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<th>Colourful voices: the experience of young lesbians combating homophobia and heteronormativity</th>
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Women & Gender Studies Series

Colourful Voices: The Experience of Young Lesbians Combating Homophobia and Heteronormativity

Aoife Mallon

Abstract

This article explores the current status of LGBT youth in Ireland, particularly focussing on the lesbian youth experience. Although previous studies have been undertaken in relation to LGBT individuals, and while there are a number of reports into the mental health of young LGBTs, little research has been carried out with regards to the lived experiences of younger lesbians specifically and how this has affected their identification process. This paper focuses on younger lesbian sexuality, those aged in their late teens to early thirties and the exploration of their patterns of identity. Through the process of an online survey which is comprised of a large sample of younger lesbians in Ireland, the author explores key themes such as “coming out”, homophobia, schooling, gender-based violence, socialization and media representation. Although coming out is an external process, it is one which has complex internal components and is a recurrent process in a heteronormative society such as Ireland. Homophobia and sexism are often intrinsically linked with coming out, with lesbians being discriminated against because of their sexuality and because they are women. Furthermore this paper explores in detail socially constructed environments such as schools and what institutionalized heteronormativity means for younger lesbians and the LGBT community. Schools are crucial spaces for the development of young people’s identities. But quite often individual identities are not fostered and encouraged but rather heterosexual identities are. This paper shows how homophobic bullying and violence serves to reinforce the heterosexual norm, by creating a climate of fear. It shows the resilience of LGBT youth resulting in a fascinating insight into the lives of a marginalized group in society.

Key words: lesbian identity; heteronormativity; homophobia; gender; sexuality; social practices
Introduction
As a young Irish lesbian this research is of particular personal interest to me and quite quickly I found that the research process developed my own identity as a researcher. To claim to be an objective researcher goes against a principle of feminist research, in that the researcher is part of the process not merely an impartial observer as required in traditional positivist approaches. Letherby (2003: 9) reinforces this point, adding that feminist accounts should be “grounded in the personal”. Furthermore Campbell and Wasco (2000: 783) state that “the process of research is of as much importance as the outcome”. Whilst midlife and older lesbians also face discrimination in relation to their age, it is my experience that younger lesbians face discrimination also but it is more implicit. Younger lesbians are marginalized by society because of their gender and sexuality, but this can also happen amongst the lesbian community. Throughout this research I was particularly interested in hearing opinions and experiences from younger lesbians. Feminist researchers have highlighted how women’s lives have not been understood by “traditional theories and research” (Deutsch, 2004: 895) and I believe this indicative of younger lesbians in Irish society.

This paper analyses the opinions of a sample of lesbians in Ireland, exploring their situations and gaining knowledge through their personal experiences and observations. Through survey methods via the internet, this research covers a wide geographical area. The completed survey included 34 questions, the majority of which provided multiple-choice answers, but also gave the option of “other” where it was found necessary, which allowed participants to add to the survey. The survey itself took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. In total 112 completed surveys were received. Although using an internet survey proved a beneficial research tool in many regards it is limited to those with internet access. Similarly because the majority of those recruited for the survey were through LGBT websites or social networking pages it means that the opinions of women who do not use these sites but identify as “lesbians” are in all likelihood under-represented. Also women who do not identify as “lesbian” but have same-sex relationships with women are not captured in this survey.

Colourful Voices: The Sample
There is a dearth of literature and research focusing on the experience of contemporary younger lesbians in Ireland. Whilst literature exists, which describes the experiences of lesbians in Ireland of the 1970s-1990s (those lesbians now being in their midlife, that is aged mid 40s to early 50s) and older lesbians (late 50s onwards), the literature is quite limited on the experience of younger women coming to identity as lesbians. Thus, for my sample population I focussed on younger lesbians (late teens to mid 30s) with the age range as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34-37</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>112</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The vast majority (94.66%) of respondents indicated their primary nationality was Irish with over 98% of respondents living in Ireland at the time of completing this survey. Over half the sample (56.35%) lived in a city with a further 23.64% indicating they were living in a suburb of a city or a large town. Those living in rural areas made up just 10% of the overall sample. The responses of the minority of those living in rural areas resonate with much of the literature in relation to the experiences of older rural lesbians and how socially alienating this can be. One lesbian woman, for example details that the reality for many lesbians living in rural Ireland involves a constant “isolated struggle to believe in themselves” (DLGC, 1986: 23). This particular individual, who chose to remain anonymous, highlights the difficulties of living in a rural part of Ireland and stresses that occasional visits to nearby urban areas to socialize with other lesbians does not constitute a “viable lifestyle” (Ibid).

A further factor influencing the migration of younger lesbians to the cities is perhaps for further education, where colleges offer LGBT societies and clubs. Participation in higher education was a strong feature among the survey sample. At the time of participating in this survey, over half of the sample (57.84%) had achieved at least a diploma or degree at third level. Furthermore, 17.64% had completed a postgraduate diploma, a postgraduate degree or a PhD, illustrating that educational achievements for the sample as a whole are very high. It is interesting to note that less than 1% of the sample had been educated to junior certificate or below with leaving certificate representing the highest qualification for under 20% of respondents.

Given the very high level of educational attainment of the sample, despite the current recessionary reality, it is still perhaps unsurprising that over half of the sample (58.45%) were employed full-time and 5.95% stating they were employed part-time. A large percentage of the sample were students enrolled in education (32.67%). In Ireland the unemployment rate was last reported at 14.8% in July 2012 (Central Statistics Office, 2012: 1). However, less than 3% of the sample indicated they were unemployed. The remainder did not wish to indicate their employment status. It is interesting to note that the majority of the sample were employed or students enrolled in education, however almost 60% of the sample who were employed indicated they were not “out” (making their sexuality known) to all of their colleagues. Furthermore over 50% of those enrolled in education were not out to the majority of their peers. These statistics raise serious questions in relation to heteronormative spaces and what is being done to tackle the lack of inclusivity of younger lesbians.

