



In our own words

Stories of African, Caribbean and Black gay and bisexual men from the MaBwana Black Men's Study in Toronto

WHO ARE WE?

Throughout the MaBwana in-depth interviews, participants described their identities as African, Caribbean and Black gay/queer men, and the silence and rejection that they experienced from being gay and Black. They recognize that identity is complex, but affirm their identity as Black and gay.

*"I guess they're [Black and queer] kind of fluid, and they kind of fit together in some spaces and maybe they are more separated in other spaces. I guess that's the part that I'm trying to figure out."*⁴

"It's [being gay] actually much more than that [sexual attraction] because it's really, I guess it defines me as a human being Someone's sexuality means a whole lot when it's fully expressed, right? And in my mind ... if you chose to ignore it, to repress it you would um ... you feel like being in prison really, yeah because you're not being true to yourself first of all. So that's why it's very important for me to identify as a gay person"

In the interviews, most participants referred to themselves as gay or bisexual. A minority described themselves as queer, which they understood as an affirmation of their rights as LGBTQ people.

"...because we live in a society where straight is the preferred orientation. Gay individuals are discriminated against and it sort of rejects everybody else. It rejects bisexuality, transgendered individuals, intersex, 2-spirited etc., etc. So queer for me is like an umbrella term where it include all orientations and for me that, I'm all about promoting equality right, so I identify myself as queer."

Most participants described strong cultural and emotional links to Africa, the Caribbean or Black communities. They spoke about their identities in terms of family and cultural connections, the struggles among Black people for justice and recognition, and the strength that they associated with their background in those societies and

BACKGROUND

This fact sheet summarizes interviews with African, Caribbean and Black gay and bisexual men from the MaBwana Black Men's Study.¹ MaBwana was a research study on vulnerability to HIV among Black² gay and bisexual men in Toronto. The interviews were held between October 2007 and February 2008, and covered a variety of issues related to health and HIV.

In-depth interviews were held with 24 men. The participants were equally divided between those who reported an African or Caribbean background, and between younger (less than 30 years old) and older (30 years or older) men. To qualify for inclusion in the study, participants were at least 18 years of age, resided in or frequented the Greater Toronto Area, and had sex with another man in the past year.³

communities.

“One thing I really like about the culture... is the fact that there’s still fight in the culture, and we’re still moving forward and trying to better our lives in that sense. So I do think that it’s a strong, strong culture, and I sort of proud to identify with it.”

Despite their strong ties to their African, Caribbean and Black societies and communities, participants recognized that their societies and communities failed to acknowledge their sexuality and even suppressed those identities.

“Basically I like everything about being African, but I’m gay... it’s not something we, they really understand back home. ...They have stereotypes of being gay ... they talk bad about you without knowing you or without even knowing you personally, and I guess it’s more about ignorance on the subject.”

MaBwana participants also recounted their experience of marginalization and rejection in white Canadian gay communities and the wider Canadian society, and the challenge of adjusting to Canadian society.

“When I was in the heterosexual community it was fine for me being black. I didn’t have as much difficulty, there was difficulty but it wasn’t the same. Coming into the gay world I found that it was a little bit more segregated into little sub-groups like the bear community, leather community or if there was a lesbian community. Everything was kind of divided, so it became more of an issue then because I kind of felt like I had no choice but to kind of face it in a different way.”

“... there was an issue of feeling ostracized or feeling alienated from community, the gay community which I, which I aspired as a gay man, a Black gay man, and then not being able to find a community, in the Black community, even in the Black gay community, and within the wider gay White community, not finding acceptance there at all...”

“Like I know people from my country who ...

we meet and we ...you know, hmm how do we get there? How do we do this? How you look at Toronto and socializing, trying to support one another. But I’ve not gone beyond that, and I told you that’s what I am in for. But I have to watch my steps. Yeah like I have heard for example of bathhouse but I’ve not been there, not yet. I may need to, but how do I get there? I am being very calculative, yeah. Because uhm, the people there are white. I am not yet at that level of like we are rubbing shoulders, no we aren’t, not yet.”

WE CARE ABOUT OURSELVES AND OUR COMMUNITIES

Despite social marginalization in mainstream white gay communities (racism) and Black communities (homophobia and heterosexism), the vast majority of participants remained connected and affiliated with networks of other Black gay men, Black communities generally, and gay men from other ethno-racial communities who experience similar marginalization.

Their commitment to creating their own networks of support and solidarity demonstrates their strong sense of empowerment and their concern for the well-being of other Black gay men. MaBwana participants also spoke about varying levels of participation in organized efforts to respond to HIV issues. Their involvement ranged from routine activities such as condom stuffing, to more high-profile activities as participating on national committees, mobilizing for HIV prevention and testing in their countries of origin, and sitting on advisory committees.

MaBwana participants framed their personal involvement in HIV/AIDS issues as “participating for the rest of the community” and helping to strengthen how their communities responded to HIV/AIDS.

“It was like I feel I’m responsible for other people’s lives... You know there are people who need to be reached out. This information, whatever you have, you have to leave it out for people to receive, yeah.”

