The early morning rain has unveiled a clear bright sky. It is late October; the time of year when everything is measured in its proximity to Christmas, the holidays. A room fills slowly with unsure guests, some of whom have been ushered in by their children who have left them there. The guests keep to themselves. They have tea quietly and some busy themselves on their phones. A few of them talk to each other.

It is difficult to tell what these people are thinking and feeling. Their faces are hard to read. When the discussion begins and the purpose for the meeting is introduced, there are sighs and exclamations. The guests have been reminded of why they are here.

This is a historic moment. It is the first official meeting of PFLAG Uganda, a local support group for parents of LGBTIQ+ children, modelled after the American organisation but re-imagined within a local context. For example, there are practicalities around language, the psychologist who leads the deliberations does so in Luganda. The entire meeting is conducted, for the most part, in Luganda. The meeting has been convened and hosted by Chapter Four Uganda, a civil liberties organisation which, in the words of Nicholas Opiyo, the Executive Director, is committed to providing a safe space in which parents can get professional help and access to accurate information about how to cope in a homophobic environment while loving, comforting and safeguarding their children. For Clare Byarugaba, this is seven years in the making.

The session is facilitated by a clinical psychologist who speaks in Luganda for the benefit of all in the group. He asks the parents how they found out their children were different. A father of a transwoman relays the moment he found out in the press about his child. He recounts the endless
calls from family that forced him to turn his phone off. The shame from having his child outed to neighbours, friends and relatives remains close. He shuts his eyes as he speaks of the hopelessness he felt in listening to the village gossip; having to shift houses and; the continuous harassment from people who wanted to photograph him. He mentions a phrase he’ll repeat often: nothing can be done about it.

The irony of a realisation he must have come to painfully sits heavy on his shoulders. He’s stooped on a table in a conference room and talks of what it means that his child has turned out this way. He remembers the anger, asking his kid when ‘it’ begun. Since his child was over eighteen, the father felt it necessary to have a talking-to with them. He refused the child’s friends from visiting out of fear that others would think he is accepting of his child and their friends’ way of life. The family was visited by Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) who checked in on how they were dealing with the outing.

Recently, one of his younger children called needing to talk. The man was scared when it occurred to him that another of his children might be “like the other one.” The boy kept turning him this side and that: asking who he had and had not spoken to; answering one question with another; dodgy. Eventually it came out that he had made a girl pregnant. The father was relieved, telling his son that was no problem at all and both families could come together and. He feels it is his role to guide his children. He ends in appreciating the opportunity to meet other parents dealing with an issue similar to his and glad to have his thinking considered.

His wife is with him. She spoke of her role as a nurturer in her child’s life especially in times of the father’s rage. She admits that her child grew up like a girl but she didn’t see any of this coming. Many people are surprised she has not chased her child away but she cannot. As the child’s mother, it is her duty to comfort her child when in distress. She has cautioned her child on using protection and not “spoiling” other people’s children. She has been accused of condoning her child’s way of life but she tells fellow parents in room not to be harsh despite how troubling and shocking it can all be.

For ‘S’, the mother of a gay man, she was initially very hurt as she began to hear, through rumours, about her son’s sexuality. She wondered whether there was any truth to what must otherwise be people being unfair and unkind. She confronted him and learnt that she had reason to worry. She had heard the truth. Knowing how difficult she had understood things to be, she decided to become even closer to her son.

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It hasn’t been easy. As she put it, embarrassment is the law. You have to withstand people’s words and remain with your child—on their side. You have to accept and hope they don’t encounter further challenges. She hoped for a grandchild and feels that once you get one, you feel OK. It is respect that ultimately matters to her: being treated as a mother ought to be and her son not doing anything unseemly near the village. Your child remains the same and it is crucial to maintain interaction and speak to them about safety. Your child is your child—even more so when the world turns against them. She ends by stating how negative remarks about her child make her angry. There is something about her confidence, asserted in a way that can only be earned. There is a secret to her strength she’s not telling. A deeper layer to the story she’s yet to share.

Mama J, begins by acknowledging how long it took her to accept her transgendered kid. So long. Her child always behaved like a girl, she knew. It always made her happy because
it meant they were smart. When the kid was in first year at university, some friends outed them to their father. The father stopped taking care of the child and let the mother know. She was unable to find a reason. A while later, she would hear rumours about her child whose friend she would press for details. The friend admitted to being gay and confirmed the gossip around her child. She stayed with her child despite threats from the father.

