

Facts About Homosexuality

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Who are we writing for?

This short manual is aimed at small NGOs in Asia and Africa. NGOs, like other organisations, are concerned with homosexuality – simply because their staff, and also the people they serve, are human. And in any group of humans there will be people who belong to sexual minorities.

People often feel confused about sexuality in general – or their own sexuality. This can be due to having insufficient facts, suppressed feelings or memories, or religious or moral ideas that do not fit with emotions.

Confusion leads us to make bad decisions. Clear, informed thinking leads to better decision-making. Therefore we should make use of the considerable scientific investigation and thought available to us. This manual pulls together the essential facts about homosexuality and attempts to bring clarity.

1. What is 'homosexual'?

Every one of us human beings has our own sexual orientation. "Orientation" means the people for whom we feel attraction. When we are attracted to people of the other sex, we are termed 'heterosexual'; when we are attracted to people of our own sex we are termed 'homosexual'.

The sexual part is important but is not the whole of the picture (refs.1 & 2). Almost all of us feel at times the desire for emotional intimacy or for romantic recognition as well as for sexual release.

1.1. How many people are homosexual?

The figures commonly used are that, globally, 5-10% of males and about 3% of females are homosexual (ref. 1). But the actual figure depends on how the question is worded and where it is asked. If we ask people about their sexual desires, the percentage will be higher than if we ask about what they do – their sexual behaviour and practices. And in conservative and rural communities, and in countries where homosexual behaviour is punished in law, fewer people will admit honestly to something so intimate and so risky.

1.2. Different groups, different names

It can be argued that to be fully heterosexual is to be at one end of a spectrum (or normal distribution curve) and to be fully homosexual is to be at the other end.

Between those two extremes are many less simple positions:

- One group see themselves as 'bisexual' – attracted to both men and women.
- A further group consists of 'transsexuals' (or 'transgender people') – those who feel that they were born into the wrong gender and/or body. In those countries where psychological and medical help is available, they may go through a long process of treatment – behavioural, hormonal and surgical – so that they can live as someone of the other gender. The majority move from male to female, a minority go from female to male. Transsexuals can encounter serious prejudice. In the European Community there are still

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countries where, before they can have treatment, they must first get a divorce and be sterilised (ref. 14).

An abbreviation that is commonly used these days to cover all the minority groups (i.e. non-heterosexuals) is 'LGBT' – lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. These are the groups with which this manual is concerned.

The word 'homosexual' has a somewhat cold feeling and would not normally be used by the people in these groups. All through the world these minorities, like others, have their own vocabulary. In the West, both male and female homosexuals call themselves 'gay'. Females also call themselves 'lesbians'. Heterosexuals are known as 'straights'. In the heterosexual world there will be other names for each group, including names that can be insults.

1.3. The process of 'Coming out'

An important process for each of the people in these minority groups is how they began to understand what they are. This can happen as early as first memories, or only later in life, when the individual is already married with children. At this point the price of honesty may be divorce and loss of their children (many western courts will take children away from parents who acknowledge they are gay).

So each person has to consider how to manage the process of making their situation public – which is known as 'Coming Out'.

Unfortunately, in some places, the price paid for being openly gay is the risk of physical attack or even death. And in less violent countries the price may be that the individual is cut off from their family. So it is understandable that many never attempt to come out at all, while others may come out only partially and to certain people.

1.4. Sexual taboos

In most cultures there are taboos about certain sexual activities. These often include anal penetration. It nevertheless takes place, not only in sex between men, but also as part of heterosexual sex, for example amongst couples who need to avoid pregnancy, or to keep the girl's hymen intact (refs. 7 & 10).

2. Fact or fiction?

2.1. Are predators who are attracted to children also homosexual?

No. Sexually abused children are most likely to be girls, abused by their own father, stepfather or other male relative – that is, by heterosexuals (ref. 4). The desire for sex with children has a different root than the desire for sex with adults of the same gender. Abusers of children have sex drives that seem never to have developed into attachment to adults – they have never grown up. For them, children, compared to adults, are easier to manage and will not make adult emotional demands (refs. 2 & 4).

