

Making the Invisible Visible: an analysis of older lesbians lived experiences

- March 2023 -





This report was compiled by the EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community - EL*C Team in collaboration with the Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) and the Institute of Conflict Research in Vienna.

Coordination and drafting of the report: Ilaria Todde

Desk research: Karin Schönpflug, Brigitte Temel

Quantitative analysis: Viktoria Eberhardt, Karin Schönpflug

Qualitative analysis: Bárbara Romero, Steph Florquin

Reviewers: Silvia Casalino, Dragana Todorovic, Evien Tjabbes, Oana Dorobantu

Proofread: Angelica Balia

Cover design: Oana Dorobantu

When referencing this report, we recommend the following citation:

EL*C (2023): Making the invisible visible, a first analysis of older lesbians lived experiences.

© **Copyleft:** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License: Attribution - Noncommercial - Share Alike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

You may copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. You can also remix, transform, and build upon the material, if this is the case, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. If you want to copy, redistribute or remix, transform and build upon the material, you must give appropriate credit to the EL*C, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests that the EL*C endorses you or your use. You cannot, under any circumstances, use this work for commercial purposes.

The Eurocentralasian Lesbian Community - EL*C is a lesbian feminist and intersectional network. We publish our own research focused on lesbians and we are present at an institutional level with our advocacy to ensure that lesbian needs are visible, heard and considered when creating policies and laws. For more information, please visit our website: www.europeanlesbianconference.org*



TABLE OF CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	4
I - DO OLDER LESBIANS EXIST?	6
A. The (very limited) research available on older lesbians in Europe	7
B. Something is wrong with the FRA data on older lesbians	9
Good practice	11
II - WHERE ARE THE OLDER LESBIANS?	11
A. Which older lesbians can be reached?	12
B. Improving research	12
C. Representation matters	14
Good practice	15
III - HOW ARE THE OLDER LESBIANS?	16
A. Lesbians' money: employment, gender pension gap and poverty	16
Good practice	19
B. Navigating lesbophobic healthcare systems	20
Good practice	24
C. A home of one's own: lesbian housing	24
The utopia and challenges of lesbian collective housing	26
Good practices	27
IV - OLDER LESBIANS' CARING FOR EACH OTHERS AND THE WORLD	28
A. "Someone in some future time will think of us": lesbian intergenerational links	30
B. "We are the ones we have been waiting for": space(ships) for older lesbians	32
ANNEX I - RECOMMENDATIONS	33
ANNEX II - METHODOLOGY	35
Quantitative analysis	36
Qualitative analysis	39

«If a spaceship came from the friendly natives of the fourth planet of Altair, and the polite captain of the spaceship said: “We have room for one passenger; will you spare us a single human being so that we may converse at leisure (...) and learn from an exemplary person?” (...) There will be surely hundreds, thousands of volunteers, just such young men, all worthy. But I would not pick any of them. (...) I would pick an old woman, over sixty. (..) The trouble is, she will be very reluctant to go. (...)

“Me?” she’ll say, just a trifle slyly “but I never did anything.”

But it won’t wash. She knows, though she won’t admit it, that Dr Kissinger has not gone and will never go where she has gone, that the scientists and the shamans have not done what she has done.

Into the spaceship, Granny! »

Ursula Le Guin, *The Space Chrones*

INTRODUCTION

When EL*C decided to produce research on the situation of older lesbians in the EU, it was clear that such work could be a complicated endeavour. There were limitations, in terms of available time and money, and challenges since the underrepresentation and invisibility of older lesbians, including within our community, makes data collection particularly difficult.

In the face of the very limited data available on lesbians, EL*C had to take action. EL*C is not a research institute and yet over the past 2 years we have collected and analysed data on many aspects of lesbian lives and realities in Europe on topics such as discrimination in healthcare, lesbophobia, the impact of COVID, LGBTI women in sports and the state of lesbian organising in Europe. Research is a fundamental part of our advocacy and community building strategies because for many years, and largely still today, lesbian lived realities have been erased and the patriarch has taken upon itself to eliminate every trace of our existence. We want to invert this process by shedding light on the many lesbian realities out there and use that information to produce change.

Despite our efforts in outreach and disaggregation¹, an analysis of our corpus of research clearly shows many blind spots, in particular concerning lesbians who are subject to multiple levels of stigma and discrimination. For this reason, in October 2022, we collaborated with ILGA Europe to publish an analysis of the data on lesbians included in the FRA LGBTI II Survey, the biggest dataset available on

¹ For example, in the EL*C COVID-19 survey efforts were made to reach underrepresented parts of the lesbian community. The EL*C dataset is available and full disaggregation of the data is possible https://elc-org.shinyapps.io/lesbian-covid-survey/?fbclid=IwAR1ohBlS-5Xp6WYzuMFOrCEfj9HYLb4Cm4drFCw_ExxY4EQRo4GfyxsCFw. See also the report containing the results of the survey and the methodology that identified some of the gaps in representation: <https://europeanlesbianconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Covid-Report-final-1.pdf>

LGBTI people in Europe². The briefing allowed us to shed a light on the multiple discriminations faced by trans lesbians, non-binary lesbians, lesbians belonging to racial, ethnic or religious minorities and lesbians living with a disability. However, because of the limitation in the dataset that we will present below, the element of age, especially old age, remained largely invisible.

While data was not available, several EL*C member organisations that have developed projects, good practices and analysis concerning the situation of older lesbians; so we knew that the lack of data and information were masking an area of research that was urgent to investigate. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its highest toll on older people, revealed the need for European societies to better care for their elderly. At the same time, the many stories of lesbians supporting the older members of our community showcased, once again, that lesbians are ready to take up this challenge and find ways to take care of each other beyond biological bonds, to “make kin³” and survive in the many crises that late-capitalism has imposed and will continue to impose on us.

As emphasised by two lesbians that we interviewed within this research, Sabine and Reingard from *Lesben und Alter*, many older lesbians have had to face systematic discrimination and violence in their lifetime, both in society and within their families of origin. Thus, they were obliged to mobilise resources, find creative solutions and develop strong networks to cope with this situation and with unwanted loneliness. In this sense, mainstream society has much to learn from the resilience and power of older lesbians.

Information on this report

The present research was produced in collaboration with the Institute of Advanced Studies in Vienna, the Institute of Conflict Research in Vienna and with a team of 5 associated researchers. A multi-methodological approach was chosen including desk research, a quantitative analysis of the data of the FRA LGBTI II Survey and the qualitative study with 14 interviews performed during the project. A mapping of good practice was also conducted, focusing where possible on lesbian specific projects, the results are included in the boxes at the end of each relevant chapter or subchapter. The interviews were conducted with persons who have knowledge of the experiences and needs of senior lesbians through work within an organisation or lived experiences. The limitation in the dataset that we used for the quantitative analysis as well as the limited number of interviews that we were able to perform means that this research is by no means exhaustive. Its aim was to start to shed a light on an area of lesbian lived experiences that had thus far been left almost completely unexplored. It also calls for more research to be performed on this topic, by civil society as well as by academic institutions.

The present report presents the main results and conclusions reached by our study and seeks to offer answers to two questions: “how do lesbians age?” and “what are their needs in this process?”. The background research for this report has been compiled in a more detailed report and is also available in EL*C website.

Chapter I focuses on the invisibility of older lesbians in research: both in previous quantitative and qualitative research and in the dataset provided by the FRA. Chapter II moves on to investigate the strategies to counter invisibilization and analyse the importance of representation. Chapter III focuses on three themes that clearly emerged from the interviews: the financial situation of older lesbians, health and access to healthcare, as well as housing. Finally, Chapter IV concludes this report by analysing the impact of three levels of discrimination on the lives of older lesbians, and explores the ways in which lesbian communities are building intergenerational links and spaces dedicated to older lesbians. A set of recommendations is available in Annex I and a note on methodology is contained in Annex II.

2 EL*C and ILGA Europe (2022), Diving into the FRA LGBTI II Survey. Briefing on lesbians <https://europeanlesbianconference.org/lesbian-analysis-2019-fra-lgbti-survey-ii/>

3 See Haraway D. (2016), *Staying with the trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press

A disclaimer on terminology

The EL*C uses the word “lesbian” as a broad inclusive term, including lesbians who identify as trans, non-binary, intersex lesbians, as well as bisexual or queer women. For this reason, in the following report the term “lesbian” includes all non-heterosexual LGBTIQ women, unless otherwise specified. We also use the term lesbian organisations when referring to all groups focused on and/or led by LGBTIQ women.

In the analysis of the FRA dataset, we chose to analyse the data concerning all non-heterosexual LGBTIQ women and all non-binary people that identified as lesbians. Nevertheless, since the FRA uses the expression “lesbian women” to indicate lesbian cis-gender women, in the part concerning the worked performed over the FRA data we will use the word “lesbian*”, with an asterisk, to indicate the respondents relevant for our analysis.

We will refer to “older lesbians” or “senior lesbians” to include all lesbians above the age of 55, as this is the standard used by international organisation, in particular the European Commission. We recognise however the limitation of this use, as explained more in detail in Chapter II.

I - DO OLDER LESBIANS EXIST?

The opening chapter of this research should have been dedicated to the analysis of available secondary data, including the data collected in the 2019 FRA LGBTI II Survey. It is instead dedicated to the analysis of the enormous gaps encountered when researching the lived experiences of older lesbians. This is because by only looking at the literature and the available data, one could easily wonder whether older lesbians actually exist. For this population, our research reveals a clear lack of data and very few records of the lived experiences and the specific needs of older lesbians. It also shows a clear difficulty in reaching this population, which seems to not be appropriately considered in data collection.

One of the strongest ways in which lesbophobia is performed in our societies is by rendering lesbians invisible. To address a phenomenon, it is first necessary to acknowledge its existence. For a long time, the mere existence of lesbians of any age was just not recognised. In parts of Europe, thanks to the enormous efforts made by the lesbian movements, such recognition is now more and more present, but lesbians subjected to further intersectional oppressions are still largely invisible. Considering the data available, this clearly applies to older lesbians.

A. The (very limited) research available on older lesbians in Europe

Research on lesbians’ lived experiences is plagued by scarce data and information⁴. In the case of older lesbians, the scarcity of data is particularly striking. This can be explained by the fact that there is very limited data on older LGBTI people in general and that women of the LGBTI community are underrepresented⁵. Older lesbians are not adequately “represented (in data) even though there are

4 EL*C (2020). The State of Lesbian organizing and lesbian lived realities in the EU and accession countries, pag. 22 <https://europeanlesbianconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-State-of-Lesbian-Organising-1.pdf>

5 ILGA World (2021). Intersections of ageism and age discrimination with cisheteronormativity, homophobia and transphobia, and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. With assistance of Ari Shaw, Ph.D., Director of International Programs, The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law (United States of America), Gustavo Diaz Fernandez (Argentina), and Martin Krajcik (Canada). Available online at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/OlderPersons/AgeismAgeDiscrimination/Submissions/NGOs/ILGA>

significant ways in which lesbian ageing is unique”⁶.

The underrepresentation in research and the lack of data on older lesbians has direct consequences on the resources allocated to this population and as a consequence on the quality of services and their capacity to meet older lesbians’ specific needs. This is particularly relevant since “multiple intersecting cultural and economic influences make the older lesbian community as diverse as any other population, older women who are lesbians are subject to specific experiences and pressures which can produce profound inequalities. The most obvious of these derives from the gendered nature of the ageing process, which intersects with sexual identity to deprive older lesbians of representation, recognition, and resources”⁷.

In the framework of our research project, a country-by- country analysis was performed of the relevant data, projects and good practices concerning LGBTI ageing. It is shown that data is available only for half of the EU Member states (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, Spain), while no relevant information on this topic could be found for large parts of the EU (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Liechtenstein, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Slovakia). It is important to note that the countries for which research is available are generally wealthier countries with developed social welfare systems and where the protection of the rights of LGBTI people have improved in the past decades.

Different national LGBTI communities in the EU also have distinct historical backgrounds regarding the decriminalisation of homosexual relationships and the development of liberation movements. In some countries, such as Austria lesbians were imprisoned as a legal punishment for homosexual acts⁸, while in others, such as Portugal, Spain and countries in the former socialist block, the experience of dictatorships long after the end of the World War II significantly affects LGBTI communities even today. Historical circumstances and traditions not only influence the needs of the LGBTI community, but also the decision making of national and regional policy makers and provisioners of social services in different settings (e.g. health care, housing, benefits). The nearly complete absence of data from former socialist countries represents, in this sense, a very significant gap in knowledge.

