

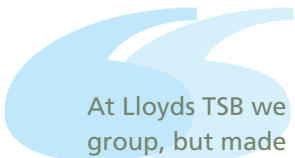
The double-glazed glass ceiling

Lesbians in the workplace



Stonewall

www.stonewall.org.uk



At Lloyds TSB we recognise that our lesbian, gay and bisexual staff population is not a homogenous group, but made up of individuals who have very different experiences of our workplace. Our own research shows that our lesbian and bisexual women face different challenges and opportunities to other staff groups and, for us, exploring this is the next step towards making Lloyds TSB a genuinely great place to work for all our LGB staff.

We believe that employers have a vital role to play in furthering equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the UK. On behalf of Lloyds TSB I am, therefore, very pleased and proud to be supporting Stonewall in producing this important guide.

Fiona Canon, Equality & Diversity Director, Lloyds TSB



Lloyds TSB

The double-glazed glass ceiling

Lesbians in the workplace

By Nathanael Miles

Interviews conducted by Ruth Hunt





Introduction

Stonewall's recent research, *Peak Performance*, found that gay staff who

feel supported by an organisation are more likely to feel able to be open about their sexual orientation at work. Consequently, they become more productive. However members of our 400-strong Diversity Champions best practice programme often express concern about the small number of openly-gay women in their workplaces and the even smaller numbers engaged in their work around sexual orientation. Stonewall wanted to investigate this and that's why we conducted this research, generously supported by Lloyds TSB.

The results suggest that often gay women think their gender is more of a barrier to success at work than their sexual orientation. Therefore, if they can hide the fact that they're gay, some feel it best to do just that. As one participant said, 'putting your hand up twice' can be difficult. But for those who have felt able to come out at work, the personal and professional benefits are considerable.

Above all, lesbian and bisexual women say that visibility of openly-gay women is key to their confidence and success. When only one in ten of directors of FTSE 100 companies is female, and only 20 per cent of parliamentarians are women, finding senior lesbian and bisexual role models remains painfully difficult.

We hope this research will help organisations think more carefully about how lesbians can be themselves in the workplace. There are recommendations to help organisations make that happen in practice. At a time of economic challenge, attracting and retaining the very best talent is critical. We hope this report helps employers do exactly that.

Ben Summerskill
Chief Executive
Stonewall

Contents

Summary	3
1 Being the lesbian in the workplace	5
2 'Keeping me at arms length' A constant awareness of difference	9
3 'More willing to engage' The benefits of being a lesbian in the workplace	13
4 Where are the lesbians?	17
5 What lesbians want	21
Recommendations	26

Summary

In summer 2008, Stonewall researchers interviewed a range of lesbian and bisexual women in depth about their experiences in the workplace. The participants discussed their experiences, perceptions and expectations of the impact that their sexuality might have on them at work. This report presents those findings.

» All participants felt that being a lesbian was something that they had to think about in relation to their work.

» The majority, however, felt that being a woman was of greater importance and significance to their experience of the workplace. Their sexual orientation was secondary, and they could hide their identity as a lesbian if they wanted to.

» Participants who were confident about their sexual orientation, and saw being a gay woman as something positive, generally felt that being a lesbian or bisexual woman gave them a distinct advantage in the workplace.

» Some participants felt that being open about being a gay woman was empowering. It had raised their profile, facilitated networking opportunities, and helped them to feel more equal with men in their organisation.

» Those who were less confident however felt their sexual orientation was a cause for concern. They were worried about how being a lesbian or bisexual woman would affect their career progression and impact upon relationships with colleagues.

» Participants felt that although lesbian, gay and bisexual staff networks are important, often they do not necessarily suit their needs. Lesbian and bisexual women felt network groups were sometimes more focussed on support for staff, rather than providing career development opportunities.

» They spoke positively of women's networks, though some felt that they could be more inclusive of lesbians and bisexual woman. Some felt that lesbian and gay networks would benefit from running events along similar lines to the women's networks.

» They felt that role models and openly-gay women made a crucial difference to the confidence and profile of lesbians and bisexual women in the workplace. The general consensus was that there are too few openly-gay women in the workplace.

Lesbian and bisexual women are very clear about what they would like organisations to do to support them:

» Participants would like more opportunities for personal and professional development within lesbian, gay and bisexual network groups.

» Participants also wanted more opportunities to network with other lesbians and bisexual woman – across organisations if necessary.

» Many did not know of any other gay women in their workplace. Participants wanted to see organisations raise the profile of their lesbian and bisexual women staff.

» Participants felt that gay women should be more involved in the development of initiatives and events, and that this would lead to greater involvement from other lesbians and bisexual colleagues.


My bosses are men.
That is how it is.
Men gave me a PhD
and pay my salary.
Men promote me
and men will fire me
one day.

Adama, private sector


1 Being the lesbian in the workplace

‘Putting your hand up twice’ Being a woman first


Organisations in both the private and public sector have implemented substantial initiatives to ensure that their lesbian, gay and bisexual staff feel included and supported. Increasingly, organisations recognise that if lesbian and gay staff feel able to be themselves in the workplace, they are more likely to be productive. This principle applies to lesbian and bisexual women, but participants in this research felt that their identity as a woman, and being able to achieve their potential as women, was of greater concern than the need to be accepted as a gay woman. Even those women who saw their sexuality as a very positive aspect of their work persona still felt that their identity as a woman was of greater importance.

 I’m in a male-dominated division, a male-dominated environment and a pretty tough sector of the economy. It’s hard enough being a woman, let alone being a gay woman and trying not to fall into any stereotypes because people tend to judge women much more harshly.


