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# Lesbian Activism in Portugal

Facts, Experiences, and Critical Reflections

**THE PERSONAL IS** political, and this critical reflection on Portuguese lesbian activism is deeply rooted in my personal experiences. I have been an active member of Clube Safo, the only nationwide lesbian association in Portugal, and I am a founding member of the LES (Discussion Group on Lesbians Issues). Besides activism, my academic research is also intrinsically connected to lesbian issues; my PhD thesis explored the potentialities of collaborative web mapping to foster lesbian visibility in public spaces.

Academic practices intersect power, knowledge, and subjectivity. Activism is not an isolated practice in certain spaces and moments of life; it is a continuum in the diverse life contexts and is embedded in academic activity (Ruddick 2004). The boundaries between academia and activism are diffuse; there are overlaps between being an activist and an academic, between research practices and political actions (Silva and Ferreira 2011).

This article presents a critical reading of lesbian activism in Portugal, based on publications, archives, semi-structured interviews, and online debates with people inside the LGBT movement, as well as my personal experience as a lesbian activist. The main questions addressed are: What kind of lesbian activism is there in Portugal? How is it inscribed in the social landscape of the LGBT activism<sup>1</sup> and the feminist movement? Which are its main alliances, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats? Is

there a need for a lesbian activism at the present time, and what possible future scenarios can be expected?

I start by presenting an overview of the literature on interrelations between sexual citizenship and space, focusing on the intersections of gender and sexualities. I go on to discuss the history of the LGBT movement and lesbian activism in Portugal, based on an analysis of diverse records, such as newsletters, mailing lists, online forums, and printed material. In the second half of the article I critically analyse how lesbian activism intersects with feminism and the LGBT movement, and present the ideas expressed by lesbian activists about some of the main issues of the lesbian activism in Portugal at the present time: Is it still necessary to have a "women only" movement? What are the specific needs that justify the existence of lesbian activism, independent from other LGBT movements? How does an identity-based activism articulate with the actual situations people face at the present time, when identities are ever more acknowledged and experienced as fluid and dynamic? The paper concludes with a critical reflection on possible future scenarios in the context of the social, cultural, and economic situation of Portugal.

### **Lesbian Visibility: Sexual Citizenship and Space**

Notwithstanding the value and significance of sexual orientation equality policy to the lives of LGBT people, these policies in general reinforce the heterosexual/homosexual binary, and undervalue gender asymmetries. Most of the claims for equality on grounds of sexual orientation and for the right to sexual citizenship, often collapse gay men and lesbian women into queer or LGBT categories, making lesbians invisible in the process (Richardson 2000). Richardson (2005) questions the "lesbian and gay equality" discourses and cites Shane Phelan's (2001) approach to lesbian citizenship which proposes "that lesbians should claim 'the space of citizenship,' understood here as a claim to political participation and public recognition" (Phelan 2001, 265). This approach acknowledges the diversity and varying interests of lesbians and the intersections with the needs and interests of other groups, at the same

time as it recognises the specificities of lesbians, being women and living in a social discriminatory context.

The possibility of invisibility of sexual orientation gives emphasis to the importance of space for sexual citizenship. People can decide not to disclose their sexual orientation, and in a context of social discrimination invisibility is a common option (Valentine 1996; Ferreira 2011). Particular identities become salient or foregrounded in particular spaces and moments, and this process is highly contingent on the power-laden spaces in and through which experiences are lived (Valentine 2007). An appreciation of intersectionality as spatially constituted and experienced, supports the understanding of the intimate connections between the production of space and the systematic production of power. The invisibility of lesbians and gays is simultaneously a cause and a consequence of inequalities in their everyday lives, and contributes to their disempowerment (FRA 2009). Non-heterosexuals are constantly aware of the performative nature of identities and spaces, exercising constant self-vigilance and policing their own behaviours to avoid disclosing their sexual orientation, in contrast to heterosexuals who take for granted their freedom to perform their own identities given the pervasive heteronormativity of public spaces (Valentine 1996). Lesbians' and gay men's self-regulation and self-policing when negotiating heterosexual space involve feelings of displacement, discomfort, and not belonging, and can cause interior harm as a result of the everyday, localised management of their sexual representation and behaviour (Corteen 2002). Recent research shows that even in countries with widely accepted legal changes towards non-discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, visible displays of same-sex affection are not in general respected or accepted (Buijs 2009; Ferreira 2011).

The public/private dichotomy constitutes a prevalent spatial representation of social discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. The public sphere, as a space where civil, political, and social rights are demanded and enacted, has often been denied to non-normative sexualities. One of the most pervasive forms of social discrimination is strong societal pressure to confine and hide lesbian and gay sexualities within

private spaces (Valentine 1993). However the public/private distinction has concealed how private spaces, such as the home, can be sites for surveillance and regulation also, since private spaces are not shielded from normative regulations (Stychin 2001).

The practices of marginalised subjects, such as queer subjects, can disrupt normative spatial practices by disclosing the fluidity and porous boundaries of normative dualisms such as between private/public, feminine/masculine, materiality/representation, and inside/outside (Bell and Valentine 1995). Moreover, the transgression and queering of public spaces, such as the production of gay and lesbian areas within cities or LGBT pride parades, contribute to the visibility of non-normative sexualities. Some scholars have argued that these transgressions of heteronormative public space are essential for the extension of equal citizenship rights to sexual dissidents. Others reject the idea that visibility necessarily leads to equality, and argue that the inclusion of gay and lesbian people into a normalising discourse of citizenship will do little to change the heteronormativity of public spaces (Hubbard 2001).

