



Lesbians. The Challenge of Invisibility.



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Réseau québécois d'action
pour la santé des femmes

This publication was inspired by the research report *Pour le dire... Rendre les services sociaux et les services de santé accessibles aux lesbiennes* (RQASF, 2003) and the leaflet *Réalités et vécus des lesbiennes au Québec* (RQASF, 2004).

Visit our website at www.rqasf.qc.ca to read the report and its summary, available in English: *Silent No More: Making Health and Social Services Accessible to Lesbians*.



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Graphic Design

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This reprint was made possible by the financial support of Health Canada.



Health
Canada

Santé
Canada

Legal deposit: 1st quarter 2013
Library and Archives Canada
Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec
ISBN: 978-2-923269-45-0 (print version)
ISBN: 978-2-923269-46-7 (PDF)

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Montréal, Québec

Lesbians. The Challenge of Invisibility.

Lesbians are present in all social classes, ethnic groups, and age groups. They are everywhere — in every neighbourhood and every job sector. And yet . . .

Nearly 9 per cent of women are lesbians.

Isn't it time we acknowledged this reality and fostered a positive environment where they can finally "come out" and lead full lives?



The presumption of heterosexuality

« Do you have a boyfriend?

Why do we take it for granted that every woman is heterosexual? Why do we always ask female co-workers if they have a husband or male partner, or school friends if they have a boyfriend?



We live in a society where it is assumed that all women are attracted to men and vice versa. This notion springs largely from traditional perceptions of sexuality's main role — reproduction of the species — which depends on this mutual attraction.

Although it is usually unconscious, the presumption of heterosexuality directly influences how we view the family and maternity. For instance, we assume that a lesbian has no children — or the reverse — that a woman who is a mother cannot be a lesbian. Between 20 and 30 per cent of lesbians have children.

! *When we speak and act as if everyone were heterosexual, this sexual orientation becomes the only one that is "normal" and acceptable.*

Heterosexism

« A real couple is composed of a man and a woman!

How many ads and TV shows present us with images of women-only families and couples?



Like any other human “norm,” heterosexuality was imposed by the majority without taking into account individual differences and social diversity. Norms are rules that vary according to historical time periods, cultures, and countries.

Imagine if the situation were to be reversed and homosexuality were the norm: romantic relationships, ads, conversations — everything — in our environment would reflect this reality. How would people express their heterosexuality? Would we have to try to “look as if,” despite our attraction for the opposite sex? Would we have the courage to disclose the fact that we were “different”? This is the daily reality of countless lesbians...

! *Heterosexism is the imposition of heterosexuality, in varying degrees of subtlety. It is based on unequal power relations and is a form of discrimination.*

Discrimination

« I don't discriminate. I treat everyone the same way!

Is it possible to discriminate against others without knowing it?



In our society, which is known for its openness, discrimination of any kind (racism, sexism, etc.) is not well received. We might find it difficult to imagine how we could unintentionally discriminate against someone else. If we know people who are gay or from another country, we think we have no prejudices and can't be guilty of discrimination.

Unfortunately, treating everyone the same way does not mean your behaviour is not discriminatory.

"When I go to the doctor, he talks to me about sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, and insists on discussing birth control. I really don't feel like telling him I'm a lesbian." (Josée, 17).

! *Discrimination doesn't have to be intentional; we notice it by its consequences.*

Lesbophobia

« A lesbian is a woman who just hasn't met the right guy yet!

Why talk specifically about *lesbophobia*? What's the difference between lesbophobia and homophobia?



We know that the word “homophobia” means ideas, attitudes, or discriminatory behaviour with regard to homosexuals, whatever their sex. But when we group lesbians into the same category as gays and address their situations together as if they were similar or symmetrical, we deny the existence of sexual inequality and inequity. We help maintain the invisibility of lesbians. The fact is, women are still subjected to a form of domination that is called sexism. **Lesbians are affected by sexism just as much as other women are.**

Lesbophobia is not just about a discriminatory attitude concerning sexual orientation, as in the case of homophobia; it is also about the sexism that affects all women.

! *Lesbians are the targets of a twofold form of discrimination because they are women and homosexuals. These forms of discrimination may also interact with other forms of discrimination such as ableism, racism, classism, etc.*

Lesbophobia in everyday life

* **Lesbophobia is not necessarily conscious or intentional.** Many people say they “accept” homosexuals... as long as they don’t get too close. Having a lesbian co-worker is OK, but a lesbian in the family is another matter. For instance, when we “forget” to include our sister’s female lover in the marriage invitation list – What will people think? Are we really so comfortable with lesbianism?

* **Lesbophobia is revealed through how we talk and behave.** Even situations that seem trivial on the surface can generate lesbophobic attitudes: avoiding reference to our best friend’s two mothers – *What do I call them? Suddenly, I’m nervous...* – Acting differently in the presence of a lesbian – *I really don’t want her to think I’m hitting on her!*

Lesbophobia primarily hurts lesbians, but it also hurts their family and friends because someone they love is suffering, or because it affects them personally. *Can I tell them that my daughter is a lesbian? What if they find out that my mother lives with another woman?*



Legal dimension

Discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation has been prohibited since 1977 under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms of Québec*, and since 1996, under the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. After Denmark, Canada was the second country to recognize the rights of same-sex couples and homoparental families when, in 2002, it passed the *Act instituting civil unions and establishing new rules of filiation*.