2.2. Are we born with our sexual orientation or is it the result of upbringing?

This is a question that is greatly debated. Currently the scientific view is that sexual orientation is the result of “a complex interaction of environmental, cognitive and biological factors...shaped at an early age; (it is) not a choice” (ref. 3). In other words it is mostly something we are born with and not something that can be changed. People who are homosexual often welcome this view because it states that what they are is not something over which they have control; it is not something that can be changed.

2.3. Can you convert homosexuals to heterosexuality?

No, (for the same reason as above). People who think that homosexuality is the result of upbringing, and therefore changeable, often see it as “evil”. Many are Christians with political leanings to the extreme right. They claim that certain programmes can “rescue” people, or “convert” their orientation to something more acceptable.

However, there is no solid evidence for these claims. In addition, some of those who have undergone such programmes claim to have been damaged by the process.

The American Psychological Society states that homosexuality is not an illness so it does not require treatment or “conversion” (refs. 1 & 3). Psychiatrists who claim to do this are being dishonest.

2.4. Are homosexuals able to be good parents?

Yes. There have been studies that compared groups of children raised by homosexual parents with groups raised by heterosexuals. They found no developmental differences between the two groups of children in four critical areas: their intelligence, their psychological adjustment, their social adjustment, and their popularity with friends.

Such studies have also found that children develop their own sexual orientation independent of their parents (ref. 2).

3. Human Rights and Homosexuality

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) persons are not specifically protected by the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1949 and the declarations that followed. Why does that matter?

For a declaration to be passed, enough governments need to sign up to it and it is then legally binding. An example would be the Rights of the Child, signed in 1989 (ref. 24). To get to the point of signing, the governments' representatives go through a process of discussion, argument and changes of opinion. It does not ensure that everybody ends up thinking the same way or the right way, but it a step in that direction.

With a Declaration of Rights in place, funding for development can be linked to specific targets, e.g. the proportion of children attending primary school. So Declarations of Rights have the effect of pushing change forward.

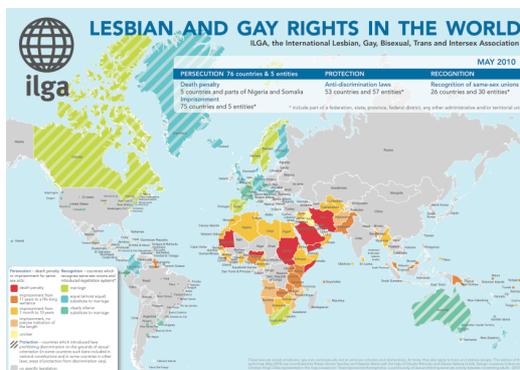
Currently, many individuals and governments are committed to improving the situation of children; the movement has a lot of internal energy. It is not yet the same for LGBT rights.

In practice, LGBT persons are often denied civil, political, social and economic rights, either by law or by the way the law is applied. The following violations have been documented, in places throughout the world:

- In 12 countries, homosexuals could face the death penalty. The laws are worded to criminalise sex acts but in reality they are used to punish the lifestyle of people;
- In more than 40 countries, same-sex acts are illegal;
- In about 15 countries or provinces the right to free association and free expression of LGBTs are denied by law;

On the other hand:

- About 30 countries have some kind of protection for people who are discriminated against due to their sexual orientation
- In 10 countries, some form of recognition exists for same-sex partnerships (ref. 23).



