



Sexually transmitted infections and hiv/aids

Lesbian and bisexual women began working with gay, bisexual and transgender men as part of the community of sexual minorities in a more significant way when the latter started working on AIDS and HIV issues. Although lesbian and bisexual women were active in the AIDS campaigns, they were cast mainly in a supporting role, because lesbians were supposed to be the least vulnerable to the risk of this disease. But this attitude did not take into consideration the fact that in many parts of the world most women, whether they are lesbians or not, have to be married simply to survive. Hence, the same level of risk to get the virus. While concern for men's health rose with worldwide attention to AIDS, the health needs of lesbian and bisexual women had little support and received no interest from the public. Even today there is little research on transmission of HIV virus and other sexually transmitted infections – STI – between two women, as compared to the research made for gay men. This leads to belief amongst lesbian and bisexual women themselves that they are immune to contracting sexually transmitted infections when having sex with another woman. Although there is no unanimity on this issue, some women and lesbian organizations have started to raise awareness and educate their community in order to get one message across: HIV and STIs can also be transmitted between two women.

Women comprise about half of all people living with HIV worldwide. In sub-Saharan Africa, where the epidemic is worst, they make up 57% of people living with HIV; and three quarters of young people infected on the continent are young women aged 15-24. In unprotected heterosexual intercourse, a female is about twice as likely as a male to contract HIV from an infected partner. Furthermore, in addition to their higher biological vulnerability, girls and women are made particularly vulnerable to HIV by conditions of gender inequality. Economic and social dependence on men often limits women's power to refuse sex or to negotiate the use of condoms. And inadequate access to education and employment opportunities encourages many women to sell or barter sex to survive. Sexual inequality endangers women's lives, and gender issues must be taken into consideration in the design of HIV prevention and care programmes.

UNAIDS 2004
www.unaids.org

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS (STIs)

**PRAZER SEM MEDO. AN INTERVIEW
WITH MÍRIAM MARTINHO.**

Um Outro Olhar is an information network for lesbians, created in 1989, and is the oldest civil society organization defending lesbian rights in Brazil. They work on health issues and human rights of women and sexual minorities through two main approaches: information, education and communication as well as behavioural intervention. The organization produced a brochure called "Prazer sem medo" (Pleasure without fear), which aims at spreading information within the lesbian and bisexual communities on the importance of health care in general and gynaecological care in particular. It describes how to perform breast examination on one's own, how to practice safer sex and gives basic tips on having an active approach towards health.

Your organization is defending lesbian rights, namely human rights, in Brazil. Why work specifically on lesbian health issues?

There is a lot of misinformation with regard to women's health, specifically the health of women who have sex with other women. This was the main reason for us to launch our projects around the health of lesbians and for lesbians. We were the first lesbian group to do this in

Brazil, beginning in 1995, with the support of the Health Department. Um Outro Olhar has two main lines of work: health and human rights. We address them separately for practical reasons, but obviously they are intertwined. The right to health is a basic human right. In our country, access to health services is difficult for the majority of the population, not to speak of socially discriminated people like lesbians. We seek to inform the lesbian community and people in general about the specific nature of lesbian health needs, in order to prevent prejudice from undermining the quality of health care for lesbian patients.

In the title of your brochure "Prazer sem medo" you link health and sexual pleasure. Why did you connect those two subjects together?

As from the 1980's, with the AIDS pandemic, there was a widespread fear of catching an illness through sexual contact. Although lesbians consider themselves immune to AIDS, the discussions raised around HIV also called for the discussion of STI; lesbians then became interested and concerned. No one wants to give up pleasure in erotic-emotional relationships; but we do want to enjoy in a healthy way, feeling safe. The title of our brochure "Prazer sem medo" is meant to stress the fact that it IS possible to have both things (pleasure and health) together.

How was this brochure welcomed among the Brazilian lesbian communities?

It was warmly welcomed. The two printed versions "sold out"! We are printing the third edition in 2006. With around 1300 visitors a day, the digital version in our website is widely used. Some organizations ask us for printed versions for them to use in workshops and lectures. We did not have problems of any kind with the authorities. On the contrary, both printed editions were sponsored by governmental agencies; this will also be true for the third edition.