None of participants in the sample stated they were in a civil partnership, however, almost 40% of the sample at the time of completing this survey were in a serious or committed relationship. A further 26.73% were dating different people or seeing someone and did not consider it serious. Under one third (31.68%) indicated that they were single and not dating anyone at the time. The remainder of respondents described additional relationship situations, such as being in an open relationship, engaged to one’s same-sex partner or co-habiting with an ex-partner. Overall 17.65% of respondents reported living with a partner and less that 2% indicated living with a partner and children.
The majority of respondents (38.24%) lived with friends or in a house share. Over one quarter of participants were living with parent(s) or guardian(s). When asked had respondents ever had children, 94.12% stated they had not, 3.92% of the sample were a biological parent, 0.98% a non-biological parent and 0.98% a foster parent. The low percentage of those in partnerships with children reflects perhaps the age profile of the respondents.

The above statistics have given a brief outline of those who took part in the survey sample, their age, nationality, living situation, educational background, principle status and relationship status. It must be noted however because online surveys are prone to sampling bias (whereby some members of the population are less likely to be included than others) and because the lesbian population in Ireland is unknown, it is not possible to establish how representative the survey sample is. Furthermore it must be acknowledged that the survey under-represents younger lesbians with children, unemployed lesbians and those with low-literacy levels. Despite these limitations, the sample size is sufficiently large I believe to illustrate an adequate detailed overview of the lives of younger lesbians currently in Ireland.

“Lets get one thing straight – I’m not!”: Younger women’s experiences of lesbian sexuality

When discussing lesbian sexuality, the study refers to women whose primary sexual and romantic attraction is to other women, this term more commonly refers to women who are same-sex attracted rather than women who have sex with other women but do not self-identify as lesbian (Mayock et al., 2009: 160). Unlike male homosexuality which was decriminalized in Ireland in 1993, lesbian sexuality has never been criminalized and has been far less visible in society. One possible argument for this is that much of the historical evidence of male homosexuality arose from scandals and court records (Lacey, 2008: 181). Wolff (1973: 12) argues that it is not historiography but rather patriarchal superiority and arrogance that allowed lesbians to suffer a less public degree of persecution as homosexual men. In a heterosexist society (where heterosexuality is considered the “natural” and superior sexuality) men sought to control female sexuality in relation to securing succession and to ensure their dominance in terms of cultural norms of family shame and personal standing and honour. Chaste females in traditional society are understood to be without sexual desire and sexual intercourse is understood as penetration by a penis so for all of these reasons intra-female passion was regarded as insignificant, particularly as most middle-class women historically did not have the financial means to live independently from men. The female sex and sexuality was regarded as of minor importance. Lesbianism was regarded as merely ‘...a playful diversion ...where the male would always emerge the victor’ (Wolf, 1973: 13).

Another argument for the lack of evidence of lesbian existence in Ireland is that female sexuality for many years was not recognised as anything more than an act of reproduction. From a psychoanalytical perspective a further reason for male sexual domination over women is a “primal fear of women” and in particular of women being indifferent to them (Rich, 1980: 14). In this regard in a patriarchal, heteronormative society such as Ireland, complete erasure of lesbian existence, except as a pornographic prelude to notions of heterosexuality, was therefore a necessity and very much a reality for midlife and older lesbians.
**Younger lesbians level of comfort with sexual orientation**

Feminists have argued that lesbian sexuality represents a threat because it rejects prescribed norms of heterosexual sex for women and instead offers them a viable alternative (Moane, 1995: 91). Many accounts of older lesbians, detail struggles with coming to terms with their sexuality in Ireland, where in order to reinforce the dominant ideal of heteronormativity, lesbian sexuality needed to remain in a subordinate position. Although this is still a concern in Ireland, younger women appear more comfortable with their sexuality, as this study found with 91% of younger lesbians polled indicating they felt “comfortable” or “very comfortable” with their sexuality, in huge contrast to a 2% minority that felt “uncomfortable” or “very uncomfortable” with their sexuality. Interestingly the younger lesbians in the sample do not appear to have faced the same level of shame or stigma as older or midlife lesbians which has been widely written about (see Munt, 2008; Sedgwick & Frank, 1995; Wells et al., 2003; Halperin & Traub, 2009). However, very little has been written in relation to younger lesbians and shame and it would be worth exploring the levels of shame experienced by younger lesbians in contrast to midlife and older lesbians.

Younger lesbians illustrating how comfortable they are with their sexuality is reinforced by the fact that over 90% of respondents have attended a LGBTQ Pride event. Organisers of LGBTQ Pride 2012 estimate 30,000 individuals were present (Dublin Pride, 2012) which is in stark contrast to the low attendance and participation in Gay Pride in the 1970s, ’80s and early ’90s which was most arguably due to the criminalization of homosexuality and social oppression of lesbians. It is therefore interesting to explore the contrasts in experiences of older and mid-life lesbians in coming out with those of younger lesbians. The next section will introduce some key differences in experiences of coming out amongst younger lesbians in Ireland.

**Cleaning out the closet! - Coming out as a lesbian in Ireland**

“Coming out” is a term given to the public acknowledgement of one’s sexuality. It is an external process to others in society but has an internal process component. It is important to note the different degrees of “outness”. For example an individual might be out in selected circumstances, such as to some friends but not all work colleagues or to their parents but not all family members. The concept of being in “the closet” is often associated with coming out, whereby “the closet” is a metaphor for keeping one’s sexual identity hidden. Sedgwick (1990: 71) states that the closet is “the defining structure for gay oppression in this century”. The structure of closet sustains heteronormativity by “othering” sexual minorities and maintaining their invisibility. The coming out process is a recurrent theme for lesbians in a heteronormative society and is one fraught with many emotions. Previous research has found that there is an average of five years to seven years between self-identification as LGBT and disclosure to others (D’Augelli, 2002; YouthNet 2003; Mayock et al., 2009). Table 2 overleaf illustrates at what age respondents first came out to another person.
Table 2: Age of coming out

