Women, Gender and Sexuality

Identity, Attraction, Connection, and Community

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Together, we can change the course of the HIV epidemic...one woman at a time.

#onewomanatatime

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Sexuality Is a Spectrum

There are many ways to express and describe a person’s romantic, physical, emotional attractions to other people.
Sexuality and Gender Identity are Fluid

• Sexuality is complex and can be **fluid** (moving and changing over time)
  – Also true for gender identity
  – Gender identity ≠ sexuality
  – Many gender identities other than "woman" and "man"
  – When we use “woman” and “man” here, we are referring to cisgender and transgender women and men, unless otherwise noted

• Connection with other people is exciting -- and there are so many ways to do it!

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What Is Sexuality?

• **Sexuality** (*n.*):
  
  — People's attraction to other people overall (also called "sexual orientation")
  
  — People's feeling of being sexual
  
  — Activities that have to do with being sexual

• Here we will primarily use the **first** definition -- to describe what and who people are attracted to when it comes to sex and intimate connection
Sexuality Definitions

- **Asexual**: someone who does not experience sexual attraction toward any person, regardless of gender.
- **Bisexual**: someone who is able to have ongoing physical, romantic, emotional attractions to people of the same gender and another gender; sometimes shortened to "bi".
- **Gay**: someone whose ongoing physical, romantic, emotional attraction is to people of the same gender, as in "gay men" (can also apply to women).
Sexuality Definitions

- **Heterosexual**: someone whose ongoing physical, romantic, emotional attraction is to people of the "opposite" gender; also called "straight"
- **Homosexual**: clinical term to describe someone whose ongoing sexual attraction is to people of the same gender; considered outdated and offensive
- **Lesbian**: a woman whose ongoing physical, romantic, emotional attraction is to other women
- **LGBTQ**: stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer"; "Q" can also stand for "questioning"
Sexuality Definitions

- **Pansexual**: someone who may be emotionally, romantically, and physically attracted to people of any gender.
- **Queer**: used to describe sexuality as not being exclusively straight.
- **Questioning**: someone in the process of discovering and exploring their sexuality and/or gender identity.
- **Same-gender-loving**: may be preferred to describe attraction to people of the same gender.
- **Sexual minority**: sexuality differs from that of the majority of society.

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Sexuality Definitions

• The language of sexuality is not "finished" and is still being written

• Always changing as communities find more ways to describe this complex aspect of who they are
What Is Sexuality?

- Sexuality is made up of (among other things):
  - **identity** (what group a person considers themselves to be part of based on their sexuality)
  - **desires** (who or what a person feels attracted to)
  - **behaviors** (what sexual acts a person engages in)

- Parts of a person's sexuality don’t always “line up neatly;” for example:
  - A woman who is attracted to women and has a woman partner may not always identify as a lesbian

- Not all people think about their sexuality in the same ways or using the same terms
What Is Sexuality?

• Same-gender sexuality has become more societally acceptable in the past ~20 years
• Number of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual is increasing
  – Especially true among Millennials (born roughly between 1980 and 1998) and younger
    • First to grow up when LGBTQ acceptance had increased
• Sexual minorities also less likely to be white than non-LGB population

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What Is Sexuality?

- Research shows the population of folks who are not heterosexual gets even larger when studies ask what gender people are attracted to (e.g., women) or sexual activities they take part in (e.g., sex with women) rather than how they identify (lesbian, bisexual, etc.)

  - People may not feel part of a community based on their sexuality, even though their behavior or desires may be the same as those that do identify as part of that community
Sexuality and Community

• Labels can be awkward but can help people find others for community or intimate partnership

• In most areas of the world, sexual minorities (people whose sexuality is different from that of the majority in society) have some experience of being marginalized (not valued, viewed as unimportant)
  — Being marginalized is one reason people want to be connected with a community of people who share their experience

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Gender identity is not the same as sexuality

- **Sexuality** = who/what a person is attracted to
- **Gender identity** = who a person feels they are inside (regardless of what others assume)
- "LGBTQ" includes "T" for transgender
  - While it’s true that these identities exist in overlapping communities, it’s misleading to group transgender (a gender identity) with lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer (sexual orientations)
What is Gender Identity?

