



**SAFAIDS**

Knowledge for action: The power to make a difference!

# Helping Traditional Leaders explain issues around sexuality in their communities



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This leaflet aims to support you, as a traditional leader, to share correct information on sexuality with other leaders and members of your community, in order to promote a culture of tolerance and acceptance. This will also help to reduce the spread of HIV, stigma and discrimination.

Because of your important and powerful role in your community, you have a responsibility to increase knowledge and understanding among your people, to improve their health and happiness.

Improving health and happiness means including everyone in the community - especially on sexual and reproductive health and rights. HIV has taught us as communities that if one of us is at risk, then we all are. It has also shown us that stigma and discrimination exposes us all to risk.

**“In the fight against HIV,  
no one should be left out.”**

# Understanding sexuality

Human sexuality is simply our ability to be sexually aroused. Our sexual orientation is linked to who makes us aroused. Sexual diversity means that we are all different in who we are sexually attracted to, including for some of us, people of the same sex.

## Terms to learn and share

**Sex:** Whether your body is male or female – men have penises, women have vaginas (but also see intersex, below).

**Straight:** A person who is sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex.

**Homosexual:** A person who is sexually attracted to people of the same sex.

**Men who have sex with men:** Many men who have sex with men do not think of themselves as gay. Some see anal sex as ‘playing around with the boys’, not as ‘sex’, so if they are asked if they have sex with men, they will answer no. Their risk of HIV transmission is increased if they are uninformed about the HIV risks of anal sex.

**Homophobia:** Fear and suspicion of homosexual people.

## The term LGBT covers several groups:

**Lesbian:** A woman who is sexually attracted to other women.

**Gay:** A man who is sexually attracted to other men.

**Bisexual:** Someone who is attracted to both men and women.

**Transgender/Transsexual:** Transgender is someone who feels they were born in the wrong body, e.g. a man who feels they should really be a woman. When people feel this very strongly they may choose to have medical treatment and surgery to change their sex – then they are called transsexual.

**Intersex:** This is when someone is born with external genitals that are not clearly male or female. Intersex people may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight.

## Language matters in building a culture of tolerance and acceptance



# What happens if we ignore or deny sexual diversity?

When our leaders and communities assume we are all the same, people who feel different are forced to hide who they really are.

Misunderstandings about sexual orientation cause many challenges in our communities, including:

- \* Failure to seek sexual and reproductive health services
- \* The spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

## Why do we need to be informed about issues around sexuality?

It is important for leaders and communities to be aware of differences in sexual orientation because:

- \* LGBT adolescents are more likely to suffer depression and be rejected by friends and family.
- \* The risk of suicide in LGBT adolescents is two to three times greater than that of other adolescents
- \* Acceptance and understanding can be a matter of life or death to friends, family and community members who are LGBT.

What matters is overcoming the stigma and discrimination that prevents LGBT seeking and being helped through good sexual and reproductive information and care.

Stigma and discrimination towards LGBT can result in:

- \* Religious intolerance that leads to exclusion that puts everyone at risk.
- \* Gay men may feel forced to marry so that they 'fit in', putting their wives and families at risk.
- \* People with different sexualities being unable to get information they need to keep themselves safe from HIV and sexually transmitted infections, putting the whole community at risk.

