

Working with traditional leaders

In April 2016, when the *Together Tomorrow* team¹ began preparing their research on male couples and HIV, they followed protocol and sought permission from traditional leaders to work in their areas. The response led to an interesting and unexpected turn of events.

Together Tomorrow is part of EHP SA's portfolio of eight research programmes and aims to understand the HIV prevention needs of male couples in South Africa and Namibia. It involves in-depth interviews and surveys with men who have sex with men (MSM) at several sites in both countries, one of which is Sweetwaters, a rural area of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

"When we approached the iNkosi (traditional leader) to notify him about the study, he asked for more information on our gender sensitivity and sexuality training," says Thuli Mjwara from the Pietermaritzburg Gay and Lesbian Network. "He felt it would be important and would meet a great need if we provided training to his Council and his iNdunas (chiefs)," she says. "It was clear that, while homosexuality is fairly commonplace in rural areas, there has been very little information or support for traditional leaders on gender and sexual diversity."

"When it comes to gender and sexual diversity, traditional leaders are very open to information and very supportive."

This initial discussion led to comprehensive gender diversity training sessions for the iNkosi and 16 iNdunas in Sweetwaters. "Basically we look at binaries, in terms of defining being a man or woman and then we look at the main categories in sex – male, female and intersex," says Mjwara. The training goes on to cover gender and gender identity, gender non-conforming, transgender and sexual orientation, different ways of having sex, sexual play and other topics.

¹ The research is led by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in partnership with the Pietermaritzburg Gay and Lesbian Network and Positive Vibes in Namibia.



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The audience was receptive, with only two iNdunas reluctant to take part. Others had lots of questions and some shared experiences, such as meeting and befriending a transgender woman online. It was agreed that MSM is not a modern western import. "These men who have sex with other men - it's not a new thing," said one iNduna. He described how men living in single sex hostels in the mines would have "outer-course", or thigh sex. "Even before there were mines, this was a usual act. They did this to relieve themselves," he said.

Traditional leaders in the workshops felt that discrimination against MSM and transgender was unhelpful. "It makes them uncomfortable and unable to feel free because there's this feud between them and the community," said one iNduna. "The community judges them, which they don't like... It makes them isolate themselves. They want to be loved, praised, and encouraged - even to be asked out. The community should fix that because they make these people uncomfortable."

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Their openness was no surprise to Mjwara, who has been working in rural areas for a long time. "When it comes to gender and sexual diversity, traditional leaders are very open to information and very supportive," she says, "as opposed to other stakeholders, especially those living in urban areas."

More about the *Together Tomorrow* study at www.ehpsa.org/evidence/regional-research-fund



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