

# Lesbian Erasure in the UK

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[www.thelesbianproject.org.uk](http://www.thelesbianproject.org.uk)

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*A note about definitions—*

*We use the word ‘lesbian’ to mean ‘exclusively same-sex-attracted female’*

## Forward by Julie Bindel



When I came out as a lesbian in 1977, aged just 15, I considered the word to be a terrible one. It took me some time until I felt pride in using it to describe myself. Now, more than four decades later, the word 'lesbian' is diminishing in use *and* popularity.

I decided to set up a project focusing solely on lesbians because—as this paper, The Lesbian Project's first—shows, lesbians have been significantly deprioritised when it comes to funding, research, and attention. Young lesbians have undoubtedly benefited from our hard-won legal and social rights, but in some ways, it is harder today to be out and proud than in the bad old days.

My mission is to put the pride back in to the word 'lesbian', and to pay attention to the needs of same sex attracted females. For too long we have been an afterthought, with gay men being prioritised over and above lesbians. Now is the time to put lesbians first, and to work towards our happiness, wellbeing, and security. It is the least we deserve.

## Summary of Key Findings

### (1) As the LGBT+ rainbow expands, lesbians have fallen to the back of the queue

- A population group cannot be served equitably if we don't even know its needs, and we can't know its needs if it is always included within a wider group. Generally speaking, lesbians as a population group have rarely had their needs assessed – instead, they tend to be included with some other group (e.g. gay men, bisexual women, transwomen). In policy-making, funding, and service-provision, there is little shared understanding of how lesbians specifically are affected by inequalities, of what their needs are, and of how these should be met. There is no national voice articulating that case for lesbians alone. This is a serious gap.
- Lesbians fall under two protected characteristics simultaneously: sex and sexual orientation. Neither the EHRC or the Government Equalities Office have much history of undertaking projects for lesbians in particular, and nor have they considered in detail how the public sector equality duty affects lesbians in relation to other groups. In the work done by them on behalf of the LGBT+ category, little information about lesbians specifically has been gathered in an unambiguous way.
- Over the last six years, the word 'lesbian' has appeared only 16 times in Stonewall's annual reports to the Charity Commission, making up 10% of the mentions of LGBT+ orientations and identities overall. The majority of these mentions were merely

formal. Similar patterns were found in other major LGBT+ Charity annual reports.

- Stonewall is a charity which both receives and spends several millions in income each year. In the last six years, only three of Stonewall's dedicated projects named lesbians as a particular beneficiary – and in each of those cases, lesbians appeared amongst a wider pool of selected groups.

***Recommendation:* Lesbians in the UK need a mainstream organisation that advocates for their distinctive interests. We have founded The Lesbian Project to address this. We call upon relevant organisations in the LGBT+ and equalities sector to support The Lesbian Project in advancing the interests of lesbians in the UK. We also call upon the EHRC to recognise its statutory duty to enforce equality law for lesbians as a group.**

## (2) Lesbians are the poor relations of lottery funding and grant-making

- In 12 years of lottery funding, including National Lottery funding, only six projects have been funded which name lesbians as exclusive beneficiaries.
- During the same time period, other major grant-making bodies have funded only two projects of exclusive benefit to lesbians.
- Across the charity funding sector, funding for projects named as of exclusive benefit to lesbians make up just 0.06% of total funds allocated to LGBT+ causes.

**Recommendation:** Lesbians need their own funded projects, which not only would provide important services for lesbians, but also furnish valuable information about their changing needs. We call upon government funding bodies, lottery distributors, and major UK grant-making funding bodies to encourage applications for lesbian causes, and to work towards making funding for lesbians more equitable with other LGBT+ groups.

## (3) Data about lesbians is impoverished in a number of ways

- The 2021 Census gives us some new information about numbers of lesbians in the UK, but there are still important limitations on the model used.
- In data collection generally, 'gay or lesbian' is often treated as a single group, without further disaggregating between males and females. Equally 'lesbian, gay, bisexual' is often treated as a single group, potentially obscuring differences between lesbians and gay men, and lesbians and bisexual women.
- In some data collection, lesbianism is treated as an identity potentially open to males who identify as women. This further threatens data robustness.

**Recommendation:** As well as providing information, data is a prerequisite for service planning, and for agencies and organisations to prioritise funding and resources. We call upon those national bodies who collect and publish statistical data, including the Office for National Statistics and its Centre for Equalities and Inclusion, to improve the quality of data collected on lesbians specifically. As well as providing information, data is also a prerequisite for service planning, and for agencies and organisations to prioritise funding and resources. Wherever data is gathered about a wider group that includes lesbians, we call upon data collectors to further disaggregate findings for sex plus sexual orientation. We also urge data collectors to treat lesbianism as an orientation only available to females, to preserve data robustness.

#### (4) Lesbians are vanishing from academic research

- Year on year, lesbians are disappearing as a research subject from the titles of research articles in academic journals. In 2020, the word 'lesbian' is listed as appearing only 6 times in article titles across 2,800 academic journals.
- Where lesbians do feature in academic research as a subject, they tend to be included in some wider group without further disaggregation.
- In government funding for academic research, across all years, of all research funding directed towards LGBT+ projects, only 9% has mentioned lesbians in the project title.

**Recommendation:** Lesbians urgently need academic research that treats them as a valuable and interesting research subject in their own right. We call upon academics, research funding bodies, and think tanks to build and fund research models and methodologies which create space for robust data about lesbian lives to emerge.

#### (5) The lesbian social scene is nearly completely extinct

- A once vibrant lesbian social scene, with dedicated bars, clubs, nights, and social spaces has now practically disappeared.
- Across the UK, only two permanent social venues predominantly for lesbians remain open.
- Very few lesbian-only club or bar nights exist. Occasional events badged as lesbian-friendly are also advertised for other groups.
- There is a lack of public clarity in about whether lesbian-only networks and formal associations are permitted, under the terms of the Equality Act. This dissuades lesbians from trying to form them.

**Recommendation:** In light of the severe decline of the lesbian social scene, we urge public organisations to find creative ways to allow lesbians to meet and support each other, and to actively support ongoing attempts to revive the lesbian social scene, across the UK. We also call upon the EHRC to clarify whether the Equality Act permits formal associations that are open only to same-sex-attracted females, given their possession of two protected characteristics as such.



## Lesbian Social and Political Life in the UK: Some Historical Background

In the wake of the Wolfenden Report in 1957—which recommended partial decriminalization of sex between men—new gay and lesbian organisations felt able to emerge into the public domain during the 1960s. Most of these focused on political representation for gay men, but two in particular were important for lesbians.

The first was the Minorities Research Group (MRG), founded in the early 1960s by Esme Langley, Diana Chapman, Cynthia Reid and others. Aims of the MRG included: decreasing the social isolation of same-sex-attracted women; improving their public image; reducing stigma; and organising 'meetings, debates, lectures and conferences and to promote intelligent and properly informed press and radio comment in relation to this minority group' (Hubbard 2021). In 1964, Langley also founded the lesbian magazine *Arena Three*. With a focus upon educating the public and an emphasis on the expertise of founder members, this magazine also functioned as a way for lesbians to communicate with each other through the small ads. In 1965, a separate lesbian social organisation splintered from the MRG – KENRIC (short for Kensington and Richmond). The founders of KENRIC wished to be more democratic in their organisation, and to focus more on social events. As the website of this group, still in existence at the time of writing, says: 'At a time when it was almost impossible for lesbians to connect with each other, KENRIC provided a lifeline to isolated women. From small beginnings in London, a network of local groups spread throughout the country, offering safe and welcoming spaces in which members can socialise, with London remaining a hub

for larger scale events. Throughout the decades, the KENRIC newsletter has also played an important part in connecting members.'

During the 50s and first half of the 60s, the lesbian social world had a largely inward-looking culture, mostly preferring to keep itself apart from heterosexual society. The main aim was to reduce the social isolation of lesbians. During that period the lesbian bars that had emerged post-war, such as the Gateways Club and the Robin Hood Club, were rigidly butch/femme and governed by strict social codes. But towards the end of the 1960s, more explicitly outward-facing and political gay rights movements started to form, energized by the growing successes of the US civil rights movements. In the UK the Gay Liberation Front formed in 1970 and held the first Pride march in 1972. This increase in overt politicization affected the lesbian bar scene too.

In the new gay politics, achieving visibility as a means of challenging social stigma was seen as a political priority. This was in contrast to previous attitudes to gay and lesbian social life, which had accepted and even sometimes enjoyed the secrecy, separateness, and relative anonymity from straight culture. This change in attitude resulted in confrontation between old and new: the newly organized Gay Liberation Front (GLF) twice protested the Gateways club, for instance. During this period, there was also growing criticism of butch/femme dynamics from a feminist direction, for supposedly mimicking outdated heterosexual stereotypes.

Also during the 1960s and 70s, the Women's Liberation Movement was in the ascendancy. From the 1970s onwards, lesbians interested in politics effectively had a choice. They could affiliate with same-sex-attracted rights movements such as the GLF, which included men; or

they could affiliate with feminist movements, which included heterosexual women.

Many lesbians in the 1970s and 80s took the feminist route. Lesbian feminists were prominent within the burgeoning UK Women's Liberation Movement, and many groups, organisations, and activities within the WLM were lesbian-focused. These included groups (e.g. the Bradford Gay Women's Group); newsletters (e.g. Revolutionary and Radical Feminist Newsletter; the Lesbian Information Service Newsletter); centres (e.g. the Camden Lesbian Centre and Black Lesbian Group); switchboards (Lesbian Link in Manchester; Lesbian Line in Newcastle); activist projects (e.g. the Lesbians and Policing Project; Lesbians against Pornography); lesbian history projects (e.g. the Lesbian Archive collective; the Lesbian History Group; Action for Lesbian Parents) and regular socials.

Within lesbian feminism, there were those who argued for complete or partial separation from men; and for the adoption of lesbianism as a feminist political strategy, though this was controversial amongst those lesbians who felt it belittled their situation to think of same-sex attraction as a choice. Arguably the most prominent lesbian feminist group was the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists, responsible for organising the 'Reclaim The Night' march in 1977 and for publishing the pamphlet Political Lesbianism: The Case Against Heterosexuality in 1979.

