



Online Violence against Lesbian Women. An Exploratory Investigation on Facebook in Italy

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Abstract

From an intersectional perspective, being women and lesbians can give rise to multiple discriminations and forms of violence that are distinct from those experienced by heterosexual women and girls or homosexual men. One form of verbal violence against lesbians consists of reactions on social media directed at women who have disclosed their homosexual orientation.

In this essay, adopting a hermeneutic approach and leveraging concepts developed in Gender and Queer studies as well as in the Symbolic Interactionism framework, a *corpus* of comments from haters on Facebook is analyzed to shed light on the definitions, values, and stereotypes underlying these often offensive and/or threatening statements. For instance, the wish for a woman to be raped reveals that, in certain contexts, male sexual acts are an expression of possession and dominance (rather than desire). Moreover, in this case, rape emerges as a "punishment" for lesbian women, as they threaten a model of hegemonic masculinity. Gender differences in the symbolic universes that emerge from the interpretation of haters' comments are also illustrated.

The stigma imposed by this and other “choruses” (Berger and Luckmann 1966) can cause significant distress, especially among young women. One way to counteract this entrenched ostracism could be to increase the number of lesbian women as role models (“significant others”) who promote and disseminate positive and serene images. However, in the long term, educating individuals from adolescence to avoid giving importance to sexual orientation when judging others represents the best form of prevention.

Keywords: *Female homosexuality; haters; online violence; lesbianism, masculinity.*

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1. Female Homosexuality, Gender Socialization, and Heterosexualization

The intersectional approach was introduced in Italy by Laura Corradi, who in 1990 worked at the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, the epicenter of theories on the intersection of gender, class, and race (Bello e Scudieri 2022). From an intersectional perspective, being both women and lesbians can lead to multiple forms of discrimination and violence distinct from those experienced by heterosexual women or gay men. As early as 1997, Gail Mason (in Rinaldi, 2012: 228) described a "double stigma" tied to being female and belonging to a sexual minority. According to Goffman (1963), stigma regarding sexual orientation arises from the discrepancy between the desires and emotionally experienced behaviors of the stigmatized individual and those socially expected.

Faccio and Foffano (2010) noted that for a long time, lesbians were less stigmatized than gay men because lesbian relationships were "clandestine and invisible" (p. 315). Numerous authors (including Eleuteri, Fabrizi e Simonelli 2009; Antosa and Ross 2014; Gaudiero 2017; Villa 2020) have pointed out the lack of visibility of female homosexuality, describing it as a "silent and private phenomenon" (Faccio e Foffano 2010: 313). Antosa and Ross (2014) observed that, more recently, there has been increased visibility of lesbian relationships in Italian media, from cinema to literature, magazines, TV series and programs. However, these representations continue to be associated with pathological behaviors and/or are destined to fail, with exceptions primarily involving media personalities or foreign women.

One reason cited by the authors stems from the culture of ancient Greece, where pederasty held a socially recognized and valued educational role, in contrast to lesbian relationships, which lacked a social function. Barbagli and Colombo (2007) observed that the "homosexual scene" was male-dominated; Rinaldi denounced a "concealment of female experience" (2012: 127). These observations likely explain one of the main findings of this study: the perceived implausibility of emotional and sexual relationships between women. As stated in the conclusions, the discomfort caused by a lack of shared role models can be alleviated by initiating processes of visibility and legitimization.

In line with the limited recognition of lesbian relationships, the phenomenon in Italy is "treated in social sciences as a subsidiary appendage to male homosexuality" (Pasqualini, 2015: 275), with a limited number of specific sociological studies (reviewed in Operto 2011). Empirical research on lesbianism is even scarcer and, with some exceptions (among these: Addeo, Delli Paoli, Masullo and Punziano 2022), primarily addresses lifestyle or reproductive health issues (Masullo, Delli Paoli e Addeo 2022: 51). For example, as Zambelli and Ruspini (2013) noted, men's coming out experiences have been explored more extensively than women's.

However, Beccalossi's work (2012) highlights that, in late 19th-century Italy, female homosexuality was a significant subject for medicine (not sociology), which produced writings on the so-called sexual perversions of women. These writings categorized women as "virile types," "tribade prostitutes" — found in brothels, prisons, or asylums — and "flames," referring to transient phenomena in boarding schools. Lesbians were generally viewed negatively and relegated to the margins of society. The partial exception was adolescent girls who experienced early romantic passions but soon abandoned these practices.

