

# Youth *incentives*

International Programme on Sexuality

## A different way

Young women,  
their sexual orientations  
and their sexual rights



inspired by Rutgers Nisso Groep, the Netherlands

## RAP-rule

The guiding principle for the work of Youth Incentives is the so-called RAP-rule:

- **R**ights-based approach
- **A**cceptance of young people's sexuality
- **P**articipation of young people

*The RAP-rule is a pragmatic approach that is meaningful within a diversity of contexts, national circumstances, religions and cultures. Youth Incentives believes that interventions are most effective when there is a broad comprehensive and interactive approach based upon the needs of young people. Young people should be involved in developing programmes and projects targeting them.*

# **A different way**

**Young women,  
their sexual orientations  
and their sexual rights**

# Glossary

**Bisexual:** Men and women who have lasting emotional, romantic and sexual attractions to both men and women are described as bisexual. Their attraction may be stronger to women or to men, or it may be about equal.

**Coming out:** This phrase is often used to describe the first time someone tells another that they are not heterosexual. A fuller understanding is that it begins when they first identify to themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual, and that it is an ongoing process of telling people, including new people who you meet. Transgendered people also come out when they tell people about their gender identity or biological sex.

**Gay:** Men whose main emotional, romantic and sexual attraction is to other men are often referred to as gay. The term is also used more loosely to refer to men and women who are attracted to the same sex as themselves.

**Gender identity:** A person's gender identity is the way in which they self-identify or feel their gender: male, female, or somewhere in between. When someone's gender identity does not match their biological sex they may be described as **transgender**.

**Heterosexual:** Men and women whose main emotional, romantic and sexual attraction is to people of the opposite sex are known as heterosexuals.

**Homosexual:** Men and women whose main emotional, romantic and sexual attraction is to people of the same sex as themselves. Many prefer the terms **lesbian** and **gay**.

**Human rights:** The thinking behind human rights is that there are some things which *all* humans should have, because they are humans. These include the following rights: to have a reasonable standard of living (food, shelter, health care); to be able to have an education; to practise any religion; to own property; and to work and to rest.

**Intersex:** A person whose body is not considered 'standard' for either the male or female sex may be described as intersex. Intersex babies are often raised by their parents as male or female. Sometimes surgeons perform operations to 'make' them male or female, but the choice does not always fit with how the person feels when they grow up.

**LGBT:** A short form of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. Sometimes an 'I' is added for Intersex, a 'U' or 'Q' for 'Unsure' or 'Questioning'... and many other variants. It is often understood as meaning everyone who is not sure that they are heterosexual.

**Lesbian:** Women whose main emotional, romantic and sexual attraction is to other women are known as lesbians.

**Masturbation:** This refers to people using their hands, sex toys or rubbing against something to become sexually aroused, often to the point of **orgasm**. Masturbation is common among women and men around the world, and is a safe way of achieving sexual pleasure.

**Orgasm:** The peak of arousal in our sexual response is known as orgasm. Experiences of orgasm vary, but they usually involve muscle contractions in the body close to the genitals and an intense sense of pleasure. Men's orgasms usually happen at same time as ejaculation (when sperm comes out of the penis).

**Sexual orientation:** This describes a person's main and lasting emotional, romantic and sexual attraction. The three main forms are heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual. Most scientists think that one's sexual orientation is not a choice, but no single cause has been definitely found. Sexual orientation seems to be due to a combination of genetic, hormonal, and environmental influences, many of which go back to developments in the womb.

**Sexual rights:** These include the right of everyone, without force, discrimination or violence, to: enjoy sexual health, including access to sexual and reproductive health services; seek, receive and give information about sexuality; have their body respected; choose their sexual partner; decide to be sexually active or not; have consensual sexual relations (where both people agree); get married; decide whether or not, and when, to have children; pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life.

**Transgender:** When someone's **gender identity** does not match their biological sex they may be described as transgender (sometimes shortened to 'trans'). It includes those who dress, want to live and be accepted as a member of the opposite sex, perhaps including medical treatment. The term is not linked to any **sexual orientation**; transgender people can be attracted to the same sex as themselves, opposite sex or both sexes.

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Colophon



*The pictures in this brochure are representing people who have nothing to do with the text or the issue under discussion.*



# Introduction

All around the world, people's ideas of sex, love and marriage focus on men and women. But this is not the whole story! There are different ways to be, including relationships between women, and relationships between men. But there is **not** much information available to help young women find their way.

We have written this booklet for young women who:

- may be feeling different;
- want to know more;
- have questions about their sexuality;
- and want to do what is best for themselves.

We want to give young women information about different sexual orientations. We hope it will help them to understand the issues better, and to make good choices, particularly if they are feeling unsure.

This booklet should also be useful for people who work with young women, such as teachers and health workers.

