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A Report on the Needs of
Lesbians and Bisexual Women
in Northern Ireland

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lasi
lesbian advocacy
services initiative

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I trace the curve of your jaw
with a lover's finger
knowing the hardest battle
is only the first
how to do what we need for our living
with honor and in love
we have chosen each other
and the edge of each other's battles
the war is the same
if we lose
someday women's
blood will congeal
on a dead planet
if we win
there is no telling

Audre Lorde

1986

Justice and equality only become a reality
when they are shared by everyone.
Anything else is inequality and injustice.

Marie Mulholland

in **Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland** (1995)

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Many women opened their hearts and recounted painful and difficult experiences for the purposes of this report and in an effort to improve the choices open to the women of the future. There has been, in the nature of this report, an emphasis on the more negative aspects of the lives of lesbian and bisexual women. I hope there will be future opportunities to record the creativity, joy and craic that is also a living part of the lesbian and bisexual women's community.

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The following political parties also kindly agreed to sponsor the launch of the report in Stormont: the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland; the Progressive Unionist Party; Sinn Féin; the Social, Democratic and Labour Party and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.

Finally, I hope that policy and decision makers and those responsible for the allocation of resources take time to read and digest this report and to act on its recommendations.

Marie Quiery

March 2002

Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative Consultation Report

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Executive Summary

- 1 The **aim of the Consultation Exercise** was to assess the current needs and services available within the lesbian community in Northern Ireland and to generate options/models for a potential organisation to meet these needs.
- 2 Inequality, discrimination and social exclusion must inevitably lead to diminished opportunities and impoverished lives. This report highlights the **impact of discrimination** on the everyday lives of lesbians and their families. It also describes the impact of homophobia on the self-confidence, esteem and emotional health and well being of these women.

This report **challenges many of the stereotypes** that exist around the lives of lesbians and bisexual women. The lesbian and bisexual community is diverse in terms of socio-economic background, educational attainment, age, lifestyle, location and health status. Individual lesbians already experiencing discrimination face the double burden of discrimination on the basis of their gender.
- 3 A largely **qualitative approach** was taken to the consultation with face-to-face individual and group interviews. During the consultation there were 56 individual interviews and 9 interviews conducted with groups and organisations. Over 160 lesbian and bisexual women and a number of gay men were interviewed either individually or in focus groups.
- 4 There is an assumption that life has become easier for and society more tolerant of lesbians and bisexual women. However, despite minor changes, the experience of work, leisure, family and education for many lesbians is a story of vilification, isolation, ostracism and abuse.
- 5 **Homophobia** manifests itself in Northern Ireland in a variety of ways. The experience of the interviewees ranged from violent assaults through to verbal abuse and discrimination at work. Approximately 20 % of those interviewed had experienced violent assaults and none of these had reported the incident to the police. Interviewees also reported incidents of women being intimidated from their homes by harassment.

Perhaps the most insidious impact of homophobia is on the personal development of lesbians as they grow up and establish their self-esteem and identity alongside other children. Many lesbian and bisexual women are left feeling unacceptable to mainstream society.
- 6 **Coming out** plays an important part in the process of lesbians and bisexual women defining their identity and establishing their self-esteem around their sexual orientation. The interviews revealed many women are still not “out” in the wider community due to the fear of the repercussions including rejection, discrimination and harassment.

- 7 There appear to be relatively few improvements in the situation of **young lesbian and bisexual women** in exploring and stating their sexual orientation. They continue to face rejection by their families, discrimination and harassment. The young women felt that the youth services should take their needs into consideration.
- 8 In the first instance many women responded in the negative when asked if they had **experience of discrimination** due to their sexual orientation. After further discussion it was revealed that women were either so closeted that their work colleagues and families were not aware of their sexual orientation or that they had minimised the discrimination they had experienced.
- Those who were 'out' at work had mixed experiences. 46% of interviewees stated they had experienced discrimination at work, ranging from severe harassment to ostracism and isolation.
- 9 10% of the women interviewed are **lesbian parents** of children ranging in age from 12 months to 25 years old. Many of those interviewed were concerned at the hostility towards the notion of lesbian parenting and felt aggrieved that donor insemination services are not available to them.
- Many lesbians had their children when they were married and live in fear of losing custody of their children. Lesbian parents find it difficult to access sympathetic and experienced legal advice in relation to custody. There are currently no services specifically designed to meet their needs.
- 10 The women interviewed felt that homophobia has had an impact on their **health**. Problems relating to alcohol and drugs abuse, domestic violence and emotional problems remain undocumented and ignored by mainstream health services.
- Interviewees felt that General Practitioners were largely ignorant of and unsympathetic to the health needs of lesbian and bisexual women.
- 11 **Counselling** was defined as individual sessions for women in distress, donor insemination counselling and more awareness of the need for relationship counselling within current statutory and voluntary provision. A number of interviewees emphasised the need for counselling free of charge.
- 12 **Lesbian relationships** are not acknowledged when it comes to pension rights, housing, bereavement or custody of children. Their relationships are not recognised in tenancy agreements or family tickets for travel and leisure facilities.
- 13 **Lesbian women with a disability** face a double oppression in terms of discrimination. Few, if any, of the lesbian social venues have disability access and there are no services provided by disability organisations for their lesbian and bisexual constituency. Lesbians with disabilities tend to be even more invisible than other lesbians as the sexuality of disabled people is still regarded as a taboo subject.

- 14 A small number of **black lesbians** were interviewed for the consultation and they reported suffering the double burden of racism and homophobia. Racism is seldom raised or discussed as an issue within the lesbian community and is generally left to black women to raise themselves. These women have also struggled to develop their black as well as lesbian identity.
15. There is currently no organised lesbian and bisexual women's group in a rural area. **Women in rural areas** were most keen on improving existing statutory and voluntary services to take into account their needs as parents, carers and consumers of social, health and welfare services. Training in the particular needs of the lesbian and bisexual women's community should also be provided for these bodies.
- 16 The strength of **family ties** has served to restrict the development of a lesbian identity and community. Many women spoke of the fear of causing hurt to family members by coming out or by increasing their visibility through organising more publicly. Some lesbians do have family support but will limit their active involvement in public campaigns for fear of causing hurt or embarrassment.
- Young women are sympathetic to the reactions of their straight parents and feel that there is little or no support or information available to them.
- 17 Many women felt that the **media and political institutions**, which may have excellent policies on gays and lesbians, do not actively tackle the homophobic attitudes that currently exist on the streets.
- 18 Mixed feelings were expressed as to the **impact of the 'Troubles'** on the lesbian and bisexual women's community. Some felt that the community had managed to maintain cohesion while others felt that the existence of a politicised community had exacerbated splits within groups and organisations. In general, many women felt that not enough time in organisations has been devoted to discussion of these issues.
- 19 There are currently **very few services** directed at the lesbian and bisexual women's community. Lesbian Line, which has been in existence for 21 years, survives on a small budget and has no staff members, relying solely on volunteers. Other gender mixed organisations reported difficulties in reaching the lesbian and bisexual women's population indicating a need for a gender specific organisation.
- 20 Individuals expressed an urgent need for lesbian friendly **legal advice**. As proposed legislation e.g. the Single Equality Bill, will allow rights based cases there will be an increased need for expert legal services.
- 21 There was broad agreement on the need for further **research**, particularly if the lesbian and gay community want to influence policy and decision makers. Topics requiring research included the nature and make up of the lesbian community, Black lesbian experience, lesbian use of Women's Centres, attitudes towards lesbians within the health service and among General Practitioners in particular.

22 It is important to name the creation of social outlets as a gap in support and services for the lesbian and bisexual community. **Social events** have a broader function than solely as an opportunity to meet people. They are often the first introduction women have to the lesbian and bisexual community. They can also serve as a vital source of information and a point of communication on broader political issues. There are few social outlets for lesbian and bisexual women that are not based in commercial clubs and pubs.

23 **Political support** is vital if both attitudes and legislation around sexual orientation are to change. There was general agreement that, in the main, nationalist political parties had better and more progressive policies on lesbian and bisexual issues than the unionist parties. The Progressive Unionist Party is an exception to this. However, interviewees felt that policies were not being implemented on the ground and were thus reduced to tokenism.