Hubbard argues that in order to claim citizenship, sexual dissidents should not be seeking more visibility in public space but, rather, "increased public legitimacy for their own privacy" (Hubbard 2001, 65). More than public visibility, non-normative sexualities are deprived of the right to privacy. Hubbard describes privacy as the "power to exclude" others (including the state) from private spaces, in contrast to the "power to access public spaces" (Hubbard 2001). These critiques of visibility as a way to access equality echo with critiques of normalising politics and the emergence of homonormativity, linked to the increased visibility of gay culture and consumption in public space.

Homonormativity does not affect lesbians and gay men in the same ways, gendered differences do matter and one has to remember how the spatialisation of sexual lives is always gendered. For example the lack of open and visible lesbian-controlled places, where lesbians safely can act on their sexual orientation can be considered a constraint. Lesbian bars provide the significant experience of being able to be authentic in a social space, shared by others like you, and a momentary safe space to

meet other lesbians. At the same time, they become sites of unintended resistance as they demonstrate the social validity of lesbian sexual desire and existence (Wolfe 1997). It is noteworthy that comparatively there are many more public spaces of culture and consumption for gay men than for lesbian (e.g. Corteen 2002).

Research on the interrelations of space and sexual citizenship often relate differences in the spatial presence of gays and lesbians in urban areas to stereotyped ideas of gender. For example Castells (1983) claimed that it was possible to identify specific urban areas as gay residential and commercial spaces, given that men were more "territorial" and had higher income, and, on the other hand, women's characteristics rendered lesbian spaces more invisible at an urban scale. Castells gendered assumptions have been widely criticised (Binnie and Valentine 1999; Valentine 2000; Podmore 2001; 2006). Podmore (2001) argues that the perception of lesbians as "invisible" in the urban landscape is a product of conceptual frameworks that rely upon territoriality and visibility in the material landscape. These approaches to urban studies do not support the identification of spaces that are meaningful in the everyday lives of lesbians, and reduce lesbian spatialities to quasi-underground and "imperceptible" to outside observers (Binnie and Valentine 1999). For example, some studies on lesbian use of commercial spaces did not identify lesbian-specific businesses, such as lesbian bars, primarily because they were not located within the territories under study. To reveal the spatial patterns of lesbians' communality and sociability, research has to incorporate more complex, deterritorialised and antiessentialist approaches (Podmore 2001). Valentine's work (1996) is a noteworthy example of these deterritorialised approaches to urban spatialities describing how lesbians define intangible and physical spaces by such things as dress, language, music, and many other ways, such as public demonstrations of affection, shopping for household goods as couples, or socialising in groups.

The visibility of lesbians to each other is often achieved in a coded way, recognisable only to those sharing the same subcultural capital, reaffirming a sense of belonging and resisting heterosexual space and

hegemony (Eves 2004). The notion of "imagined communities," meaning that those who perceive themselves to be members "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991, 6), is used by Rothenberg (1995) to explain the way lesbians build a sense of community and belonging. The perception of "others like us" has a significant impact on how lesbians experience space, creating an imagined safe space made of interrelations between lesbians.

Interpreting urban public spaces exclusively within a heterosexual/homosexual binary is not adequate in the case of lesbians, given that one has to take into account the asymmetries of gender experienced by lesbians within and without LGBT spaces. The intersections of gender and sexualities are particularly evident in the research of Julie Podmore (2001) on Montréal's Boul. St-Laurent. Podmore describes patterns of lesbians' interaction, sense of communality, and visibility that question the heterosexual/homosexual binary. The women in her study identified more strongly with the neighbourhood of Boul. St-Laurent, even if there were little evidence of a lesbian presence in the material landscape, than with established "queer" or "LGBT" sites in Montréal (Podmore 2001). The Boul. St-Laurent was valued more for its heterogeneity and diverse countercultural context. More than being a visible lesbian space to others, the most important thing for the participants in Podmore's research was that they were visible to each other.

The analysis of the intersections of sexual citizenship and space highlights how sexual lives are always gendered. Gender continues to be a salient axis of difference, and lesbian activism can challenge the conflation of lesbians and gay men, asserting that heteronormativity and homonormativity do not affect lesbians and gay men in the same ways.

### **LGBT in Portugal**

The reality of life for lesbians and gays in Portugal has changed rapidly in recent years. A consistent and significant set of legal measures has been adopted, from the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1982<sup>2</sup> to the same-sex marriage law of 2010. It is a remarkable change, framed

both by the revolution of 1974 that ended a long period of dictatorship and brought noteworthy social changes to Portugal in extensive and diverse areas of life, including sexuality, and by the accession to the European Union in 1986.

Portugal has wide-ranging antidiscrimination laws and is one of the few countries in the world to include in its Constitution a ban on discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Nevertheless, some areas of Portuguese legislation remain discriminatory on the grounds of sexual orientation, of which parenthood is a notable example.

Recently, in May 2013, the Assembly of the Republic passed a bill on co-adoption<sup>3</sup> for same-sex couples. However, this bill still needed further legal discussion to become law. On March 14, 2014 the final project was voted in the Portuguese Parliament, and was not approved by the difference of 5 votes. This was a significant moment for LGBT rights in Portugal, a step back on the advances registered in May 2013, and a warning that change is not always positive. Parenthood remains one of the most discriminatory areas of life for non-heterosexuals. Same-sex couples do not have parental rights and assisted procreation services for single women and lesbian couples remain illegal.

Social discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is a pervasive reality in Portugal (FRA 2009). In 2009, the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) supervised a research project: "Study on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Based Discrimination" (Nogueira and Oliveira 2010). This was the first comprehensive research project on this subject conducted in Portugal, and aimed to advance the knowledge of these populations regarding access to rights, discrimination, and citizenship. The final report identifies an overall context of social discrimination in Portugal; emphasising that LGBT people feel most discriminated against when subjected to insults, and that the institutions they felt most discriminated by were associated with the church and the state. The model of heterosexist thinking was reported to be the most crucial factor supporting discrimination or unfavourable opinion towards LGBT rights, and it was most common among men, and within the family, among fathers (Nogueira and Oliveira 2010). This report's

results support our understanding that "although legal change is of key importance, it is not enough to guarantee the respect and recognition sought by LGBT intimate and sexual citizens" (Santos 2013, 9).