What other types of information campaigns on health do you envisage?

Another interesting campaign on lesbian health would be one targeted to physicians, especially gynecologists. The government shows interest in the health topic, but we don't know if it is in

its plan to provide funding for this campaign for the lesbian community. It is currently giving priority to more vulnerable groups, such as the people with AIDS and women in poverty.

www.umoutroolhar.com.br

HIV/AIDS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

WHEN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IS COMBINED WITH HIV/AIDS, THESE TWO SCOURGES ARE EVEN MORE LETHAL THAN EACH WHEN VIEWED AS MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE.

Engender is a South African NGO engaged in research and capacity building in the areas of genders and sexualities, justice and peace. Its objective is to provide participatory research and facilitation services directly to communities of people, in particular the women's and peace movements, for their self-empowerment. Its founding Director, Bernedette Muthien explored the intersections between gender violence and HIV/AIDS in South Africa and identified the services available, if any, to address both problems. More importantly, she details the impact of HIV/AIDS on female survivors of gender violence (rape/sexual assault and domestic violence), and talks about the needs of these women and how they can be met. Below are a few extracts that speak for themselves:

"Southern Africa is at present confronted with two key epidemics: HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence. When gender-based violence is combined with HIV/AIDS, these two scourges are even more lethal than each when viewed as mutually exclusive. Since the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in South Africa is at least 10% of the population nationwide, it can be assumed that women (and less frequently children and men) who are subjected to coercive sexual intercourse, from stranger rape to sexual intercourse in relationships subject to domestic violence, are at greatest risk of being infected with HIV, in part due to their lack of power to negotiate safer sex practices."

"[Due to] the perception that HIV does not affect dykes - there is minimal literature on HIV and dykes. But because of gender-based violence, dykes are at higher risk, especially specifically [if violated] on the basis of [their]

sexuality. (...) we need to repackage the issue and encourage women to test for HIV, perhaps as a sub-issue to why they come in. Broadly, women are very susceptible to [HIV] infection, but they are always referred to heterosexual organizations. The organization needs to create understanding. Lesbians who have sex with men are also a huge issue."

"(...) "It is worse for lesbians in every sphere, for example medical treatment. (...) Intersectionality of oppressions is important since it compounds one's experience of oppressions, for example they love you on the stage as an artist, but they don't want you as part of the family". The issue of lesbianism is further exacerbated by the large-scale invisibility of women in general."

"Since services are geared towards heterosexual women, lesbians and bisexuals face not only the silence and stigma about their sexuality, but also about their experiences of gender-based violence. (...). Homophobic paranoia is even worse than for HIV. Lesbian sexuality is an even greater threat for women's sexuality, with the false belief that lesbians are a danger to children - what they [shelter residents escaping domestic violence] fear is that lesbians would sexually molest their daughters and/or sexually molest other shelter residents. So, for example, they won't go into the bathroom if a lesbian is there already. The biggest fear of moms is of their boys being feminine."

"Strategic Interventions:
Intersections between Gender-Based Violence & HIV/
AIDS" by Bernedette Muthien / Engender
www.engender.org.za

GENDER, HEALTH AND AIDS

NEGOTIATING SAFER SEX IS OFTEN NOT A REALISTIC EXPECTATION

The issue of women and AIDS is centred on empowerment and training women to negotiate for safer sex, for their bodily integrity. Often women do not have much choice and are not in a position to negotiate in developing countries. If lesbians and bisexual women are at risk at all, it is from having relations still with a man because of the unequal status of women. In a developing country, negotiating is often not a realistic expectation. When a woman negotiates for safer sex or refuses sex, she can become a victim of violence. The Philippines is one of the biggest suppliers of labor in the world. Most of them are domestic helpers and seafarers. Seafarers' wives do not see their husbands for years. When the men return, sex is on demand and unprotected. The women presume that their husbands had been celibate. Many HIV cases have arisen due to the situation wherein a woman gets a sexually transmitted infection from her husband who demands unprotected sex. (...) The difference between the way men and women behave in sex is that women are conditioned to be celibate or monogamous while men are allowed many partners. Even men having sex with men feel a sense of entitlement whether to have safe or unsafe sex. Gay men must also look into women's issues, these being an issue of disempowerment or disenfranchisement. The lower status of women must be addressed.