There was unanimous support for the lobbying of political parties and governmental structures.

The consultation exercise revealed that there is clearly a need for an organisation to represent the voice of lesbian and bisexual women. As in other areas of society, women's voice tends to be subsumed in gender mixed organisations.

The report makes the following recommendations:

Diversity and difference

The advocacy organisation should pay attention to the diversity within the lesbian community.

Accountability

Any emerging organisation should take care not to attempt to address all the needs of the lesbian community even though there will be pressure to do so. The organisation should be clear about its plans and should make these public so clarifying any ambiguity or misunderstandings about its role.

Support

Ongoing reflection and support should be available on a regular basis for both members of staff and members of any management structure.

Level of involvement

Many women do not feel that they want or are adequately prepared for involvement in a committee structure. Opportunities should be developed for lesbians to participate at different levels.

Acting as a Catalyst

LASI should act as a catalyst to the establishment of relevant support services for the lesbian and bisexual community rather than trying to provide these services. The role of LASI would be to support the formation of groups and

assist them with capacity building, group development and funding applications.

Development of leadership

The focus of an advocacy organisation should be the development of leadership rather than solely the development of the organisation. This may involve the provision of both formal and informal training courses in leadership and organisational skills.

Personal Development

Any emerging organisation must recognise and allow for the personal development that comes with being actively involved in advocacy. Time and resources should be devoted to reflection and learning about ourselves. This level of awareness raising is crucial to the reproduction of leadership within the lesbian community and the promotion of a healthy community.

1 Introduction

This report is the product of a consultation process within the lesbian and bisexual community in Northern Ireland. The report was commissioned by the Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative (LASI), an ad-hoc group of lesbian women who are concerned about the need for the voice of lesbian women to be heard in the current equality debate.

1.1

Aims and Objectives of the Consultation Exercise

The aims of the consultation were to:

- Assess the current needs and services available within the lesbian community in Northern Ireland;
- Generate options/models for a potential organisation to meet these needs;
- Support the Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative to agree broad parameters for the potential organisation;
- Consult broadly within the lesbian community to ascertain the support for the development of a new organisation and identify both support for and resistance to the establishment of an organisation;
- Produce a report summarising the findings and making recommendations for the future.

The objectives of the consultation exercise were to:

- Meet with the ad-hoc group to plan the consultation process;
- Meet with a range of individuals, focus groups and organisations throughout Ireland to gather information on appropriate organisational models and activities;
- Carry out a literature search of relevant material;
- Meet with the ad-hoc group to discuss proposals for organisational structure aims etc and assist with strategic planning;
- Produce a written report summarising and analysing the findings.

The consultation was conducted over a 5 month period and during that time over 160 women were interviewed, either individually or as part of a focus group or organisation.

1.2.

Definitions

It is important to define some of the terms that will be used in this report to describe the experience of lesbians and bisexual women in Northern Ireland today.

Homophobia- the fear and hatred of gays and lesbians and of homosexuality itself. Homophobia can be expressed at both an individual and institutional level. Violent assault is a visible example of homophobia at an individual level. The exclusion of sexual orientation from employment protection legislation is an example of institutionalised homophobia. There are many other less visible examples.

Heterosexism- the assumption that all people are heterosexual, that being

“Many women do not want to identify their sexual orientation for fear of further discrimination. They are liable to lose their jobs, custody of their children, their homes and the right to live without harassment...”

heterosexual is the ‘normal’ sexual orientation and that heterosexuality is the only valid sexual orientation. This has resulted in heterosexuality being privileged legally, culturally, educationally, socially and economically. For example, sex education in schools is almost exclusively focussed on heterosexuality.

Oppression- the systematic undervaluing and exclusion of a group by another set of people, which results in different and unequal conditions of living for the two groups.

Social Exclusion- the deliberate and institutionalised exclusion of one group of people or individuals from the experiences or privileges enjoyed by another group of people.

Marginalisation- the experience by one group of people of being pushed, by another group of people, to the edge of mainstream society. This results in different social, economic, cultural, legal and educational opportunities and rights for the two groups of people.

The description of the experience of lesbians and bisexual women in these terms gives recognition and acknowledgement to the rights of lesbians and bisexual women and the inequalities which currently exist rather than individualising and isolating the experience of this group of people.

1.3.

Visibility of the lesbian and bisexual community

There are currently no exact figures for the numbers of lesbians and bisexual women in Northern Ireland. It is interesting to note that the 2001 census does not allow the collection of data on the basis of sexual orientation. Many women do not want to identify their sexual orientation for fear of further discrimination. They are liable to lose their jobs, custody of their children, their homes and the right to live without harassment.

Considerable efforts were made in the consultation exercise to contact the invisible members of the lesbian and bisexual community. This was done on the basis of personal contact and by interviewing where respondents felt most comfortable, for example, in their homes and lesbian friendly venues.

1.4.

Inequality and discrimination

The inclusion of sexual orientation in the recent legislation on Statutory Duty (Section 75, Northern Ireland Act 1998) is an important milestone in the history of the gay, lesbian and bisexual (LGB) community’s struggle for equal rights. However, these rights are limited to the policies and actions of public bodies and do not extend to the private and social sphere where most discrimination occurs. It is important to recognise and acknowledge that the LGB community suffers from social exclusion and discrimination and that discussions around the Equality Agenda and building an inclusive society must include the rights of gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

Public bodies will face difficulties in addressing the needs of lesbian and bisexual women in particular as they are largely invisible in our society and their experience remains undocumented. No research has been carried out on the nature and size of the lesbian and bisexual community in Northern Ireland. It is therefore nearly impossible for public bodies to address

inequality for lesbians and bisexuals and carry out their Statutory Duty under the new equality legislation.

Inequality and discrimination must inevitably lead to diminished opportunities and impoverished lives. This report highlights the impact of discrimination on the everyday lives of lesbians and their families. It also describes the impact of homophobia on the self-confidence, esteem and emotional health and well being of these women. The 'pink pound' which can act as a cushion against the worst effects of discrimination is largely a male phenomenon and not within the reach of the majority of the women consulted for this report. As women, mothers and carers their work is underpaid and unrecognised for the contribution it makes to the social economy.

Prejudice leads to many stereotypes. This report challenges many of the stereotypes that exist around the lives of lesbians and bisexual women. The reality is that the lesbian and bisexual community is diverse in terms of socio-economic background, educational attainment, age, lifestyle, location and health status. Individual lesbians already experiencing discrimination face the double burden of discrimination on the basis of their gender. Yet in the documentation and research on the impact of discrimination on women their experience is notable by its absence. This report attempts to rectify this situation and will hopefully stimulate more research and debate on this important human rights issue which affects thousands of women in our society.

1.5.

Lesbian organisations

To counter the impact of discrimination, oppression and the unequal treatment that lesbians and bisexual women experience, it is important to work at a variety of levels i.e. at the personal, community, and at the national level of policy and decision making.

The impact of oppression at the personal and community levels results in people organising to create better situations for themselves and for the communities they are from. This usually takes the form of actions at the personal and community level with support services, campaigning work for legal and social policy changes, and socialising activities being the three main strands of organising. Each of the three is necessary as each meets a different need of the community in tackling the effects of discrimination and oppression.

One can identify three potential models for lesbian organisations. These are social, service orientated and human rights based models of organisations. Inevitably, women do not make a distinction between their needs for equality, appropriate services and social outlets. Indeed all three are inextricably linked in terms of social justice and quality of life. Patricia Prendeville (1999) described similar feelings in her survey of 50 women who were involved in lesbian organising.

Women were aware of the high level of support services needed by lesbians for different aspects of life, e.g. health, parenting, alcohol and drug dependency, 'coming out'. But women also identified the need for the provision of social outlets, and a third set of needs was the need to campaign for equality, social justice and changes in social policy. These three sets of needs are all equally legitimate and urgent, but are very different. Women often expected one group to fulfil all three sets of need.