“I can’t be Black, queer and not consider HIV an issue. If not for me, for people that I would share my life with.”

OUR INTIMATE SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

MaBwana participants generally voiced strong commitments to safer sex and HIV prevention, while at the same time recognizing that their commitments were difficult to maintain in practice. The majority of participants viewed using a condom for anal sex as the “natural”, “automatic”, and right thing to do, something that was good not only for the health and well-being of themselves but of their sexual partners.

“No, no, no, no [to unprotected sex]. Because it’s not about what they wanna do because I have to be I have to take control, yeah. So, whether or not they’re positive or negative doesn’t really matter because it’s condom all the time that’s just my rule of thumb. Simply.”

“It’s my policy. It’s always safe with me, it’s always safe. I wear a condom, yeah. I wear a condom and I yeah I wear a condom ... I never really have sex without a condom, I never do have sex without a condom. If you want have it without a condom, I mean I walk away.”

Many spoke about safer sex in terms of taking personal responsibility for their health. However, nearly all the men interviewed for MaBwana recalled occasions of unprotected sex with other men, which they attributed to drugs and alcohol, “heat-of-the-moment” encounters, and wanting to show that they trusted their sexual partners.

“I live in a fear of becoming HIV positive and although my choices sometimes are not the wisest by negotiating I first, I will only negotiate if the person discloses to me that they are HIV negative and I trust them, and don’t ask me what

am I basing that trust on, but then I will negotiate that, ok, I’m going to take this risk and have the unsafe sex with him.”

“I was offered the drug and I used that drug and about an hour later, it was a case where, if, if a condom was there and the person insisted then it was used, if it was not, in that particular scene, I didn’t ask, I didn’t ask questions like, I just threw caution, just threw caution to the wind. We both were under the influence of that drug and just acting out, yah.”

WE’RE RESISTING HIV

MaBwana participants demonstrated a strong interest in getting tested for HIV. Almost all interview participants had tested for HIV, some repeatedly and others infrequently (e.g., more than a year ago). There was also some anxiety and fear associated with getting tested for the first time.

“Scary as hell... I was still negative at that time. But that was scary, really scary.”

On a whole MaBwana participants showed much interest in HIV prevention, which they interpreted as a demonstration of their community involvement and responsibility. Participants also had a special interest in AIDS service organizations and other organizations involved in health and HIV work among Black gay and bisexual men. Participants were drawn to HIV prevention campaigns that showed Black people “in a good light” and promoted or portrayed a sense of community solidarity and responsibility for preventing the spread of HIV.

“Um they basically keep reminding me to use safe, to practice safe sex and it’s a good, even though I know it, it’s a good thing to basically keep seeing it, keep reminding you that it’s, that AIDS is still there and it’s killing people.”

“When I see a campaign for um the Black and Caribbean group for HIV prevention you know, I feel really good and you see somebody else and

they're just smiling, you know and they look you know, it shows the black community in such a good light. People are very respectful for themselves, because they always think, and I use to always hear, Black people don't respect themselves, you know, they are lazy and all this, so when you see add campaigns that are like that it gives you different feeling about yourself kind of, you feel proud that you know this is going on and that we are that organized and well put together."

BLACK GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN IN PERSPECTIVE

Despite the experience of marginalization across white mainstream gay communities in the form of racism, and from Black communities in the form of homophobia and heterosexism, MaBwana

participants did not regard themselves as victims. Instead, they cared about their health and the health of their communities and networks. By and large, they were meaningfully engaged in their own health and well-being, as well as the health and well-being of other Black gay men and their wider Black communities. AIDS service organizations and other community-based organizations must find ways of harnessing the energy of Black gay men to achieve health and well-being for them and their communities. Black LGBT people are competent, resourceful and deserving members of our communities, and ought to be recognized as such.



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¹ The MaBwana Black Men's Study was implemented from 2006 to 2008 by a team from the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT), ACCHO, the University of Toronto, the University of Windsor, the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, the Ontario HIV Treatment Network and the Hospital for Sick Children (Sick Kids Hospital). The Community Advisory Committee (CAC) included members with a variety of professional affiliations (e.g., university, AIDS service organization, etc.), who were involved in various community initiatives related to health and community among Black LGBTQ communities. The study emerged from discussions among members of the African and Caribbean Council on HIV/AIDS in Ontario (ACCHO). The main purpose of MaBwana was to inform HIV prevention services for Black gay and bisexual men in Ontario. The community report - MaBwana: Health, Community and Vulnerability to HIV among African, Caribbean and Black Gay and Bisexual Men in Toronto – is available at www.accho.ca/pdf/Mabwana_Report.pdf.

² In this fact sheet, we use the term “Black” to refer to African, Caribbean and Black.

³ MaBwana also included a survey of Black gay and bisexual men. The survey results are reported in the community report, and in a fact sheet titled “Black gay and bisexual men in Toronto: A snapshot of results from the MaBwana Black Men's Study”.

⁴ All quotes from MaBwana interview participants that are more than a few words in length are highlighted, with quotation marks.

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This fact sheet was written by Akim Adé Larcher, with graphic design by Frantz Brent-Harris.

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