



The State of Lesbian Organising and the Lived Realities of Lesbians in the EU and the Accession Countries

November 2020



ELC*

**EUROCENTRALASIAN
LESBIAN* COMMUNITY**

This report was compiled by a 'core team' within EL*C:

Coordination: Leila Lohman

Historical Analysis: Silvia Casalino

Current state of the lesbian movement: Dragana Todorović

Literature review and meta-analysis: Magdalena Siegel

This report was made possible thanks to the input of the following EL*C team members & outstanding lesbian activists:

Alice Coffin, Ilaria Todde, Faika El-Nagashi, Olena Shevchenko, Karima Zahi, Kseniya Kirichenko, Evgenia Giakoumopoulou, Kika Fumero, Lynn H. Ballen, and Mima Simić.

When referencing this report, we recommend the following citation:

EL*C (Ed.s): Report on “The State of lesbian organizing and the lived realities of lesbians in the EU and the accession countries” by the EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community (November 2020).

Copyright: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License: Attribution - Noncommercial - Share Alike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

You may copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. You can also remix, transform, and build upon the material, if this is the case, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. If you want to copy, redistribute or remix, transform and build upon the material, you must give appropriate credit to the EL*C, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests that the EL*C endorses you or your use. You cannot, under any circumstances, use this work for commercial purposes.

Disclaimer: This license applies to the text of this Publication and its annexes. It does not apply to the photos and drawings integrated into this report licenses need to be sought from the appropriate copyright holder.

Gefördert vom:



Bundesministerium
für Familie, Senioren, Frauen
und Jugend

Table of Contents

About EL*C	5
Executive Summary	7
Background, Rationale, Scope	9
The missing history of the lesbian movement	10
Origin & usage of the term lesbian	10
Lesbian mobilizations in the early days	12
Escaping the police raids or the founding of Daughters of Bilitis	13
Emergence & development of political lesbianism	14
The rise of national and international lesbian organising	18
Data on Lived Realities of Lesbians in EU & Accession countries	22
Aim, limitations and methodology	22
The representation of lesbians in health-related research	23
Literature Review on lesbian lived realities	24
Violence and Harassment	26
Discrimination	28
Mental health	32
Being out and participation in daily life	33
Conclusions	35
Current State of Lesbian Organising in the EU & Accession Countries	37
Introduction	37
Summary	38
Leadership and Governance	38
Human Resources	40
Technical and Financial Resources	41
Outreach and Visibility	47
Monitoring and Evaluation	48
Programmatic Areas of Work	49
Recommendations	52
Recommendations on the missing history of the lesbian movement	52
Recommendations on how to improve data collection on lesbian lives	53
Recommendations on how to improve lesbian civil society	54
Policy recommendations based on the data analysis	55



ACT
ELC
EUROPEAN
LESBIAN
CONFERENCE
TRANSFORM

CONNECT
ELC
EUROPEAN
LESBIAN
CONFERENCE
CONNECT

EUROPEAN LESBIAN CONFERENCE



About EL*C

The EL*C started out of a self-organised space three years ago, recognizing the multitude of needs surrounding the rights, the visibility and the well-being of lesbians throughout Europe and Central Asia. Two conferences and three years later and after receiving overwhelming feedback from our communities, we decided to take a step forward and transform into a sustainable entity. We assessed our needs thoroughly and contextualised them within the wider socio-political regional and global developments.

In the three years of its existence, we embarked on a daring lesbian journey of “L*volution” with the EL*C: to continue building our lesbian utopia, to shed stigma and shame and take pride and joy in who we are, to reach out to each other and our diverse communities, to connect through our shared experiences, our accomplishments, our insecurities and our strengths; to heal, outgrow and transform ourselves while we navigate the known and the unknown.

Our conferences are our lighthouses - shaping connections, sharing knowledge, finding common languages and understanding of our diversities, building bridges that reach and impact far beyond the time and space at which they take place.

Our communities are intersectional. We seek to create the spaces that we need to exist and evolve: lesbian led and lesbian dedicated sites, projects, platforms to be “talking, laughing, loving, breathing, fighting, f*cking, crying, drinking, riding, winning, losing, cheating, kissing, thinking, dreaming” (*from: The L-Word Theme*). We center diversity, inclusion and participation - within the LGBTIQ* community as well as all the worlds through which we move. Our experiences, needs and perspectives differ - individually and collectively, throughout our regional focus area of Europe and Central Asia and with respect to the intersecting social groups we belong to, the ways we are limited and enriched by this, marginalized or centered, and the strategies we apply to move out of global systems of oppression, discrimination and dichotomy.

Our struggles are shared and we face them through allyship - meaningful and lasting connections with partners and stakeholders that we establish at every level of our enterprise, engage with and involve ourselves in. They are grassroots and community, institutional and government, regional and global. We speak for ourselves and we insist on being heard.

We seek dialogue and access to deliberations and decision-making. We are active and experienced partners and advocate for systemic change, for recognition, representation and resources and for human rights

based policies and programmes within political bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency. We carry the many voices of our lesbian communities into these spaces which we, in turn, use to strengthen and empower our movement.

We write our own stories. We change the narratives around lesbian lives and do not put a limit on our interventions: We change the way 'news' is being produced and covered, we sensitize media outlets and contribute to critical media coverage, we impact the language that is used when reporting about us, we exhibit sustainable principles and practices of lesbian activism and introduce them into different spheres of public awareness.

We claim spaces and occupy places. We draw from early forms of lesbian activism, from their social knowledge and skills, their political positionality and their (dyke) tactics of reaching, infiltrating and subverting public and media spaces. From the Lesbian Avengers and the Combahee River Collective, from eco-feminism and anti-racism, from social justice and global justice movements, from the fight for abortion rights and the fight against HIV/AIDS, from Black Lives Matter and Pussy Riot, from lesbian iconography and lesbian visual culture. Building on this legacy, we invent our own activism of change: impactful and persistent, immediate action and consistent radical thought. The revolution will be live. Our guiding theme is centering and celebrating lesbian lives. It is visionary, generous and alluring. It's bringing lesbian genius to the world.

Within our network and organisation, we face each other with open hearts and minds. As equals, attentive to our differences, appreciative of our strengths and considerate of where and when we struggle and hurt. We aim to create the structures and processes that allow us to interact with each other in such a way that our political vision is reflected in our personal practice. We dedicate time and effort to this. We shift away from traditional and hierarchical order and dare to move into chaos, re-imagining our powers, our thought, our language, our form, our relations. We do not surrender. We dare to remain connected throughout the disruptions of our revolution.

For the EL*C, the word "lesbian" is part of the political struggle for visibility, empowerment and representation. We therefore use "lesbian" in our name with an asterisk, to include anyone who identifies as lesbian, feminist, bi, trans or queer, and all those who feel connected to lesbian activism. For the purpose of this report we use the same approach, apart from the third part focusing on data collection which brings about a more nuanced approach to the term based on targeted population per survey.

Executive Summary

There is an expression that goes like this: 'if you don't have a dog, you hunt with a cat,' which means that if you don't have the 'tool' proper to make a move, you will create a new or different tool to work with. This entire study project can be seen in this light. In the sense that we came to the realisation that we were missing so much information on lesbian communities' history, about the state of inclusion of lesbians in data and the state of lesbian organising that we decided to put our own skills to work to start developing, creating and researching this information in light of being able to start connecting the dots.

Based on this goal that we had to research and compile complimentary (missing) information, we pulled together our efforts and knowledges and thanks to the generosity of so many extraordinary lesbians that helped us with interviews, analytical skills, desktop research, and their time and stories we have managed to trace what we hope will be a solid foundation to further research on the histories of the lesbian movement, the existing data on lesbians and the state of affairs of lesbian organising.

By no means can we claim for this output to be comprehensive, it would take more than a lifetime to dig up the legacies and histories of the lesbian movement. And we can only hope that what we have dug up will incite further research - that the current flagrant lack of (scientific) data including lesbians will encourage further inclusion of these realities and that the challenges experienced by lesbian organisations will be overcome wherever possible thanks to further support by relevant stakeholders.

The resilience is as big as the gaps and challenges. But this comes as no surprise to us lesbians. We need to make sure that these facts reach anyone in doubt or anyone in a power (policy making) position. This is why we encourage all lesbians and allies to read this short report and to take further its key messages to their communities and political leaders; to let them know about our histories, the fact that we need to be taken into account in any policy and research undertaking, and that lesbian organising must be supported in a meaningful way.

Despite the missing information, what we have pulled together is phenomenal. In the historical part, you will find various events, meaningful lesbian historical moments in different countries such as Ireland, France, Spain, or Poland and Hungary among others. With part 2, we have attempted to shed light on the little data existing encompassing lesbian lived realities but by doing so at the same time what is there will,

we hope, encourage additional and more inclusive scientific data to be produced by any relevant academic institution, political body or local lesbian group. This leads us to the third part of the study, which sheds light on so much of the incredible ways that the lesbian groups across the EU and accession countries operate. If being able to move mountains with little money or political support is an indication of a group's strength, will or motivation, even smartness, this part three lets readers see that lesbian groups have been and continue to carry out titanic work!

So in a sense this project is the first step in helping us point to what is missing. This is already a commendable accomplishment. However, this also means that, in a sense, the biggest job lies ahead of us, because from this fundamental outcome we must and we will build, construct, and augment our reach and impact. With this project we have started naming the challenges, and now it will be up to us to find the most sustainable and feminist ways of solving them!



Background, Rationale, Scope

This research comes at a time in which the awareness around the exclusion and invisibility of lesbians is growing, and as an increasing number of stakeholders express willingness to engage in a more meaningful way on advancing human rights and visibility of lesbians. Yet, even though societies and movements in the EU, and to some extent the accession countries, have come a long way in advancing the rights of LGBTI persons and women's rights, lesbians still face strong discrimination, violence and stigma, and are one of the most marginalized, vulnerable and invisible social groups, affected by patriarchal gender norms, misogyny, sexism and lesbophobia, which is still widespread throughout the EU and the accession countries. Lesbians face challenges and underrepresentation in all spheres.

As already mentioned, this research has been conducted from October 2019 to January 2020. Since, the Coronavirus pandemic has re-shuffled the global list of priorities, unraveling and exacerbating the oppressions and violence that minority groups, like people of colour, women, people with disabilities, LGBTI and queer persons, are already suffering and that are covered later in this report. The global crisis has affected lesbians as everyone else, but also in so many specific and intersectional ways. For this reason, our work goes on, and we have elaborated a specific survey to be published beginning of 2021, in order to assess the impact of the COVID-19 on lesbians. The lack of capacities and strategic and sustained mobilization of the lesbian movement is hindering effective impact on national authorities, policy reform and decision-making, which is further exacerbated by lack of awareness, data, impact assessment and in some contexts, the political will of decision makers, which in turn results in lesbian-specific issues being unrecognized and absent from policy-making.

With regards to the geographical scope, for this study, we use the acronym "EU-Plus", which stands for the following 37 countries:

- EU member states (27 countries): Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.
- The UK has left but is still considered in our study (1 country): The UK.
- Schengen Associated States (4 country): Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.
- Future enlargement of the European Union (5): Turkey (applied on 14 April 1987), North Macedonia (applied on 22 March 2004 as "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"), Montenegro (applied in 2008), Albania (applied in 2009), Serbia (applied in 2009).

The missing history of the lesbian movement

The purpose of the first part of this report is to highlight fragments of the genealogy of lesbian mobilizations, from their emergence to their strategies. Through desktop research as well as interviews, and archival analysis conducted between October 2019 and January 2020, we've attempted to trace and even reconstruct a chronology specific to lesbian mobilizations. Because of the scarcity of archives and historical analysis, despite the multitude of experiences and lesbian projects described by the activists interviewed, the work necessary to draw a coherent history of the lesbian movement from a European perspective or even just to start a clear timeline of facts and places in different European countries is a monumental job, which has never been done.

Lesbian **history is not linear** and presents multiple paradoxes. Reconstructing the history also presents numerous challenges due to the extreme influence of the Western perspective, and the much better documented U.S. LGBT movement through LGBT studies at universities, compared to Europe. Due to the vastness and the complexity in producing a historical analysis for each country, and eventually tying the various histories together, in the following pages we share insight from some countries: Italy, France, Spain, Ireland, Poland, Hungary and the Balkans (Slovenia and Serbia). For the latter, we have chosen to share a message by Lepa Mladjenovic, pioneering lesbian activist from Belgrade, entitled, 'Notes of a Feminist Lesbian during Wartime'.