Natalie, private sector

 I think that in many situations women have enough challenge just from a gender perspective to try and get ahead in the workplace. I think the fact that we’ve still got such inequality in women’s pay and remuneration compared with their male colleagues shows that we’ve still got quite a way to go just as women. *Jacqui, private sector*


Participants talked of a range of indicators that they felt sent a strong message that in order to succeed as women they had to work much harder than male colleagues. Regardless of sexual orientation, women feel that the lack of senior successful women with families is a cause for concern.

 What I’d like to see is more women with children who are very senior. It worries me that at very, very senior levels – director and director general level – there aren’t women with children, and that is obviously something that’s a problem and it’s not rocket science to work out why it is.


Anya, public sector

 One of my team leaders has left. She's got two children. She went down from five days to four days. The rumour was that, basically, because she did that she would never get any further in the company. That's the message that's sort of gone out to us all. *Lucy, private sector*

Most of those interviewed placed their identity as a woman over and above their identity as a lesbian. Consequently many participants focussed primarily on the discrimination they face because of their gender, before considering that based on their sexual orientation.


 A lot of lesbians in the workplace don't want to put their hands up twice: once for being a woman and then secondly 'by the way, I'm a lesbian'.


They feel they've got hard enough work cut out as a woman without having to take on board any sort of mission or responsibility for calling out that they're a lesbian as well. *Jacqui, private sector*

 I think a gay male, especially a white gay male, doesn't have to worry about the old boy's network but they do have to worry about their sexuality. I think for a gay female they have two issues. They have being female and then they have their gayness. They're both very important but do they want to push both? They want to feel accepted and if they want to place emphasis on something it's going to be placing emphasis on being accepted as a female first. *Nicola, private sector*


'No gay flag on my desk' Being a lesbian second

Participants had a range of experiences when it came to their sexual orientation. Some spoke of it as a liberating and empowering facet of their work persona while others described it as a constant source of anxiety. Most participants agreed however that their sexuality was something that they regularly thought about at work.

 I'm definitely aware of my sexual orientation because it's massively different from everybody around me. People talk about their weekends and their heterosexual lives and mine is obviously very different, and you do pause for a second before saying 'my girlfriend...', because it is very different from most people's experience and I'm aware that in a fairly conservative environment maybe I'm the first one they've met. *Anya, public sector*

 I think it's rare to speak absolutely freely at work unless you are with other people you know are lesbian, gay or bisexual. There's always the self-censoring about what you did last night, who you were with etc. It takes a lot of energy and it makes you tired. *Eva, public sector*


This awareness of being different means that some women feel unable to be open about their sexual orientation in the workplace.

 I never really wanted to come out at work or for people at work to know much about my personal life. I've always tried to keep that separate. I suppose I probably wouldn't need to do that if I


was straight... I just don't want it to be a factor that enters the mix when people think about me or are judging my performance or making decisions on who to offer jobs. *Clare, private sector*

Others might be open to some people, but were not necessarily out to everyone. There was an awareness that they didn't want to become 'the gay one'.

 I wouldn't say I'm out and proud but I wouldn't say I'm in the closet either. It depends. I have colleagues and close friends at work that I'm out to but I wouldn't say I'm generally out to everybody... I get to know people and then I'll talk to them if I need to or if someone asks me. But I don't put the gay flag on my desk and walk around wearing a t-shirt or anything. *Natalie, private sector*

 Is 'lesbian' the first thing I want my colleagues to think about me professionally? Probably not. It's not that I'm ashamed of it; it's just there are other things I want them to think first. *Anya, public sector*

This mixed approach to being open in the workplace meant that many participants felt that lesbians are not as visible.

 You're looking at a number of women, over the age of forty, in senior positions within the firm, many of whom are gay females who are not out and never will be because they don't feel comfortable. The old guard where you didn't express sexuality in a


As a woman you've already got one strike against you in terms of a diversity box that you check. As a lesbian that's the second one as well. If you're an ethnic minority lesbian then you've got three.


As a woman and as an ethnic minority you can't hide that, but there's no reason to foreground the fact you're gay as well. People feel that it's hard enough.


Georgia, private sector

corporate setting and certainly you didn't mention you're a lesbian... It's scary that there are many older women out there who are afraid of being out and would much rather separate their personal life from their work life. It's upsetting that the senior management don't want to play those very important roles of being out in the workplace at a senior level. *Nicola, private sector*


Many participants contrasted the relative invisibility of lesbians with the strong identity of gay men. Some felt that they faced a different decision about coming out compared to male gay colleagues.

 For a lot of men they've already got a much stronger established community of other gay men at work. So they know they're drawing attention to themselves, but it's okay because there are lots of other guys who are in that position and there's an established club for them to belong to as gay men. *Jacqui, private sector*

 The guys are definitely more obvious. They've always been more out and obvious about it and there are a few women around who I think might be, but it's never really mentioned. *Amy, private sector*

 The males seem to not have any trouble coming out once they've been seen in the network. Whereas the females would still be very quiet and reserved in comparison. *Nita, private sector*

Bisexual participants struggled with this invisibility to an even greater degree.

 There were always question marks around the fact that I'd had relationships with men and somehow that meant I couldn't belong to the group of lesbians. I found that people really couldn't manage that; their attitude generally was that I'd just sleep with anyone at anytime, anywhere... At my last job when I came out to a couple of work colleagues that I was quite close to, their attitude was that I couldn't make up my mind and that I wanted the best of both worlds... It still feels as if it's invisible. As if there's a silence around it because you can't necessarily be identified you know – sexuality can't necessarily be identified. *Rachael, public sector*

Participants therefore felt that they faced challenges because of both their gender and their sexual orientation. The fact that many consequently feel unprepared to 'put their hand up twice' and be open about their sexuality, in turn leads to a damaging lack of visibility in the workplace.

Just because I don't talk about it, doesn't mean that I'm not thinking about it. I worry about it across the bases. I worry about people's reaction. You're talking to someone who's the equivalent of your father in age, like my senior manager, and if you tell them you're gay you just think my god, it could all go horribly wrong. It could go horribly wrong career wise.