We hope this booklet is easy to read. Some of the topics can get complicated, but we've kept them as simple as possible. Words in **bold** are explained in more detail in the glossary at the back of the booklet.

## *Our values*

We believe in **human rights**. They are things which everyone should have. Among them are **sexual rights**. Everyone should be able to choose their sexual partner, to decide whether or not to have sex, and be free to try and have a satisfying and safe sexual life.

Too often these sexual rights are abused. For example, young

women are forced or pressurised into having sex, or required to marry a certain man. The situation is usually worse for women who are attracted to other women.

Sometimes information can help. In many cultures young people get a confusing mix of messages from films, magazines, friends, family members, and religious leaders. Some of this information is incorrect. Some of it is used to try and control them. Many adults think telling young people information about sex will lead to them having sex. This is not true! Many studies have shown that getting information about sex and healthy relationships helps young people to make better decisions.

## *What's in this booklet*

Chapter 2 is about sex and healthy relationships. It should be useful to all young women.

Chapter 3 explains what **gender identity** is, and outlines the different kinds of attraction or **sexual orientation** that are normal for humans.

Chapter 4 has a lot of questions and answers about women who are attracted to other women. They should be interesting to young people in general, and particularly to young women who are trying to figure out their sexual orientation.

*Give me the same human rights as approved for all the universe... I want to get married [to my girlfriend] one day, raise kids.  
Lesbian from Mozambique (d)*



# Sex, love and relationships

## What is sex?

The word 'sex' is commonly used in two ways.

It is used to describe if someone's body is male or female or **intersex**. This may be referred to as someone's 'biological sex'.

It is also used to describe behaviour between people which is sexually intimate, as in the phrases 'having sex' or 'doing sex'.

What counts as 'having sex' varies. For some people it may mean any sexual behaviour between people, from a touch or kiss onwards. For others 'sex' refers to greater intimacy such as touching each others' genitals (the sex organs: mainly the penis and vagina). The narrowest definition is that sex is when a man's penis enters (or 'penetrates') another person's body (vagina or anus).

In this booklet we think of 'sex' as being about intimate, erotic behaviour. It usually involves touching and kissing, and could involve stroking, rubbing or massage. It might involve oral sex (one person's mouth on another's genitals). It could involve penetration. It may lead to **orgasm**. It should be pleasurable for the people doing it.

## What about sex and being in love?

Sex and love do not always go together.

A young woman can be in love without having sex with the person she loves. She can still be physically affectionate such as through hugging and holding hands. Couples can also be emotionally close through talking and listening, and demonstrating their care and respect for each other.

Equally, a young woman can have sex without being in love. She may choose to do this for pleasure or some other benefit to her. Or she may have no choice. For example, a woman who does not love her husband may struggle to refuse to have sex with him.

## Healthy and unhealthy relationships

Healthy relationships tend to have the 'SHARE' qualities in common.

- Safe:** Neither partner will harm the other, physically or emotionally.
- Honest:** The partners can be open with each other, can admit to being wrong, and can resolve disagreements by talking.
- Accepting:** They take each other as they are and appreciate each others' qualities. While supporting each others' personal development, they do not try and "fix" each other.
- Respectful:** The partners think highly of each other. They do not feel superior or inferior in important ways. They respect each other's right to have separate opinions and ideas.
- Enjoyable:** The partners enjoy being together; the relationship improves their lives.

When the SHARE qualities are reversed it is an unhealthy and abusive relationship; there is fear and violence, dishonesty, judging and dissatisfaction, disrespect, and little enjoyment. Such relationships may involve threats, name-calling, blaming, being made to feel guilty, jealous questioning, and violence. When a woman suspects she's in an abusive relationship, there's a good chance she is.

Instead of improving her life, the relationship restricts her life and damages her. She may need to get help to leave this relationship. For example, the support of a relation, school counsellor, social worker or someone else she trusts.

### **Starting to have romantic relationships**

As girls turn into young women they often become interested in forming romantic relationships. Most families and cultures have ideas about what is OK and what is not. It can be helpful if young women talk about this early on with their parents or guardians, to reduce conflict over dating.

Girls and young women 'go out with' or 'date' boys and young men for lots of different reasons. These include making friends, having someone to hang out with, sharing a new experience with someone, being close to someone, being sexually intimate, and being loved. Other reasons include wanting to look cool, wanting to 'fit in', and wanting presents or money in return for sexual intimacy.

How can a young woman know if she should have sex with someone she's in a relationship with? There's no simple answer. She needs to consider how she feels about the person, and to think about what is likely to be best for her in her circumstances. To be able to make good choices she needs to know herself, what she wants, and what she's comfortable with.

It may be helpful if she reflects on the relationship so far. Is it making her feel loved, valued, and supported? Is she able to be herself as well as being part of a couple? Or does she feel judged, or under valued or that there is a lack of trust? She can use the SHARE qualities to help her assess the situation. An

*Just because you are turned on to someone does not mean you are ready to have sex. You have to feel emotionally ready. It's important that the two people talk about what they like and do not like. No one should have to do something they do not want to do. There's no need to rush things. It'll come in time.*

**Terry, age 16, USA (b).**

unhealthy relationship will not become healthy by adding in sexual intimacy.