Anna Leah Sarabia. From the workshop held on Gender, Health and Aids at the 22nd ILGA World Conference, November 2003, The Philippines.

HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES AND HIV/AIDS

WHAT IS A NAMIBIAN WOMAN'S CHANCE TO SURVIVE THE HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC?

"Young women are given away to uncles and cousins, usually men who are much older than themselves. Young women in these communities do not have a choice; parents and other clan members decide to whom they will be given into marriage. This is done in order to keep the wealth in the extended family. This harmful practice violates young women's rights to choice and freedom of association, and puts them at risk of HIV and AIDS."

"The practice of 'dry sex', in which women use herbs to dry out the vagina and thereby enhance the sexual pleasure of men, leads to the tearing of the wall of vagina and exposes women further to infection with HIV."

"A 'good marriageable woman' is believed to be silent, obedient and shy. Our girls are raised not to challenge and demand, but to obey. This is further reinforced by different religions that teach women to obey their husbands at all costs. What is a Namibian woman's chance to survive the HIV/AIDS pandemic? Discussions of sex are seen as dirty and taboo, and men are seen as the ones who are supposed to take the initiative in sexual matters. How can women and young women confront boys and men in such situations? Moreover, divorce is out of question for many women, who have to endure domestic violence, including the violation of becoming infected by a promiscuous husband 'until death do us part.'"

"Some traditional healers encourage men to sleep with babies and virginal young girls to cure themselves from HIV/AIDS."

From a Press statement issued by Women's
Leadership Centre, Namibia, 24 November 2005



ACON

www.acon.org.au

It is an Australian health promotion organization based in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities with a central focus on HIV/AIDS. It provides HIV prevention, health promotion, advocacy, care and support services to members of those communities. ACON developed and produced a campaign around HIV and STI prevention for lesbian and gay people called "Mates look after each other".

AIDE SUISSE CONTRE LE SIDA

www.aids.ch

The Swiss AIDS Federation is active in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections and is committed to ensuring quality of life for those infected. The website provides general information about HIV/AIDS in English, French, German and Italian.

The manual "La santé: Parlons-en!" (Let's talk about health) is intended for lesbian and bisexual women. Among others, the booklet talks about gynecological examinations, menopause, HIV/AIDS, violence towards women and among same-sex couples. The last chapter gives a list of Swiss lesbian, women and AIDS organizations. The manual is available in German and in French on www.aids.ch/shop/e.

EQUAL

www.equalonline.co.uk

Equal was set up when several organizations agreed to work jointly to promote and enhance the sexual health information available to the lesbian, gay and bisexual community in the West of Scotland, UK. A three-year campaign was launched in 2004 featuring advertising that tackles lesbian and gay sexual health issues so that people can enjoy more fun and fulfilling sex lives, regardless of whether you have no partner or lots of partners! The ads have been designed to take on a slightly more humorous

approach than traditional sexual health advertising. Equal is keen to promote the different ways to have safer sex, including mutual wanking and using sex toys. All the images are real lesbians that live in Glasgow.

STIs are the domain of gay men and heterosexuals right? Wrong. Oral and other kinds of sex carry a risk for lesbians, too; and it's worth knowing about them. Nicky Coia, Senior Health Promotion Officer, of NHS Greater Glasgow said: "One challenge with the women's work has been issues of how women choose to be represented visually without falling into stereotypes, and also about how risque language could be used. A small number of women really didn't like the headline in STI image, although by far and away the majority did. This has been difficult to balance with the needs of other women who have berated us for not daring to use the word c*n to describe vagina!"

EURO-MEDITERRANEAN UNIVERSITIES OF HOMOSEXUALITIES (UEEH)

www.ueeh.org

The Euro-Mediterranean Universities of Homosexualities take place every year in July when several hundred LGBT people meet in Marseille, France. The UEEH is a place for exchange, debates, discussions, conferences, workshops, exhibitions.

