

## **3.6 Monday Night Group/ Dorothy's Granddaughters Case Study**

### **Data**

The following data was obtained from interviews with two women had who worked with these organisations.

The Monday Night Group was a social and support group for bisexual and lesbian women established in 1985. The Group offered women a safe and social meeting space in the form of a weekly drop-in. The Group's activities included discussions, workshops and presentations by visiting women and other organisations. The Group also offered one-to-one support.

An evaluation exercise in 1995 revealed that over 300 women attended the Group that year and over 50 per cent were aged 25 or less. Most of the women identified as lesbian although a minority was bisexual, married and/or unsure. Although two women identified as Black, most identified as white. Although most women lived in Reading, the Group had a large catchment area with women travelling from other areas of the county and other counties in the region. Most of the women were referred through Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline and Reading Women's Information Centre although a minority attended after finding out about the service through word-of-mouth.

The main issues arising for the young women who attended the Group included:

- Coming out and being out.
- Sharing experiences.
- Being bisexual or lesbian and a parent.
- The need for safe and women-only space away from the pressures of family, work and wider society.
- The importance and need for social networks.
- The importance and need for support.

Dorothy's Granddaughters was a social and support group for young bisexual and lesbian women established in 1991. The organisation met fortnightly but folded in 1995. The organisation's activities included discussions and educational and social activities devised, organised and facilitated by the young women themselves.

Over 30 women attended the group during the four years. The age range was 16 to 25 although most of the women were aged 18 and over. Most of the members identified as lesbian although a minority was bisexual or unsure of their sexual identity. Most of the women identified as white although one identified as Asian and another as Black. Most of the women lived in Reading although a number of women travelled from Bracknell, Maidenhead, Slough and Bracknell.

The main issues arising for these young women included:

- Alcohol use and abuse.
- Assertiveness and confidence.
- Coming out and being out.
- Eating disorders and body image.
- The desire to learn about lesbian and women's herstory.
- Traumatic family backgrounds and violence within the family, especially after coming out.
- Homelessness.
- Arranged marriage.
- Mental health issues: clinical mental health problems, depression, isolation and loneliness and the problems of leading a double life.
- Their need for considerable one-to-one support and reassurance and confidence to be able to attend the group.
- Parenting and wanting to have children.
- Racism.
- Relationship issues: relationships versus friendships and long- and short-term relationships.
- Sexism and the male-dominated scene.
- Sexual abuse.
- Doubts and uncertainty about sexual identity.
- Stereotypes: what you are supposed to be and look like to be a lesbian and how to fit in?

A worker with the group stated that:

“Staff at the Reading Women’s Information Centre identified the need for a support group for young lesbians and women with issues around their sexual identity. The members worked hard to actively work through their issues together and share their experiences. There was a lot of trust and mutual support within the group and little competition. The women-only space was safe, empowering and encouraging. Members felt strengthened by being with other young lesbians, having something in common. The group was a haven and friendship and support networks developed over time. There was no hierarchy between members and workers. The group was a source of support for women who often felt under immense pressure from often having to lead a double life. Women can feel really strong in a women-only environment. The group was small and intimate and the members kept in touch when the group closed. Dorothy’s Granddaughters was a successful experiment. It was the first provision in Reading for young bisexual and lesbian women; this at times was problematic, as there was little support. For example, Berkshire County Council’s Youth and Community Service was approached for support but they declined, citing Section 28. Although there are women members of ReachOUT, they would really benefit from women-only space, though not necessarily a women-only group. Women-only space is an important experience all women should have. Unfortunately, many young women have had no or little experience of women-only space and therefore do not see the need or its value.”

## **Discussion**

Few of the issues highlighted in this case study or from the findings of the Young People’s Health and Housing Survey (see Chapter 3) seem to be *specific* to women. Although not particular to women, a case could be made that several issues are *pronounced* because of gender. As this research project did not attempt to identify the specific experiences, issues and needs of young women this is only a cursory observation. However, in analysing the findings the author did pay attention to gender differences and several important *differences and similarities* were found between the experiences, issues and needs of young men and women, see Figure 35. There is obviously a need for further investigation.

**Figure 35: Differences and Similarities in the Health and Housing Experiences and Issues of Young People based on Gender**

<b>Differences in Terms of Health Issues</b>	<b>Similarities in Terms of Health Issues</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bisexual and lesbian women’s first sexual experience was likely to be with a man and not a woman.</li> <li>▪ Women were less likely to have sold sex for money compared to young men.</li> <li>▪ Women were less likely to have used drugs. Young men were three times as likely to have used certain types of drugs compared to women.</li> <li>▪ Women were more likely to diet and worry about their weight compared to men.</li> <li>▪ Women were more likely to have self-harmed.</li> <li>▪ Men were twice as likely to always practice safer sex, to have had an HIV test, to have been vaccinated against hepatitis B and to have had an STI.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Men and women were both aware of their sexual identity/‘difference’ and sexually active before age of 18 (the age of consent at the time of writing).</li> <li>▪ A similar proportion of men and women consumed more than the recommended level of alcohol and a similar proportion considered their alcohol consumption to be a problem.</li> <li>▪ Men and women had similar views on bisexuality.</li> <li>▪ Men and women were equally likely to have suffered domestic violence.</li> <li>▪ Men and women were equally likely to suffer from an eating disorder.</li> <li>▪ Similar numbers of men and women were not out to their GP or health care worker.</li> <li>▪ Men and women were equally likely to have suffered a mental health problem, to have experienced depression and to have thought about and attempted suicide.</li> <li>▪ Men and women had similar experiences of sex education.</li> </ul>
<b>Differences in Terms of Housing Issues</b>	<b>Similarities in Terms of Housing Issues</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Women were more likely to be living with a partner or relatives compared to men who were more likely to be living in the family home or with friends.</li> <li>▪ A higher proportion of women spent more than 50 per cent of their income on housing costs compared to men.</li> <li>▪ Women were less likely to have been made homeless.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A similar proportion of men and women had difficulties in meeting their housing costs.</li> <li>▪ A similar proportion of men and women experienced housing difficulties because of their sexual identity.</li> </ul>

Although the research project did not focus on gender issues as an explicit objective, it is obvious from Figure 35 that there are a number of important differences because of gender. Lack of evidence prohibits the author from speculating further save a few general comments.

It seems from the interviews with the workers that there are five major issues particular to women:

- The general invisibility of women and women's issues.
- The fact that bisexual, gay and lesbian community and voluntary sector organisations and scene venues are often male-dominated, not only in terms of the numbers of male service users/punters but also in terms of the positions of power held by men. Furthermore, there is also the fact that the agenda, resources, service focus and power relations within these institutions tend to be male-oriented *despite* the fact that there are many female staff working in these sectors.
- The lack of research into women's issues and specific services.
- The lack of, loss and under-valuing of women-only space and provision.
- The wider social reality of patriarchy: the oppression of women institutionally and socially, the social position and role of women, expectations of women, sexism, etc.