Differences about prioritising and an inability to meet needs were the cause of community criticism and disappointment

Prendeville (1999)

Despite limited resources the lesbian community in Northern Ireland has an honourable history of self-organising in terms of social organisations and service provision. Lesbian Line has been working successfully for over 21 years and lesbian women since time immemorial have contrived to meet each other socially. There have been numerous formal and informal organisations established over the years to meet this need.

Existing organisations have attempted to meet the need for a human rights based organisation but have found their resources stretched to capacity. This report clearly demonstrates the desire and need for a human rights, advocacy organisation and that the time is ripe to draw on the energy and interest of the community of lesbian and bisexual women to create a better society for themselves and their children.

Consultation Methodology

A largely qualitative approach was taken to the consultation with face-to-face individual and group interviews. It was felt that, given that most of the subject group are not publicly lesbian or bisexual, postal questionnaires would not be appropriate. During the consultation there were 56 individual interviews and 9 interviews conducted with groups and organisations.

2.1.

Obstacles to participation

Consultation with lesbians and bisexual women poses some difficulties for a consultant. The lesbian community is largely invisible due to the pressures of and the response to 'coming out' or making one's sexuality known within the majority community. The temptation for the consultant is to interview only the visible community which is largely made up of confident and articulate women who are involved in lesbian and bisexual organisations and may not form a representative sample of the overall lesbian community. The most vulnerable and marginalised lesbians are often 'closeted', lack the basic resources needed to participate in the community e.g. childcare, or are isolated in rural areas.

Using personal contacts and a snowballing approach for the consultation (asking women to contact others they know), it was possible to contact more marginalised women who are not actively involved in organisations and in many cases are closeted.

2.2.

Profile of participants

There is no one definition of the term 'lesbian'. Lesbian identity is diverse and, as in the heterosexual community, lesbians define themselves with multiple identities. The consultation did not attempt to define the boundary between bisexuality and lesbianism but attempted to be as inclusive as possible. Using personal and organisational contacts a diverse group of lesbians and bisexual women were interviewed including women living in rural areas; young and older women; working and middle-class women; nationalist, republican, unionist and loyalist women; lesbian parents (and grandparents!) and disabled lesbians.

Over 160 lesbian and bisexual women and a number of gay men were interviewed either individually or in focus groups. Representatives of all of the organisations currently active in or working directly with the lesbian and bisexual community were interviewed. These included three gender mixed organisations and 2 lesbian organisations (for a full list please see Appendix 1). A limited consultation was also carried out with a lesbian organisation in Cork and at a workshop at the annual **Lesbian Lives** conference in Dublin. An individual interview with the Rector of Clonard Monastery was also conducted.

It was recognised that only a small minority of women are involved in the various organisations established to meet the needs of the lesbian and bisexual community. 39% of the interviews were carried out with women who are not active in any lesbian or gay organisation, which reflects the profile of the community. Some of these interviews took place in focus groups in women's homes and others were conducted at night in social clubs

using volunteer interviewers who were briefed beforehand. All of the interviews were conducted by lesbians which supported the level of trust required to encourage participation. There was an enthusiastic response to these informal interviews and young lesbians in particular appreciated the opportunity to discuss relevant issues and problems.

2.3. **Literature review**

There is relatively little research available on the nature and make up of the lesbian community in Ireland, North or South. However, the consultant had access to an extensive library of information, resources and leaflets based on the experience of lesbian and gay organisations throughout Britain and Ireland.

2.4. **Advisory Group**

An Advisory Group was established to discuss the methodology and process of the consultation. The Group was made up of lesbians and bisexual women who are active in the lesbian community and reflected the diversity of that community in terms of class, religion, race, age and background.

At a workshop held in January 2001 the Advisory Group agreed the questions for focus groups and also consented to participate in a survey of women using two lesbian social venues in Belfast. The Advisory group also met to discuss the findings of the consultation and give feedback on the draft report.

3

Issues affecting the Lesbian and Bisexual Community

3.1.

Introduction

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the strength of emotion expressed throughout the consultation process. The 'coming out' stories and the experiences of discrimination described by the interviewees, particularly those of the young women and lesbian parents, was very moving and sometimes distressing. There is an assumption that life has become easier for and society more tolerant of lesbians and bisexual women. However, despite minor changes, the experience of work, leisure, family and education for many lesbians is a story of vilification, isolation, ostracism and abuse. Few if any women had reported physical abuse to the police and relied on the support networks provided by friends to support them through the experience.

In general, there was a high level of agreement amongst the divergent women interviewed around the issues affecting the lesbian and bisexual community. It is important to note that lesbians and bisexual women, as with other groups of women, come from a variety of social, economic, racial and religious backgrounds and it is important not to stereotype them or the issues that have a major impact on their lives. Similarly, as with other groups of women, lesbians and bisexual women bear the brunt of domestic and family responsibilities within our society. They are mothers, lone parents, carers of the elderly, workers in low paid and temporary jobs and, in general, have less access to political and economic sources of power in society.

3.2.

Homophobia

Homophobia is understood as being the fear and hatred of lesbians and gays and of homosexuality itself. It can express itself in the personal behaviour and attitudes of individuals or in its institutionalised form where organisations and the state discriminate either directly or indirectly.

Homophobia manifests itself in Northern Ireland in a variety of ways. The experience of the interviewees ranged from violent assaults through to verbal abuse and discrimination at work.

3.2.1

Violent assault and verbal abuse

The number and extent of violent assaults experienced by interviewees is quite frightening. Approximately 20 % of those interviewed had experienced violent assaults and none of these had reported the incident to the police.

"I twice got a kicking just walking along the street. I was too embarrassed to go along to the RUC I would have gone to a lesbian organisation if there had been one."

"I have been queer bashed in Belfast 9 years ago and still face verbal assaults full cans of beer thrown at me across the street etc."

"I've had harassment from neighbours and local kids. I get names shouted at me and my kids."

Interviewees also reported incidents of women being intimidated from their homes by harassment. This level of violence is not peculiar to Northern Ireland. The GLEN and Nexus study (1995) reported that 25% of their respondents had experienced violent assaults because of their sexual orientation.

Efforts to organise are greeted with hostility and one woman recounted her experience of trying to establish a gay and lesbian group in Magee College in Derry, only to find that within days anti-gay posters had gone up around the university campus.

3.2.2

Self esteem

Perhaps the most insidious impact of homophobia is on the personal development of lesbians as they grow up and establish their self-esteem and identity alongside other children. Many lesbian and bisexual women are left feeling unacceptable to mainstream society. Research in the United States has shown that lesbian and gay people who feel that they are not able to 'come out' or who are isolated from the gay community may experience significant psychological distress including impairment of self-esteem (Garnet et.al., 1992)

“As a lesbian I’ve spent my life trying to please others and trying to fit in- I haven’t led my own life at all.”

“As a lesbian I’ve spent my life trying to please others and trying to fit in- I haven’t led my own life at all.”

“I am made to feel like a second class citizen, I’m not able to live an ordinary life like everyone else. Waiting for taxis and when you go to non-gay venues, you get verbally abused.”

Women reported that they are seen as freaks who are vilified or, at best, tolerated by mainstream society. It is hardly surprising then that a large proportion of lesbians and bisexual women take the line of least resistance, conform to society’s stereotypes of women and enter into marriage and child-rearing before eventually coming out as lesbian.

3.3.

Coming Out

Coming out is the term used to describe the process of acknowledging one’s own sexual orientation and telling other people, friends, family, colleagues at work and society at large. The opposite of this is referred to as being ‘closeted’ or ‘staying in the closet’. Coming out plays an important part in the process of lesbians and bisexual women defining their identity and establishing their self-esteem around their sexual orientation. The interviews revealed many women are still not out in the wider community due to the fear of the repercussions including rejection, discrimination and harassment.

“I’m only partly out the other lesbians in the area don’t support each other because of the fear - there’s at least 20 other lesbians in the town and we don’t talk to each other.”

“I don’t feel I can come out at work- it’s my choice but I feel I’m more restricted by that.”