1) Origin & usage of the term lesbian

The usage of the **word 'lesbian'** itself has a tumultuous history, carrying stigma and derogatory connotations. Today, this coincides oddly with the oversexualisation of lesbians, with the term 'lesbian' being the most researched word on Internet porn websites over the past few years. This somewhat paradoxical situation highlights the historical hypocrisy around shaming, banning and criminalising of lesbian lives. The term 'lesbian' has in the meantime been reclaimed by the lesbian community and it is nowadays also a word used in the area of policy making and activism. It has taken the lesbian community a long time to also reclaim terms like 'queer', 'dyke' and 'butch'. The terms themselves point to the

conflation of LGBT people crossing gender norms, with gay men being depicted as effeminate, and lesbians as hyper masculine. It is therefore an understatement to claim that the term 'lesbian' is contested and subject to continuous renegotiation. Even today it is still very complex to reclaim the word lesbian because of the burdensome stigma still attached to it.

The word 'lesbian' itself derives from the name of the Greek island of Lesbos, home of the 6th-century poet **Sappho** (c. 630 – c. 570 BC), greatly admired since antiquity for the beauty of her poetry that includes themes primarily concerned with the female religious and educational community, women's daily lives, relationships, and rituals. As the *New Yorker*, after the discovery of a new fragment of her poetry, recently stated: "The greatest problem while studying Sappho is that there's so little Sappho to study. It would be hard to think of another poet whose status is so disproportionate to the size of her surviving body of work." And then adding "The uncertainties plaguing the biography of literature's most famous Lesbian explain why classicists who study Sappho like to cite the entry for her in Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig's - *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* - (1979). To honor Sappho's central position in the history of female homosexuality, the two editors devoted an entire page to her. The page is blank."

Before the mid-19th century, the word 'lesbian' in English and in many other European languages, referred to any derivative or aspect of Lesbos, including a type of wine.

In **medical literature**, the use of the word 'lesbianism' to describe erotic relationships between women has been documented since 1870. With the entry of the term 'lesbian' in a medical dictionary in 1890, as an adjective to describe tribadism (as "lesbian love"), lesbians became a pathologised group. As a result, lesbianism was considered a neurological disease ('uranism') and lesbians were subjected to surgical treatments as a means to curtail homosexual behavior, including ovariectomies, clitorectomies, and lobotomies. Although the World Health Organization took homosexuality including lesbians out of the official list of mental illnesses in 1990, the infamous phenomenon of 'conversion therapies' - encouraged by the fact that national (American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association) and international medical organisations treated lesbians as people with a mental illness - are only starting to be outlawed today, including the example of Germany in 2019.

Criminalisation of homosexuality, even where it has been targeting sexual activity between men, has undeniably affected lesbians directly. Moreover, in addition to the consequences of legal and



moral condemnation, lesbians have suffered from **invisibility**, including in legal texts, and the imposed self-censorship.

“I was an activist and cultural organiser from the ‘80s till today and I never witnessed a period when lesbians were hype or women didn’t have any problem in identifying as lesbians”

- Manuela Kay, journalist and publisher of L-Mag and Siegesäule magazines

2) Lesbian mobilizations in the early days

In 1915, recognising the importance of propaganda, a group of radical thinkers led by the Irish poet and radical suffragist, Eva Gore-Booth, founded a **magazine called Urania**, which is one of the earliest examples of lesbians and gay men collaborating on a shared cultural project. Privately printed and circulated to a membership, Urania ran until 1940. Each issue, between 10 and 20 pages long, consisted almost entirely of clippings of articles from newspapers all over the world, on cross-dressing, life-long transvestism, passing women, hermaphrodites, transsexualism, and same-sex ‘marriages’. Attention was also given to women who achieved success in male fields such as those who won open scholarships, built ships, fended off attackers, and to men who knitted exquisitely. Urania argued that there were no innate differences between men and women and that gender was an artificial cultural construction that worked against the true realisation of an individual’s potential. Urania also argued that once women and men escaped the imposed limits of gender, heterosexual relationships could no longer be prioritised over same-sex relationships.

Case study: **Ireland**

20th century Ireland owes a lot to Irish lesbians, particularly to a network of lesbians living in Dublin, many of whom met each other through their involvement with the suffrage movement and many of whom later became actively involved in the Revolution, in trade unions, local governments and the issues of poverty such as healthcare and social housing. These Irish lesbians were part of a broader network of lesbians in Europe, U.S. and the UK also involved in addressing social inequities. The first Lesbian Lives Conference, held in Spring 1993, was organised by Dr. Geraldine Moane, Ailbhe Smyth and Rosemary Gibney in conjunction with a Dublin lesbian community called LOT, Lesbian Organizing Together. In 2019, the University of Brighton announced the 24th edition of the Conference.

In the city of Cork, south of Dublin, a resource center, **LINC - Advocating for Lesbian and Bisexual Women**, has been working for more than 20 years to organize trainings, provide health services and spaces for social events and to increase the visibility of lesbian and bisexual women. Thanks to the economic support of the City council, this NGO is one of the rare examples of sustainable and long lasting lesbian project in Western Europe.

3) Escaping the police raids or the founding of Daughters of Bilitis

In the 1950s and the 1960s, lesbians based in the United States became profoundly influenced by, and took part in the civil rights movement (1954-1968); they were inspired by the movement's tactics and strategies. Along with the postwar 'sexual revolution', laws criminalising homosexuals became compared to laws on segregation. The **Daughters of Bilitis ('DOB')** was the first lesbian civil and political rights organisation in the United States, formed in 1955 in San Francisco and started as a social alternative to gay and lesbian bars. Considering that police raids grew in frequency and in violence in public spaces up until the infamous Stonewall riots in 1969, this proved to be a strategically smart new positioning. The DOB, who called themselves 'A Woman's Organization for the purpose of Promoting the Integration of the Homosexual into Society', also launched their own publication called, 'The Ladder' which they published until 1970.



It is important to note that for the 'homophile movement' with DOB for lesbians and the Mattachine Society for gay men, the **private and the public were still seen as separate entities**, meaning that for many lesbians until the rise of the 'gay liberation' movement (early 1970s) there was a schism between being a lesbian in private and acting or pretending to be heterosexual in public or even being out in the public sphere.

Right after DOB, during the 1970s, **radical self-publishing projects** set up by lesbians in the US and Europe were widespread, stemming from the fact that the LGBT community had been 'ghosted' in mainstream art, culture and cinema.

4) Emergence & development of political lesbianism

In the midst of growing public disapproval of the Vietnam War, and tensions within both the mainstream gay movement and the women's rights movement, some lesbians broke off to form their own political groups, focusing on lesbian issues beyond the major feminist themes, e.g. abortion, birth control, or pre-marital sex. As such, **'political lesbianism'** started at the intersection of feminist, civil rights, pacifist, environmentalist, anti-capitalist political struggles, giving rise to multiple groups all over Western countries, such as Radicalesbians (USA), les Lesbiennes Rouges (France), Lesbian Feminist Liberation (USA), le Fuorine (Italy), Lavender Menace (USA), among many others.

Case study: **Italy** - From Elena Biagini's book
l'Emersione Imprevista (Edizioni ETS, 2018)

In Italy at the beginning of the Seventies, "political" lesbians started to found their own space between feminism and gay liberation movements, through separatist practice. In 1972, Mariasilvia Spolato (1935 - 2018) took part in the 8th of March demonstration in Rome carrying, alone and for the first time in Italy, a sign with the words "Liberazione omosessuale". The first group of lesbian women to officially gather in Italy was **Le Fuorine**, the women's group of at F.U.O.R.I., acronym for Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano, the first association of the Italian homosexual liberation movement founded in 1971 in Turin.

The provocation belongs to those first groups, like the **Brigate Saffo** (Saffo Brigades) since the choice of the name of the collective is the same as the most famous group of the communist armed fight in Italy, the "Brigate Rosse". As told by some protagonists: "In those years, there were of course the Red Brigades in Turin. So, when we were tagging, at night, our lesbian slogans on the city walls, we had to finish very quickly to sign with our name. Once the police stopped us, we had only written "Brigate" and the police patrol thought we were from the Brigate Rosse". The slogan "We are separatists to be autonomous, we are autonomous to be free", highlights the complex relationship between separatism and autonomy, in which the former is the necessary instrument to know one's own condition, and as such, is felt by many as partial and temporary, while the latter is the very objective of the movement. Autonomy and separatism are the path indicated by the experience gained in the Italian movement of '68 when the "anti-institutional, anti-repressive, anti-authoritarian" revolt had broken down barriers but left those between the sexes intact.

In 1979, for the first time on 8 March in Rome, one hundred **lesbian women** took to the streets, making visible their own slogans within the feminist movement's march. The same year, Edda Mallarini and her partner participated in the first television programme on the subject, broadcast during prime time, on Rai 2.

Despite the schism between second wave feminists and political lesbianism, some leading figures made it their mission to **broaden the understanding of 'feminism'**, namely Adrienne Rich who talked about 'a coat of many colours', Audre Lorde who wrote about focusing on the 'particular instead of the universal' and Monique Wittig, whose iconic sentence: "lesbians are not women" became the motto of several lesbian separatist movements.

Case study: **France**

We can consider the beginning of the modern cultural visibility of lesbians in France with “La Garçonne” a novel by Victor Margueritte published in 1922 with such success that it became a social model of female emancipation: for the first time, the heroine had a homosexual adventure. This adventure didn’t last, obviously, but it imposed lesbian relationships as an aspect of the “emancipated woman” experience. Before WWII and right after, the cultural lesbian scene was composed by intellectuals (a lot of them were American women settled in Paris), political activists and artists (Suzy Solidor and many others).

The **French second wave** of feminism has been analyzed and discussed in literature, activism, academia and pop culture and lately the influence and interconnection with the lesbian movement is increasingly mentioned. In short, between 1967 and 1970, several working groups were formed. One of the most famous groups, the MLF’s “Mouvement de libération des femmes” (Women’s Liberation Movement), first direct-action strategically making use of media presence took place on August 26, 1970, when a small group of women (the majority of them later identified as lesbian, among them Monique Wittig and Christine Delphy) laid under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris a wreath of flowers “to the wife of the unknown soldier” (in solidarity with the strike of the American women, who were celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of female suffrage in the United States on that day). On their banners one could read: “There is more unknown than the unknown soldier, his wife” and “One man in two is a woman”.

Unfortunately, the history of the 1970s lesbian politics has been erased from feminist memory in France, and Monique Wittig’s whole theoretical legacy has been negated. **Lesbian studies** barely exist as a field of research in France, and lesbian perspectives struggle to find their place in feminist, gender and sexuality studies, while receiving little institutional support. As evidence of the lack of academic recognition for lesbian research, two of the three symposiums organised on lesbianism in the last fifteen years were set up by activist organisations, the Coordination Lesbienne en France (Lesbian Coordination in France) and the Paris Lesbian Archive, rather than by universities.

In 1977, Elula Perrin (1929 - 2003) became famous by publishing an autobiographical book, “Les femmes préfèrent les femmes”, and took part in television programs to openly talk about the complexity of lesbian desire.

In 1981, Kimberlé Crenshaw, a U.S. lawyer and scholar, introduced the theory of **intersectionality**, arguing that the experience of being a Black woman cannot be understood only in terms of being Black, or only of being a woman, but must include the interactions between the two sets of oppressions. Discussions of how intersecting identities expose people to increased oppression were already present in lesbian groups

in the 1970s and 1980s. Some examples of early organising in this regard include the National Congress of Black Lesbians in England, the lesbian group GEMMA - “a group of disabled and abled lesbians created in England in 1976 to break the isolation of physically challenged lesbians”, and the 1991 Black Lesbian Conference in Berlin, as part of the Berliner Lesbenwoche. Discussing the intersections of social justice movements was not limited to identity politics, as lesbian political movements have been heavily involved in economic, environmental and anti-nuclear justice struggles, and anti-war movements, across borders.

“We haven’t yet begun to study why a higher percentage of lesbians become international volunteers than other women. But this was surely the case in our region.”

Lepa Mladenović, Serbian lesbian activist

Case study: **Balkans (Slovenia and Serbia)**

Lesbian Section ŠKUC-LL was established in 1987 in Ljubljana Slovenia and it was the first lesbian organisation in the former socialist Eastern European states. The first gay and lesbian organization in Serbia was founded in 1991 in Belgrade, under the name Arkadia. Dejan Nebrigić and Lepa Mladenović were among the founders. In 1995, a group of lesbians in Belgrade decided to focus on lesbian activity and founded Labris, a lesbian human rights NGO.

