

SPOTLIGHT ON

ZANELE MUHOLI

Stonewall

Who are Stonewall?

This resource is produced by Stonewall, a UK-based charity that stands for the freedom, equity and potential of all lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning and ace (LGBTQ+) people. At Stonewall, we imagine a world where LGBTQ+ people everywhere can live our lives to the full. Founded in London in 1989, we now work in each nation of the UK and have established partnerships across the globe. Over the last three decades, we have created transformative change in the lives of LGBTQ+ people in the UK, helping win equal rights around marriage, having children and inclusive education.

Our campaigns drive positive change for our communities, and our sustained change and empowerment programmes ensure that LGBTQ+ people can thrive throughout our lives. We make sure that the world hears and learns from our communities, and our work is grounded in evidence and expertise.

Stonewall is proud to provide information, support and guidance on LGBTQ+ inclusion; working towards a world where we're all free to be. This does not constitute legal advice, and is not intended to be a substitute for legal counsel on any subject matter. To find out more about our work, visit us at www.stonewall.org.uk.

Registered Charity No 1101255 (England and Wales) and SC039681 (Scotland)

Zanele Muholi (they/them)

Zanele was born in the township of Umlazi in Durban, South Africa in 1972. They're the youngest of 8 children and their dad died shortly after they were born.



Apartheid

The South African Apartheid continued throughout Zanele's childhood. It was a system of racial segregation, which lasted from 1948 until 1991. This system meant that white people were given high status, whilst People of Colour were given lower status. Black South Africans were given lowest status of all.



Family

Zanele's mother provided for the family by being a domestic worker for a white family. Zanele and their siblings were raised by their extended family.

In 1991 they told their family that they're attracted to women. Their mother continued to be supportive of them after they came out.



What else happened in early 90s South Africa?

South African Apartheid ended in 1991. At the age of 21, Zanele was able to vote in the 1994 election. This was the election that brought Nelson Mandela to power.



Change for LGBTQ+ people

During Apartheid, homosexual relationships had been outlawed. However, South Africa's new constitution banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Despite this, Black LGBTQ+ people in South Africa, women especially, face high rates of prejudice based violence.



Becoming a visual activist

In 2002, having moved to Johannesburg, Zanele co-founded an organisation called the Forum for the Empowerment of Women. It's a Black lesbian organisation focused on providing safe spaces for women to meet.

At around this time, Zanele started developing as a photographer.



“I picked up the camera because there were no images of us that spoke to me at the time when I needed them the most. I had to produce a positive visual narrative of my community and create a new dialogue with images.”

Zanele Muholi

Zanele's work

Zanele's photographic work has always celebrated Black LGBTQ+ South African people.

Their work explores both positive and negative aspects of people's lives – their joys as well as experiences of violence.



“My images are portraits, so if my work is being exhibited, someone else’s existence is also being affirmed. What matters is having a dialogue – with people, with institutions and with history. It’s a collective project of reclaiming space”

Zanele Muholi

Ongoing growth

In 2009 Zanele achieved a Masters degree in Documentary Media from Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. Their work there focused on Black lesbian identity and politics in post-Apartheid South Africa.

In the same year, they founded Inkanyiso, a non-profit organisation which provides a forum for queer visual activist media in South Africa.



International success

Zanele has found international success and has exhibited their work internationally.

Their self-portrait series entitled Somnyama Ngonyama, which translates to ‘Hail the Dark Lioness’, is their most famous body of work. These images refer to current and historical attitudes towards matters including race, gender, and LGBTQ+ lives. By 2018 Zanele had started using they/them pronouns.



“I came out as a same-gender loving person, but because there was no Zulu name for it, I was called a lesbian. But we move on, transpire, transgress, and transform in many ways; so I’m just human.”

Zanele Muholi