< A map illustrating the persecution, protection and recognition of homosexuals around the world (2Mb PDF format) is available from ilga.org at http://old.ilga.org/Statehomophobia/ILGA_map_2010_A4.pdf

4. The realities of life for homosexuals

Around the world, for people with a different sexual orientation, life is different – and changing. For example, the word “Homosexuality” was typed into the search slot on the Amnesty website: the first page of findings showed links to five articles reporting stories where life was becoming more difficult for LGBTs (in the Middle East and Africa) and to two stories about life becoming better (in India & the Philippines). Two steps forward and five steps back is perhaps a good picture of the current situation (ref. 5).

A factor that has changed the position of homosexual people has been the growth of the Internet. Websites and search engines mean that isolated people can find information about who they are and where others like themselves might be. A Palestinian describes this process: “At that time, the internet was the only place I could find information about my sexual identity; mostly it was in English, and it wasn’t easy to read about myself in English” (ref. 22). While the web certainly helps urban and better-educated people, the rural and less educated remain uninformed by it.

4.1. The West: Europe, America, Australia

In the western culture, LGBT people can live visible and productive lives in fields like the arts and the media. But in many other fields they can still encounter discrimination.

In most of this culture, being masculine is strongly linked to being heterosexual. Boys grow up listening to a constant rain of remarks and jokes suggesting that homosexuality is bad – and that it is also infectious. Gay men, it is suggested, will try to seduce and convert others; to be “real” men, males must keep their feminine side under control. It is not surprising that these attitudes often produce anger and fear in those who hold them. This can build up into verbal and physical abuse. During their school years, most young gay men experience abuse of one or both kinds.

Lesbians are less visible. Traditionally, anti-gay laws have never included them. They still provoke stereotyping and labelling but their existence does not create so much anger as male gays. Both women and men are less threatened by female homosexuality.

4.2. The Middle East & North Africa (MENA)

In some MENA countries there are good signs, such as the start-up of LGBT-oriented NGOs and websites and the beginnings of ‘gay scenes’ – places where sexual minorities can safely meet and make contact. Lebanon is one such country. Even Saudi has the beginnings of a gay scene.

At the other end of the spectrum are countries like Egypt and Syria. According to gaymiddleeast.com, gays in Syria live in a culture of suspicion with relatives, neighbours and police watching what others are doing. There are gay meeting places – certain streets, restaurants or Turkish Baths – but some people are too afraid to go there. The police are targeting gays. Arrest is followed by nasty physical examinations, then special military courts which can sentence them to three years or more in prison. A private life is therefore very tricky. At the same time, the family will be putting on constant pressure for the individual to accept marriage.

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The government provides no education or services for this community. The effect of this is that almost 20% report never having safe sex, or even discussing it. “This paints a dark picture of widespread unsafe sexual relations” (ref. 13).

In 2009, a survey into safe sexual practices looked at gay anal sex with condom use (safe) or without (unsafe). In the UAE, Lebanon and Qatar over 70% of respondents responded that they always had safe sex. In these countries there is less persecution, and more openness to outside ideas and education – in the Lebanon, for example, the national LGBT organisation (Helem) is actively educating the public. But in Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Egypt, just under two-thirds said that they always had safe sex. Here, the persecution of gays and the absence of any GLBT organisations makes spreading educational messages difficult (ref. 13).

4.3. The Caribbean & Latin America

In Jamaica, nearly one-third of gay men may be infected with the HIV virus. And it is assumed that males with HIV/AIDS are homosexual. But the public health response seems paralysed by homophobia. For example, if a man attends any health clinic that has HIV-positive people among its users, this may not be kept confidential. The result is trouble, since he can be labelled as HIV positive and gay. And some tens of men with this label have been killed (ref. 8).

Latin America had traditionally been home to the culture of Machismo – strong ideas about what it is to be Male. But some areas are becoming more tolerant very fast. The region is influenced by trends in the USA. It is becoming more reliant on tourism; many of the tourists come from Europe and the USA and are relatively liberal; there are now openly LGBT travellers seeking holidays where they will be accepted. Argentina has now legalised same-sex marriage, with Chile hoping to be the second country to do so.

