LESBIAN WOMEN AND GIRLS

OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

• Sad & Dying: Lesbians with sad, hopeless lives (e.g., lonely, in love with a straight best friend, rejected by family or community, conflicted over coming out) or killed off (usually to further a straight character’s story). Equating lesbian identity to tragedy and angst is false and harmful to depict.

• Skinny & Feminine: Characters, usually white, whose physical appearance and gender expression conform to feminine, Eurocentric beauty standards. While femme* lesbians do exist, these depictions erase the majority of other lesbians (e.g., BIPOC, large body type, older, disabled, butch*).

• Predatory Butch: Storylines about butch lesbians, especially Black ones, sexually preying on other women or perpetuating violent crime. This leads to a false perception that butch lesbians are violent, causing them to be over-criminalized and over-policed and less likely to be believed as victims (e.g., in intimate partner violence*).

• Unstable: Lesbians portrayed as obsessively jealous, homicidal, suicidal, or experiencing psychosis, often treated as villains. This inaccurately paints lesbians as threatening and ignores real issues they face (e.g., lack of access to mental healthcare).

• U-Hauling: Jokes about and portrayals of two women moving in together on the second date. This both reinforces the falsehood that lesbians lack boundaries in relationships and that “settling down” is the most important life goal for women.

• Hypersexualization: Objectifying depictions of two+ women together sexually/romantically (e.g., “girl-on-girl”), often framed through the male gaze. Not only are these portrayals sexist, they also reduce lesbian identity to sex acts and perpetuate sexual violence against lesbians and all women.

THINGS WE’D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

• Underrepresented Experiences: Nuanced portrayals of different kinds of lesbians (e.g., BIPOC, disabled, trans, intersex, ace, older, butch), allowing their identities to shape their beliefs and behaviors. Explore lesbian and queer culture from non-white, non-Western lenses (e.g., same-gender-loving African Americans).

• Community: Lesbians of all ages in friendship, community, and spaces tailored for them with other queer women and girls—not just as the token lesbian among straight characters. Show them helping each other through real issues lesbians face (e.g., discrimination, navigating dating).

• Joy: Thriving, happy characters in hopeful, carefree storylines with happy endings (e.g., having hobbies, ambitions, respectful relationships). Show lesbian women and girls who are out, proud of their identity, and celebrated because of it (i.e., not just characters who “happen to be” lesbian).

• Varied Attraction: Attraction and romance between lesbians of all kinds (e.g., BIPOC, disabled, trans, intersex, ace, older, butch, different body types) with other queer women. Portray different types of consensual and pleasure-positive relationships (e.g., dating, marriage, casual sex, polyamory, sex toys) and desires.

• More Masc: More butch and masculine-presenting lesbians comfortable in their identity and driving their own stories (e.g., friendships, dating, careers), especially in community and healthy relationships with other butch lesbians.

• Role Models: Lesbians of all ages in ambitious roles (e.g., running for office, achieving in academics, in successful careers, mothers) and as the protagonists in stories about more than just their lesbian identity.

*Denotes a term in the glossary

Note on Language: Some women prefer to call themselves “gay” or “wlw”* rather than “lesbian.” As TV writers, we should be intentional about the language our characters use to identify themselves.

WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Women who are only or predominantly sexually, romantically, and/or emotionally attracted to other women, and girls who are attracted to other girls. This includes all women and girls: transgender (or “trans”), intersex, and cisgender (or “cis”). “Lesbian” is a sexual orientation, an embodied part of a person’s identity, no matter their relationship status or sexual/romantic experience. Note: Some non-binary people predominantly attracted to women also identify as lesbians.

HERE’S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Despite strides in representation, Hollywood’s portrayals of lesbians are still sometimes sexist and homophbic. Lesbians onscreen are often depicted as white and feminine, with no nuance that differentiates them from straight characters, or they’re simply flattened to a token character, or they’re simply flattened to a token whose only personality trait is their orientation.