Rinaldi (2012) and Faccio and Foffano (2010) pointed to a greater presence of research on female homosexuality in other countries, mainly in North America, Australia,

the United Kingdom, and a few European nations. These studies also highlighted that anti-gay acts are more visible than those targeting lesbians. Thus, the concealment of lesbian victimization is tied to the fact that "masculinity", as Ellen Faulkner argued (in Rinaldi 2012: 128), is always the foundational gender, even in anti-homosexual violence. Additionally, Faulkner reported more extreme cases of violence against gay men, while lesbians were exposed to harassment and violence throughout their lives, much like heterosexual women.

Research cited by Faccio and Foffano suggests that lesbian women are more likely to define their relationships in emotional-relational terms than gay men, possibly due to socialization processes encouraging women to prioritize expressive aspects.

As Zambelli and Ruspini (2013) observed, the category of "homosexual" — as a concept and term — is relatively recent, emerging in the late 19th century, though non-heterosexual relationships have always existed. The category of "heterosexual" appeared later, in opposition to the former. As is now widely accepted, categories are socially constructed through practices and the meanings attributed to them. Plummer (1975) was one of the first to critique the term "homosexual," arguing that there is no such thing as a homosexual person, but a homosexual behavior.

In recent years, the LGBTQI+ community has also sought to avoid rigid distinctions in sexual orientation — which can change over time and circumstances — and gender identity, which should not be confined to a binary, dichotomous framework. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1990) posited that dichotomous categories exist only in opposition to each other.

Concerning female homosexuality, there was no collective identity for lesbian women until at least the first half of the 20th century (Gaudiero 2017).

To study homophobia, it is essential to consider both the construction of "masculinity" and "femininity" and the conceptualization of sexual and emotional orientation, particularly the processes of heterosexualization (Connell 2011; Rinaldi 2012; Zambelli and Ruspini 2013).

A vast body of literature highlights the differences in the construction of female versus male gender identities, from early pioneers (Simone de Beauvoir 1949, Margaret Mead 1949, Gabriella Parca 1959, Betty Friedan 1963, Juliette Mitchell 1966, Kate Millett 1970, Schulamith Firestone 1970) to more recent contributions (among many others, Zuccarello 2000, Bellassai 2011, Connell 2011, Fagiani and Ruspini 2011, Priulla 2013, Corbisiero and Nocenzi 2022, Fobert Veutro 2020 e 2023, Botto *et al.* 2022, Ruspini 2023).

Gender role socialization might influence not only personal identity but also sexual orientation: faced with an emphasis on machismo, the choice of lesbianism might sometimes be seen as a refuge in a gentler and more egalitarian world.

It appears that gay men express more sexual desire, while lesbians, as noted earlier, express more emotional desire. Regarding the nature of sexual orientation, two positions emerge: essentialism and constructivism (Rinaldi 2012; Zambelli and Ruspini 2013). Essentialists argue that sexual behavior is an expression of essence or nature, innate and immutable. They also rigidly adhere to a binary understanding of gender, dismissing exceptions as insignificant. Constructivists, by contrast, maintain that the meanings of sexuality and homosexuality vary over time and space, shaped by different cultures.

Zambelli reports that, according to the literature, women are more often inclined to define their sexual orientation as 'fluid' and show a greater tendency to change gender.

In the investigation presented here, it is found, as will be seen later, a conception of female homosexuality as the result of a (criticizable) choice or a mistaken belief that can be altered through therapy.

Key symbolic and practical characteristics in constructing "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 2011) include heterosexuality, dominance over women, and violence — or at least aggression (the "tough guy" persona). Adults often subtly or openly legitimize these behaviors. In common thought, heterosexuality is not considered one sexual identity among others but the norm. Aggressive behavior against those who challenge it often serves as a public manifestation of heterosexual masculinity (Rinaldi 2012).