Women face a dilemma in 'coming out'. If they don't come out then they will remain isolated and unlikely to meet other lesbians or access support. On the other hand 'coming out' increases the level of harassment and rejection that they experience.

"The more out you become the more marginalised you become-it's a Catch 22 - people have to come out and then get abused. If you don't come out you don't get to meet other lesbians-we are considered a threat to the family unit."

However, others who had taken the plunge and have 'come out' feel an enormous sense of relief and an increase in their confidence and self-esteem.

"Coming out helped it's now less nerve-wracking and I'm more accepting of myself."

3.4.

Discrimination at work

It is important to note that, in the first instance many women responded in the negative when asked if they had experience of discrimination due to their sexual orientation. After further discussion it was revealed that women were either so closeted that their work colleagues and families were not aware of their sexual orientation or that they had minimised the discrimination they had experienced. Those who were 'out' at work had mixed experiences. 46% of interviewees stated they had experienced discrimination at work, ranging from severe harassment to ostracism and isolation.

"I was working in a hotel, the head receptionist refused to work with a 'lesbian'. I left because of the pressure."

"I was badly assaulted by work-mates and was intimidated into leaving the town. The dole disallowed me because I had left work deliberately. "

Others found that they silenced themselves at work, either by staying closeted or by ignoring homophobic remarks.

"There can also be pressure at work to 'keep quiet' for example if you're working in a school like I am."

"I haven't faced any discrimination since I was in the army and I haven't been 'out' at work since then."

"I was afraid of getting into a situation because I'm lesbian so I left youth work. I had been a youth worker for nearly 8 years."

"There can also be pressure at work to 'keep quiet' for example if you're working in a school like I am."

“The union doesn’t deal with gay and lesbian issues. I was active for 25 years and never came out in the union. They don’t practice what they preach.”

The experience of women in Northern Ireland is similar to gays and lesbians elsewhere. In 1993 Stonewall conducted a survey of over 2,000 lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. In this they found that:

37% of respondents had faced discrimination at work
 48% had been harassed at work
 68% concealed their identity from some or all of the people they worked with.

Similarly, a TUC survey, cited in Labour Research (July 1999) found that 44% of lesbian, gay and bisexual trade unionists had suffered discriminatory treatment at work.

Many interviewees found that their experience of homophobia was not taken seriously at work and one woman stated that homophobia should be treated as seriously as sexual harassment.

“A guy touched me up at work, (a high street store) no disciplinary action was taken and no-one from management came back to me when I complained. I think they would have pushed it more if I was straight.”

Women felt that without protection under the law it would be difficult to ‘come out’ at work. Many ‘out’ lesbians felt powerless to take action around discrimination at work and had mixed responses from their trade unions. Some have found their union supportive e.g. the existence of a gay and lesbian section, others felt that their union ignored their needs.

“The union doesn’t deal with gay and lesbian issues. I was active for 25 years and never came out in the union. They don’t practice what they preach.”

Class and financial status were cited as factors in addressing discrimination at work.

“Money is a great leveller-the middle class experience is different to the working-class one.”

Middle-class lesbians or lesbians in positions of relative power, for example, those who are self employed are less likely to be exposed to harassment and discrimination.

However, it is interesting to note that research conducted on behalf of the Combat Poverty Agency in the South of Ireland (1995) showed that lesbian women in general were more likely than men to say that their workplace environment was hostile. The Commission of the European Communities (1991) also points out that discrimination at work can have a devastating impact on victims’ health and confidence, morale and performance and can damage their employment prospects.

3.5.

Lesbian Parenting

10% of the women interviewed are lesbian parents of children ranging in age from 12 months to 25 years old. As with any parent the issues arising from caring for a young baby are quite different from those associated with a young adolescent at school.

3.5.1

Support for parenting

Those interviewed who have young children focused on the support services available for parents and prospective parents. Many were concerned at the hostility towards the notion of lesbian parenting and felt aggrieved that donor insemination services are not available to them.

“I feel discriminated against in relation to artificial insemination services in Northern Ireland. I was told that services are not available to ‘single’ women even though I was in a long-term relationship.”

3.5.2

Access to statutory support services

Many women reported that the hospital and pre-natal services were supportive and acknowledged their partner at all stages of the birth process. However, once the baby is brought home the support services appear to be less aware of and sympathetic to the needs of lesbian parents and their children.

“In post-natal care the mid wife and the GP asked when is your ‘friend’ leaving now that your parents have arrived. ”

“The GP still asks are you the childminder, aunt, and chooses not to see our relationship. Legally as a partner I have no rights e.g. to sign consent forms for treatment for the baby. Lesbian parents tend to access standard things but not other services as it’s difficult for them. If there were behavioural problems we would be afraid to consult a social worker or psychiatrist because they may relate the problem to being lesbian. Access to parenting support may be difficult for others - lesbians parents may be set up to fail.”

“I had post-natal depression and was frightened to tell anyone or ask for support in case my daughter was taken off me.”

“I had post-natal depression and was frightened to tell anyone or ask for support in case my daughter was taken off me.”

3.5.3

Custody rights

Many lesbians had their children when they were married and live in fear of losing custody of their children. These women felt that due to society’s attitudes and pressures they had limited choices when they were young and ended up in unhappy marriages which they were fearful to leave. As with other groups of women, life choices are limited by financial dependency, low status as a woman and societal pressures as to acceptable lifestyles for women.

“My experience was of not leaving my husband because he threatened he’d get custody of the kids -logic told me he couldn’t do it-but there was no help available to me.”

Lesbian parents find it difficult to access sympathetic and experienced legal advice in relation to custody. There are currently no services specifically designed to meet their needs. Legal recognition of partnerships is still not available, leaving the non-biological mother in a precarious position vis a vis her rights to access and custody should anything happen to the biological mother.

3.5.4 The Education System

Lesbian parents are faced with a dilemma when their child starts school. Do they 'come out' to the school and the teachers, leaving their child open to bullying and discrimination or do they ask their children to carry the burden of keeping their parents' sexual orientation a secret?

A number of children who are 'out' at primary school decide not to tell friends when they move to secondary school. Individual women carry the weight of homophobia, they have to weigh up the implications of being out. If they decide not to come out the child has to carry the secret.

"I'm dreading my children becoming teenagers and the abuse they'll have to face the kids don't tell you half of it."

Each woman decides how far she wants to come out and takes into consideration the repercussions on the child. One woman told the child's teacher for fear of bullying her son had told other kids and was laughed at. The father told the child not to tell anyone. Women with ex-husbands have not only to take the interests of the child into account but also the reaction of the father it can become a custody issue.

Each school has, in theory, an anti-bullying policy but interviewees reported that these policies were not put into practice in relationship to bullying on the grounds of the parent's sexual orientation.

"My daughter has been bullied at school because of her mother. The school had a bullying policy but didn't do anything. She got to the stage where she wouldn't go to the local shops and didn't go out. She had to move school and can't get a bus pass even though the school is further away. The new school is more supportive."

Even in schools which accepted lesbian parents, the curriculum did not reflect this.

"We were accepted not celebrated. It's the last taboo in relation to equality."

3.5.5 Support within the Lesbian Community

Many parents felt that their needs and interests as parents were ignored by the lesbian community.

"The Scene is a pub/club culture. There is a lack of sympathy on the scene for lesbian mothers."

3.6.

Young lesbians and bisexual women

There appear to be relatively few improvements in the situation of young lesbian and bisexual women in exploring and stating their sexual orientation. They continue to face rejection by their families, discrimination and harassment.

3.6.1

Education and Youth Services

The experience of the young women interviewed revealed that sexual orientation is largely ignored in our schools and the process of 'coming out' can be an isolating and difficult experience. Equally, the statutory Youth Service has no acknowledgement of or specialised provision for young lesbians.

“When I came out to a friend she told the year head who took me aside and said if I didn't tell my parents that night she would contact them herself. I said they (and I) weren't ready for it but she went ahead anyway and phoned them.”

“At school they didn't cover sexual orientation or homosexuality. It was part of the syllabus and the teacher said she didn't feel comfortable dealing with it while I was in the class- I said I was fine with it.”

“At school when I came out people started to cover up when changing for sports etc.”