These portrayals ignore the diverse experiences of lesbian women and girls, especially those who fall outside heteronormative beauty standards. This lack of mindful representation creates a gap in understanding around lesbian issues (e.g., minority stress, workplace discrimination, lack of tailored healthcare), leading viewers to falsely believe there’s no more work to be done to protect lesbians. It also contributes to the erasure of distinct lesbian culture, spaces (e.g., bars, social groups), and history, which are unique and joyous experiences that should be portrayed onscreen.

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#WRITEINCLUSION: TIPS FOR ACCURATE REPRESENTATION

Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

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QUICK FACTS

- For the first time in history, lesbians represented the majority of LGBTQIA+ characters (40%) on broadcast TV in the 2021-22 season.
- Of women characters on children’s TV in 2020, only 0.5% were LGBTQIA+.
- While lesbian and bi+ women only make up 8.3% of women in the general population, they are overrepresented in U.S. prisons (33.3%) and local jails (24.6%). Queer girls make up 40% of the juvenile justice system.
- Studies show lesbian and bi+ women get less routine healthcare than other women due to barriers like fear of discrimination from healthcare providers, negative experiences with healthcare providers, and lower rates of health insurance.
- 44% of lesbians experience rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner, compared with 35% of straight women.

ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- Bridgewater State University: “The Frequency of Stereotypical Media Portrayals and Their Effects on the Lesbian Community”
- Center for American Progress: “Paying an Unfair Price: The Financial Penalty for LGBT Women in America”
- Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media: “See Jane 2020 TV: Historic Screen Time & Speaking Time for Female Characters!”
- GLAAD: “Glossary of Terms: LGBTQ”
- GLMA: “Top 10 Things Lesbians Should Discuss with their Healthcare Provider”
- Huffington Post: “8 Things Later-in-Life Lesbians Want You To Know”
- “Why Lesbian Identity Matters”
- NPR: “The ‘Criminal’ Black Lesbian: Where Does This Damaging Stereotype Come From?”
- Prison Policy Initiative: “Visualizing the unequal treatment of LGBTQ people in the criminal justice system”
- Teen Vogue: “10 Lesbian Myths About Lesbians You Need to Stop Believing Now”
- “InQueery: The REAL Meaning of the Word ‘Butch’”

GLOSSARY

Butch:

In lesbian culture, “butch” refers to a woman whose gender expression and traits present as typically masculine (e.g., clothes, short hair, pursuing more men-dominated careers and roles). For lesbians, being butch challenges society’s understandings of gender and what it means to be masculine. The term is sometimes used by other LGBTQIA+ people, particularly non-binary and genderqueer people.

Femme:

Used to describe someone who exhibits feminine identity (e.g., physical appearance, clothes, behavior). To some, “femme” should only be used to describe LGBTQIA+ people and is understood as an identity that subverts traditional femininity (i.e., not synonymous with being a straight and/or cis woman).

Heteronormativity:

The inaccurate belief that heterosexuality is the default, natural, or normal expression of sexuality. It upholds the false gender binary and the notion that sexual and marital relationships should be between people of “opposite” sexes (i.e., a man and a woman who conform to rigid notions of gender, sexuality, and gender roles).

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV):

Physical, verbal, psychological, economic, or sexual violence committed by a current or former partner. While most IPV portrayals feature women in straight relationships, LGBTQIA+ people experience IPV at comparable rates but are less likely to report it due to stigma, lack of resources, and perceived power balance in same-gender relationships.

WLW:

Stands for “woman-loving woman” or “women-loving women.” This term has become a unifying label for a woman who is attracted to and/or has emotional, romantic, and sexual partnerships with other women (e.g., lesbians, pansexual women, sapphics, same-gender-loving women). Often stylized as “wlw.”

Please visit our Expanded Glossary for in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms: gender binary, gender expansive, the male gaze, minority stress, non-binary lesbian, polyamorous, queer, queerbaiting, same-gender-loving, sapphic, and stud.

In-kind support and materials for this factsheet were provided by the following partner organizations. Please contact them for additional information, story guidance, and in-room consultations.

GLAAD.org
StorylinePartners.com
HRC.org
SRC-Partners.com

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY:

Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website:
WriteInclusion.org/factsheets