Lucy, private sector


2

'Keeping me at arms length'


A constant awareness of difference

Lesbian and bisexual women feel concerned about how their sexual orientation might affect their employment opportunities. Many participants expressed concern that their sexual orientation might affect the way that colleagues respond to them at work.


 To be gay, you're always up against bad press, bad energies... You need to feel relaxed at work. It's not very relaxing worrying that people might not like you. *Lucy, private sector*

 I am assuming that some people might be keeping me at arms length because they feel uncomfortable or something like that. But you can never really know. *Adama, private sector*


Many worried that their reticence over talking about personal lives at work often came across as unfriendliness and prevented them from forming important relationships with colleagues.

 I try to avoid the subject by keeping things quite generic. When people ask what you've done in your weekend, it would be nice to be able to say 'I went away with my partner for the weekend'. I think people think you're a bit brief and sometimes aren't necessarily being particularly


friendly, so I don't think it creates the right impression. *Selma, private sector*

 I worked there for five years and I never made a single friend because there was such a huge bit of my life that I wasn't talking about... It was very distracting to have everybody assuming I was this frumpy little sexless spinster who couldn't form a human relationship. *Laura, private sector*


Some participants suggested that their relationships with colleagues were affected because they found traditional gender roles and modes of communication between men and women uncomfortable.

 If you observe a meeting or social event and you look at the way straight men interact with gay women and the feedback that they get, the visual feedback, and the way that straight men interact with straight women and the feedback that they get – if you look at the two straight people there will usually be some degree of flirting. I've been in a number of situations with straight men who will try and flirt and I can't flirt back. I don't know how to do it and that can create some awkwardness


because I don't know the appropriate responses and more than that, even if I do know them, I'm not comfortable. *Georgia, private sector*


 I don't actually flirt with people in work. I decided that some time ago. I think it does have an effect in that I sometimes have to work harder because I'm not prepared to play those sorts of games.

Eva, public sector


 One of the big inhibitors is the lack of authenticity. If I'm trying to hide who I am, then of course I'm not going to be natural in my interactions with people. So not only do I not know how to flirt with straight men, but if I'm then self conscious about the fact because I don't want anybody to guess that I'm a gay woman either, then it's a double inhibitor. *Georgia, private sector*


Some participants who worked in sectors where relationship building is particularly important felt that they may have missed out on career opportunities because of an inability to network in traditional ways.

 I wasn't out in academia. It was harder there. Everything was more personal and I just got tired of all the sucking up. I mean you are dead if you don't have someone rooting for you. So if you are a little weird, you don't wear heels, you're a little butch, forget it. *Adama, private sector*


 I suppose if two people are equally good at what they do, and one of those fits into the group particularly well, then they're probably more likely to get the job... If I applied for a job with the department I was last in, and there were other people going for this job that have got appraisals that are as good as mine, then I suppose the fact that I haven't socialised as much with them might count against me. *Clare, private sector*

Participants felt that lesbian and bisexual women need to be very aware of the impression that they make at work and that their sexual orientation is a key factor in this. Some were wary of the link between their appearance and the attachment of certain negative stereotypes about lesbians. Others felt that some lesbian and bisexual women may change their appearance in order to avoid stereotypes and discrimination.

 I think some people actually fall into an appearance and stereotype that they're not comfortable with just to save themselves getting any verbal harassment. I certainly know that there's one member of staff who actually made the step to grow her hair long because she felt that having short hair immediately identified her as being a lesbian. She changed her appearance to fit in with what others perceived to be a heterosexual woman's appearance. *Kat, public sector*

 I see women around the organisation who you instantly paint as lesbians and I think, well, you are going to have to look a little different if you are going to move on here. There is looking the way you do and wanting to be part of the group and looking the way you do to make a statement and stand out from the group. In a team-based organisation like this, there is certainly an element that if you don't try and fit in with the team, you are not a team player, therefore you are not considered as highly as somebody who is a team player. It comes down to the fact that in a corporate environment, low slung trousers, spiked hair, facial piercings, is just not going to do it. Likewise, I come to work in a suit every day but I don't wear a tie and a men's suit. There is a subtle distinction but it is one that people pick up on. I see women who are stereotypically feminine wearing ironic ties and that sort of stuff and not a backward glance is cast. It's different if you tend to not fit the tall, blond, long-haired appearance. *Alice, private sector*

Many participants suggested that there are subtle, unspoken rules about how to present yourself in the workplace, and that lesbians may sometimes fall foul of these conventions.

 You buck the trend if you're a very camp man, if you're a very butch dyke or if you're transitioning – you're different, which I think is not very common within my firm. Anyone who falls outside of a certain look definitely struggles. *Nicola, private sector*

For some women, therefore, being gay is a cause for concern. They are unsure about how to turn their sexual orientation into a positive aspect of their work persona.

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a human relationship.

Laura, private sector


I get respect for having the guts to be out. If you're visibly out it carries with it a sense of integrity and honesty that sort of spills over into people's view of how you deal with difficult situations generally, so it makes you seem good leadership material. In terms of leveraging your career you'd be surprised how a bit of forceful talking about it raises your profile. *Laura, private sector*


3

‘More willing to engage’


The benefits of being a lesbian in the workplace

Some participants felt that being open about their sexual orientation in the workplace gave them an unequivocal advantage in terms of networking, career development and raising their profile in the organisation. Almost all those that were ‘out’ at work spoke positively of the impact this had had on them personally and on their ability to do their job well.

 **It does make you more open in your dealing with people. If you’re not out there is an element of you that’s hiding. It changes you in terms of how comfortable and secure you feel in your position within an organisation.** *Alice, private sector*


 **I’m more relaxed about being myself and I don’t have to hide things or pretend.** *Natasha, public sector*


Participants agreed that keeping your sexual orientation secret at work was exhausting, stressful and damaging not only to the morale of the individual, but also to that of the team.