Another significant lesbian feminist organisation was the Lesbian Custody Project. In 1982, the feminist legal organisation Rights of Women won funding from the Greater London Council to set up this project at a time when a backlash against lesbian mothering was developing in the courts. This project aimed to combat legal

discrimination against lesbian mothers by providing them with advice, building a network of lawyers to fight their custody cases, and using research to establish that there was no detriment to their children. In many cases, lawyers from The Lesbian Custody Project were able to prevent children being removed from lesbian mothers, before The Children's Act in 1989 replaced the use of custody as a legal concept altogether (Pittman 2019).

Also in the 1980s, the AIDS crisis hit, motivating many lesbians to affiliate politically with gay men in solidarity with them. Some opted to care for the those who were ill, including those who had no-one else who would care for them even when they were dying. Meanwhile many lesbians also engaged with gay men in political AIDS activism. Activist initiatives that involved lesbians in the UK included a campaign launched by London Lesbian Line for increased blood donations; a protest staged by the Lesbian and Gay Youth Movement against William Frank Brownhill (the Conservative leader of South Staffordshire Council, who had previously called for gay men and lesbians to be 'gassed' in order to halt the spread of AIDS); and a demonstration at Pentonville Prison by ACT UP.

In 1987, the Organisation for Gay and Lesbian Action was formed, aiming for a representative national membership body which addressed both gay and lesbian interests, but relatively quickly disbanded due to internal conflict. In 1988, hostile reaction to Section 28 – legislation to prohibit the 'promotion of homosexuality' in schools – further cemented political bonds between lesbians and gay men in the UK, and also galvanized the formation of new organisations. Of these, Stonewall was and is the most notable one, focusing more narrowly on legal reform, and with an initial focus on laws discriminating against gay men. Stonewall was founded in 1989 by a



group of gay men, including Ian McKellen, Michael Cashman, and Simon Fanshawe, in order to fight direct discrimination, especially in the courts and in employment. Soon afterwards, lesbians were invited into the management structure. Olivette Cole-Wilson, Pam St Clement, and Lisa Power were among founding members and trustees.

Under the directorship of lesbian lawyer Angela Mason, in the 1990s and early 2000s Stonewall caused or contributed to many significant legal victories on behalf of gay men, and to a lesser extent lesbians (since they were not affected by restrictive legislation in the same way). In this, Stonewall was aided by the partial incorporation of 'sexual orientation' into the European human rights framework in the 1980s and 1990s, which allowed them to draw on European Court of Human Rights rulings in pursuing changes to UK legislation. They were also helped by the election of New Labour to government in 1997, with whom several of the founders had social connections and political sympathies.

Under the directorship of Mason, Stonewall successfully contributed to several notable legal outcomes, including lowering the legal age of consent for gay men, overturning the ban on gay people in the armed forces, and changing the law to allow for gay and lesbian adoptive parents. In subsequent years, Stonewall also successfully lobbied for the repeal of Section 28; legislation against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation; the introduction of Civil Partnerships for gays and lesbians; and access to marriage on equal terms with heterosexuals.

By the 2000s, many of the original lesbian feminist groups and projects that had formed in the 1970s and 80s were in abeyance. Partly this was caused by the rise of identity politics, and a resulting disaffiliation from

simply 'woman' or 'lesbian' as organising categories. It was also connected to ideological battles between those politically practising S&M and those against it; and to the rise of post-structuralism and queer theory in academia, which conceptualized 'gender' and its remedies differently, and so shifted the tide away from second wave feminist framings. Hence, as the 21st century began, the main source of mainstream political representation for lesbians in the UK was gay and lesbian rights organisations, and chiefly amongst them Stonewall.

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## Lesbian Social and Political Organising: The Current Landscape

The phenomenon of intersectionality is popularly discussed in progressive circles. 'Intersectionality' refers to the idea that some people suffer from more than one intersecting source of discrimination or oppression at a time, because they fall into more than one discriminated-against or oppressed group simultaneously. This issue is most commonly raised for women of colour, but the same logic also applies for lesbians (and all the more, for lesbians of colour).

As is well-known, theorists of intersectionality have noted that general political campaigns are not always well-placed to notice ways in which discriminating or oppressive forces intersect for a particular group. Applying this logic to the case of lesbians: feminist activism will tend to think of lesbians primarily in terms of their belonging to the group of women, but not think particularly about any needs based on their being same-sex-attracted as well. Meanwhile, historically speaking, LG and LGB activism in the past has tended to think of lesbians primarily in terms of belonging to the group of same-sex-attracted people, but not think particularly about any needs based on their being women as well. There are likely to be special problems or issues that lesbians face, in virtue of being *both* women and same-sex-attracted people, that don't get picked up in either activist context: for instance, double costs of discrimination and exclusion that may be relevant to service-provision, life chances and opportunities.

Given the widespread acceptance of intersectionality in progressive spaces, it is noteworthy that separate political organising for lesbians does not occur more often. Within activist spaces, though it can be contested, there is sometimes room for special interest groups to form their own associations and organisations. For instance, it's now accepted that there can be shelters and refuges for minority ethnic women; social and political organisations for black LGBT+ men; and initiatives only for bisexuals, such as Bi Pride. Yet within LGBT+

political organising, there is a sense that lesbians having their own organisations is somehow problematic.

Considered as a group in their own right, lesbians were further politically disempowered when the rainbow 'umbrella' started to expand, and changes in direction within LGBT+ politics began to dilute the focus on same-sex-attracted people. Whenever a group, politically conceived, is composed of different groups of people, the differences between them tend to be minimized in service to group cohesion, efficiency, and overall political expediency. And where resources are finite - as they are for any particular social cause - then the more numerous the groups represented under a single overall banner, the fewer resources will be available for any particular one of those groups - even assuming that allocated resources are evenly distributed amongst groups, which of course need not be the case.

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An early and significant change here was the incorporation of bisexuals under the remit of 'LGB' politics. The choice was available at the time to focus only or mainly upon the political representation of bisexual people in same-sex relationships—for after all, these would be obviously the people most affected by homophobic discrimination, and with whom gay people had most in common. Instead, however, the sector took the decision to include, as part of their advocacy remit, bisexuals in heterosexual relationships—even exclusively. For instance, the LGB sector started to sponsor initiatives such as 'Bi Visibility Day', which was considered as important politically for bisexuals in relationships with the opposite sex as for those in same-sex relationships. Regardless of the merits of this move for bisexuals, it produced a further source of competition for resources and attention for lesbians (and for gay men) within political activist spaces.

*While these political enlargements of scope brought with them a flurry of new projects and revenue streams ..., they also diminished attention on lesbians and gay men*

The same logic applies to the sector's move to formally incorporate political advocacy for trans people under the 'LGBT' political umbrella, including by Stonewall in 2015; and again with the recent Stonewall decision to expand the umbrella once again to 'LGBT+' (or as their website puts it, 'lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning and ace'). As neither being trans nor being asexual are sexual orientations, both moves have officially brought heterosexuals under the umbrella. Some trans people, and some asexual people, are heterosexual (opposite-sex attracted) while others are same-sex-attracted. While these political enlargements of scope brought with them a flurry of new projects and revenue streams for LGBT+ charities and activist groups, they also diminished attention on lesbians and gay men (as is strongly evidenced in the material below).

The situation for lesbians and gay men was further complicated by the incorporation of the 'T' into LGBT+ politics around 2011-2015, along with an emphasis on 'gender identity'. This brought about an effective redefinition of their respective categories within LGBT+ organisations like Stonewall. For most of the history of gay and lesbian rights, it has been treated as essential to understand lesbians and gay men as people of a particular biological sex, sexually or romantically attracted to others of the same biological sex. This understanding changed with the move of the sector towards transactivism. According to the new and approved transactivist doctrine, being a lesbian is not officially connected to facts about biological sex, nor the sex to which you are attracted. Rather, it's believed that being a lesbian is an identity also open to males who identify as women and are attracted to those who identify as women. Being a gay man, meanwhile, is now understood by LGBT+ groups to be an identity also open to females who identify as men and are attracted to those who identify as men.

This shift in thinking is evidenced, for instance, Stonewall's 'Truth about Trans' page on their website, which asks the question 'So, could a lesbian have a trans woman as a lesbian partner, or a gay man be with a trans man?' and answers: 'Of course – if they fancy each other! First and foremost, we need to recognise that trans women are women, and

trans men are men.’ More recently, the current Stonewall director Nancy Kelley has criticised the phenomenon of lesbians (in the original sense of females attracted only to females) who do not wish to have sexual relations with trans women on principle, as being analogous to ‘the issue of sexual racism’.

Such issues are highly controversial. But whatever one thinks about this shift in terminology, it seems clear that either way it causes a further dilution of political focus for lesbians in the original sense. For not only do they have to compete for resources and attention with other causes under the LGBT+ umbrella - such as issues pertaining to gay men, bisexuals of both sexes in heterosexual relationships, trans people, and asexual people – thanks to transactivist redefinition, even *within* the category of ‘lesbians’, same-sex-attracted females are now treated by mainstream LGBT+ organisations as exhibiting no interesting biological, social, or political differences with males who identify as women, attracted to others who identify as women.

In response to the transactivist turn within LGBT+ organisations, a number of grassroots lesbian organisations have sprung up to reassert the separate biological, social, and political identity of same-sex-attracted females. Most notably, Get the L Out protested London Pride in 2018 with banners saying ‘Lesbian=Female Homosexual’ and ‘Lesbian Not Queer’. Other active grassroots political and social organisations for lesbians specifically include Lesbian Labour, the Lesbian Rights Alliance, LesBeReal, WomensZone, the Lesbian Strength Collective, Lesbian Fightback, Positively Lesbian, and several others. LGB Alliance was founded in 2019 by two lesbians to represent the interests of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals.

In general, though, while the grassroots resurge vigorously, there is a need for mainstream non-partisan representation for lesbians, operating in the same establishment spaces as major LGBT+ organisations who purport to represent their interests there. It is the aim of the Lesbian Project to rectify this.