2. Hostility towards Female Homosexuality on Facebook in Italy: The Research Design

One form of verbal violence against lesbian individuals is represented by reactions on social media directed at women who have openly revealed their homosexual orientation. Social media constitute a peculiar showcase due to their many-to-many and circular communicative structure — unlike mass media, which are characterized by a one-to-many communication flow, mostly unidirectional (Paccagnella 2020). The former, therefore, promote anonymity, the possibility of presenting one's preferred self-image, the creation of groups and communities, the sharing of opinions, and, in general, statements made with immediacy, unconsidered and thus little or not at all monitored, including hate speech. (Amistà, Romagnoli e Borrelli 2021). Thus, we can expect that hostile attitudes toward homosexuality, expressed via this medium, are more direct, perhaps rather crude, and with little or no self-censorship, compared to other social arenas.

Social media, therefore, can be considered a useful source of information to analyze in an exploratory sociological study of attitudes that are not easily expressed with other data collection techniques due to their social undesirability. I adopted a qualitative research technique: the analysis of documents. It is customary to distinguish "personal" documents from "institutional" ones (Corbetta 1999). Institutional documents include elements derived from mass media (such as press articles, television and radio broadcasts, advertisements, and promotional images), literature, pedagogical texts, fairy tales and folk stories, judicial materials, political documents (manifestos, programs, slogans, etc.), corporate and administrative records, and, more recently, social media content.

I analyzed the comments on posts, published on Facebook from June 20, 2023, to November 5, 2024, on certain profiles of couples of women presenting themselves as lesbians, using a hermeneutic approach. I considered three profiles: *Seguendo il sole: Erika e Miriam*, *Le perle degli omofobi*, and *DeboraeLoredana*. In total, I reviewed 1,048 comments collected over approximately 16 months. Following the saturation criterion in sample composition (Bertaux 1981), I concluded the data collection when I observed that the concepts expressed in the reactions of Facebook users were repetitive and no longer heuristically significant, adding nothing new to the analysis I was gradually developing.

Regarding the sociodemographic characteristics of the subjects investigated, when the usernames appeared ambiguous regarding gender, I gathered some information by visiting their Facebook profiles, where sometimes age, preferences, lifestyles, and opinions on social issues could also be inferred. However, to standardize all the cases in the convenience sampling, I considered only the characteristic that could be reliably identified:

gender. On the other hand, the study was not aimed at determining any associations between lesbophobia and certain socio-anthropological profiles of the subjects investigated, associations which are, of course, interesting and can be detected from other sources and with different information-gathering techniques.

Its goal was instead to identify the ways in which hostility toward female homosexuality is expressed and the image, the “facade”, that users intended to present, in order to understand the cultural models that guide them. This awareness helps in setting up educational plans, both for girls and boys, in schools, families, media, and recovery programs for abusive men.

Of the 1,048 comments, excluding those that consisted only of one or more “emojis” (either of appreciation, participation, or hostility/disgust), a sample of 302 reactions was selected that represented the concepts expressed and repeatedly seen throughout the entire *corpus*. Of these 302, 276 expressed disapproval or contempt with usually short, often vulgar or violent phrases. I did not consider the many positive comments from the entire collection, which expressed sympathy, solidarity, and appreciation (from people of both genders), as this study was focused on analyzing critical positions. It was predictable that a large number of reactions would be favorable, as social media have, from the beginning of their emergence, been a protected and privileged space for marginalized groups, such as the members of the LGBTQI+ community (Lovari e Scarcelli 2022). Therefore, among the followers, it is likely that many share the same stigma or are gay-friendly.

The first result of the investigation is that the women who showed hostility are numerous but fewer than the men, as noted in other studies (among others, Connell 2011; Priulla 2013; Fobert Veutro 2023): of the 276 texts against lesbianism, only 71 came from women.

For the analysis, some sensitizing concepts from the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism were employed, along with references to central themes from Gender and Queer Studies: *definition of the situation, chorus, significant others, stigma, impression management, gender socialization, heterosexuality (assumed as the norm), heterosexualization, and hegemonic masculinity*. While referring to the specific literature on these schools of thought (for Symbolic Interactionism see Blumer 1969 and Perrotta 2005; for Gender and Queer Studies see above), below I will briefly outline the concepts that were not mentioned in the preceding paragraphs.