Accepting oneself and daring to “come out”: “*It’s not so easy...*”

Accepting and then valuing one’s lesbianism is a process that may go on for years and even a lifetime. The process of self-revelation and revealing oneself to others known as “coming out” can be smooth or very complicated, depending on the person’s situation. For some women, overcoming their own feelings about their lesbianism adds to their anxiety about the idea of coming out.



Fear of discrimination is rooted both in personal experience and the reality of social discrimination. For example, it could be more difficult to accept being attracted to another woman if you have grown up in a family where lesbianism was considered a “sin,” or if you believe that sex between two women is unnatural (because it cannot result in the conception of a child). Although the situation is improving, most lesbians still have few positive role models.

Everyday life is full of situations in which lesbians are forced to assess the risk involved in coming out to others about their sexual orientation.

! *“Internalized lesbophobia” refers to the condition in which lesbians expect negative reactions if they reveal their sexual orientation.*

Social invisibility

« I don't think any of the people I know are . . .

How many of us believe we are in contact with lesbians every day?

Yet, lesbians represent roughly 9 per cent of the female population. When we're in a staff meeting, class, party, or other event attended by 10 or more women, most probably one of them is a lesbian.

« *"That's impossible!"
Maybe you're asking yourself,
"How come I've never noticed?"*

- In contrast to certain popular beliefs, lesbians have no particular identifying traits.
- The process of acknowledging their sexual orientation may occur relatively late in life, and in the meantime, some women have heterosexual relationships.
- Because of the sense of being "different" and fear of negative consequences, many lesbians never reveal their sexual orientation.

The mere existence of homosexuality shakes our heterosexist vision of society. It questions certain social values and convictions. For instance, we may totally agree with the principle of equity when it comes to parental leave for a lesbian employee, but feel very uncomfortable witnessing expressions of affection between her and her partner.

In Canada, homosexual relationships were considered criminal acts until 1969.

The road to change

* On paper, lesbians enjoy the same rights as other women in Québec.

And despite the hate propaganda disseminated by some media outlets and on the Web, many lesbians view the current context in a positive light, especially compared with the conditions experienced by earlier generations and lesbians in other countries.



The appearance of steadily progressing attitudes about homosexuality masks the persisting taboos. Although it is an integral part of our society, lesbianism seems to be non-existent because of the presumption of heterosexuality and prejudicial attitudes that drive lesbians to hide their romantic preferences.

When their need to express their true feelings, live an authentic life, and be accepted by those they love overrides their fear of the consequences, they decide to affirm themselves and “come out.” **We all have a role to play so that women — they could be our sisters, friends, daughters, co-workers, doctors, patients, etc. — can live authentic and full lives in freedom and security.**

Overview of Lesbian Health

- Twice as many lesbians as heterosexual women are considered “very poor” (15.5% versus 6.9%);
- Lesbians are targets of hate crimes, including verbal and physical assaults;
- Lesbophobia is the cause of social isolation and it affects lesbians’ mental health, notably causing depression, problematic substance use, and even attempted suicide;
- Violence and assaults are also present in relationships between women, but there are still a lot of taboos surrounding the problem and it is often minimized by care providers;
- Breast cancer occurs three times as often among lesbians due to a higher number of risk factors, particularly, fewer children, obesity, alcohol and drug use, tobacco use;
- Lesbians are more vulnerable when it comes to ill health. They have fewer check-ups and less access to prevention and treatment due to barriers in health institutions; many lesbians prefer to consult alternative health practitioners (homeopaths, naturopaths, etc.) and educate themselves about health issues.
- Studies have shown that health care providers are often ignorant about lesbians’ health issues.

What can I do today?



As a family member or friend : Lesbians often look for signs of acceptance or openness in a person before taking the risk of coming out. An open and non-judgmental attitude (for instance, use the word “partner” rather than boyfriend or husband) may encourage her.

As a co-worker : Be her ally. Don’t join in discriminatory or lesbophobic jokes and don’t encourage these kinds of comments or gossip. Clearly indicate your open attitude.

As a health service or other provider : Lesbians have the same needs as other women, including being respected and listened to. Let the patient talk about herself, show that you are open and use inclusive vocabulary (for instance, “do you need birth control” rather than “what kind of birth control do you use”) *Many resources are available; find out about them because you can make a difference!*

As a community member : I can educate myself. I can also demonstrate my support during public awareness campaigns. Just take some time to think about it!

And you, are you questioning your sexual orientation? Are you feeling worried or anxious about it? Regardless of your age or past experiences, don’t hesitate to ask for information and help from a supportive organization.

Resources



Centre de solidarité lesbienne (CSL)

T 514 526-2452

www.solidaritelesbienne.qc.ca

American Psychological Association (APA), *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients*,
<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/guidelines.aspx>