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of coming out</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>31.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-39</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34-37</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>112</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
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The survey sample of younger lesbians found that the majority of respondents came out to someone between the ages of 18-21. Previous studies have found that the average age of first disclosure to others most frequently occurred at age 17 (D’Augelli, 2002: 439). Similarly an exploratory survey in Northern Ireland found that male respondents usually came out to someone aged 17 whilst females disclosed their sexual orientation aged 18 (YouthNet, 2003). Furthermore national research targeting LGBT individuals from a wide spectrum of ages found that most individuals were aware of their sexuality aged 12 (Mayock et al., 2009: 52). This echoes D’Augelli (2002: 439) who found that awareness of same-sex feelings can begin as early as 10 years old. Having self-identified as a lesbian, but not yet being able to disclose this to others can be a time of considerable stress and loneliness. The period between the initial awareness of, and the actual coming to terms with, one’s own sexuality and coming out was generally experienced as “difficult, daunting and traumatic” by most participants (Mayock et al., 2009: 59).

**Coming Out to Friends**

For many younger lesbians coming to terms with their sexuality is clearly a challenging time. However as seen in table 2, a huge percentage of younger lesbians have disclosed their sexuality to at least one person between the ages of 14-17 years old, this asks questions in relation to empowerment and what is driving younger women to self-identify and come out at increasingly younger ages? Furthermore the increase in women coming out earlier illustrates the need for initiatives for younger lesbians such as, support groups and coming out workshops particularly in schools as results from the survey found that the majority of respondents, 83.17% first disclosed their sexuality to a friend.

Most research confirms that the majority of young people will disclose their sexual identity to a friend first (D’Augelli, 2002; YouthNet, 2003; Minton et al., 2008; Maycock et al., 2009). Therefore this illustrates a real need for coming out workshops and education in all sectors of society not simply the LGBT community in order to ensure the coming out process is a positive and one of acceptance. Figure 1 below notes the percentage of younger lesbians who felt “very accepted” by each of following:
A high level of acceptance amongst friends as detailed above (94.14%) is clearly important especially if friends are one of the first disclosures. In all categories the majority of younger lesbians in the sample felt accepted.

**Coming Out to Family**

Although the majority of respondents identify friends as one of the first to disclose their sexual orientation to, there were variations in relation to what percentage of friends, family, work colleagues etc. that respondents had fully shared their sexual orientation with. Contrary to what may be expected, friends do not represent the highest percentage of people to whom these women are out to. Results found that actually 87.9% of the women were completely out to their parents. Table 3 presents the individuals to whom, or institutions within which younger lesbians have disclosed their sexual identity.

**Table 3: Disclosure of lesbian identification**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are you out to ...</th>
<th>None %</th>
<th>Some %</th>
<th>All %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18.63</td>
<td>80.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>5.94</td>
<td>6.93</td>
<td><strong>87.93</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>14.15</td>
<td>79.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>14.85</td>
<td>32.67</td>
<td>48.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work colleagues</td>
<td>14.71</td>
<td>32.35</td>
<td>41.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School college</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>19.80</td>
<td>43.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth/ Other organisation(s)</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>28.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>23.00</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly in another recent survey *Supporting LGBT Lives* in Ireland, two-thirds of respondents were out to all immediate family members (parents and
siblings) (Mayock et al., 2009: 58). This is quite different to the personal and historical accounts given in Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland (O’Carol & O’Collins 1995) and Coming Out: Irish Gay Experiences (O’Brien, 2003) where parents and family members were often amongst the last to know of their son’s or daughter’s or sibling’s sexuality. In 1986 when lesbians and gay men were both the largest and most invisible minority in Ireland, Dublin Lesbian and Gay Men’s Collectives (DLGC) published a book Out for Ourselves which detailed the stories and lived experiences of Irish lesbians and gays. The book describes various negative reactions by family members which include ostracism, violence, forced psychiatric treatment and even asking the doctor for hormone tablets in a hope to cure homosexuality (1986: 136). For many lesbians disclosure to family members is clearly a difficult process, but for younger lesbians in the sample almost 67.92% felt “accepted” by their parents and an overwhelming majority of respondents 87.23% were fully out to their parents, these statistics are in huge contrast to the experience of mid-life and older lesbians. For example Eilís Mhara who came out in 1973 details her own personal experiences of how lesbians “lived in closeted fearfulness of exposure, job loss and increasing isolation” (1988: 96). At this time being part of a visible “scene” risked, “...at best, hospitalization and, at worst, incarceration” (Ibid). The prevalence of homophobia amongst older lesbians experiences of coming out is further reinforced here and is often intrinsically linked with issues of coming out.

Homophobia & Internalized Homophobia

Homophobia is the term used when referring to discrimination in relation to an individual’s sexual orientation, according to Sibley (1995: 42) “homophobia will not go away while homosexuality is constructed as an “other” which threatens the boundaries of the social self”. Therefore Sibley contends that in a heteronormative society homophobia will exist once heterosexuality remains the dominant sexuality. Homophobia is also part of the individuals own subjective experience as an internalized sense of fear or rejection:

Homophobia is not just a set of attitudes which creates psychological and social problems for lesbians...It creates a climate of fear even for those lesbians who have overcome their internalized homophobia, and who are fully accepting of and positive about their sexuality (Moane 1995: 88).

Moane describes the panic homophobia can produce even in most secure of women who have come to terms with their internalized homophobia. The term “internalized homophobia” relates in particular to suppressed manifestations of homophobia (Moane, 2008: 130). This can lead to a fear of discrimination which may reinforce social alienation and lead to a decreased quality of life.

