

10 March 2010

Open letter to Minister Lulu Xingwana from activists and civil society groupings

The Joint Working Group (JWG), a network Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) organisations and many other organisations and individuals across South Africa have been following with great concern the discussions around the walk out of Minister Lulu Xingwana from the Innovative Women exhibition in August of last year. We were particularly interested to read the official statement issued by the Minister on the 4th March and her subsequent comments. We demand a full apology from the Minister for her behaviour at the exhibition and her subsequent disgraceful comments, a renewed commitment to the defence of artistic freedom, and a clear statement that there is no block on funding from the ministry for LGBTI related work.

The Innovative Women exhibition, which opened at Constitution Hill in August last year and has since toured both Cape Town and Durban, was a showcase for a group of female artists from across South Africa to display their work. One of these artists was world renowned photographer Zanele Muholi, a multi award winning artist whose photos have for many years created a voice for black lesbian women in South Africa who are all too often both silenced and invisible. Another of the artists featured was Nandipha Mntambo one of the most talented young South African artists of her generation. Minister Xingwana who was due to speak at the opening refused to do so after having viewed the images and according to media reports later chastised officials in her department for having given funding to the exhibition.

The Minister has been very quick to insist that homophobia is not the motive for her decision to walk out of the exhibition stating on more than one occasion that she was “not even aware as to whether the bodies were of men or women or both”. This seems somewhat unbelievable given that it suggests she did not interrogate the images sufficiently to know their content but enough to brand them as “immoral”, “pornographic” and “in opposition to nation building”. Whether the Minister was aware or not her decision to walk out of the exhibition comes at a time when LGBTI people and particularly black lesbian women face terrible discrimination and violence within our society.

Coming from a minister of state who is a role model for many people, these actions are likely to promote hatred and hate crimes against lesbians and other sexual minorities. Over the last few years there has been an increasing number of so called “corrective rapes” of women identified as lesbian and a number of

women have been murdered in these attacks. We only mention the names of a few of the well known cases of those who have been cruelly robbed of their life in homophobic murders, including: Sizakele Sigasa, Salome Masooa, Zoliswa Nkonyana and Eudy Simelane. An apology and retraction of these utterances is needed because failure to do so will create the impression that the Ministry and indeed the government condone these barbaric attacks.

The images in the exhibition do include nudity and intimacy and intimate portrayals of lesbian women. Some people may find these jarring to view, nudity is and has always been a culturally sensitive issue. It is however a huge stretch to suggest that the mere presence of nudity and intimacy labels these images as pornographic. Indeed if this was the case we would be forced to consider many of the most famous pieces of art in the world as pornographic. Zanele's photographs present a touching and powerful expression of lesbian love and intimacy within South Africa and the subjects are all lesbian women who willingly allowed their images to be used in order to provide a voice for this usually silenced and often brutalised community. Nandipha's art asks searching questions of us about rape and violence but is also beautiful and important. It is without question one of the fundamental roles of art and artists within society to push our boundaries and both these artists do so. There is little more subjective than taste in art and the Minister as an individual is not obliged to like or be comfortable with the images on display, she is however as the Minister of Arts and Culture obliged to represent and respect all arts and all culture in South Africa, not merely that to which she personally approves.

The Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, expressly including artistic expression. As Minister of Culture there is a huge responsibility to defend freedom of speech, thought and opinion. The officials who decided to support this incredibly important and powerful exhibition with a grant of three hundred thousand rand acted correctly. The defence of artistic freedom should be one of the cornerstones of the work of the ministry of Arts and Culture and a primary function of the Minister.

As stated above we the undersigned demand the following from the Minister:

- A full apology for her behaviour at the exhibition and her subsequent comments
- A commitment from the Ministry to fully defend the principle of artistic freedom
- A commitment that there is no block on LGBTI related work receiving funding from the ministry

This Letter is endorsed by the following organisations and Individuals:

- The Out in Africa Gay and Lesbian Film Festival
- Gender DynamiX
- Gay Umbrella
- Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action
- OUTFRhodes
- The Coalition of African Lesbians
- Behind the Mask
- Activate
- The Lesbian and Gay Equality Project
- The Inner Circle
- RainbowUCT
- Triangle Project
- Vishwas Satgar, Member of National Convening Committee Conference of the Democratic Left
- Gay and Lesbian Network
- Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church
- People Opposing Women Abuse
- Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church
- Sonke Gender Justice Network

For more information please contact:

Emily Craven
Joint Working Group
011 403 5566
emily@jwg.org.za