Prior to the revolution of April 25, 1974, no organised gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender movements existed in Portugal. It was not until the mid-1990s that many LGBT associations emerged (Santos 2005; Cascais 2006). Before the 1990s, a kind of embryonic gay and lesbian movement began as a result of initiatives taken by a small number of individuals, and the years 1990 and 1991 saw the founding of the lesbian magazine *Organa* and of the GTH (Homosexual Working Group) (part of the Revolutionary Socialist Party) (Cascais 2006). The emergence of LGBT associations in Portugal can be closely linked to the AIDS epidemic (Vale de Almeida 2004; Santos 2005; Cascais 2006), in that the Portuguese LGBT movement and the visibility of the gay community gained strength within the broader process of the fight against the AIDS epidemic (Cascais 2006). However, it was only after 1996 that a well-established and enduring LGBT movement emerged.

Pride events are among the more recent developments in Portugal. The first Pride Festival was organised in Lisbon, the country's largest city and its capital, in 1997 and it was also here, in 2000, that the first Pride Parade took place. Porto, the second largest city in Portugal, organised its first Pride Festival in 2001 and its first Pride Parade in 2006. For three consecutive years, between 2006 and 2008 the Mira Pride festival was organised in Praia de Mira, in the district of Coimbra, by the now no longer existing Vip Club. Braga, a medium size city in the north of Portugal, organised the first Pride Parade on July 13, 2013, becoming the third Portuguese city to have a Pride Parade. The International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO), May 17, was first commemorated in Portugal in 2010 in Coimbra, with a parade. Other LGBT related projects worth mentioning include the Queer Lisboa (Lisbon Gay and Lesbian Film Festival),<sup>4</sup> founded in 1997 and one of the most important European forums for international LGBT films, and the radio programme *Vidas Alternativas*<sup>5</sup> (Alternative Lives), which has been broadcasting since 1999.



One of the most interesting aspects of LGBT associations' activities relates to the academia (Cascais 2006; Santos 2006); specifically, the organisation of conferences and workshops. Various LGBT associations, in collaboration with academic institutions, have organised a diverse set of initiatives, namely: Jornadas Lésbicas/Lesbian Workshops, organised by Clube Safo (Association for the Defence of the Rights of Lesbians), and ISPA (Higher Institute for Applied Psychology), in 2002; Encontro sobre Homoparentalidade/Meeting on Homosexual Parenthood, by Clube Safo and ISPA, in 2004; Fórum Casamento/Wedding Forum, by ILGA Portugal and ISCTE (Higher Institute of Labour and Enterprise), in 2005; the first international congress of gay, lesbian and queer studies, "*Cultures, Visibilities, Identities*," by Janela Indiscreta (responsible for the Queer Lisboa film festival), Franco-Portuguese Institute and Centre for Communication and Language Studies at the New University of Lisbon, in 2005; and several local initiatives launched by Não te Prives (Don't deprive yourself, Group for the Defence of Sexual Rights) in cooperation with the Centre for Social Studies, Coimbra University. In December 2009, LES (Discussion Group on Lesbians Issues) launched an online journal which aims to promote scientific research, as well as intervention projects and opinion pieces related to various lesbian issues: *LES Online: Digital Journal on Lesbian Issues*.<sup>6</sup>

By 2011, 9 active LGBT associations and 17 informal groups could be identified in Portugal (Ferreira 2011). This number of associations and informal groups seem to indicate a strong LGBT movement in Portugal, considering the country's population and dimension. However, if one considers that most of these associations and informal groups consist of a small number of individuals with no financial support, the fragility of the LGBT movement becomes more obvious. The large majority of members of LGBT associations are volunteers, who have to combine their professional work with unpaid work at the association. This reality limits the capacity of LGBT associations to design and implement new projects. A number of LGBT associations recently gained access to funding from the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality, a government institute, and this may be a major step forward. Asso-

ciations, however, must consider the advantages of non-funded independent status, as well as the limitations imposed by a lack of economic resources and the implications and bonds of being funded. Although LGBT associations and informal groups often engage in significant social and political activity (Santos 2005), the majority of their members are not open about their sexual orientation in their daily environments. This state of affairs reinforces the invisibility of gays and lesbians in society and makes social advances in equality more difficult.

Advances in sexual orientation rights in Portugal have been the result of joint endeavours by civil society, namely LGBT associations, and policy makers. This does not mean that there has been a consistent common agenda, rather that certain specific understandings and combined projects led to changes. Media coverage has been an essential instrument for change in legislation and in the attitudes of Portuguese society towards homosexuality.

The LGBT movement is not homogeneous; diverse understandings of equality exist within it. Some LGBT associations assume a state-oriented position, aiming to gain access to the same rights as heterosexuals (for example, access to marriage); while other LGBT associations take a more radical and transgressive position, questioning the rules and norms that organise society, and challenging power structures. Policy makers have established strategic alliances with state-oriented LGBT associations, and have made specific agendas possible, such as same-sex marriage legislation (Santos 2013). The diversity of the LGBT movement and its internal conflicts can be understood as catalysts for legal and social change. Firstly, such conflicts generate invaluable media coverage, and also raise awareness of the fact that apart from a common sexual non-normativity, LGBT individuals are multidimensional and include diverse socio-political positions. Alliances between policy makers and specific LGBT associations are now more visible, thanks to project funding and LGBT associations' increasing cooperation with government institutes responsible for equality policy, such as the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality.

