

SEXUALITY, GENDER IDENTITY AND DISABILITY - A GUIDE

Safety & Wellness Guides for Queer Zimbabweans

Sexual and gender minorities with disabilities experience unique challenges due to the combination of their sexual and gender identities with their disabilities. This intersectionality means that their lived experiences, discrimination, and needs may differ significantly from those who are not disabled or who do not identify as sexual or gender minority. It's crucial to understand that disability does not negate someone's ability to identify in any way, nor does sexual and gender identity cancel out someone's disability.

UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

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THE DISABILITY SPECTRUM AND ITS IMPACT

The disability spectrum includes:

- **Physical Disabilities:** These affect the body (e.g., mobility impairments, cerebral palsy).
- **Intellectual Disabilities:** These affect cognitive functions (e.g., Down syndrome, ADHD).
- **Sensory Disabilities:** These affect the senses (e.g., blindness, deafness).
- **Mental Health Disabilities:** These include conditions like depression, anxiety, PTSD.
- **Non-visible Disabilities:** These are conditions that aren't outwardly apparent (e.g., chronic pain, learning disabilities).

Each of these disabilities can intersect with one's sexuality and or gender identity, creating experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and additional barriers in social and sexual contexts.

SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING OF DISABILITY AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Disability is not solely a medical condition but also a social and political experience. The social model of disability emphasizes that individuals are disabled by societal barriers rather than their impairments. In Zimbabwe, disabled people often face exclusion due to inaccessibility, stigma, and a lack of support systems. This exclusion is further compounded for sexual and gender minorities with disabilities, who may experience discrimination from both the disability community and the queer community. Recognizing the importance of inclusive policies, accessible environments, and community support is essential in ensuring that all individuals, regardless of disability or identity, can fully participate in society.

LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

Language is an important tool in shaping how we view others. Using respectful and inclusive language is an important way to be disability inclusive. In Zimbabwean languages, there are several slurs and derogatory terms used for people with disabilities, which can perpetuate stigma and exclusion.

ABLEISM AND INTERNALIZED ABLEISM

- **Ableism**

The discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities. It can manifest in obvious ways, such as the lack of ramps or access, or in subtle ways like microaggressions or exclusion from queer spaces.

- **Internalized Ableism**

Occurs when disabled people internalize society's negative stereotypes about disability. This can lead to low self-esteem and depression, especially if their disability is compounded by discrimination related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

BEING AN ALLY TO QUEER PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Being an ally to sexual and gender minorities with disabilities requires:

- **Listening to their experiences:**

Each person has a unique perspective. It's important to let them speak about their lived experiences and advocate for their needs.

- **Challenging ableist language and behavior:**

Call out derogatory terms when you hear them, and educate others on respectful language.

- **Promoting inclusivity:**

Advocate for accessible spaces and events. This could mean ensuring physical accessibility (e.g., ramps, elevators) and providing resources in accessible formats (e.g., audio, braille).

- **Providing emotional and psychological support:**

Recognize that queer disabled individuals may face compounded discrimination and emotional stress, and offer a safe space for them to express themselves.

COMMON ABLEIST TERMS AND THEIR ISSUES

"Crippled / Cripple" - Dehumanizing and reduces a person to their disability.

Alternative: "Person with a mobility disability" or "wheelchair user."

"Handicapped" - Outdated term with negative connotations.

Alternative: "Person with a disability" or "person with an impairment."

"Dumb / Mute" - Offensive to people with speech impairments.

Alternative: "Non-speaking person" or "person with a speech disability."

"Lame" (used to mean bad or boring) - Disparages people with mobility impairments.

Alternative: Use specific language like "uninteresting" or "ineffective."

"Blind to the truth" / "Turn a blind eye" - Uses blindness as a metaphor for ignorance.

Alternative: "Ignoring the truth" or "choosing not to see the facts."

"Deaf and dumb" - Insulting and outdated term for people who are deaf and non-speaking.

Alternative: "Deaf person" or "non-speaking individual."

"Wheelchair-bound" - Implies restriction rather than mobility.

Alternative: "Wheelchair user" or "person who uses a wheelchair."

"Special needs" - Can be patronizing and vague.

Alternative: "Disabled person" or "person with a disability."