4.4. Africa

The relative intolerance of most of Africa is striking. No other geo-political region has such a high rate of anti-gay legislation.

The slowness of the legal systems to become more realistic and tolerant is affected by the strength of both conservative Islam (Shari'a law is in place in parts of Nigeria and Sudan) and conservative Christianity. The conservatism of some Christian churches is leading to conflict with their brother organisations in Europe, which have started to appoint gay bishops (refs. 9, 12 & 17). In South Africa, in practice a relatively gay-friendly country, politicians openly condemn homosexuals. In 2009 there was the first conviction of a gang member responsible for a “corrective” gang rape and murder of a woman labelled lesbian – one of 30 similar incidents in the last decade. These crimes should be seen in the context of a country that has the highest level of rape in the world. It seems that when a country has problems, people find new ways of attaching blame to the homosexual community (ref. 11).

4.5. S.E. Asia & the Far East

In China, there is no explicit law against homosexuality or same-sex acts between consenting adults. But there are no gay rights organisations either. It is believed that

the Chinese policy towards the gay issue remains the "3 Nos": no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion (ref. 25).

In Indonesia, most people consider homosexual acts as abnormal and forbidden by morality and religion. Nevertheless, there are many adults who see themselves as having homosexual or bisexual orientations. Functioning groups for gays and lesbians exist, with meeting-places in some large cities. Most gays and lesbians, however, hide their orientation and activities. And in the regions further from the Capital there is active persecution (ref. 26).

In India, public discussion of homosexuality is made difficult by the fact that sexuality in any form is rarely discussed openly. In recent years, however, attitudes towards homosexuality have shifted slightly. In particular, there has been more discussion of issues around homosexuality in the news media and even portrayals in Indian films. In 2009, the Delhi High Court decriminalised homosexual sex between consenting adults (ref. 27).

5. Why homosexuality matters...for everybody

5.1. ...for couples:

Humans pair up. Heterosexual couples can use this pairing as a basis for having children and building a family. As one half of a strong pair, individuals feel obligation and loyalty – they are more likely to avoid risky behaviour and to try to keep healthy. But where homosexuality is illegal or strongly disapproved of, gay and lesbian couples find it much more difficult to keep long-term relationships going – and are more vulnerable to infidelity and transmittable disease (ref. 28).

5.2. ...for families:

Most people are part of an extended family. Even in the West where families are relatively small, an individual may be in touch with dozens of relatives. Family members are frequently the source of surprises: imagine being approached by an uncle, a niece, a son or daughter who wants to say that they are gay or lesbian or, more challengingly a transsexual. Readers would wish to respond in a loving, helpful way, which would depend on being well-informed.

5.3. ...for workers in Mental Health services:

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental and emotional disorders (ref. 1).

This does not mean that homosexuals are free from mental illness, psychological problems or destructive behaviour. The data from some studies suggest that, although most sexual minority individuals are well adjusted, non-heterosexuals may be slightly more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and related problems (ref. 2).

Faced with people who are unhappy with their lives, mental health carers may draw on their own religion. Some belief systems (e.g. Hinduism, traditional Christianity) emphasise that mental health can only be achieved by the individual accepting the roles into which she or he has been born. This leaves no room for homosexuality.

5.4. ...for workers in fostering and adoption:

Since gays can be good parents (see 2.4), this can be extended to their being fit adoptive and foster parents. Consider a child with a minority sexual orientation who gets fostered with a balanced and happy person with the same orientation. Such a placement may help the child to feel less alone, feel validated and provide an example of how their life can be lived successfully.

6. Homosexuality & HIV/AIDS

6.1. The key considerations

In Africa there are countries where the HIV/AIDS epidemic shows signs of getting under control. In other African countries, in Asia and Latin America, it is still expanding.

Men who have unsafe sex with men – that is, without using a condom – run a serious risk of receiving or passing on the HIV virus.

