

Driven Women

Leading the pack on the road to equality.
By Sheryl Kay

African Equality

At 28 years old, **Kate Kamunde** describes herself as an activist, poet, vocalist and composer, and a blogger who identifies as a queer woman of color. In fact, she's all that and more. Kamunde is currently an administrator with the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya (GALCK), an umbrella organization that includes Minority Women in Action (MWA), Transgender Education and Advocacy (TEA) and Persons Marginalized and Aggrieved (PEMA Kenya). She's also a co-founder and very active member of Artists for Recognition and Acceptance (AFRA-Kenya), a group of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women artists who advocate for human rights through the arts.

She's bravely committed to social justice in a country where same-gender sex is illegal; where being gay is viewed as evil, deviant, and depraved; and where most gays live as heterosexuals, because those who do come out often fear for their lives.

"It breaks my heart to see my fellow women lost in alcohol and substance abuse as they try to deal with who they are," says Kamunde. "Life is difficult even when one is in the closet. It takes a toll on mental and physical health."



Kate Kamunde



Lori Johnson

Kamunde knows this firsthand. After five years of living in the closet, she says she could no longer pretend to be someone she wasn't. But coming out, especially as an activist, has come with its own dangers. More than once, she has been threatened by strangers who recognize her from the media.

Still, she continues on. In the past year, she's helped to host a Woman-to-Woman Health Forum, organize a march to the Health Ministry in Nairobi for increased funding for sexual minorities in Kenya, all while sitting on a board that works on decriminalization strategies. She's also just organized the first-ever LGBT film festival in Nairobi.

"Running away from our problems will not solve them," says Kamunde. "Let us stay home and fight for our basic existence as gay women. It is our right."

Good Car-ma

Cars are in **Lori Johnson's** blood. Like her father, and his father before him, she makes a living in the automotive industry. In fact, she's a technical expert.

Over the past two decades, Johnson has done it all, going from hands-on floor technician and repair mechanic to supervisor. She's also edited engine manuals and served as an instructor in automotive technology at the Community College of Philadelphia.

Today, Johnson is the president of Ladies,

Start Your Engines—a company that specializes in automotive education for women. Her company offers classes that are interactive and that encourage women to ask questions in a nonthreatening environment.

"It's about sharing knowledge, not just being a talking head," says Johnson. "And, I think the fact that I'm a woman also puts them at ease. They know that I understand their frustrations."

Even today, notes Johnson, the automotive industry is mostly a man's world. She has faced her share of double takes. "I still have to prove myself every time I meet someone new in the industry who doesn't know what I do for a living," she says. "It's always interesting how they talk to me and how that changes once they realize I know exactly what they're talking about."

And while the stereotypical every-woman-mechanic-is-a-lesbian notion still exists, she "can think of 10 women off the top of my head that work on cars and are straight. Are there lesbians out there? Of course," she says, smiling, "but it's not a requirement of the job."

Gay or straight, you need to learn about your vehicle, and Johnson encourages women to attend local adult-education classes. In the end, it's all about safety, whether you're on the road, or monitoring the work done by your local repair shop.

"Empower yourself...and maybe you'll be showing someone how to change her tire." ■