Whilst younger lesbians in the sample cite a high majority of positive reactions from friends (94.14% were accepting), it is very much in contrast to the experiences of older lesbians in Ireland:

[...] friends who could not cope with their own homophobia deserted me...I became the kind of woman that my friends, mother and sister had warned them about (Mhara 1988: 96).
Some authors mention the difficulty in coming out in Ireland in the 1970s, adding that coming out meant undoing much of her conditioning as a carer and mother figure. For Joni Crone coming out meant not only battling with her sexual identity but her own identity as a female in a heterosexist society. In 1980, Crone appeared on an Irish national television programme the Late Late Show and declared: “I am lesbian and I am proud” (1995: 66). This moment was hugely significant and conveyed a sense however brief, of lesbian visibility in the media. Crone’s appearance however, was not without its repercussions, although not on a professional level, Crone adds she suffered on a personal level:

I suffered rejection from my family, received threats of violence and experienced ostracism. My parents had feared their house would be set on fire or that they would be shunned by the neighbours...it has taken more than ten years for the wounds to heal (Crone: 1995:66).

The process of coming out is clearly recognised as being something hugely difficult and challenging for individuals, but there is perhaps a misconception that once “out” you are now free from oppression and exclusion. This however, is not the case for many individuals, as clearly seen in the above quote. Butler (1997: 302) emphasises this point questioning whether “outness” does in fact free the individual from subjection and discrimination or rather does being out create a more insidious case of oppression? Once out, this suggestion of a new type of marginalisation seems far less prominent in the experiences of younger lesbians. There seems a real sense that younger women are having a far more positive experience of coming out than mid-life and older lesbians previously have experienced, this is evident in statistics relating to how comfortable younger lesbians feel with their sexuality, as well as high levels of acceptance by friends and family members.

“But how can a lesbian be a Mother?” Lesbian Identity and the Heteronormative Family

Being a lesbian and a mother is seen to challenge the dominant ideologies of gender, motherhood and family which together destabilize the heteronormative family (Plummer, 1992: 99). The heteronormative family privileges heterosexual couples and believes heterosexual marriage is the only acceptable or “natural” form of marriage. Ideally the heteronormative family consists of a heterosexual married couple raising heterosexual children. Hudak & Giammattei note that there remains no definition of the “family” in public consciousness that refers to a same-sex couple with children (2010: 49). Therefore the “heteronormative family” remains the only visible type of family which maintains its position as the superior and “natural” family. Alternative families are then subject to oppression and marginalization, while heterosexual couples enjoy the privilege of “simple visibility” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009: 883). For example when the term “mother”, “wife”, “family”, “wedding” or “marriage” is used by the media, in conversation or in any public forum it is associated with heterosexuality without further explanation, heterosexuality remains the superior sexual preference and “simply visible”. One has to use “lesbian” in relation to the above mentioned terms to remain visible within a heterosexist society (Hudak & Giammattei, 2010: 49). Heterosexism is defined as, “the repressive social system of mandatory or compulsory heterosexuality...the language, thoughts, assumptions and symbols of the dominant society encode it” (1995: 146). Therefore a
heterosexist society renders lesbian identity and consequently lesbian mothers and wives invisible.

Female identity is often defined in relation to fertility and male heterosexuality, where sexual activity is confined to heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Similarly in Out for Ourselves a common theme in the experiences of mid-life and older lesbians is of heterosexual sex being the norm and the expectation of heterosexual marriage and motherhood (DLGC: 1986). The heteronormative family and the notion of the “home” as a rightful place within which women were formally and legally assigned in their role as “mother” is still enshrined today in Bunreacht na h’Éireann, (The Irish Constitution, 1937) in which regulation of women’s lives both social and professional is instilled through their location “within the home” and the idealised construction of their identity is reinforced as a heterosexual “mother”. This is further illustrated in the following articles from the Constitution:

In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved... The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (Bunreacht na h’Éireann, 1937, Article 41 2.1/2.2)

In the past forty years due to the impact of feminist opposition and the questioning of women’s rights in society, traditional beliefs have been contested. Such challenges to patriarchal domination meant that the traditional bases of Irish society had been somewhat destabilised, which in turn had a huge impact on the control of women’s sexuality and reproduction (Smyth, 1992: 4). Furthermore this meant the battles between traditional ideologies and those for progressive change were heightened as lesbian activism grew in the 1980s and ‘90s. Nevertheless despite huge successes through both feminism and the Women’s Movement, the Irish Constitution remains steadfast and as such messages regarding the position of lesbians in society are not to be overlooked in terms of their influence. A contemporary example is the interpretation of the “natural” family communicated within the article which details:

The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights...The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack. (Bunreacht na h’Éireann 1937, Article 41, 1.1/3.1)

Lesbian partnerships with children in Ireland are not equated with the “natural” units referred to in the Constitution and are often cited as the perpetrators attacking the institute of marriage, when protesting for marriage equality.

**Marriage Equality**

On August 12th 2012, the fourth annual LGBT Noise March for Marriage took place where over 5,000 supporters of equal rights marched in support of the marriage
equality campaign. This campaign argues for the right for same-sex civil marriages to be recognised by the Irish State (Marriage Equality, 2012). Rights for same-sex marriage was an issue respondents in the survey felt very strongly about, with marriage equality deemed the second highest issue that women felt would most improve the situation of lesbians in Ireland. Figure 2 below provides a more complete breakdown of the answers given.

Figure 2: What would most improve the current situation in Ireland for lesbians

![Image](image.jpg)

Although 22% of women felt equality would most improve the current situation in Ireland for lesbians, 20% felt marriage equality would specifically better their position. In retrospect the option “equality” without a specific association or explanation was too broad a term. However this flaw in the survey in actuality illustrates how politicised younger lesbians are in terms of marriage equality. While respondents could have clearly chosen “equality” in a broader sense which could include marriage equality, younger lesbians wanted to make the explicit point that in their opinion marriage equality is what would most improve their situation in Irish society. With the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993 and greater visibility of lesbians in society, younger lesbian women now seem concerned with legal recognition of their relationships.

