

LGBTQ+ 13.12.2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

library, people, collections, lgbtq, lesbians, women, volunteers, archive, queer, reflected, project, space, learning, gw, impact, organisation, important, community, feel, terms

SPEAKERS

Ren, Mae, Sue John, Niamh, Joy

Suggested links are highlighted in yellow:

Women In Profile

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2017/11/20/in-profile-and-staying-there-celebrating-25-years-of-gwl-by-taking-a-look-back-at-its-predecessor-women-in-profile/>

Bildwechsel - more about links with German projects at

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2023/09/07/women-in-profile-from-glasgow-to-nuremberg/>

Our own classification system

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2022/04/21/gwls-feminist-classification-system/>

Our sister organisation in India <https://aksharacentre.org/about-us/#journey>

European Women's Thesaurus <https://collectie.atria.nl/en/thesaurus> or

<https://winenetworkeurope.wordpress.com/2010/09/07/european-women%E2%80%99s-thesaurus-online-in-new-layout/> ?

Lesbians In Peer Support project -

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2023/06/22/a-guiding-hand-founding-lesbians-in-peer-support-lips/> then

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2023/06/30/lesbians-in-peer-support-blog-2/> then

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2023/07/06/lesbians-in-peer-support-blog-3/>

Lesbian Archive and Information Centre

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/explore-the-library-and-archive/the-archive-collection/the-lesbian-archive/>

Jackie Foster https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackie_Foster

'Out in the Archive' <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/event/out-in-the-archive/>

resource web pages

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/explore-the-library-and-archive/lgbtq-collections-online-resource/>

zine catalogue <https://archive.womenslibrary.org.uk/zines-2>

Three Decades Project <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/tag/three-decades-of-changing-minds/>

Transcript

Intro

Hello and welcome to the GWL at 30 podcast series. Developed and recorded by volunteers, this podcast sheds light on our history and celebrates our thirty years of work across 6 main themes – accessibility, green, LGBTQ+, anti-racism, violence against women, and changemaking.

This episode focuses on our LGBTQ+ work. Our volunteers chat to staff members across collections, volunteering programme, and senior management, about how GWL has championed LGBTQ+ communities and histories in our three decades of work.

Niamh

Hi, I'm Niamh. I've been volunteering at Glasgow Women's Library since December 2020.

Joy

I'm Joy. I've been a member of the Library since the 90s, and I've been volunteering here for the last few years.

Niamh

We're joined today by Sue, Mae and Ren. We're going to discuss LGBTQ+ issues in the Library today, in the Library's past and wider society.

Ren

Hi, I'm Ren, I'm the Volunteering Programme Assistant and my pronouns are they/ he/ she.

Sue John

And I'm Sue John, and I'm one of the Co-Directors here at Glasgow Women's Library, and my pronouns are she/ her.

Mae

And I am Mae Moss. I work as the GWL Archivist, and I use she/her.

Joy

So Sue, maybe first question for you. Lots of lesbians were, of course, already involved in the early days of the Library. But it was never conceived as a lesbian library. And many women, regardless of their sexuality, enjoyed going to the social events that were organised, simply because they were seen as a safe space. So could you maybe give us a sense of the atmosphere of those early days?

Sue John

Yeah, and I think that's broadly true, those statements as well. And I think it's fairly typical of lesbians and feminists and women and queer people in general, that if something doesn't exist, that we feel is needed, we just build it ourselves. That's the way it has to be. And I think - so that is true at the time that lots of lesbians were involved - but I think the central aim was, was key. And I think that was about building somewhere that didn't exist in a context like ours, which was to champion women's cultural and historical achievements. So that was always the aim, it was kind of for broader women's history and so on. But yes, I mean, is it coincidence that it was lesbians that were involved? I don't know, certainly, some of the key sources of inspiration that early members, of both **Women In Profile** and the Women's Library, sought out and managed to gain a lot of confidence from and a lot of networking with, were groups in Germany. Built **Bildwechsel** and other broader women's cultural houses, and certainly there they were lots of lesbians involved in those resources as well. So, you know, I think that that's all very true, but the the, you know, the, the idea of creating a safe space for all women was certainly really important to everybody. And, yeah, the knock on effect was that if any fundraisers were organised by Women In Profile or at the early Women's Library, they did attract to, you know, a broader range really to those events. And, and I think, you know, that the atmosphere, it was very informal in terms of the structure compared to now, certainly, and it was, you know, it was born of, just sheer commitment and a sense of need and rage and you know, a real will to make something different, so the atmosphere was one of fun, determination, just a real feminist kind of undercurrent of, of making something and making it work. And I think it's fair to say that there was no sense really, that it would culminate in something that we have today with sitting here in our beautiful building, so I think the atmosphere was, you know, certainly serious, but also lots of fun and a feeling that we didn't really have anything to lose.

