



# Lesbians, WSW & HIV



## Sexual identity and sexual behaviour

Sexual identity does not always determine sexual behaviour. Woman who identify as lesbian may also have sex with men, and not all women who have sex with women (WSW) identify as lesbian or bisexual. Heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality have a powerful impact on sexual identities and behavior. For example, many people identify as heterosexual regardless of sexual behavior, because of the extent to which same-sex identities are stigmatised, denied and demeaned. Likewise, women who identify as lesbian may still have sex with men because of societal pressure to conform to heterosexual norms. The use of rape of 'cure' or punish lesbians can be seen as an extreme and brutal expression of compulsory heterosexuality.

## Prevalence of HIV amongst lesbians

While we know of lesbians who are living with HIV and even of lesbians who have died of AIDS, there is an absence of research data on HIV prevalence among lesbian women and WSW globally. However, in a recent study, 9% of a sample of black lesbians in Gauteng self-reported that they are HIV positive (Wells & Polders, 2006). The self-report HIV prevalence rate among a sample of lesbian and bisexual women in Kwa-Zulu Natal was also 9% (Wells, 2006).

## Ways in which lesbians and WSW may become infected with HIV

HIV is transmitted when blood (including menstrual blood), semen, vaginal fluids, or breast milk from someone with HIV enters the blood stream of another person.

WSW can get infected with HIV

- By having unprotected sex with women
- By having unprotected sex with men
- By sharing injection drug equipment such as needles
- By sharing sex toys without using a new condom for each user or without cleaning toys between users
- By using unscreened semen for artificial insemination
- Through unprotected transactional sex with men
- Through rape

## What are the factors that make lesbians vulnerable to HIV infection?

There are a variety of intersecting factors that increase lesbian women's vulnerability to HIV infection:

- The use of physical and sexual violence to communicate to women their place in the gender hierarchy is widespread in South Africa. Lesbians and gender non-conforming women are specifically targeted for rape as a form of punishment or under the guise that rape turns a lesbian into a 'real woman.'

- Lesbian women may have sex with men for a variety of reasons, such as:
  - economic necessity
  - for access to drugs
  - because of family or social pressure to conform to heterosexual norms, e.g. forced marriage
  - confusion about sexuality
  - sexual experimentation or desire
  - for 'protection' in communities that are hostile to lesbianism

In the case of lesbians, sex with men is more likely to be unplanned, unexpected and/or transactional, and therefore more likely to be unprotected.

- Sexual and gender identities intersect with racial and economic inequalities. Black lesbians are therefore particularly vulnerable to HIV and its effects.
- Drug and alcohol abuse (including intravenous drug use) also has a major impact on risk and vulnerability to HIV.

## Silence and exclusion as a source of vulnerability

The exclusion of lesbians and WSW from HIV/AIDS discourses is itself a source of vulnerability for lesbians and WSW. This exclusion and silence has led to:

- a denial of HIV risk among lesbians and WSW
- an absence of funding for essential research
- a lack of information and knowledge about women-to-women transmission and lesbian safer sex
- the unavailability of appropriate safer-sex and prevention materials
- the lack of appropriate and non-discriminatory health services
- the lack of HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care programmes that address the intersecting factors that make lesbians vulnerable to HIV infection.



Triangle Project  
Phone: (021) 448 3812  
PO Box 13935, Mowbray, 7705  
Unit 29, Waverley Business Park, Dane St, Mowbray  
E-mail: [info@triangle.org.za](mailto:info@triangle.org.za) Postal address:  
Gay & Lesbian Helpline: (021) 712 6699.