- **Definition of the Situation:** The concept was introduced by the symbolic interactionist William Thomas (1931) and highlights that views of phenomena and events, whether individual or social, depend on the meaning that observers attribute to them. Defining a situation involves looking at a phenomenon and framing it from a specific point of view, which may differ from group to group and even from person to person. A scholar in the human sciences who neglects the definitions of the studied subjects, applying his own, misses essential elements for understanding a phenomenon. In this investigation, the goal is to grasp the definition of female homosexuality by those who show disapproval and hostility.

- **Chorus:** A concept offered by Berger and Luckmann (1966), which refers to one of the functions of the chorus in Greek tragedy, that of confirming the story, definition, or opinion expressed by the protagonists. In social relationships, members of the chorus are not necessarily the people closest to the actor or the most significant, but they can confirm (or deny) a definition and also serve as a sounding board. On social media, they may be completely unknown to the person expressing an opinion.

• **Impressions Management:** Erving Goffman (1959) demonstrated that our social life is akin to a theatrical performance, where we use dramaturgical techniques to present the “facade” we deem most appropriate. In this study, this concept is framed as “reputation management” by men who adhere to a model of “hegemonic masculinity” and as “stigma management” by lesbian women.

• **Significant Others:** In the lexicon of Symbolic Interactionism, these are individuals to whom we attribute importance or even prestige, whose judgment on us matters, and whose opinions and stances we often share. They may also include people who are not part of our immediate social circle. In this study, they take on the role of potential testimonials and are mentioned in the concluding observations.

The investigation also revealed two additional themes, which will be discussed further: the sexualization of homosexual relationships and gender differences in comments.

3. Results and Discussion

Definition of the Situation: Lesbian Relationships are not Credible

In the 207 comments, many men and several women argue that lesbianism is against nature: "You're not a couple, but two women with unnatural instincts"; "I'm normal, you're the ones who are sick". Perhaps the definition of the situation revealed by the male Facebook users I considered is linked to this assumption. The corollaries, which are most frequently mentioned, to this definition – lesbian unions are not credible – are that these women actually exhibit a homosexual orientation because they have not found the right man, the true man; that it is just a transitional period; that sooner or later they will return to their true nature. There does not seem to be a similar conviction regarding male homosexuality in the literature.

Below are some of the male comments that support this interpretation: "How sad, when they're 40 they'll be crying because they're alone"; "I hope both of you find a man who loves you and makes you real women"; "This is a disease young generations are getting"; "A couple of women??? (incredulous emoji)"; "Real women love men; it's useless to get upset when they tell you that you're disgusting"; "What a waste"; "This isn't fun; I'll teach you if you want"; "You're missing the raw material... you're nothing without it"; "If treated in time, there's a cure"; "Your woman is very hot; be careful, these women will eventually return to their true nature"; "If she finds a man, she'll have a child, and that's what she should do."

When two young women post on their Facebook profiles that they've ended their romantic relationship, and in the videos they later publish, one appears with a new girlfriend and the other with a new boyfriend, the reactions are along these lines: "So, one of them has gone back to a man. I said that a while ago, but I was criticized. And the ladies swore they were absolutely sure of their homosexuality...". One of the comments further emphasizes the artificiality of the homosexual choice: "I wonder why they broke up when the right-wing is in power. Clearly, your choice was just ideological". In over a thousand comments, I found only one, from a man, who considered lesbianism an innate and unchangeable condition: "You were born this way, it's not your fault".

Specifically regarding sexual activity, the reactions of many men reinforce the definition of the implausibility of lesbian relationships: the men mocked sex between women, claiming that a man's presence was necessary, often mentioning the male member and displaying a persistent obsession with the penis. This is not surprising: our culture is influenced by a perhaps poorly digested Freudism that has spread the ideas of

"penis envy" and the "castration complex." It should not be forgotten that, until the 1500s, medicine, at least in the Old Continent, considered the vagina a sort of inverted penis, as described by Galen, the most important medical scholar of the Roman Empire.

In some novels, Antosa and Ross (2014: 66) identify "a persistent denial of erotic desire between women, which is discursively transformed into a "maternal" desire or into pre-adolescent uncertainty".

The expressions of personal sexual desires almost always use vulgar terms and metaphors. This mode is common and part of hegemonic masculinity, but what is relevant for this research is that even these comments, like those mentioned above that express skepticism and incredulity, serve to deny the possibility of sex between women and to reinforce the need for male presence in this sphere of intimacy.