- **Gender binary**: the 2 genders ("male" and "female") most people think of when they hear about gender ("binary" means involving two things)
  - Considered limiting and oppressive
- Often unfair consequences for people outside the binary
  - Transgender and other gender nonconforming people are extremely vulnerable to harassment and violence

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What is Gender Identity?

- There are many gender identities beyond, and even within, men and women
  - Growing understanding that gender (like sexuality) is a spectrum, not 2 fixed points
- “Gender” often gets confused with “sex”
  - **Sex** (male or female; in some cases “intersex”): label given at birth, based on biological characteristics (body parts, chromosomes)
  - **Gender**: ways that societies and cultures expect people to think, look, act based on assigned sex

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Gender Identity Definitions

- **Butch**: someone whose identity or expression leans towards masculinity; often masculine queer women/lesbians but can refer to any gender

- **Cisgender**: someone whose gender identity aligns with sex assigned to them at birth

- **Femme**: queer person of any gender who presents and acts in a traditionally feminine manner; often associated with feminine lesbians/queer women
Gender Identity Definitions

- **Gender expression**: how people choose to show their gender identity on the outside, through clothing, appearance, behavior, language, voice, or other outer characteristics; also called "gender presentation"

- **Gender minority**: person or group whose gender identity differs from that of the majority in society

- **Gender nonconforming**: broad term for someone who does not behave in a way that conforms to traditional expectations of gender – or whose gender expression does not fit easily into a single category
**Genderqueer**: someone who rejects notions of fixed gender categories; may see themselves as both male and female, neither male nor female, or completely outside these categories

**Intersex**: umbrella term describing natural variations of people's physical bodies that are different from the narrow definitions of male or female
  - Some traits visible at birth (for instance, a baby having genitals that are not clearly male or female)
  - Others may not appear until puberty or show on the outside at all

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Gender Identity Definitions

• **Nonbinary**: someone who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman; may identify as both, in between, or completely outside these labels; may also identify as transgender (or not)

• **Transgender**: someone whose gender identity and/or expression is different from sex assigned at birth; may identify as heterosexual, gay, bisexual, etc.

• **Two Spirit**: umbrella term used by some indigenous people in North America to describe gender identities beyond binary of male and female

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Sharing Pronouns

• **Pronouns** (e.g., she/her; he/him; they/them) describe a person or thing, especially when not present
  – People often make assumptions based on name or appearance about which pronouns that person wants used
  – Assumptions not always accurate; can be hurtful

• It’s often, **but not always**, true that people identifying as men use "he," as women use "she"
  – A person may identify as a cisgender woman and use gender-neutral pronouns like "they/their"
    • “Ze/hir" or "ze/zir" are less well-known gender-neutral pronouns

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Sharing Pronouns

• Referring to a person by their personal pronoun is a way to show respect for them
  — Sharing your own pronouns when meeting new people invites others to share their pronouns with you
  — Helps to challenge idea that people can tell a person's gender identity by looking at them

• Sharing in group spaces can help create a setting that welcomes gender nonconforming and intersex folks
  — Not always safe for people to reveal they are gender nonconforming by sharing pronouns
Many cultures across the globe have some stigma against people who are not strictly heterosexual

- Shows up in common assumptions that everyone is straight
  - E.g., “Where’s your husband?” to a woman who may or may not have relationships with men
  - Widespread belief that heterosexuality is "norm": easier for anti-LGBTQ violence, policies to continue

May not be safe for a person who is not heterosexual to be open about their sexuality

- Same-sex sexuality against the law in 69 countries (as of Dec. 2020)
Examples of Sexuality-based Stigma

- **Tanzania** (2018): prominent politician ordered roundup and arrest of LGBTQ people in capital city
- **Russia** (2013): vague law made virtually all public displays of queer identity illegal
  - Numerous LGBTQ hate crimes followed
  - Numerous reports of torture, some deaths, of LGBTQ community members by law enforcement in Chechnya
  - Asylum applications from Russia to the U.S. have spiked during this time; continue to rise each year
Examples of Sexuality-based Stigma