 **People in the closet spend an awful lot of time and energy playing pronoun games, talking about ‘they, they, they’ and omitting a lot of the truth. What comes across is that you’ve got an individual who doesn’t trust people that they work with, so**

you end up with a weaker team dynamic. I think where you’ve got relationships that are based on honesty and truth, authenticity if you like, you’ve got the possibility of forging much stronger teams. *Georgia, private sector*


There was agreement that it is much easier to declare your sexual orientation to new colleagues early on.

 **The easiest way is just to come out from the start and not hide it. Otherwise people feel like you’ve been hiding something and that you’re ashamed of it. It makes it more of a big issue in their mind.** *Clare, private sector*

 **Other lesbians in the firm have found it quite difficult to come out, because they didn’t go in from the word go and make it clear. I made a point of mentioning it at the beginning. Just to save them awkward questions. The more people leave it I guess it is more difficult to bring up the subject.** *Nita, private sector*


 **I outed myself in the interview. I wasn’t going to be hired if they couldn’t deal with it because I’m way too old for that now.** *Eva, public sector*

Participants recognised that personality and confidence had a significant impact on whether a woman was likely to be out or not.

 There is an unquantifiable weight that needs to be put on the self-confidence of the individual. If you're working in an environment that's pretty macho and where you have to be fairly robust, it's a big ask to go that extra step and disclose something. In the same way that people often don't disclose disabilities, to disclose something that people don't otherwise need to know about, any kind of differentiator.


Georgia, private sector

Women with more confidence felt more able to come out to colleagues.


 I was completely naive and it didn't occur to me that it would be a problem. So I came out in my first working environment. It never for one split second crossed my mind that anything bad would come of it. Then of course nothing bad came of it so that gave me a lot of confidence.

Georgia, private sector

Some participants also spoke of how a proactive and assertive approach to their sexual orientation allowed them a greater degree of control over how colleagues respond to them.


 I came to realise that, yes, other people can oppress you, but you don't have to give them a helping hand. I felt I was actually giving them a helping hand by self censoring. I became much more conscious of choosing not to be a victim.

Eva, public sector

 I'm quite out and I do mention it. I'll never refer to a partner with a gender neutral pronoun because I want to make sure I'm not hiding.


Anya, public sector

Some found that their ability, as a lesbian or bisexual woman, to sidestep feminine conventions was both liberating and empowering, as it made them feel more able to engage with men as equals.

 I confuse the hell out of men. I mean maybe it's because I'm a feminist rather than a lesbian, I don't know. But I do know when I've been with women talking about who has gone in to talk to their boss about a pay rise and at bonus time has actually gone in proactively and said 'I think I'm worth X and here's why'; I'm one of the very few women who put their hands up, whereas men just do that. I think often women don't do it because it's seen as aggressive, but a lot of the things that in a


woman would be seen as aggressive, I kind of get a 'get out of jail for free' card from the men because, 'well she's a lesbian'. So they've got an explanation for what is, generally, in a woman perceived to be aggressive. You're allowed to depart from a feminine stereotype.

Laura, private sector


 I often wonder if lesbians are more willing to play men at their own game. They don't have to cope with the stereotypical notion of masculinity versus femininity. I think that is a much more blurred boundary for us. Whereas some women would be very uncomfortable going into meetings and behaving in certain fashions, I would have absolutely no compunction about doing it. I certainly see that definitely in all the lesbians I have worked with; they're more willing to engage men on their level rather than at a female level.

Alice, private sector

For those women that did feel able to engage with senior men at their level, and in a sense to 'play them at their own game', their sexual orientation was less relevant. These women instead gained the respect of senior male colleagues for their confident approach.


 I think that there is less emphasis on flirting and more emphasis on being able to play with the boys because it is such a male-dominated culture.

Nicola, private sector


 I don't feel as though gay female sexuality is that important where I work. I think the old boys' network is more likely to accept a lesbian than a camp man. They like the idea of lesbians. Gay men frighten the life out of them.

Nicola, private sector


Some participants suggested that the experience of coming out as a lesbian in the workplace had equipped them with some of the attributes necessary to succeed at senior levels.

 I think I've been successful at mirroring the behaviours of people who are successful. You could argue maybe that's because lesbians have to be shape shifters and they do have to try harder to get in and maybe they are used to self-editing.

Anya, public sector

 We think more about structures and about power and about how to leverage what we've got and we actually try to understand what is going on.

Laura, private sector


 I think that my company attracts a certain type of individual and I think the gay females tend to fit this mould.

Nicola, private sector

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Eva, public sector


Some went further, arguing that in the corporate world in particular, the image of a successful woman was so heavily associated with the stereotype of an aggressive lesbian that senior women of all sexual orientations often tend to act in a way that heterosexual women perceive to be gay, in order to infiltrate senior leadership structures.

 **The power dyke is a very common look around the office, straight or gay, because it's the stereotype of a very strong woman. If you look at the stereotype of a power dyke, a woman who wants to escalate very quickly through the organisation, who doesn't act like a man, but has a very male quality, a corporate quality. So, dresses very masculine a lot of the time, interacts on a daily basis with men in high profile positions and almost takes on that persona. And gay men are the absolute opposite of that. I think the gay male finds it much harder to infiltrate that senior leadership, unlike women who tend to be straight or gay. If you have that persona you can succeed.**
Nicola, private sector

Many participants felt that when women had children, they were less likely to succeed in their organisations. This assumption led some to conclude that certain perceptions

which employers may have about lesbians can be advantageous. They felt that a commonly held view about lesbians is that they do not have children or families. Although not always the case, this was cited by some participants as something they felt able to turn to their advantage.

