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# Women, Gender and Sexuality

## *Identity, Attraction, Connection, and Community*

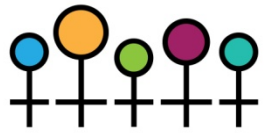
*Last Updated: March 21, 2024*

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

#onewomanatatime

[www.thewellproject.org](http://www.thewellproject.org)

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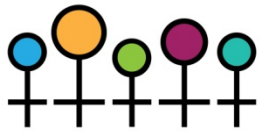


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# Sexuality Is a Spectrum

There are many ways to express and describe a person's romantic, physical, emotional attractions to other people.

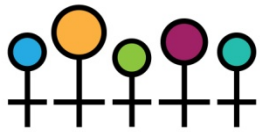




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# Sexuality and Community

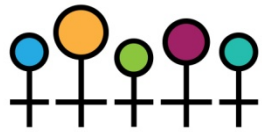
- Labels can be awkward but can help people find others for community or intimate partnership
- In most areas of the world, **sexual minorities** (people whose sexuality is different from that of the majority in society) have some experience of being **marginalized** (not valued, viewed as unimportant)
  - Being marginalized is one reason people want to be connected with a community of people who share their experience



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# Sexuality and Gender Identity are Fluid

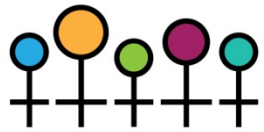
- Sexuality is complex and can be **fluid** (moving and changing over time)
  - Also true for gender identity
  - Gender identity ≠ sexuality
  - Many gender identities other than "woman" and "man"
  - When we use "woman" and "man" here, we are referring to cisgender and transgender women and men, unless 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 feeling of being sexual
  - People's attraction to other people overall (also called "sexual orientation")
  - Activities that have to do with being sexual
- Here we will primarily use the **second** definition -- to describe what and who people are attracted to when it comes to sex and intimate connection



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# Sexuality Definitions

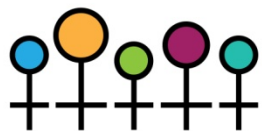
- **Asexual:** someone who does not experience sexual attraction toward any person, regardless of gender
- **Bisexual:** someone who is able to have ongoing physical, romantic, emotional attractions to people of the same gender and another gender; sometimes shortened to "bi"
- **Gay:** someone whose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



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# 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"

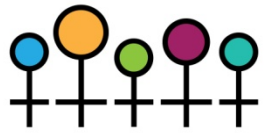


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# Sexuality Definitions

- **Pansexual:** someone who may be emotionally, romantic, physically attracted to people of any gender
- **Queer:** used to describe sexuality as not being exclusively straight
- **Questioning:** someone in 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 majority of society

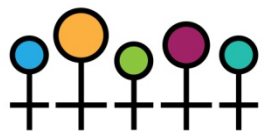




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# Sexuality Definitions

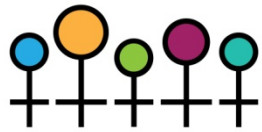
- The language of sexuality is ***not "finished" and is still being written***
- Language shapes how we understand world
- Language is changing as communities find more ways to describe this complex aspect of who they are



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# What Is Sexuality?

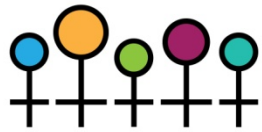
- Sexuality is made up of (among other things):
  - **identity** (what group a person considers themselves to be part of based on their sexuality)
  - **desires** (who or what a person feels attracted to)
  - **behaviors** (what sexual acts a person engages in)
- Parts of a person's sexuality don't always “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



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# What Is Sexuality?

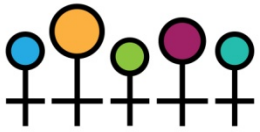
- Same-gender sexuality has become more societally acceptable in the past ~20 years
- Number of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual is increasing
  - Especially true among Millennials (born roughly between 1980 and 1998) and younger
    - First to grow up when LGBTQ acceptance had increased
- 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

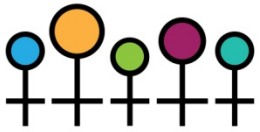


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# What is Gender Identity?

