June, they tabled a resolution, which was exactly how we wanted it to be worded. It was adopted.

First ever resolution on sexual orientation and gender identity anywhere in the whole United Nations. Even though there have been resolutions before that that have mentioned sexual orientation, but they were not about sexual orientation. This was focused on ending violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. And that was an amazing, really movement building moment. Because it wasn't just us, as I was saying. Many organizations all rallied around working out who's best to do what. Since you're in South Africa, okay you do that. We will lead on that. We're in Geneva we will speak to the ambassador of South Africa and we will get the ambassador of Norway and so on. So, everybody came and said okay what is it how do we do this together while working together, but separately as well. You know, what is the edge that each organization has and then that process has continued in various ways. It's unfolding in quite exciting ways. That's the Human Rights council.

I'll just make one more example at the African Commission on Human and People's rights. This is part of the African Union, it's like the European Union; similar kind of idea. And the human rights organ of the African union is the African Commission of the Human and People's rights. It's based on the African charter of Human and People's rights and we decided that we wanted to lobby the African Union. If we had gone there six, seven years ago, they would have clubbed us, we would have been closed down by now. We would have come under such attack.

So tactically we said "no we're not going to go directly to the African union we're going to start with the commission." Because they aren't politicians, but independent experts. It's lawyers, who are human rights experts in their own countries and so on. So let's start with them, let's focus on them. Let's put them under pressure. Let's sensitize them. Let's educate. Because we knew, even though they are supposed to be human rights experts, they don't think this is a human rights issue. In fact, they think this is disgusting. Now in the April session we were told that we are like a virus. And this is by human rights experts. This is how we knew that this is the case. So we decided to start working with them to sensitize them starting 2005 or 2006 and it was an uphill battle, of course.

We had a lot of resistance from our human rights experts. And we decided "okay we are going to apply for observer status", which would mean that we are being now recognized as human rights activists. That's essentially what it is. When you get observer status, it means that you can attend the African Commission and that you can speak in the name of your organization in the Commission. There's certain sections when NGOs can speak. Open sessions. And so we wanted

that, not so much because we wanted to speak, of course we do want speak, but we wanted them to recognize us as a human rights organization. That's it.

So we applied and of course it went on and on and the documents were lost and "no we can't, the agenda is full this year we can't", and it just went on and on and on from 2005 to 2010. And then we just had enough and we brought our lawyers on board, who wrote a letter basically demanding "we meet all the criteria. These are the criteria one, two, three. We met this criteria by doing this, we met that criteria by doing that dadada. We need an answer. This has been going on for so many years, you lost it..." We detailed the whole thing. And they gave us a reply within weeks. Declining. Saying the work you're doing is not in defense of human rights.

So we were happy—at least we forced their hands. I mean, we could have still been waiting. You know we could have still been waiting in 2015. If we had left them to their own devices, they would never have responded, so for us that was an achievement. We forced them to make a decision one way or the other and we then used that rejection to mobilize people and to get people to shout in every single meeting, in the media, all across the continent, and internationally at embassies. We know how to make a noise. We created just complete chaos.

There was just one session, I wasn't there, but Figgile, who used to be the director before me, she used to work quite a bit there and a number of activists: LGBT activists and women's rights activists. After the decline, in the October 2010 session, we got every single NGO attending the commission to use their voice to make their statement saying they want to just speak about CAL's observer status. And one after the other the people just came. The commissioners are sitting there and NGOs and people just went up one after the other strongly saying "Commissioners we want to speak about this" and when it came to about the tenth person one of the commissioners the chair said "STOP, STOP, STOP! We've heard enough about the CAL!"

That was wonderful. That really pushing them to the edge, you know? But they were getting the point. They tried to isolate us and say "This is not human rights work. Basically, you're just bunch of people that are looking for exotic pleasure. You're disgusting. You're unafrican, you're evil." So they wanted us to feel isolated and, in fact, it had the opposite effect. And that's why in this process it was really an education for them. We were doing this behind the scenes sensitizing work with them and eventually we decided that, in terms of our tactics, that we needed to hold back with that application and first work together with a number of organizations get this resolution through.

In October 2013, we tabled this resolution through the Commission. We asked them: "There's a resolution we'd like you to pose. This resolution is the first resolution, again similar to the one at the human rights council, in its focus on sexual orientation and gender identity and it's calling for an end to violence based on this." And it was adopted.

What we had done was we did research and we collected all the numbers of violations and everything and we had a launch. We called two of them to our launch. It was in the April session 2013 and it was a big thing about this book and this book was distributed and two of them came and then we used the fact that they were in our launch. We had a book and we can use that to push for the resolution. They couldn't say there's no violence because the report was very clear: how many cases of violence in so many years and so on. They adopted the resolution calling for an end to violence.

And there's no way they could have said no because we've proven that there's violence and nobody, not even them even if they're homophobic, can say that violence is okay. That's all we were getting them to say is this violence must stop. It's wrong. It's discriminatory and so once we had that, we then turned back to the CAL observer status because we knew we had built up enough solid thinking and also some standards.