In the present situation in Portugal with political and economic cri-

sis, the LGBTQ movement has joined other organisations in marches related to the "global" protest. These joint actions do not have the participation of all LGBT associations given that the LGBTQ movement in Portugal comprises diverse political opinions. The lesbian association Clube Safo and feminist associations, such as UMAR (Feminist Portuguese association), are some of the associations that participate in organised "global" protest actions. However, the political agenda of the "global" protest is not yet part of the discourse of those who speak in the name of the association Clube Safo, as it is present in other LGBT groups such as Panteras Rosas (Pink Panthers), a more political and radical group. Considering that these joint "global" protest actions are still recent it is difficult to analyse the outcome of the intersections with the LGBTQ movement.

Prevailing sexism within LGBT associations should also be noted. These associations invariably reproduce patterns of the societal context in which they exist; sexism and male dominance, therefore, are a pervasive reality even within LGBT organisations. Specific lesbian issues are, for example, rarely afforded the same prominence as gay issues. Blood donation by men who have sex with men, for example, is a topic that is much more widely discussed and focused in LGBT associations than, for example, medically assisted procreation, a key equality issue for lesbians, which currently is only available to women in heterosexual marriages. This prevailing sexism is echoed in the media and in the public arena; one example is that same-sex marriage in Portugal is commonly known as gay marriage, whereas the word "gay" in Portugal is commonly used in reference to male homosexuals, and not to female homosexuals.

### **Lesbian Activism: Facts and Experiences**

In 1990 a small group of women decided to join forces and create a lesbian journal, *Organa*. This pioneering initiative contributed to promote the visibility of lesbianism in the Portuguese society, and fostered the individual and social empowerment of lesbian women. Other groups followed, such as the Grupo Lilás (Lilac Group) in 1993 that produced a publication with the same name as the group. In 1998 the Group of

Women of ILGA Portugal, became more active and started publishing the newsletter *Lesbiana*.

However, the first lesbian movement in Portugal, with women publicly assuming their sexual orientation and disclosing their names and faces, was the group Clube Safo (Sappho Club) created in 1996. This group of women openly identified as a group of lesbians, as it was clear from the very name they first choose: Clube Safo, Group of Lesbians. The most used phrase in the flyers and promotional materials of this group was: "Lesbians are sisters, daughters, cousins, girlfriends, mothers, aunts, grandmothers, colleagues ... We are many!"

This was a milestone for lesbian visibility. It was the first time that women in Portugal publicly announced their lesbianism, and they advanced social and political actions to defend the rights of lesbians. Clube Safo organised diverse activities, such as meetings, camping, parties, and walking tours. For the first time in Portugal there were activities in public spaces organised by lesbians for lesbians. A very important aspect is that some of the activities were outdoors, which meant leaving the spaces previously used by lesbians: indoors and with the guarantee of invisibility. The spaces used by Clube Safo were mostly public spaces with full visibility. For example, camping in public campsites in groups of more than forty women, self-identified as lesbians or bisexuals. During the camping there were debates, games, conversations around the campfire at night, workshops, community dinners, and many other activities. All these activities were held outdoors and with full visibility. Displays of affection between women were common, visible, and public. These were moments of lesbian visibility; and being in a group made it easier given that it provided a sense of security and belonging.

One of the most relevant aspects of the work of Clube Safo is the publication of *Zona Livre* (Free Zone), a lesbian bulletin with 60 issues published from September 1997 to December 2007. It is the longest-running lesbian publication in Portugal, and it contains texts, poems, drawings, short stories, articles about movies and music, news, personal ads, articles on the history of lesbianism, reports on activities, gossip, opinion on politics, etc. Essentially this publication aimed to be a pub-

lication made by lesbians for lesbians. The full record of 60 *Zonas Livres* is available on the website of Clube Safo.<sup>7</sup>

Since 2000 the social and political intervention of Clube Safo have become more consistent. One of the most important aspects of this new phase was the participation in the organisation of the first Pride March in Portugal, held in Lisbon on July 1, 2000. The Pride events are important moments of the LGBT rights movements and from the very beginning Clube Safo took part in their organisation. On October 7, 2000 Clube Safo participated in the World March of Women and began to collaborate actively in the initiatives of this movement. It was during this march that the first Portuguese lesbian manifesto, signed by the Women's Group of ILGA Portugal, Clube Safo, GTH, and Grupo Lilás, was released and distributed.

As the social and political interventions increased, the informal group Clube Safo was registered as an association on February 15, 2002. By this time, intense and fruitful internal debates lead the association to change the designation of "Group of Lesbians" to "Association for the Defence of the Rights of Lesbians."

After the registration of Clube Safo as an association there were some noteworthy initiatives in collaboration with academic institutes, such as the abovementioned Jornadas Lésbicas/Lesbian Workshops in July 2002, and a meeting on homoparentality in July 2004. The association was also an active participant in different socio-political initiatives, such as the 24<sup>th</sup> Conference of ILGA Europe in Lisbon in October 2002, and the Portuguese Social Forum in June 2003. A particularly important moment was the joint action of Clube Safo, UMAR, Não te Prives, and the Youth Action for Peace, to support the organisation Women on Waves on the Campaign Making Waves in 2004. This campaign brought the Dutch ship *Borndiep* to Portugal with the purpose to call attention to the consequences of illegal abortion, to give information on sexual health education, and to catalyse changes in the restrictive abortion law existent at the time in Portugal. The ship was scheduled to dock at the port of Figueira da Foz, to organise board meetings, seminars and workshops in favour of decriminalising abortion. The Portuguese

government blocked its entry into national waters by sending two war ships. The *Borndiep* ship remained along the Portuguese coast between August 29 and September 9, 2004. In February 2009, this action of the Portuguese government was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights, which declared that Portugal violated the right to freedom of expression and decided to grant a monetary compensation for moral damage to the three complainants associations, among which was Clube Safo.