Many MSM (men who have sex with men) also have sex with women – some are mainly gay but may occasionally seek sex with women; others are married men who may see themselves as hetero but sometimes seek sex with men. So a mechanism for the fast spread of the virus is in place.

HIV positivity is significantly higher among MSM than in the general population (it is lower among women who have sex with women). According to UNAIDS, there are epidemics of HIV among MSM in every major city of Asia, Africa and Latin America. By 2020, half of all new infections in Asia will be among MSM.

Clearly, a major response is needed with targeted prevention. But as yet the frequent response of governments is that this group of people does not exist. One of the main reasons for this, it is said, is homophobia. Most African countries do not include MSM in their HIV surveillance. In countries where homosexual acts are against the law, MSM are faced with discrimination and illegality – so they are unlikely to come forward voluntarily and there are few services to meet their needs (ref. 18).

6.2. Prisoners

Inmates in all-male prisons demand consideration. Sexual exchanges, particularly among long-term prisoners, are inevitable. And drug use – often the reason for a prison sentence – continues inside, but with no clean needles. Normal relationships are made almost impossible by a lack of Institutional safety and control, so what flourishes are strict hierarchies, forced sex, the bartering and labelling of people. This all leads to extremely negative experiences – for a group that has the lowest status – plus a greater chance of infection (refs. 15 & 16).

Unsurprisingly, prison populations have HIV positive rates much higher than the average in their countries – and these prisoners will eventually come out and return to their previous lives. However this issue is given almost no priority. A few programmes of intervention (condoms, HIV testing and treatment) have been started but have not grown in number (ref. 16). Sixteen programmes for Prison-Based Syringe Exchange (PSE) have led to lower syringe sharing and no increase in viral

transmission (ref. 19). But, so far, only a tiny fraction of the total prison population has been reached.

6.3. An inspiring example: Indigenous People

What is called “the Indigenous People's movement” now includes groups from North and South America, Africa, Australia and the Pacific. The different geographical groups share issues centred on their common position as poor minorities, often in rich countries. Rates of HIV/AIDS among indigenous peoples are higher than those in the general population. With the exception of Canada, men having sex with men (MSM) is the most common mode of transmission among indigenous peoples.

Indigenous people and the MSM among them are under-represented in HIV surveillance data. This is bad for effective research, prevention, treatment, care, and support. The movement is pushing for recognition that the root causes of HIV infection for indigenous peoples are the same as the root causes of other ill-health – a lack of self-determination, the social and economic inequalities, the poverty, stigma and discrimination, and the lack of culturally-appropriate health care. The histories of colonisation have led to these groups emphasising the principle of self-determination – that the people who use a service should decide on its design.

One of the most important elements in this response to HIV/AIDS is that indigenous groups reclaim their traditional views of sexuality. They are returning to indigenous languages to describe sexual diversity and healthy sexuality, using “inclusive language that names all sexual and gender identities – including gay, lesbian, two-spirited, bi-sexual and transgendered”.

Parts of the Action Plan are:

- developing culturally-appropriate strategies to combat homophobia
- reducing stigma against indigenous peoples living with HIV/AIDS
- when information collecting, making sure key interviews take place with indigenous people living with HIV/AIDS.

It was important for this movement that it got Human Rights mechanisms on its side. The most important was the ratification of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in 2007 by the United Nations General Assembly.

7. How to become informed – and part of the solution

Ask yourselves the following: in the community served by your NGO, are there minorities that are ignored for the wrong reason? What could get them included?

Do they include sexual minorities? Is it time to get informed about these minorities?

Perhaps there are problems to overcome first. Often the staff of an NGO are not ready to talk frankly about sexual matters. Workshops are a common strategy in the field of HIV/AIDS and can start to deal with these problems.

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If different minorities are part of the community served by your NGO, are they fully involved? Are they involved when seeking information and designing activities? Are they involved in implementation and evaluation?

If they are increasingly involved, congratulations. If not, now is a good moment to start to make a change. And Good Luck.

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