Looking specifically into the available data on older lesbians and especially to the scarce European based research, it is clear that most studies on the topic of senior LGBTI people do not take a more nuanced approach to the different groups of the community and their needs, without due consideration of issues such as race or class or other intersectional factors. Based on the existing country analysis, there are no European studies that consider the specificities of older lesbians, while conflating their experience with those of other groups in the LGBTI community; singular good practice projects do exist, but usually there is not a lot of information on them.

From analysis of the meagre data available, it is clear that “lesbian seniors have triple vulnerability (gender, sexual orientation, and age), necessitating inquiry into their social support needs”⁹. Lesbophobia, as a combination of misogyny and stigma related to non-conforming sexual orientations, also means that “many older lesbians are still unwilling to be open about their sexual identities, finding security and recognition only among others like themselves”¹⁰. Navigating a lifetime of systemic

6 Traies, J. (2019). Older lesbians, ageing and equality. In S. Westwood (Ed.), *Ageing, diversity and equality: Social justice perspectives* (pp. 101). Routledge.

7 Traies, J. (2019). Older lesbians, ageing and equality. In S. Westwood (Ed.), *Ageing, diversity and equality: Social justice perspectives* (pp. 101). Routledge.

8 Greif, E. (2019). *Verkehrte Leidenschaft. Gleichgeschlechtliche Unzucht im Kontext von Strafrecht und Medizin*. Jan Srmaek: Wien.

9 Gabrielson, M. L., Holston, E. C. (2014). Broadening definitions of family for older lesbians: modifying the Lubben social network scale. In *Journal of gerontological social work* 57 (2-4), pp. 198–217. DOI: 10.1080/01634372.2013.879683.

10 Traies, J. (2019). Older lesbians, ageing and equality. In S. Westwood (Ed.), *Ageing, diversity and equality: Social justice perspectives* (pp. 111). Routledge.

oppression makes older lesbians fear further discrimination and stigma, thus mobilising avoidance strategies. The result is also that lesbians experience poorer health conditions than straight women and they face a wide range of unmet needs, especially in the area of healthcare (e.g. delayed diagnosis and treatment of gender-related cancers, that is, breast, ovarian, and endometrial cancer¹¹).

B. Something is wrong with the FRA data on older lesbians

Since the very beginning, this research was confronted with the almost complete lack of quantitative data concerning older lesbians. This is especially clear when looking at the biggest dataset on LGBTI people available in the EU+. The EU-LGBTI II Survey of the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU (“FRA”) collected information of 141,569 persons aged 15 years or older who described themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or intersex (LGBTI).

However, of those over 140 thousand people, only 768 identified as older (cisgender) lesbians (+55) and 139 as older (cisgender) bisexual women (+55). Even when adding trans women, intersex and non-binary persons who self-identified as lesbians to the dataset, the number of answers from senior lesbians constitutes a meagre 0,7% of all respondents.

Table 1: Expected and realized sample numbers in the FRA LGBTI data

	Expected sample numbers				Realized sample (uncleaned)				Target value reached (%)			
	15-34	35-54	55+	total	15-34	35-54	55+	total	15-34	35-54	55+	total
L*BTI+ n.b. Persons					44 749	7 448	1 129	53 326				
Lesbian	7 851	6 200	4 131	18 182	17 244	4 975	768	22 987	220	80	19	1
Gay	14 284	11 654	6 624	32 562	37 066	18 685	3 751	59 502	259	160	57	1
Bi (woman)	11 567	4 054	3 413	19 034	25 643	1 750	139	27 532	222	43	4	1
Bi (man)	7 307	3 110	2 770	13 187	7 630	1 813	444	9 887	104	58	16	
Trans	5 072	4 535	4 835	14 442	16 739	2 655	563	19 957	330	59	12	1
Intersex	701	831	948	2 480	1 145	445	114	1 704	163	54	12	
Total	46 782	30 384	22 721	99 887	105 467	30 323	5 779	141 569	225	100	25	1

Source: (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020c), pp. 16 and 106. The total for intersex persons is added up incorrectly in the report, it should be 2593.

The data is very unevenly distributed among the EU Member States and two accession countries (Serbia and North Macedonia). In fact, out of 1122 cleaned (details in Table 4 below) answers¹², 11 countries (Cyprus, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and North Macedonia) had zero or only one answer from older lesbians*. Given this very low response rate, data from those 11 countries have not been used in the EL*C quantitative analysis.

In 5 countries, less than 10 answers from older lesbians* were collected (Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Serbia). Only three countries (Denmark, Ireland and Netherlands) reached the target value defined by FRA. For all other countries, the number of answers obtained from older lesbians was significantly lower (below 65%) than the target value. For this reason, only the data collected from those three countries can be considered representative.

11 We found one UK meta-study analysed the available research on older lesbian health in general and then took a more detailed approach to the impact of the COVID-19. Sue Westwood, Trish Hafford-Letchfield & Michael Toze (2022) Physical and mental well-being, risk and protective factors among older lesbians /gay women in the United Kingdom during the initial COVID-19 2020 lockdown, Journal of Women & Aging, 34:4, 501-522, DOI: 10.1080/08952841.2021.1965456 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08952841.2021.1965456>

12 FRA cleaned the data, please refers to: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-lgbti-equality-technical-report_en.pdf

Table 2: Lesbians* age 55+, by Country

Country	Absolute	Percent of target group
Austria	40	3,6
Belgium	49	4,4
Czech Republic	2	,2
Denmark	66	5,9
Finland	38	3,4
France	90	8,1
Germany	225	20,1
Greece	13	1,2
Hungary	4	,4
Ireland	34	3,0
Italy	42	3,8
Malta	7	,6
Netherlands	127	11,4
Poland	5	,4
Portugal	24	2,1
Spain	43	3,8
Sweden	35	3,1
United Kingdom	269	24,1
Serbia	4	,4
Sub-Total	1117	100,0
Not used for EL*C quantitative analysis		
Bulgaria	0	n/a
Croatia	0	n/a
Cyprus	1	n/a
Estonia	0	n/a
Latvia	0	n/a
Lithuania	0	n/a
Luxembourg	0	n/a
North Macedonia	1	n/a
Slovenia	1	n/a
Slovakia	1	n/a
Romania	1	n/a
Grand-Total	1122	

Source: (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020c), own calculations

As explained in more detail in Annex II, because of the very low representativity, the data is not weighed as is performed in the overall FRA exercise that is based on a much larger data set. For such small respondent numbers as for older lesbians*, a weighting process, would not double actual respondents; but reiterate or “copy” too few actual responses and bias representativity even further.

While not being satisfactory from a statistical point of view, we have opted for the solution of analysing the data from those countries that have at least 2 answers from older lesbians*. This choice aims to provide at least an indication of the data on older lesbians* included in the FRA 2019 LGBTI II Survey. For this reason, the data from the FRA Survey used in the following chapters serves only as an illustration that must be read while keeping in mind the above-described limitations.

Moreover, based on the adverse data situation, most graphs show results for different countries separately, because all calculations that are not country specific are distorted by countries with the highest numbers of respondents, especially Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. They are calculated in percentage terms so that we can draw comparisons between the countries as well as between other groups within the LGBTI communities (in particular cis-men and younger lesbians*).

Good Practice

Fostering and supporting research on older lesbians: the 'Empar Pineda' award

In 2022, the Fundacion 26D, a Spanish organisation focusing on older LGBTI people, launched an award aimed at the promotion of research on older lesbian women in Spain. The award is named after Empar Pineda, a lesbian feminist activist who was part of the anti-Franco movement, founded the first lesbian organisation in Madrid and was one of the leaders of the feminist and LGBTI movements in Spain¹³.

The award focuses on recent research projects targeting older lesbians, performed by academic institutions (Universities, Research Institutes, Academies, Scientific Societies...), . A jury composed by lesbian activists and experts evaluate the research projects received and assign the award, a prize money and the publication of the research by Fundacion 26D.

In 2022 the award was given to Elena Molinero Garau for the research "Intersectionality and old age: a study on perception of feminist activists in Spain"¹⁴.

II - WHERE ARE THE OLDER LESBIANS?

Given the limited information available in secondary data, the first focus of the present study was to better understand the reasons why accessing older lesbians is difficult. The general invisibility of senior lesbians and the difficulties in involving them in activities and research is a common issue addressed in all the interviews that were realised within this project. In other words, we wanted to understand "Which older lesbian can be reached?" and "How can they researchers, civil society organisations and social services improve such outreach?"

A. Which older lesbian can be reached?

First of all, it is necessary to define "older" or "senior" lesbians. ANS, an organisation focusing on older people in Italy, explained during our interview that institutions such as the European Commission consider anyone above the age of 55 in that category. But they pointed out the shortcomings of this approach, because there are almost two generations between the 55 years olds and 85 years olds. For this reason, ANS make the distinction between those who are "old but active" and those who have important care needs, in particular the "older old", people over 75.

From the FRA data it is also clear that visibility about the situation of "older old" lesbians is particularly difficult to grasp. 2 out of 3 respondents to the FRA LGBTI Survey are younger than 65 which means that, in most EU+ countries, they are in active employment (some of them for at least a decade still).

¹³ <https://www.ehu.eus/es/web/berdintasuna-direccionparalaigualdad/-/empar-pineda-biografia>

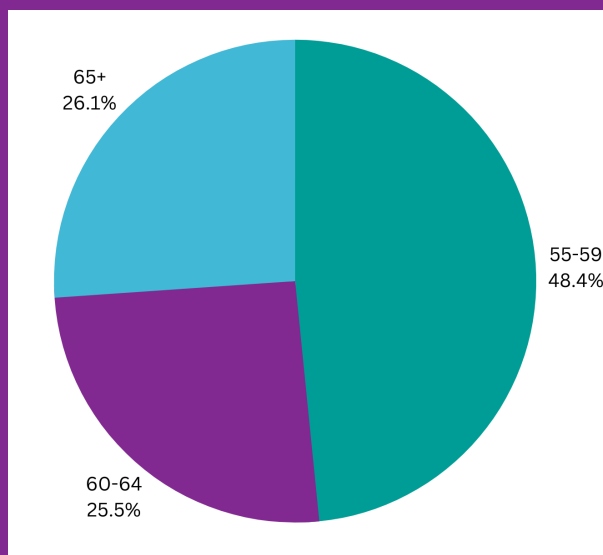
¹⁴ <https://fundacion26d.org/una-habitacion-para-nosotras-lesbianas-mayores-feminismo-y-memoria/>

Health and care needs are likely to differ considerably between the younger and the older cohort.

Table 3: All lesbians* by age (N=47.231)

Age	Absolute	Percent	% target
15-17	9128	19,3	-
18-24	19045	40,3	-
25-29	6835	14,5	-
30-34	4131	8,7	-
35-39	2793	5,9	-
40-44	2030	4,3	-
45-49	1236	2,6	-
50-54	916	1,9	-
55-59	541	1,1	48,4
60-64	285	,6	25,5
65+	291	,6	26,1

Figure 1: Lesbians* age 55+ (n=1117)



Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020), own calculations.

The analysis includes data for AT, BE, DK, FI, FR, DE, EL, IE, IT, NL, PT, ES, SW, UK with small sample sizes between 13 to 269 respondents and CZ, HU, MT, PL, RS with very small sample sizes between 2 to 7 respondents each. CY, LU, SI, SK as well as RO, BG, HR, EE, LV, LI were excluded, as respectively one or zero respondents had been reached in those countries

Similar considerations can be made concerning further levels of intersectionality. However the sample obtained by the FRA Survey is too small to allow for disaggregation based on further characteristics such as gender identity, disability, race and ethnic origins.

B. Improving outreach

The struggles to collect quantitative data concerning older lesbians, evident in the FRA Survey, was also experienced by our interviewees. For example, when RFSL in **Sweden** did a needs assessment on senior LGBT persons they received a very small percentage of answers from LBT women, compared to the number of answers by GBT men. Of the over 600 participants, only 13% of respondents were women.

In this sense, **outreach methodologies** should be developed considering specifically this difficulty. Vanja, from RFSL, explained this difference between men and women with the fact that outreach was conducted via larger gay platforms (magazine, meeting sites,..). However, she also thinks that there might be more men that identify as gay in that generation.

” We don’t know if the lesbians are harder to reach because they are fewer or because we don’t meet their needs
Vanja/RFSL, Sweden

While the ageing organisation ANS (Italy) faced general difficulties in recruiting senior LGBTI persons for their video campaigns and trainings for professionals finding lesbians proved even more challenging because senior residential homes declared not to have LGBTI residents and the LGBTI organisations they collaborated with only provided them with contacts of men. The organisation Proud observed that a research team implementing academic research on LGBTI persons in the **Czech Republic** had faced difficulties reaching lesbians. Both ANS and Proud noticed that the best way to reach lesbians seems to be by word-of-mouth.

