

Intersexed in Africa

'I'm human, I'm not from Mars'

Many traditional African communities explain the birth of intersexed babies with cultural beliefs such as interventions by ancestors after the parents have broken customs. **Sophia Grootboom** and **Karabo Keepile** spoke to two intersexed Africans who have experienced severe discrimination and whose sexes were wrongly identified at birth

In the Heidelberg township community where 35-year-old Linda K lives, everyone — including Linda K himself — believes his parents got what they deserved.

He was born with a small vagina and a normal-sized penis and this is ascribed to the fact that his parents shared a surname and came from the same tribe, which is problematic as married couples should have different surnames and come from different tribes.

In Zulu culture, such marriages are forbidden, and “bad things will happen to you if you break the rules,” said Linda.

His mother desperately wanted a daughter. As a result, Linda was raised as Lindiwe, a girl, and had to endure years of mockery at school. “Schoolmates soon realised there was something different about me,” he said. “I was dressed in skirts, but acted like a boy. And I had two clear sets of genitals.”

When Linda joined the boys on the soccer field, they chased him away, shouting: “What are you? A girl? A boy? Or a homosexual?”

Linda was never sexually drawn to boys. During puberty, some girls, however, pretended to be attracted to Linda so that they could satisfy their curiosity about his physical appearance. They would later laughingly explain to school friends what he looked like and would then break up with him. “It made me feel hurt, angry and too embarrassed to return to school the next day,” he said.

When he turned 15, Linda decided to change his gender. He was convinced he was a boy — even though he had small breasts — as he had developed a deep voice and body hair. Most of all, he felt like a boy.

Lindiwe became Linda and the schoolgirl in skirts started to arrive at school in trousers.

But that was only the beginning of the difficulty Linda faced in trying to lead a normal life.

Almost 20 years later, he spent three years in Natalspruit Hospital in Kathlehong as a medical team

closed his vagina and straightened his penis. He said he underwent a series of painful operations that required intensive aftercare and, lacking help at home, he had to rely on hospital staff for support.

Another shock awaited him after his surgery. “The doctor told me I was HIV-positive. I have no idea how I got the virus — whether it was through the operations or sex.”

Linda battled to change his official identity to that of a male. “Home affairs wanted to have several medical records and needed my mother to testify. But she didn’t want to get involved — she didn’t understand all this.

“So I ended up without a male ID. When I applied for manual labour at construction sites, I was asked: ‘How can a woman do this job, what are you trying to hide?’”

In June, after the intervention of activist organisation Gender Dynamix, Linda finally received his new identity.

“I hope I’ll find a job now,” he said. “I finally have a girlfriend who understands me and I want a child with her. But she won’t trust me until I can support the child.”