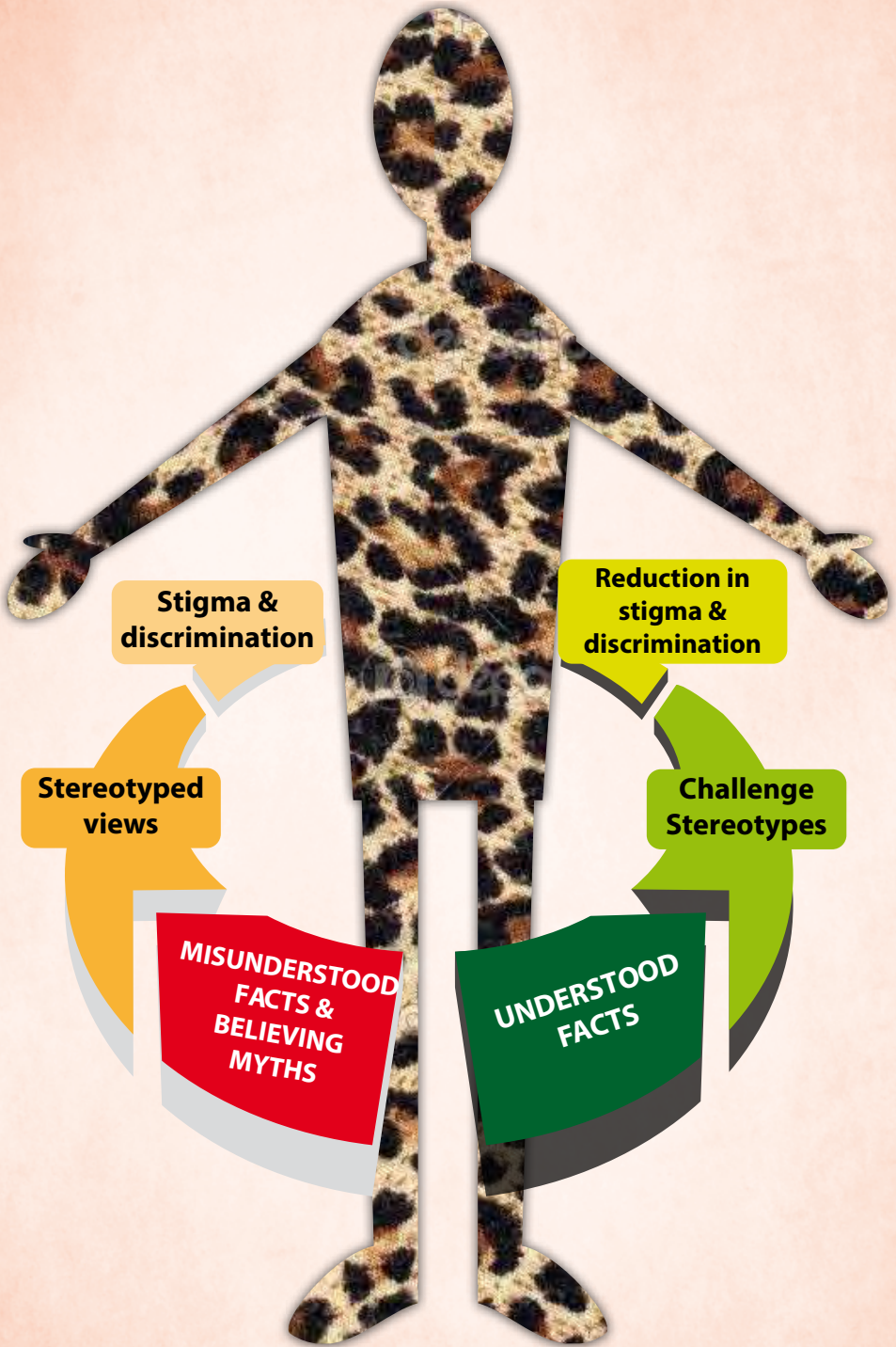


**Providing everyone with correct information, especially on health, reduces stigma and discrimination.**

**Including everyone is important in building a culture of tolerance and acceptance in our communities. Leaders already know the importance of finding common ground.**







# Myth busters

The answers in this table will help you address some of the attitudes you may face in yourself, as well as from members of your community as you encourage openness around sexuality.

Addressing common myths and misunderstandings is important when building a culture of tolerance and acceptance.

<i><b>What they say</b></i>	<i><b>What is true</b></i>
<i><b>People choose to be homosexual</b></i>	Just as we cannot choose the colour of our eyes, we cannot choose our sexual orientation. Research shows that a person's sexual orientation is decided by both genes and social influences.
<i><b>It is the parents' fault if their child is gay</b></i>	It is never anyone's 'fault' if someone grows up to be homosexual. Why ask why? Does how you feel about a homosexual person depend on knowing why they are homosexual or how they behave towards you and others?
<i><b>It is unAfrican to be gay or lesbian</b></i>	Research shows that up to 10% of people in every community and society are lesbian or gay, and that includes Africa.
<i><b>Gay men sexually abuse children</b></i>	Child sexual abuse has nothing to do with being homosexual. It is an abnormal, criminal behaviour and most often the offender is a straight male who is known to the child.
<i><b>You can tell if someone is gay from how they look and act</b></i>	You cannot tell if someone is homosexual by looking at them. Homosexual people are as different in their dress, mannerisms, and lifestyles as anyone else.