One explanation for the difficulties in reaching senior lesbians might be that they **not feel represented by general LGBTI organisations** as much as other members of the community. In the RFSL senior groups, (cis) women participate but are in minority. Vanja, coordinator of RFSLs work with senior LGBTI persons, thinks that part of the explanation could be that women tend to attend other spaces than older gay men, such as feminist spaces. Moreover, RFSL was traditionally seen as a male dominated organisation. While Vanja believes that this is less the case today, older generation of lesbians might still be under that impression and have less trust in the organisation.

Lesben und Alter, an organisation by and for older lesbians, confirmed that many senior lesbians that they meet in Germany feel part of the lesbian community or the feminist movement, but do not necessarily feel that they belong to the broader LGBTI community. According to Sabine and Reingard, the reasons may be that women have felt “put on the side” because the focus in the LGBTI movement was on gay men. Gay organisations also received more funding and recognition and as a result they have more resources to engage with their community.

Finally, **personal and economic difficulties as well as health conditions** should be taken into consideration when reaching out to older lesbians. Antonia from Hungary worried that she no longer sees older lesbians at community meetings organised by the lesbian organisation Labrys and made the hypothesis that it is because they are not doing well, are taking care of grand-children or are in such a difficult economic situation that they do not have the means to come to meetings. She also emphasised the relatively better situation of those senior lesbians who have a supportive family.

**” ...I also know that there are other older lesbians who obviously are not accepted by their families, they don’t come to meetings, I’m always a bit worried about them, that they are in so much despair...
Antonia, Hungary**

C. Representation matters

The invisibility in data collection and the difficulties in reaching out to older lesbians are also deeply linked with broader issues of representation and of the lack of public discourse concerning lesbians in general and older lesbians in particular.

**” If you are a lesbian, (...) there is always an attempt to bring you back ’ok, you did what you wanted but now it’s time that you..., you know for women, being a lesbian is just a stage (...)
Dimitra, Proud Lesbian, Greece**

For this reason, the interviews explored **what representation looks like for senior lesbians** and the possibilities for senior lesbians to find representations of other older lesbians among public figures and in public spaces, as well as **the impact that representation or lack thereof** has on this population.

The results indicate a significant lack of public representation of older seniors, who are generally invisible in society, in the media and to a certain degree also in the broader LGBTI community. According to some respondents, this invisibility has a negative impact on the construction of senior lesbians' identity as well as on their well-being. The lack of visibility of senior lesbians is also closely related to the general invisibility of senior persons in general as well as the lack of visibility of lesbians of all ages.

For example, Margarita from the organisation Cantapaxarina, **Spain**, pointed out that since both lesbians and elderly women are mostly invisible in her region, senior lesbians are even less visible. She observed that as a result of the legal recognition of same-sex couples in Spain, there is a normalisation of lesbian women's existence and with this comes an idea that there is no need to talk about sexual orientation or lesbian relationships. Nevertheless, she pointed out that in the case of senior LGBTI persons the need for representation may be stronger because of the discrimination and harassment they faced throughout their lives.

” Not having representation in the media or elsewhere is like we do not exist, or this naive perception that there is enough acceptance and that there is nothing else that needs to be done.
Margarita/Cantapaxarina, Spain

AGE Platform Europe (a network of national organisations of and for older people active at **EU level**) agreed that there is no representation of older LGBTI people in the media or anywhere, and even less of lesbians.

The **role of the media** was stressed by interviewees who emphasised that when senior people are represented in the media they are white men (Zivot 90, **Czech Republic**) and when lesbians are represented they are young (Clube Safo, **Portugal**). Representation is also lacking among politicians and other public figures.

Jolana (Proud, **Czech Republic**) believes that seeing other people talk openly about their sexual orientation, whether in the media and among peers, helps those for whom coming out remains difficult. It encourages them to be more comfortable with who they are and makes people feel supported. She emphasised the importance of (senior) LGBTI persons being represented in everyday life.

” In every little town, in every region, on the borders, wherever, it takes courage, you have to do a lot for people to encourage them, also to support them... it is important not to hide ourselves... the more people are out, the more will follow them.
Jolana/Proud, Czech Republic

Several respondents pointed both to the general invisibility of older populations as well as the **negative connotations around ageing and being old**. Since it is seen as something negative many people prefer not to talk or think about it.

” In general ageing is something we don't want to think about.
Evien, The Netherlands

The lesbian ageing network Lesben und Alter further stressed that in **Germany** age is not a visible topic within public programming and policy and that they, as an organisation focusing on ageing lesbians, are constantly putting it back on the agenda.

” The subject of age is always difficult because most (people) don't even think about that age is something special, especially for the LGBTI persons. So we always have to put it back in, 'did you think about that age is also a topic?', youth is always a topic, but age very seldom.... so we always have to put it (on the agenda).
Reingard/Lesben Und Alter, Germany

Good Practice

Older lesbians doing it themselves: the experience of Lesben und Alter

The organisation Lesben und Alter¹⁵ is a network of 13 lesbian and women's organisations who work specifically or partly with senior lesbians. They started their activity in 2004 and the formal organisation was created in 2009, which makes them one of the longest running lesbian organisations in Europe.

The network activities focus on providing opportunities for the community to meet as well as to develop capacities for its members. Lesben und Alter also engages in advocacy and provides expertise on senior lesbians to policy makers, researchers, and other civil society actors. They focus on areas such as the material situation (including pension policy and old-age poverty), living and housing situations of older lesbians, their social and political participation and participation in sport, the accessibility of care and the improvement of health (both physical and mental health).

15 Visit their website for more details: www.lesbenundalter.de

III - HOW ARE THE OLDER LESBIANS?

The main questions tackled throughout this research was how older lesbians in Europe are doing, in particular their personal and socio-economic conditions and their main needs. To answer those questions, the report considers some elements that emerged from the desk research, the FRA dataset as well as the interviews. This chapter focuses on three factors that are key in ensuring the survival and wellbeing of older lesbians: financial resources, health status and availability of housing. Because of the limitations of the present research, the chapter provides only initial elements for an analysis. Further research in these areas is urgently needed, considering also intersectionalities related to factors like ethnic and racial background, gender identity, class and socioeconomic status¹⁶.

A. Lesbians' money: employment, gender pension gap and poverty

The data from the FRA Survey show that, in most countries, a majority of the respondents in our target population were in paid work at the time of the survey. This data can be explained by the fact that 2 out of 3 respondents are aged between 55 and 65 and therefore, in most European countries, too young to be retired.

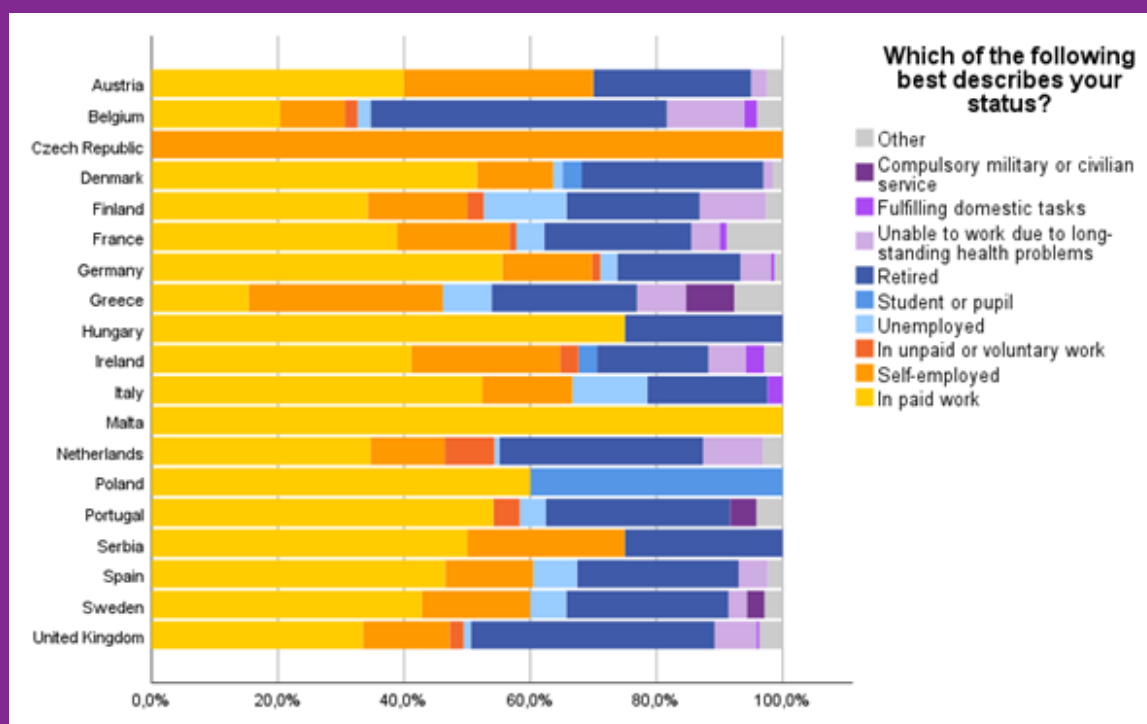
As already noted by EL*C in the 2022 Briefing on lesbian data in the FRA LGBTI II Survey, the tool was constructed in a way that “did not allow respondents who indicated that they were in paid work to provide specifics about their employment situation, such as if they were in part-time or minimum-wage employment. Especially when considering the socio-economic situation of women, data relating to the quality of employment relationship is as important as data on the employment rate.”¹⁷

16 Especially since “all of these factors are, of course, further complicated by their intersection with other social locations. Older lesbians/gay women from Black, Asian and/or minority ethnic backgrounds will find their experiences at the “Bermuda Triangle” (Traies, Jane (2015): Old lesbians in the UK: community and friendship. In *Journal of lesbian studies* 19 (1), pp. 35–49. DOI: 10.1080/10894160.2015.959872) of ageism, sexism, and heterosexism, further nuanced by racism/ethnicism (Seelman, K. L., Adams, M. A., & Poteat, T. (2017). Interventions for healthy ageing among mature black lesbians: Recommendations gathered through community-based research. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 29(6), 530–542. [https:// doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2016.1256733](https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2016.1256733)). Disability will differentiate and inform older lesbian/gay women's experiences of ageing and this may also intersect with race/ ethnicity and other social locations (Reygan, F., Henderson, N., & Khan, J. (2020). 'I'm black, a woman, disabled and lesbian': LGBT ageing and care services at the intersections in South Africa. *Sexualities*, 1363460720975322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720975322>). Socioeconomic status and relationship status also add further dimensions to older lesbians/gay women's experiences of aging, as well as whether they are living in rural or urban areas (Traies, 2016 quoted above; Willis, P., Raithby, M., & Maegusuku-Hewett, T. (2018). “It's a nice country but it's not mine”: Exploring the meanings attached to home, rurality and place for older lesbian, gay and bisexual adults. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 26(6), 908–916. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12616>). Thus, the lives of older lesbians/gay women are complex and made more complicated by sites of privilege and disadvantage across their lives and particularly in older age.” (Sue Westwood, Trish Hafford-Letchfield & Michael Toze (2022) Physical and mental well-being, risk and protective factors among older lesbians /gay women in the United Kingdom during the initial COVID-19 2020 lockdown, *Journal of Women & Aging*, 34:4, 501-522, DOI: 10.1080/08952841.2021.1965456

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08952841.2021.1965456>)

17 EL*C and ILGA Europe (2022). Diving into the FRA LGBTI II Survey. Briefing on lesbians <https://europeanlesbianconference.org/lesbian-analysis-2019-fra-lgbti-survey-ii/>

Figure 2: Employment situation (Lesbians* age 55+, n=1117)



Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020), own calculations.

The analysis includes data for AT, BE, DK, FI, FR, DE, EL, IE, IT, NL, PT, ES, SW, UK with small sample sizes between 13 to 269 respondents and CZ, HU, MT, PL, RS with very small sample sizes between 2 to 7 respondents each. CY, LU, SI, SK as well as RO, BG, HR, EE, LV, LI were excluded, as respectively one or zero respondents had been reached in those countries.

The EIGE Gender Equality Index 2020 found that “women tend to be found more often in temporary, part-time or precarious employment... Such inequalities have particularly dire consequences for vulnerable groups of women, including younger and older cohorts, single mothers with dependent children, and those from migrant communities or other minority groups¹⁸”.