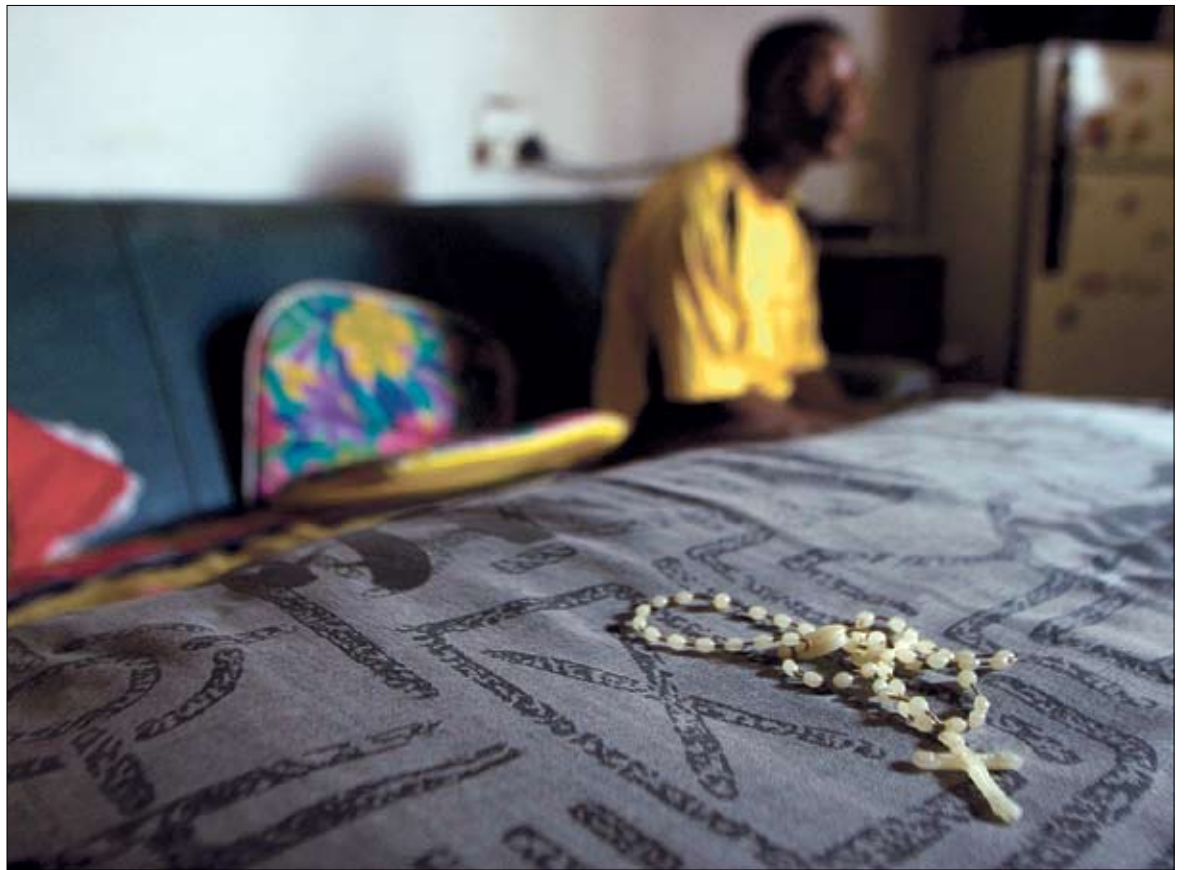
Linda has no idea whether he can have children. “The doctors never really gave me an answer about that.”

He still has small breasts. “When the wind blows, I’m too embarrassed to walk in a T-shirt, because they show. But every time that I go to the hospital for the injections that can make my breasts go away, they say they’re out of stock of the medication.”

After several years of rejecting him, Linda’s family has finally started to accept that he’s a man. “They now call me Mlindo, a sign that they’re accepting me. They can see I’m happy. You know, all I want is to be treated like a human, just like everyone else.”

Sangomas in Julius Kaggwa’s rural Ugandan village told his mother that he was a reincarnation of his great-grandmother and as a result he was raised as a girl called Juliette.

Interviewed telephonically in



Linda, who was born with both male and female genitals, has struggled throughout his life to be accepted as a man by his family and society. Photograph: Oupa Nkosi

Kampala, where he lives, Kaggwa said this was their explanation for the fact that he was born with both male and female genitals. If he was not raised as a girl — the sangomas said — he would die, as failure to raise him as a girl would be a denial of his great-grandmother’s wishes.

“My community believed it was a sort of curse placed on my parents. That’s entirely inaccurate. It’s a biological, not cultural condition, and many people suffer from it.”

Kaggwa’s mother moved him from school to school to prevent teachers and classmates from discovering his condition. He was forbidden to undress in front of anyone, or to participate in sport. He had no social life to speak of.

“Everything went relatively smoothly until I had to participate in a traditional sexual ritual at the age of 12,” said Kaggwa. “I was in an all-girls’ school and our Baganda custom required us to undress for the ritual.”

For the first time in his life Kaggwa saw other girls naked. “I was very shocked and embarrassed to discover that I looked so different from them. I ran away. That was the first time that my mom talked to me about my condition.”

His mother put him on contraceptives because she believed it would stimulate his female hormones, but this didn’t work.

Kaggwa’s voice soon broke, his breasts were underdeveloped, he grew facial hair and he did not begin menstruating. On top of all, he felt sexually attracted to girls. “I finally found the courage to tell a friend that I wasn’t a girl. That’s how I ended up in counselling for a full year.”