In the rest of this document, we will demonstrate the pressing need for The Lesbian Project. We will show how lesbians, as a subject of social and political concern in their own right, are disappearing from the LGBT+ movement, funding decisions, equalities organisations, data collection, academic research, and representation in UK social life. Our contention is that there is an ongoing erasure of lesbians as a self-standing group. Moving forward, it will be the aim of The Lesbian Project to address this multi-faceted issue.

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## Five Areas of Lesbian Erasure

To investigate the extent to which lesbians are disappearing as a subject of concern in the UK, in this section we present findings from research in five areas. First, we investigate the extent to which lesbians are priorities for major UK LGBT+ charities and UK equalities bodies. Secondly, we look at funding to lesbian-specific charitable projects from National Lottery and non-lottery funds, as well as grants from central and local government. We then describe how well government and other bodies in the UK capture data about lesbians, focussing on the 2021 England and Wales Census. Fourthly, we review the extent to which lesbians are topics of academic research, and finally, we provide a qualitative review of the extent to which lesbian social spaces have declined in the UK in recent years.

### 1. Lesbians as Priorities in LGBT+ and Equalities Organisations

To learn more about the extent to which lesbians are priorities in LGBT+ organisations in the UK, we reviewed recent annual reports of two major UK LGBT+ organisations—Stonewall and the Scotland-based Equality Network.

#### *The LGBT+ sector*

It is part of the function of an annual report to report charitable activity over the year. It is therefore reasonable to take the number of mentions of a particular group as informative about the degree of charitable activity directed towards that group. In 2019 Professor Michael Biggs of Oxford University Sociology Department surveyed the number of

appearances of the word ‘lesbian’, along with other common LGBT+ words, in the annual reports of Stonewall, Equality Network, and others over the decade to 2019<sup>1</sup>.

#### **Stonewall**

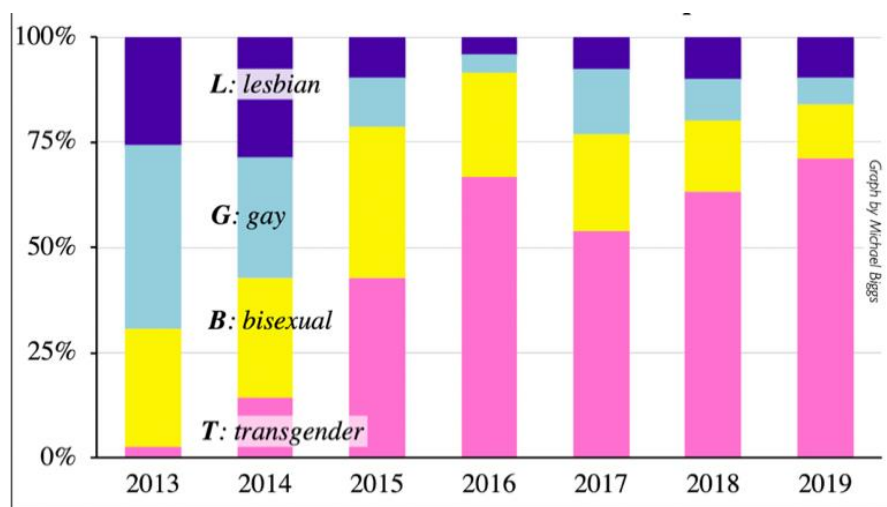
Reviewing Stonewall’s annual reports to the Charity Commission between 2013 and 2019, Biggs used Adobe’s advanced search to count the number of whole words in each pdf document: (1) *Lesbian, lesbians*; (2) *gay*; (3) *bi, bisexual, bisexuals*; (4) *trans, transgender, transsexual, transsexuals*.

Figure 1 (reproduced from Biggs) shows the percentage of mentions of ‘lesbian/s’ fell across time from around 25% prior to 2015 to much less in subsequent years. During this period of time, the term ‘trans’ increased relative to other categories, and by 2019, it comprised almost 75% of all mentions.

*Over the last six years, the word ‘lesbian’ has appeared only 16 times in Stonewall’s annual reports to the Charity Commission, making up 10% of the mentions of LGBT+ orientations and identities overall*

<sup>1</sup> [https://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/LGBT\\_figures.shtml](https://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/LGBT_figures.shtml)

**Figure 1. LGBT Words in Stonewall Annual Reports 2013–2019**



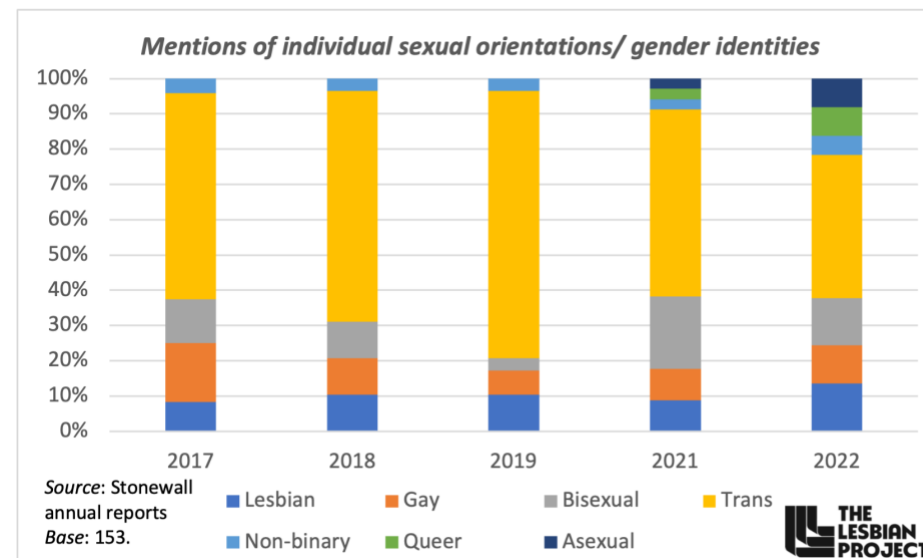
Note. Reproduced from Biggs (2019). Adobe’s advanced search was used to count the number of whole words in each annual report to the Charity Commission: (1) *Lesbian, lesbians*; (2) *gay*; (3) *bi, bisexual, bisexuals*; (4) *trans, transgender, transsexual, transsexuals*.

To see if this trend continued, we surveyed the annual reports of Stonewall between 2017 and 2022. We used similar methodology, looking at mentions of individual sexual orientations and gender identities. Reflecting expanding terminologies in use, we included the words ‘non-binary’, ‘queer’, and ‘asexual’ in the analysis.

As seen in Figure 2, our findings showed the trend seen in Biggs’ research has continued in subsequent years. ‘Lesbian/s’ were mentioned in Stonewall annual reports just 16 times in the five years

we examined,<sup>2</sup> 10% of all mentions. Stonewall mentions of the word ‘gay’ also declined over recent years. ‘Trans,’<sup>3</sup> on the other hand, was by far the most popular word in Stonewall annual reports between 2017 and 2022, appearing 88 times (58% of mentions).

**Figure 2. Mentions of Individual Sexual Orientations/ Gender Identities in Stonewall Annual Reports 2017–2022**



Note. Numbers drawn from Annual Reports lodged at Charity Commission 2017–2022. The 2020 Annual Report was unavailable. The number of words in each annual report to the Charity Commission was counted: (1) *Lesbian, lesbians*; (2) *gay*; (3) *bi, bisexual, bisexuals*; (4) *trans, transgender, transsexual, transsexuals*; (5) *non-binary*, (6) *queer*, and (7) *asexual*. Base: 153.

<sup>2</sup> Note the 2020 annual report was unavailable on Charities Commission website at the time of analysis (November, 2022)

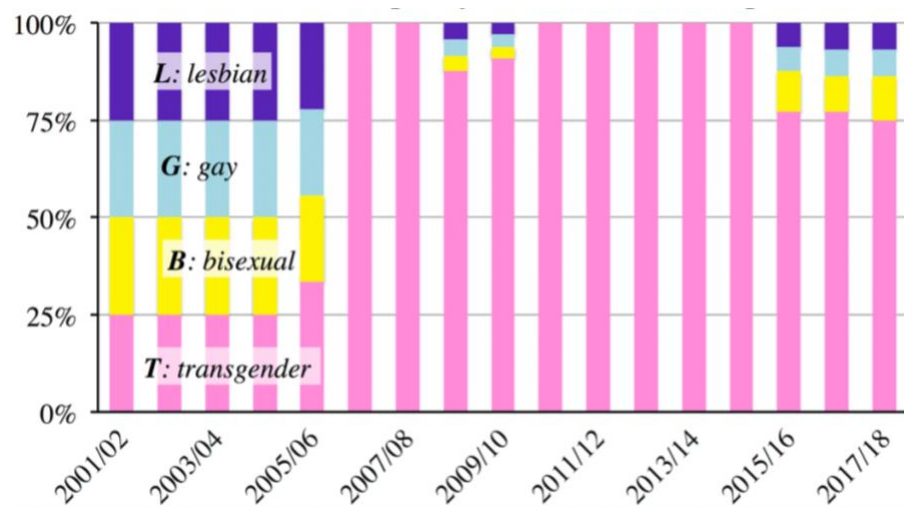
<sup>3</sup>Or variations: *trans, transgender, transsexual, transsexuals*



### Equality Network

Biggs also reviewed the Scottish based Equality Network’s annual reports to Companies House between 2001 and 2018, counting the same words used in his Stonewall research. Figure 3 shows ‘lesbian’ accounted for around 25% of all mentions between 2001 and 2006 after which it dropped off significantly as terms related to ‘trans’ began to dominate mentions.

**Figure 3.** LGBT Words in Equality Network’s Annual Reports 2001–2018



Note. Reproduced from Biggs (2019). The number of words in each annual report to Companies House was counted: (1) Lesbian, lesbians; (2) gay; (3) bi, bisexual, bisexuals; (4) trans, transgender, transsexual, transsexuals.

We examined Equality Network’s annual reports between 2017 and 2022 to see if Biggs’ pattern continued.<sup>4</sup> We used a similar methodology to that used in our Stonewall analysis, but included the term ‘intersex.’<sup>5</sup> Results can be seen in Figure 4. ‘Lesbian/s’ were mentioned in annual reports just 19 times (9% of total mentions) in the six years surveyed, whereas the term ‘trans’<sup>6</sup> appeared 107 times (49% of total mentions).