Huge debates and protests have surrounded the fight for marriage equality in the past decade in Ireland. The Civil Partnership Act 2010 was signed into law on July 19th 2010, with the first civil partnerships being recognised by the State in January of 2011. Civil Partnership was designed to resolve the fact that lesbian and gay couples had no opportunity to formalize their partnership legally. Furthermore same-sex couples were being completely discriminated against by being denied the rights that heterosexual couples gain through civil marriage. The Missing Pieces Report, commissioned by Marriage Equality highlighted key differences between civil partnership and civil marriage in Ireland. The findings were in complete contrast to claims that “civil partnership provides most or all the rights of marriage” (Fagan: 2011: 6). The report found that 169 differences existed between same-sex and civil marriage. Same-sex couples who register a civil partnership will be denied a
range of rights and protections across various legislation such as family law, immigration, housing, taxation, inheritance, freedom of information and many others, which they would be entitled to if they could legally marry (Fagan, 2011: 10). Omissions from the Act have major implications for the rights of civil partners and their children. The choice to have a family is clearly an important issue as 9% of the sample feel reproductive rights for lesbians will most improve their situation in Ireland. Therefore, the complete lack of recognition of the rights of same-sex families and children under civil partnership are clearly a vital issue for younger lesbians. By giving same-sex civil partnership less rights than heterosexual marriages the state infers that civil partnership and therefore same-sex couples are of less worth. This reinforces an insidious form of homophobia. It is clear from statistics that respondents feel the choice of civil marriage and the choice towards reproductive rights is of significant importance to younger lesbians.

**Reproductive Rights**

Often the needs of lesbians are ignored within discussions of reproductive rights, however reproductive rights are an issue for all women regardless of sexuality. Lesbians should also be entitled to the right to legal and safe abortions, the right to birth control and the right to reproductive health education in order to make informed reproductive choices. Importantly reproductive rights include access to education about sexually transmitted diseases (STIs). Studies have shown there is a current myth amongst healthcare professionals and women that lesbian sex presents little risk in terms of STIs (Hudspith, 1999; Gilliam, 2001; Hughes & Evans, 2003, Bailey et al., 2003; McAlister & Neil, 2009).

Again very little research exists relating to experiences of younger lesbian and contraceptives in Ireland and often research and resources tends to focus on male sexual orientation, overlooking the needs of younger women further. Alongside the lack of research on the topic there is a complete lack of lesbian sex education within schools. This is perhaps unsurprising given the strong Catholic ethos that prevails in the Irish education system. As agents of contemporary society what they teach or exclude in their teachings often reinforces the dominant ideal of heteronormativity.

**“Boy meets Girl” – Heteronormativity in Schools**

Schools are a crucial space for the development of young people’s identities. A recent report found that LGBT pupils are amongst the most voiceless people in Irish society (Lynch & Lodge, 2002 cited in O’Higgins-Norman, 2008: 69). The broader implications of heternormativity allows for the assumption that heterosexuality is “natural” and superior to other sexualities and this assumption is currently engrained in the Irish school curriculum, where sexuality is now taught within the context of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Where this should be an obvious area for discussing lesbian identity, any such discussion is completely lacking.

Younger lesbians in the sample reported quite negative experiences of school in relation to lesbian visibility, sexuality and freedom to express their identity. A 21.57% minority stated they felt comfortable with their sexuality in school which is significantly lower to how respondents currently feel, with over 90% of the sample
indicating they feel comfortable with their sexuality. The statistics from the survey sample illustrate the silencing of lesbian identities within school settings. Clearly younger lesbians have indicated their marginalization, with a high majority, 94.12% of younger lesbians feeling unable to access lesbian support or youth groups. The voices and opinions of younger lesbians are being silenced with only 3% indicating they experienced positive discussions of lesbian issues in class. Such stigmatization of homosexuality and lack of visibility within the educational system is a clear example of institutionalized homophobia. Table 4 below offers a complete breakdown of those who agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements (those indicating “agree” or “strongly agree” and “disagree” or “strongly disagree” respectively):

**Table 4: Level of comfort expressing lesbian identity/issues in school**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression of lesbian identity/issues in school</th>
<th>Agree/Strongly Agree %</th>
<th>Disagree / Strongly Disagree %</th>
<th>Does Not Apply %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt comfortable with my sexuality at school</td>
<td>21.57</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was at least one other teacher/staff member in school I could talk to</td>
<td>11.65</td>
<td>82.75</td>
<td>5.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had other lesbian role models to look up to</td>
<td>11.65</td>
<td>83.94</td>
<td>4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship and sex education included lesbian-specific information</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>97.04</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were positive discussions of lesbian issues in class</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were negative discussions of lesbian issues in class</td>
<td>24.51</td>
<td>71.66</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were positive images in books, posters etc. representing lesbian people/issues</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>95.59</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt I had access to information about lesbian support/youth groups</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>94.12</td>
<td>4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt I could take a same-sex date to a school event (e.g. debs)</td>
<td>8.08</td>
<td>86.42</td>
<td>5.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore younger lesbians in the sample overwhelmingly point to the lack of sex education with lesbian-specific information in the curriculum. Less than
2% of the sample was aware of lesbian-specific content, which indicates a complete failure on the behalf of schools to address minority sexualities and identities. It is unsurprising then the myths and assumptions about the low risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) associated with lesbian sex. For example a recent survey in the UK of 6,000 lesbian and bisexual women found that over 50% of the sample had never been screened for an STI (Hunt & Fish, 2008). Very little research exists in relation to experiences of younger lesbians in Ireland and their use of contraceptives and sexual health education and it is an invisible subject in the curriculum. By failing to include sex education for younger lesbians, schools are putting these young women’s health in serious danger.

**Homophobic Bullying**

In a recent report on homophobic bullying in Ireland, 90% of teachers reported that their school’s anti-bullying policy did not include any reference to homophobic bullying (O’Higgins-Norman, 2007: 73). The research also found that 79% of teachers were aware of instances of verbal bullying where homophobic comments were made. It is essential that schools have pastoral services in place not only to support pupils bullied due to their sexual orientation but also to support teachers. Previous research has found that teachers in the Irish context feel unequipped to deal with homophobic bullying in school, which is often related to the religious ethos and pervasive homophobia which is deeply embedded in the majority of Irish schools (Norman et al., 2006; Mayock et al., 2009; McNamara et al., 2009).