 **I would use my sexual orientation as a seller because I don't plan to have children, so I won't be taking maternity leave and actually I would perceive that as being something that I could turn to my advantage.** *Georgia, private sector*

 **I suppose in some ways I get on because I can devote my whole self to the job. Not that children are a specifically straight thing, but I don't have a family or a partner to go home to. I can work. There is always the perception, I suppose, in employers' minds that you are not going to go on maternity leave, you are not going to do all these things. Therefore you are more devoted to the organisation.** *Alice, private sector*


Participants therefore felt that being able to be open can have a significant, positive effect on lesbian and bisexual women's morale and sense of well-being.

I just get really cheesed off and on a bad day I think of all the women who really went out on a limb to try to get things to where they are today and it gets a bit frustrating when there aren't the women coming forward to be involved either in staff groups or in social events or whatever.


Althea, public sector

4 Where are the lesbians?


The vast majority of participants felt that if lesbians were visible in the workplace, this made a crucial difference to their feelings about being gay.


 I think role models are absolutely integral... Somebody actually having the confidence to come out sends an entirely different message through the organisation and that person becomes a good role model, not just for the lesbian and gay community, but for all of the diverse communities really. *Georgia, private sector*

Some went further, suggesting that senior lesbians have a duty and responsibility to present themselves as visible role models at work, in order to change the current culture.

 I came out at my last job because there weren't any out gay women and I was very high up in the organisation. I made a conscious decision so that

people could see and either contact me or just to know that we are around. *Althea, public sector*


 One of the reasons for being out is to say that the lesbians can do it too and not to stay in the closet, actually to be there, politically to be out and successful. I wouldn't impose it on anyone else. I think it's a personal political decision but I think it follows from my politics that it is something I should do even if it makes me a bit uncomfortable at times. *Laura, private sector*


 I just think it's very important that people in positions of working with young people as I do should be out. It's sending a really, really negative message if you're not out because it's like 'oh well – she's ashamed, she's hiding'. I just think it's so important that it's absolutely okay to be gay. In fact, it's good. *Rose, public sector*

Chief Superintendent Stephanie Morgan, one of the highest ranking openly lesbian or gay officers in the police service, is an active and highly visible role model within **Hampshire Constabulary**. Chief Superintendent Morgan is a lead champion for lesbian, gay and bisexual issues within the force, acts as a mentor to staff, is a visible driver for LGB initiatives and is profiled in staff publications. Her visibility demonstrates to staff that being an out lesbian is no barrier to progression in the force.

The majority felt however, that lesbians are far less visible in the workplace than gay men, and that very few women attend sexual orientation staff networks or events.


 **In our network, I think probably the ratio of men to women is ten to one.** *Nicola, private sector*

 **We have five women in our network. Of those, only two turn up on a regular basis to any events that we run and one of those is me.**
Georgia, private sector


 **It's one of those Catch-22 things. If a woman comes along and only sees one woman and ten men, she may not come again. But we need them to come in order to get those numbers up, to reverse that spiral, so that a woman will come along and see ten women.** *Althea, public sector*

Are network groups necessary?

Some participants explained that they did not attend network groups or events because they simply did not feel the need. Some suggested that gay men had a greater need of the support function provided by network groups. Unlike women, men had no reference point for the experience of being a member of a disadvantaged group until they had come out.


 **Men have never had the experience, within their gender, of feeling they're not dominant; it is more of an uncomfortable experience for them. It's a new and more novel experience for them to be in a minority or to be repressed. Whereas maybe we're just used to it, we don't need special spaces... Maybe they do feel that need because it does feel very new to them to not be top dog.**
Anya, public sector

Anya went on to say:

 **The gay network's primary objective seems to be; if you're having problems being gay then they will provide you with support. It just strikes me as a little bit victimy... I don't feel the need to go and be gay with other gay people in work. I don't have**


the need for support because being gay for me isn't a problem at work. So I just really, really don't see the need. *Anya, public sector*

One participant works in a sector where most staff are female and therefore, unusually form the larger group within the LGB network. She explained that her gay male colleagues sometimes struggle with not being dominant within the network.


 **There have been a couple of comments about not being able to get a word in edgeways. I couldn't say how serious, but many a true word is spoken in jest. They were interesting comments.**
Rachael, public sector

Nothing to do with the workplace

Other participants explained their own lack of engagement with the network groups by arguing that their personal life was separate from work and therefore that their sexual orientation was not a relevant consideration while at work. Some failed to make the connection between being open and being productive and felt that the point of being out was to get extra perks, rather than organisational benefits.

 **I go into work to do my job and do it well. I go to work and prove how good I am at doing what I do, rather than try and say; don't you know I'm lesbian? You should give me this, that and the other.** *Myna, private sector*


Some also worried that the identity of a lesbian carried with it additional negative connotations that might attach themselves to a woman who was seen to be active in the staff network.


 **Do I want to be out, do I want to be seen as that woman who wants to get up the ladder, seen as aggressive and if you're seen as gay then does that mean you're going to be even more so? People don't want to have anything detrimental and if it's something as simple as my sexuality then I'm going to hide that. It's hard enough for women to get up the ladder and I don't want any extra hidden negativity from the people who are likely to promote me.** *Amy, private sector*


In our network, I think probably the ratio of men to women is ten to one. *Nicola, private sector*

Too many men

Others simply felt that the lesbian, gay and bisexual staff networks had little to offer them. Many women explained that they were actually involved in establishing networks, but had subsequently stopped attending, as the groups became increasingly male-dominated.


 It was all gay guys and a few straight girls and what was the point really? *Myna, private sector*


 It has become more about the guys, the guys meeting up with the guys and the women sort of being less involved. *Natalie, private sector*

 We have a networking group and it is incredibly heavily male-dominated... I don't tend to go to the meetings because it's just the boys and there's nothing really there for me. If you think you might want to go the first thing you do is call a couple of the girls and say, are you going, because if you don't you're going to turn up and it's going to be you and 12 guys. They tend to be as much fun as a poke in the eye. *Alice, private sector*

Social rather than developmental

Participants felt that LGB network groups were increasingly focussed on social drinking, often at the expense of other activities that might appeal more to women.