Fadzai submitted in June of last year and in April of this year, the African Commission on Human and People's rights approved our observer status after two hours and twenty minutes in a public session, where they fought openly with each other. Somebody called us "viruses" and how our objectives is to convert people in 19 countries to all become like us, because we're a South African organization registered in South Africa, and we've gotta be stopped. It was crazy. Fadzai and other colleagues were completely traumatized by the kind of debate. The commissioners who were in favor were so strong and one even threatened to leave the session because she went through the criteria and said "Criteria number one? They meet it. They meet it by? 1, 2, 3. You do not have the authority when somebody meets the criteria to say because of your own attitudes to say no that they can't have [observer status]".

We've actually got the video of the whole conversation now, which is fantastic. We're going to actually make a sort of short documentary on the whole process from the application.

So they lost. The homophobes lost and we were granted our observer status and so we are a human rights, I mean we've always been, but now officially we are a human rights organization recognized by the African Commission on Human and People's rights.

LSVD: We and our government like to support lesbian/gay movements in Africa. How can the global north do this without enforcing colonial and racist patterns? What should we keep away from and be aware of?

Cavanagh: Maybe it's similar to the movement building stuff. It is about consultation and listening. Nobody knows everything and nobody knows the answers to everything and definitely not governments. They definitely don't know the answer, otherwise the world would not be looking like it's looking.

In many constitutions, I don't know about the German constitution, but there's often that language "we the people". Because the government is supposed to be in service of the people, that's what government it means. They are the stewards, they are looking after the resources on behalf of the people. If governments can just learn, this is not only about Germany, this is about South Africa, this is about every single country, and could start looking at how they can actually make decisions in parliament, in the cabinet, etc. about "we the people". They're doing this on behalf of the people. That constitution belongs to the people.

I think once people get into power, maybe it's the nature of power, they become many demigods, you know? They become, as they say, a law unto themselves and they know and the people do not know.

Society can only take a government seriously if the government is taking society, people seriously. Often governments don't. They don't do that. They don't take their own people in their own country seriously.

Where are they going to listen to me coming from South Africa when I want the German government to do something about the right to development--because the European Union doesn't believe in the right to development, right? Why won't the German government listen to me, from South Africa, when the German government doesn't listen to its own people? One thing is listening, taking seriously the fact that governments aren't gods, they're not a law unto themselves. That they're there in service of humanity and service IS to serve and, therefore, what they should be doing is listening to people.

Maybe just one thing on the side of NGOs and movements like yourselves and others, it's really the work that needs to be done at home, in the home country. I should not necessarily try to push the German government on something because they listen to their own people. I don't vote for Angela Merkel, she doesn't care. I can't give her a vote or take it away, but you can. And governments want to remain in power, that's just the nature of it, they don't want to leave the seat of power.

Our friends in all the different countries need to really put pressure on governments, not just for LGBT because it's not just even the struggle that we face around sexual orientation. At CAL we don't even believe in LGBT rights at all. There are human rights related to sexual orientation and gender identity and if we focus on that, we can solve the problem because the problem is about who owns this body. That's the problem. Who's body is this? Because it applies to even a man, even a man a gay man, even a straight man. It's who's body is that? Who owns this body? Who can make the decisions about this body?

It's really for our friends in the global north to start to expand the conversation. We can't just be worried about sexual orientation and gender identity. We have to start looking at social justice, economic justice, poverty and inequality and making that a part of the struggle and then pushing your governments to do what's right because you have the vote and if you have the vote then you have the power.

LSVD: You were talking about being part of the movements; I feel like creating movements, but how do you do this? How do you manage to organize movements using the edge of every organization?

Cavanagh: I don't have one answer. It's such a big question. If I just had to focus on one thing, because it is such a big question, it's about understanding relationships. Because when we're talking about human rights and change work we're often talking these big technical things. You need the skill, you must be able to do this, have a degree or whatever. Yes, that's really lovely to have all of that, but actually at the end of the day it is about actually really valuing human connection. And respecting people and respecting people's thinking and people's work and recognizing it. For me it's about feminism in action. It's about saying these people know this, they've done wonderful work on this. And affirming and recognizing and praising and learning and listening to others. And not thinking you know everything because there's always something that somebody has done before you, otherwise we wouldn't be here now. It's really about respecting people and learning how to build relationships and it's not always easy. Because we're different and as activists we're so clear. We all think we know everything, so it's not always easy and there's often conflict. There's often competition, but it is about staying in the process. You don't leave the process because you and I disagreed about how we should go about talking to the African Commission and you say "no no no", you're a lawyer, "let's not shout at them" and I say, "let's shout!"

It's really about understanding for us and being humble. There's nothing more special about me than there is about somebody else and putting into practice our belief that if we say that all people are equal, how does that look in real life? You are as important as I am. So I think that really has been for us one of the strengths in building the movements.

Also respecting other people. Peoples see that and doors open. People want you in their space because, even though you might be very direct and very strong and know what you want and say it, you also respect people and you're humble and you listen, then doors do open. People do want to work with you. Not everyone, but the people that you want to work with want to work with you. Especially our work in the women's movement and in feminist spaces has been about LOVE, understanding with others and finding ways to connect and to offer what we know and be able to see what others know.

That's partly what we're doing with LSVD and with filia in this process. It's not just about the money. If the money ends in three years, we're not going to say "goodbye we're never going to have anything to do with you". Maybe the money has opened a door for us to get to know each other and build friendship and if the money gets finished, we still can find ways of working together because that's what movements are. It's about connection and relationship.

LSVD: Thank you, Dawn Cavanagh. Good luck for your next steps.