In 2005, a workshop on lesbian safer sex was proposed by Faina Grossman and Clotilde Genon. The content of this workshop included prevention of STI for lesbians, such as the various types of STI contamination; awareness raising; how to protect yourself; the link between alcohol, drugs and prevention; the risk of hierarchisation of sexual practices; exclusion of those considered sick; access to the various means of protection; how to facilitate discussion on lesbian sexuality. The workshop was for lesbians, women and transgender women only.

FREEDOM AND ROAM UGANDA (FAR)

www.faruganda.4t.com

This lesbian association was established in 2003 by a group of lesbians who were constantly harassed, insulted and discriminated against by a misinformed society in Uganda. Its objective is the attainment of full equal rights of lesbians, bisexuals and transgender women, as well as the removal of all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The organization has a regular radio talk show aimed at raising awareness about the existence of LGBT people in Uganda and informing, educating, as well as calling lesbians to join forces and support the struggle. It also offers counselling services to lesbian, bisexual and transgender women. The FAR team also participates in the formulation of the Uganda HIV/AIDS policy and works hand in hand with Sexual Minorities-Uganda (SMUG), an alliance of LGBT organizations in Uganda.

GENDERDOC – M

www.gay.md/lesbi/eng

The Informational Center on Gender Studies is the only organization for gays and lesbians in Moldova with a juridical status. The main goals of the organization are to promote health and sexual education for youth, help them in their transition from adolescence to adult life, support those representatives of sexual minorities who are discriminated against and help them find justice.

In November 2004 GenderDoc organised a one-day seminar on lesbian and bisexual women STIs and safer sex practices. It was managed by a team of lesbian activists: Faina Grossman, Lada Pascari and Olesea Bondarenko. Participants discussed different issues in relation to STIs: what is safer lesbian sex, the degree of danger in transmitting HIV/AIDS among female lovers, the issue of trust between long-time partners, vaginal infections that are not transmitted du-

ring sex, the necessity of open dialogue between partners in relation to STIs and sexual practices.

GenderDoc produced a brochure on STIs and safer sex practices for lesbian and bisexual women. The brochure covers the following issues: information about STIs; vaginal infections and HIV/AIDS, including their symptoms; probability of transmission to women having sex with women; preventative measures and treatment; safer sex practices and measures of protection while using different types of lesbian sex (fingering, cunnilingus, penetrative sex, anal sex, using sex toys, etc). The brochure is distributed free of charge among the lesbian and bisexual women community in Moldova and is available in Russian and Romanian.

LABRIS

www.labris.org.yu/en/

A Serbian lesbian human rights group, Labris works on the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against lesbians and women of different sexual orientation. Labris' goals are to support lesbians and women of different sexual orientation in accepting their identities, promote the right to lesbian existence and reduce public homophobia, cooperate with lesbian groups from former Yugoslavia and lesbian and gay groups in Serbia and Montenegro, work on the change of legislation that would acknowledge the rights of the same-sex oriented people, lobbying non-governmental and governmental organizations to acknowledge lesbian rights as part of human rights.

"Sigurniji Lezbejski Sex" (Lesbian safer sex). This brochure is intended for women who identify themselves as lesbians and for women who have sex with other women. It includes detailed information about HIV/ AIDS; describes the anatomy of a vagina (called "inside story"); and lists different types of lesbian sex practices, including the use of dental dams, sex toys, dildos and anal toys. It explains how to negotiate sex and protection, how to take preventive measures and

how to deal with artificial insemination. A special section is dedicated to prostitution and advices for those using drugs and sharp instruments, piercing and tattoos. It also mentions lighter subjects, such as sports and other recreational activities and gives listings of venues where one can buy protective devices and sex toys. There is a dictionary of terminology, the contact details of different groups and an SOS line. The brochure is distributed free of charge among the lesbian communities in Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Bosnia.

LECRIPS

www.lecrrips.net/L/

This French website offers various documents and brochures that can be easily printed out and disseminated. The brochure dedicated to gynecological follow up describes how a gynecological visit is usually carried out and why it is important to have preventive visits. The STI brochure describes the various infections that can be contracted during sexual intercourse with women, but also with men. The brochure on sexual orientation describes coming out and negative and positive myths about homosexuality. The website also proposes a game to be played in couple or among friends to push people to talk freely about sexuality.