As **Lepa Mladjenovic** explains it in her text “Notes from a Feminist Lesbian during Wartime”: “The war in the former Yugoslavia, started in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1991 and went on until 1996. (..) The war makes a hierarchy of survival needs. The right to be alive and the right to survive become the only urgency. This is a fact in countries at war and in the regions of war zones: there is no space for naming identities. One needs food and safe shelter. The war produces distrust. For lesbians who are hiding in their private homes, behind their masks, behind their names, the war, as another institutionalized ritual of hatred, is like a monster outside the closet waiting to intensify, gorge on their feelings of guilt. Lesbians do not have many options. Some of them join the nationalist machinery, others refuse to participate and either become apolitical or, if they can, they leave the country. Only a few feminist lesbians, only if they feel a minimum security, remain, to try to understand the complexity of coming out as lesbian, as feminist and as anti-fascist in wartime.”

In the 1990s, a new generation of political lesbian groups, such as the Lesbian Avengers in New York or Arcilesbica in Italy, identifying as **direct action** groups “focused on issues vital to lesbian survival and visibility”, were formed out of the frustration that little to no progress was made to address lesbian struggles. Dozens of Lesbian Avengers’ chapters quickly emerged in Europe as well: London, England, Glasgow, Scotland, Dublin, Ireland, Paris, France (Les lesbiennes se déchainent) and Berlin, Germany, with a few expanding their mission to include questions of gender, race, and class. To this day, the most visible Lesbian Avenger legacy remains the **Dyke March**, held annually in dozens of cities across the world, including in Europe.

Case study: **Spain**

What has made the current Spanish feminism shift toward transfeminism? Based on in-depth interviews and literature reviews, R. Lucas Platero and Esther Ortega-Arjonilla (“Building coalitions: The interconnections between feminism and trans activism in Spain”), explore what factors facilitated the participation of trans women in Spanish feminism. And found out that lesbian activism has played a very important role.

The first time that the term “**transfeminism**” was used was at a Feminist Conference in Cordoba, Spain, in 2000. Kim Perez used the word in her talk, “Woman or Trans? The Insertion of Transgender Women within the Feminist Movement.” However, in 2009, transfeminism became not so much a translation of an Anglo concept, but rather a local concept with its own definitions, and its use signaled that Spanish feminist movements were willing to question binaries like man/woman, homosexual/heterosexual, and cis/ trans. Transfeminism led to Spanish feminism in general becoming more queer, more decolonising, and intersectional.

5) The rise of national and international lesbian organising

On a **national level**, lesbian gatherings were taking place in the early 1970s and 80s in Europe and in the United States. Lesbian camps were notably popular in France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Norway during



the 1980s. Austria had nine annual lesbian conferences in Vienna from 1981-1991, in Sweden the organisation Lesbian Feminists (LF) held annual seminars from 1975-1983, and in Germany there was the Berliner Lesbenwoche every year from 1984-1997. In Germany there was also the Lesben-Frühlings-Treffen (LFT), an annual lesbian springtime gathering, which began in 1974 and still continues to this day.

For countries from the former Socialist Bloc, outspoken lesbian organising was challenging until the early 1990s due to the political regimes in place but also because of the language barriers and censorship of publications coming from the West. Therefore, lesbians invested heavily in more “subcultural” strategies, with the regular organisation of social events, such as parties and holiday camps, which allowed them to gather in autonomous spaces and create connections.

Case study: **Poland**

What the historical dimension of being a Soviet satellite state meant in practice is that for decades (1947-1989) Poland was closed off to all the important social, cultural, and scientific influences that were happening in Western countries, both in Europe and outside. Even though it came decades after similar organisations had been launched in the Western context, a milestone was achieved when recognisable LGBTIQ* organisations were established after the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union: Lambda in 1995, and Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH) was established in 2001.

As Dr. Marta Olasik, an independent scholar explains: “The lack of historical reference, the absence of a solid and continuous feminist movement^[18], and a certain misunderstanding of the function of human rights and equity all directly translate into the lack of a salient local feminism structure. By extension, no serious or separate discourse on behalf of lesbian women has ever had a chance to develop, which is an outcome of both the country’s political conditionings and the absence of diversified feminist discourses. With politically- and Church-driven abstract notions – such as ‘gender ideology’, ‘LGBT lobby’, or ‘the sexualisation of children’ – being created and fiercely debated for the last several years, it is mostly gay men that are mentioned or repressed in this context, with ‘lesbians’ being a conventional linguistic addition rather than an actual object of interest^[19]. Therefore, no direct or formal acknowledgement of lesbians being part of the Polish civil society – and national policies – can be identified.”

In November 2017, **SISTRUM Association** was established, the only publicly lesbian-oriented initiative in Poland. It drew its inspiration from EL*C, and has a very bold manifesto, resembling a classic lesbian-feminist stance.

In the second half of the 1990s, **autonomous lesbian groups** developed with the support of new technologies, which made it possible to circumvent the lack of resources to create physical spaces.

The first **large-scale international and European lesbian organising** came with the establishment of the International Lesbian Information Service (“**ILIS**”). In Turin in 1981, criticism concerning the lack of visibility of lesbians within the LGBT movement, the lack of inclusivity towards postcolonial issues within the wider movement, as well as the cost of participation for lesbian activists to the ILGA conferences, led a group of lesbians from various countries to separate from what was called “IGA” at the time. ILIS arranged international conferences in Europe, Latin America and Asia via regional networks. ILIS published its final newsletter in 1998.

Case study: **Hungary**

Labrisz Lesbian Association was called into life by the stronger and stronger need for an initiative which, apart from providing social space, reflects on the social position of lesbian and bisexual women in a more organized form. It was officially registered in 1999 with 17 members, but the core group of the organization had been facilitating meetings and discussions since 1996.

It started with a photocopied, samizdat newsletter edited by a few lesbians, who later organized meetings for their readers. These regular monthly meetings became regular discussion evenings under the name “Labrisz Evenings”, which were held for 10 years, on various topics. Some of the regular visitors of the Labrisz Evenings founded the organization.

Lesbian Identities Festival (LIFT), the first lesbian cultural festival in Hungary took place in the autumn of 2005, and included film screenings, workshops, literary readings, a lesbian herstory exhibition and a women’s afterparty. The last (13th) edition took place in 2019.

In 2008 Labrisz started a lesbian herstory project, making interviews with lesbians over 45 years of age in order to create the basis of an archive and an edited volume. “Secret Years”, a documentary based on 11 interviews was shown in the 2009 LIFT Festival, the volume of interviews with a similar title was published in 2011 with 16 lesbian life histories.

In 2019, the University of Brighton announced the 24th edition of its *Lesbian Lives Conference*, which was initially organised in conjunction with the Dublin lesbian group called LOT (Lesbians Organizing Together), bringing together both established and emerging scholars, as well as participants from all continents. Also in 2019, the EL*C held the second edition of its cross-regional event in Kiev, Ukraine, co-organised with the local organisation Insight. It brought together more than 350 participants, following the success of the first conference in Vienna in 2017, attended by over 500 participants from 45 countries. That same year, the global lesbian movement was mobilized in South Africa to take part in the Global Feminist LBQ Women’s Conference, which was led by COC Netherlands in partnership with local host, Triangle Project and a group of international lesbian activists from over twenty countries.

Data on Lived Realities of Lesbians in EU & Accession countries

1. Aim, limitations and methodology

The following study analyzes the available data capable of shedding light on the lived experiences of lesbians in the EU-plus. Giving the general invisibility of lesbians in all fields, the studies included in this literature review use different sampling frames. While some focus on lesbian women specifically, others also include bisexual or other non-heterosexual women. In general, experiences of transgender or nonbinary lesbians in particular are rendered invisible **because** the results for this population are analysed and discussed with regard to their gender identity, but not their sexual orientation¹. For this reason, unless otherwise specified, we use the term 'lesbian' whenever we refer to 'lesbian, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual women'. Similarly, we use the term 'gay' to refer to 'gay, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual men'.

The first part of this literature review is a **content analysis** of the representation of lesbians **in health-related research** on LGBTI populations in general and in European countries in particular². Those studies, therefore, offered a large enough sample for conducting a content analysis and providing some indication on the representation of lesbians in research and data collection.

The second part is a **literature review and meta-analysis**, a statistical method that combines the results from several individual studies into a single, overall estimate. The studies we have used are recent (published from 2010 onwards) and they include lesbians and bisexual women in the EU-plus. They are focusing on the following topics:

- personal safety including violence and harassment, hate crimes, hate speech, and intimate partner violence,

1 For a notable exception see: James-Hawkins, L., Booker, C., & Bao, Y. (2019). *National LGBT Survey 2017: Healthcare amongst lesbian and bisexual women*. London: Government Equalities Office. [UK]

2 We focused on health-related research because it is relatively well researched compared to other policy areas (e.g., Hudson-Sharp & Metcalfe, 2016), thereby ensuring a sufficiently large sample size of studies. These analyses are part of a preregistered, in-depth review on health and healthcare experiences of lesbian and bisexual women in Europe (protocol: <https://osf.io/3g7nc/>) and will be published in detail elsewhere. Results presented in this report constitute preliminary results, subject to change in the final publication.

- discrimination (in the legal, educational, and healthcare system, as well as in the labour market),
- the impact of violence, harassment and discrimination on health, especially mental health,
- visibility and being out in public spaces.

We selected these topics in line with LGBTI research priorities identified by the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank³.

The literature research and all analyses for this review were conducted between September 2019 and January 2020 and include results of the first EU LGBT Survey on lived experiences of LGBT populations in the EU conducted by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in 2012⁴. However, in May 2020, results from the second wave of the EU LGBT Survey (data collection: 2019) have been published⁵. Thus, we will present selected and up-to-date results from the EU LGBT Survey II throughout this document after each section of our literature review results.

The complete review on Data on Lived Lesbians in EU & Accession countries is available on the EL*C website. A more detailed methodological description can be also found there.

2. The representation of lesbians in health-related research

Of **230 health-related reviews eligible for inclusion in our analysis**, we found that 51% (118) focused exclusively on gay, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual men. Another 40% (93) focused on mixed populations, and **only 8% (19) on lesbian, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual women**. Compared to other populations, lesbians are considerably underrepresented (less than 9%) in recent health-related research on LGBTI populations on a global level (Figure 1, top panel).

After full text assessment, 63 systematic reviews met our criteria for inclusion into a further analysis regarding **representation of European lesbian and other non-heterosexual women in health-**

³ Badgett, M. V. L., & Crehan, P. R. (2016). *Investing in a research revolution for LGBTI inclusion*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014). *European Union lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender survey. Main results*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

⁵ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020). *A long way to go for LGBTI equality*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

related research. Only two reviews⁶ focused on lesbian and other non-heterosexual women in European countries specifically **and on average only 10% of studies included data on European lesbians.**

Within the EU-plus, research including lesbians is predominantly conducted in very few countries, that are very progressive countries in terms of social acceptance and legal recognition of LGBTI people (Figure 1, bottom panel).