Moreover, a 2021 ILGA World briefing for the UN Human right’s Council stated that “LGBTI older persons are at greater financial risk than their non-LGBTI counterparts.” (...) resulting from “the lifetime differences in earnings, employment, and opportunities to build savings as well as discriminatory access to legal and social programs that are traditionally established to support ageing adults. In addition, the lack of legal recognition of relationships formed by LGBTI persons may leave older LGBTI persons without inheritance and survivor benefits.”¹⁹

Quantitative data concerning lesbian in general seem to confirm this tendency, considering that in the EL*C 2020 Survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, 40% of the respondents declaring to be employed were engaged with contracts that were not full-time, not open-ended, or neither.

Precarious employment is one of the main factors explaining the **gender pension gap and old age poverty**. As such, the impact of a heightened exposure to precarious job employment on lesbian retirees and women-only households is an area of research that merits investigation. In this sense,

18 EIGE (2020). Gender Equality Index 2020 report, page 25, available from: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-report>

19 ILGA World (2021). Intersections of ageism and age discrimination with cis-heteronormativity, homophobia and transphobia, and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression - Submission to the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons. To inform forthcoming report to the 48th session of the Human Rights Council.

several participants in the qualitative study emphasised that senior women have a comparably more difficult financial situation than men, due to their care responsibilities in their families and gender-inequalities in the labor market (gender pay gap, lower participation in the labour market, less paid work and more unpaid work) resulting in lower pensions²⁰.

For example, Angela from Lesbians in the Change observed that in **Austria** those members of the community that had worked only part time or had different kinds of contracts that had not paid enough into the system, now have a **very low retirement income**. Antonia, a British woman who has lived for 20 years in **Hungary**, highlighted the difficult situation of senior women and lesbians in a post-communist country because **pensions are calculated on the basis of a (very low) communist salary**. In a socio-economic situation that is generally very worrying for older people, the situation **for lesbians rejected by their lesbophobic families is significantly worse**.

Sabine from Lesben und Alter also noted the severe impacts that the **repeated crisis of the last years**, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing energy crisis and the housing crisis that touches bigger German cities, have had on older lesbians in Germany. This situation is worsening the isolation of senior lesbians as some do not engage in group activities, because they cannot afford to buy a coffee. Reingard from Lesben und Alter further asserted the inequalities of the German **pension system** which is **based on the assumption that couples are married and live together**. This makes it unfair to lesbians and gays who only got the right to marry in 2001, as well as heterosexual women who never married. They emphasised that it is very difficult for a single person to live on one pension.

” The German pension system is patriarchal and always benefitted men who were married.

Reingard/Lesben und Alter, Germany

According to the Foundation 26D, many senior lesbians in **Spain** had previously been **married to men and were dedicated to caring for their families**. As a result, they did not have personal incomes that could guarantee their economic stability in their older years. A similar consideration was made by the interviewees in **Czech Republic**, where women - including lesbians - are often caregivers of both children and elderly parents, as part of a generation known as the “sandwich generation” phenomenon, which impacts their possibility to have a steady income (Proud). Zivot90 (Czech Republic) stressed that since people usually retire by the age of 65 many women spend up to 20 years in difficult economic conditions. Moreover, interviewees from Greece and Hungary stressed that senior lesbians who do not have support from their biological families/families of origin are particularly at risk of facing financial hardship and difficulties in accessing housing.

While most of the organisations interviewed do not yet work with older trans lesbians, the the sparse existing literature points to especially dire financial situations. Witten finds that “despite the overall feeling that they have aged successfully, the respondent trans-lesbian population harbors significant fears about later life [and is] ill-prepared for the major legalities and events that occur in the later to end-of-life time periods²¹.”

20 The gender pension gap in Malta and the Netherlands is the worst in Europe with 46% and 42% respectively and the least of a difference in Estonia (with 3%). The gender pension gaps of the countries that the participants of the qualitative interviews of this report are residing in are: Austria: 35%, Germany 32%, Italy 31%, France 28%, Sweden 25%, Greece 24%, Spain 23%, Portugal 20%, the Czech Republic 15%, and for Hungary 10%. Data are available here: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1127967/umfrage/gender-pension-gap-in-den-mitgliedsstaaten-der-europaeischen-union-eu/>

21 Witten, Tarynn M. (2015): Elder transgender lesbians: exploring the intersection of age, lesbian sexual identity, and transgender identity. In Journal of lesbian studies 19 (1), pp. 73–89. DOI: 10.1080/10894160.2015.959876.

Putting lesbian money together: the experience of Sappho Foundation

The Sappho Foundation has been active in Germany for several decades. The organisation aims to ensure that wealth (property and assets) created by lesbians reliably benefits lesbians by acting as a pool of capital. The capital required to finance the statutory goals is brought together through gifts in the form of donations and endowments as well as through inheritances.

The foundation also owns buildings for which the priority is to secure property so that a partner or other lesbians can continue to live in the donor's house and be protected from any claims by the donor's family members or impending foreclosure.

During a few years, the Foundation had a "Lesbian ageing Quality of Life Fund", set up thanks to a donation by a lesbian. This fund supported senior lesbians with little money with exceptional costs (medical, holidays, mobility), needs or amenities with up to 500 euros annually. The funds were exhausted at the end of 2014, after 5 years of activity and after handing out a total of €28,000 to 79 applicants.

B. Navigating lesbophobic healthcare systems

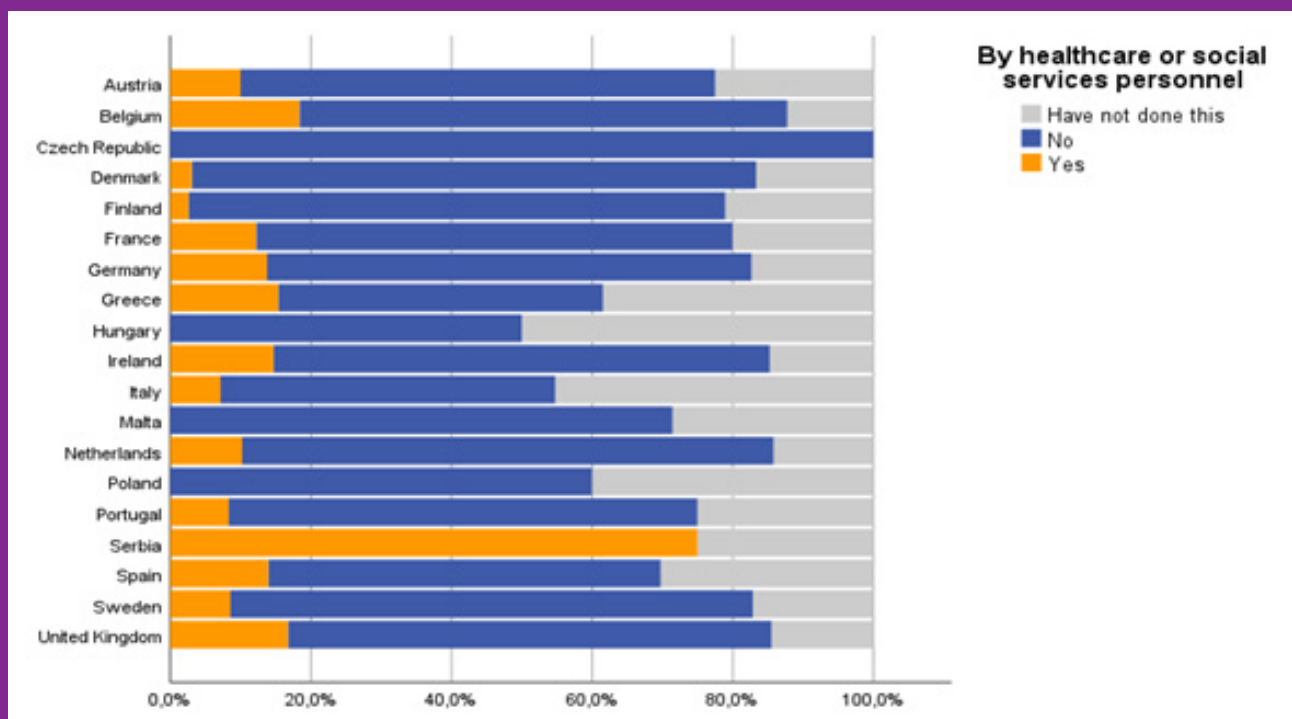
As shown in the EL*C 2022 briefing on healthcare, misogyny and heteronormativity are often embedded in the functioning and structures. Inadequate services and discrimination are still common experiences for lesbians when in contact with medical professionals²². Lesbians who have a greater need for healthcare, for example because of diseases connected with old age, could therefore be at a higher risk of being exposed to such forms of discrimination.

Our analysis of the FRA LGBTI II Survey data shows that in most countries lesbians are exposed to higher levels of discrimination in healthcare than gay or bisexual cisgender men in the same age group (55+). This indicates that misogyny can play a role in the experiences within healthcare systems. This data is also confirmed by a broader analysis of the FRA data, conducted by EL*C and ILGA Europe in 2022. Such analysis reveals that lesbians were generally more likely than the total of respondents to report that their specific needs were ignored (10.47% and 7.18%, respectively). Lesbians also experienced more instances of inappropriate curiosity compared to the total of respondents (17.89% and 14.24%, respectively)²³.

22 EL*C (2022). A bitter pill to swallow. Gaps and discrimination of lesbians in healthcare <https://europeanlesbianconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ELC-SUBMISSION-IE-SOGI-health1.pdf>

23 Trans and intersex lesbians as well as lesbian with disabilities experienced both discrimination and inappropriate curiosity at a significantly higher rates than lesbians in general. EL*C and ILGA Europe (2022), Diving into the FRA LGBTI II Survey. Briefing on lesbians, page 8 <https://europeanlesbianconference.org/lesbian-analysis-2019-fra-lgbti-survey-ii/>

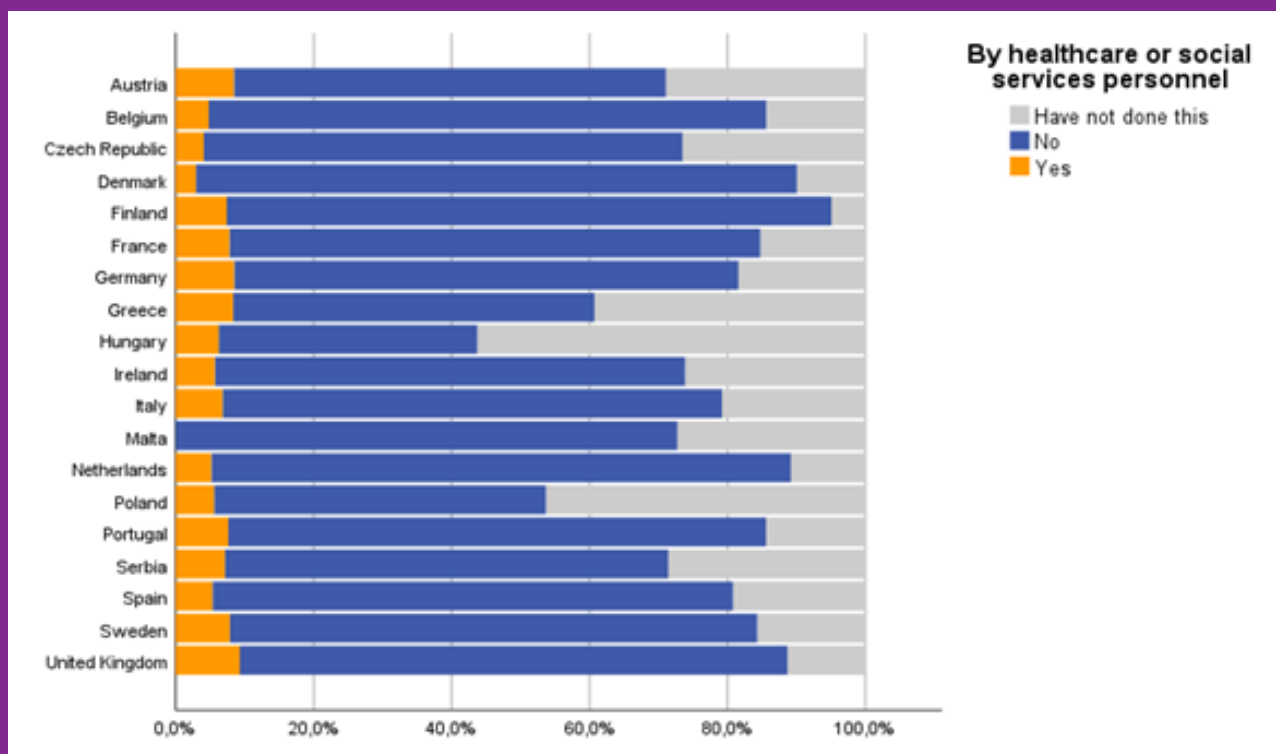
Figure 3: Discrimination by healthcare or social services personnel (Lesbians* age 55+, n=1117)



Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020), own calculations.