She should also remember that romantic relationships do not have to include shared sexual activity. Although it may seem that all her peers are having sex, this is probably not true. And in any case, she needs to decide what is right for her, rather than copy others or give in to the pressure they put on her.

### **Being assertive**

When sex is part of a relationship it should be positive. Here are the common factors which can make it negative for young women:

- Feeling pressured or forced into having sex;
- Feeling guilty or bad about having sex;
- Feeling pressured into doing sexual acts that they do not want to do;
- Having a partner who does not care if they experience pleasure;
- Having sex because they fear the partner will leave if they don't;
- Being worried about pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV;
- Feeling discomfort or pain during sex.

One problem women face is that in many societies we are not encouraged to talk about sex. In fact, we are often expected to be passive: to just agree, even if it is not in our best interest.



Yet being able to say what we feel and what we need can help us. By communicating clearly we can avoid or reduce some of the problems listed above.

Assertive communication involves knowing our rights and being able to express our feelings honestly. For example, being able to talk about whether we feel ready to have sex, to discuss our expectations about a relationship, and to say what we like and do not like to do sexually.

To be assertive in communication we can:

- practice what we want to say before hand;
- pick a good time and a good place to talk;
- use eye contact and gestures to show we are not passive;
- use a confident voice;
- use 'I' statements to explain and own how we feel e.g. "I feel we do not know each other well enough to have sex";
- state what it is we want e.g. "I want to get to know you more before we have sex";
- keep repeating our position e.g. "You find it frustrating, but I want to know you better, and to be closer to you emotionally, before we have sex.";
- ask questions to check the other person's point of view, and to find out if they are being controlling e.g. "So you think I do not love you because I am not ready for sex yet? And although you love me, if I do not agree to sex you'll leave me?"

In some situations we can use assertive communication to find a compromise that suits both partners. For example "You are not comfortable buying condoms, but I want us to use them, so why do not get them?". However, we should not make compromises that would affect our self-esteem and our rights.

# Gender identity and sexual orientation

## Gender identity

We are defined as being male, female or intersex by our biology. But we also have an internal sense of what we are – male, female, or in between. This is our **gender identity**. We express our gender identities in the way we present ourselves to the world. This includes how we dress, how we walk, and how we talk.

Most people's biological sex and their gender identity are the same. For example, most females feel that they are female. But some people are **transgender**: males who feel they are female, and females who feel they are male. They may hide this from others, or make it visible by dressing and behaving according to their gender identity. A minority of transgender people have hormone treatment and surgery to change their bodies to match their gender identity. Transgendered people may be attracted to their own sex, the opposite sex, or both.

## Sexual orientation

What attracts us to certain people? How they look? Their personality? Their skills and wealth? There are so many factors. But underneath those preferences comes our **sexual orientation**. It is our fundamental sense of whether we are emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to males, females, or both males and females. These are three types of sexual orientation. All of them are normal, but our societies favour the group with the most people, the heterosexuals.

- **Heterosexuals** are mainly attracted to the opposite sex (males to females and females to males). They are sometimes referred to as 'straight'.
- **Homosexuals** are mainly attracted to people of the same sex as themselves. Males who are attracted to males may

be said to be **gay**. Females who are attracted to females are **lesbians**, and are also sometimes described as gay.

- **Bisexuals** are attracted to both males and females, and are sometimes called 'bi'.

These terms make it sound as if we can put all humans into one of the three categories. But the groups represent a range of orientations – from people who are only attracted to their own sex to people who are only attracted to the opposite sex, and all the places in between. For example, a woman who identifies herself as being a lesbian might sometimes (and for many different reasons) have sex with a man. Or a young woman may be attracted to or sexually intimate with another woman, but not see herself as being bisexual or lesbian. We shouldn't worry about the labels. What's important is understanding ourselves, and feeling comfortable with who we are.

*We live in societies that believe that to be heterosexual is the only right way to be and anything other is wrong. It separates and alienates us from each other. We are all unique and do not fit into neat little boxes. What is important is to acknowledge and accept our differences and see the beauty in all diversity.*

**Nicci, South Africa (c)**

Many people are sure about their sexual orientation from early on in their lives. Others are not sure. They wonder 'Am I different? Am I a lesbian? Or will these feelings pass?' It can be confusing, scary and lonely for a young woman who is trying to figure out her sexual orientation. It may take her a long time. Even once it's done, something may happen that makes her question what she thought she knew. This is all totally normal. Over time it will probably be helpful if she can figure out this aspect of who she is. Knowing and accepting her sexual orientation will help her self-esteem and ability to make good choices for her life

*For me, being bisexual means to love a person for themselves, regardless of their gender. I believe we should be able to love people for themselves, rather than for their gender, their looks their money or anything else.*  
Paula, South Africa (c)





# Questions and answers

We asked young people from around the world for their questions regarding women who are attracted to women. We hope your queries are answered here.