“When I came out to a friend she told the year head who took me aside and said if I didn't tell my parents that night she would contact them herself. I said they (and I) weren't ready for it but she went ahead anyway and phoned them.”

The young women felt that the youth services should take their needs into consideration. Those who are members of the Gay and Lesbian Youth NI group (GLYNI) were very appreciative of the support and friendship they had gained. They also commented on the improvement in their self-confidence and esteem through their involvement in GLYNI. A number of the young women stated that their parents were also pleased that they were accessing support through the project. However, concern was expressed that the service was limited to young people over the age of 16 years. Support is also needed for young lesbians who are younger than 16.

GLYNI has supported 108 young people since November 1999 and has provided an invaluable resource to both individuals and groups of young gays and lesbians. The project has also maintained e-mail contact with isolated young lesbians living in rural areas. The funding for the project is due to finish at the end of 2001 which has created uncertainty for both the young people and the sole staff member.

3.6.2

Socialising

Understandably, socialising is a major priority for young lesbians and bisexual women, who want to meet other young women and explore their sexuality in a safe and supportive environment. Much of the gay scene is currently focused around bars and clubs, neither of which women under the age of 18 have legal access to.

“Women come below gay men- I don’t want anything extra- I just want the same rights as everyone else.”

3.7.

“There’s not enough social events for dykes especially young ones (we can only go to clubs where there’s drink)”

“For example, there’s no tennis clubs for dykes!!-it’s not socially accepted. I can’t put my arm around my girlfriend they should have groups in youth clubs.”

Young lesbians and bisexual women also felt that the gay and lesbian organisations should offer more support, particularly in relation to coming out.

Health

One organisation interviewed commented that, as a result of the impact of HIV and AIDS on the male community, the health needs of lesbian and bisexual women had been largely overlooked. The women interviewed felt that homophobia has had an impact on their health. Problems relating to alcohol and drugs abuse, domestic violence and emotional problems remain undocumented and ignored by mainstream health services.

“I worked in the Kremlin (Belfast based gay bar) and lots of young people have really serious problems with their sexual orientation there is a high suicide rate because people can’t come out.”

A 1983 study of 416 gays and lesbians aged 15-20 years and living in London discovered that 19% of them had attempted to take their own lives. Interviewees felt that General Practitioners were largely ignorant of and unsympathetic to the health needs of lesbian and bisexual women. There were some exceptions to this although few G.P.s had access to information on appropriate services for the lesbian and bisexual community. Some interviewees felt that the gay and lesbian community were at fault as they had not targeted doctors and primary health care workers in relation to information.

“Research is needed on the attitudes of GP’s and Community Psychiatric Nurses for example do they publicise Cara-Friend and Lesbian Line? They can be tunnel visioned. Does their training take into consideration sexual orientation? The older ones are less sympathetic - there hasn’t been a shift here since the last major reports e.g. the Wolfenden Report. We need to send stuff out to GP’s etc.”

Issues around the sexual health of lesbian and bisexual women should also be addressed.

3.8.

Partnership rights

Lesbian relationships are not acknowledged when it comes to pension rights, housing, bereavement or custody of children. Their relationships are not recognised in tenancy agreements or family tickets for travel and leisure facilities.

“Women come below gay men- I don’t want anything extra- I just want the same rights as everyone else.”

Legal recognition of same sex partnerships can be broadly classified under three headings relating to the rights, responsibilities and recognition accrued by: marriage, civil partnerships and co-habitation.

Marriage is where the rights, responsibilities and legal recognition given to same-sex couples is the same as those for married opposite-sex couples. The Netherlands implemented marriage and adoption legislation for same-sex couples in April 2001.

Civil partnerships give specific and enumerated rights, responsibilities and legal recognition to same-sex couples who register their partnership.

Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, France, Germany and parts of Spain, the United States and Canada have all recognised civil partnerships. In Germany, which legalised civil partnerships in the Summer of 2001, registered partners are able to change their last name and qualify for the same inheritance tax exemptions as married couples. They have joint custody over children for whom one partner already has custody, recognition of next-of-kin rights, joint eligibility for some social security benefits and have maintenance payment obligations.

Cohabitation of same sex couples is recognised in Belgium, Portugal and Scotland where certain rights are automatically accrued after a specified period of co-habitation.

3.9.

Disability

Lesbian women with a disability face a double oppression in terms of discrimination. Few, if any, of the lesbian social venues have disability access and there are no services provided by disability organisations for their lesbian and bisexual constituency. Lesbians with disabilities tend to be even more invisible than other lesbians as the sexuality of disabled people is still regarded as a taboo subject. It is not surprising therefore that only one lesbian with a disability was interviewed in the consultation. She was concerned that services for lesbians did not take her disability into consideration, e.g. with a hearing disability she is not able to access telephone services. This young woman also mentioned that she received repeated and hurtful verbal abuse in the deaf community because of her sexual orientation.

3.10

Racism

The lesbian community is a microcosm of the wider society and reflects many of the attitudes and values of that society including racism. A small number of black lesbians were interviewed for the consultation and they reported suffering the double burden of racism and homophobia. Racism is seldom raised or discussed as an issue within the lesbian community and is generally left to black women to raise themselves.

"I'm not as assertive in the lesbian community as in the straight community. It's not verbal discrimination it's ignorance of identity and the need to include. They don't advocate discussion around black women's rights there's nothing around Pride. People are afraid to talk to you. I would try to advocate lesbian feminist rights but there's no impetus no linking of equality of rights. I have been disappointed about the lack of advocacy of

“I knew from when I was nine I was lesbian and I only knew from when I was 10 that I was black it was only when I was called a ‘nigger’. My identity was born through discrimination.”

rights there’s tokenism- We’re just a microcosm of the human race and we tend to forget that- if we acknowledge problems it’s seen as a weakness- that’s part of racism, sexism and homophobia.”

These women have also struggled to develop their black as well as lesbian identity.

“I knew from when I was nine I was lesbian and I only knew from when I was 10 that I was black it was only when I was called a ‘nigger’. My identity was born through discrimination.”

There were strong feelings that the lesbian community needed to be informed about and take action on issues relevant to black lesbians and bisexual women.

We’re going to have to rely on the wider lesbian community to advocate for us- we’re going to have to trust the wider lesbian community to push our case. There’s an onus on the lesbian community to educate themselves and to consult they tend to use models from Britain which don’t always apply here.

3.11

Lesbian and Bisexual Women in Rural Areas

There is currently no organised lesbian and bisexual women’s group in a rural area. Consultation was therefore carried out with a number of individual women who stressed their isolation and their difficulty in accessing anything other than telephone services. Women in rural areas were understandably most keen on improving existing statutory and voluntary services to take into account their needs as parents, carers and consumers of social, health and welfare services. They felt that more attention should be paid to the dissemination of information to primary health and social services. Training in the particular needs of the lesbian and bisexual women’s community should also be provided for these bodies.

3.12

Family and Community Support

In many other areas of oppression family support is readily available as it is likely that other family members have also experienced marginalisation, bullying, negative stereotyping etc. Examples of this would include the family support and solidarity available to the Travelling community, black people, republicans etc. Oppressed people can draw on the strength of family ties in this society. (Coulter 1995) However, the strength of family ties has served to restrict the development of a lesbian identity and community. Many women spoke of the fear of causing hurt to family members by coming out or by increasing their visibility through organising more publicly. Some lesbians do have family support but will limit their active involvement in public campaigns for fear of causing hurt or embarrassment.

Coming out to parents and family is particularly difficult. One young woman was evicted from the house by her parents, another rejected by her complete family.

“I was spat on when I first came out my own ma spat on me.”

“Coming out to parents is difficult - it’s the sex! Someone should get a group of parents together - Pride (Gay Pride Week) should have workshops for gays on ‘coming out’.”

“I wish I hadn’t told my father as he’s been upset since. My brother doesn’t speak to me.”

Young women are sympathetic to the reactions of their straight parents and feel that there is little or no support or information available to them.

“Parents need more information they think I’m on drugs and will get AIDs.”