*‘Lesbian/s’ accounted for around 25% of all mentions between 2001 and 2006 after which it dropped off significantly as terms related to ‘trans’ began to dominate mentions*

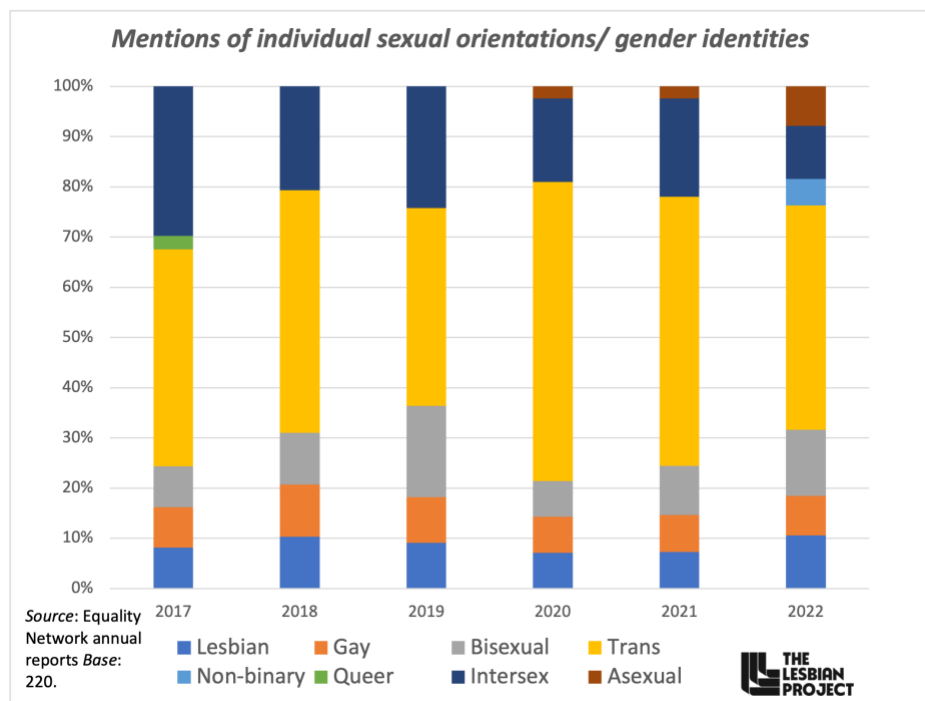
<sup>4</sup> Terms analysed: (1) Lesbian, lesbians; (2) gay; (3) bi, bisexual, bisexuals; (4) trans, transgender, transsexual, transsexuals, (5) non-binary, (6) queer, and (7) asexual

<sup>5</sup> ‘Intersex’ was included in this analysis as a search term as the Equality Network has increasing equality and human rights situation for those with intersex conditions or DSDs

(differences of sex development) as one organisational aim; see <https://www.equality-network.org/about/our-aims/>

<sup>6</sup> Or variations: ‘trans’, ‘transgender’, ‘transsexual’, ‘transsexuals’

**Figure 4. Mentions of Individual Sexual Orientations/ Gender Identities in Equality Network Annual Reports 2017–2022**



Note: Numbers drawn from Equality Network Annual Reports 2017–2022 lodged at Companies House. The number of words in each annual report was counted: (1) Lesbian, lesbians; (2) gay; (3) bi, bisexual, bisexuals; (4) trans, transgender, transsexual, transsexuals, (5) non-binary, (6) queer, (7) intersex, and (8) asexual. While ‘intersex’ is not a sexual orientation or gender identity, it was included as the Equality Network has increasing equality and human rights situation for those with intersex conditions or DSDs (differences of sex development) as an organisational aim. Base: 220.

It should also be noted that nearly all mentions of the word ‘lesbian’ in the annual reports surveyed were found in the formal repetition of charity objects, or (in Stonewall’s case) in descriptions of the

orientations or identities of staff members—rather than for specific dedicated projects where lesbians were named as beneficiaries. There were no projects where lesbians were named as exclusive beneficiaries.

There were four projects in which they were named as beneficiaries of a particular project, along with a few other groups (rather than LGBT+ or LGBTI as a whole):

1. ‘We launched our newest global programme, *Out of the Margins*, which will work with 29 organisations worldwide, including international human rights bodies, human rights violations against lesbians, bi women and trans people’ (Stonewall, 2018)
2. ‘We delivered the second year of our two-year global programme *Out of the Margins*, with 28 organisations across three world regions - Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and Central Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. Together we worked to deepen evidence for international advocacy on inequalities and rights violations faced by lesbians, bi women and trans people (LBT) and raise the visibility of LBT rights issues globally.’ (Stonewall, 2019)
3. ‘We launched our *IVF For All* campaign to ensure that lesbian, bi and queer women as well as trans and non-binary people have equitable access to fertility support on the NHS.’ (Stonewall, 2022).
4. ‘The project conducted community surveys on LGBT+ people’s experiences of conversion therapy, and on lesbian and bi+ women’s experiences and views on kinship’ (Equality Network 2022).

## Discussion

These findings from reports of two major UK LGBT+ organisations—Stonewall and the Equality Network—reveal that in the two decades between 2001 and 2022 there was a marked reduction in mentions of the word ‘lesbian’ in these organisations’ annual reports.

Over the last six years, the word ‘lesbian’ has appeared only 16 times in Stonewall’s annual reports to the Charity Commission, making up 10% of the mentions of LGBT+ orientations and identities overall. The majority of these mentions were merely formal. Similar patterns were found in other major LGBT+ Charity annual reports.

This period corresponds to the one in which both Stonewall and the Equality Network diversified their activities and began to represent the interests of other groups more substantially. Even where lesbians were mentioned, these are rarely discussions of lesbians as beneficiaries in projects, but rather statements about charity aims or staff orientations or identities.

Stonewall is a charity which both receives and spends several millions in income each year. In the last six years of data available, only three of Stonewall’s dedicated projects named lesbians as a particular beneficiary—and in each of those cases, lesbians appeared amongst a wider pool of selected groups.

Taken together, these findings make it clear that despite lesbians having been the two most recent heads of Stonewall (Ruth Hunt 2014–2019; Nancy Kelley 2020-present), lesbians as a group are one of the groups of lowest practical priority to the current UK LGBT+ sector.

*Lesbians as a group are one of the groups of lowest practical priority to the current UK LGBT+ sector*

## Equalities Bodies

### Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)

Lesbians fall under two protected characteristics simultaneously: sex and sexual orientation. Yet, just as an expanded remit in the LGBT+ sector has meant a reduced emphasis on focus on lesbians, the same is the case with governmental and public bodies charged overseeing social equality and equality law. For instance, the inception of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) replaced three separate commissions on sex equality, race, and disability, with an expanded remit covering nine protected characteristics and human rights more generally, while its overall budget was reduced.

During its history, the EHRC has commissioned eight research reports of direct relevance to the LGBT+ community (out of 138), and these include at least one report of relevance only to one group within the wider LGBT+ group (*'Attitudes to transgender people'*). Yet no dedicated reports have been commissioned for lesbians in particular. Additionally, the EHRC has paid little visible attention to the Public Sector Equality Duty as it pertains to lesbians in relation to other LGBT+ groups.

### Government Equalities Office (GEO)

The Government Equalities Office (GEO), meanwhile, describes itself as leading 'work on policy relating to women, sexual orientation and transgender equality'. Amongst its listed priorities are two pertaining to LGBT+ people generally, and several pertaining to women, but it has done little work on lesbians in particular. In 2017, the GEO commissioned a major national LGBT+ survey, which included information about lesbians, but this was recorded in a confusing way, apparently allowing those who were 'male assigned at birth' or 'trans women' could be counted as 'lesbian'.

**Recommendation:** Lesbians in the UK need a mainstream organisation that advocates for their distinctive interests. We have founded The Lesbian Project to address this. We call upon relevant organisations in the LGBT+ and equalities sector to support The Lesbian Project in advancing the interests of lesbians in the UK. We also call upon the EHRC to recognise its statutory duty to enforce equality law for lesbians as a group.

*The EHRC has paid little visible attention to the Public Sector Equality Duty as it pertains to lesbians in relation to other LGBT+ groups.*

## 2. Dedicated Funding for Lesbian Projects

In this section, we investigate the national funding landscape for lesbians. We look at funding to lesbian-specific charitable projects from national lottery distributors and other grant-making bodies, as well as grants from central and local government over the last 13 years. To do this, we used Grantnav to determine the relative number of grants allocated to projects of various sexual orientations and gender identities. We used the advanced search function for each type of funding body ('Lottery Distributor'/'Grantmaking Organisation'/'Central Government'/'Local Government') using search terms *lesbian*, *gay*, *LGB*, *LGBT*, *trans*, *queer*, and *bisexual* for each year from 2010 to 2022.

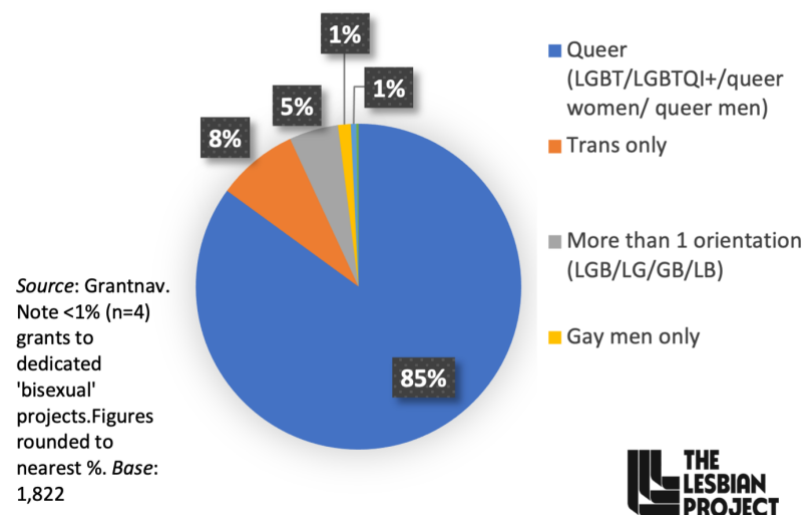
### All funding bodies

Our results showed that funding for dedicated projects for lesbians were few and far between. When we looked at all grants between 2010 and 2022, we found that in total only 10 funded projects named lesbians as the sole beneficiary. This compares with 23 funded projects for gay men, and 147 funded projects for trans people. The category of 'lesbians and bisexual women' fared slightly better: 19 funded projects in 13 years, as compared to 15 for 'gay and bisexual men.'