## *What does it mean to be a lesbian?*

Lesbians are women who have a lasting sexual and emotional attraction to women, and not to men. Perhaps you have heard stories about what lesbians supposedly look like and how they behave, as if they are all the same? In reality lesbians are as varied as humans are, in their appearance, their jobs, their personalities and their behaviour.

## *I think I love a girl I know. Does this mean I am lesbian?*

It's very common for girls and young women to be attracted to other girls and women. This feeling may last or it may not. You do not need to label yourself as lesbian just because you've felt 'turned on' by another girl, or have been intimate with her. Your sexual orientation will emerge over time, probably little by little. Give it time, and explore and experience your sexual feelings with an open mind. You may end up finding that you are a lesbian, or that you are heterosexual, or bisexual.

## *I am a woman who's attracted to women. Am I normal?*

Yes! It's natural for people to be attracted to members of their own sex. Same-sex behaviours are well documented for around 500 different animal species. However, as we grow up we are taught that heterosexuality is normal, and anything else is not normal. This is not true. Most scientific experts agree that a person's sexual orientation is strongly influenced by things which happened in their development before they were born. It's normal and healthy to be yourself, whether you

*Once I accepted myself and my sexuality, I found that I became more involved in life with my friends because I was more comfortable with myself.*

**Tammi, USA, age 18 (b)**

are gay or straight. What's really important is that we learn to like ourselves.

## *I have a disability, can I also be a lesbian?*

Of course. People often wrongly assume that people with disabilities do not have sexual feelings and desires. Whether you are gay, straight or bisexual, you will probably have to challenge other people's assumptions as you seek a safe and satisfying sexual life.

## *Can I be a lesbian even though I have had relationships with boys?*

Yes. Most societies do not talk about the possibility of girls being attracted to girls. So girls believe that they will form sexual relationships with boys and men, and most do so. Perhaps you were unsure of your sexual orientation, and had a heterosexual relationship to find out what it was like, or to

*We're told that it's sick, or perverted, or sinful, or abnormal. But the people who tell us that are the same ones who say that women belong in the kitchen, and that Black people are inferior, and that people with disabilities are useless. Who's to say what's normal? Some people think eating raw fish is normal, and other people think it's disgusting and abnormal.*

**Terry, age 16, USA (b)**

do what was expected of you. Or perhaps you only began to question your sexual orientation after having relationships with boys. If you now realise that you are definitely not attracted to men, but are attracted to women, then it sounds as if you are a lesbian. Or perhaps you are attracted to men and women, in which case you may be bisexual.

***I've had sex with another woman. Does that make me a lesbian?***

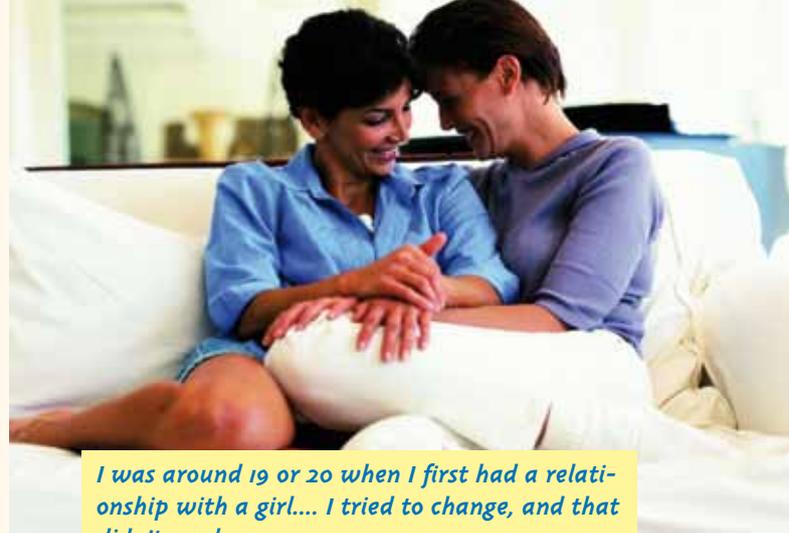
If you were sexually attracted to the woman, and now feel attraction to women, then perhaps you are a lesbian, or bisexual. Or perhaps you weren't very attracted to her, or do not feel attracted to women now? Take time to explore your feelings and to allow them to develop. And do not worry if you feel unsure, you will figure it out in time.

***Do women choose to be lesbians?***

In the past scientists have thought that homosexuality was caused by bad parenting, or that being gay was a mental illness. Now we have better evidence from genetic and other studies. They suggest that the likelihood of whether we are attracted to the same or opposite sex is established before we are born. So most scientists and doctors now view homosexuality not as a problem but as a normal sexual difference. It's like the way that green is a normal but unusual eye colour.