“Coming out to parents is difficult -it’s the sex! Someone should get a group of parents together - Pride (Gay Pride Week) should have workshops for gays on ‘coming out’.”

GLYNI, the gay and lesbian youth project has worked with the Eastern Health and Social Services Board to redress this situation and plans to publish a support and information booklet for parents in October 2001. The booklet is focused on the information needs of the parents and carers of lesbian and gay young people.

The mainstream community response tends to be negative also and is quite often expressed in the homophobic attitudes of the young people who gather at street corners. There were mixed views as to the nature and cause of these attitudes. Many women felt that the media and political institutions, which may have excellent policies on gays and lesbians, do not actively tackle the homophobic attitudes that currently exist on the streets.

Mixed feelings were expressed as to the impact of the ‘Troubles’ on the lesbian and bisexual women’s community. Some felt that the community had managed to maintain cohesion while others felt that the existence of a politicised community had exacerbated splits within groups and organisations. In general, many women felt that not enough time in organisations has been devoted to discussion of these issues. There should be room for individuals from different political backgrounds and with political ‘baggage’ to discuss their differences.

Some women from a unionist or protestant background felt that catholic or nationalist communities were more sympathetic to gays and lesbians.

“West Belfast is different to East Belfast, they see themselves as being more progressive. The Troubles held us (Protestants) back lots of social issues were pushed to the back burner. Our own development was held back in the way we relate to other people children tend to take on their parents behaviour and attitudes.”

Another interviewee from a Protestant background felt that Catholics outnumber Protestants amongst lesbian activists.

“Unionist women don’t organise. Catholics come from an underdog approach.”

However, nationalist /catholic lesbians and bisexual women did not necessarily agree and felt that they face equal problems and levels of harassment. One lesbian couple, living in a nationalist area, reported being threatened by men and women with hurley sticks and other weapons.

“I have been forced back into the closet by (a) this society and its attitudes and (b) by being a mother. Women are more accepted by the communities in the South it’s due to the oppression of the churches here and the education system.”

The Christian churches are regarded as powerful forces within local communities in demonising sexual diversity. Concern was also expressed that the Statutory Duty, under the new equality legislation, did not cover the Catholic Church and its institutions.

As part of their Lenten Series on Marginalisation in 2001, Clonard Monastery in Belfast organised a service for the family and friends of lesbian and gays. Over 80 people attended the service. Brendan O’Rourke, Rector of Clonard Monastery, in an interview recognised the great need and the mighty silence around these issues. He also acknowledged that lesbian women face a double edged sword as they don’t have a sense of being welcomed as women or lesbians within the church.

“I have been forced back into the closet by (a) this society and its attitudes and (b) by being a mother. Women are more accepted by the communities in the South it’s due to the oppression of the churches here and the education system.”

A number of women also felt that the history of colonisation in the North limited the development and progress of sexual diversity by comparison to the South of Ireland.

“The political system is different in the South a colonised state is more narrow-the South is more progressive than up here. Other issues take the forefront it’s not about housing, schools etc..”

4 Gaps In Services and Support

The consultation addressed gaps in mainstream services as well as specifically lesbian orientated groups and services. The following gaps in services and support were identified.

4.1. Existing services

There are currently very few services directed at the lesbian and bisexual women's community. Lesbian Line, which has been in existence for 21 years, survives on a small budget and has no staff members, relying solely on volunteers. Other gender mixed organisations reported difficulties in reaching the lesbian and bisexual women's population indicating a need for a gender specific organisation.

Interviewees were asked about their awareness and use of existing services. All respondents were aware of Lesbian Line and those who had used it were very satisfied with its services.

"I used the Line for years when I was 14 before I came out."

"I was delighted with the service, it was extremely useful I was able to meet other lesbians who had been married."

One woman commented that Lesbian Line was of little use to her as she is deaf and she recommended that the Line use Type Talk.

Other services and facilities were not well known and women living in rural areas in particular expressed a need for more publicity around these. Information and telephone services are particularly important to young women and those living in rural areas as the cost and availability of transport acts as a barrier to accessing services.

4.2. Legal Advisory Service

Individuals expressed an urgent need for lesbian friendly legal advice. There are currently two male solicitors in Belfast who are willing to undertake cases but interviewees felt that weekly advice sessions with female solicitors in a lesbian friendly venue are important.

As proposed legislation e.g. the Single Equality Bill, will allow rights based cases there will be an increased need for expert legal services.

4.3. Research

There was broad agreement on the need for further research, particularly if the lesbian and gay community want to influence policy and decision makers. Topics requiring research included the nature and make up of the lesbian community, Black lesbian experience, lesbian use of Women's Centres, attitudes towards lesbians within the health service and among General Practitioners in particular.

4.4. Counselling

Counselling was defined as individual sessions for women in distress, donor insemination counselling and more awareness of the need for relationship

counselling within current statutory and voluntary provision. A number of interviewees emphasised the need for counselling free of charge. Donor insemination services were also requested.

4.5. Information

Some of the established groups stated that they played a role in providing information to lesbians and bisexual women, to their families and to statutory and voluntary providers. They felt that there was a need for relevant leaflets which could be distributed widely in straight as well as gay venues and services. In particular the information and support needs of the straight parents and families of lesbians and bisexual women were cited. Information should also be available at a local and community level where it can be easily accessed, particularly by young women in rural areas. The production of a data-base of 'lesbian friendly' services and organisations should also be undertaken.

Other groups felt that access to information about the legal rights of lesbian and bisexual women in other countries would raise the awareness of women and encourage them to raise their expectations of their own legal rights.

4.6. Advocacy Service

"Ideally the lesbian voice should be heard in many different ways- it shouldn't be left to just one organisation. A specific lesbian organisation is good but other groups e.g. women's and community groups should be involved. Anti-racist groups have managed to get race on the agenda of others."

There was strong agreement that an Advocacy Service is urgently needed although there was divergence as to the understanding of the term. Some saw the emphasis being on representing individuals or acting as a mediator between advisory bodies and individuals with a problem or grievance. Others saw an Advocacy Service as focusing on influencing government policy and decision-makers. Yet others envisaged it as a means of having an impact on existing services and the allocation of resources within them e.g. relationship counselling provided by Relate. Some women felt that an Advocacy Service should broaden out and impact on other human rights groups and organisations.

"Ideally the lesbian voice should be heard in many different ways- it shouldn't be left to just one organisation. A specific lesbian organisation is good but other groups e.g. women's and community groups should be involved. Anti-racist groups have managed to get race on the agenda of others."

One organisation felt that an advocacy service with a community development approach is needed. This approach would develop awareness and leadership in the lesbian and bisexual community and would enrich the work of other organisations e.g. CoSO.

4.7. Statutory and voluntary services

Young women in particular were aware of the need for voluntary and statutory service providers to be more conscious of the needs of the lesbian and bisexual community. They recognised that this required attitudinal change as well as policy change but were optimistic about the possibilities presented by recent equality legislation and changes in government structures. A number of organisations were mentioned as already providing lesbian

friendly services albeit in a piecemeal fashion. Women interviewed had positive experiences of Relate, the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), the trade union Unison and two G.Ps.

Interviewees were asked if they were aware of Statutory Duty and the proposed Bill of Rights. Almost 50 % of women were unaware of legislative change and an even greater percentage (75%) didn't know the implications of the legislation. They felt that greater efforts, on the part of statutory bodies, should be made to inform the lesbian and bisexual community of these pieces of legislation and their potential impact on locally based services.

4.8.

Social Outlets

Although LASI has clearly stated that it does not see the creation of social outlets as part of its function, it is important to name this as a gap in support and services for the lesbian and bisexual community. Social events have a broader function than solely as an opportunity to meet people. They are often the first introduction women have to the lesbian and bisexual community. They can also serve as a vital source of information and a point of communication on broader political issues. There are few social outlets for lesbian and bisexual women that are not based in commercial clubs and pubs.

LASI could usefully explore the development of social events attached to events in the wider community e.g. the May Day celebrations or community festivals which would also serve to inform and politicise both the public and the lesbian community.

4.9.