<b><i>What they say</i></b>	<b><i>What is true</i></b>
<b><i>If homosexuals bring up children, the children will also be homosexual</i></b>	Children of lesbian or gay parents are no more likely to become gay or lesbian than the children of straight parents.
<b><i>Homosexuals are promiscuous</i></b>	Having many sexual partners at the same time occurs in all sexualities, regardless of sexual orientation. Many homosexuals choose to be sexually active with one partner only and have long term, mutually faithful relationships.
<b><i>Being with gay people will make others gay too</i></b>	Homosexuality is not an illness; it is just an aspect of human sexuality. If someone is comfortable and informed as a sexual being, they will not suffer from this kind of homophobia.
<b><i>Men who have sex with men are gay</i></b>	Men who have sex with men can be of any sexual orientation; they can even be married.
<b><i>Two gay men who are both HIV positive can have unprotected anal sex, since they are both positive anyway</i></b>	This is a risky practice. Condoms should always be used. Re-infection can occur with a different strain of HIV that can complicate treatment. Continual re-infection speeds up the progression of HIV to AIDS.
<b><i>People with disabilities cannot be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex</i></b>	People living with disabilities - whether physical or mental – also have sexual needs and may have an LGBT sexual orientation just like anyone else.

# Overcoming our fears- together

Building a culture of openness and tolerance requires us to reflect on our own feelings and practices before we judge others.

Being homosexual is not a choice.

## Let's talk!

### If it was your son?

Your son comes to you one day and says he wants to talk. He is obviously upset and tense. “I need to tell you something, baba. I think I am gay and I want to kill myself”

### This is a challenging situation. How do you respond?

Be happy that he feels able to approach you about something so important. It shows how much he trusts you. Of course you want to help him find a way to accept his situation, rather than killing himself or running away.

### How can I reconcile my own or a loved one's sexual orientation with my faith?

This is difficult for many people. Learning that a loved one is LGBT can be challenging if you feel it is at odds with your faith tradition.

But many LGBT people are religious, active and accepted in their own faith communities. It is up to you to explore and make choices in order to reconcile your religion with homosexuality.

### Is being lesbian or gay only about who you have sex with?

For many years people believed that only straight people have emotional relationships, while homosexuals just have sex. Like all couples, lesbian and gay couples are attracted to each other on the sexual, emotional, physical and intellectual levels and can live happy, loving and fulfilled lives.

### What do I do if someone tells me they are LGBT?

#### How can I support them?

Feelings of grief, guilt and denial are natural. Whatever your reaction, try to reassure them that they still have your love and acceptance – they are still the same person they were before they told you!

“

**As leaders and community members we need to find our comfortable space on issues about sexuality.**

”



# Fact or fiction?

## Homosexuality is unchristian

In the bible, for example, homosexual acts are mentioned in only seven passages and none of these relate to the work of Jesus. But there are 250 verses on the proper use of wealth and more than 300 on our responsibility to care for the poor and work for justice. How much thought and effort do we spend on these last points?

- \* What matters is that people are able to access the information they need to be able to follow their private sexual practices safely.

## LGBT is a sickness that can be cured

Homosexuality is not an illness or a disorder, nor is being transgender. It is not a choice!

Some religious organisations sponsor campaigns to change homosexual people's sexual orientation. This assumes that there is something wrong with being LGBT. Trying to shame someone to change can actually do more harm than good.

- \* What matters and needs to change are the anti-LGBT attitudes, laws and policies that are putting individuals, families and communities at risk.

In building a culture of tolerance and acceptance, it is important that as leaders, we develop openness about our own feelings and beliefs.

# Lift the barriers to our sexual and reproductive health



**NOT KNOWING and NOT TALKING  
PUTS us all at RISK**





**SAfAIDS**

Knowledge for action: The power to make a difference!

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