This means that homosexuals are no more responsible for their sexual orientation than heterosexuals are. It is not something you choose, it's something you discover in yourself.

However, just as children are sometimes punished for being left-handed in a world dominated by right-handedness,



*I was around 19 or 20 when I first had a relationship with a girl.... I tried to change, and that didn't work.*

*When I was 27 or 28, my family kicked me out of the house ... I had a job as a teaching assistant at a Catholic school, but the nuns started to suspect me, to follow all my steps... and eventually fired me....I cannot change my life. They will have to put me in prison like the others.*

**Carine, Burundi (a)**

societies often discriminate against homosexuals. So women who are sexually attracted to other women do have to decide whether to live actively and openly as lesbians. In many parts of the world it is difficult and dangerous for a woman to be in a relationship with another woman. Lesbians who decide not to be open about their sexuality must keep their relationships with women secret, or opt not to have any female sexual partners.

Instead of a scientific answer to this question, we may ask if anyone would choose to have a sexual orientation which leads to them being persecuted, subjected to violence, and sometimes put in prison? If it really was a choice, people would choose the "easier way" of being heterosexual. The fact that lesbians and gays exist in countries where they are hated and discriminated against shows that it is not a matter of choice.

*The woman who took me in when I was kicked out of home said 'It's God who gives this to people, and you cannot change what God gives you'*

**Johnson, Burundi (a)**

#### ***Do certain experiences make women become lesbians?***

You may have heard stories about why women become lesbians. For example, because they've been sexually abused, or they've had bad relationships with men, or they've been to girls boarding schools. Of course, these things have happened to some women who are lesbians, just as they've happened to some women who are heterosexual. But they do not by themselves cause women to become lesbians.

#### ***Is it a crime or a sin to be lesbian?***

In some countries it is against the law for a woman to have sex with another woman. We say it is the governments which have such laws that are in the wrong. Their laws cause discrimination and violence against lesbians and bisexuals, and prevent women from achieving their sexual rights.

As for sin, what is a sin? It varies according to culture, and over time. For example, the Anglican church used to view contraception as a sin, but does not now. Who decides what is or what is not sinful behaviour? Mostly powerful men. And yet people also interpret what they are told. For example, the Catholic church says it is sinful to use contraception, yet many Catholics see it as a moral issue and decide to limit the number of children they have.

Most religions view sex between women as being sinful. Yet within each of those religions there are people who disagree, and believers who are lesbians. We've included some useful websites about this in Chapter 5.

#### ***Can lesbians be cured through having sex with men?***

No, lesbians cannot be 'cured' because being a lesbian is not a disease or a disorder. It is normal. Many lesbians have

willingly had sex with men, and yet are still lesbians. The illegal practice of so-called 'corrective rape' (men raping lesbians) is about trying to control and punish lesbians through violence. It does not change lesbians' sexual orientation, but may keep them hidden, due to their fear of violence.



*Friends told me they won't allow me inside the church anymore. But still I go to church. People still talk to me the same way they used to talk. When I am there they talk nicely, but when I am not there, they talk behind my back.*  
**Lesbian from Mozambique (d)**

### *How do lesbians get sexual pleasure?*

Humans get sexually aroused through thinking about things they find arousing, seeing things they find sexually stimulating, and touching. In healthy relationships sexual partners find out what is pleasurable for each other, and negotiate when and how they have sex. This applies to heterosexuals, homosexuals and bisexuals.

There is an unspoken part to this question about how lesbians enjoy sex... how do they enjoy it without a penis? The answer is 'easily'! When a woman masturbates (touches herself) she does not have a penis. She uses her own hands, or rubs against something, or perhaps uses a vibrating sex toy. Similarly, when she has sex (with a man or woman) she can get sexual pleasure and have orgasms without having a penis in her vagina. Many societies view sex too narrowly as penetration (penis in vagina) and forget about other ways of getting sexual pleasure, such as massage, rubbing, and oral sex.

### *What sorts of relationships do lesbians have?*

Lesbians have the same kinds of relationships as heterosexuals have. These include faithful long term relationships, casual sexual relationships, multiple partners, and times without any romantic or sexual relationship. And, just as with heterosexuals, these relationships can be anywhere in the range from very healthy to very unhealthy.

### *Can lesbians be mothers?*

Yes. Lesbians who are hiding their sexual orientation may have a child (by choice or not) with their male partner or husband. Others may take a boyfriend in order to get pregnant. Within a lesbian relationship, either woman can



get pregnant by having sex with a man, or by putting a man's sperm in her vagina. In some countries lesbian couples can also adopt children. The governments of those countries have realised that lesbian couples are just as good at being parents as heterosexual couples.