The analysis includes data for AT, BE, DK, FI, FR, DE, EL, IE, IT, NL, PT, ES, SW, UK with small sample sizes between 13 to 269 respondents and CZ, HU, MT, PL, RS with very small sample sizes between 2 to 7 respondents each. CY, LU, SI, SK as well as RO, BG, HR, EE, LV, LI were excluded, as respectively one or zero respondents had been reached in those countries.

Figure 4: Discrimination by healthcare or social services personnel (Cis men, 55+, n=4052)



Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020), own calculations.

The analysis includes data for AT, BE, DK, FI, FR, DE, EL, IE, IT, NL, PT, ES, SW, UK with small sample sizes between 14 to 674 respondents. CY, LU, SI, SK as well as RO, BG, HR, EE, LV, LI were excluded.

The impact of discrimination has on people's general health condition is also stressed in the **literature** and "in terms of their health and wellbeing, cis older lesbians/gay women generally experience poorer health when compared with cis older heterosexual women, which is attributed to minority stress and exclusionary heteronormative healthcare experiences [...]. They face a wide range of unmet healthcare needs [...], including delayed diagnosis and treatment of gender-related cancers, that is, breast, ovarian, and endometrial cancer²⁴".

Among the organisations interviewed within this research, two, Proud Seniors Greece and ANS (Italy), had specific programs on health, while three others implement some programs or efforts related to health: Clube Safo (Portugal), Foundation 26D (Spain), and Proud (Czech Republic). Health needs and access to healthcare were important topics of discussion during all interviews.

The most frequently mentioned health issues for senior lesbians were **mental health problems**, such as depression, mainly related to isolation, invisibility and loneliness, as well as the lack of inclusive health services. Besides issues common to all ageing persons, Margarita (Cantapauxarinha, Spain), identified depression as the most common health issue among senior lesbians in her region, Asturias, **Spain**. The organisation Cantapauxarinha wishes to implement a lesbian housing project in order to break the **isolation** that leads to depression and "to help (lesbians) recover their self-esteem and self-worth in making a change in life and becoming a community". In terms of mental health, the Foundation 26D identified a link between **exposure to lesbophobia, homophobia and transphobia throughout a lifetime** and mental health problems. Within the current senior LGBTI population, some were imprisoned when the previous law criminalised LGBTI people. According to Eva, such "experience of fear, silence and discrimination, leaves a mark on people". Similarly, the AGE platform (network active at **EU level**) stressed that having faced hate and violence in their younger years might create traumas which could still be present when elderly. Other factors that negatively influence the well-being of senior LGBTIQ persons were identified by RFSL (**Sweden**) when launching their work with the senior LGBTI community, including **not being out** about their sexual orientation (or gender identity) and **not having contacts with other members of the LGBTI community**.

In terms of **access to healthcare**, the situation appears to be significantly different depending on the national context. Both **Spanish** respondents reported that the general healthcare system is good in the country but that services such as gerontology, mental health and sexual health do not adequately meet senior lesbians' needs. They also pointed to general limitations such as healthcare not being accessible to some migrant persons and a decline in the welfare system coverage. According to Zivot 90, in the **Czech Republic**, care providers are not ready to work with older LGBTI people. While the country has a good health system it is not always accessible to everyone due to transportation issues. Michaela from Zivot90 recalled having heard of cases of discrimination against elderly LGBTI, in the health system. Moreover, the organisation emphasised that sexual health services are basically non-existent and that there is not always enough support for people facing mental health issues.

Healthcare is one of the main areas addressed by Proud Seniors **Greece**. The organisation provides senior LGBT persons with contacts of professionals (including health professionals, psychologists and physiotherapists) that have been identified by the organisation as being "safe" on LGBT issues and, when needed, also help senior LGBTIQ persons access services by paying for them.

Clube Safo, in **Portugal**, pointed out, that there is not enough discussion about **sexual health among lesbians** in general, especially among older women. Many senior lesbians do not have their yearly exams such as the pap smear. For that reason, Clube Safo, implemented a campaign in **Portugal** to raise awareness on cancer. Similarly, the Italian general ageing organisation ANS believes that not

24 Sue Westwood, Trish Hafford-Letchfield & Michael Toze (2022) Physical and mental well-being, risk and protective factors among older lesbians /gay women in the United Kingdom during the initial COVID-19 2020 lockdown, *Journal of Women & Aging*, 34:4, 522, DOI: 10.1080/08952841.2021.1965456 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08952841.2021.1965456>

enough attention is paid to the sexual health of older persons in general. In the country it “is a taboo, the medical professionals do not explore it except if they are specifically asked by patients”. (Licia/ANS, Italy)

Most respondents in our study agreed that **healthcare services and senior service providers** are generally **not (appropriately) trained** on LGBTI issues or lesbian issues. In fact, much too often the general assumption is that everyone is heterosexual. For example, when ANS approached care facilities in their region in **Italy** within the frame of a campaign on senior LGBTI persons, asking them if they could meet their LGBTI residents, all professionals answered that they don't have any LGBTI residents or don't know whether they do. As reported also in the literature, statements of this kind are common and “they suggest the working of heteronormativity which could deny sexual and identity difference²⁵”. This lack of awareness and training means that formal processes and protocols on how to attend to senior lesbians in health and care facilities are lacking and if training is done, it is done in an ad hoc basis. This is reported by respondents in **Sweden, Spain and Austria**. As a result, there is no guarantee that care provided will be free of discrimination.

This is echoed by ANS in **Italy** as they find a gender perspective is missing in the analysis of the care needs of the ageing population. As a result, programs do not sufficiently adapt to gender differences. This certainly also impacts lesbians.

” (The gender perspective) is on the agenda and there's a discussion to consider, gender, when you develop studies or therapies, but it's not really in the ordinary practice now, so it's not something that's really taken into account when you develop healthcare programs (...) services are very much provided as a standard and they do not really take into account specificities including gender specificities. Licia/ANS, Italy

Concerning trans lesbians, existing studies point to extremely poor adequate and respectful provision of health care services²⁶ - which also holds for the intersex population.

25 The study consisted in a survey of 187 care and service providers for older people, responses such as the ones mentioned by our interviewees were reported in the large majority of cases. (Simpson et al 2018: 869)

26 Lottmann, R.; Lautmann, R.; do Mar Castro Varela, M. (2017). Homosexualität_en und Alter(n). Ergebnisse aus Forschung und Praxis. Wiesbaden.

Good Practice

Better healthcare for lesbians: the experience of Fundacion 26D

The Spanish organisation Fundacion 26D implements the project “Program for Integral Health of Diverse Women” which specifically targets lesbians and women with diverse backgrounds and is implemented by a coalition of lesbians and LGBTI organisations. The project therefore involves lesbians in general, and focus on older lesbians is ensured by the participation of Fundacion 26D, which is an organisation working on older LGBTI people.

The activities include workshops on diverse women’s health issues, such as stress and anxiety management, healthy habits, depression, menopause, prevention of loneliness and social relationships, gender-based violence, etc. Psychological counselling is also provided, as well as legal support when needed. The organisation also implements training activities targeting health teams and organisations and organise community meetings to support senior lesbians in building networks against unwanted loneliness.

C. A home of one’s own: lesbian housing

Data concerning housing collected via the **FRA Survey** seems to confirm the idea that housing is in general a serious concern for lesbians throughout their life. 215 of the 1117 respondents in our target population (19%) experienced some form of housing difficulties at some point in their lives. Because of the small number of respondents, this data is representative of a generally well-off population, with access to employment and with higher levels of education. The fact that 1 out of 5 respondents have nevertheless experienced struggles in accessing housing represents a very high proportion and should be further investigated.

Concerning cis men in the same age range, 10,5% of them experienced some form of housing difficulty throughout their lives. Although this is also a high proportion, it is still lower than that of older lesbians* (19%) and of lesbians* between the age of 25-54 (22,9%).

Table 4: Housing difficulties lesbians* 55+ (N=1.117 respondents with 1.160 responses)

Housing Difficulties	Absolute	(% of N=1.187)
I had to stay with friend or relatives temporarily	150	13,5%
I had to stay in emergency or other temporary accommodation	34	2,9%
I had to stay in a place not intended as a permanent home	58	5,0%
I had to ‘sleep rough’ or sleep in a public space	16	1,3%
No housing difficulties	902	81,0%
Total	1160	

Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020), own calculations.

The analysis includes data for AT, BE, DK, FI, FR, DE, EL, IE, IT, NL, PT, ES, SW, UK with small sample sizes between 13 to 269 respondents and CZ, HU, MT, PL, RS with very small sample sizes between 2 to 7 respondents each. CY, LU, SI, SK as well as RO, BG, HR, EE, LV, LI were excluded, as respectively one or zero respondents had been reached in those countries

Access to housing for senior lesbians was considered particularly pressing by several participants in our interviews. Situations vary across regions and are influenced by more general economic conditions (pension levels, access to property ownership and access to private or semi-private rental properties). For some of the interviewees, for example in **Greece** and **Hungary**, the housing situation is a concern because of **generalised poverty**.

On the other hand, in **Germany** where the urban **housing crisis has worsened**, older lesbians often fear losing their flats as their rents go up, especially in bigger cities (Sabine and Reingard, Lesben und Alter). Lesben und Alter had also observed differences in access to private property between urban residents, affected by the housing crisis, and rural areas, where private ownership is more common. Similar information was shared by interviewees from **Spain** where Margarita (Cantapaxarina) believes that the majority of retired women in general and lesbians in particular in her region Asturias (North) have economic support and their own houses to live in while in Madrid Fundacion 26D registered cases of senior lesbians facing a precarious economic situation due to low pensions.

In some countries, for example **Italy**, the housing situation was not considered a problem for senior lesbians as a result of a relatively generalised access to private property ownership. In the **Czech Republic**, organisations also reported that while they lacked data on the housing conditions of senior lesbians, they considered that it was generally easier for older generations to access private property compared to younger generations (Zivot90). A similar situation was reported by Lesbians in Change, in **Austria**, where many senior lesbians either live alone in private properties or in long-term social housing.

However, lesbians might find themselves in situations that are not comparable with the general population because of **family rejections** and **ownership of private property being linked with marriage**. For example, Dimitra from Proud Seniors pointed out that even if private property is generally accessible in **Greece** for older generations, this might not be the case for LGBTI people because property is often owned within the family. In case of lesbophobic, homophobic or transphobic families, lesbians may lose their possibility to stay on the family property.

Furthermore, according to Proud in **Czech Republic** the situation of senior lesbians is different for those who have previously been married to men (due to the pressure and the political regime in their youth years) and had children. These older lesbians tend to have an easier access to privately owned houses and have a larger family network to rely on.

” ...If you’re a lesbian or a gay or a trans person, it’s very usual that your family will reject you. (...). If people come out openly as lesbians there is still discrimination. (...) families cannot stand this. They end up as people living in bad housing, they cannot pay rent, with gentrification it is becoming harder. And many people live in poverty. Dimitra/Proud Seniors, Greece

The utopia and challenges of lesbian collective housing

One of the topics frequently raised by the participants during the interviews concerned apprehensions linked with being forced (because of economical or health reasons) to leave one's houses. In particular, fear of having to move out of a private apartment or house to move to a collective or medicalized senior housing was a common topic raised by participants.

As pointed out in literature, the heteronormativity of care facility and unawareness about needs and specificities of lesbians might result in several adverse effects. This includes "failure to recognise the distinct health and social care needs" as well as the fact that "LGBT residents could be obliged to depend largely on the goodwill, knowledge and reflexivity of individual staff (including people of faith) to meet care and personal needs [which is] (...) no substitute for collective practices (involving commitment to learn about LGBT issues) that become integral to care homes' everyday functioning²⁷".

One issue identified by interviewees is that older lesbians may **feel forced to go 'back in the closet'**, hiding their sexual orientation and gender identity from staff and other residents. This is confirmed by AGE Platform (network active at **EU level**) that considers that senior lesbians face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination due to their age, gender, sexual orientation and in some cases race or gender identity. The organisation has seen cases of discrimination and violence in senior residencies and care facilities, mostly performed by peer residents.