 Within the gay network it has up to this point been very focussed on social drinking activities in primarily very gay male venues, which definitely put women off who want to attend. The large majority of our female members are older women who certainly don't want to attend these events. Three quarters of them are over 35 years old. *Nicola, private sector*

 I think that actually women, not just lesbians, but women generally do not really enjoy standing around with a glass of wine and a couple of canapés. For a start it's damn uncomfortable if you wear heels and secondly, speaking for myself, I don't like to drink if I'm not eating. *Georgia, private sector*

 It was just like going to a bar where there was a particular collection of people rather than where there was anything that made you network as such. *Selma, private sector*

Different ways of working


Many participants felt that there is a distinct difference between the ways that men and women network professionally, and that this difference helps explain why women attend network groups in such small numbers.

 If we think about what benefit the men get, well the first benefit they get is a social benefit. Typically women don't. I've never had in my register of socialising that I want to go out and have lots of drinks with women that I work with and then kind of go cruising. That's never really been something that terribly interested me. Gay men have a whole different approach to socialising. *Jacqui, private sector*

Participants also suggested that gay women have yet to develop effective methods of networking with each other.

 I think women can confuse networking more with friendship. I mean one of the things that I've always tried really hard to do with anyone that has worked for me that was showing promise is I always keep in touch with them. I give them career advice, I phone them up and I genuinely think that what you must do is try to do a bit of mentoring. And people who have worked for me phone me up to ask questions, ask advice and I phone them up if they become more senior. We just look out for each other and I think it would be so splendid if the lesbians in this industry started doing that more for each other. *Laura, private sector*

Many participants also pointed out that because men and women network differently, gay women are at a disadvantage, because they are such a small minority within most groups.


 Within my firm, women tend to help women and men tend to help men. So if you look at the gay network in comparison to the women's network, the true emphasis of the women's network is to help other women gain exposure opportunity within areas of the firm that perhaps they're interested in or for promotional purposes. Same thing in the gay network, but very male orientated. I think because there are fewer women, the women don't feel as though they have the opportunity because they don't think that a gay male would be as interested in helping them. *Nicola, private sector*


Participants felt that the current structures in place to support lesbian, gay and bisexual staff are important, but do not necessarily suit their needs. All acknowledged that this creates a situation where lesbian visibility is low, and this makes it more difficult for other women to feel positive about their sexual orientation and to learn from others how being open can have a positive impact on careers.

Time and time again I hear 'there's never any women; it's always the boys', which obviously is Catch-22 because if you're not going to go, then women are going to see that it's the guys all the time. A couple of them feel that they're male-dominated. So we've tried to get around that by having more gay women events. *Natalie, private sector*


5 What lesbians want

Lesbian and bisexual women have very clear ideas about what they want from their employers. When asked about the types of activities they would like their organisations to champion, most participants agreed that they were far more likely to engage with initiatives that had an element of personal and professional development.

 I would like people to see the network is not just there so people can meet new people and go for a jolly down the pub; it is actually beneficial in other ways as well. I think that message needs to get across a bit stronger. *Nita, private sector*

 If you've got an event that's focussed on personal and professional development then they've got a reason. You're giving them something they can't get elsewhere... So we give them access to a

speaker that they couldn't normally hear, or a skill session they can see a particular benefit from. *Georgia, private sector*

 You have to come back to what the value proposition is for the members. Our network is much less social than most network groups. So we talk more about engaging with external organisations like Stonewall. We talk about mentoring and career development and leadership development and things like that. *Jacqui, private sector*


Some organisations have taken specific steps to talk to their gay staff about their experiences. Employers can learn a great deal from consulting with their lesbian and bisexual women staff to find out what type of support they require. By asking women what they want, employers have raised the profile of gay women.


When **Lloyds TSB** introduced sexual orientation monitoring into their quarterly employee engagement survey it became evident that the lesbian, gay and bisexual staff population was consistently less engaged than straight staff. To pinpoint which groups within the LGB population were less engaged and why, a unique and detailed piece of research was commissioned. Lloyds TSB were particularly keen to get a good response from lesbian and bisexual women, who had a lower profile in the organisation than gay men. The communication promoting the research included specific reference to the need to hear the voices of lesbian and bisexual women, with messages from the Deputy Group Chief Executive and a senior openly-lesbian employee.

An all-staff survey was conducted which confirmed that lesbian and bisexual women were two of the least satisfied groups within the organisation. Focus groups with lesbian and bisexual women were then held to probe the complex issues behind the difference in responses. The results of the research will help to shape the future sexual orientation strategy and inform the development of the employee network group. To ensure that the voices of lesbian and bisexual women continue to be heard, Lloyds TSB have established an LGB email consultation group, of which around half the participants are women.


Women's network groups

Many participants felt that the lesbian and gay staff networks do not offer enough opportunities for career development; being focussed more on socialising. Many were more likely to attend the women's network groups instead, as they had identified these types of structured professional development opportunities there.


 The lesbian, gay and bisexual network is fine but it's not a huge part of my life. To me it's just something incidental. Selfishly it's a question of is it going to help me develop my career? No. If I go to the women's network I meet very successful women and build relationships with them that I can call on should I need help. It really is a learning exercise in terms of behaviours and methods that help them get to where they are. For me it is work and it is career driven. *Alice, private sector*

 I actually see the women's network as more relevant and more interesting and I think that's partly because they get along really interesting, high profile women to talk about experiences and politics and that kind of thing and there's a bit more of a point to it as opposed to just all sitting around being gay. *Anya, public sector*


Some also suggested that women's networks were popular because gay women may be more likely to respond to initiatives that focus on gender rather than on sexual orientation.