Below are some comments that suggest the implausibility of sexual practices between women, all scurrilous, as mentioned above. Five suspension dots represent male and sometimes female genitalia or sexual practices.

"What I'd give to be in the middle"; "Always w the..... always, it's beautiful..... I adore it"; "When you let me join you two... (laughing emojis and a wink)"; "Nice duo, missing the third"; "But take the.....in the....."; "But with..... it's a different story!"; "From the online work they do, I have half an idea (wink emoji)"; "Today, human cucumber?"; "No sucking oysters today"; "Buy a nice vibrator... so you'll have fun"; "I get excited watching you"; "After dinner, multigender gangbang?"; "Come on, an orgy's happening"; "You're lacking in vitamin....."; "You're hot"; "Would you like to have a....."; "Do you like the....."; "A black guy with 30 cm would do you good."

For the purpose of deconstructing the stigma, the above definition of the situation has undesirable consequences, which will be discussed in the concluding observations.

Support from the Chorus

Many men approve of the vulgar remarks made by those who mock sex between women: they praise hegemonic masculinity and amplify homophobic comments, probably to assert their own masculinity.

In response to a man who says he "would like to be in the middle" of the two women from one of the profiles considered, another replies: "At least you're healthy". Many other comments are of the same tone; they often approve with a thumbs-up or smiling emojis.

Those who show sympathy for lesbians are often accused of being homosexual: in response to a man who shows sympathy for a lesbian couple and criticizes homophobic attitudes, another replies violently and concludes: "Mind your own, which is probably what you want!" Another man who disapproves of homophobic attitudes is called "the fluid one". In response to a man who writes about one of the lesbian couples, "You disgust me, but you make me think," showing doubt while expressing contempt, many reply negatively and with vehemence; some insult him.

This is probably another way to defend and emphasize their own hegemonic and heterosexual masculinity, concepts addressed in the following two points, which are interconnected.

Defending against Threats to Hegemonic Masculinity

As mentioned, male homosexuality strongly threatens the traditional traits of hegemonic masculinity — heterosexuality, virility, strength, toughness, protectiveness, and the absence of tenderness and sweetness — but female homosexuality completely undermines the dominance of men over women, which is one of the core aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Lesbian women are not emotionally, sexually (and even economically) dependent on men, and they may not even engage with men, thus not having to submit to their dominance. In this study, for example, the response of one woman to a man who claims “two women can’t be mothers. It’s biology and nature!” is “we women survive and procreate even without your genitals”.

Several male comments reflect this sense of danger: “You can’t do this to me!” Another man reacts with shock to a rainbow family, composed of two mothers and two daughters: “Who would the father [of the daughters] be? What is this nonsense?” Referring to a couple of women, one says, “better friends than lovers”. Other comments include: “I’m 70 years old and I don’t watch this trash, let alone lesbians”; “Why should I respect those who don’t respect others? This thing disgusts me”. “I tolerate two women more than two men”: probably, the reason why some people consider female homosexuality less threatening than male homosexuality, as explained above, is because they perceive the relationship between two women as not truly real.

Some individuals abreact. ‘Abreaction’ is a term taken from the lexicon of psychoanalysis. When the psychoanalyst approaches the core of the patient's problem during the session, the patient may abreact, that is, display violent and disorganized emotional reactions. Excessively violent comments — sometimes even stronger than those usually recorded towards gay men — testify that the image of two lesbian women strikes a raw nerve, and therefore the “guilty” must be punished as severely as possible: “I hope they send you to the crematorium ovens so you burn alive... Italy doesn’t need people like you”; “I hope you burn”; “Oh Jesus, kill them all”; “We need Mussolini’s fascism”; “Emigrate to Russia to do this crap, then let’s see if you keep laughing!!” It is noteworthy that genocidal actions and repression by totalitarian regimes are even invoked. Such savagery is usually not directed at perpetrators of serious crimes, such as homicides and especially femicides. Probably, for some individuals, the reaction is more violent the more their identity feels threatened, regardless of the severity of the violation of community principles and laws.