Changes always cause some disruption, along with difficulties and resistance. From 2005 on the meetings and discussions of Clube Safo became open to everyone and not just to women. This change led to an intense internal debate, which in my opinion was both challenging and productive. In November 2005 the *Zona Livre* no. 50 was published with a cover made of photographs of the faces of some women who actively participated in the association. It was an action of visibility, to publically stand for the rights of lesbian, proudly and with the face uncovered. In the editorial we can read: "Not only made by women and not only for women, but clearly about being a lesbian – how to defend the rights, visibility, and their specific needs ... – in search of a positive lesbian identity." (*Zona Livre* 2005, 2)

In March 2008 the women of the executive board did not run again and no list was presented to the election of the new executive board of Clube Safo. In my personal case this decision was related to wanting to complete postgraduate studies and to engage in academic research. The association suspended all the activities for three years. This long intermission of the activities of Clube Safo was related to the lack of civic participation in Portugal, particularly in the area of LGBT activism (Santos 2009). On May 28, 2011 a new executive board was elected and the association Clube Safo continued its project.

In the beginning of 2008 I joined a group of women and started a new project: LES (Discussion Group on Lesbians Issues). This group started an innovative project in Portugal, the *LES Online*, a digital journal on lesbian issues,<sup>8</sup> which aims to promote studies and scientific research, as well as intervention projects and opinion pieces related to different

aspects of lesbian issues. The first editorial of *LES Online* presented the main questions and objectives of the journal:

In our time the borders of gender categories tend to blur, while sexual orientation issues are being framed in enlarged terms, defying definitions such as lesbian, gay, hetero and bisexual. Whereas poststructuralist and queer theories suggest ways of rethinking gender and sexual identities, we propose a digital publication on lesbian issues.

Is it relevant to have a publication exclusively dedicated to lesbian issues? [---]

We have a common background of voluntary work in lesbian support groups of a nongovernmental organization focused on the fight for the civil rights of lesbian women. This experience gave us an insight of the everyday life of women who engage in sexual/emotional relationships with other women; of their social and psychological experiences, expectations, fears and anxieties. We worked with very heterogeneous groups of women but with some common issues, such as being women and living in a social discriminatory context. It became evident the lack of specific approaches to these women's realities that included strongly diverse socio-economical, political and psychological dimensions.

We believe that those different dimensions create a specific landscape that is not completely addressable and understandable by using a feminist or LGBT analysis. This question is the starting point of *LES Online*. We invited researchers and activists to share their views and arguments on the following problem: Lesbian issues are often addressed within the framework of feminist or LGBT issues. Are there lesbian issues that are not visible when using a feminist or LGBT framework[]? Is there a need for a specific approach? (*LES Online* 2009, 1-2)

The papers included in the journal have been addressing this question and presenting diverse possible approaches.

Although there has been a consistent and sustainable lesbian activism in Portugal since the mid-1990s it has not achieved a level of visibility that ensures an autonomous political intervention, able to influence the

agenda of social, legal, and political issues and focus the debate on priorities that relate especially to women and lesbianism (Santos 2009).

### **Intersections of Lesbian Activism with Feminism and the LGBT Movement**

The lesbian activism in Portugal is intrinsically linked with the LGBT movement. It was in the mid-1990s that most of the LGBT associations emerged: ILGA-Portugal (1996); the major nationwide lesbian association, Clube Safo (1996); Portugal.Gay.pt, an Internet-based organisation (1996), and Opus Gay<sup>9</sup> (1997). From that moment on other associations were created, such as: Não te Prives (2001); Rede ex aequo, a LGBT youth association (2003); @t (Association for the Study and Defence of Gender Identity) (2003); Panteras Rosa, an informal group with significant political activity (2004); Caleidoscópio LGBT (2007); MICA-me (LGBT Movement of Artistic and Cultural Intervention) (2008); and Amplos (Association of Mothers and Fathers for Free Sexual Orientation) (2009).

The shared objectives of disclosing the heteronormative and heterosexist structure of the social context in which we all live, and the determination to fight all forms of discriminations on grounds of sexual orientation, were the common ground that motivated lesbian activists to co-organise actions with other LGBT associations. These joint actions included lobbying and direct action, negotiation and confrontation (Santos 2008).

This alliance provided mutual learning, and consolidated the Portuguese LGBT movement, whose political, legal, and social impacts have been felt in recent years. On the other hand, the lesbian collective action has been increasingly assimilated in the LGBT movement, tending to lose its specificity and diluting the opportunities for lesbian interaction that can lead to individual and political empowerment of lesbian women in future generations (Santos 2012). There are several examples of the assimilation of lesbian activism into the LGBT movement that led to the invisibility of lesbian specific needs and demands. Most of the leaders of the LGBT associations and informal groups have, with very few excep-



tions, always been men, while women play a major role in the backstage work, thus reproducing the dominant sexism of the Portuguese society. At a more political level the fact that the LGBT movement was born and gained visibility in the context of the fight against AIDS (Santos 2005), and that emphasises was on men who have sex with men, pushed lesbians into the background (Coelho and Pena 2009). Another fact that demonstrates that lesbian issues are secondary to the LGBT movement was the feeble and diffuse reaction from the LGBT movement when the parliament in 2006 approved a law that excluded single women and lesbian couples from medically assisted procreation (Santos 2012).

Lesbian sexuality in particular has been almost entirely absent from the public debate. Portuguese campaigns on sexual health besides reinforcing a heterosexist perspective of human sexuality also refer to men who have sex with men in the context of sexually transmitted infections. Although sex between men in sexual health campaigns is usually associated to not so positive things as sexually transmitted infections, at least it is mentioned and gains visibility.