Butler (1990) argues that gender is enacted through what she refers to as a “heterosexual matrix” in which masculinity and femininity are enacted through an assumed heterosexuality, thereby constructing heterosexuality as the norm against which everything else is considered. Most commonly homosexuality is seen as the performance and heterosexuality as “natural”. However repetitive gendered displays of “being” heterosexual, such as constantly asserting one’s heterosexuality in opposition of homosexuality is clear evidence of “doing” gender. It is because heteronormativity prevails in schools that the homophobic performance is normalized. In the survey sample, younger lesbians report direct homophobic harassment. A high percentage 20% had been verbally insulted because of their sexuality by other students, a further 2.2% reported homophobic insults from teachers also.

Such findings illustrate the victimization endured by younger lesbians. Although overt forms of physical and sexual violence were low, over 10% of younger lesbians in the sample suffered verbal threats of being “outed” (disclosure of a person’s sexual orientation without their consent). Although staff members were not found to threaten or attack a more indirect form of victimization is perhaps the unwillingness of staff to get involved in homophobic bullying or issues relating to younger lesbians. For example it is evident from statistics whereby over 82.75% of the sample felt they did not feel able to confide in a staff member, that there is a lack of support from staff for sexual minorities in schools. Over 10% of younger lesbians polled in the sample cited they missed or skipped school because they felt threatened, scared or harrassed because of their perceived sexuality. This highlights the necessity for schools to take action and put in place a set of measures to challenge homophobic bullying and heteronormativity in the school setting. International best
practice in this area includes LGBT youth groups, in-service teacher training, developing policies that include and value diversity, the provision of LGBT awareness education and support programmes for sexual minority youths in school (Fineran 2002; TeacherNet 2008, cited in McNamara, 2009: 26).

When younger lesbians in the survey sample were asked what they felt could most improve the school environment and educational experiences for all involved, opinions differed slightly across the sample. However a large proportion of women felt that both positive discussion of lesbian issues in class (18%) and relationship and sex education involving lesbian-specific information (17%) would mean a vast improvement for lesbian youth in schools. Figure 3 details the results further:

**Figure 3: What would most make school a more positive environment for lesbian youth**

A high percentage of younger lesbians also believed that lesbian-specific relationship and sex education would most improve the experience for lesbian minorities in school given the high percentage (97.04%) of women who did not feel there was adequate sex education for lesbians in the school setting. A large percentage of respondents also felt positive discussion of lesbian issues (18%) and a positive representation of lesbians in books, posters etc. (13%) would create a more inclusive curriculum. There is a clear need for textbooks which include positive images of lesbians in order to enable minority sexualities to self-identify. Without such images, heterosexuality is further maintained as the norm against which everything is measured.

sectors of employment (Lillis, 2009: 31). These exemptions favor the rights of denominational institutes to protect their ethos. Therefore these exemptions allow particular religious, medical and educational institutions to grant more advantageous treatment on religious grounds to employees or prospective employees in order to maintain the religious ethos of the organization. It also enables institutions to take “necessary” action to prevent the hiring of an employee or prospective employee if they are not deemed in keeping with the religious ethos of the institution (Lillis, 2009: 31). This is a further example of subtle homophobia rather than overt. However, with the establishment of the INTO LGB Teacher’s Group in November 2004 there has been even greater emphasis on the insufficient protections legislated for lesbian teachers.

Subsequently many teachers fear openly identifying as a lesbian. Therefore lesbian teachers are unable to act as a role model for their students. Results from the survey point to the lack of support younger lesbians received from teachers, with 82.75% of younger lesbians stating they did not have a teacher or staff member to confide in. Similarly another 83.94% felt they had no lesbian role models in school. Previous research points to how lesbian teachers maintain a self-imposed distance from their students and are reluctant to answer personal questions (Sanlo 1999: 95-96). This sense of self-regulation and policing is echoed in a further study which found that teachers made conscious decisions about who they disclosed their sexual orientation to (Mayo, 2008: 8). These teachers also indicated the complex nature of their interactions with colleagues especially when socializing outside of work and often the difficulties faced with trying to negotiate inclusivity for their same sex partner (2008: 9). The prevalence of heteronormativity in schools further allows for heterosexual teachers to benefit from the privilege of “simple visibility” (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009: 883). Social cues such as wedding rings and titles such as Mrs., all allow for heterosexuality to remain dominant and “simply visible” whilst oppressing sexual minorities.

It is evident from the responses from younger lesbians in the survey the important role teachers play in their experiences of schooling. 10% of the sample felt that teachers supportive of lesbian issues would most improve their schooling environment and experiences. This reinforces the absolute need for pre-service and in-service teacher training to include LGBT issues, specifically addressing homophobic bullying. Thus increasing lesbian visibility, the importance of which I will explore in greater detail in the final sections where I concentrate on the social category of lesbian identity.

“Closets are for clothes!” Lesbian Visibility in Society

It has been argued that we understand our world in terms of social categories, which emphasises the importance of visibility of lesbians in society (Jenness, 1992: 66). In turn these social categories act as a basis of self-evaluation, where we assess ourselves and our own experiences as an object living in a greater social sphere. This reinforces Fuss (1995: 3) who states that “identification is from the beginning, a question of relation, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside”. Furthermore regardless of how the category of “lesbian” is understood, what is most important is that there is awareness of the social category in order for a woman to categorize herself as a lesbian and adopt that identity (Jenness, 1992: 66). The
importance of lesbian visibility in the construction of lesbian identity is stressed here. For younger lesbians in the sample it was interesting to note the emphasis on visibility of lesbians in the school curriculum, for example in textbooks, anti-bullying workshops and relationship and sex education as previously mentioned, as well as out teachers and staff to look to as role models. For many lesbians in a heterosexist society, who have attended heteronormative schools, isolated from other lesbians, the “scene” becomes a natural draw and is a hub of lesbian visibility.