### *How can I live my religion and be a lesbian?*

Most religions say that sex is something which should only happen between a man and woman within a marriage. They focus on sex as the means to have children, not as a way to have sexual pleasure. So most religions view homosexuality, and in particular sex between men, negatively. Some actively seek discrimination against people who are not heterosexual. Some try to 'cure' homosexuals.

However, religions are cultural; they are made up of people and their interpretations of translations of old texts. This means that the 'official position' of any religion varies between different contexts and sub-sections of the religion.

It also changes over time. So within each religion, there are believers who view homosexuality more positively, and believers who are lesbians. You may find it helpful to find out what they say, to help you find your own way. Chapter 5 includes some useful websites.

### *Where can I get information and support?*

If you can get to use a computer with an internet connection you'll be able to find a lot of information and support on the world wide web. We've listed some good sites at the end of this booklet.

You could also find out if there's a lesbian group you could join. Growing up as a lesbian is not always easy and it can be helpful to meet other people who will understand your worries and difficulties. Of course that does not mean that you can only have lesbian friends, or that your heterosexual friends won't understand you. If there's no lesbian group near to you, perhaps you can talk to a woman you think may be a lesbian, or to someone who you think will be understanding.

In some countries there are also help lines which you can phone for support.

Can you tell if someone is a lesbian by looking at them? You may sometimes guess correctly that someone is a lesbian. Some lesbians fit the stereotype of dressing and behaving more like a man than a woman. But you will also guess incorrectly. Many women who dress and behave in ways considered to be mainly heterosexual. And many lesbians and bisexual women

dress and behave in ways that are considered to be normal for women. All women are different, and lesbians are as diverse as straight women.

If you are a lesbian, remember it is up to you how you present yourself. You do not have to fit any stereotype. Be yourself.

### *How many homosexuals are there?*

It's impossible to know how many adults in a population are not heterosexual. In many places it is illegal to be homosexual, or there is a stigma to it. This means that people suppress their sexuality, and will not say they are gay to a researcher. So survey results vary a lot. But here are a few things which seem to be true:

- There are more heterosexuals than other sexual orientations;
- The number of people who say they feel attracted to the same sex as themselves is higher than the number who report having been sexually intimate with the same sex as themselves;
- The number who have been sexually intimate with the same sex as themselves is higher than the number who identify with the label of being gay or lesbian or bisexual.

In a survey in Britain in 2000, among women aged 16-24, 9.1% said they had had a sexual experience with another woman, while 4.5% said they had had sex including touching vaginas with another woman.<sup>1</sup>

In a 2009 survey in ten Brazilian cities, 4.9% of women reported being lesbian, and 1.4% identified as being bisexual.<sup>2</sup>

1 The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles surveyed 11,000 people in the UK. When compared to the same survey in 1990, the results showed changing attitudes towards more acceptance of homosexuality, and more people reporting same sex behaviours [www.avert.org/gay-people.htm](http://www.avert.org/gay-people.htm)

2 8,200 people over 18 years old took part in the survey [www.mundomais.com.br/exibemateria2.php?idmateria=334](http://www.mundomais.com.br/exibemateria2.php?idmateria=334)

### *I am lesbian, does this mean I am safe from HIV?*

The answer to this depends on what you do, and with who. Your risk is also affected by how many sexual partners you have, and the level of HIV infection where you live.

Perhaps you only ever have sex with women. The risk of HIV being transmitted during sex between women is much lower than through sex between men or between men and women. But it is not impossible. HIV can be transmitted through blood including menstrual blood (monthly bleed), vaginal fluids, and breast milk. During sex with another woman you are therefore advised to:

- Avoid contact with your partner's menstrual blood;
- Avoid contact with any visible cuts or sores on her genitals;
- Use a barrier during oral sex, such as plastic wrap, or a condom which you have cut open;
- Avoid causing any bleeding (or use latex or vinyl gloves and lubrication);
- If you use sex toys inside the vagina or anus, do not share toys, or put a new condom on the toy for each person if you are sharing.

Following this advice will also reduce your risk of getting other sexually transmitted infections including herpes, genital warts, hepatitis and syphilis. You should also get tested for such infections, and get treatment for them.

Your risk of HIV infection will be much higher if you any of the following things:

- Sharing needles when using intravenous drugs: HIV is passed very efficiently
- Having anal sex with men (penis in anus) without using condoms: HIV is passed efficiently
- Having vaginal sex with men (penis in vagina) without

using condoms: HIV passed quite efficiently

- Using sperm from a male friend to get pregnant: HIV is passed quite efficiently

### *Do lesbians need to bother with contraceptives?*

Women who only ever have sex with other women will not get pregnant. But the label 'lesbian' gives no protection during sex with men. Lesbians who do not want to become pregnant and who do have sex with men should use contraception if possible.