Figure 5 shows that by far the most popular funding beneficiary was the 'LGBT' group and associated variations, across all funders, with 1,550 grants (around 85%) dedicated to queer/ LGBT/ LGBTQI. In nearly all cases, it was unclear from the grant description what proportion of the money allocated would be spent on distinct orientations or identities under the LGBT+ umbrella.

**Figure 5.** Percentage of Grants by Sexual Orientations/ Gender Identities 2010–2022 (All Funding Bodies)

### All funded projects 2010-2022



Note: Grantnav advanced search across 13 years from 2010 to 2022 using words '*lesbian*' '*gay*' '*LGB*' '*LGBT*' '*trans*' '*queer*' and '*bisexual*'. Titles and descriptions of grants awarded were examined to determine the primary beneficiaries. 184 irrelevant/ unclear grants were excluded from the analysis. Base: 1,822.

Next we look in more detail at this funding, separating findings by grant type: (a) national lottery distributors, (b) other grant-making (non-lottery) bodies, (c) central government, and (d) local government.

### Projects funded by national lottery and other grant-making bodies

Our research reveals that between 2010 and 2022, £40,471,046 of national lottery funds were distributed for LGBT+ projects. We found that lesbian-specific projects received just £91,978 (less than 1%) of these funds.

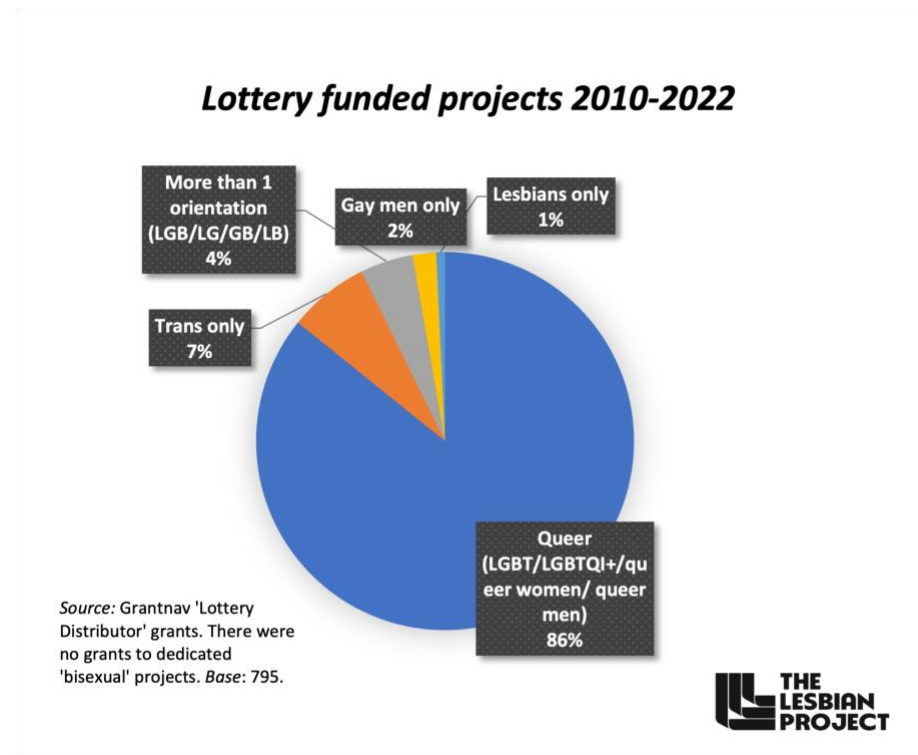
When we looked at non-lottery funds (using the filter 'Grantmaking Organisation') between 2010 and 2022, we found £46,442,686 distributed for LGBT+ projects. Of this, lesbian-specific projects received only £5,665 (less than 1%) of this funding.

Figure 6 shows that—in terms of *numbers* of grants awarded—of the 795 grants awarded by lottery fund distributors, just 6 (1%) were awarded to projects solely focusing on lesbians.

Figure 7 shows that of the 867 grants awarded by funding bodies, just 2 (less than 1%) were awarded to projects solely focusing on lesbians.

*Between 2010 and 2022, £40,471,046 of national lottery funds were distributed for LGBT+ projects. We found that lesbian-specific projects received just £91,978 (less than 1%) of these funds*

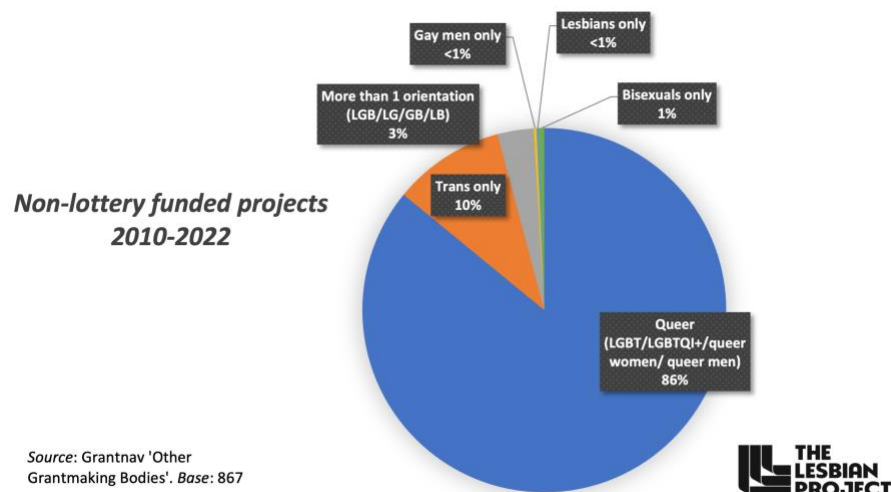
**Figure 6.** Percentage of National Lottery Grants by Sexual Orientations/ Gender Identities 2010–2022



Note: Grantnav advanced search on 'lottery distributor' across 13 years from 2010 to 2022 using words 'lesbian' 'gay' 'LGB' 'LGBT' 'trans' 'queer' and 'bisexual'. Titles and descriptions of grants awarded were examined to determine the primary beneficiaries. There were no grants awarded to dedicated 'bisexual' projects during this period. Nine irrelevant grants involving word 'trans' were also excluded, or where it was unclear how LGBT people were involved. Base: 795.



**Figure 7. Percentage of Grants (Non-Lottery) by Sexual Orientations/ Gender Identities 2010–2022**



Note: Grantnav advanced search on 'grant-making organisations' across 13 years from 2010 to 2022 using words 'lesbian' 'gay' 'LGB' 'LGBT' 'trans' 'queer' and 'bisexual'. Titles and descriptions of grants awarded were examined to determine the primary beneficiaries. 'Wellcome Trust' was excluded from search results due to high number of false positive medical grants. 105 other irrelevant grants were excluded, some involving word 'trans', or where it was unclear how LGBT people were involved. Base: 867.

Below we list details of lesbian-only projects funded by the national lottery and other grant-making bodies over the past 13 years:

#### National lottery distributor

1. *2010: Manchester Lesbian Community Project.* 'This community group in Manchester will use funding to offer literacy and basic computing classes. This will improve opportunities for beneficiaries

to gain employment and also improve self-confidence and self esteem' Amount awarded: £9,779.

2. *2012: Women's Equality Network.* 'Women's Equality Network Wales will organise a series of workshops across Wales aimed at researching the issues faced by older women, particularly those from black and ethnic minority communities, lesbians and disabled women. They will create a report based on the research evidence which they will use to highlight these issues to policy makers.' Amount awarded: £5,000.
3. *2016: Glasgow Women's Library.* 'Lesbian Archive Development Project. This project will carry out a survey and develop a team of volunteers to act as champions for the collection'. Amount awarded: £9,999.
4. *2017: Pride in Plymouth.* 'Lesbian Voices of Plymouth- Past and Present'. Amount awarded: £46,200.
5. *2019: Behind The Lines.* 'Connecting communities with hidden lesbian stories embedded in popular heritage from the past'. Amount awarded: £20,000.
6. *2020: Older Lesbians Being Seen.* 'We want to hire a float or bus'. Amount awarded: £1,000.

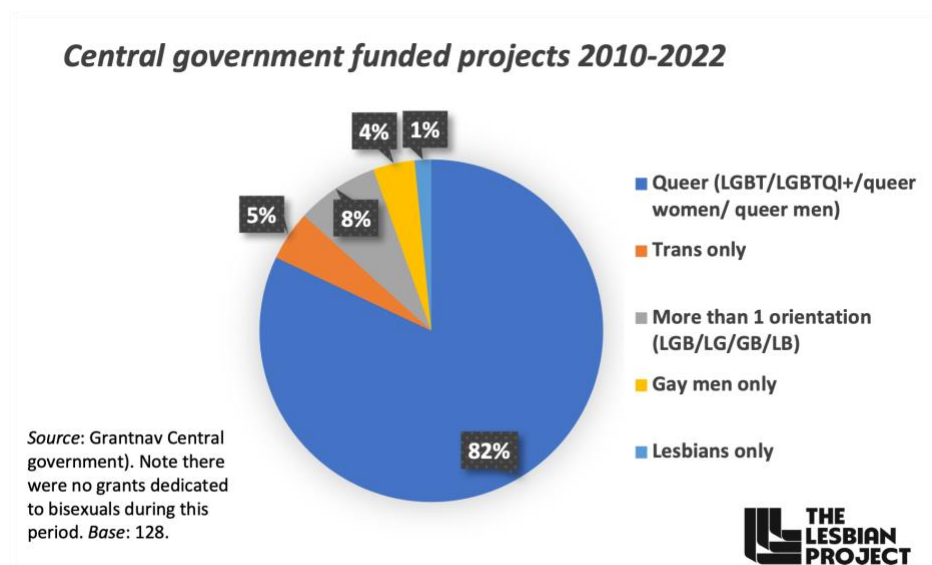
#### Other grant-making bodies

1. *2019: Grant to Lesbian Unity Festival South London (LezFest).* 'Support the implementation of Lesbian Unity Festival 2019 for women of all background in South London.' Amount awarded: £1,500.
2. *2020: Lesbian Immigration Support Group.* 'Beyond Safety. Food, phone credit and essential kitchen items' Amount awarded: £4,165.