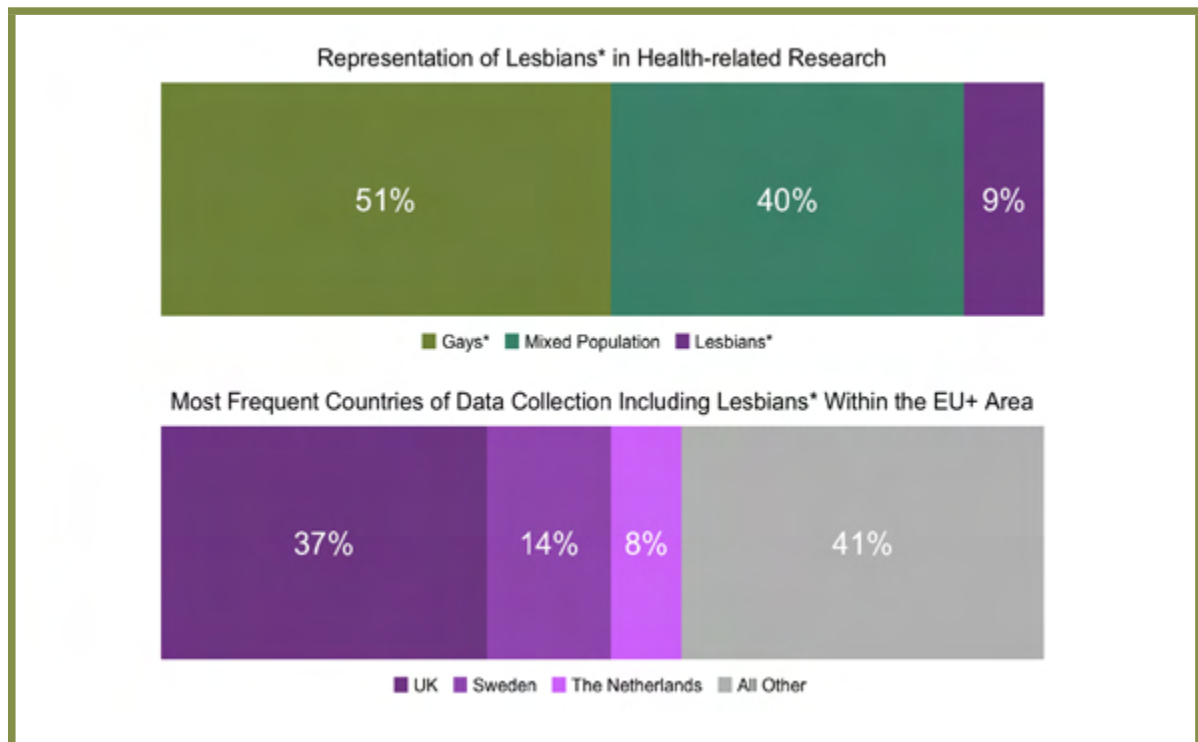


Figure 1. Top panel: Content analysis of investigated populations in systematic reviews on LGB+ health (2015–2019). Bottom panel: Most frequent countries of data collection in health-related research including lesbian women in the EU-plus (2010-2019).

3. Literature Review on lesbian lived realities

In all, **109 studies** (34 reports, working papers, grey literature; 75 journal articles) **reporting data from 33 countries are included in this review.** Our review relied on studies drawing on convenience samples (the sample is taken from a group of people easy to contact or to reach), and to a lesser extent on population-based samples (subset of subjects that is representative of the entire population)⁷.

⁶ Meads et al., 2019 - UK; Wells & Lang, 2016 – Nordic countries

⁷ a population is a complete set of people with a specialized set of characteristics, and a sample is a subset of the population.

In terms of their regional coverage and range of topics, the EU LGBT Survey I and II in combination with the World Bank Survey⁸ (both not population-representative and surveying mixed populations) constitute the most comprehensive data sources on lesbian women in the EU-plus (see Table 1). **Comparable surveys that target lesbian across the EU-plus specifically are currently lacking.**

Survey (year of collection)	Surveyed countries	LGBTI participants (unweighted)	Lesbian participants (unweighted)
EU LGBT Survey I (2012)	EU-27 + Croatia	93,079	15,236 (16.37%)
EU LGBT Survey II (2019)	EU-28 (incl. UK) + North Macedonia and Serbia	139,799	22,707 (16.24%)
World Bank Survey (2017)	Albania, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia	2,296	490 (21.34%)

Table 1. Recent large-scale, cross-national surveys on the lived experiences of LGBTI populations in the EU-plus that report data on lesbians.

Population-based evidence on lesbians is absent for most parts of the EU-plus, with the exception of few and legally progressive countries that include measures of sexual orientation in national data collection efforts (Denmark, Finland, France, Sweden, the Netherlands, UK). Consequently, while findings from these studies may be generalizable *within* the country of data collection, **they are most likely not generalizable across the EU-plus due to varying socio-legal conditions.**

In **convenience-based samples** (and when this information was provided), lesbians were typically reported to be well-educated, relatively young, frequently residing in urban-dwelling areas, and (due to the predominant surveying mode), had access to the internet as well as the LGBTI community (either online or offline). This is linked to the advantages offered by internet-based surveys when studying LGBTI populations (e.g., low costs, anonymity, reaching a more diverse sample than using offline, venue-based approaches⁹), but **risk to exclude regions or populations**

8 World Bank (2018). *Life on the margins: Survey results of the experiences of LGBTI people in Southeastern Europe (English)*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. [Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia]

9 Guillory, J., Wiant, K. F., Farrelly, M., Fiacco, L., Alam, I., Hoffman, L., ... & Alexander, T. N. (2018).

(e.g., elderly, peoples in less institutionalized settings) where access to the internet and/or the LGBTIQ* community might not be universal.

The first general outcome of this review is that **data on lesbians are most often collected, analysed, and discussed as part of larger investigations in mixed LGBTI populations**. This practice interferes with in-depth investigations into lesbian's intersectional experiences, such as those related to their gender and gender expression, and even more so those related to their age, ethnicity/ race/migration background, ability, or socioeconomic status.

The studies included in our review offer a **glimpse into the lived realities of lesbians in EU-plus**. Under consideration of their regional origin, they document how lesbians are faced with inequalities, discrimination, and threats to their personal safety in many (some might argue almost all) areas of their lives and what is the impact on the daily life and wellbeing of lesbians.

Violence and Harassment

Lesbians across the EU-plus are disproportionately affected by many forms of **violence**. In the EU-wide Violence Against Women Survey¹⁰ **lesbian and bisexual women exhibited higher rates than heterosexual women in all surveyed forms of violence** (stalking, physical, sexual, and psychological violence), regardless of perpetrator characteristics (partners and non-partners), and age (before and after the age of 15). Population-based studies from Denmark¹¹, Sweden¹², and the Netherlands¹³, similarly find elevated risks for victimization, physical and sexual violence, or threats of violence for lesbians, both during their lifetime as well as in the past twelve months.

Online harassment constitutes a specific form of harassment, of which LGBTI people in general and LGBTI youth in particular are disproportionately affected, with negative consequences for their

Recruiting hard-to-reach populations for survey research: Using Facebook and Instagram advertisements and in-person intercept in LGBT bars and nightclubs to recruit LGBT young adults. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 20, e197. Meyer, I. H., & Wilson, P. A. (2009).

10 Sampling lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 56, 23–31.

10 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014). *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey. Main results*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. [EU]

11 Graugaard, C., Giraldi, A., Frisch, M., Falgaard Eplow, L., & Davidsen, M. (2015). Self-reported sexual and psychosocial health among non-heterosexual Danes. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 43, 309–314. [Denmark]

12 Bränström, R., Hatzenbuehler, M. L., & Pachankis, J. E. (2015). Sexual orientation disparities in physical health: Age and gender effects in a population-based study. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 51, 289–301. [Sweden]

13 Dukers-Muijers, N. H. T. M., Somers, C., de Graaf, H., Meijer, S., & Hoebe, C. J. P. A. (2015). Prevalence of non-volitional sex types and associated factors: A national sample of young people. *PLoS one*, 10, e0132847. [Netherlands]

health, well-being, and academic achievement¹⁴. Evidence from a non-representative Austrian survey on online hate speech against women mirrors these findings, with **28% of lesbian and bisexual women surveyed having been harassed online**, compared to 10% of heterosexual women¹⁵. In the UK Stonewall Survey on hate crimes, almost one in ten (8%) lesbian and bisexual women have been harassed online on grounds of their sexual orientation¹⁶, whereas in the LGBTIreland Report, 15% of lesbian respondents reported online harassment because of their sexual orientation¹⁷.

The EU LGBTI Survey II reports that there are heavy consequences of violence on lesbians. Following the last incident of hate-motivated violence: 34% developed psychological problems (depression, anxiety), 29% were afraid to go out and visit places, 4% needed medical assistance and, 3% became unable to work or stopped working.

In light of these findings, it is important to note that lesbian, bisexual and other non-heterosexual women are victims of violence and harassment for a variety of reasons, including (but not limited to) their gender (identity and expression), sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, or class. Therefore, it is often difficult if not impossible for lesbian women to identify the motivation behind an incident of violence (particularly sexual violence), as they may be resulting from **an intersection of any of these categories**. Results from investigations into hate-motivated violence and harassment on grounds of sexual orientation **may therefore grossly underestimate the true burden experienced by lesbian women** (as incidents attributed to, for example, gender-based violence are not assessed) and should be interpreted from this perspective.

14 See e.g., Abreu & Kenny, 2018, for a review on LGBTQ youth

15 Forschungszentrum Menschenrechte & Weißer Ring Verbrechensofferhilfe, 2018

16 Bachmann & Gooch, 2017

17 Lifetime; Higgins et al., 2016

3 in 5 lesbians have been harassed and 1 in 5 lesbians have suffered a physical or sexual attack in the last year (EU LGBTI Survey II and World Bank Survey)

Violence

Across the EU, **21% of lesbian** respondents to the EU LGBT Survey II **experienced a physical or sexual attack** for any reason in the five years prior to the survey. Of those, 47% reported being attacked more than once. The World Bank Survey shows similar rates (28%).

The reporting rates for hate-motivated violence are low: **only 17% of lesbian respondents reported their last incident of hate-motivated violence to the police**, or any other organisation or institution.

Harassment

In the five years prior to the survey, **57% of lesbian respondents were victims of in-person harassment**, and 12% were victims of cyber-harassment. In the year prior to the survey, 41% reported having been victims of hate-motivated harassment. Similar rates (59%) are reported in the World Bank Survey. In the EU LGBTI Survey II, lesbians and bisexual women indicated that they were harassed because of their gender, in addition to or as part of the harassment linked to their sexual orientation.

Reporting rates for harassment are similarly low: Only 8% of lesbian respondents reported the last incident of hate-motivated harassment to any organisation or institution.

“We are verbally harassed on a daily basis when walking the streets holding hands with my girlfriend, we have been physically attacked when publicly expressing affection walking in a small street in my hometown. I am often verbally harassed in my everyday life (as well as online) for being a butch lesbian, and/or fat.”

25, Greece, cisgender woman, lesbian
i.e. the EL*C Survey

Discrimination

In the absence of full legal protection and recognition in many countries in the EU-plus (ILGA Europe, 2019), lesbian women’s lives are shaped by

their home country's legal landscape in profound ways. Among others, the law determines their possibilities to access legal partnership options (available in 22 EU-plus as of 2019), Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART is accessible to lesbians in 12 countries as couples, 19 countries as singles), and joint (14 countries) or second-parent adoption (15 countries).

Qualitative investigations from Italy, France, and Germany, Austria, and Switzerland¹⁸, elucidate how **legal recognition** impacts lesbian and other non-heterosexual women's life trajectories and choices. To form or protect their families and partnerships in the absence of legal recognition, lesbian and other non-heterosexual women have to draw up legal documents themselves, negotiate individually with local authorities (e.g., during hospital visits), rely on care networks outside of heteronormative living arrangements, or resort to law evasion (e.g., traveling to another country for access to ART). As all of these counteractions are costly, lacking legal recognition impacts lesbian and other non-heterosexual women in economically precarious conditions the most, as they are excluded from taking those actions. Lacking legal recognition also impacts lesbian and other non-heterosexual women emotionally, by eliciting feelings of invisibility, being a second-class citizen, stress, and concerns for their partners' or children's material security.

Public opinion polling constitutes an important measure of the **social climate** for LGBTI people and enables identifying both time trends and regional variations. Survey items to assess these opinions vary considerably. Different set of questions are meant to evaluate attitudes towards LGBTI rights, moral condemnation of homosexuality, perceived discrimination of LGBTI people (by the general public), and feeling comfortable around LGBTI people¹⁹. All of these measures consider LGBTI people as a homogenous group, potentially masking important differences in attitudes towards subgroups²⁰. Only a few surveys across the EU or internationally have assessed attitudes towards lesbian women and gay men (and to some extent bisexual and transgender individuals) separately. These include the 2012 wave of the International Social Survey Programme (assessing perceived fit of male and female same-sex couples to raise children), the 2015 and 2019 waves of the Special Eurobarometer on Discrimination (level of comfort with female and male same-sex couples showing affection in public), as well as the 2017 edition of the ILGA-RIWI Minority Report,

18 Italy (Gusmano & Motterle, 2019), France (Van Hoof, Pennings, & De Sutter, 2015), and Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Siegel et al., 2020)

19 e.g., as neighbors, colleagues, see e.g., Smith, Son, and Kim, 2014a, 2014b for an overview and elaboration

20 Worthen, 2013



and a survey carried out in selected EU member states as part of the *Call it Hate Project* (both assessing attitudes towards neighbors)²¹.