 I suspect gay women might feel more comfortable about engaging in things that are about their gender first rather than their sexual orientation. *Jacqui, private sector*


Participants repeatedly spoke about how valuable it was to meet and network with other women.

 In terms of career progression, career development and personal development, the women's network is a useful place to be. For me it's about network building more than anything else. Seeing women who have got on, seeing how they've done it. I feel that I have got more out of the women's network than the lesbian, gay and bisexual network. *Alice, private sector*

Many women spoke enthusiastically about the developmental nature and learning-based focus of women's network events. Participants were very keen on these practical workshops that supported them to develop new skills and competencies.

 We tend to focus them around events. We do a lot of seminars and workshops. So we have a seminar on networking or on confidence and credibility or building your own personal ground through what you wear or the psychology of meetings or maximising your career wave, and then we do networking on the back of them. So people come, they've got something that they want to attend. *Georgia, private sector*

In particular, participants highlighted the value of events themed around leadership development and confidence-building, which are typical of women's network programmes.


 We have a course which is about helping women develop a voice at work, to be able to put forward ideas in a way where they can be more confident and don't have to make apologies for the fact that they're making a suggestion about how to run the business. *Jacqui, private sector*


BT identified that there were issues for career progression and success for women that they wanted to include in their annual Diversity Week. They recognised that there were specific issues regarding career success faced by lesbian and bisexual women in the workplace, notably a lack of visible senior lesbian and bisexual role models. A high-profile openly lesbian speaker was therefore invited to speak about career success and sexuality during the diversity week.

Realising that inviting members purely from Kaleidoscope, BT's lesbian, gay and bisexual network group, would not promote the event to the largest group of lesbian and bisexual women possible, members of the Executive Women group were also invited. This also made it easier for lesbian and bisexual women who were not 'out' in the organisation to attend. The event proved a success, opening up important discussions on the issues facing lesbian and bisexual women at work.

Citypink launched in January 2004 providing a unique forum for gay professional women to meet socially and make business contacts. The network welcomes all industries and levels of seniority. Events include monthly social networking at private members clubs, business seminars hosted by some of the city's top companies and ad hoc events and parties. Today www.citypink.co.uk is the UK's largest professional network for gay women.

Although some women attend women's network groups instead of gay network groups, others felt that the women's networks do not currently provide everything that gay women need. Participants often found that women's networks were not inclusive of gay women.

 **I would not say there is any part of the women's network that even begins to recognise gay females.** *Nicola, private sector*


 **I've been to a number of the women's network events, but I found they end up in talks around maternity leave and flexible working, which isn't a priority for me. They seem to talk more about childcare and people who have to work part time and those kinds of things.** *Selma, private sector*


Despite this lack of inclusion, many participants still often felt happier at the women's network. This was because their events offered career-focussed opportunities for networking and professional development, which participants did not find at the gay and lesbian network.

Improving women's attendance at lesbian and gay events

The fact that the women's networks offered the chance to network in a women-only space was seen as very positive and participants contrasted this with the lack of opportunities to do so in the gay network. Many participants suggested that women-only LGB events would be a good idea. Some, aware that numbers are often quite small, also suggested that cross-


organisation and cross-sector women-only networking events might be a good solution.

 **I think that there is a real space for cross-sector networking. Because of the numbers and also because I think actually if you can do it and you can do it well, you can really develop the profiles of the role models beyond their organisation.** *Georgia, private sector*

 **Our general network event is slow on the uptake with females, so we do a separate one for girls alongside, to get more numbers. There is a much greater response rate on the female-only group. I think there is a fear of being the only female there.** *Nita, private sector*

 **We spend most of our time or most of our money on social networking activities. If we changed that and also did more ladies-focussed, appealing events that then met up with a larger group after a women's event, I think that would make a big difference.** *Nicola, private sector*

Participants discussed a range of other approaches that they felt had encouraged women to engage more. Some had considered the development of more personal ways that women might initially become involved with the network.

 **Women don't go to the events. They might join the network but you never see them. So I just think it's good for them to at least meet one person on the network if they're not going to come to any events... When the head of the network gets new women coming in, I contact them and meet up for a coffee. I try to meet everybody on the open and closed list as much as I can, just the women**


I would not say there is any part of the women's network that even begins to recognise gay females. *Nicola, private sector*

Recognising the need to include and attract more women, the **Crown Prosecution Service** LGBT Network Group restructured its committee. Fully supported by the CPS, the network group implemented a policy to have one male and one female co-chair. Having male and female co-chairs was seen as a vital way of raising the profile of lesbian and bisexual women both within the network and in the Crown Prosecution Service as a whole.


Further, to ensure that the network group represents the voices and opinions of both gay and bisexual men and lesbian and bisexual women, all of the group's work aims to have the input of both male and female committee members.


though... The formal e-mails will go out announcing something from the LGBT network and I'll follow that up with a personal note to the women on my list saying; do you want to get involved or I'll be attending this, if you want to come along let me know. *Natalie, private sector*

attendance... It was successful because it was smaller, it was all women and I think it gave them an opportunity to meet people they really wanted to spend time with and get to know; that is other lesbians. *Nicola, private sector*


 If I knew someone and they said; hey, do you want to go to this network group, then I'd probably go with them. Or maybe if it was an online Facebook group or something, you join that first. Something where it wasn't so much like you have to walk into a room and there's people you may not know – that's quite intimidating. *Julia, public sector*

Some felt that a significantly different mood could be achieved with a few key changes to the format of events. Participants suggested that events that took place during office hours and that provided nourishing food rather than canapés would encourage women to attend in greater numbers.