## ***Gender identity is not the same as sexuality***

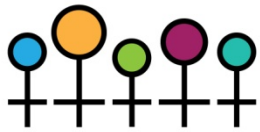
- **Sexuality** = who/what a person is attracted to
- **Gender identity** = who a person feels they are inside (regardless of what others assume)
- "LGBTQ" includes "T" for transgender
  - While it's true that these identities exist in overlapping communities, it's misleading to group transgender (a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



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# What is Gender Identity?

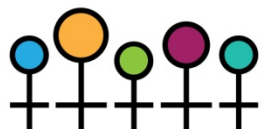
- ***Gender binary***: the 2 genders ("male" and "female") most people think of when they hear about gender ("binary" means involving two things)
  - Considered limiting and oppressive
- Often unfair consequences for people outside the binary
  - Transgender and other gender nonconforming people are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

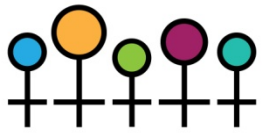


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# Gender Identity Definitions

- **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

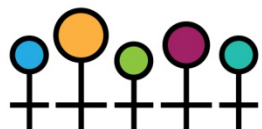




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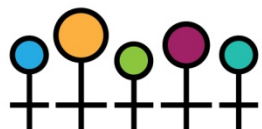
- **Gender expression:** how people choose to show their gender identity on the outside, through clothing, appearance, behavior, language, voice, or other outer characteristics; also called "gender presentation"
- **Gender minority:** person or group whose gender identity differs from that of the majority 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



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# Gender Identity Definitions

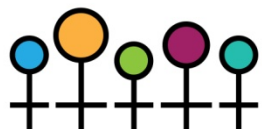
- **Gender spectrum:** full range of ways people may identify or express their gender; the idea that there are many gender identities beyond the gender binary
- **Genderqueer:** someone who rejects notions of fixed gender categories; may see themselves as both male and female, neither male nor female, or completely outside these categories



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# Gender Identity Definitions

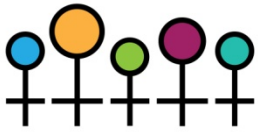
- **Intersex:** umbrella term describing natural variations of people's physical bodies that are different from the narrow definitions of male or female
  - Some traits visible at birth (for instance, a baby having genitals that are not clearly male or female)
  - Others may not appear until puberty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



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# Gender Identity Definitions

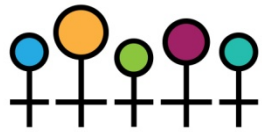
- **Nonbinary:** someone who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman; may identify as both, in between, or completely outside these labels; may also identify as transgender (or not)
- **Transgender:** someone whose gender identity and/or expression is different from sex assigned at birth; may 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

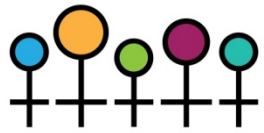
- **Pronouns** (e.g., she/her; he/him; they/them) describe a person or thing, especially when not present
  - People often make assumptions based on name or appearance about which pronouns that person wants used
  - Assumptions not always accurate; can be hurtful
- It's often, **but not always**, true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

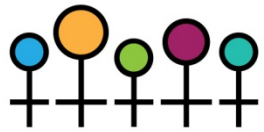
- Referring to a person by their personal pronoun is a way to show respect for them
  - Sharing your own pronouns when meeting new people invites others to share their pronouns with you
  - Helps to challenge idea that people can tell a person's gender identity by looking at them
- Sharing in group spaces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



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# Sexuality and Stigma

- 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)



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# Examples of Sexuality-based Stigma

- **Tanzania (2018):** prominent politician ordered roundup and arrest of LGBTQ people in capital city
- **Uganda (2023):** anti-LGBTQ law
  - Imposes prison sentences for having gay sex
  - Requires neighbors to report anyone suspected to be gay
  - Criminalizes neutral acknowledgement of LGBTQ people
- **Russia (2013):** vague law made virtually all public displays of queer identity illegal
  - Numerous hate crimes
  - Torture, deaths by law enforcement in Chechnya

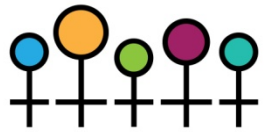




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# Examples of Sexuality-based Stigma

- **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)
  - New anti-transgender bills in several states (2023-2024)
- LGBTQ people seeking asylum outside their home countries

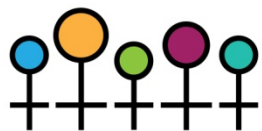


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# Sexuality and Stigma

But there's good news!