Across all surveys and measures, attitudes towards non-heterosexual women are more favorable than towards non-heterosexual men. However, the comparatively favorable attitudes towards non-heterosexual women need to be interpreted from a gendered perspective. First, items assessing assumed parenting capabilities of male and female same-sex couples may be confounded by assumptions about differential parenting capabilities of men and women in general. Second, items assessing being comfortable with women showing affection in public may not be able to capture sexualized and/or objectifying nuances that are inherent to homophobia against women²².

Lesbians are still at an **economic disadvantage at the household level**. Even if a lesbian earns sometimes more than a heterosexual woman²³, she still earns less than a man (and the latter outweighs the former), leading to a lower household income for female same-sex couples than for different-sex couples²⁴.

21 see Takacs, 2015; European Commission, 2019; Godsziz & Viggiani, 2019; ILGA, 2017.

22 and may yield differential responses from participants of different genders; see Worthen, 2013, for an elaboration

23 Carpenter (2008; Canada) and Aksoy et al. (2018; UK), Valfort, 2017

24 Ahmed, Andersson, & Hammarstedt, 2011; Humpert, 2012

The position of lesbians in society is also complicated by structural gender inequalities. Therefore, because of their sexual orientation, but also their gender, gender expression, and other social and identity categories, lesbians are at a heightened risk for experiencing unequal treatment also in **educational and healthcare settings** (see the results in the two boxes here-after).

Nearly half of lesbians have been discriminated against in the last year (EU LGBTI Survey II and World Bank Survey)

In the year prior to the EU LGBTI Survey II, 44% of lesbian respondents reported that they experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation:

- 21% felt discriminated against at work or when looking for a job.
- 16% felt discriminated against by healthcare or social service personnel.
- 24% felt discriminated against at a café, restaurant, bar or nightclub.
- 46% of lesbian respondents aged 15 to 17 report having been ridiculed, teased, insulted, or threatened at school because of being lesbian.
- 51% of lesbian respondents to the World Bank Survey have experienced discrimination in the year prior to the survey because of their sexual orientation. 23% experienced discrimination at work for the same year

More than one third of lesbians have suffered discrimination in healthcare settings (World Bank Survey)

- 38% of lesbian respondents have felt discriminated against when trying to access healthcare services during their lives.
- 10% avoided treatment out of fear of negative reactions
- 5% changed their doctor due to their negative reaction
- 3% have been pressured into unnecessary medical or psychological tests

On a European level, things don't seem to be getting better. Across the EU, lesbian respondents to the EU LGBT Survey II indicated that

prejudice and intolerance (39%), or violence (49%) against LGBTI people increased (a little or a lot) during the past 5 years. Main reasons for this increase in prejudice, intolerance, and violence mentioned are a negative stance and discourse by politicians and/or political parties (69%), lack of support from the civil society (39%), lack of enforcement of existing laws and policies (36%), no visibility and participation of LGBTI people in everyday life (34%), and negative changes in law and policy (22%).

“Some guys in a car while I was walking home with my wife, they opened their windows, insulted and threatened us. We made a complaint at the police station the next day, they said that “dyke” was not a homophobic insult and if we weren’t able to handle this kind of language, it was our problem (as if we were too sensitive). The complaint was transformed into a ‘warning’”

32, France, lesbian, non-binary gender

Mental health

The lack of legal recognition and protection in many countries – coupled with prevailing social stigma and hostile or prejudicial treatment from authorities – significantly and negatively impact lesbians both materially/financially as well as psychologically and emotionally (e.g., reduced life satisfaction, heightened psychological distress, heightened rates of victimization and threats of violence²⁵). This context and the structural oppression has a strong impact on the mental health of lesbians and on their degree of being out and visible in the public spaces.

Lesbians and bisexual women in the EU-plus face significant mental health inequalities experienced by LGB+ populations globally²⁶. Most notably, European lesbian and other non-heterosexual women are at an increased risk for several forms of suicide.. (41% of suicidal ideation and 17% of suicide attempts) compared to heterosexual women (17% of suicidal ideation and 4% of suicide attempts), see Figure 2.

- 25 Hatzenbuehler, M. L., Bränström, R., & Pachankis, J. E. (2018). Societal-level explanations for reductions in sexual orientation mental health disparities: Results from a ten-year, population-based study in Sweden. *Stigma and Health*, 3, 16–26. [Sweden], Gusmano, B., & Motterle, T. (2019). The micropolitics of choice in Italy: How the law affects lesbian and bisexual women’s daily life. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 23, 336–356. [Italy], Pachankis, J. E., & Bränström, R. (2018). Hidden from happiness: Structural stigma, sexual orientation concealment, and life satisfaction across 28 countries. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 86, 403–415.
- 26 Plöderl, M., & Tremblay, P. (2015). Mental health of sexual minorities. A systematic review. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 27, 367–385. Lick, D. J., Durso, L. E., & Johnson, K. L. (2013). Minority stress and physical health among sexual minorities. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8, 521–548.

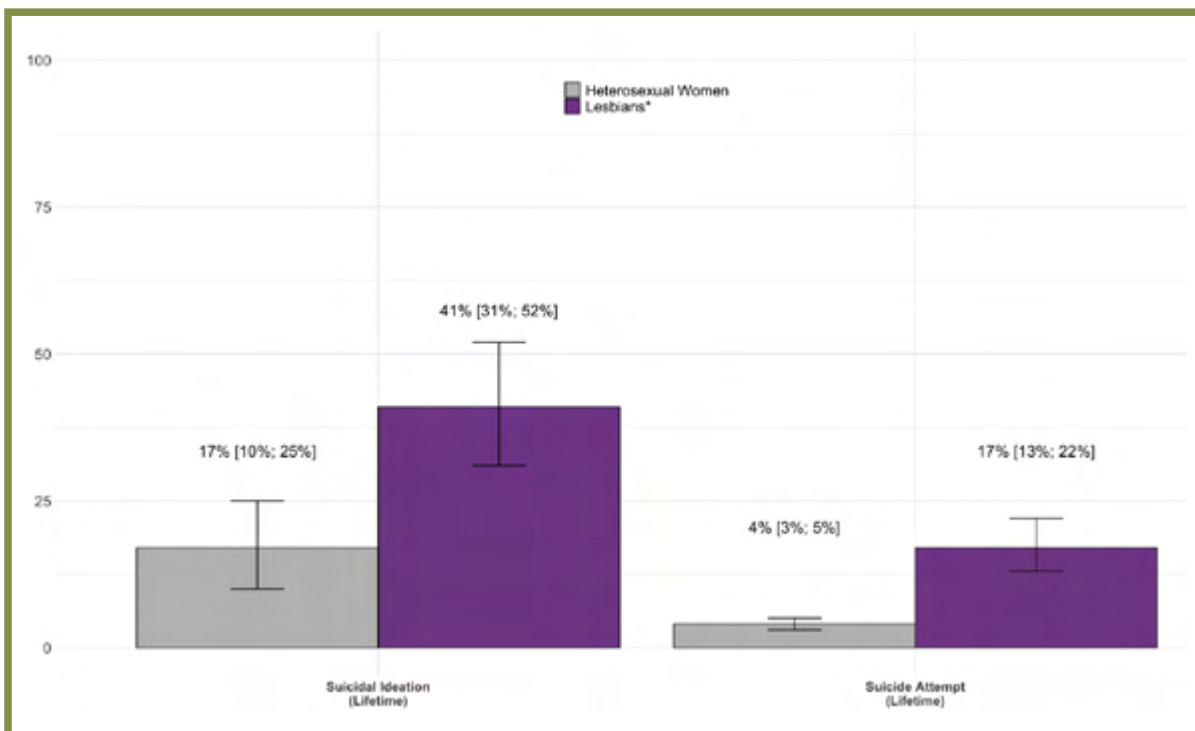


Figure 2. Prevalence of suicidal ideation and lifetime suicide attempts among heterosexual versus lesbian and other non-heterosexual women in the EU-plus

In addition, lesbians and bisexual women are at an increased risk for several adverse mental health outcomes. These include a longstanding emotional or psychological condition, or current emotional distress; anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. Lesbians also have more unfavorable healthcare experiences, benefit less from (psychological and therapeutic) treatment and face difficulties when using or trying to access healthcare services due to their sexual orientation.

Being out and participation in daily life

A cross-cutting finding from the research is that lesbians are confronted on a daily basis with the choice between being out about their sexual orientation and risking discrimination, harassment and violence or staying closeted to the detriment of their personal authenticity and well-being. This has considerable impact on the degree of being out and visible in the public spaces.

This visibility management is a daily and vital practice for lesbian women and expressed through identity concealment and management, as well as through avoidance of places, locations, or activities. Outness, then,



becomes a deliberate act of resistance²⁷. Similarly, lesbians are careful in managing their gender expression in daily activities, during job interviews, or at work²⁸, often navigating a fine line between personal authenticity and necessary safety behaviors. In the case of lesbian asylum seekers, the scope and severity of this predicament is particularly evident, as conforming to various organizations' and authorities' perceptions of 'typically' lesbian women can become a matter of life and death²⁹.

Apart from managing their identities and expressions, fear of victimization or discrimination can also lead lesbian women to avoid places or withdraw from activities altogether. This is most evident in the high share of lesbian women avoiding certain public places for fear of harassment (see the box below for the results), but also in other areas of life, such as sports³⁰ or engagement in faith-based communities or organizations (e.g., selection of senior homes)³¹.

27 e.g., Atalay & Doan, 2019; Béres-Deák, 2011; FRA 2014a, Gusmano & Motterle, 2019; World Bank, 2018; Wright, 2011, 2013

28 e.g., Gusmano & Motterle, 2019; Woodruffe-Burton & Bairstow, 2013; Wright, 2011, 2013

29 Sari, 2019.

30 In the EU-wide Outspport Survey, their sexual orientation played a crucial role in quitting (9% of those not currently active in sports) or refraining (14% of those not currently active) from certain sports activities for a sizeable proportion of lesbian participants. The most common reasons are unrelated to sexual orientation however, such as lack of time or financial resources to participate in a sports activity (Menzel et al., 2019).

31 Menzel et al., 2019; Bachmann & Gooch, 2018b, Siraj, 2011; Bristowe, 2018

More than half of lesbians are obliged to hide in public spaces or to avoid them for fear of being assaulted, threatened, or harassed (EU LGBT Survey II and World Bank Survey)

- 51% of lesbian respondents in the EU and 72% of lesbian respondents in the Balkan region always or often avoid holding hands in public with a same-sex partner for fear of being assaulted, threatened, or harassed;
- 33% of lesbian respondents in the EU and 63% of lesbian respondents in the Balkan region always or often avoid certain places or locations for fear of being assaulted, threatened, or harassed;
- IN EUROPE, Most respondents (57%) avoid being open about their sexual orientation in the public sphere, such as public transport and on the streets, followed by public premises or buildings (40%), cafes, restaurants or pubs (36%). 22% avoid being open around their family or at home (8%);
- At work, 14% of lesbian respondents in the EU and 61% of lesbian respondents in the Balkan region, hide their sexual orientation;
- At school, 21% of lesbian respondents in the EU, aged 15 to 17 hide their sexual orientation, 66% are selectively open, and 13% are very open. At school (assessed retrospectively), 27% of lesbian respondents in the Balkan region, have at least rarely experienced negative comments or conduct at school because of their sexual orientation. However, 71% of lesbian respondents reported that they hid or disguised their sexual orientation during school years.

4. Conclusions

Although this part of the research has focused on personal safety, discrimination and health, we want to stress that health inequalities, and economic inequalities faced by lesbians, impact each other in complex and multi-layered ways. As noted by many scholars and institutions, lesbians are subject to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities that differ from those of other LGBTI groups. In the literature forming the evidence base of this review, this is particularly evident at the intersection between sexual orientation, gender (identity), and gender expression. Lesbians are differentially impacted by diverse gendered phenomena, for example violence against women or gender wage differentials (leading to an individual-level premium that translates

into a penalty at the household level). Their experiences in traditionally gendered settings (e.g., sexual and reproductive health care) similarly differ due to their sexual orientation and the living conditions resulting from it. While there is considerably less evidence on the differential impact of other social and identity categories on lesbians' lives, existing findings highlight their complex interactions with sexual orientation, as well as the specific vulnerabilities and needs of lesbians that result from them. In this respect, there is a need for more interdisciplinary research using different methodologies to investigate these intersections further, so as to fully understand lesbians' lived experiences.