While fear is not always grounded in concrete discrimination, several organisations such as those in **Sweden, Italy, Spain, Austria, Czech Republic and Germany**, as well as the European AGE Platform, emphasise that long-term senior care is generally not prepared to welcome LGBT persons. In fact, in long-term care in **Italy**, everyone assumes that older people are heterosexual:

“Most care professionals (in the facilities) had never thought that among their clients there may be LGBT persons, it's something they tend to associate with younger age so they don't even ask themselves if between their clients there is this group.
Licia/ANS, Italy

Lesben und Alter (**Germany**) stressed that the fears associated with long-term senior care facilities, is also related to the **importance that women of second wave feminism associate with autonomy**:

“A lot of older lesbians think and care (...) about 'what happens if I'm not able to live an autonomous life anymore'. Autonomy is a very big thing, especially for the older generation and the women of the 2nd wave of the women's movement.
Reingard/Lesben Und Alter, Germany

27 Simpson, P., Almack, K., & Walthery, P. (2018). 'We treat them all the same': The attitudes, knowledge and practices of staff concerning old/er lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans residents in care homes. *Ageing and Society*, 38(5), 869-899. doi:10.1017/S0144686X1600132X

Because of the **minority stress** related to collective housing, and the unpreparedness of staff and the fear of discrimination, several respondents stressed out that they are **working on collective housing solutions** for senior lesbians or would like to develop such projects.

” *There is like a dream, an utopia (...) ‘what if we created a house just for women (...) In a classical retirement home, someone would take care of us, but it seems less joyful to be in an environment that is totally ‘heteronormative’.*

Marie, France

Good Practice

Building a safe home: experiences of LGBTI and lesbian housing projects in Germany, Spain, Sweden and Greece

In Spain, Cantapaxarina is currently developing a co-housing project for elderly lesbians. This is their major project in the short and medium term. A public collective senior LGBT housing exists in Stockholm, Sweden, focusing on community building but Vanja is not aware of any specific housing solutions for lesbians in the country. Similar projects are dawning in Greece where Proud Senior Greece has started to lay the groundwork towards senior LGBT collective housing. Fundación26D is working to launch a first LGBT inclusive senior residence in Spain. In Germany a collective housing for senior lesbians is planned in Berlin, by a local NGO.

In 2021 Vienna’s social housing offices (FSW) commissioned a research study to explore the needs of community housing projects for LGBTQI+ persons in Vienna. The study confirmed the desires in the community for queer housing projects and also explored the specific needs and issues of LGBTQI+ ageing . Solutions organised by individuals are also frequent in Austria as noticed by Angela, from Vienna’s group Lesbians in the Change. While some of the group members have access to Vienna’s (regular) social housing, there are also private solutions, for example by living among a group of 4-5 senior lesbian friends in a communal house outside of Vienna: “it’s a friendship-family mixture shared house”.

28 Schönflug, K.; Eberhardt, V. (2021). Senior*innen-WGs für LGBTQI+-Personen. Bedarfsevaluation. IHS Forschungsbericht, available at: <https://irihs.ihs.ac.at/id/eprint/6116/7/ihs-report-2021-schoenflug-eberhardt-senior-innen-wgs-lgbtqi%2B-personen.pdf>

IV - OLDER LESBIANS' CARING FOR EACH OTHERS AND THE WORLD

The final chapter of this research is dedicated to exploring the many ways in which older lesbians have developed ways of resisting the multiple oppressions they face and offer inspirations to lesbian movements everywhere to step up actions in support of the elderly, to continue exchanges between generations and to find ways of securing the legacy of those that have led the fights for visibility, equality and liberation.

It is also fundamental that public authorities, national governments, and international organisations really start to look into the lived experiences of older lesbians, end the erasure of their realities and fight systematic discrimination. Academic institutions and funders should also step up their efforts, increase and provide accessible research focusing on lesbian lives and improve the way in which lesbians affected by multiple levels of discrimination are investigated. To this effect a set of recommendations is provided in Annex I.

“Our common world²⁹”: resisting a lifetime of lesbophobia

Several of our respondents stressed the impact of discrimination and violence in the lived experiences of older lesbians as well as the **lack of data** on these phenomena. They observed that there is no data **on senior lesbians' experience of violence and discrimination**. Therefore, their accounts mostly relied on personal and professional observations and in some cases personal experiences. Situations of discrimination were reported as taking place within general society, in care services, by family members or within the LGBTI movement.

Margarita, from Cantapaxarina (**Spain**), mentioned that fellow senior lesbians shared with her the experience of being discriminated **by their families**. In some cases, senior lesbians are not allowed to have contact with their nieces and nephews. Being rejected by the families increases senior lesbians' feelings of loneliness. While there are campaigns in the region to prevent discrimination against LGBTI populations, these do not provide information or representation of seniors. Fundacion 26D and Zivot90 in the **Czech Republic** also registered cases of **discrimination within healthcare, care facilities** and **by unaccepting families**. As also mentioned above, several respondents pointed out that the biggest fear of discrimination for older lesbians is the one that they might suffer in care facilities.

Several respondents also commented on the **impact of having spent one's life in lesbophobic social and legal environments**, confirming what can be observed also in the literature. Scholars emphasise that “many older lesbians are still unwilling to be open about their sexual identities, finding security and recognition only among others like themselves. Older lesbians' formative experiences of inequality across the life course have been the result of numerous intersecting oppressions (...) Those experiences have made some of them reluctant to engage with the services they need. Overcoming this reluctance and allaying their fears of discrimination are therefore urgent priorities for providers of services to old people”.³⁰

According to Michaela (Zivot90) the historic prosecution of LGBTI persons by the communist government in **Czech Republic** until the 80s resulted in many older lesbians and LGBTI people not feeling safe about being open with their sexual orientation or gender identity in public. Reingard from

29 The reference is to a pamphlet produced in 1983 by the Coordinamento Lesbiche Italiane (CLI), one of the first groups of Italian feminist lesbians written to denounce the lesbian erasures by feminist movements. The pamphlet was recently re-published. CLI (1983). *Il nostro mondo commune, un contributo al dibattito aperto dal gruppo n-4 di Milano*, Asterisco Edizioni 2020

30 Traies, J. (2019). Older lesbians, ageing and equality. In S. Westwood (Ed.), *Ageing, diversity and equality: Social justice perspectives* (pp. 111). Routledge.

Lesben und Alter (**Germany**) also shared that many senior lesbians had been married and had faced the risk of losing custody over their children because of their sexual orientation, a discrimination that was present until the 1990s and remains a taboo topic that is hard to research:

*”A lot of the oldest (lesbians) had heterosexual marriage before with children, some were forced to stay in the marriage and lived in constant fear, even when they discovered that they are lesbian, they couldn't leave the marriage because they were in constant fear of losing their children.
Reingard/Lesben Und Alter, Germany*

Because of these experiences, senior lesbians are constantly confronted with the **choice of whether or not to come out**. As put by Evien, a lesbian woman in her 60s from the **Netherlands**, “...there are always new moments for coming out”. She recalled the different situations in her life when she had told people that she was a lesbian or when people had come to understand this, showing that coming out is not neutral but always bears a significance. Evien's account shows some ambiguity towards coming-out. While she generally does not openly state that she is a lesbian, and feels like this is private information, she also does not actively hide it and would answer if someone asked. Nevertheless, in order to avoid possible discrimination, her and her partner of three decades generally do not speak about the nature of their romantic and sexual relationship unless necessary, while being open with family and friends.

When Proud (**Czech Republic**) shared that when contacting ageing lesbian women for a study, they manifested no interest in participating. Due to the discrimination that they have lived before, they mentioned that for them it was also not necessary to join activities from organizations, instead just met among themselves, in ways that they feel comfortable and safe.

Respondents observed that senior lesbians often **do not feel comfortable in “mainstream” senior spaces**. On the one hand, while there may not be direct discrimination or exclusion, sexual orientation is not something that is asked or discussed and heterosexuality is assumed, resulting in there not being space for talking about same-sex partners and non-heterosexual realities. (Licia/ANS, Italy, Lesben Und Alter, Germany). Senior lesbians and other LGBT persons may fear how people in their own generation will react once they discover that a person is not heterosexual or cisgender (Vanja/RFSL, Sweden).

Moreover, a difference between senior heterosexual and homosexual women, that was observed by several respondents, is that many lesbians did not have children and thus cannot relate when other senior persons speak about their grandchildren.

*”There are places where seniors can go and they have open groups, but I would never go there because I feel like I'm wrong there because there are mostly heterosexual people and their lives are totally different from mine, so we do not have that much in common, and that's very difficult.
Reingard/Lesben Und Alter, Germany*

A. “Someone in some future time will think of us³¹”: lesbian intergenerational links

Several respondents stressed the importance of nurturing **intergenerational relationships** within the lesbian community in combination with space dedicated to older lesbian (see below). Many organisations implement activities in this sense. Lesben und Alter in **Germany** consider that the interest from younger persons to learn from the older generation has increased when compared with the past and that both young and old feel like they can learn from each other. This impression is also shared by Vanja from RFSL in **Sweden**, who thinks that there is a general interest among the younger LGBTI community to learn from the older generations.

Examples of intergenerational activities carried out by organisations include films made by younger generations about the lives of the older generations such as *Katzenball* (Switzerland 2005) or *Verliebt, verzopft, verwegen* (Austria 2009), **film festivals, discussion events** and **storytelling** as a tool for intergenerational exchanges, as well as lesbian parties constructed having in mind an older population, as it is the case for the Dyke menopause **parties** organised in Paris, **France** by a lesbian collective. Those parties are constructed starting from the perception that ageing lesbians did not fit in lesbian spaces anymore and with the explicit objective of creating an environment that is welcoming for lesbians from different generations. For this reason, they start early and make sure to have music from different moments in the local lesbian culture. They are attended by several hundreds of lesbians between the age of 20 to the age of 70 (with 1200 attendants in past editions). The organisers are also reflecting on improving the model by including moments of storytelling and narrative from older lesbians in the community.

It's very important to have intergenerational talks, that you can understand one another and talk to one another, not in the sense 'I'm old I know how it works' because you can learn from one another and I think that is something that is not done often enough.

Reingard/Lesben Und Alter, Germany

Jolana from the organisation Proud in the **Czech Republic** stressed the importance of guaranteeing that older people are involved in all the activities, and that the groups are intergenerational. She thinks that LGBTI organisations in general are not doing enough to include different ages in their activities. The lesbian organisation Clube Safo in Portugal does not have specific programs for senior lesbians but makes efforts to have activities that are as inclusive as possible for every lesbian person, regardless of their age. They try to attract older lesbians to their activities, by communicating using different tools and by organising a range of activities such as conversations in bookstores, poetry nights, dinners, documentary movie sessions and participation in the **Pride March**.

Respondents observed that it is not always easy as a senior lesbian to fit into the broader LGBTI community. (Proud Seniors Greece; RFSL, Sweden; Zivot 90, Czech Republic, Fundacion 26D, Spain). When Zivot 90 in the **Czech Republic** implemented a Rainbow volunteering program in which an elderly LGBTI person was joined by someone younger, only gay men participated.

Fundación 26D observes the importance of creating opportunities for elderly LGBTI persons to meet and prevent unwanted loneliness. They therefore proposed specific activities in Madrid, **Spain** such as a gardening project, theatre, board games, dance sessions as well as a Day Center for LGBTI seniors.

31 Sappho Fragment

However, they reach few senior lesbians with these activities even though lesbian women face unwanted loneliness to a great extent. According to Eva, the reason may be that many of the proposed activities are developed from the interest of ageing men. Fundación 26D is working on finding new ways to invite and include more lesbian seniors to join their activities.

Dimitra from Proud Seniors in **Greece** stressed that as lesbians age they do not feel like they fit in LGBTI places. She further stressed that "(g)eneral society and the mainstream gay places, (are) mostly focused on very ableist, wealthy people, around the particular neighbourhood of Athens". While most gay places in Athens are not open only for men, as a lesbian "you don't feel like it's nice to be there".

Two respondents spoke about the **role that senior lesbians play in ensuring the lesbian herstory is maintained**. The older founding members of Clube Safo share a collective memory of the activities and situations that they lived in the mid 1990's, when the organisation was born. And Evien, an EL*C Board member from The Netherlands, emphasised the importance of remembering lesbian herstory and explained that this is the very reason she joined EL*C.

”Somehow the connection with the past is very fragile. It's important because it's relevant to keep the herstory alive because I think it helps us now to understand certain things and to see that there has been improvement. Evien/EL*C, The Netherlands

B. “We are the ones we have been waiting for³²”: space(ship)s for older lesbians

The big majority of interviewees observed the need for **networks among senior lesbians** and agreed on the importance of guaranteeing safe and welcoming meeting spaces for older lesbians.

Cantapaxarina (**Spain**), emphasised the need for connection that many senior lesbians feel. Moreover, many elderly women in Asturias are not openly lesbian, because they live in a small town which are considered to be more conservative than bigger cities.