Many men wish for lesbian women to be sexually assaulted (“the two pedophiles should be raped and killed”, one comment says): the hope to be raped confirms that male sexual acts, in certain situations, are expressions of ownership, domination, and/or punishment, not desire. This has been called “rape culture.”

These findings confirm that, in the recovery paths of abusive men, cultural models based on possession and domination should primarily be deconstructed, as they lead to perceiving human beings as objects of our ownership.

Reaffirming the Norm: Heterosexuality

As stated, heterosexuality is considered the “normal” and natural viewpoint, learned by distancing oneself from what is not heterosexual (the category, in fact, emerged after the category of homosexual: see above).

Indeed, many men's comments reflect this assumption: "Who plays the man of the two?"; "Do you play the man's part and the other the woman's, or vice versa?"; "The husband always accompanies the wife shopping". The comment "Who plays the man?" which appears in posts, leans toward normalizing, i.e., heterosexualizing.

But even some women wonder who the husband is in couples that present themselves on Facebook. On the other hand, the need to normalize is also found in some lesbian couples: for example, Debora and Loredana, on Facebook, with their clothes, attitudes, and posture, present and emphasize distinct roles: that of a man and a woman. According to Eleuteri, Fabrizi, and Simonelli (2009), the so-called butch/femme model in 2009 was still quite common among lesbian women; but perhaps today things have changed. It is also necessary to consider the possibility of non-conforming or fluid gender identities. It has been said that women are more inclined than men to define their sexual orientation as fluid: in some cases, therefore, the display of masculine traits would not be linked to the need for normalization through heterosexualization. This study cannot distinguish such aspects.

Reputation of the Alpha Male. Joyful Lesbian Families

Rinaldi (2012: 153) extended the concept of "impressions management" proposed by Goffman to "reputation management". To assert the reputation of being heterosexual, behaviors are enacted that intimidate not only the homosexual person but also the whole group they are associated with: even heterosexuals who deviate from dominant models are targeted. This is probably one of the motivations for the online anti-homosexual haters, and the group of those who act as the "chorus" in this study is quite large.

In general, "an openly and visibly anti-homosexual behavior unequivocally proves the heterosexuality of the subject who enacts it; it becomes a masculinizing practice" (ivi 126).

As for the strategy of "stigma management", Zambelli and Ruspini (2013: 7) identified two paths. One involves emphasizing the subjects respectability in their social life. In this perspective, sexual orientation is considered a private matter, socially irrelevant, and not worthy of importance. Another strategy is to emphasize the idea of love, devotion, and commitment in a romantic relationship, whether gay or straight, and, consequently, discredit those who do not adhere to this notion of coupledness, such as those who engage in promiscuous sexuality.

It seems that the women in the Facebook profiles considered for this study mostly follow the second strategy and, additionally, showcase other ways of distancing themselves from stigma: they "normalize" the couple by posting videos where they joyfully engage in daily activities together: cooking, shopping, celebrating birthdays and religious holidays, traveling.

As will be discussed in the conclusions, the first strategy cited by Zambelli seems to be the most functional for an inclusive society that respects individual choices, but probably the times are not yet ripe.

Sexualization of Homosexual Relationships

As in any romantic relationship, and as stated by several women, in words and deeds, being a lesbian is not only a choice of sexual orientation but also emotional, intellectual affinity, taste, etc.

Thinking of a heterosexual couple, usually, their sexual activity is not the first thing that comes to mind. However, in the comments on Facebook, men almost always sexualize, explicitly mentioning sexual practices between women.

Obviously, this is another way to diminish the importance and depth of a union. One can expect that reducing a relationship to the sexual sphere is also reserved for gay men.

I report some of the comments from this study, avoiding references to body parts or specific practices: “you spent zero on condoms because for your stuff, you don’t need them”; “How many times do you have sex? Is that all you do? The rest (four vomiting emojis)”; “If that camper could talk”; “What a waste”.

Another way — to put it plainly — to discredit the union between women is through devaluation and insults: “two lesbians scraping by”; “Even junkies are free to shoot up, but that doesn’t mean they should flaunt it on the web”; “If you move, you’re a mess”; “Your face is shaped like a foot”; “Imagine two lesbians on their period... and with a driver’s license... laughing”; “imbalanced from birth”; “tough masculine woman”; “two ugly girls”; “lesbian big mouth”; “what a disgusting thing today.”