Furthermore, several studies³² from the Netherlands, Sweden, and the UK found no health disparities between lesbian and heterosexual women, comparable levels of victimization and negative workplace experiences, a positive impact of socio-legal progress on lesbians' well-being, as well as respectful and inclusive treatment in healthcare settings or by other professionals³³. These findings deserve close attention. Their causes and drivers may serve as a blueprint for effective social change and best-practice examples of inclusive care for lesbians while at the same time further research is needed to shed light on the experiences of lesbians in different countries, taking into account the considerable regional variation across the EU.

Finally, apart from the data pointing to the disproportionate insecurity, discrimination and health issues, the collected data also allows to highlight that lesbians navigate these various barriers in highly creative ways. Future research needs to further investigate lesbians' counteractions and their positive impact on their own communities and the society at large in order to foster not only self-empowerment, but also to bring about effective change.

32 e.g., Axelsson et al., 2013; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2018; Kuyper, 2015; Lindström et al., 2020; Mann et al., 2019, Pachankis & Bränström, 2018

33 Meads, C., Hunt, R., Martin, A., & Varney, J. (2019). A systematic review of sexual minority women's experiences of health care in the UK. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16, 3032–3059.

Current State of Lesbian Organising in the EU & Accession Countries

1. Introduction

ELC conducted an organisational capacity assessment (OCA) as part of this research, which took place from September 2019 to January 2020.

The assessment was conducted for 29 lesbian organizations across 21 EU member and accession countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, the Czech Republic, Poland, Cyprus, Portugal, Finland, Spain, Germany, Austria, Greece, and Bulgaria. ELC specifically focused on organizations and groups that primarily address lesbian issues and self-identify as lesbian organizations for this analysis.

The assessment aimed to provide an overview of the lesbian movement in EU member states and accession countries by evaluating the organizational and programmatic performance and capacities, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, and offering recommendations for future capacity building and movement building. The assessment was conducted through guided, semi-structured interviews, which took place online. The interviews focused on identifying levels of development for each capacity area, establishing a common understanding of priorities for capacity development, and identifying possible support from EL*C and other stakeholders. The assessment paid particular attention to assessing trends and challenges in each area, as well as identifying ways forward. The overall assessment of organizational development was determined by averaging the assessments for each capacity area.

The capacity assessment covered six main capacity areas: 1/ leadership and governance, 2/human resources, 3/technical capacities, 4/funding and fundraising, 5/programmatic areas, and 6/ attitudes/experiences/ overall movement assessment.

2. Summary

The OCA (organisational capacity assessment) process has shown The process of conducting the Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA) has revealed that **the movement is relatively young and faces significant challenges related to insufficient funding and underdevelopment.** Additionally, organizations that have been in existence for a longer period have either experienced setbacks or ceased to exist. However, there are sporadic instances where certain organizations have achieved noteworthy levels of development and managed to establish stability in their work. These successes are primarily attributed to their adeptness in navigating the priorities of donors and adapting their activities to capitalize on available opportunities. This adaptive approach has been crucial for these organizations' survival. **Lesbian organizations encounter various challenges in the realms of organizational development, human resources, financial stability, and the creation and maintenance of high-quality programs.** While each capacity area presents its unique obstacles and priorities, there are three overarching areas that are significant across the sub-region and for all organizations: financial stability, organizational development and professionalization of work, and the overall advancement of programs and activities. Moreover, it is important to recognize that these areas are interconnected and should be addressed collectively to achieve synergy and stability in the development of the lesbian movement.

3. Leadership and Governance

The structure and operations of the organizations analyzed align with current practices observed in the civil society sector globally. All the countries covered in the OCA have established a legal framework that governs the formation and functioning of civil society organizations (CSOs). While there may be slight variations from country to country, the overall approach remains consistent. The laws typically outline the minimum requirements that a group must fulfill to attain legal entity status.

The prevailing practice among organizations is to adopt a structure that revolves around a General Assembly comprising an active membership typically ranging from 5 to 30 women, on average. Additionally, there is a Board that serves as the primary decision-making body, reporting to the General Assembly and assuming operational responsibilities. Moreover, there is an Executive Director or President who is appointed either by the General Assembly or the Board. This individual is entrusted with the responsibility of representing the organization and implementing its strategic and operational plans.

A noteworthy portion of the assessed organizations, specifically 12 out of 29, adopt a more horizontal structure. In these cases, executive boards play a dual role of monitoring and supervising, as well as handling the implementation of the strategic plan and day-to-day management. The power dynamics within these boards are characterized by horizontal and equal distribution. Another observed practice entails the existence of additional bodies within the organization. These bodies may hold certain powers, such as overseeing financial operations, or they may serve in purely advisory roles. These advisory roles often involve experts specializing in specific fields of interest.

A significant challenge faced by most organizations is the disparity between the formal structure outlined on paper and the actual implementation in reality. **These organizations grapple with maintaining a consistent level of engagement across their operations, particularly in terms of involving an adequate number of individuals in their governing and executive teams.** This often results in a situation where the same individuals serve in both the Management Board and the Executive Team, with all of them also being members of the Assembly. Consequently, this presents a challenge in terms of ensuring accountability and transparency in their work. The absence of a clear distinction between the roles of monitoring and evaluation, and executive functions can lead to difficulties in effectively fulfilling these separate responsibilities.

Additionally, a persistent challenge revolves around inadequate practices in engaging with governing structures. Typically, members of the Assembly lack the opportunity to actively track the organization's operations, resulting in their roles being more informal than substantive. Frequently, they find themselves unable to make well-informed decisions and rely heavily on recommendations from the Management board and the Executive team. Consequently, this limits their contributions in terms of critically questioning the organization's work and generating innovative and unconventional ideas.

There is a potential risk of fostering a "bubble" effect, wherein fresh perspectives and outside-the-box thinking are stifled.

The approach to strategic planning constitutes an important aspect of organizational leadership and governance. It is primarily manifested through the formulation of short-term or long-term strategic plans, which include monitoring and evaluation plans with specific indicators and expected results, as well as yearly action plans and budgets. However, among the assessed organizations, **only a few (6) have experience with a strategic planning process and the development of accompanying documents.** For those organizations that do have a strategic plan, it is typically a short-term plan covering a period of up to three years. These plans are often outlined in a broad manner, with some indications of specific yearly focuses, while leaving the finer details to be determined based on available finances and donor priorities. Unfortunately, there is generally a lack of general mechanisms for assessing the impact of the organization's work. This situation creates a scenario where **the donor community strongly influences program development, diverting the organizations' work towards the priorities of the donors rather than those of the lesbian community they represent.** Additionally, the limited emphasis on impact assessments means that even when they are present, they are not effectively utilized for advocacy and community-oriented efforts. Furthermore, impact assessments are not given due importance in decision-making processes related to program development, action plans, and activities.

4. Human Resources

The recruitment and hiring of individuals pose significant challenges for the organizations assessed. **Hiring practices often revolve around employing individuals on** a project basis, and tasks requiring specific skills are outsourced to external experts. The majority of people involved in the organizations' work do so on a voluntary basis. Only a small number of organizations (5) have the capacity to employ individuals on a long-term basis, with teams consisting of 3 to 10 employees. Most organizations struggle with limited human resources, relying on occasional employment of 1 or 2 individuals and an average of up to 5 volunteers who contribute their spare time to the organizations' activities. Furthermore, the OCA process has revealed that organizations receiving operational/core funding have established robust internal policies and procedures governing various aspects of their work. These organizations often adhere to practices such as conducting regular employee performance reviews and providing opportunities for professional development, typically on an annual or even semi-annual basis. In contrast, organizations lacking sufficient resources tend to overlook performance reviews and professional development in order to prioritize other pressing needs.

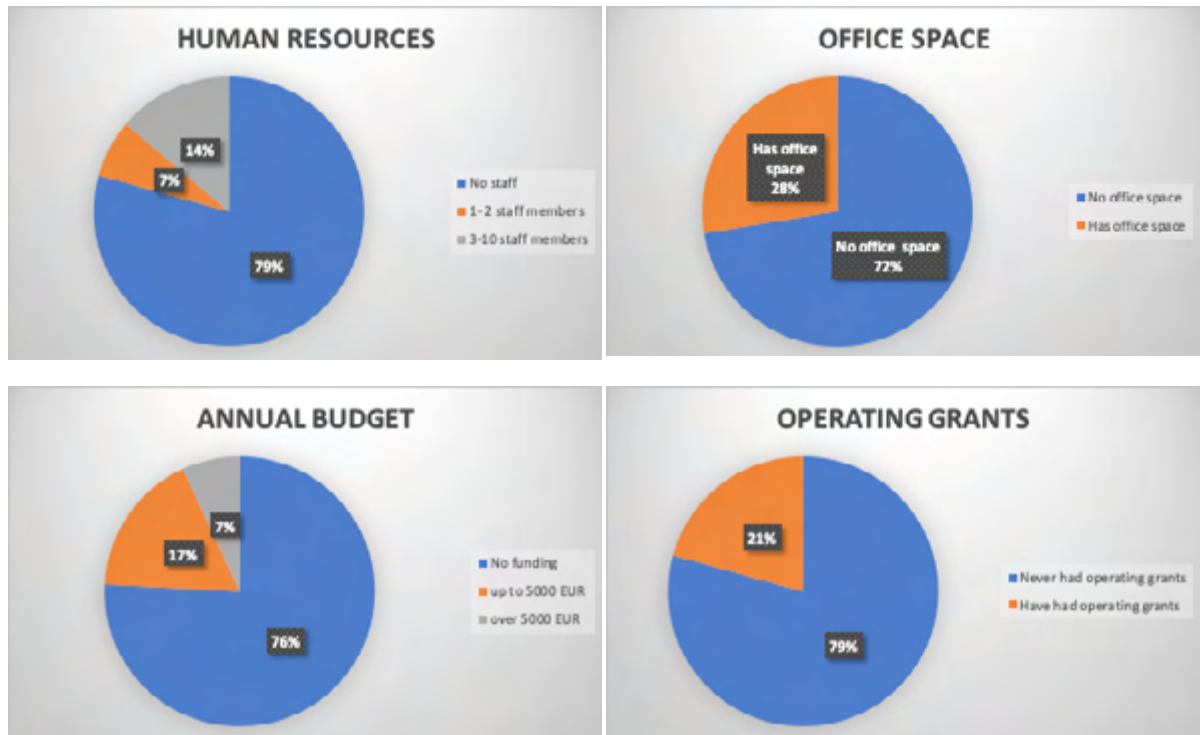
The representatives of the assessed organizations have expressed valid concerns regarding the selection and recruitment process. Employment opportunities within these organizations are typically contingent upon securing funding for specific projects, and the time frame between project approval and project commencement is often very short, leaving little time for proper advertising and recruitment procedures. As a result, organizations heavily rely on the dedication of motivated volunteers, and when positions do become available, they are initially offered to these volunteers. Another major issue highlighted is the challenge of ensuring long-term engagement from activists, volunteers, and employees in general. The overall financial instability experienced by the organizations leads to the creation of primarily short-term positions. This situation puts volunteers in a difficult position, often requiring them to seek alternative employment opportunities that take precedence over their involvement in the organization. Additionally, the workload and stress placed on volunteers and employees can lead to burnout, resulting in a high turnover rate. This turnover not only contributes to decreased organizational stability but also leads to the loss of institutional knowledge, expertise, and continuity. These factors collectively contribute to the cycle of high employee turnover, decreased organizational stability, loss of institutional knowledge, and reduced continuity within the organizations.

All the assessed organizations heavily rely on the contributions of volunteers, with only a few of them having experience in engaging interns. When interns are involved, their engagement is typically formalized through contracts that outline clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and expected learning outcomes. Volunteers within these organizations often take on various roles, including members of governing bodies, executive team members, or occasional volunteers for specific activities. However, only around half of the organizations have developed some form of volunteer policy and procedure, with some lacking any structured framework. The most common practice is for individuals to express interest in the organization's work and join the team without initially having clearly defined tasks or expectations. These tasks and expectations are often defined at a later stage. The OCA process has revealed that organizations face challenges in engaging volunteers in more meaningful and structured ways. The overwhelming workload often hampers their ability to effectively involve volunteers in a manner that allows for greater impact and structured contributions.