”We need networks and exchanges, we need to talk and feel that we are not alone (regarding the interest to interact with other senior lesbians). Margarita/Cantapaxarina, Spain

Creating connections is also important to ensure that support is provided when needed. Angela (Lesbians in the Change/**Austria**) recalled that during the lockdowns imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic they kept in touch and instead of organising monthly in-person gatherings, they managed to develop twice a month an online meeting to keep connected.

The need to create spaces for older lesbians to connect is also due to the general feeling of disconnection with the broader LGBTI community. In **Portugal**, Clube Safo stressed that the senior lesbian women that they work with, are interested in joining activities, and being part of a lesbian group, but do not

32 Alice Walker (2006). We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness, The New Press

necessarily see themselves as part of a general LGBTI movement. According to Simone, this is due to differences between generations on things related to concepts, ways of thinking and expressing themselves.

Vanja from RFSL **Sweden** agrees: "Our LGBT community is seen like a youth culture and in a way that's what it is". Instead, some senior lesbians look for each other to form networks since they feel more comfortable among peer lesbians rather than in the general LGBTI community. A similar impression is shared by Lesben und Alter in **Germany**.

In Asturias, **Spain**, senior lesbians do not always live openly as lesbians but still look to each other for company, meeting in cafés or in organised activities. So, they join activities designed for elders in general, and form separated groups among lesbian seniors. A conclusion that was reached also in other research concerning older lesbians: "the distinction between "organised networks" and "informal, local and 'hidden' networks" is unhelpful. In reality most lesbian social organisations fit into both categories. (...) Many women belong to more than one group, so that the lines of communication, both formal and informal, between individuals and groups make up a far-reaching web of connections³³".

Such connections are also key to lesbians' wellbeing because many of them are estranged or have very conflictual relationships with biological families. The **creation of networks of friends, lovers and ex-lovers** is an important part of lesbians' social life at any age³⁴. As stressed by Sabine, from Lesben und Alter (Germany): "(o)ne big topic for older lesbians is that a lot of them do not have connection to their family of origin so they are dependent on networks they built for themselves, what we call family of choice". Angela (Austria), confirms that even for lesbians that have contact with their origin families, the most and the closest contacts are with the chosen family, their friends.

Families of choice are so important that respondents consider they should be better recognised by society and public authorities and the **definition of family should go beyond married couples and children**.

”Lesbians have quite a few strategies to cope with this situation (not having good relationships with biological families), they build networks from a very young age so they depend on their friends.

Sabine/Lesben und Alter, Germany

33 Traies, J. (2015) Old Lesbians in the UK: Community and Friendship, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 19:1, 35-49, DOI: 10.1080/10894160.2015.959872

34 In Traies, 2015: 44 (quoted above): "An older lesbian's ex-lovers are not only likely to remain in her social circle, as described above; they are often among her best friends. It is not uncommon, as [...] for lesbian and gay families of choice to include both ex-partners and the current partners of ex-partners. Often a lesbian's previous partners are her closest friends"

ANNEX I - RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Action

1. Local and national authorities as well as international institutions such as the European Union, the Council of Europe and the UN should include the specific realities of senior lesbians when planning and implementing actions concerning elderly populations, for those that are active and live in individual housing, those who live in collective but non-medicalized housing, and those (especially the “older-old”) who need medicalized housing.
2. Local and national authorities as well as international institutions such as the European Union, the Council of Europe and the UN should include the perspective of senior lesbians and actively promote a gender and age aware approach when planning and implementing policy concerning LGBTI persons.
3. Local and national authorities as well as healthcare providers and long-term providers should train professionals working with older populations on the specific realities of senior lesbians, including consultations of lesbian organisations that focus on or have projects concerning senior lesbians. Such trainings should be included in the initial curriculum and in further training and should be mandatory for all staff
4. Local and national authorities as well as international institutions such as the European Union, the Council of Europe and the UN should support and fund lesbian-lead and lesbian-focused organisations in general and those that implement and support lesbian senior-specific and intergenerational activities in particular.
5. Local and national authorities as well as international institutions such as the European Union, the Council of Europe and the UN should support and fund, including by re-granting mechanisms with more developed lesbian lead and lesbian focused organisation, grassroot organisations and informal lesbian groups who implement small-scale local activities aiming to build community, provide individual support and prevent unwanted loneliness.

Recommendations for Research

1. Academic institutions, such as universities, research institutes and others, including civil society organisations working on elderly people and LGBTI people, should specifically investigate the lived experience of senior lesbians.
2. Academic institutions such as universities, research institutes and others should ensure that intersectionally aware perspectives of older lesbians are always included when investigating the lived experiences of older LGBTI people and of older women.
3. Funders (including universities and public funders) should finance research focusing specifically in developing knowledge on the lived experiences and realities of older lesbians, including by funding quantitative and qualitative research on unwanted solitude, informal senior lesbians groups and collectives, health issues (including mental health), relationships with chosen and biological families, as well as the consequences of having grown up in hostile environments (dictatorships and political regimes that oppressed LGBTI persons), as well as internalised lesbophobia and discrimination and violence towards senior lesbians including in social services, care institutions and with health care services
4. Researchers should ensure that research on older lesbians takes into account the impact of on experiences of racism, classism, misogyny, trans-, inter-phobia, as well as forms lesbophobia linked with gender expressions (e.g. butch-phobia/femme-phobia), and includes senior lesbians from different regions, urban and rural areas.

ANNEX II - METHODOLOGY

EL*C research was based on a multi-methodological approach combining a quantitative analysis of the data included in the EU LGBTI II Survey by the Fundamental Rights Agency with 15 interviews of targeted participants. Desk research focusing on European literature and best practices was also conducted.

Quantitative analysis

This report analyses the answer provided by older L*BTI + non-binary persons to a survey by the European Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA).

The FRA data

A total of 139,799 persons aged 15 years or older who describe themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or intersex (LGBTI) completed the online EU-LGBTI II Survey in all EU Member States and the candidate countries of North Macedonia and Serbia. (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020b, p. 8) The survey was conducted online from 27 May to 22 July 2019. Its questionnaire covered a wide range of issues, such as experiences with discrimination, harassment or violence, rights awareness, openness about being LGBTI, positive and negative experiences at work and in education, socio-economic and living conditions, health and well-being, and housing issues (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020b, p. 8). The findings are conveyed in the 2020 report “A long way to go for LGBTI equality” and compared to a similar survey from 2012.

Purpose

The purpose of the quantitative analysis was to provide information on the lives of older lesbians at EU level. Unfortunately, the data provided by the FRA does not include enough respondents in the target group to be representative.

Instruments

To analyse the data provided by the FRA, we use the statistical software SPSS Statistics developed by IBM.

Coding

For the EL*C research desiderate the FRA Data was coded as follows to generate the category “lesbians*”:

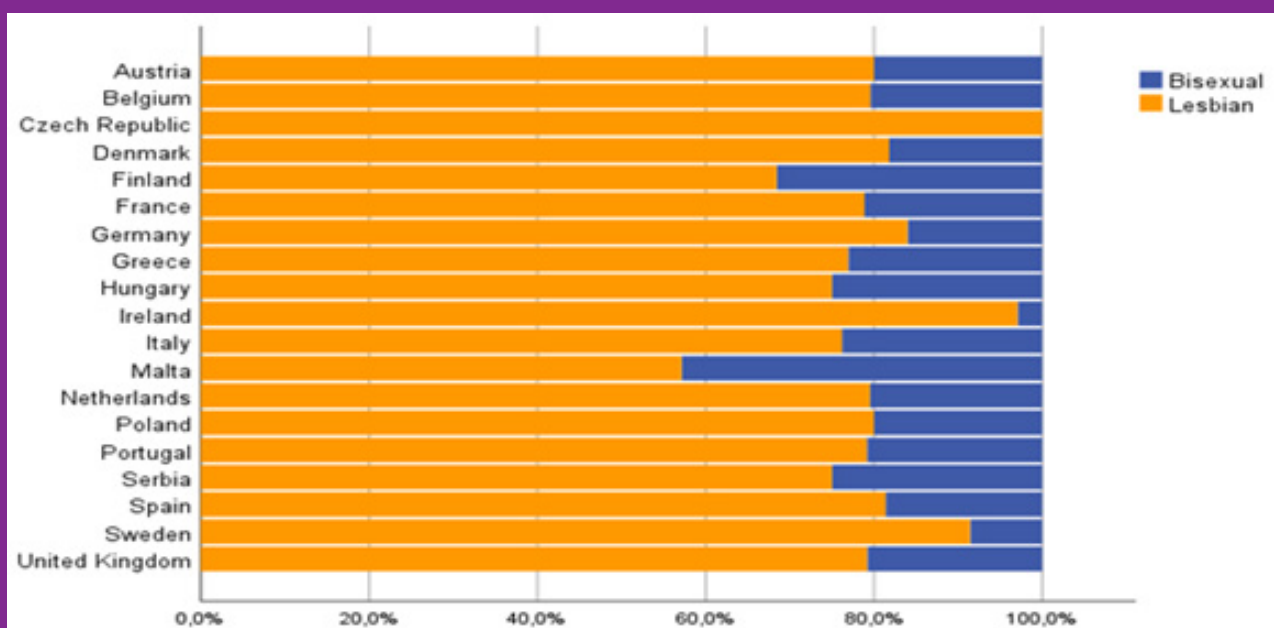
1. Lesbian: Defined as a combination of:
 - a. Self-declared sexual orientation as “lesbian” and
 - b. Gender identity today (“woman/girl” or “trans woman/girl” or “trans man/boy” or “Non-binary or Genderqueer or Agender or Poly-gender or Gender-fluid”, no matter whether the person is self-declared “intersex” or not) and
 - c. Sexual attraction (“women” or “women and men”) or
2. Gay:
 - a. Self-declared sexual orientation as “gay” and
 - b. Gender identity today “woman/girl”
3. Bisexual: (Defined as a combination of:
 - a. Self-declared sexual orientation as “bisexual” and
 - b. Gender identity today (“woman/girl” or “trans woman/girl” or “trans man/boy” or “Non-binary or Genderqueer or Agender or Poly-gender or Gender-fluid”, no matter whether the person is self-declared “intersex” or not) and
 - c. Sexual attraction (“women” or “women and men”).
4. The category sexual practice (“In the last five years, you have had sex with...”) with the

possible options: “women”, “mainly women”, “both women and men”, “mainly men”, “no one” was not considered as it might not only reflect a person’s wishes, but also circumstances, such as geographical setting, age, social isolation, COVID etc. that might not reflect choice, but chance.

This categorization yielded 53.326 persons of the 139.799 cleaned data entries. Respondents within this categorization over the age of 55+ were then selected. The final cleaned data was composed of 1129 respondents.

The broader definition of lesbians* by the EL*C includes bisexual women, which make up 19% of the lesbians* age 55+. This means that the group of 1117 lesbians* includes 902 lesbian women (in the narrower FRA understanding) as well as 215 bisexual women. We find the highest proportion of bisexuals in Malta. In contrast, the FRA did not reach any bisexual women in Czech Republic. Note that the sample sizes for the target group are 7 for Malta and 2 for Czech Republic.

Figure 5: Sexual orientation of lesbians* age 55+ (n=1117)

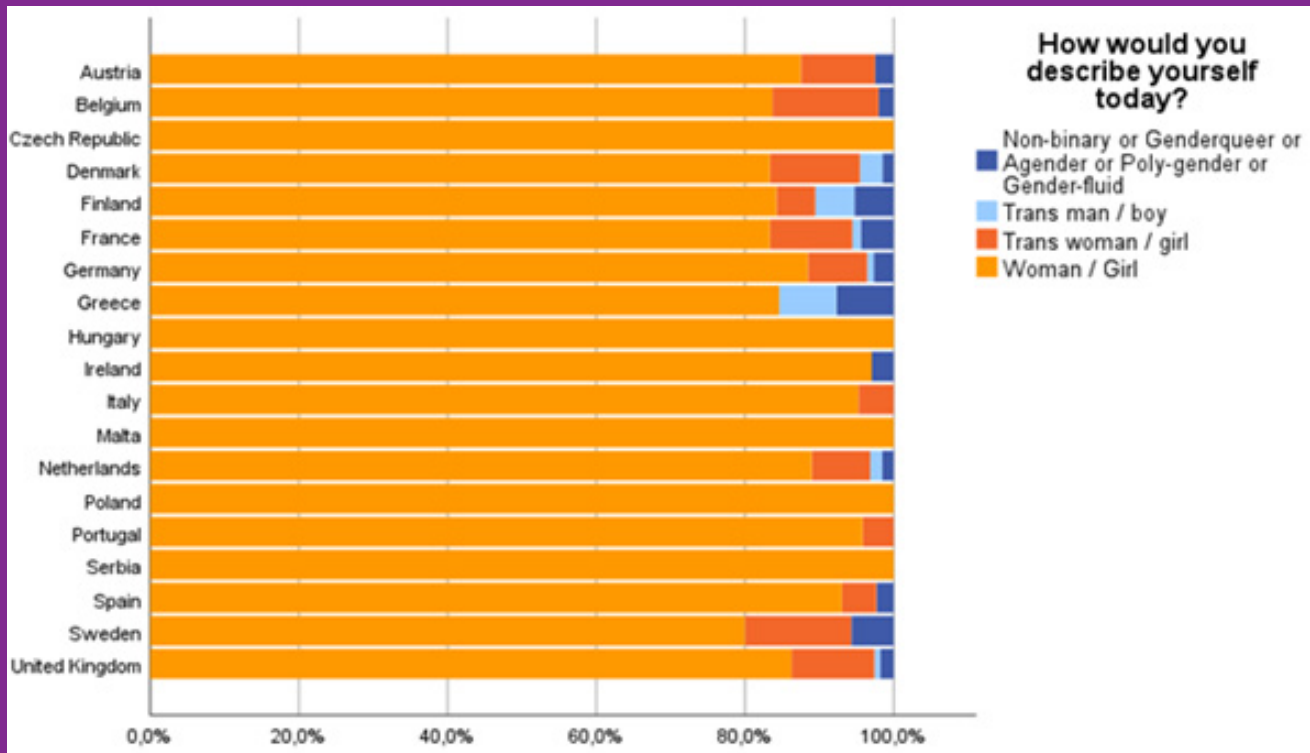


Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020), own calculations.