Gender Differences in Comments

As has been found, the critical or pleased comments from men are mostly sexualized: they refer to the erotic activities of the girls or their desires for them, reinforcing the need for male presence in sexual practices.

This trend does not appear at all in the critical comments from women: they focus instead on lifestyle and/or a generic religious morality. Here are some examples: “It has become a trend, this is not possible”; “Let’s not distort the truth with language: two women don’t marry, they have a civil union”; “How can you go from gay to straight, I don’t judge but I’m surprised”; “Wasn’t this something you were born with?”; “God made you a woman, you can’t become a man!”

In some cases, stigmatization is heightened: “perverse, immoral, against nature, and against God’s laws... be ashamed of yourselves”; “What a shame... repent... man + woman = children... love! Everything else is the work of the devil”; “You can’t even look at you... obscene... both as a woman and as a failed man”; “There is no respect. They’re married and with children on the way”; “Ridiculous, foolish, get help”.

Furthermore, women much more than men notice or reproach exhibitionism (“You’re not free, you’re just exhibitionists” “It’s not freedom... it’s exhibitionism”; “If you don’t want to be criticized, don’t show off”; “Everything in public! But stop”).

Some women, in a calm manner, emphasize that there’s no need to use labels like lesbian, homosexual: “Why emphasize lesbian love? It’s not necessary”.

These last reactions raise a question. Do they indicate an open mind? That is, there’s no reason to express your preferences. Or is it narrow-mindedness? That is, don’t talk about these things? Or perhaps, is it a rejection of terms seen as stigmatizing? This doubt is not answered in this study; it will be speculated upon in the conclusions.

Conclusions

The stigma imposed by this and other “choruses”, both proximal (family, friends, colleagues) and distal (institutional, political), can cause significant distress, especially for young women. Understanding the cultural models underlying lesbophobia helps in designing educational plans aimed at both girls and boys, at school, in families, in the media, and in recovery programs for abusive men.

One of the findings of this study suggests that if a type of relationship with another person is cognitively denied, meaning it is considered unthinkable, it becomes very difficult to deconstruct the stigma. Deviant behavior, in fact, constitutes a severe attack on the principle of reality, on established mental categories that reassure our existence.

It has been said that female homosexuality severely undermines the social identity of hegemonic masculinity, but, even if to a much lesser extent, this also applies to the female gender, which may perceive the phenomenon as a threat to the model of womanhood, perhaps as the “rib of man” that several women could embody.

Therefore, it seems appropriate to increase the social visibility of minority types of relationships to show that they “exist” to legitimize them.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that when the received socialization does not encompass certain social “institutions,” that is, social relationships and actions that are “objectified” taken for granted by the community (in this case, sexual orientation freedom), and this causes distress, a process of “legitimation” must be initiated. Its goal is to affirm and justify the existence of a social institution; it operates both at the cognitive level (that institution is part of this world) and at the evaluative level (that institution is good).

One way to combat deeply rooted ostracism in the short term could therefore be to increase the number of lesbian women as testimonials (“significant others”) who propose and spread positive and serene images. This could also mitigate the heterosexual imperative to which we have all been socialized. Recently, another challenge is questioning the binary of gender identity.

As mentioned, both through primary socialization and educational plans, cultural models that encourage thinking it is possible to exercise power and dominance over other human beings —whether they are children, spouses, or generally perceived as weaker or threatening to one's identity — could be challenged.

The frequent reference to sex in the conversations of many men and, conversely, the relatively widespread modesty on this subject by women, show the sexophobic nature of our society, certainly influenced by religious culture. These different reactions also, of course, depend on the different gender socialization. A freer and more open education in this area would likely avoid the malice, winks, and sense of shame that often accompany the expression of sexuality.

We wondered if certain reactions from Facebook users could be seen as expressions of modern thought, that is, considering sexual orientation irrelevant, or as signs of the modesty and shame mentioned earlier, as well as rejection and denial of terms such as “lesbian” which seem stigmatizing. At this historical moment, it seems that the generalized attitude is not the former, and therefore, people with minority sexual orientations still need to claim the right to freedom of expression. However, in the long term, educating from adolescence to not assign significance to sexual orientation when judging others is the best form of prevention.


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