LOTHIAN GAY & LESBIAN SWITCHBOARD

www.lgls.co.uk

A help and support organization for the LGBT community within the Edinburgh and Lothian area and those living in other parts of United Kingdom. It provides assistance to families, friends and other supporting organizations. Main services include telephone and email support and information on a range of issues, including sexuality, relationships and coming out.

The Lothian Lesbian Line is a volunteer run community service, part of Lothian Gay & Lesbian Switchboard. The helpline has been in existence for over 30 years

and provides emotional support, sexual health promotion and information to women. Lesbian line is for women and staffed by women who are lesbian. Many of their calls are about coming out, sexual identity in general, sexual health, relationships, isolation and other health and emotional matters.

The leaflet "Lesbian Sex - Are you as safe as you think?" describes how lesbians are at risk of STI, it is not what you do but the way you do that can put you at risk is its main message. It details how STI can be transmitted and how to protect yourself. This brochure has been distributed to women's organizations and counselling centres.

MIXANGES

mixanges@yahoo.fr

Mixanges gathers a group of French artists who carry out prevention projects, namely via exhibitions. The organization created STI/AIDS prevention postcards specifically targeted at young lesbians to make up for the lack of STI/AIDS prevention information for young lesbians and bisexual women. The reverse side of the postcards can be adapted and customised by any organization that wishes to use them for prevention purposes.

OUT

www.out.org.za

The pamphlet "Woman loving woman and STI" provides information to both lesbian women and gay men on HIV and STIs in South Africa. It is targeted at younger, under-resourced gay and lesbian people. It deals with variations in women who have sex with women (WSW); myths about the sexual health of WSWs; STIs, including common symptoms; what to do if you have an STI; transmission of STIs, including HIV; dealing with rape; safer sex strategies.

SENSOA

www.sensoa.be

Sensoa is the Belgian Flemish expert organization on sexual health and HIV. Its strategy is determined by five target group programmes: children, young people and their parents; adults; homosexuals, lesbians and bisexuals; migrants; and people with HIV.

The organization published an article in its 2005 yearbook on the health needs of lesbians in Flanders. The article contains an analysis based upon a literature overview, a questionnaire taken amongst lesbians and interviews with experts. It compares heterosexual to homosexual and gay male to gay female health problems and behaviours. Female cancers, domestic violence, alcohol addiction, relational problems with health care professionals and institutions seem to be different for lesbian and bisexual women. Motherhood, menopause and aging also seem to have a different course specific to lesbians. But above all, the article underlines that ignorance concerning homosexuality and absence of items specific to homosexual men and women in the usual statistical collections contribute to the lack of reliable data.

Risico's van onzichtbaarheid - Seksuele, lichamelijke en emotionele aspecten van de gezondheid van lesbische vrouwen in Vlaanderen (Risks related to lack of visibility - Physical, psychological and sexual aspects specific to female homosexual health in Flanders) - by Mark Sergeant.

THE YOUNG WOMEN'S HEALTH PROJECT

www.likt.org.uk

This British organization is run by and for young lesbian and bisexual women. It works to improve young lesbian and bisexual women's health by promoting activities which address six areas of well-being: physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, occupational and social/community. The organization also issues a quarterly magazine called LIK:T.

The organization created a "Guide to sex and relationships" to encourage positive attitudes to being lesbian or bisexual. The guide contains safer sex information, but also a quiz on assertiveness, and information on relationships.

THE WOMEN'S SUPPORT GROUP

www.wsglanka.com

This organization supports lesbian, bisexual and transgender women in Sri Lanka. They regularly hold workshops on sexual health, sexual rights and sexuality. The purpose of having these workshops is to raise awareness on women's issues regarding sexuality and to give knowledge about women's health related to STI/HIV, etc.

The Women's Support Group has undertaken a series of workshops in the rural areas of the country, with women leaders of the communities. The main aim is to raise visibility of the organization as a support group for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women. In most instances, they have held these workshops for women community workers who are leaders in their own villages and districts. By addressing these women, they wish to bring attention to the stigma and discrimination faced by LGBT people in their own surroundings. In their activities they focus on gender awareness in relation to society, as sexuality and gender are intrinsically connected.