She thinks this is a habit her child and friend learnt and she condemns whoever taught it to them. She takes care of her kid especially after the child was abandoned by the father. She would like her child to look as discreet as their friend. The child is luckily bold and brave keeping mostly to themselves for security reasons although people do know about them. The father seems to be softening especially after a grandchild.

Another mother speaks so softly, the room goes still to hear her. This is the sort of talk she has got used to having in hushed tones, probably. Her child was arrested in 2016 for wearing a gomesi and she heard whispers of claims which the child denied.

Finally, the last one to speak is another mother. She was the last one that came to the meeting, after it started. On finding out about her child, she felt so bad that she had to seek refuge in the village for two months. Looking back, the child usually brought male friends over who were very effeminate. She had wondered why and what it signalled. In the end she concluded they must be ‘bayaye’-spoilt children. Shortly thereafter, she heard from the mother of a friend to her child. The two had stopped being friends, she was informed, because her son is gay. The mother of this friend offered to take his mother to see him at an establishment he and his friends frequented. [what did she see?] She has asked his friends to speak to him to change. She prays for him all the time. She has realised he is an adult and there isn’t much she can do to change him. She confessed she was late because she had refused to come but thought it would be important at the last minute.

The parents agree that attending functions and family members are the thorniest aspects of life to navigate since they knew about their children. Some of their children have chosen to isolate themselves from their families because of gossip, including on social media. A parent mentions a group on Facebook where family had been nasty to her child. There was apprehension around being constantly looked at and ugly assumptions made including that their children will teach others this vic. There is collective anxiety around what the future holds. One parent views ‘it’ as a virus he must warn his child against. What good can it bring?

Sharing their feelings on where they presently are, S says she feels OK for the most part. She does however question whether it’s all real sometimes. How her child can possibly be this way? How things could possibly be this complicated? The parents look at each other; they know exactly what she means. Someone brings up a story about an LGBTQIA+ youth beaten up in Kayunga. The group shudders. Another parent talks about feeling petrified when she heard of the re-tabling of the anti-homosexuality law. More shudders. Not much is said. It appears it’s being pushed aside because it would kill the mood to ponder.
Clare, the founder of PFLAG-Uganda who has until now been quietly observing the proceedings, and perhaps wanting to relay at least one of their fears, states that the Government in a statement on 25th October assured the public that there are no plans by the government to introduce another anti-gay law.

The parents embolden themselves with hope. One mother, shaking her head narrates how she is tired of seeing different men—short-tall, dirty looking, poor-rich, old-young, entering her home. She has resorted to demanding that her son sticks to one person instead of sleeping around like the world is ending. The same way they have laughed self-deprecatingly at intervals throughout the meeting is the same way they laugh with this mother shaking their heads in wonder, they maintain a sense of joy in thinking about their children and the predicament they find themselves in.

The conversation naturally diverts to where these parents are stuck. Why are their children like this? A father states that it’s nothing new because it appears in the Bible and it was punished by Sodom and Gomorrah, but he would like to know how and why it started in his child. It bothers him so much, he sends his son off to his mother a lot of the time. A mother worries that she doesn’t have anyone to ask.

Two mothers disagree: one assuredly insists these children are born this way—attributing it all to a ‘hormone’ that is inborn the child while another is certain the children are influenced by others. Someone says the children themselves don’t know where the attraction stems from. The parents don’t have answers to all of their questions but have found a place where they can ask and process through everything that has been bothering them. It has made them light, hopeful, cheerful, and offered some relief.

Ms Clare notes that the parents and family of LGBTQIA+ are often ignored. How do they feel about their loved one? How can they remain united as family? Can they? She informs them that the support group meetings shall be scheduled every month, and there is a resounding/collective commitment to attending, and relief that this is not the last time they are meeting each other. A bond has been formed.

She was nearly in tears closing the session, plotting follow-up gatherings and bidding farewell to her guests. All your children want is to love and be loved by you, she says. At lunch, some of the children join to escort their parents back home.

I suspect it’s going to be a lovely Christmas and/or holiday season for these families.