The analysis includes data for AT, BE, DK, FI, FR, DE, EL, IE, IT, NL, PT, ES, SW, UK with small sample sizes between 13 to 269 respondents and CZ, HU, MT, PL, RS with very small sample sizes between 2 to 7 respondents each. CY, LU, SI, SK as well as RO, BG, HR, EE, LV, LI were excluded, as respectively one or zero respondents had been reached in those countries.

The majority of respondents describe themselves as woman / girl (979, 88%). 99 respondents (9%) are trans women / girls, 12 people are trans men / boys (1%) and 27 respondents identify as non-binary / genderqueer / agender / poly-gender / gender-fluid.

Figure 6: Gender of lesbians* age 55+ (n=1117)



Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020), own calculations.

The analysis includes data for AT, BE, DK, FI, FR, DE, EL, IE, IT, NL, PT, ES, SW, UK with small sample sizes between 13 to 269 respondents and CZ, HU, MT, PL, RS with very small sample sizes between 2 to 7 respondents each. CY, LU, SI, SK as well as RO, BG, HR, EE, LV, LI were excluded, as respectively one or zero respondents had been reached in those countries

Process

For the EL*C we looked into analysing the following issues of the FRA survey:

- Section H. Background, Details (H1, H2, H3, H20, H21)
- Section C. Discrimination (C1: A-H)
- Section B. Trends and responses to homophobia, lesbophobia, transphobia biphobia and intersexphobia (B1, B2)
- Section D. Safe Environment (D4)

For these items, we provide an analysis for a selection of countries not only for older lesbians*, but also for older cis men and younger lesbians*, in order to be able to compare results between the groups.

For all results, it is important to keep in mind that we did not work with data weighed by country. Due to the very small numbers of adequate respondents distortive effects would have been too great.

Instead, we avoid using averages across different countries. Most graphs will show results for different countries separately. Note that all calculations for lesbians age 55+ that are not country specific are highly influenced by countries with the highest numbers of respondents, especially Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Comparisons between groups within LGBTIs are only possible at the country level to avoid bias by countries with comparatively many responses.

Limitations of the quantitative analysis

- The analysis is limited by the data available for EL*C's target group
- The FRA survey did not reach their target numbers for lesbians age 55+
- Older LGBTIs are generally underrepresented in the data
- Women* are generally underrepresented in the data
- The level of education completed by respondents is too high to be representative
- Sample sizes for some countries are too small for quantitative analysis
- Weighing the data by country is unreliable with such small sample sizes
- With the given data, it is impossible to extract results for lesbians* age 55+ on an EU-level

Qualitative analysis

The purpose of the qualitative research was to get a better understanding of the experiences and needs of senior lesbian in the European Union member states.

Purpose

The research was exploratory and did not aim to reach saturation or guarantee representativity for lesbians* across the EU.

Participants

Because of limitations in time and resources, the choice was made to focus the data collection on persons who have knowledge of the experiences and needs of senior lesbians through work within an organisation or lived experiences. For this reason, interviewees included: people belonging to a lesbian organisation who focuses or had a project on senior lesbians, people who belonged to an ageing organisation or an LGBTI organisation that implemented a project on senior LGBTI or senior lesbian (over 55) and have information on the experiences and needs of a broader senior lesbian community, as well as 3 senior lesbians individuals.

Instrument

A short questionnaire was developed aiming to identify which organisations conduct activities aimed at improving the situation of senior lesbians* or LGBT persons.

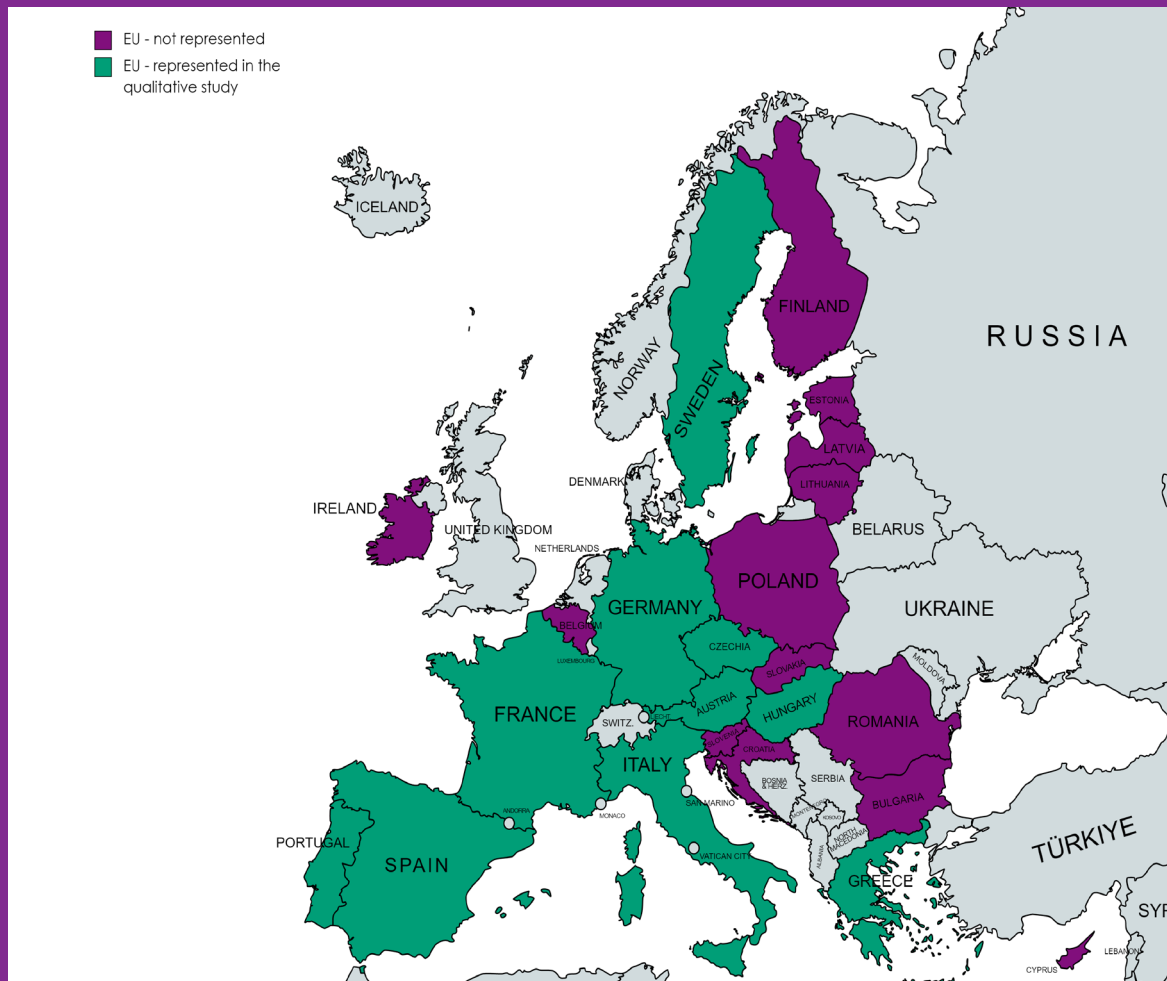
A guide for a semi open interview was designed (Annex 1). It included questions on general information for the contact person, the organisation and an identification of possible challenges and learnings in their work with senior lesbians, divided into categories.

A template was defined for the collection of so called "Good Practices", activities aiming to address the needs of senior lesbians (or LGBT persons) that could be replicated or adapted

Sampling

The sampling was a mix between purposeful and snowball sampling. All EL*C members (49 members at the time of the data collection) were contacted alongside 38 other organisations including European LGBTI network, national LGBTI organisation and local lesbian initiatives as well as organisations working on ageing.

Figure 7: Countries represented in the qualitative study



Process

15 interviews were conducted with organisations (Table 1) and individuals (Table 2). In most cases interviews were held online using Google meet. Interviews were held in English or in the national language of the participant, if the researcher spoke that language (interviews were held in Spanish, Swedish and French).

Table 5: Overview interviews - representatives of organisations

Organization	Country	Focus, scope	Lesbian ageing specific program	Person interviewed
Cantapaxarina	Spain	Senior lesbians	Yes (housing)	Margarita Llorenta (72 years old). President, founder. Lesbian
Fundación 26 de Diciembre	Spain	Senior LGBTIQ	One program in sexual and reproductive health for senior lesbians, bi and trans women	Eva Pérez. Patron and Board Member. Lesbian.
Proud	Czech Republic	LGBTI rights	Specific program for ageing LGBTI, no lesbian specific activities.	Jolana Novotna, 57 yo. Senior Programme Coordinator. Lesbian.
AGE Platform	European Union	Older people, including older LGBTI people	Ageing focus. LGBTI policies.	Apoline Parel, 32 yo. Human Rights and Research Project officer .
Zivot 90	Czech Republic	Ageing population, some activities for senior LGBT	Some activities for senior LGBT, No lesbian specific.	Michaela Jirsova, 37 yo. Secretary and Coordinator of activities for LGBTI persons.
Club Safo	Portugal	Lesbian women (including bi, trans, intersex and non- binary)	Focus on lesbians. No specific program for ageing lesbians.	Simone de Cavalcante, 50 yo. Member of the organisation. Lesbian.
Lesbians in Change	Austria	Senior lesbians	Yes	Angela Schwarz, 64 years old. Member of the group. Lesbian.
Lesben und Alter	Germany	Senior lesbians	Yes. Ageing lesbian network	Reingard Wagner (Board member, 72 yo, lesbian) , Sabine Arnolds (staff, 60 yo, lesbian)
Proud Seniors	Greece	Senior LGBT	Ageing LGBT organisation, no lesbian specific activities	Dimitra Kryllo (member, 58 yo, lesbian)
ANS - Anziani e non solo	Italy	Ageing (younger older and older older), regional/ national	Ageing LGBT projects, no lesbian specific activities	Licia Boccaletti (staff, 43 yo)

RFSL	Sweden	LGBT	Ageing LGBT programme, Vanja Braathen (staff, no lesbian specific activities 44 yo)
-------------	--------	------	---

Table 6: Overview interviews – Individuals not representing an organisation working on older LGBT/lesbian

Name	Country	Age	Affiliated to organisation	Self-identification
Evien	The Netherlands	67	EL*C	Lesbian
Antonia	Hungary	73	Feminist Library	Lesbian.
Marie	France	62	/	Homosexual

Limitations

- Limited time for recruitment, data collection, compilation and analysis;
- Difficulties reaching organisations, many of them are volunteer-based;
- Sample is not representative of the whole of the region;
- Most organisations participating work in urban areas;
- Almost all interviewees were white and cisgender lesbians;
- Did not interview any older-old lesbians (over 75).



CONTACT INFORMATION

Email: info@lesbiangenius.net

Web: www.europeanlesbianconference.org / www.lesbiangenius.net

Twitter: @EuroLesbianCon

Facebook: fb.com/EurocentralasianLesbianCommunity

Instagram: @elc_lesbiancommunity

TikTok: @elc_lesbiantok



Making the Invisible Visible: an analysis of older lesbians lived experiences

© EL*C / March 2023