### Central and local government funded projects

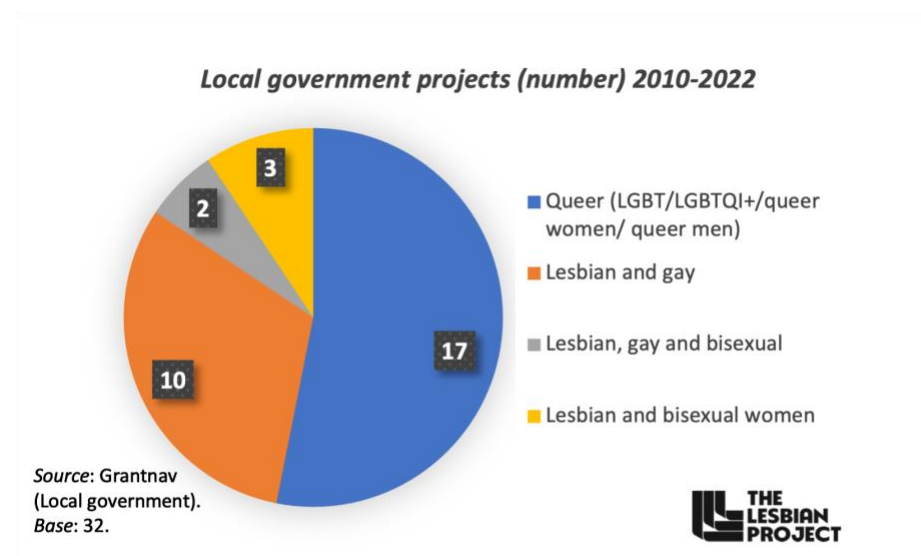
Finally, we looked at central and local government funds to LGBT+ projects between 2010 and 2022. Figure 8 shows that of the 128 grants awarded by central government funding bodies, just 2 (1.6%) were awarded to projects solely focusing on lesbians. Figure 9 shows that of the 32 local government grants awarded to LGBT+ projects, none were awarded to lesbian-specific projects.

**Figure 8.** Percentage of Central Government Grants by Sexual Orientations/ Gender Identities 2010–2022



Note: Grantnav advanced search on 'central government' funders across 13 years from 2010 to 2022 using words 'lesbian' 'gay' 'LGB' 'LGBT' 'trans' 'queer' and 'bisexual'. Titles and descriptions of grants awarded were examined to determine the primary beneficiaries. 70 irrelevant grants were excluded, some involving word 'trans', or where it was unclear how LGBT people were involved. Base: 128.

**Figure 9.** Number of Local Government Grants by Sexual Orientations/ Gender Identities 2010–2022



**Figure 8.** Grantnav advanced search on 'local government' funders across 13 years from 2010 to 2022 using words 'lesbian' 'gay' 'LGB' 'LGBT' 'trans' 'queer' and 'bisexual'. Titles and descriptions of grants awarded were examined to determine the primary beneficiaries. There were no grants awarded solely to lesbian, gay men, bisexual, or trans-focused projects during this period. Base: 32.

Below we list the two lesbian-only projects funded by central government over last 13 years:

1. *2019: University of Cambridge. Shared biological motherhood: Parent-child relationships and child adjustment in lesbian mother families formed through partner-donated eggs. Amount awarded: £468,684.*
2. *2020: KAIROS Nottingham Lesbian Immigration Support Group. 'The fund aims to: 1) To reduce closures of essential charities that provide essential services to vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 crisis by ensuring they have the financial resources to operate, thereby reducing the burden on public services.2) To ensure essential services are provided to vulnerable people, both in the short and long term through increased community support through the work of charitable organisations.'* Amount awarded: £1,200.

*Of the 128 grants awarded by central government funding bodies, just 2 (1.6%) were awarded to projects solely focusing on lesbians. Of the 32 local government grants awarded to LGBT+ projects, none were awarded to lesbian-specific projects*

## Discussion

Despite large amounts of money flowing into LGBT+ projects, lesbians are of the lowest priority in funding decisions, relatively speaking.

Across the time period we surveyed, it has become increasingly popular to allocate funding to a composite group, understood as including lesbians, bisexual women, trans women, and sometimes nonbinary people too. This group – which includes both same-sex-attracted females and same-sex-attracted and opposite-sex attracted males, but is presented as a unified group nonetheless (sometimes referred to as 'queer women') - is an increasingly popular funding recipient: 50 grants in 12 years. It's possible that funders tend to think of this as an inclusive grouping for 'women' in the LGBT+ sector, but once again it's unclear in such cases how funding is allocated to particular orientations and identities, or indeed sexes, within the composite group.

The general conclusion we draw here is that across the sector, there is very little funded charity activity deliberately going towards lesbians in particular, distinct from other groups; and little attention being paid to their particular interests.

**Recommendation:** Lesbians need their own funded projects, which would not only provide important services for lesbians, but also furnish valuable information about their changing needs. We call upon government funding bodies, lottery distributors, and major UK grant-making funding bodies to encourage applications for lesbian causes, and to work towards making funding for lesbians more equitable with other LGBT+ groups.

### 3. The Collection and Publication of Statistical Data About Lesbians

#### *Census*

Findings from the 2021 England and Wales Census<sup>7</sup> give us the most recent information about numbers of lesbians in England and Wales. These can be extracted from those who identified as belonging to the category 'gay or lesbian', cross-referenced with those who described themselves as 'female'. Responses indicate that 1.15% of England & Wales female residents over sixteen identified as lesbian, as compared to 1.76% of females identifying as bisexual, and 1.95% of males identifying as gay. This translates as 349,831 women in England and Wales identifying as lesbians.

In age groups up to 44 years old, females were more likely to identify as bisexual than as 'gay or lesbian'. This was particularly the case in the 16-24 group, with females three times as likely to say this. Generally speaking, females (1.76% or 440,000) were more than twice as likely to have identified as bisexual than males (0.78% or 184,000). This represents a continuation of a trend observed since 2014, where a higher proportion of men than women identify as gay or lesbian and a higher proportion of women than men identify as bisexual.

There are some limitations to this data, however. First, a significant number of people (7.5%) chose not to respond to the Census question on sexual orientation. If the reason for some lesbians' non-disclosure on this question was fear, stigma, or being closeted within a household,

actual numbers could be higher. It's therefore important to find out why such a large number did not respond to this question.

Second, in the Census questions 'straight/heterosexual', 'gay or lesbian', and 'bisexual' were presented as sexual orientations alongside an option for 'other'. Of those who chose 'other', 0.27% of females identified as 'pansexual'; 0.08% identified as 'asexual'; and 0.04% as 'queer', with females more likely than males to have identified into these further categories. Yet strictly speaking, being asexual or queer is compatible with being lesbian. The use of the 'other' option may therefore confound information about true lesbian numbers.

Third, a further complicating factor is that high numbers of exclusively same-sex-attracted women do not like, or use, the term 'lesbian'. They might prefer 'gay', or 'queer', or some other term.

Finally, of those who identified as trans women in the question on gender identity, 66% replied 'female' in the sex question. Of those who identified as trans men in the question on gender identity, 68% replied 'male'. Since some trans men are exclusively same-sex-attracted females, and no trans woman is biologically female, both of these aspects could potentially further obscure the data about numbers of lesbians, when cross-referenced with sexual orientation answers.

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/bulletins/sexualorientationenglandandwales/census2021>

### *Bodies who collect and publish statistical data*

Generally speaking, there's an increasing tendency for bodies who collect and publish statistical data to treat 'gay or lesbian' as one homogenous group. This has the potential to mask important differences between lesbians and gay men. Similarly, lesbians are often included in a grouping of 'lesbian, gay, bisexual', which potentially masks not only differences between lesbians and gay men, but also between lesbians and bisexual women.

To take just two examples: the Office for National Statistics (ONS) publication 'Personal well-being and sexual identity in the UK: 2013 to 2015'<sup>8</sup> offered findings for 'gay or lesbian' and 'bisexual', reporting that 'those who identify themselves as gay or lesbian, or bisexual report lower well-being than the UK average for all personal well-being questions'. However, it did not further disaggregate findings for lesbians, gay men, bisexual women, and bisexual men considered as distinct groups. Because of sex-based differences and associated social patterns, it's possible and even probable that results would have varied significantly amongst, say, gay men and lesbians. There may also have been important differences between lesbians and bisexual women that remain hidden by the lack of specificity.

Meanwhile, the NatCen publication<sup>9</sup> 'Investigating factors associated with loneliness in adults in England' (2022) reported that 'gay, lesbian, and bisexual people' were found to be at a greater risk of loneliness than heterosexual people, but did not further disaggregate into particular orientations either. Again, there might well have been interesting differences between lesbians, gay men, and bisexual men

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/2013to2015#differences-between-sexual-identities-largest-for-anxiety>

and women but the lack of disaggregation meant this opportunity was lost.

***Recommendation:*** As well as providing information, data is a prerequisite for service planning, and for agencies and organisations to prioritise funding and resources. We call upon those national bodies who collect and publish statistical data, including the Office for National Statistics and its Centre for Equalities and Inclusion, to improve the quality of data collected on lesbians specifically. As well as providing information, data is also a prerequisite for service planning, and for agencies and organisations to prioritise funding and resources. Wherever data is gathered about a wider group that includes lesbians, we call upon data collectors to further disaggregate findings for sex plus sexual orientation. We also urge data collectors to treat lesbianism as an orientation only available to females, to preserve data robustness.