Niamh

One thing that's evolved quite a lot, if we look back over the last 30 years, since the Library started, is language, which is now much more precise than it was in the 1990s. How's that process of developing more specific terms being experienced and reflected at GWL?

Mae

So I think, firstly, I would say in terms of, like, language being more precise, now, I would say maybe, I wouldn't necessarily say it was more precise, I would say that language very much reflects the current culture and time. So I would say now, like, language has evolved, and it's different, you know, the terms that we use to describe people within our catalogues and classification system is very different to how we might have. Say, for instance, the term like "queer", you know, if you look at it in the, you know, the late 20th century, you know 1970s, 1980s, like it was a slur, Now, it's been re adopted and reclaimed by the LGBTQ community. So yeah, it feels like I guess, different and evolved now. And I think it's also important, I guess, to reflect on the fact that, you know, terminology is a really like crucial aspect of identity formation and affirmation of communities. So I think here, that's always been extremely important to us. We have **our own classification system**, and that was designed for our library books, and was taken up into the Archive and Museum Collections, and we use that and apply that to our materials.

Sue John

And we review that all the time, because as Mae says, it's an evolving thing, and you know, the striving to be more inclusive involves looking at language as well. And our classification system in the Library

was bespoke really, set up by our own Librarian and taking sources from **our sister organisation in India** and the **European Women's Thesaurus** and, and that's reviewed all the time, and, now used throughout the Collections. So I know the Collections team are really, always keen on keeping that updated and relevant, and that's so important.

Joy

So over the years, the Library has had a number of LGBTQ projects that have been really important, of course, both for the development of the Library, but also for the individuals concerned. So could you maybe tell us a little bit more about the Lesbians In Peer Support project?

Sue John

Yeah, **Lesbians In Peer Support** project was, was actually the first funded project that came to being in the Library. So everything before then was unpaid workers, volunteer time, and so on. And we got some funding for Lesbians In Peer Support, LIPS, from Comic Relief. And we applied for it because we'd just undertaken a Research Commission from Glasgow City Council that was about poverty and social exclusion.

And one of the key findings was that young lesbian and bi women - because that was the focus of the research, it was lesbians, gay men, was the focus of the research - but lesbians and bi women were coming to us and saying we know we feel excluded from the gay scene, because of men, you know, telling us that we're taking up their space and we feel excluded from youth provision because of kind of assumed heterosexuality and heteronormative, you know, working, so we've just got nothing to do so we just thought we could try and quick fix that. So we applied to Comic Relief and got three years funding for a peer support project for young lesbian and bi women, and that ran for, actually for six years. They renewed the funding after three years.

And it was just an amazing project that saw lots of young women meet every fortnight with, I was one of, it's how I became paid first of all in the Library as a part time youth worker with somebody else for that. And we based it on the Collection, you know, so a lot of the inspiration for ideas of events were based on the Collection on queer history and so on. And we did all sorts of things, we went on residential. And it was just a really amazing project. And I thought it was an amazing project at the time, but what I know now is an amazing project. I know that because we recently had, in looking at this 30 years of the Women's Library and its impact, we had a reunion of these young women, and I think twelve or so came, now of course, in their 40s, so with families of their own.

And, you know, just amazing young people have turned into these amazing people that are doing all sorts of things, and, you know, just talked really openly about the impact that LIPS had had on them and on their lives, so, you know, I do think it was a really great project. And you know, I certainly learned a lot. It was a privilege to work with every one of those young people, and, yeah, I think it was really important to have that in the Library at the time as well. And of course, surrounded by the Lesbian Archive had recently arrived in the Library, so that was a great source of inspiration, I think, for them to draw upon, in the events and the activities that we had every fortnight.