The Lesbian Scene

The “scene” is a social space distinguishable from others due to its explicitly gay/lesbian character (Green, 1997: 61). The scene provides a space which is free from heteronormative ideals and for many is an integral part of shaping one’s identity. For many it is where lesbians form a more visible social space in bars, nightclubs, cafes, bookstores, sports teams, political groups etc. (Stein, 1993: 226). By identifying as a lesbian, one is potentially connecting to lesbians of all races, classes, abilities and to multiple queer communities (Stein, 1993: 220). For many lesbians this connection and commonality is found on the scene.

The lesbian scene in Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s appears relatively different to the one which exists today in that there seemed far more focus on annual events such as Belfast International Women’s Day, Cork Women’s Fun Weekend and Irish Women’s Camp instead of specific lesbian social spaces throughout the country (Moane, 1995: 94; O’Donnell, 2008: 5). These events allowed for a strong lesbian network and sense of community in an otherwise heteronormative society. The Dublin lesbian scene was larger and had weekly lesbian discos since 1977, providing more of a social outlet and community for lesbians and a haven for those coming out.

The scene in Ireland has undergone a number of changes in the past decade, becoming increasingly commercial and lucrative. Dublin LGBTQ Pride Festival 2011 brought between €1.7m and €2.2m in business to the city’s economy. Organizers estimate that Dublin LGBTQ Pride Festival 2012 will increase in economic benefit to between €2.8m and €3m. This is a 27% increase, which is quite dramatic during a period of such economic decline (Dublin Pride, 2012). In any of Ireland’s cities there are LGBT pubs, nightclubs and club nights. Dublin contains the largest scene with three main nightclubs. The gay and lesbian scene is one of the only thriving entertainment sectors in Ireland, which heterosexual business men have capitalised upon.

Over half of respondents in the sample indicated they socialized in bars, clubs or events associated with the lesbian scene at least once every two weeks. Respondents were then asked how often they socialized in bars, clubs or events not specific to the lesbian scene. Interestingly results were quite similar with almost 50% of younger lesbians socializing in other venues not specific to the lesbian scene at least once every two weeks. A small minority of younger lesbians 3.92% stated that they never socialized in places not specific to the lesbian scene. This illustrates less segregation and gay ghettoization (an area characterized by a high concentration of LGBTs). Clearly statistics show younger lesbians are socializing quite frequently. O’Donnell (2008: 14) argues that the recent commercialization of the Dublin scene has meant there is a greater focus on the lesbian social scene rather than community projects.
Lesbian Community

A sense of community is often intrinsically linked to the scene and is an important factor in lesbian identification. When asked, 92.15% of younger lesbians agreed there was a lesbian community in Ireland, however just 43.88% indicated they felt included in it. This raises questions around community support for younger lesbians, political activism and grassroots community projects which would have been more common amongst mid-life and older lesbians.

If younger lesbians are not involved with a lesbian community though participating in a commercialized scene this raises questions about the long term repercussions as lesbians get older and perhaps move away from the scene. This may lead to renewed isolation and invisibility. In comparison to heterosexual women, invisibility amongst older lesbians increased vulnerabilities, social exclusion and access to healthcare (Gabrielson, 2011: 323). This can then lead to self neglect and increased morbidity. Oppression and isolation can also affect the manner in which lesbians seek care providers. Older lesbians in particular report feeling suspicious of health care professionals and a system that has historically discriminated against them (Diamant & Wold, 2003: 47). This creates problems of segregation and decreased social connection which can lead to mental health issues (Ibid). Lower levels of depression were found amongst lesbians with high levels of identity support (Gabrielson, 2011: 323).

A recent study of LGBT community development in Ireland concluded that the LGBT community was underdeveloped and under resourced as it had not been deemed a significant target group by policy makers (Gleeson & McCallion, 2008: 33). Many LGBT community projects are in urban areas and neglect those in rural areas. A recent report Coming Out – LGBT Young People: Challenges and Supports in Rural Ireland details the need for LGBT drop in centres, workshops for children and parents, resources and funding in order to make this possible, which is just not a current reality (Smyth: 2011). The BeLonG To Youth Service which began in 2003 is a national youth service for LGBT youth. Although it is based in Dublin, BeLonG To also supports LGBT youth groups throughout the country. The accessible provision of youth community groups such as BeLonG To is a necessity for younger lesbians in order to “support the development of their personal identity, to build life skills, to allow for social networking, and to allow space for young people to feel normal, safe, accepted and included” (McNamara et al., 2009: 35).

Media (Mis)representation

As previously argued the development of a lesbian identity is greatly dependent upon the definitions that women attach to the social category “lesbian” (Jenness, 1992). Such meanings are directly related to what is available in their immediate environment, such as what is presented in the media. Therefore when lesbians are either eroticized or made into something deviant this creates a huge barrier towards lesbian identification. Stereotypes can then be used to normalize oppression and discrimination against minority groups, such as lesbians. If as lesbian identity is shaped by what society socially constructs, then the power of the media becomes enormous. Stereotypes can generate falsified expectations of how an individual should appear to act or identify. When younger lesbians are misinformed and
assume certain stereotypical views of lesbians, they are often more likely to
counter problems as they try to develop their identities (Chung, 2007: 102).

Much of the stereotypes relating to lesbians involve butch and femme
categories. Definitions of butch and femme vary greatly, but often “butch” women are
noted to represent traditionally more masculine traits and whilst “femme” women
embody the traditionally feminine role. Many critics have rejected these categories.
The second wave feminist movement equated the butch/femme as mimicking
patriarchal relationships that feminism opposed. This led to many butch and femme
women adopting “the androgynous aesthetic of the feminist culture, as a preferable
choice to facing exclusion from the feminist-lesbian movement” (Levitt & Hiestand,
points to her own self-identified position as a femme and states the mistrust she felt
from butch women on occasion who did not identify her as a lesbian. Walker (1993:
879) states that “within the butch and femme economy, the butch emerges as visible
while the femme is included in the identity “lesbian” through her association with the
butch”. Walker further argues that because her outward appearance does not display
her sexuality in the same way as her butch lovers then she is perceived as
heterosexual by both lesbians and heterosexual individuals, rendering her invisible
(2001: 3). Similarly Nestle (1992: 140) remarks that femmes are the victims of
“...double dismissal: in the past they did not appear culturally different enough from
heterosexual women to be seen as breaking gender taboos and today they do not
seem feminist enough (1992: 140). The 1990s saw theoretical literature explore the
ways butch and femme women explore their identities (Halberstam,1998; Munt,