<sup>9</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/factors-associated-with-loneliness-in-adults-in-england-during-the-pandemic/investigating-factors-associated-with-loneliness-amongst-adults-in-england-during-the-pandemic>

## 4. Academic Research into Lesbian Lives

To gain a better understanding of the extent to which lesbians are the focus of academic research and whether this has shifted over time, we reviewed the extent to which the word 'lesbian' appears in titles of academic articles and grants between 2010 and 2020.

### Academic journal articles

To do this, we compared the number of articles with 'lesbian' in their title with other groups,<sup>10</sup> year by year from 2010 to 2020. JSTOR (Journal Storage) is one of the most highly used platforms with over 2,800 academic journal titles in its searchable archive spanning the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences across 57 countries.<sup>11</sup>

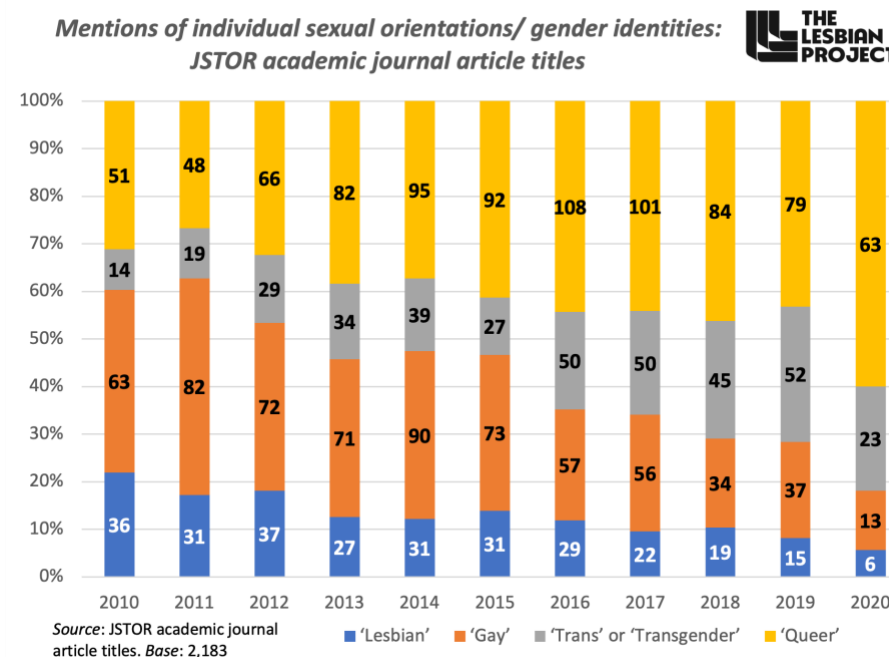
We found that 'lesbians' as a group are mentioned the fewest times of those orientation/ identity categories reviewed, making up 13% of total mentions. This compares with 17% 'trans'/'transgender', 30% 'gay', and 40% 'queer'.

We can see in Figure 10 that lesbian mentions compared with other groups diminishes across time. In 2010 'lesbian' appeared 36 times in JSTOR journal article titles (22% of mentions) but by 2020 it was just 6 times (6% of mentions). The term 'gay' also declined sharply over the 11 years, although from a larger base than 'lesbian.'

The term 'queer' on the other hand—while high to begin with (31% of mentions)—increased further over time to 60% by 2020. In contrast, it is notable that by 2020 the combined terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' comprised only 18% of mentions compared to combined 'trans/transgender' and 'queer' which made up 82%. By 2020 only around 1 in 5 (18%) mentions were for the terms 'gay' or 'lesbian'

whereas the remainder—4 in 5 (82%) were 'trans'/'transgender' or 'queer.'

**Figure 10.** Mentions of Individual Sexual Orientations/ Gender Identities in JSTOR Academic Journal Article Titles 2010–2020



Note: JSTOR Advanced search, using words 'lesbian' 'gay' 'trans' 'transgender' and 'queer'. A number of irrelevant grants involving word 'trans' were excluded. Base: 2,183.

<sup>10</sup> Search terms: 'lesbian', 'gay', 'trans'/'transgender', and 'queer'

<sup>11</sup> <https://about.jstor.org/librarians/journals/>



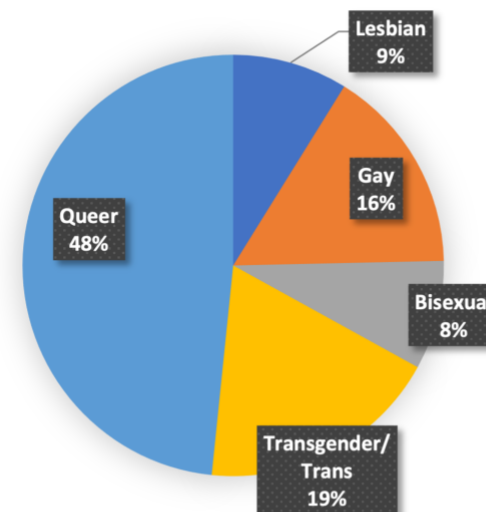
### Research grants

As a further indication, we looked at the numbers of awarded academic research grants with 'lesbian' in the title, comparing it with other commonly mentioned orientations and identities in research grant titles. We used the Gateway to Research (GtR) website developed by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) to search and analyse information about publicly funded research.<sup>12</sup> We covered the entire period for which UKRI has records (from 2006<sup>13</sup>), and included both completed and active projects.

Figure 11 shows that of the total 215 LGBT+ projects included in the database, we found that since 2005, there have been 19 projects (9% of the total) with 'lesbian' in the title, as opposed to 34 for 'gay' (16%), and 18 for 'bisexual' (8%). Once again, 'queer' is by far the most popular LGBT+ word for funders, with 104 projects (48%) mentioning 'queer' in their titles funded since 2005. Also once again, 'transgender' and 'trans' are more popular with funders than projects on sexual orientations (40 grants, 19%).

**Figure 11.** Number of UK Academic Grants by Sexual Orientations/ Gender Identities (2006–2022)

*Percentage of academic grants by sexual orientations/ gender identities (2006-2022)*



Source: <https://gtr.ukri.org/search>.  
Base: 215

Note. Advanced search of <https://gtr.ukri.org/search> of titles from years 2006 to 2022 using search words 'lesbian' 'gay' 'bisexual' 'transgender' 'trans' and 'queer'. A number of irrelevant grants involving word 'trans' were excluded. Base: 215.

<sup>12</sup> <https://gtr.ukri.org/resources/about.html>

<sup>13</sup> Including those with a start year in the future (up to 2025 at the time of the analysis in November 2022)

Of the 19 funded research grants that mention 'lesbian' in the title, only 8 were (ostensibly) exclusively dedicated to research on lesbian life. But even this relatively modest finding must be heavily caveated, because in several pieces of research we looked at under this heading, 'lesbian' was being used by researchers in a way that did not map exactly on to the category of exclusively same-sex-attracted females; that is, it potentially included some subjects who were not exclusively same-sex-attracted-females, and potentially excluding some subjects who were. For instance: 'Queer Women and Where to Find Them: An Intersectional History of Lesbian Space in London from the 1970s-1990s' (AHRC, 2021-24) makes clear from the project description that it treats lesbianism as an identity, and is also concerned with the wider category of 'queer women'. 'A Sociolinguistic Study of Identity Construction From Lesbian Youth On TikTok' (ESRC, 2022-26) makes clear from the project description that it's focused on 'self-identified lesbian youth'.

It seems therefore that, in practice, the amount of funded research solely dedicated to lesbian life is even smaller than it appears in the data.

### Discussion

In academia generally, there has been a significant loss of research into lesbian lives, experiences, and interests. There is apparently a preference for discussing lesbian lives, if at all, under some larger umbrella heading such as 'queer' or 'LGBT' (not surveyed here), or alongside gay men.

This was precipitated by the rise of queer theory and gender identity ideology, both of which frame lesbianism as an identity alongside others—one that males may partake in, and that exclusively same-sex-attracted females may opt out of. Comprehensively documenting this loss will take a separate piece of research which we hope to do in future.

**Recommendation:** Lesbians urgently need academic research that treats them as a valuable and interesting research subject in their own right. We call upon academics, research funding bodies, and think tanks to build and fund research models and methodologies which create space for robust data about lesbian lives to emerge.

*There is apparently a preference for discussing lesbian lives, if at all, under some larger umbrella heading such as 'queer' or 'LGBT' or alongside gay men.*

## 5. Lesbian Social Venues

In the past, a vibrant lesbian social scene played a significant role in grounding and sustaining lesbian communities, locally and nationally. It also provided a valuable place where newly out or partly-closeted lesbians could make friends and connect with others, away from heterosexual male advances, judgmental glances, and also in a way that was separate from gay male sexual culture.

Though much of the original scene was informal, based around the organising of collectives and women's groups, nonetheless there were also several permanent dedicated venues for lesbian socializing. These days, however, there are only two remaining permanent venues in the UK that advertise themselves as predominantly for lesbians. The few club and bar nights that remain and are advertised as lesbian-friendly tend to be sporadic, and branded for queer women, including trans women.

We have focused below on permanent lesbian venues: pubs, clubs, or rooms within pubs. The list below is not exhaustive but indicates the extent to which permanent lesbian social venues are now scarce. (Those shaded red have closed; those shaded amber are no longer officially for lesbians/ mixed; those in green are still open. Some opening and closure dates are tentative.)

A separate issue is the disappearance of lesbian-only or predominantly lesbian nights in otherwise mixed-sex venues, which we do not cover in detail here. These are also scarce, with nearly all events advertised as for other identity groups as well.

There is also a lack of lesbian-only networks and formal associations in workplaces or elsewhere. Partly this is because of the monopoly of LGBT staff networks, instigated in workplaces by Stonewall. Partly it is due to a fear of being seen as 'discriminatory' by 'excluding' other groups. And partly it is due to lack of public clarity about whether lesbian-only formal associations (understood as confined to females) are permitted under the Equality Act, given the protected characteristics of 'sex' and 'sexual orientation' and their legal interaction with the protected characteristic of 'gender reassignment'. We follow Sex Matters in calling upon the EHRC to clarify this matter.