Niamh

So just tell us a bit about why and how the Lesbian Archive ended up at GWL

Sue John

Yes, gosh, I mean, it was just, you know, a normal day, and I think, around at the time we'd had, we had this paper called the Pink Paper - lots of copies in the Archive, the Museum Collection - and the Pink Paper was a free weekly paper that people used to pick up at various places. And I think for a few weeks running there'd been little columns, and the columns were getting bigger, that were focussing on the **Lesbian Archive and Information Centre** in London, which was set up in 1984, and was at its own premises and so on. And I think the first news was that it was going to lose its funding, and therefore it would lose its premises and that collection would be at risk: what would happen to it? Well, it would be split up or it would be, it had no home. So we were, you know, quite concerned about that and Adele just decided to ring them, and picked up the phone, in those old fashioned days where you just picked up them, just rang them and said "Oh, we just heard this in the Pink Paper" and they were just having a conversation and whoever was on the other end of the phone just jokingly said, knowing that we didn't have any money, "Well, unless you have 1000 square foot of space". And we did, because we'd just moved into the Trongate, just the year before. And we were on the fourth floor, but we had this whole of the fifth floor empty, so we did have space. So it kind of started this conversation about whether or not the Lesbian Archive could come. I think they came up to look at the space, the committee, and we went down and we had a great time with them. **Jackie Foster**, you know, what a woman to get to know, you know, a lot of really amazing women.

And I think they had some key questions. One of them was: "are there any lesbians in Glasgow?" which we remembered well! So when it did come, we made sure that we answered that question by getting every lesbian we knew in that room for the opening party. So you know, they had questions like that, because the other contender for the collection to go to, was down in Brighton, was at Sussex University or something like that. So there are issues there about access, and it being in an academic institution was a big deal for them, I think, so we got to know them, and you know, it was a kind of lovely relationship, that meant that they were so happy that it came to Glasgow. So it's a really amazing thing for us, yeah.

Joy

So a couple of good examples there of the work of the Library, the Lesbian Archive and LIPS. But now maybe zooming out a little bit if you like, going a little bit broader. How would you sum up the impact of the Library's work in this field in general, maybe Ren, you might want to come in on that.

Ren

Sure. I mean, I think Sue will probably have a better idea of the kind of overall impact over the last three decades. But I think for me, like I think mainly about the impact lying and creating a space where people are able to feel themselves, like working with volunteers in particular like, I know that lots of queer volunteers who come to us, their lives are kind of changed by the way that they feel seen and safe here. And seeing their, their community being championed as well. Like, I know that that was my experience, like as a volunteer, coming like about six or seven years ago now, as a young queer person. And being surrounded by lots of other queer people of different generations, and then coming out as trans and having that like, respected and seen, while spending time in this organisation was like, profoundly impactful for me. So I think part of the, like, bigger scale impact for the queer community is those small stories of individual representation and people feeling really safe and championed. Yeah, and I see that through volunteers all the time, and how being in this space surrounded by so much queer knowledge, and queer history, really changes the course of a lot of people's lives.

Sue John

And I think knowing that the impact on individuals, I think that's really key, you know, I think that is the one thing we can do is champion and make safe spaces. And so to know, that's happening is always really important to us, I think, to know that that is the case. And I think, the other thing is, knowing that we're having an impact the broader kind of sectors that we work within, as well, but by the work that we're doing. So, you know, I know that, for us, the whole point of what we were doing was about people, about who was in here, not what was in here, it wasn't about.

The starting point wasn't about the Collections and what we've amassed, you know, which is often the starting point for a lot of museums, and archives, in particular. So, you know, knowing that people are centred is a really key thing.

But actually now what we're finding all the time is that we are having an impact on sectors, whether or not that's a whole sector that's grown up around the professional volunteering, or whether or not it's about museums, or libraries, so really major institutions now and small institutions alike come to us to say "we want to be more inclusive" of LGBTQ+ people, or people of colour or, you know, other communities, and, you know, "can we can we speak to you about that, how you've done it?"