### *Why do people react negatively to homosexuals?*

The answer to this question is complicated! Here are some of the general reasons:

- Humans have a tendency to like people who are like them, and to dislike and distinguish themselves from people who are different. Minorities often experience discrimination. This might be because they look unusual, sound different to others, come from another place, have a different faith, or have a different sexual orientation.
- Because homosexuals are a minority and many keep themselves hidden, the majority of heterosexuals do not have any close friends or relatives who they know to be gay. It's harder for heterosexuals to understand the issues and to know that homosexuality is normal when they do not know of any gays or lesbians.
- Religions often only approve of sex within marriage as a means to create children; they therefore disapprove of all other forms of sex.
- Many governments have laws against sex between people of the same sex. This sends a clear message to everyone that homosexuals are deviant and 'criminals'.

- There is a lack of understanding about what it means to be homosexual. There is little balanced debate in public, so people rely on what they are told are told by religious leaders, the media and others with power.
- Some powerful people lie about homosexuals. For example, they say that gay men sexually abuse children. In fact, paedophiles (adults who are sexually attracted to children) can be male or female, and straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual.
- Some organisations deliberately stir up hatred against gays. For governments it distracts the public from the real issues that the state should be dealing with. For religions it helps them unite their believers against a group they say is a threat. And for media organisations it can help them make money, by getting more TV viewers and selling more newspapers.
- It's very difficult for homosexuals to stand up for their rights, and to counter the lies told about them when they face discrimination, jail and even the death penalty for being gay, lesbian or bisexual.

It's important to know that these reactions can be changed. Around the world there are many examples of changes towards tolerance, acceptance and celebration of sexual diversity. These include changes in laws, religious beliefs, and social attitudes, and have happened largely due to the efforts of **LGBT** (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) groups.

*I was born a girl, but when I was 10 or 11, I felt like I wanted to be a boy. When I was 18 my mother found a boy for me to marry. I said, "I do not want to marry a boy, I want to be with a girl." She said, "Then you have to leave this home." But she realized she couldn't force me. She gave up on it, and I stayed with my family. I was lucky: my mother is Congolese and had met open lesbians in Kinshasa, so she already knew what this was.*  
Cynthia, Burundi (a)

### *I think I am lesbian. Should I 'come out' and tell other people?*

Here are some things to think about to help you decide whether or not to **come out**.

- Are you sure you are a lesbian? If you are not sure, it's better to wait until you have a more solid sense of your sexual orientation before you tell everyone. For now perhaps you can talk about it with someone you trust.
- Have you been thinking about this for a while? If it's a recent idea, take some time to consider your options.
- Are you able to take criticism or initial rejection? You may get a positive response, but you need to prepare yourself for a negative response. Be aware also that sometimes people pass on the information you have told them without your permission.
- Do you feel pressure from other people who think you should come out? Is it your decision or theirs?

*When I told a couple of my friends, I told them I was no different now than I was five minutes before I told them, except that now I wasn't keeping a big secret from them.*  
Nicki, USA, age 16 (b)



Coming out is (over time) a liberating experience for most people, but you do not have to do it. Follow your own instincts. If you decide to come out, only do it when you are really ready. Coming out in some countries is extremely difficult and can be dangerous.

*I've decided that I need to be true to myself and come out.*

*How should I do it?*

- Plan ahead. If you get a negative response what will you do? For example, if you may be thrown out of your home, where could you go?
- Start by confiding in someone you trust who can give you the support you need to tell others.

- Try to be honest and open, and you show respect for the person you are telling.
- If they react badly, try to stay calm. Sometimes people need time to come to terms with unexpected news. Do not despair if at first they do not respond as you had hoped. People can change their attitudes.

*How should I deal with a friend that does not accept me?*

If you have recently come out to your friend, they may still be in shock, feeling uncomfortable and not knowing how to react. You could encourage your friend to ask you questions, to help them understand. Or perhaps you could get another friend who does accept you as you are to talk to them.

*It helps me to interact with people who make me feel happy and good about myself. And I try to do things I feel good about doing.*

**Sarah, USA, age 19.**

However, it's possible that your friend will not accept your sexual orientation. You may feel very hurt by being rejected by them. Remember that the cause of the pain is your friend's reaction to you, which is caused by many different things. It's not your fault.

### ***How can I feel good about being a lesbian?***

Developing self-esteem (feeling good about ourselves) is very important for young people. But it can be hard for young lesbians. You may be surrounded by people who think you are bad or sick. You may have to hide who you really are. You may have to have sex with men when you do not want to. All of this can make you feel alone, fearful and depressed. You may find yourself using alcohol or drugs to try and hide from those feelings, or you may feel you want to hurt or kill yourself. These problems are not caused by you being a lesbian, but by other people's reactions to your sexual orientation. Here are some suggestions from young lesbians about learning to accept yourself:

- Read good books about lesbians - books with accurate information and positive role models of lesbians.
- If possible, meet other lesbians. You won't like all of them, but you should get support from people who understand you, and you may make friends.