Counselling helped Kaggwa realise that it was acceptable to be a man and that he would not die because of a curse: “I realised I was not suffering from a mysterious

condition from Mars. I’m a normal human being with a human medical condition.”

His parents had died by this time, and he had no one to talk to.

“It’s one of the biggest problems with intersexuality in Africa — the seclusion that you have to live in because people believe you suffer from a shameful condition.

“Some people even thought I was a witch or a weird kind of lesbian. It’s really only my faith in God that carried me through.”

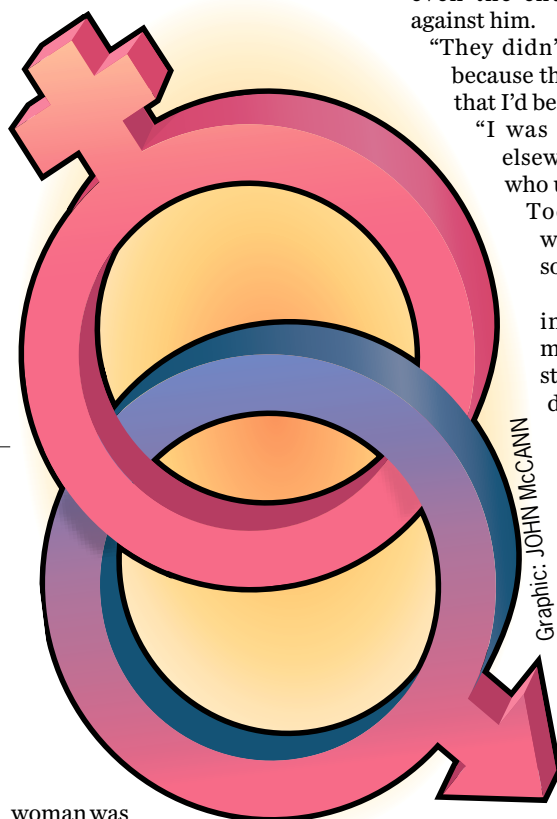
Kaggwa underwent a series of operations that involved closing his vagina and he eventually met a woman he wanted to marry. But even the church discriminated against him.

“They didn’t want to marry me because they weren’t convinced that I’d be able to have children.

“I was eventually married elsewhere by a clergyman who understood.”

Today, Julius and his wife have a biological son and a daughter.

“My wife is an amazing woman. She told me that everyone has stories; my story is just different.”



Kenyan challenges state over prison facilities

Jillo Kadida

An intersexed Kenyan has applied to Kenya’s constitutional court to be released from Nairobi’s Kamiti Maximum Security Prison on the grounds that he belongs in neither a jail for men nor women.

Richard Mwanzia Muasya, who was convicted and jailed for robbery with violence, says he is subjected to continuous human- and constitutional-rights violations at the prison, which is for men only. He claims to suffer inhuman and degrading treatment at the hands of male convicts,

prison warders and the public.

Muasya was born with both male and female sex organs, but regards himself as a man. He has asked the court to release him because, he says, he is neither man nor woman and there is no special prison for people like him. He argues that if he is transferred to a female prison he will suffer the same fate.

The second leg of his case challenges Kenyan law for discriminating against him. He argues that the law recognises only the two sexes, male and female, and should be changed.

The fact that Kenyan law does not recognise intersexuality makes it difficult for him to acquire vital documents, including the national identity card, Muasya says in papers filed in court. This is because he does not know whether to complete application forms as a man or a woman.

The birth and death registration law also does not provide for intersexuality, making it impossible for him to acquire a birth certificate.

Muasya was arrested with three other suspects in February 2005 after a robbery during which a

woman was gang-raped.

However, the rape charge against him was dropped after medical reports confirmed that he is intersexed. The medical examination determined that none of his sex organs was fully developed and that it was unlikely that he could commit rape.

Muasya and other intersexed people in Kenya suffer ridicule and discrimination. In some instances they are kept out of the public eye

because people are ashamed of them.

The problem facing Kenya’s constitutional court is that he has been convicted of an offence, yet the country has no separate facility for holding intersexed offenders. In addition, the Kenyan constitution does not recognise the unique rights of intersexed citizens.

Under South African law, the intersexed are recognised and their rights are protected.

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