- **Uganda** (2014): law some called "kill the gays bill" attempted to punish same-sex relations with life imprisonment or death penalty
  - Later found to be invalid but it resulted in huge surge of anti-LGBTQ violence, murder of a prominent activist

- **United States**: while a destination for people seeking safety from violence due to their sexuality, until recently:
  - Same-gender sexuality was illegal in many U.S. states (until 2003)
  - Same-gender marriage was not allowed in every state (until 2015)
Sexuality and Stigma

But there’s good news!

• Even in countries where a person can go to prison for being who they are and loving who they love, people resist, form communities and organizations, connect with and fight for one another

• The Indian Supreme Court (2018) voted to remove a law that made same-gender sexual relations a crime
Modern LGBTQ advocacy was shaped by early HIV activism

- In the epidemic's early days, many more gay men were closeted (hiding their sexuality); few strong gay communities in many places
- HIV and AIDS believed by society to only affect gay men; stigma against being gay and having HIV fueled one another, fanned flames of public hatred and fear

Gay men came out in massive numbers – an important tactic to fight for advances in HIV treatment, care, and policy
Stigma and Sexuality in the HIV Community

- Men who fought to come out as gay and living with HIV (or who were outed by others) suffered great consequences
  - Losing families, jobs, often their entire previous life
  - HIV community owes much to their courage and struggles

- Gay men continue to be the most visible face of the HIV community in many parts of the globe

- Very little said about women living with HIV whose primary relationships are with other women or transgender men

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Stigma and Sexuality in the HIV Community

• In the HIV community, often assumed that women with HIV must be with men
  — Extremely low risk of HIV transmission between women during sex adds to this assumption
  — Sexuality is fluid; women whose enduring attraction is to other women may have been with men before

• Most, but not all, women acquire HIV through sex
Stigma and Sexuality in the HIV Community

• Transgender women are highly vulnerable to HIV – roughly 1 in 5 US transgender women are thought to be living with HIV

• Transgender men are also vulnerable – particularly those who have sex with cisgender men
  — Transgender men's sexuality and HIV risk are not well studied or understood

• Aside from HIV risk, important to understand and document experiences and unique health needs of all of our communities

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Some women living with HIV:
- Survived sexual and intimate violence
- Have experienced past traumas

Experience of trauma may change the way sexuality is experienced

But: claiming one’s sexual identity on one’s own terms can help a person heal from such trauma
Finding Voice, Finding Community

• Safety is one reason there are such tight-knit communities of people based on sexuality
  — Can identify spaces for support, to be themselves, to find others to fight for them

• The communities people connect with based on sexuality may change as their identity changes
  — People may worry this will cause a rift with communities they identified with before
  — Can be important to connect with communities that welcome the diversity and fluidity of sexuality

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Much progress has been made in many areas of the world, but it still takes a lot of courage for women to be open about their sexuality and the truth of its complexity.

If this is part of your journey, know that you are not alone!
Finding Voice, Finding Community

• Local, national, international groups celebrate and affirm sexual diversity (see fact sheet)

• Online communities of LGBTQ people have flourished since the dawn of the Internet
  — May be more accessible than in-person groups for people who live in isolated areas or need to be quieter about their sexuality in their everyday lives

• Social medial platforms like Facebook can also be good places to find community
Several A Girl Like Me bloggers have written about sexuality and gender identity:

- 4 Strikes Against Me...But I am Not Out! by Maria T. Mejia
- I Have a Secret, by Gina Brown
- My Christmas Carol, by KatieAdsila
- Why My Ex and Best Friend Li and I Broke Up After 10 Years Together and Married Legally, by Maria T. Mejia

Whatever your journey, may be with your sexuality, we hope that their experiences inspire you to be yourself and live your truth!
To learn more, and for links to articles featuring more details, please read the full fact sheet:

- Women, Gender, and Sexuality

For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:

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- www.twitter.com/thewellproject
- www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv
- www.youtube.com/thewellprojecthiv