Myth busting

Harmful attitudes about gender and sexuality are often created and reinforced by incorrect knowledge – or myths.

Sometimes these myths come up in conversations at the bar with friends, or over dinner with family. If we challenge these myths with information when we hear them, then each of us can do something to foster knowledge and acceptance for all genders and sexualities in our communities. Here are some myths to bust!

**Myth 1: Women are not natural leaders**

Historically, women have been excluded from political and religious leadership positions, and denied the right to vote or participate as equal citizens. While women have far more rights now, than they did even ten years ago, there are still many countries, religions and cultural groups that deny women the right to enter into leadership positions. This can be linked to the gender-binary in which qualities that are thought to make good leaders are often assigned as ‘male’ qualities that their ‘female’ counterparts are unable to attain. As with all stereotypes, this belief has been constructed by people (this is also known as **social construction**) and communities over decades, and even centuries, and the reality is that effective leaders can be all genders.

**Myth 2: People can be ‘recruited’ into homosexuality**

There is no evidence to support the notion that people can be ‘made gay’ or ‘made lesbian’, just as there is no evidence to show that gay, lesbian or bisexual people can be ‘made straight’. Peer pressure, although a powerful influencer of young people’s behaviour, has not been shown to influence the development of same-sex sexual or bisexual orientations. Instead, there is substantial evidence to show that acceptance of sexual and gender diversity has not only benefited LGBTI people but impacted positively on public health, civil society and country’s long-term economic growth.

[Read more: Diversity in Human Sexuality: Implications for policy in Africa](http://spl.ids.ac.uk)[1]

**Myth 3: Homosexuality is un-African**

African history is filled with examples of erotic and non-erotic same sex relationships. Here are some examples:

- The ancient cave paintings of the San people near Guruve in Zimbabwe depict two men engaged in ritual sex.
- During precolonial times, the ‘mudoko dako’ (or effeminate males) among the Langi of northern Uganda were treated as women and could marry men.
- In Buganda, one of the largest traditional kingdoms in Uganda, it was an open secret that Kabaka (king) Mwanga II, who ruled in the latter half of the 19th century, was gay.

The vocabulary used to describe same sex relations in traditional languages, predating colonialism, is further proof of the
existence of sexual diversity in precolonial Africa. To name but a few:

- The Shangaan of southern Africa referred to same-sex relations as ‘inkotshane’ (male-wife)
- Basotho women in present day Lesotho engage in socially sanctioned erotic relationships called ‘motsoalle’ (special friend)
- In the Wolof language, spoken in Senegal, homosexual men have been known, and respected, for centuries as ‘gor-digen’ (men-women).

The context and experiences of such relationships did not necessarily mirror homosexual relations as understood in the West, nor were they necessarily consistent with what we now describe as a gay or queer identity. We talk about some of the problems with labels – like gay, queer, or LGBTI – in the Sexuality and Social Justice Toolkit.

Read more: What’s wrong with labels? [2]

Sexual diversity in Africa is far more complex than the champions of the ‘homosexuality is un-African’ myth would have us believe. In addition to a wide range of erotic same-sex desires that have been recorded in precolonial Africa, same-sex erotic practices were also acknowledged to be part of people’s spirituality. For example, the Ndebele and Shona in Zimbabwe, the Azande in Sudan and Congo, the Nupe in Nigeria and the Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi all engaged in same-sex acts for ritual purposes and for spiritual rearmament (i.e., as a source of fresh power to secure their territories). Among various communities in South Africa, sex education among adolescent peers allowed them to experiment through acts such as ‘thigh sex’, ‘hlobonga’, among the Zulu, ‘ukumetsha’ among the Xhosa and ‘gangisa’ among the Shangaan).

**Myth 4: Homosexuality can be cured**

There is no evidence that someone’s sexuality can be changed through ‘conversion’ therapy. Given the documented dangers of such therapy and its direct conflict with medical ethics, these interventions should not be used. Instead, positive psychosocial and religious support, particularly for adolescents, is recommended to facilitate the adjustment of same sex orientated persons to the stress, stigma, shame and discrimination they may face and to affirm their choices and orientations.

Read more: Diversity in Human Sexuality: Implications for policy in Africa [3]

Conversion therapy that seeks to alter sexual orientation has a controversial and chequered history. For decades, dangerous physical methods, such as electroshock treatment and chemical castration, were used in some countries to ‘cure’ homosexuality. These were forms of serious punishment and in many cases lead to death (including suicide).

**Myth 5: Homosexuality is unnatural and a crime against nature**

There is now wide global consensus that a wide range of sexualities – including homosexuality and bisexuality – are normal and natural variations of human sexuality.


Hundreds of studies have found no scientific basis for considering bisexuality or homosexuality a ‘disorder’ or an ‘abnormality.’ Since the 1970s, dozens of national and international bodies, and in countries as diverse as Argentina, Uruguay, Germany, Russia, South Africa, Vietnam, Hong Kong Philippines, Denmark, Brazil, France, New Zealand, the USA and UK confirmed that same sex or bisexual orientation is a normal part of human sexuality and that same sex orientation – just like opposite-sex orientation – does not indicate any psychological impairment nor any inability in social or work life nor any threat to other lifestyles or persons.

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