It is also true that the lesbian association *Clube Safo* never had a significant influence on the LGBT political agenda and did not succeed in promoting an autonomous voice to speak out for specific rights of lesbians. In spite of expanding its political intervention after 2002, the activities of *Clube Safo* that have always attracted more women were ludic and social. In general assemblies and informal meetings there was strong resistance and contestation to a more political stand of the association. The majority of the members clearly preferred that *Clube Safo* maintained a more convivial nature, and not a political one.

Some of the factors that contribute to the current situation of invisibility of a lesbian autonomous collective action in Portugal are historical reasons related to the 48 years of political oppression, the Catholic conservatism in the area of sexual and reproductive rights, the backwardness on the rights of sexual and intimate citizenship that characterise contemporary Portuguese society, as well as the sociocultural reasons anchored in the public/private binomial that ascribes women to a domestic role in the private spaces, rather than to an assertive and partici-

patory one on the public sphere (Santos 2012).

In the Portuguese context, the intersections with the feminist movement have provided a space of assertion for lesbian activism. The strong feminist component of the Portuguese lesbian activism is particularly visible in the involvement in diverse initiatives to decriminalise abortion, including demonstrations during trials and promotion of thematic debates. One of the most significant moments of this involvement was the previously mentioned fundamental role played by Clube Safo in co-organising the Campaign Making Waves (Santos and Alves 2009; Whitten 2009). The involvement of lesbian activism in the feminist movement contributed to a more political collective consciousness and increased the theoretical reflection on patriarchy and sexism (Santos 2009). It is also significant that the first lesbian manifesto in Portugal was produced in the context of the World March of Women in 2000. More recently, another evidence of the importance of lesbian activism in the context of the feminist movement is the inclusion of specific issues on lesbian sexualities and citizenship in the Feminist University<sup>10</sup> in Portugal.

It is interesting to highlight that in other countries culturally close to Portugal, such as Spain, the joint actions of lesbian together with feminist associations have not meant, historically speaking, a higher autonomy for the lesbian movement. The lesbian movement in Spain have come a long way from the total absence and non-recognition of their existence in the law on dangerousness and social rehabilitation, an act of Spanish penal code adopted by the Franco regime in 1970, to the present day of resisting the hegemony of the LGBT movement that silences the diversity comprised within the LGBT acronym. Lesbians have had to articulate for themselves a political discourse and social presence to ascertain their visibility within both the feminist and the LGBT movement (see Trujillo 2009).

The intersections of lesbian activism and the feminist movement in Portugal have not always been easy. During the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist movement was not open to discuss lesbian issues or even to acknowledge that some of the feminists were lesbians. One of the main

reasons for this was the understanding that to include specific lesbian issues on feminist claims would reinforce the stereotype of feminists as women who hate men and this might draw heterosexual women away from the movement (Amaral and Moita 2004). On the other hand some feminists, many of them lesbians, say that they never disclosed their sexual orientation in the context of the feminist movement. The silencing and invisibility of lesbian feminism was imposed by feminists but also self-imposed (Coelho and Pena 2009). There were some noteworthy exceptions, referred to by Maria José Magalhães (2010), in some more "radical" groups, mostly in the north of Portugal, which embraced a political lesbianism, a claim that politically, regardless of a woman's sexual orientation, feminists are lesbians. This more "radical" perspective of feminism triggered many negative and even aggressive reactions from the institutionalised (integrated in political parties) feminist movement (Magalhães 2010). An example of this lesbian inclusive perspective of the feminist movement is the journal *Artemisia*, published in the 1980s by the Group of Women of Porto, that had articles on lesbianism, the (in)visibility of lesbians, their experiences, feelings, and specific social problems. According to Maria José Magalhães (2010) the Group of Women of Porto was lesbian friendly and the presence of lesbians, who disclosed their sexual orientation, contributed to broaden the scope of the fight for women's rights.

After the 1990s along with the emergence of the LGBT movement in Portugal, there has been a progressive and consistent interconnection between the feminist movement and LGBT issues and more specifically with the lesbian activism. Besides the abovementioned feminist initiatives that include lesbian issues, it is noteworthy that feminist associations are co-organisers of the Pride March. It is significant that most of the initiatives focused on lesbian issues were mainly promoted either by lesbian associations on their own or in collaboration with feminist organisations. The joint actions of lesbian and feminist associations contributed both to strengthen the autonomy of a lesbian political action, as well as to push forward the critical reflection within the feminist movement on the binarism of gender and sexuality.

## **Lesbian Activism: Voices from the Field**

Semi-structured interviews with lesbian activists together with an on-line inquiry were the starting point to question some of the main issues of the lesbian activism in Portugal at the present time: Is it still necessary to have an "women only" movement? What are the specific needs that justify the existence of a lesbian activism, independent from other LGBT movements? How does an identity-based activism articulate with the actual situations people face at the present time, when identities are more and more acknowledged and experienced as fluid and dynamic? What possible future scenarios can be expected? 4 women actively involved in lesbian activism were interviewed and an online inquiry was published both on a mailing list and a Facebook group of Portuguese lesbians. The participants in the online inquiry are 34 women: 31 self-identified as lesbian and 3 as bisexual; 14 are under 30 years old, 16 are between 30 and 50 years old and 4 are more than 50 years old; 5 completed the secondary level of education and 29 have a graduate degree.

