

# Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity

There are a lot of different aspects to each of us: our body shape and physical features, our likes and dislikes, our interests and skills, our attractions and desires. All of these add up to make us who we are as people.



## Two very important aspects are sexual orientation and gender identity.

Did you know that all people have a sexual orientation and gender identity? Do you know the difference between the two?



### Sex

Sex is all about biology. A person's sex (whether they are considered male or female) is usually determined by their physical features – for instance, if they have a penis or vagina, XY or XX chromosomes, and their level of testosterone or oestrogen.

But not all people fit into the two categories of male or female. This may be because of their sex anatomy, reproductive organs or chromosomes.

**INTERSEX:** a person whose biological characteristics do not match the typical definitions of male or female.



### Gender

Gender is all about the behaviours expected of the two sexes. It refers to the roles, activities and attributes that a society considers appropriate for men and for women. In other words, it's the different qualities associated with masculinity and femininity.

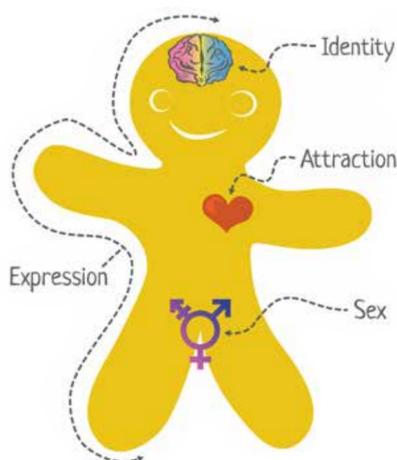
There are a number of assumptions about how men and women 'should' behave. These are known as gender roles. These assumptions are cultural not natural. They change over time and are not the same in all societies.

Sometimes a person's inner sense of being male or female doesn't match their physical body. That is why it's important not to confuse a person's sex (how they look on the outside) with a person's gender (how they feel on the inside).

**GENDER IDENTITY:** a person's inner sense of being male or female.

**GENDER EXPRESSION:** the way that a person expresses their gender identity – for instance, through clothing, behaviours, social activities and so on.

**TRANSGENDER:** a person whose understanding or expression of their gender is different to their physical sex. A transgender person may choose to dress, live and act in a way that is different to what society expects of them. Some transgender people may also choose to change parts of their body through surgery or other medical treatments.



## Sexual orientation

Everyone has a sexual orientation – some of us are attracted to the opposite sex, but others are attracted to the same sex or to both sexes. This is a natural and normal part of who we are as people.

The term 'sexual orientation' refers to physical, emotional and romantic attraction, and so is not the same thing as a person's gender identity.

**LESBIAN:** a woman who is emotionally and sexually attracted to other women.



**GAY:** a man who is emotionally and sexually attracted to other men.



**STRAIGHT:** a person who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex.



**BISEXUAL:** a person who is emotionally and sexually attracted to both sexes.



You may also have heard people use the acronym **LGBTI**. This is a shorthand way of saying lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex.

There are many well-known people who are LGBTI or who support LGBTI rights. You might be familiar with singers like Toya Delazy or Frank Ocean, or TV personalities like Raven-Symoné or Somizi Mhlongo. Who else could be added to this list?

## Put yourself in someone else's shoes ...

"I want to have a relationship with my family, but they won't give me an opportunity. Sometimes I feel sad and lonely, like I'm not loved." – *Thabo, 17*

"One teacher said that if she gave birth to a *stabane* she would kill it. She tried to chase me from the class. I try to ignore all this because I have to finish school and support my family. There's no-one at school I can talk to." – *Tanisha, 13*

LGBTI youth face many challenges. It can be hard at first for people to talk about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Young people in particular fear losing friends or loved ones, or may be scared for their personal safety.

Imagine living in a world where you were always called names, or where you were attacked for holding hands with your girlfriend or boyfriend, or where you were forced to wear a school uniform that made you uncomfortable. This is the world LGBTI learners live in every day.

## MYTHS

LGBTI people are un-African

LGBTI people are sick and can therefore be cured or fixed.

Homosexuality is un-Christian, evil or a form of possession.

Homosexuality is contagious: hanging out with lesbian or gay people will make you the same as 'them'.

A lesbian woman will be 'corrected' if she is forced to sleep with a man; a gay man will be 'corrected' if he is forced to sleep with a woman.

Being lesbian or gay is 'just a phase'.

## FACTS

LGBTI people exist in all cultures. There is rich history of sexual and gender diversity in a number of African traditions. In many societies, LGBTI people are celebrated and respected.

LGBTI people are neither sick nor damaged and so there is nothing that needs to be fixed. Sexual orientation and gender identity are natural and normal.

Incorrect. Many religious leaders promote love for all people. There are also many churches that welcome and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

A person's sexual orientation is not a disease or illness, and it can't be spread or caught.

Being forced to have sex with someone is rape and is a crime. It will not change a person's sexual orientation. Rape is often brutal, violent and intended to humiliate a person. It is not acceptable under any circumstances.

Wrong. A person's sexual orientation is a natural part of who they are and so it is not something they will grow out of.

"To discriminate against our sisters and brothers who are lesbian or gay on the grounds of their sexual orientation is as totally unacceptable and unjust as apartheid ever was." – *Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

## South Africa's Constitution

is considered one of the best in the world because of its Equality Clause. This statement makes it illegal to discriminate against a person because of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, culture, language or any other aspect.

Equality is a central principle in our society, but what does it mean – is it about everyone being the same or about respecting people's differences? Take a few minutes to think about some ways you can celebrate and respect diversity in your family, school, church or community.

All of us have a role to play in protecting human rights. Stand up and say NO to homophobia and transphobia!