5. Technical and Financial Resources

The majority of the assessed lesbian organizations (21 out of 29) do not have their own office space or working equipment. Instead, they rely on personal work equipment and materials located in their homes or workplaces. Additionally, eight organizations share office space and working equipment with another organization, but none of them have their own dedicated office space. The OCA process has revealed that when office and social spaces are available, even if shared with other organizations, lesbian organizations are more likely to develop

and implement comprehensive programs that effectively address the needs of their target groups. These spaces provide a sense of security and safety, free from social and institutional discrimination. In some communities, these spaces serve as oases for lesbians. In terms of technical resources for their day-to-day work, organizations heavily rely on personal equipment due to the lack of dedicated resources. The absence of technical resources is typically attributed to the lack of financial resources.



Financial stability and accountability are indeed critical aspects for the assessed organizations. It is noteworthy that more than half of these organizations have been in existence for up to six years, and as a result, many of them lack experience in implementing projects of different scales, including small-scale (up to 10,000 EUR), mid-scale (up to 50,000 EUR), or larger-scale projects (over 100,000 EUR). This applies not only to newer organizations but also to those that have been operating for a longer period, some of which have extensive experience but have not had the opportunity to implement such grants. **A significant number of organizations (24 out of 29) have never received operational/core funding, and only three organizations have had grants exceeding 100,000 EUR. The majority of organizations (22 out of 29) operate with little to no funds, with yearly budgets of less than 5,000 EUR.** These budgets are primarily sourced from individual small ad hoc donations made by members or supporters. Such financial circumstances create challenging conditions that hinder the financial stability of most assessed lesbian organizations, ultimately jeopardizing their overall operation and existence. **As a result, 22 out of the 29 organizations have experienced periods where they had to cease operations at least twice in the last seven years, only to resume their work again.**

The recently published study also confirms similar findings, highlighting the concentration of funds for LBQ (lesbian, bisexual, and queer) groups primarily in North America, where the median annual budget amounts to \$315,000. In stark contrast, no other region reaches a median budget of even \$20,000 per year. **LBQ groups in Europe and Central Asia face the greatest financial challenges, with a median budget of \$5,000, leading many organizations in this region to struggle for survival. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, nearly half (43%) of LBQ groups operate on an annual budget of less than \$5,000, while in Western Europe, over half (53%) work with the same limited resources, which represents the lowest median budget globally among all regions.** Furthermore, globally, younger LBQ groups tend to operate with zero or small annual budgets, with 83% of groups with zero budgets and 70% of groups with small budgets having been formed since 2010. Moreover, when comparing funding received by LBQ groups, there are significant disparities between North America and other regions. **The regions of Europe and Central Asia, as well as Asia and the Pacific, received the lowest median external funding at \$1,150 and \$1,170, respectively,** while LBQ groups in North America received a median external funding amount of \$244,202.³⁴

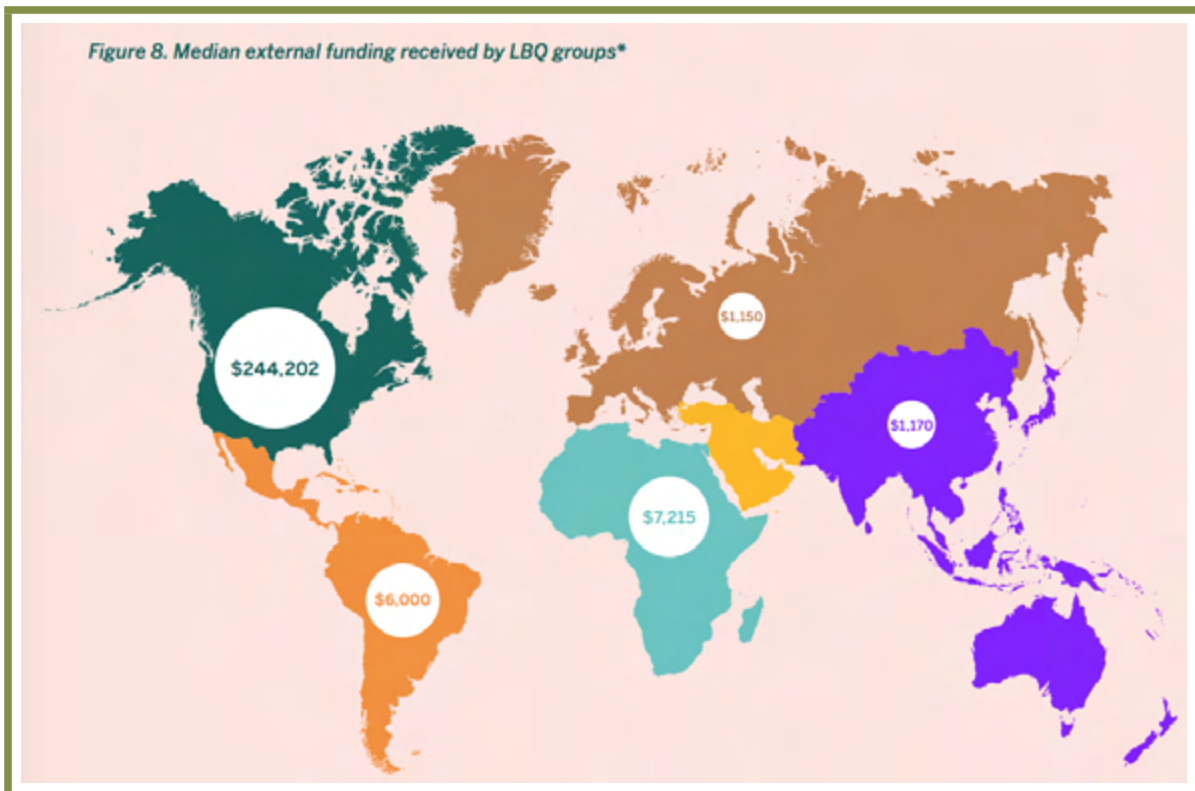


Figure 1. Median external funding received by LBQ groups from Vibrant Yet Under- Resourced: The State of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Movements. Note: insufficient data from the Middle East/Southwest Asia region.

In addition, another global report which was published also this year, reveals that all over the world (outside of USA) a total of \$20.6

34 Saleh, L and Sood, N, (2020). Vibrant Yet Under- Resourced: The State of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Movements. New York and Amsterdam: Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice and Mama Cash.



Furthermore, another global report published this year sheds light on the funding landscape for projects specifically focused on lesbian, bisexual, and queer women worldwide (excluding the USA). The report reveals that a total of \$20.6 million is allocated to such projects, accounting for approximately 8 percent of all funding dedicated to LGBTI issues outside the U.S. during the two-year period of 2017-2018. This disparity highlights how this particular segment of the LGBTI movement receives the least amount of funding. In Western Europe, the bi-annual funding fluctuated from \$500,000 in 2013-2014, then dropped to \$50,000 in 2015-2016, and eventually increased to \$1.2 million in 2017-2018. These figures place LBQ organizations in Europe (both Western and Eastern) among the least funded in the world, alongside Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.³⁵

35 Global Philanthropy Project (2020). 2017/2018 Global Resources Report: Government and Philanthropic Support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Communities.

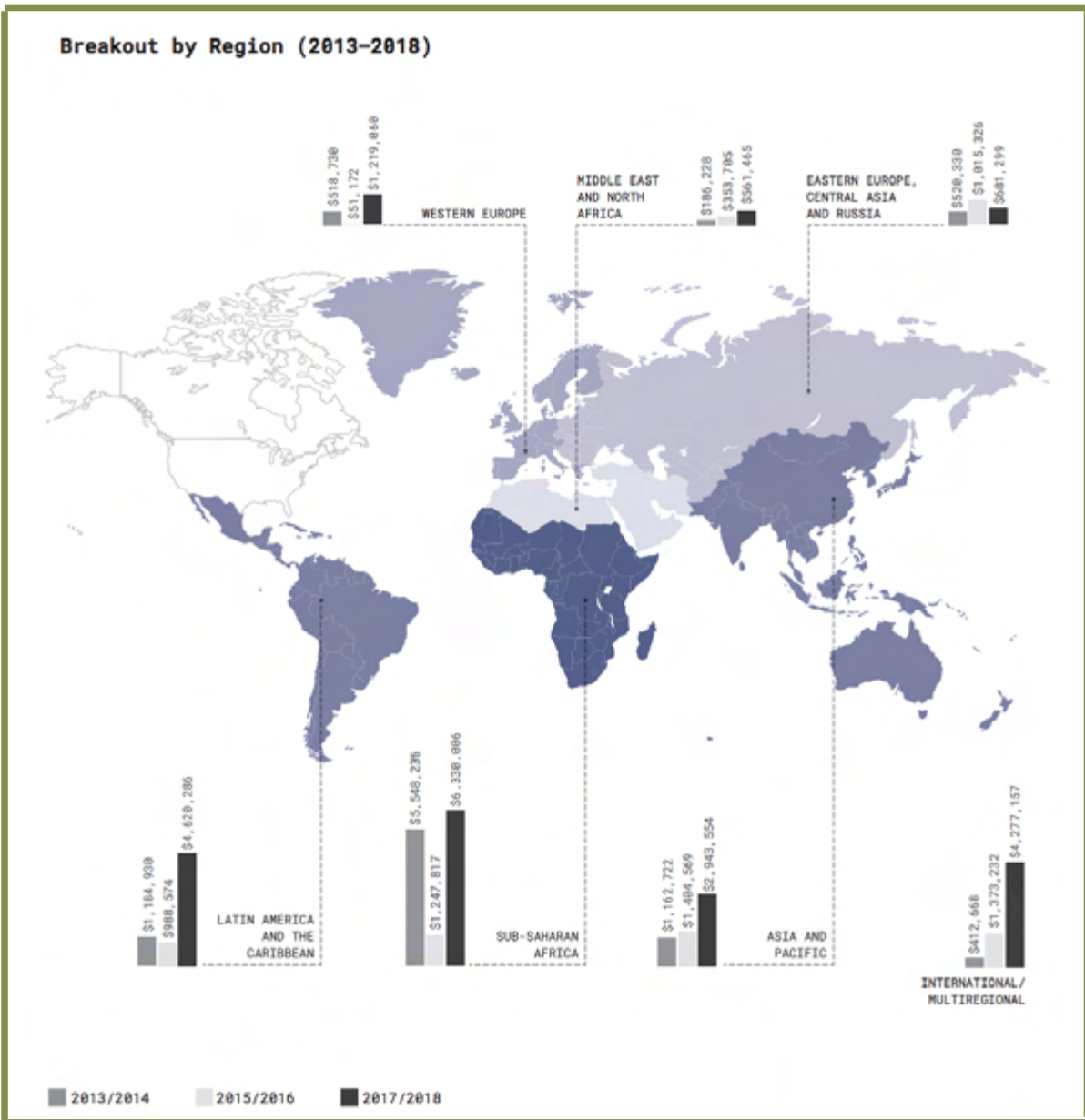


Figure 2. Breakout by Region (2013–2018). 2017/2018 Global Resources Report: Government and Philanthropic Support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Communities

Only a small number of lesbian organizations actively and strategically engage in fundraising activities. The majority of organizations have limited experience in fundraising, and more than half of them (15) have given up after facing repeated failures. Among the organizations that do engage extensively in fundraising (5), they follow a common approach that involves donor mapping, understanding their strategies and priorities, establishing relationships, and submitting project proposals. The targeted donors are typically international foundations, governments, and national development agencies of European countries. There is also some level of engagement with donors based in the United States of America. However, national entities are generally not targeted due to the prevailing belief that high levels of social and systematic lesbophobia create resistance among these actors in supporting the work of lesbian organizations.

Established organizations with more than 10 years of experience, a larger number of employees, and exposure to core funding and larger projects have created fundraising strategies as part of their strategic plans. However, most organizations struggle to balance their priorities with those of donors and typically approach donors with project-specific ideas. According to the OCA, lesbian organizations generally lack capacity in project cycle management and writing. Typically, only one or two people have experience with project writing and implementation, and others are only familiar with some of the activities, resulting in a lack of understanding of the project as a whole. This, combined with limited strategic planning, makes fundraising largely donor-driven, making it challenging for organizations to represent the needs of the community while remaining operational. Another challenge is the lack of alternative financial resources. Lesbian organizations do not have experience in developing marketable services, have minimal collaboration with for-profit sectors, and receive low levels of personal donations from the lesbian community in the sub-region.