Most of the participants clearly identify the need for an autonomous lesbian activism claiming that there are specific needs related to the intersection of gender and sexual orientation, the misogyny of the Portuguese society and the invisibility of lesbians in the public sphere:

Lesbians being women carry all the stigmas/traumas that the Latin misogyny grants them, plus the problems of being homosexuals. They can integrate in the general LGBT movement, but they need to have their own voice that reflects their specific issues, such as medically assisted procreation. (Online inquiry, lesbian, 35 years old)

To fight for lesbian visibility, to politicise lesbian women and to question stereotypes. Because lesbians endure a double discrimination both as women and homosexuals, women face diverse discriminations that gays do not face. (Online inquiry, lesbian, 26 years old)

Because lesbians are more invisible in the public sphere than gay men. (Online inquiry, lesbian, 42 years old)

A lesbian only group makes it easier for lesbians to feel confident and to free themselves! (Online inquiry, lesbian, 32 years old)

The article 13 of the Portuguese Constitution (principle of equality) remains unfulfilled. Women are discriminated against in fact, not in the law, and in particular lesbian women are discriminated against. On the other hand, LGBT organisations and their leaders are predominantly male. But we, lesbians, are responsible for our weakness: for being self-condescending and preserve our invisibility. (Online inquiry, lesbian, 51 years old)

Just few women claimed that it would be important to have a united LGBT movement with no autonomous groups to uphold a stronger political impact on society.

There is no need to create micro groups, restricted only to some; if we divide we lose strength. (Online inquiry, lesbian, 41 years old)

One voice, one united LGBTQ movement will be stronger. (Online inquiry, lesbian, 35 years old)

The question about the need of a "women only" movement in our times was the most controversial. Diverse ideas and opinions were presented, such as claiming the need of "women only" groups, advocating mixed models where men can participate only in some activities, and proposing completely inclusive groups regardless of one's sex or gender. Those who argue for the need of "women only" groups use a biological-based argument claiming that the fact of being a woman automatically provides knowledge and capacity to speak out for the specific needs of women:

Yes, I believe it still makes sense. Despite the feminist and LGBT movements being attentive to the specificities of lesbian women, lesbian rights are not their priorities. Although I think it is important that there is a strong presence of lesbian activism within the feminist movement,

bringing together the "old" claims "personal is political" and the right to self-determination of bodies and identities, it is still important that they are groups of women. (Semi-structured interview, lesbian activist, 48 years old)

I believe that not everyone can discuss everything. What do men know about the voluntary interruption of pregnancy? Like people without children, what are they talking about when they talk about co-adoption? In my understanding it is abusive to grant equal right to participate to those who know nothing and to those who can experience on a critical and visceral way the situations. (Semi-structured interview, lesbian activist, 37 years old)

A mixed model including everyone in some activities and spaces and maintaining other activities and spaces exclusive for women was also presented by the participants, mostly arguing that men's presence inside the structure of lesbians' associations might reproduce the sexist power structure of society:

Public campaigns should have the participation of all but it is important to have spaces for reflection and sharing exclusively for lesbians. (Semi-structured interview, lesbian activist, 38 years old)

As regards to the participation of men in lesbian activism, I tend to include them only as supporters. I believe there are men who fight for the causes of lesbian women, but a "formal" integration could lead on the one hand to draw back some lesbians and on the other hand to increase the possibility that the lesbian movement would replicate the sexist power structure which exists in society and to place women on subordinate positions all over again. (Semi-structured interview, lesbian activist, 43 years old)

Those who claim that lesbian activism should be open to everyone regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity focus on defending rights rather than on the characteristics or experiences of women:

You don't have to be a lesbian to defend lesbians' rights or to be a woman to be a feminist. The movement must be open to all women, men and transgender people who either self-identify as a lesbian, or want to defend the lesbians' rights. (Online inquiry, lesbian, 45 years old)

The awareness of social discrimination and of lesbian invisibility is not an exclusive of lesbians. Ideally any human being regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity should have the opportunity to contribute to the awareness and advocacy of the rights of lesbians. (Online inquiry, lesbian, 38 years old)

Clearly it is still necessary to debate questions of sex and gender in what concerns the LGBT activism. Sex and gender matter and it is a significant axis of difference that intersects activism and the political action. It is noteworthy that the concepts of cisgender and transgender were almost never used, and that it was implicit that by naming "lesbians" participants assumed that everyone would understand that they were talking about cisgender women.

Diverse possible future scenarios of lesbian activism were anticipated, with emphasises on the need to link to other social movements and at the same time maintaining the autonomy and its own voice:

The future is exciting considering the way that in Portugal there are increasingly diverse social platforms either linked to feminism, precarious, housing rights, reproductive rights, gender rights, antiausterity, etc. All these movements can grow and contribute to their mutual strength. It is possible to grow together, interdependent and autonomous. (Semi-structured interview, lesbian activist, 43 years old)

The future will be what we build together. We are witnessing a slow decline of prejudice in the Portuguese society [...]. After overcoming prejudice, there will surely be, equally slowly, reduced discrimination. The conquest of legal rights contributed to the social acceptance of same-sex relationships. There are also new issues that need to be addressed,

such as aging or family reconfiguration. However, there is not a strong and cohesive LGBT agenda that integrates and promotes synergies of diverse needs and situations, and this hold changes back. (Semi-structured interview, lesbian activist, 48 years old)

Alliances between the lesbian activism, LGBT movement, trans activism, queer and feminist are essential for civic awareness, policy change and even mentalities. Their synergies can increase the impact of their claims. (Semi-structured interview, lesbian activist, 38 years old)

Even with a small number of participants it is possible to register diverse perspectives on lesbian activism, what it is, how it should work and how it can evolve. The diversity of perspectives can contribute to enrich social movements, however it is necessary to promote questioning and debates in order to foster synergies and actually move (produce/create actions).