*It has taken me 11 years to come out and I am not fully out yet. Well... it's illegal to be gay in Kenya but that's beside the point. The truth is that I didn't want to be gay and I worked really hard not to be.*

**Briana, Kenya**

- Say to yourself every day "I am lesbian and I am OK."
- Find someone you can talk to who also believes that lesbians are OK.
- Remember: it's normal and natural to be a lesbian, just like it's normal and natural for people to be heterosexual.





## Further information

The websites we have listed here were OK in December 2010, but things change quickly on the internet. If you find they are not working, or you want to look for other sites, use a searching site such as Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)) to help you. Please be aware that the search may bring up websites which are not about supporting lesbians, but instead feature women acting in sexually intimate ways for the pleasure of viewers.

### *Support groups and sources of information*

**ILGA** is the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, which strives to end discrimination and to fight for equality. Their website <http://ilga.org/> includes relevant information for non-heterosexuals about laws affecting them in different countries. It's directory includes phone numbers and web pages for almost 1,600 organisations around the world.

**Behind the Mask** is a news website covering news about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people's affairs in Africa - [www.mask.org.za](http://www.mask.org.za)

**The Coalition of African Lesbians** works to promote and secure the sexual, reproductive and other human rights of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women [www.cal.org.za](http://www.cal.org.za)

**The Gay and Lesbian Arabic Society** is a networking organisation for gays and lesbians living in Arabic nations or of Arabic descent - [www.glas.org](http://www.glas.org)

**www.utopia-asia.com** is a site which aims to improve the lives of Asian lesbians and gay men, to build community, and to foster a deeper understanding of gay life in the region. It includes local information for 19 countries in the region.

There are a lot of country specific LGBT groups in Latin America: use the ILGA directory at <http://ilga.org/> to find them.

**Rainbow Sauce** is an online bookshop which stocks lesbian fiction and non-fiction including lesbians telling the stories of their own lives. You could use their list to find books you'd like to read, and then see if you can get them from Amazon or other site which will deliver to you. [www.rainbowsauce.com](http://www.rainbowsauce.com)

### *Religion*

The website Religious Tolerance is run by people from different faiths. They believe in human rights and in working towards cultures that are relatively free of discrimination. Their website [www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org) has articles on major religions and their positions towards different sexual orientations.

**Imaan** is a UK organisation which supports lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Muslims and their families and friends to address issues of sexual orientation within Islam. It promotes the Islamic values of peace, social justice and tolerance through its work, and aspires to bring about a world that is free from prejudice and discrimination against all Muslims and LGBT people. Their website <http://www.imaan.org.uk/> includes a forum for people to have online discussions.

**The Safra Project** provides resources on issues relating to lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender women who identify as Muslim religiously and/or culturally - [www.safraproject.org](http://www.safraproject.org)

**Other Sheep** is global organisation run by Christians who believe that our sexuality – whatever our orientation – is a gift of God to be celebrated with dignity. See [www.othersheep.org](http://www.othersheep.org) (in English and Spanish).

**SisterFriends Together** is a website which aims to provide a safe and welcoming online faith community for lesbian, bisexual, questioning and transgender women - [www.sisterfriends-together.org](http://www.sisterfriends-together.org)

**The World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Jews** has the vision of an environment where lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews worldwide can enjoy free and fulfilling lives. It consists of around 50 member organizations different parts of the world - its website [www.glbtejews.org](http://www.glbtejews.org) includes links to local organisations.

GALVA, the **Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association**, aims to educate Vaishnavas, Hindus and the public about gays, lesbians, bisexuals etc and to provide a friendly place where they can associate and learn more about Krsna consciousness and so advance in spiritual life.

**[www.sarbat.net](http://www.sarbat.net)** is a website for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Sikhs.

**The Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association** promotes Humanism as a free-thinking, rational, and ethical worldview. It campaigns for equality and diversity, particularly relating to sexual orientation and identity in the UK and internationally - [www.galha.org](http://www.galha.org)

# Sources of quotes in text boxes...

- (a) These quotes from HRW (2009): *Forbidden: Institutionalising Discrimination Against Gays and Lesbians In Burundi*, Human Rights Watch, [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)
- (b) These quotes from [www.workingitout.org.au/resources\\_lesbian.html](http://www.workingitout.org.au/resources_lesbian.html), based on a booklet by Kevin Cranston and Cooper Thompson, with help from members of Boston Area Gay and Lesbian Youth.
- (c) quotes from Kraan K (2005): *Bisexual: Part of the Lesbian and Gay or the Straight World? Questions and Answers about Bisexuality*, The Triangle Project, [www.triangle.org.za](http://www.triangle.org.za)
- (d) Quotes from an unpublished report *The status of sexual minorities in Southern Africa* by Engender for Oxfam affiliates in Southern Africa.



## Colophon

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