Organizations that are more developed and have financial management systems in place implement regular activities and practices to document their operations and activities. Compliance with legal requirements is a key aspect, as legislation often mandates certain basic documentation. These legal obligations typically revolve around documenting the work of governing bodies, donation contracts, employment agreements, memorandums of cooperation, financial records, and other relevant documents. Additionally, organizations with grants in particular have established a practice of conducting regular reviews of these documents, usually once or twice a year. To ensure compliance and synchronization with changes in the legal framework, many of these organizations engage external accounting agencies or experts to handle accounting tasks. Reporting practices commonly involve submitting yearly financial reports to government institutions and the organization's assembly, quarterly reports to the management board, and various reports to donors in accordance with grant agreements.

6. Outreach and Visibility

The importance of communication capacities lies in the organization's ability to gain support from both the general public and experts, aligning with their work and objectives. The findings of the OCA highlight that the socio-political context often presents barriers for organizations to effectively reach a wider audience, resulting in their successes and challenges remaining unnoticed and unheard by the majority of the population. Given the prevalence of lesbophobia in certain segments of society, including the media, governments, and public institutions, it becomes crucial to assist lesbian organizations in enhancing their communication capacities to effectively convey their work and challenges to all relevant stakeholders.

The OCA has conducted an assessment of organizations' capacities and practices pertaining to their visual identity and media presence, as well as their internal approaches and practices for organizing communication activities. Regarding visual identity, larger and more developed organizations have established their logos, distinctive designs, and graphic identity. They also maintain a practice of continuously developing other visual materials when feasible, such as roll-ups, banners, notebooks, pencils, and similar items. Furthermore, the majority of organizations have an online presence, with most having websites and utilizing platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. However, a few organizations still lack websites and comprehensive online information and presence on social media. Some lesbian organizations have expressed challenges related to the pressure of maintaining a constant presence on social media, which can strain the resources of the organizations. In some cases, this responsibility is delegated to volunteers and interns, providing them with an opportunity to learn about lesbian activism. However, this can lead to an imbalance between the quantity and quality of shared content, as well as the dissemination of information across social platforms and the organizational website. Frequently, the website serves more as a means of informing donors and partners, containing formal and official information. On the other hand, social media platforms are primarily utilized to engage with the lesbian community and the general public, aiming to inform them, raise awareness, and garner public support.

The landscape appears to be significantly diverse regarding a strategic and organized approach to communication activities. A small number of organizations have developed communication strategies that encompass specific targets, risk and crisis management strategies, and assigned responsibilities within their teams. These organizations align their communication strategy with their overall strategic plan, ensuring that appropriate public messages support the successful implementation of their strategic objectives. Adopting a strategic approach to communication also allows organizations to engage in discussions about values and messages, creating a unified mode of communication that effectively conveys both information and core values. However, the majority of organizations lack the capacity, whether in terms of personnel or finances, to implement such a strategic approach. Instead, most organizations rely on an ad-hoc approach, with the best-case scenario being a project-based approach. Consequently, there is a perception that organizations primarily operate through projects, missing out on the opportunity to build upon previous activities. Each new project introduces new messages, activities, and topics, dispersing and diluting the organization's voice. Moreover, organizations have limited capabilities in preparing for effective responses in crisis situations. Typically, critical events are treated as isolated incidents, with individual approaches taken for each situation, rather than capitalizing on the opportunity to connect and craft a stronger and more comprehensive message.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

Among all capacity areas, monitoring and evaluation appears to be the least developed. Most organizations view monitoring and evaluation primarily as a means to justify their expenses, demonstrating to donors that they have fulfilled their project commitments. This practice is primarily observed among organizations that manage funds. Consequently, monitoring and evaluation efforts are typically confined to individual projects, lacking an overarching organizational-level approach. However, a small number of organizations (only 2) have successfully implemented monitoring and evaluation practices at the organizational level, integrating them into their strategic plans. These organizations utilize monitoring and evaluation as a tool to understand the impact of their work, discern the effectiveness of different activities, and continuously improve their efforts to achieve more significant outcomes.

During the activity planning stage, organizations consider the tools that will facilitate the monitoring of activity implementation, taking into account the available resources and the level of complexity involved. In most cases, organizations opt for simple tools such as participant lists or immediate participant evaluations, which subsequently shape the formulation of expected results. These expected results are predominantly defined at the output level, representing the immediate outcomes of the implemented activities. Results defined at the outcome or impact level are rarely present. This practice can be attributed to a general lack of knowledge and understanding of monitoring and evaluation, as well as limited financial and human resources. Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation processes are often perceived as costly and require experienced experts to implement effectively.

or everything concerning evaluation, organizations have developed modest practices that focus on observing the final outcomes of implemented programs and activities. These practices highlight the activities that were carried out as planned and those that were not, but they often lack deeper analysis to understand the underlying reasons for these outcomes. Furthermore, evaluations are primarily connected to projects and narrative reports, serving the purpose of justifying funds to donors, while the aspect of learning is not given sufficient recognition. Mid-term evaluations are only conducted when specifically required by donors, and overall, organizations have an ad-hoc and irregular practice of discussing their experiences in implementing programs and activities.

8. Programmatic Areas of Work

Based on the assessment of 29 lesbian organizations in EU member states and accession countries sub-region, it can be concluded that these organizations have historically or are currently implementing programs in four main areas: : community empowerment and services, advocacy and research, arts, culture and media, and sports.

1. In the field of community empowerment and services, all organizations have established activities aimed at providing psychological support. This support is offered through individual and group therapy sessions facilitated by professional therapists, helplines, online chat spaces, and self-support groups specifically designed for lesbians and their families. Furthermore, community empowerment is fostered through various educational initiatives addressing topics such as

communication, conflict resolution, self-empowerment, mental health, and personal development. Some organizations (11) are also actively building networks with public and civil organizations and institutions to create safe and inclusive environments for information sharing and collaboration. Additionally, educational activities are conducted to enhance the capabilities of healthcare providers who directly interact with lesbian women, with the aim of ensuring high-quality services. Legal consultations are provided through in-kind support or project-based initiatives, primarily focusing on assisting victims of domestic violence, hate crimes, and discrimination. A notable achievement is that three organizations have successfully developed housing support programs in the form of drop-in centers or safe houses, depending on the availability of financial resources. Presently, the only operational safe house for lesbian women is located in Albania, serving as a commendable model that is being replicated in North Macedonia.

2. Advocacy efforts among lesbian organizations are relatively limited and underdeveloped. Only three of the assessed organizations engage in advocacy activities, although these efforts are often reactive and opportunistic rather than part of a strategic and planned approach. It is worth mentioning that organizations with greater capacities, such as staff, office space, and financial resources, tend to be more involved in advocacy work. Other organizations have cited several reasons for their limited involvement in advocacy. These include a lack of expertise in advocacy strategies, insufficient financial resources, and time constraints. Furthermore, over half of the organizations expressed challenges in engaging in advocacy efforts.
3. Programs focusing on art, culture, and media are sporadic but can be found in most of the organizations. These initiatives primarily involve organizing events such as film festivals and art exhibitions to promote lesbian culture and empower lesbian artists and cultural activists. However, only a few organizations engage with the media in a more professional manner. While many organizations send out newsletters and create online media content, only one organization has successfully established a news portal dedicated to reporting on topics relevant to the lesbian movement and reaching a broader audience. Additionally, a small number of organizations (four) publish regular or occasional lesbian magazines and books. On rare occasions, organizations have also experimented with lesbian radio programs. Another notable development is the utilization of the "Living Library" methodology, which facilitates personal and direct interactions between individuals identifying as lesbian and the general population, allowing for dialogue and understanding.



4. The involvement of lesbian activism in the realm of sports has emerged as a significant form of organized activism in recent times. However, sport activities primarily serve as social events, although there are several groups that are increasingly active in organizing events with the goal of promoting tolerance and acceptance.

While programs and activities have been developed at various levels in the sub-region, they face two common challenges: a lack of expertise and programmatic instability. It is challenging to retain highly skilled professionals in these programs without stable financial support, which in turn hinders the ability to provide ongoing and empowering programs consistently.



Recommendations

1. Recommendations on the missing history of the lesbian movement

- a. Incorporate lesbian history into general history classes in primary, secondary and university level and encourage women's study centres to teach lesbian history as part of history of feminism, LGBTI and women's movements.
- b. Fund doctoral studies focusing on the lesbian movements in Europe and encourage historical research, by research centres, archives and multimedia organisation, through the gathering of materials and the collecting of interviews via oral history methods to enlighten people about the experiences of those who paved the way for the recognition of lesbian rights and visibility.
- c. Encourage museums, libraries and cultural institutions, both private and public, to showcase exhibits retracing the history of the lesbian movements, to collect books and materials and to focus their work on portraying historical lesbian characters.
- d. Support and fund projects (artistic, documentaries, fictions) for the dissemination to the public of the history of the lesbian movement on a national and international level.



2. Recommendations on how to improve data collection on lesbian lives

- a. In the design, implementation, and analysis of surveys on women and/or LGBTI+ people, ensure the visibility of lesbians (cisgender, transgender, non-binary, or intersex) and their lived experiences by including tailored survey items and reporting disaggregated data for this population.
- b. Ensure that research and data collection efforts that focus specifically on lesbians (as opposed to investigations in mixed LGB+ populations) are implemented and funded by national and international actors.
- c. Develop and support the development of large-scale, cross-country surveys across EU-plus tailored to lesbians. Put additional efforts into reaching a wider scope of lesbians beyond those who are well-educated, relatively young, urban-dwelling, and with access to the internet and the LGBTIQ* community.
- d. Ensure the assessment of sexual orientation (and non-binary gender identities) in large scale, population based, health-related and other surveys to ensure a broader and more accurate representation of lesbians' health-related needs, experiences, and life conditions.
- e. Promote and support research projects specifically aimed at understanding the effects of intersectional discrimination on lesbians in the workplace, healthcare, education, and access to goods and services on their health, well-being, and participation in daily life.



3. Recommendations on how to improve lesbian civil society

- a. Strengthen and increase visibility, participation and representation of lesbian civil society organisations in policies and policy making processes at national, regional and international levels.
- b. Ensure adequate opportunities for lesbian civil society organisations to access public financial resources, in order to enable their equal participation in all policy areas.
- c. Ensure that lesbian women are explicitly recognised as a target group in funding priorities.
- d. Ensure that long-term operational and action funding is provided to both national lesbian organisations and to European lesbian networks.

4. Policy recommendations based on the data analysis

- a. Explicitly recognise the disproportionate impact of hate crime, gender-based violence, sexual violence and hate speech on lesbians, due to the intersection of gender and sexual orientation, when designing and implementing public policies to address these issues.
- b. Ensure that sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are expressly recognised as strands of hate crime and hate speech in law, allowing for biases against lesbians on multiple grounds to be recorded, investigated and prosecuted.
- c. Tackle the very low reporting rates of violence and harassment against lesbians to law enforcement and service providers for victims of violence by ensuring capacity-building and support services (incl. training and awareness raising) are provided to frontline professionals, and include the experiences of domestic violence, intimate partner violence and gender-based violence as lived by lesbians and non-heterosexual women.
- d. Combat online hate crime and hate speech targeting lesbians or contributing to the invisibilisation of the word lesbian, by collaborating with social media platforms and actors in the digital industry, to notably to ensure that the word lesbian is not automatically associated with harmful derogatory or hypersexualised content.
- e. Address the gaps in anti-discrimination legislation, making sure that sexual orientation and gender identity are included as protected characteristics when dealing with discrimination in the workplace, access to healthcare, education and access to goods and services.
- f. Ensure that awareness-raising of healthcare professionals on the specific needs and living conditions of lesbians* (e.g., sexual health needs, heightened mental health vulnerability) is included in the design and implementation of policies on health, taking into consideration the impact of the intersection between gender and sexual orientation through targeted campaigns and training led by experts on lesbian health and lesbian civil society.
- g. Combat stigma, prejudice and hostility against lesbians to improve social acceptance, notably through awareness-raising and information campaigns and improving and ensuring representation and visibility of lesbians in the media, thereby enabling lesbians to be out in all spheres of life.

LESBIAN  IS NOT A DIRTY WORD



CONTACT INFORMATION

Email: info@europeanlesbianconference.org / info@lesbiangenius.net

Web: <https://europeanlesbianconference.org> / <https://lesbiangenius.net>

Twitter: [@EuroLesbianCon](https://twitter.com/EuroLesbianCon) Facebook: [Europeanlesbianconference](https://www.facebook.com/Europeanlesbianconference)

Instagram: [europeanlesbianconference](https://www.instagram.com/europeanlesbianconference)