 Allowing people to bring their partners to certain events seems to get better attendance. I suppose it is nervousness and having someone there who makes you feel more comfortable about yourself. Just giving you extra confidence and knowing there's going to be another woman there just in case there aren't any others. *Selma, private sector*

 One of the things that we can do is provide bowl food; so people will get a bowl of pasta or a bowl of chilli and rice or a bowl of lamb couscous or whatever. It means that people actually get to eat something proper. We've put enough seats so that people who want to sit down and put their glass of wine on the floor can do so; you're not having to juggle everything. It changes the mood significantly. So changing the catering can change the mood. *Georgia, private sector*

Many participants felt that women were much more likely to attend events that departed from the usual canapés and evening drinks format of LGBT network events.

 When we've done, for example, a non gay male venue event, we've had a good turnout. We had a ladies' dinner; that almost got 100 per cent

Participants felt that lesbian, gay and bisexual events and networks could learn from the success of the women's programmes. Events designed and developed by women, for women, are more likely to attract higher participation. Networking and profiling of gay women is considered key to helping lesbians and bisexual women regard their sexual orientation as a positive in the workplace.

Time Warner's employee network group UKOut@TimeWarner struggled to attract lesbian and bisexual women to their committee meetings and network group events. In efforts to bring in lesbian and bisexual women, the employee network group devised an internal poster campaign targeting women and encouraging their participation in the group. Through their online forum, they set up discussion posts specifically targeting women, encouraging their feedback and involvement. They then monitored responses as a result of the communications campaign to evaluate the impact of their efforts.

I think I've been successful at mirroring the behaviours of people who are successful. You could argue maybe that's because lesbians have to be shape-shifters and they do have to try harder to get in and maybe they are used to self-editing. *Anyia, public sector*

Recommendations

1

Provide opportunities for professional development

Lesbian and bisexual women feel that women are not encouraged or enabled to achieve at the highest levels. They may also face discrimination as a result of their sexual orientation. Employers should promote career development opportunities to lesbian and bisexual women and encourage them to attend sessions designed to develop assertiveness and confidence. External opportunities such as Stonewall's leadership course can also build confidence and leadership capacity.

2

Increase visibility – support role models

Having visible, open lesbian and bisexual female leaders in the organisation reassures lesbian employees that they won't be discriminated against and encourages them to be out at work. Employers should support and enable lesbian and bisexual senior members of staff to be out and visibly involved in awareness raising initiatives. They should also encourage the career development and progression of lesbian and bisexual women staff to be future leaders.

3

Individual direct contact from female colleagues

Many network groups find that although they have women on their distribution lists, very few attend meetings. Individual direct contact from a woman involved with the group can encourage women to engage more. In some network groups the female chair or co-chair will meet individually with all new female members.

4

Think about the tone of network group events

Consider testing alternatives to the usual canapés and evening drinks format of events; altering the timings and venue to appeal more to women. Lesbian and bisexual women also need opportunities to network in a women-only space. With the support of the LGB network, a women-only group might meet separately before joining the rest of the network.

5

Network across sectors

One solution to the low levels of engagement from women within LGB networks is for organisations to group together to arrange women-only networking events and share role models. Diversity Champions from the same region might jointly host an event, or organisations from the same industry might choose to network together on a national basis.

6

Think about internal and external communications

Employers should target communications better at lesbian and bisexual women. In recruitment and advertising: through posters, articles and intranet systems, employers should ensure that the images and messages they use are not simply focussed on gay men, but are also relevant to and inclusive of lesbian and bisexual women.

7

Develop opportunities for mentoring

Many participants said they would like to be mentored by a senior woman within the organisation. Senior women of any sexual orientation should be supported to become mentors, and lesbian and bisexual women should be encouraged to join mentor programmes wherever possible.

8

Make women's networks inclusive

Many lesbian and bisexual women are involved with women's networks, but some feel that these groups can exclude the experiences of gay women. Women's networks should consider the themes of their events, ensuring that they include content that is relevant for lesbians and bisexual women.

9

Monitor staff and events

Monitoring staff for sexual orientation allows employers to track the career progression of lesbian and bisexual women. It helps ensure that gay women are given equal opportunities by allowing organisations to target support and career development if necessary. Checking attendance at events allows employers to track whether initiatives to engage lesbian and bisexual women staff have been successful.

10

Ask people what they think

Employers should regularly consult with lesbian and bisexual women members of staff to find out what their needs are, allowing them to better tailor provision where it is needed.

Methodology: In July and August 2008, researchers interviewed 22 lesbian and bisexual women in depth about their experiences in the workplace. Interviewees were selected to include both women who are open about their sexual orientation in the workplace and those who are not. They were also selected to include women who were not involved in lesbian, gay and bisexual network groups and initiatives at work. Participants were drawn from different levels of seniority in both public and private sector organisations and include women from a range of different age groups. The interviews explored the women's experiences, perceptions and expectations of the impact that their sexual orientation might have on them at work.

Design: lucyward.co.uk

Through Stonewall's Diversity Champions programme over 400 employers are ensuring that by working with Stonewall, and each other, they strive to create workplaces where lesbian, gay and bisexual colleagues can be themselves and feel fully included.

Diversity Champions members benefit from access to Stonewall's benchmarking services and a dedicated client account manager. Members enjoy networking opportunities and our good practice seminar series which delivers key learning on relevant topics, such as sexual orientation monitoring. Diversity Champions members also gain access to the latest knowledge, research and advice on specific organisational initiatives. We showcase members of the programme through our Starting Out Lesbian & Gay Recruitment Guide and ensure they attract a diverse workforce by advertising vacancies on our Proud Employers job board.

The programme is now Britain's largest and fastest growing diversity forum. To find out more and to speak to a member of the Workplace team, phone us on **020 7593 1868**

The double-glazed glass ceiling

Lesbians in the workplace



Stonewall

www.stonewall.org.uk