Political Support

Political support is vital if both attitudes and legislation around sexual orientation are to change. There was general agreement that, in the main, nationalist political parties had better and more progressive policies on lesbian and bisexual issues than the unionist parties. The Progressive Unionist Party is an exception to this. However, interviewees felt that policies were not being implemented on the ground and were thus reduced to tokenism. There was strong feeling, particularly from republican lesbians that if political parties publicly supported the gay and lesbian community it would be easier for young people in society to acknowledge and accept sexual diversity and so reduce current levels of harassment.

There was unanimous support for the lobbying of political parties and governmental structures.

5

Issues for the Establishment of an Advocacy Organisation

5.1

Lesbian Representation

The consultation exercise revealed that there is clearly a need for an organisation to represent the voice of lesbian and bisexual women. The current gender mixed organisations have low or no representation of women on their organising committees. All of the organisations stated that this was not a deliberate choice and one pointed out that the low representation of women was just a recent phenomenon. However, as in other areas of society, women's voice tends to be subsumed in gender mixed organisations. There is clearly a need for coalitions and co-operation with gay men and interviewees were clear that a lesbian advocacy organisation should build on existing advocacy work rather than duplicating it.

5.2.

People in the mainstream community tend to have access to some form of formal or informal training through school politics, management structures at work and in their communities. Lesbian and bisexual women are often excluded from these channels and need access to confidence-building and organisational training.

Diversity

The lesbian and bisexual community is not homogeneous and reflects the diversity of the mainstream culture and society. Some groups initially claimed that their lesbian identity was the most important and over arched any differences in their group. On further exploration individuals revealed that this, in fact, is not always the case, and the example of Protestant lesbians feeling overwhelmed by what they saw as strong nationalist/Catholic women active in the community was cited as an example.

Others felt that lesbian organisations made assumptions about participants. Examples given were the notion that all lesbians were 'hippies' or 'into using rain sticks in discussions'.

In the two workshops conducted in the South where more general discussion was possible the issue of diversity and difference was aired. The issues of marginalisation and unequal access to power on the basis of class, colour, age and geographical location was raised. A resolution to these issues was not presented but it was felt that ongoing discussion was needed to address the power base of lesbian organisations. Patricia Prenderville, in her research into a lesbian organisation in Dublin (unpublished evaluation report, 2000), attributed much of the conflict arising out of difference, to internalised oppression and the lack of recognition of these issues in an effort to preserve unity. She emphasises that this issue is prevalent in the organisations of other 'oppressed' groups and needs to be acknowledged in the establishment and ongoing development of any lesbian organisation.

5.3.

Participation and Consultation

Those interviewed welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process and emphasised that this should be an ongoing one to ensure the participation of the diverse elements within the lesbian community. Concern was expressed that a committee structure would exclude those who are 'closeted', those less articulate, young women and women from outside Belfast. Foyle Friend emphasised that representation on a committee in Belfast would be interpreted as a token gesture and would not be sufficient to ensure active participation.

5.4.

Representation

The lesbian and bisexual community is largely invisible which causes difficulties in representing its views and ideas. Some concern was expressed that an organisation would be established without a clear mandate from the community. The problem of representation is highlighted at times of conflict or controversy and the criticism of misrepresentation can be levelled at any emerging organisation. While representation from other organisations on a LASI committee could be useful, other methods of involving the community must be explored.

5.5.

Transparency

Women expressed an interest in being kept informed about developments within LASI and were concerned that the group's structures and decision-making procedures should be transparent and open to the wider lesbian and bisexual community. However, there are difficulties and contradictions for LASI within this. Many women are living fairly closeted lives and do not want to be on a mailing list or even listed on a database. The question must be asked then how can these women be contacted regularly and how can they be involved in decision-making processes? There is not an easy answer to this one although an emphasis on an outreach approach could be a useful tool and would be essential to any organisational work or structures arising out of the consultation process. The construction of a web-site for the dissemination of information and as a contact point would also be useful.

5.6.

Skills Base

One of the limiting factors identified in both this consultation process and in Patricia Prenderville's (1999) research is the current lack of organising skills within the lesbian and bisexual community. There are many barriers to lesbian and bisexual women accessing these skills. People in the mainstream community tend to have access to some form of formal or informal training through school politics, management structures at work and in their communities. Lesbian and bisexual women are often excluded from these channels and need access to confidence-building and organisational training. Many active lesbians have gained their skills elsewhere within other political or voluntary and community organisations. There are few if any opportunities for lesbians to gain the skills of working in groups and committees, lobbying, report writing and management.

Often workers are appointed for their commitment to the lesbian community and cause rather than for their organisational and management skills. In the past (Prenderville 1999) this has caused resentment and conflict within lesbian organisations.

“People in the mainstream community tend to have access to some form of formal or informal training through school politics, management structures at work and in their communities. Lesbian and bisexual women are often excluded from these channels and need access to confidence-building and organisational training. ”

5.7.

Short-lived organising

Short-lived organising has worked very well in the lesbian community and often this is needed to address a particular need or issue. However, we need to develop models of sustained long-term organising, or to explore the long-

term organisations within the North and see what they have done to stay in existence. Lesbian Line has managed to maintain a high profile both within the lesbian and mainstream community and has provided the first port of call for many young and older women going through the process of 'coming out'. The organisation attributes its success to the crucial need for its services and the anonymity of its volunteers.

The consultation revealed that the pressure of being active in an organisation with the associated increase in harassment that goes along with being 'more out' tends to lead to burn out quite quickly.

5.8. **Need for support**

Individual lesbians need a lot of support to come out and to remain involved in fairly public campaigns and organisations. There is a tendency, also prevalent in other oppressed communities e.g. the Traveller community, to allow one person to carry the burden of being spokesperson and to take the criticism, from within the community, that comes with that role

5.9. **Internalised oppression**

Internalised homophobia manifests itself in a variety of ways in an organisational context. At the individual level it results in low self-esteem and lack of confidence. While involvement in an organisation can have positive impacts on the individual's feelings of self worth and identity it also means that any conflicts or disagreements are deeply felt at a personal level and individuals can feel damaged through their involvement.

At the organisational level internalised homophobia can impact on the notion of 'good' and 'bad' lesbians, what is acceptable to the mainstream society in terms of both behaviour and representation. Equally, there can be conflict between those women who are 'very out' and those who do not yet feel ready for a more public profile.

Emerging leadership within the lesbian community is also often subject to enormous pressure to represent all lesbians and comes under criticism when this is not possible.

diversity⁺ difference

accountability

support

level of **involvement**

acting as a **catalyst**

development of **leadership**

personal development

diversity +

6.1. Diversity and difference

The advocacy organisation should pay attention to the diversity within the lesbian community. As well as different levels of skills, education and experience of organising there will be differences in background and life experience. Often, lesbian organisations have tended to gloss over internal differences of class, race, politics and ability in an attempt to maintain a semblance of unity. Differences need to be acknowledged and discussed openly. The usual committee structure is often inadequate in dealing with difference and there is a temptation to have a token young person or mother on the committee. Suggestions were made during the consultation process for regular focus group meetings to draw on the experience of different sections of the lesbian community e.g. young women.

6.2. Accountability

Any emerging organisation should take care not to attempt to address all the needs of the lesbian community even though there will be pressure to do so. The organisation should be clear about its plans and should make these public so clarifying any ambiguity or misunderstandings about its role. The organisation should establish a limited mandate at a public meeting or conference and should then work through an agreed work plan for a full year, referring back to the community of lesbian and bisexual women through focus groups reflecting the different interests and needs of the community.

6.3. Support

Ongoing reflection and support should be available on a regular basis for both members of staff and members of any management structure. These sessions should occasionally be supported and facilitated by an independent facilitator.

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acting as a C

6.4. Level of involvement

Many women do not feel that they want or are adequately prepared for involvement in a committee structure. Opportunities should be developed for lesbians to participate at different levels. For example, it may be easier for a woman with young children to volunteer for a few hours per week rather than to attend committee meetings. During the consultation a number of women volunteered to contribute particular skills.

