

Fact Sheet:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Sister Girls

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lesbian, gay men, bisexual, transgender or sister girl (LGBTs) identities remain strongly connected to an individual's cultural identity and community. How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders address issues of sexuality or gender identity are strongly influenced by:

- Support and acceptance from ones family
- Respect for family beliefs and attitudes towards these issues
- Fulfilment of family and community roles
- The levels of discrimination, acceptance and understanding within the community
- The impact of stigma and isolation
- The level of influence christianity has within the community

For many LGBTs people their identity as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders comes before their sexual or gender identity. This may result in LGBTs people prioritising their connection with and respect for their family and community before addressing personal issues of sexuality or gender identity.

The Visibility of LGBTs people in the Community

Same sex relationships and sexual behaviours are generally far less visible in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities compared to the wider community. Factors that influence the invisibility and inability of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals to be open about their sexuality include:

- The association of gay men with paedophilia and acts of sexual abuse
- Men may engage with same sex sexual behaviours but not identify as gay
- The expectation of women to raise families
- Women often identify as lesbians later in life, after they have had children. The association of mothers being lesbians is often not recognised
- Terminology such as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender is often not used in rural and remote communities to describe these identities or sexual behaviours

The acceptance and visibility of sistergirls is often considered far greater than gay men or lesbians in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Sistergirls are biological men who are effeminate or live their lives as women. Communities will often accept and recognise sister girls as women. Sistergirls undertake the roles and responsibilities of women, having relationships with straight men. However sister girls do not generally identify as transgender.

Feelings about sexuality and Community connection

The Queensland Survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Men Who Have Sex With Men:2004 (QLD Survey) reported that 75% of men who have sex with men agreed or strongly agreed that they were happy to be gay. Just over half of the respondents had told most or all of their close family, straight and heterosexual and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander friends about their sexual identification.

The survey noted that these men maintained a stronger attachment and involvement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community than the gay community. Seventy-five percent of respondents considered themselves to be very much a part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community while only 44% of respondents considered themselves to be very much a part of the gay community. Again more men felt they were very much involved in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community while only 26% of men considered themselves very much involved in the gay community. Although men who have sex with men may maintain a stronger connection with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community many LGBTs people experience geographic relocation as a result of the lack of acceptance of their sexuality or gender identity, especially from cultural communities and rural areas. Relocation often results in the loss of support networks and family connection, adding to concerns for the health and wellbeing of LGBTs people.

Mental Health and Discrimination

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disproportionately exposed to depression, alcoholism, suicide and violence, in part as a result of colonialism. However the effects of social displacement can be even greater for LGBTTS people in indigenous communities. Experiences of social exclusion for LGBTTS people are often experienced within both indigenous and non-indigenous communities, either on the basis of sexuality or gender identity or race and sometimes both. In the *QLD Survey* 41% of men having sex with men reported often or occasionally experiencing discrimination on the basis of their sexuality within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However 54% of these men also experienced racial discrimination often or occasionally within the gay community. Facing issues of discrimination on the basis of race, sexuality or gender identity and economic inequality may increase LGBTTS people's sensitivity towards issues of discrimination generally and addressing issues related to sexuality and gender identity.

The difficulties generally encountered with transitioning to life in metropolitan areas, the loss of social support networks and experiences of social isolation, depression and discrimination as a result of an individual's sexuality or gender identity may influence the high rates of alcohol consumption and use of illicit drugs by LGBTTS people. The *QLD Survey* noted one in six men who have sex with men consumed alcohol at high risk levels to their health and two thirds used illicit drugs at considerably higher rates than the general population. However the increased use of drug and alcohol use are a general concern with the general LGBT community.

Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS in the LGBTTS community

Concerns are still prevalent around the attitudes of shame and stigma associated with sexual health issues and education for LGBTTS people. This has been noted especially as a concern for LGBTTS people relocating to metropolitan areas, with less opportunity to access information regarding sexuality, safe sex practices and knowledge of the LGBT community in general. As with the general LGBT community a lack of education and resources that address LGBTTS sexual health concerns remains a concern for ensuring positive health outcomes for this community.

The *QLD Survey* identified slightly lower rates of HIV testing amongst men having sex with men in comparison to the general population of gay men in QLD. In the last 12 months 43% of Indigenous men were test for HIV compared to 74% of men who responded to the *QLD Gay Community Periodic Survey 2004* (QGCSP). Again lower levels of knowledge regarding Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) and its appropriate use was noted in comparison to the findings in the QGCSP. The *QLD Survey* noted only 39% of respondents were aware of PEP compared to 65% of men in the QGCPS.

Source of HIV transmission may vary in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities compared to the general community. Significantly more Indigenous women contract HIV through injecting drug use and heterosexual contact than the general population and less HIV is transmitted through gay men's sexual practices. However HIV in rural and remote communities is considered to be a 'gay man's disease' or urban disease and not considered a threat to Indigenous communities. This is especially a concern in regard to the amount of men having sex with men in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities but do not identify as gay.

Accessing services

The fear of breaches in confidentiality is a primary concern for LGBTTS people, especially those in rural and remote communities. The disclosure of having sexuality, gender identity or HIV status disclosed to members of the community is considered one of the main reasons for not accessing health services.

Support Groups for LGBTTS people in QLD

The ATSI project with the QLD Association for Healthy Communities Inc provides two support groups, Yu Pla, Mi Pla, Ah fla in Cairns and gar'ban'djee'lum in Brisbane. The groups are designed to give social support and safe sex education to gay, lesbian, bisexual men and women, transgender and sister girls in the ATSI community.

For further information contact:

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