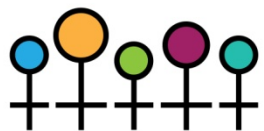
- Even in countries where a person can go to prison for being who they are and loving whom they love, people **resist, form communities and organizations, connect with and fight for one another**
- The **Indian** Supreme Court (2018) voted to remove a law that made same-gender sexual relations a crime



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# Stigma and Sexuality in the HIV Community

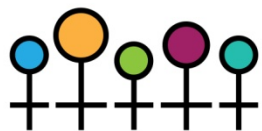
- Modern LGBTQ advocacy was shaped by early HIV activism
  - In the epidemic's early days, many more gay men were closeted (hiding their sexuality); few strong gay communities in many places
  - HIV and AIDS believed by society to only affect gay men; stigma against being gay and having HIV fueled one 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



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# Stigma and Sexuality in the HIV Community

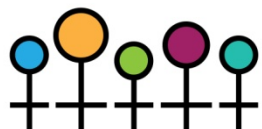
- Men who fought to come out as gay and living with HIV (or who were outed by others) suffered great consequences
  - Losing families, jobs, often their entire previous life
  - HIV community owes much to their courage and struggles
- Gay men continue to be the most visible face of the HIV community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

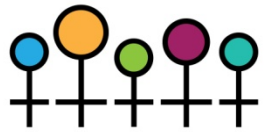
- In the HIV community, often assumed that women living with HIV must be with men
  - Extremely low likelihood of HIV transmission between women during sex adds to this assumption
  - Sexuality is fluid; women whose enduring attraction is to other women may have been with men before
- Most, but **not all**, women acquire HIV through sex



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# Stigma and Sexuality in the HIV Community

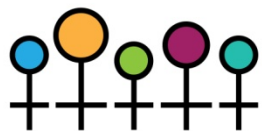
- Transgender women are highly vulnerable to HIV – roughly 1 in 5 US transgender women are thought to be living with HIV
- Transgender men are also vulnerable – particularly those who have sex with cisgender men
  - Transgender men's sexuality and HIV vulnerability are not well studied or understood
- Aside from HIV, important to understand and document experiences and unique health needs of all of our communities



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# Stigma and Sexuality in the HIV Community

- Some women living with HIV:
  - Survived sexual and intimate partner 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

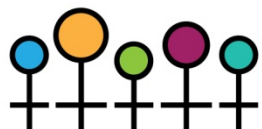


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# Finding Voice, Finding Community

- 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

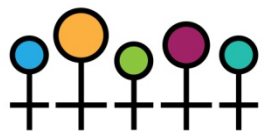




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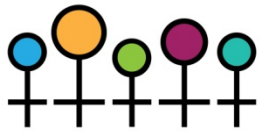
- Much progress has been made in many areas of the world, but it **still takes a lot of courage for women to be open about their sexuality and the truth of its complexity**
- If this is part of your journey, know that ***you are not alone!***



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# Finding Voice, Finding Community

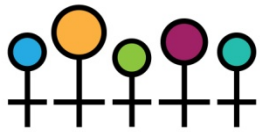
- Local, national, international groups celebrate and affirm sexual diversity (see fact sheet)
- Online communities of LGBTQ people have flourished since the dawn of the Internet
  - May be more accessible than in-person groups for people who live in isolated areas or need to be quieter about their sexuality in their everyday lives
- Social media platforms like Facebook can also be good places to find community



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# Finding Voice, Finding 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 gender and sexuality, we hope that their experiences inspire you to be yourself and live your truth!



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## Learn More!

- 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:
  - [www.thewellproject.org](http://www.thewellproject.org)
  - [www.facebook.com/thewellproject](https://www.facebook.com/thewellproject)
  - [www.twitter.com/thewellproject](https://www.twitter.com/thewellproject)
  - [www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv](https://www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv)
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