

STEVE LETSIKE

b. March 30, 1985

SOUTH AFRICAN ACTIVIST

“There is no justification in a democracy for discrimination based on health status, race, nationality or ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, disability, social status or age amongst others.”

Mmapaseka “Steve” Letsike is a leading South African HIV/AIDS and LGBTI activist. She serves as deputy chair of the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC), overseeing campaigns to tackle the epidemic in her country. South Africa is home to the world’s largest HIV-infected population.

Letsike grew up in Atteridgeville, South Africa, an impoverished township comprising 99% black African residents. Her parents died when she was young. She was raised by her grandparents.

**She is the deputy chair
of the South African
National AIDS Council.**

Letsike’s childhood struggles helped her build resilience. She describes “hustling” from a young age to support herself. She persevered by experimenting in different fields, including entrepreneurship and activism.

As a child, Letsike did not identify as a “normal girl” or conform with societal expectations. She successfully challenged her school’s dress code, which did not allow girls to wear slacks. She played soccer, where she was nicknamed “Steve,” and she established the first female soccer team at her high school.

After high school, the self-described feminist joined a program for social development that exposed her to advocacy and training workshops. She founded her own organization,

Access Chapter 2 (AC2), which brings attention to the intersectional issues facing the most marginalized South Africans: black people, women, children and the LGBTI community. The organization’s name refers to the Bill of Rights, which is Chapter 2 of South Africa’s Constitution.

Letsike is the deputy chairperson of the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC), an association established by the government to respond to HIV, tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases. For several years, Letsike co-chaired the organization with H. E. Cyril Ramaphosa, then deputy president and now president of South Africa. Letsike also serves as the chair of the SANAC National Civil Society Forum, which plays a pivotal role in program implementation at the grassroots level.

In 2015 Letsike represented her country in the launch of DREAMS, an international initiative in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Girl Effect, created to secure an AIDS-free future for girls and women in sub-Saharan Africa. Each week more than 2,000 young South African women are infected with the virus—the highest rate on the continent.

In addition to her HIV activism, Letsike co-chairs the National Task Team, established by the South African Department of Justice to address hate crimes and violence against LGBT individuals.

Letsike has a daughter who she says provides her main motivation in life. In 2018 Letsike married her longtime partner, Lucy Thukwane.



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