Ways need to be found for new lesbian/bisexual women to be involved without burdening them with the management of the full organisation. The use of interest and/or working groups around particular issues is one way of achieving this.

6.5 Acting as a Catalyst

LASI should act as a catalyst to the establishment of relevant support services for the lesbian and bisexual community rather than trying to provide these services. The role of LASI would be to support the formation of groups and assist them with capacity building, group development and funding applications.

6.6. Development of leadership

The focus of an advocacy organisation should be the development of leadership rather than solely the development of the organisation. LASI should move away from the established notion of 'owning' groups or organisations with its focus on the development of a limited number of people. This may involve the provision of both formal and informal training courses in leadership and organisational skills.

Attention should be paid to the different needs of young women. The GLYNI project has made a unique contribution to services for young lesbians and should be supported with the provision of more secure, core funding from the statutory bodies.

Personal Development

Any emerging organisation must recognise and allow for the personal development that comes with being actively involved in advocacy. Time and resources should be devoted to reflection and learning about ourselves. Our community is unusual (and perhaps closer to the experience of people with disability) in that women can come out at any time in their lives-there will always be 'new' lesbians who do not always have the opportunity to learn from the experience of those who have gone before. This level of awareness raising is crucial to the reproduction of leadership within the lesbian community and the promotion of a healthy community.

GLYNI provides a useful role model for supporting the personal development of participants and thus increasing their ability to respond to and impact on policies and issues that affect their lives.

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Appendix 1

Groups/Individuals Interviewed

Coalition on Sexual Orientation (CoSO)

The Coalition on Sexual Orientation (CoSO) was established by the LGBT community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) groups in N. Ireland in order to provide a voice for the LGBT community in debates and consultations surrounding the rights of the community. In June 2001, they produced a Guide to Involving and Consulting the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Community.

Dykes With Babes

Dykes with Babes was started in October 2000 by two lesbian mothers of young children. It is an informal organisation which functions without funding and does not have formal membership or charitable status at this stage. The group is open to all lesbian and bisexual mothers and co-parents and their children. The aim of the group is to break the isolation of and to provide a social and support network for lesbian mothers and their children. "In particular, we want to create an environment where our children do not feel that they are the only ones in their situation, and where they develop a strong sense of self-worth to help them deal with homophobia." The means used at this stage are outings organised on the last Sunday of every month, advertised through local lesbian networks and personal contacts, though they may in future extend their activities. The group can be contacted through Lesbian Line or Women's News.

Foyle Friend

Foyle Friend exists to support and reach out to the lesbian, gay and bisexual community in the North west of Ireland through the provision of relevant services and information. It evolved from Derry Cara-Friend which was established in 1980 to provide a telephone and befriending service. In 1995 the organisation changed its name to Foyle Friend with a view to increasing accessibility to lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Gay Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland (GLYNI)

GLYNI was established in November 1999 and is a youth project of Cara-Friend, the voluntary counselling, befriending and information organisation. The project is based in Belfast and is grant aided by Comic Relief. The aims of the project are to increase the awareness in young people, in those working with young people and in the wider community of the personal issues relating to same-sex orientation in young people and to enhance and develop the services for young gays and lesbians.

GLYNI helps to reduce the isolation experienced by young lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Northern Ireland by providing a safe and confidential environment where these young people can come together to gain support, share experiences and make new friends. It's an open group, which means young people can join at any time. Activities have ranged from personal development workshops on topics such as 'Coming Out' and confidence building to outdoor pursuits.

GLYNI has catered for over 100 young gays and lesbians from all over Northern Ireland since its formation in 1999.

Lesbian Line

Lesbian Line is a voluntary telephone helpline that offers confidential support, information and befriending to lesbians and bisexual women. It was established 21 years ago as part of Cara-Friend. In the year 1999/2000 a total of 329 calls were received of which 69% were from outside Belfast. The Line has also been involved in training, information sessions and in contributions to the Equality Agenda.

L.Inc, Lesbians in Cork,

L.Inc was established in 2000 as a voluntary collective to provide services/networks for the lesbian and bisexual community. They seek to act as a forum for lesbian and bisexual women to communicate with one another across many boundaries, both geographical and political. L.Inc have opened a resource centre in Cork which is used by a range of groups, publishes a magazine and organises workshops and classes on relevant subjects. The group was interviewed as part of a development week-end in Cork in May 2001.

Lesbian Lives Workshop

In an effort to consult as widely as possible, a workshop on lesbian organising was held at the Lesbian Lives conference in February 2001. Over 50 women from throughout the country attended the workshop.

Queerspace

Queerspace was established in January 1998 as an inclusive, safe space for the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgendered community. It is an alcohol and drug free space which has been totally supported by voluntary donation. More recently, grant-aid has been received from Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT) and the Voluntary Services Bureau (VSB) to support volunteers. Queerspace has organised a drop-in, collective meetings and discussion around issues relevant to the queer community. The organisation is a founding member of CoSO and has contributed to submissions on the Bill of Rights.

Shankill Women's Centre

The Shankill Women's Centre provides services and facilities for women in the Greater Shankill area. The Centre brought together a group of lesbian women to participate in the consultation process

Other interviews were conducted with the following. The groups came together solely for the purposes of the consultation:

A group of lesbian republican mothers from West Belfast

A group of lesbian parents in an urban area outside Belfast

A group of black lesbian women

Individual lesbian mothers based in rural areas

Brendan O'Rourke, rector of Clonard Monastery, Belfast

Appendix 2

Results of Survey Conducted in Two Lesbian Social Venues in Belfast

The interviews were conducted with 50 individual women in two separate social venues.

1 Awareness of services available to lesbian and bisexual women

YES 33 (66%) NO 17 (34%)

Services mentioned

Lesbian line	27
Carafriend	9
Queer space	4
Foyle friend	2
Women's News	2
GLYNI	1
Women's centres	1
Brook	1
FPA	1
AUT	1
Juice bar	1
LGB officer at Uni	1

2 Have you used them?

Yes 12 (24%) NO 38 (76%)

Comments

Lesbian line

Fab

Helpful information, advice and support

No good for deaf people type talk would do the job

Very helpful

Very good, very friendly

Very helpful

Queer space

Didn't like it, felt isolated, not enough mature women

Would have preferred women only

Unallocated

Informative

Helpful, friendly, quite accessible

Do you think there is a need for

Legal advice	46 (92%)
Lobbying	47 (94%)
Health	47 (94%)
Counselling	47 (94%)

Other

- Insurance / mortgage advice
- Lesbian Relate
- On-going support for women coming out
- Non-club venues
- Fertility and mothering
- Newsletter
- Debating arenas
- Creating lesbian archive
- Trade Union
- General information service
- Career advice
- Telephone advice
- Women only pubs and clubs
- Social events for new lesbians
- Gay union in the workplace

Have you ever experienced discrimination or abuse?

YES	23 (46%)	NO	19 (38%)
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N.B. A further 8 (16%) said they hadn't but said this was because they were not out

5 (10%) were subjected to violent assault

9 (18%) talked of harassment at work, two left their jobs as a result

Sample Quotations:

"I twice got a kicking just walking along the street. I was too embarrassed to go to the RUC I would have gone to a lesbian organisation if there had been one."

"I was badly assaulted by work mates and was intimidated into leaving the town. The dole disallowed me because I'd left work deliberately."

"I was working in a hotel, the head receptionist refused to work with 'a lesbian'. I left because of the pressure."

"Yes, in relation to artificial insemination services in Northern Ireland. I was told that the services were not available to 'single' women, even 'though I was in a long-term relationship."

"I've had harassment from neighbours and local children. I get names shouted at me and my kids."

"I lived with a group of people when I was at university and when they found out, they ignored me. A girl in my class made my life unbearable. I ended up moving back home. A very unpleasant experience."

"Yes, whilst in Belfast City Council swimming pool, the life-guard singled myself and partner out and verbally abused us in front of the rest of the people present. When we complained to the management we were treated very unsympathetically."

5

Are you aware of

New equality legislation

YES	25 (50%)	NO	25 (50%)
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Bill of Rights

YES	24 (48%)	NO	26 (52%)
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