In the past decade however the butch/femme dichotomy has undergone
considerable changes. With the commercialization of the lesbian scene and the
growing number of television programmes such as The LWord, Lip Service and
Sugar Rush, depicting chic lesbian lifestyles, lesbians have become fashion conscious.
It was interesting to find that almost one third (32.35%) of respondents when asked,
did not believe there were certain physical characteristics related to lesbian identity.
Of the 67.65% of the sample who did associate certain factors with lesbians, the
majority felt clothing (30%) was the greatest identifier. Hairstyle (27%) and
stance/body posture (23%) were closely followed.

However amongst younger lesbians as butch/femme categories are no longer
as apparent it would be interesting to explore further what particularly influences
younger lesbians’ choices in portraying a certain outward appearance. The media
must be considered as an influential body with over 30% of younger lesbians in the
survey sample believing that media representation of lesbians in films, books, and
magazines influenced the way in which they dressed. With more individuals
consuming media than ever before the need for positive representations of lesbians is
evident here, especially in relation to younger lesbians who have been surrounded by
media consumption to a far greater degree than midlife and older lesbians. Research
has also found that the majority of individuals now learn about lesbian and gay
culture mostly from media rather than parents and teachers (Chung, 2007: 4). In the
survey sample when questioned, over one third (33.98%) of the respondents stated
they received lesbian relationship and sex education through the media.

Recently there has been a greater prevalence of mainstream television
programmes including lesbians. However 66.32% of the sample does not feel
lesbians are being realistically depicted in the media. Similarly the majority of the sample believes there is not adequate representation of younger lesbians. There is clearly a market for lesbian-specific media, with 71.43% actively seeking out media with a lesbian theme. While the majority of mass media remains heteronormative younger lesbians may feel the need to imitate the way in which heterosexuals act in order to feel accepted and therefore attempt to change their identity to fulfil a certain heterosexist ideology. Therefore there is a real need for a greater number of younger high-profile out lesbians in the media with only 37.25% of the sample stating they had positive role models in the media growing up.

Conclusion

The survey set out to explore experiences of how younger lesbians in Ireland come to identify with the category of lesbian. The author was particularly concerned with lesbian focussed research as although there has been an increase in national research aimed at LGBT youth, the majority of respondents are male (YouthNet, 2003; Gleson &McCallion, 2008; McNamara et al., 2009; Minton et al., 2008; Mayock et al, 2009). The survey received a high response rate quite quickly, indicating that younger lesbians felt this topic was worthwhile and in need of exploration.

Previous researchers note that much less research has been devoted to strengths and competencies of LGBT youth than to vulnerabilities and risks associated with the LGBT population (Mayock et al., 2009: 137). While this article points to several issues which impact negatively on younger lesbians, the survey also found that in spite of victimization and discrimination over 90% of the sample felt comfortable with their sexuality. This high majority gives an important insight into the possible experiences, issues, individuals, relationships, institutions and support networks which have impacted positively on younger lesbians more so than their midlife and older counterparts.

Strong evidence from the survey suggests that younger lesbians are coming out and self-identifying at an earlier age which is in keeping with both national and international research (Remafedi, 1999; D’Augelli, 2002; YouthNet, 2003; Mayock et al., 2009, Me Namara et al., 2009). Therefore sources of support need to be implemented at an earlier age such as, LGBT youth groups and coming out workshops. It is perhaps unsurprising that the survey found that the majority of respondents, 83.17% first disclosed their sexuality to a friend. Previous research related to coming out has yielded similar results (D’Augelli, 2002; YouthNet, 2003; Minton et al., 2008; Mayock et al., 2009). However given the high majority of women who felt comfortable with their sexuality and the number of respondents who chose a friend to disclose their sexuality to first, it was quite unexpected that friends do not represent the highest percentage of people to whom these women are out to. Results found that actually 87.93% of the women were completely out to their parents. This emphasises the practical need for resouces for the parents of lesbian youth. Information for families and parents of lesbians need to be made more widely available and accessible in order to enable parents to best support their children through the dificult process of developing a sexual identity.

Although younger lesbians seem to be moving away from community based projects towards a more commercial scene there appears to be a huge politial
momentum for marriage equality amongst respondents. With over 5,000 individuals marching for marriage equality in the fourth annual LGBT Noise March for Marriage 2012, traditional ideas of the heteronormative family are being challenged with huge visible support. Same-sex marriage is now a topic being widely discussed throughout political and social realms. This open discussion and level of protest from heterosexuals as well as LGBTs is hugely significant considering twenty years ago homosexuality was criminalized in Ireland.

The dominance of a strong Catholic ethos which prevails in Irish schools is often highlighted as having a significant effect on the education of sexual minorities. Results from the survey show the impact of heteronormative school settings on young lesbians and the adverse affects of homophobic bullying such as intentionally missing school, impacting on the educational attainment of sexual minorities. Findings in the survey pertaining to younger lesbians experiences in school were overall quite negative with low reports of visibility of lesbians in the curriculum, in particular sex education. Although the SPHE (Social, Political, Health Education) syllabus and the RSE (Relationship Sex Education) programme in secondary schools provides an opportunity for the discussion of all sexualities, this does not seem to be the case, with an overwhelming majority of younger lesbians (97.04%) receiving heteronormative sex education. Lesbian identities need to be equally validated through both the formal curriculum, such as images in textbooks and positive discussions in class and the informal curriculum, for example at school social events. This study has gone some way towards demonstrating a detailed overview of the experiences of younger women in how they come to self-identify with the category of lesbian. Nonetheless there is definite scope for future research developing from this grounding.

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