***Recommendation:*** In light of the severe decline of the lesbian social scene, we urge public organisations to find creative ways to allow lesbians to meet and support each other, and to actively support ongoing attempts to revive the lesbian social scene, across the UK. We also call upon the EHRC to clarify whether the Equality Act permits formal associations that are open only to same-sex-attracted females, given their possession of two protected characteristics as such

Venue name	Address	Type	Era	URL
<i>Ace of Clubs</i>	52 Piccadilly, London	Lesbian club	80s/90s	<a href="https://twitter.com/gaystheword/status/1252289486475669511/phot">https://twitter.com/gaystheword/status/1252289486475669511/phot</a>
<i>Bar Titania</i>	Charing Cross	Lesbian bar	2013-16?	<a href="https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction_Review-g186338-d7776571-Reviews-Bar_Titania-London_England.html">https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction_Review-g186338-d7776571-Reviews-Bar_Titania-London_England.html</a>
<i>Below Stairs at The Lesbian and Gay Centre</i>	67 Cowcross Street, London	Lesbian bar	1984-91	<a href="https://twitter.com/gaystheword/status/1252289486475669511/photo/1">https://twitter.com/gaystheword/status/1252289486475669511/photo/1</a> <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_Lesbian_and_Gay_Centre">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_Lesbian_and_Gay_Centre</a>
<i>Blush Bar</i>	Stoke Newington, London	Lesbian bar	1997-2015	<a href="https://goodbyelondontown.wordpress.com/">https://goodbyelondontown.wordpress.com/</a>
<i>Candy Bar</i>	Carlisle Street, London	Lesbian bar	1996-2014	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2013/oct/27/lesbians-soho-candy-bar-close-london">https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2013/oct/27/lesbians-soho-candy-bar-close-london</a>
<i>Candy Bar</i>	St James Street Brighton	Lesbian Club	Closed 2005	<a href="https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/6707649.lesbian-club-is-put-up-for-sale/">https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/6707649.lesbian-club-is-put-up-for-sale/</a>
<i>Carved Red Lion</i>	Islington. London	Predominantly lesbian pub	70s and 80s	<a href="https://islington.humap.site/map/records/the-carved-red-lion">https://islington.humap.site/map/records/the-carved-red-lion</a>
<i>The Champion</i>	Notting Hill	Predominantly lesbian pub	1960s	<a href="https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/lgbtq-heritage-project/meeting-and-socialising/lesbian-clubs-and-pubs/">https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/lgbtq-heritage-project/meeting-and-socialising/lesbian-clubs-and-pubs/</a>
<i>Club Louise</i>	Poland Street, Soho	Lesbian club	1973-1980s	<a href="https://historicengland.org.uk/get-involved/visit/walking-tours/queer-soho-walking-tour/club-louise/">https://historicengland.org.uk/get-involved/visit/walking-tours/queer-soho-walking-tour/club-louise/</a>
<i>Coyote's</i>	Manchester	Lesbian bar	2003- 2014 approx.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/101765596533774/">https://www.facebook.com/groups/101765596533774/</a>
<i>Due South</i>	Stoke Newington	Predominantly lesbian pub	Mid 90s- 2004 approx	<a href="https://onlywhenimdancing.com/stoke-newington/due-south/">https://onlywhenimdancing.com/stoke-newington/due-south/</a>
<i>Duke of Clarence</i>	Islington	Lesbian bar	Closed at end of 90s	<a href="https://www.thegayuk.com/lost-lgbt-scene-the-duke-of-clarence-islington/">https://www.thegayuk.com/lost-lgbt-scene-the-duke-of-clarence-islington/</a>
<i>The Fiesta</i>	Notting Hill	Predominantly lesbian pub	1960s	<a href="https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/lgbtq-heritage-project/meeting-and-socialising/lesbian-clubs-and-pubs/">https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/lgbtq-heritage-project/meeting-and-socialising/lesbian-clubs-and-pubs/</a>

Venue name	Address	Type	Era	URL
<b>First Out</b>	Soho	Predominantly lesbian but mixed venue	1986-2011	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/oct/09/first-out-cafe-closure">https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/oct/09/first-out-cafe-closure</a>
<b>Follies</b>	Manchester	Lesbian bar	Late 90s-?	<a href="https://ilovemanchester.com/a-queer-block-party-for-all-homoelectric-unveils-iconic-line-up-for-homobloc-festival-at-mayfield-depot">https://ilovemanchester.com/a-queer-block-party-for-all-homoelectric-unveils-iconic-line-up-for-homobloc-festival-at-mayfield-depot</a>
<b>Forester's Arms</b>	Nottingham	Lesbian pub, now mixed	1958	<a href="http://www.ournottinghamshire.org.uk/page_id_448_path_0p31p34p53p178p.aspx">http://www.ournottinghamshire.org.uk/page_id_448_path_0p31p34p53p178p.aspx</a>
<b>The Fox</b>	Birmingham	Lesbian pub.	Open; now mixed LGBT.	<a href="http://www.thefoxbar.co.uk/">http://www.thefoxbar.co.uk/</a>
<b>Gateways</b>	Kings Road, Chelsea	Lesbian bar	1931-85	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gateways_club">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gateways_club</a>
<b>Girls Go Down at G-A-Y</b>	Old Compton Street, Soho	Downstairs bar	Still open in 2019- now replaced?	<a href="https://www.timeout.com/london/nightlife/g-a-y-bar">https://www.timeout.com/london/nightlife/g-a-y-bar</a>
<b>Glass Bar</b>	Euston, London	Lesbian bar.	2001-2008	<a href="http://lostwomynspace.blogspot.com/2011/11/glass-bar.html">http://lostwomynspace.blogspot.com/2011/11/glass-bar.html</a>
<b>Katies Bar</b>	Glasgow	Lesbian bar	Open, now mixed LGBT.	<a href="https://www.autostraddle.com/glasgow-qgcg/">https://www.autostraddle.com/glasgow-qgcg/</a>
<b>Marlborough</b>	Princes Street, Brighton	Lesbian pub.	Open, now mixed LGBT.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/marlboroughbrighton/">https://www.facebook.com/marlboroughbrighton/</a>
<b>Muse Soho (formerly Labels)</b>	Frith Street	Lesbian bar	Closed 2017/18	
<b>Napier Pub</b>	Nottingham	Lesbian pub.	1960s	<a href="http://895be307.webeden.org/venues">http://895be307.webeden.org/venues</a>
<b>Oak Bar</b>	Stoke Newington	Predominantly lesbian bar	Closed 1993- 2013	<a href="https://lostspacespodcast.com/blush-bar-stoke-newington-london/">https://lostspacespodcast.com/blush-bar-stoke-newington-london/</a>
<b>Old Moseley Arms (pool room)</b>	Birmingham	Lesbian room in mixed pub.	Open, now mixed.	<a href="http://www.gaybirminghamremembered.co.uk/tags/Old%20Mo">http://www.gaybirminghamremembered.co.uk/tags/Old%20Mo</a>
<b>Robin Hood Club</b>	Westbourne Grove, London	Predominantly lesbian club	Mid 60s-80s	<a href="https://www.historypin.org/en/person/63836/explore/geo/52.558899,-2.305228,6/bounds/48.599402,-7.358939,56.190732,2.748483/paging/1/pin/1037953">https://www.historypin.org/en/person/63836/explore/geo/52.558899,-2.305228,6/bounds/48.599402,-7.358939,56.190732,2.748483/paging/1/pin/1037953</a>
<b>Rush Bar</b>	Soho	Lesbian bar	Closed in Mid 2000s	<a href="http://lostwomynspace.blogspot.com/2016/01/london-lesbian-bars.html">http://lostwomynspace.blogspot.com/2016/01/london-lesbian-bars.html</a>
<b>Sappho's in Sadie Frost's</b>	Glasgow	Lesbian room within pub	Closed	<a href="http://hiddenglasgow.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=10459">http://hiddenglasgow.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=10459</a>
<b>Southtopia</b>	London	Lesbian bar	Closed	

Venue name	Address	Type	Era	URL
<b><i>SHE Soho</i></b>	Soho, London	Predominantly lesbian bar	Open	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/shesohobar/?locale=en_GB">https://www.facebook.com/shesohobar/?locale=en_GB</a>
<b><i>Stokey Stop</i></b>	Stoke Newington, London	Predominantly lesbian bar	2013-16	<a href="https://lostspacespodcast.com/blush-bar-stoke-newington-london/">https://lostspacespodcast.com/blush-bar-stoke-newington-london/</a>
<b><i>Triangles</i></b>	Nottingham	Lesbian club	1992-?	<a href="https://www.leftlion.co.uk/read/2020/july/exploring-the-lgbtqplus-community-and-nottingham-s-night-time-culture/">https://www.leftlion.co.uk/read/2020/july/exploring-the-lgbtqplus-community-and-nottingham-s-night-time-culture/</a>
<b><i>Rockets at The Pied Bull</i></b>	Liverpool Road, Islington	Iconic Thursdays and Fridays event.	1980s-90s	<a href="https://islington.humap.site/map/records/rockets">https://islington.humap.site/map/records/rockets</a>
<b><i>Rush bar</i></b>	London	Lesbian bar	Closed in mid-90s	<a href="https://goodbyelondontown.wordpress.com/">https://goodbyelondontown.wordpress.com/</a>
<b><i>Vanilla</i></b>	Manchester	Predominantly lesbian bar.	Open	<a href="https://www.nightflow.com/vanilla-manchester/">https://www.nightflow.com/vanilla-manchester/</a>
<b><i>Velvet Jacks</i></b>	Brighton	Lesbian bar.	Now mixed.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/velvetjacksbrighton">https://www.facebook.com/velvetjacksbrighton</a>
<b><i>Vespa Bar</i></b>	Giles High Street, London	Predominantly lesbian bar	Closed	<a href="https://londonist.com/2006/12/the-intrepid-co">https://londonist.com/2006/12/the-intrepid-co</a>



## About The Lesbian Project

**The Lesbian Project highlights and champions the experiences, insights and sensibilities of lesbians in all their diversity. We intend to give voice and influence to women whose stories are too often overlooked.**

We work to:

- build a knowledge base about lesbian lives
- promote sensible and evidence-based policy
- contribute to building lesbian community in the UK and internationally

**Find out more at [thelesbianproject.co.uk](https://thelesbianproject.co.uk)**

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