### **Conclusions and Critical Reflections on Possible Scenarios**

The LGBT movement claims for sexual citizenship and sexual rights of ten collapse gay men and lesbian women into queer or LGBT categories, making lesbians invisible in the process (Richardson 2000) and equality policies in general reinforce the heterosexual/homosexual binary and undervalue gender asymmetries. Sexual lives are always gendered and the intersections of sexual orientation and gender are central to comprehend the specificities of lesbians as being women and living in a social discriminatory context. Gender is one of the most salient axes of difference, and lesbian activism can challenge the conflation of lesbians and gay men, asserting that heteronormativity and homonormativity do not affect lesbians and gay men in the same ways.

LGBT associations reproduce the prevailing societal context of sexism and male dominance. In this context, it is important that a lesbian association with women that disclose publicly to be lesbians advance social and political actions to defend the rights of lesbians. Notwithstanding the consistent and sustainable lesbian activism in Portugal since the mid-1990s, it has not been able to influence the agenda of social, legal,



and political issues and focus the debate on priorities that relate especially to women and lesbianism, achieving an autonomous political intervention (Santos 2009).

At the same time as the interconnections of lesbian activism with the LGBT movement consolidated the Portuguese LGBT movement, the lesbian collective action tended to lose its specificity and was increasingly assimilated in the LGBT movement. This reality can deprive lesbian women in future generations of opportunities for lesbian interaction that can lead to individual and political empowerment (Santos 2012). On the other hand the intersections with the feminist movement have provided a space of assertion for lesbian activism. Common political actions to decriminalise abortion, the production of the first lesbian manifesto in Portugal in the context of the World March of Women in 2000, and the inclusion of specific issues on lesbian sexualities and citizenship in the Feminist University, are some of many examples of the intersections of lesbian activism and the feminist movement. These intersections increased the theoretical reflection on patriarchy and sexism and contributed to a more political collective consciousness of the lesbian activism (Santos 2009).

Although the intersections of lesbian activism with the feminist movement in Portugal have not always been easy, mostly due to the resistance from some feminists to discuss lesbian issues or even to acknowledge that some feminists were lesbians, after the 1990s there has been a progressive and consistent confluence. One significant sign of this confluence is the fact that most of the initiatives focused on lesbian issues are mainly promoted either by lesbian associations on their own or in collaboration with feminist organisations. This joint action has been positive for both parts; it strengthens the autonomy of a lesbian political action and pushes forward the critical reflection of binarism of gender and sexuality within the feminist movement.

Exploring the opinions and ideas of lesbian activists and other women on the lesbian activism in Portugal, it was possible to register diverse perspectives about what it is, how it should work and how it can evolve. Notwithstanding the diverse perspectives on lesbian activism, one of

the most important conclusions is that it is urgent to promote debates and questioning on sex and gender. When talking about lesbians most of the participants used language that reproduce binarism and did not include the myriad of combinations between sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The notion of political activism was somehow absent from most of the ideas expressed. It seems that to talk about lesbian activism in Portugal still resonates with lesbian sexual exclusivity.

In the present situation of economic crisis in Portugal there are more diverse social movements emerging, such as on precarious work, housing and sustainable economy, that provides opportunities to collectively organise political actions and to work together on a common political agenda. It is crucial to connect the lesbian activism with other movements such as feminist, trans, queer, and other emerging movements to engage in disruption of normative binarism. Connecting and working together does not mean erasing diversity but acknowledging in actions the intersections of diverse situations, needs, and agendas. This is the time to promote a political lesbianism with no ideological separatism but advocating for a cohesive feminist/LGB/queer agenda that integrates and promotes synergies of diverse needs and situations, and that at the same time acknowledges the importance of gender as an important axis of difference that intersects all other.

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## NOTES

1. "LGBT activism" is used here as a generic term for mixed activism, organisations, and groups.
2. The Portuguese Penal Code of 1886 criminalised "those who habitually practice vices against nature", not specifying either male or female homosexuality.
3. The joint adoption of a child by one person who is already the biological or legal parent of the child together with another person who is not. Co-adoption creates a permanent and legal relationship between a child and both parents, where previously the child had only been related to one of the parents.
4. <http://queerlisboa.pt/en>.
5. <http://www.vidasalternativas.eu/>.
6. <http://www.lespt.org/lesonline>.
7. <http://www.clubesafo.com/ZL.htm>.
8. <http://www.lespt.org/lesonline>.

9. The name of is an ironic reference to the ultraconservative Catholic organization Opus Dei.
10. The Feminist University is an initiative of diverse feminist associations and academic research centres, <http://universidadefeminista.weebly.com/>.

## SAMMANFATTNING

Artikeln ger en översikt över lesbisk aktivism i Portugal, inramad av en teoretisk analys av skärningspunkterna mellan genus och sexualiteter och det ömsesidiga konstruerandet och reproducerandet av sexuellt medborgarskap och rum. LHBT-rörelsens och den lesbiska aktivismens historia i Portugal, tillsammans med skärningspunkterna mellan lesbisk aktivism och feminism och LHBT-rörelsen bildar utgångspunkt för en rad frågor ställda till lesbiska aktivister och andra kvinnor om portugisisk lesbisk aktivism: Är det fortfarande nödvändigt att ha en rörelse för enbart kvinnor? Vilka speciella behov motiverar en lesbisk aktivism, fristående från andra LHBT-rörelser? Hur förhåller sig identitetsbaserad aktivism till den faktiska situation som människor befinner sig i, nu när identiteter i allt högre grad betraktas och upplevs som flytande och dynamiska? Artikeln avslutar med att understryka behoven av att koppla lesbisk aktivism till feministiska, trans-, queer- och andra framväxande rörelser, att bryta upp normativa binariteter och att verka för en politisk lesbiskhet som betonar betydelsen av genus som en viktig skillnadslinje som korsar alla andra.

**Keywords:** lesbian activism, Portugal, feminist movement, LGBT movement