So I think, I think it's, it's interesting, actually, to see museums in particular, I think, almost like backfill, you know, backfill with queering and backfill with women of colour or women artists in general, you know, I mean, it's great to see, but it's kind of like sometimes I think oh it's interesting that people are catching up now. Great, you know, long overdue, but at least, at least that's happening.

Mae

Yeah, I certainly think in terms of the Collections, when you think about, like, being donated here, you know, it was only a couple of months ago that I spoke to a researcher who, this is in terms of the impact that GWL had. This is back in 1994, you know, she heard that the Lesbian Archive had been donated to GWL, and she drove from Northumberland with some material that she had collected, to deliver it here, and that was because the Lesbian Archive was here. And I think like, you know, you can really see the significance even back in 1994, when the Lesbian Archive was initially donated here. You know, it's about this idea that we're, we're preserving the LGBTQ community's history. And the preservation of that is like, a signal for us to, you know, of visibility and you know, we're making that that history more accessible. And that, in turn, means that people have donated to us.

Niamh

In a time of considerable polarisation, GWL is now seen by many as a place where people can come together and obtain information. What sort of everyday work is going on in the Library to make it a safe space for LGBTQ+ people, and a place that is seen as a source of expertise?

Ren

I think in terms of it being a safe space, the way that this is created in the Women's Library is through like shared values of all of the staff and volunteers. All of us are very passionate about equality and accessibility and about inclusion and we all work towards that, as individuals, so when we come together as a community, it feels really natural that this space gets safer, and that is built on needs and wants of various different communities.

And I think we work towards that through like big things - that's reflected in like our programming, Collections or in like, staff training or volunteer training. But it also comes into small things like pronoun badges, or the things in the shop that people can see their identities reflected in. So it's sort of these small individual acts, and these huge organisational pushes, that kind of make us all have that inclusion, not just of queer and LGBTQ+ people, but of lots of different communities that are marginalised at the forefront of our minds, really.

And I think that's emboldened by how much access to knowledge there is here and how much empowerment can be gained through access to that knowledge. Like I think queer people, or LGBTQ+ people more widely, often feel really alone. And I think there's something inherently powerful about being able to see your community reflected back at you on the shelves. It makes you feel like you can be your authentic self here. And, and that, yeah, I think that's reflected in the sort of day to day working of the Library is that, it's just we're just a public space where people can come in and feel themselves, and feel empowered by seeing that the knowledge and the knowledge of their communities is worth preserving and worth sharing for other people to read and hear.

Mae

Yeah, and I guess, like you can, you can see that happening physically in the space. So for instance, on the Archive mezzanine, that's a space where like researchers, Collections team, volunteers, student placements, other members of staff all work together and, you know, have conversations and you're also, you're working within the material. You are quite literally surrounded by archive material. And by people willing to have conversations and it's, it's a learning environment, it's educational, it's a positive experience, I think, to be on the mezzanine and in the GWL space more widely.

And I guess, like in terms of my work, like my day to day work, and what we do as a Collections team, with volunteers and student placements, you know, we think about the way that we catalogue material, we make it accessible. We create Research Guides and displays and exhibitions. So like, last year, there was 'Out in the Archive', which was a fantastic exhibition that sort of mapped like LGBT history within GWL. And we've got different online LGBTQ like [resource web pages](#). I'd really recommend the [zine catalogue](#) as well. People want to peruse that.

Joy

Do you have any any further thoughts about how people can maybe be allies of LGBTQ people here at the GWL, but maybe also in wider society? Any, any further thoughts on that?

Mae

Yeah, so I would probably say like, allyship, is not, it's not like a label that you can just sort of stamp on yourself. Like, I think it's an action. It's a process. And I guess, like the way the way we do it here is we sort of provide space for people. And that sort of invites people in, to talk about their experiences, and that helps with visibility. And I feel like we do that in different ways through events and exhibitions, but then also just like, quite informally, our existence, I think, is, you know, an invitation for people to feel welcome.

Ren

Yeah, I think like having it rooted in learning, like, yeah, I think to echo what Mae was saying that the community has a lot of allies, but I think it does need to be rooted in kind of action and learning, and

unlearning as well. And I think at GWL we do a really good job of like, utilising our collections and our programming to keep learning from other people's experiences. And I think like learning from other people, this cuts across like allyship for anyone, but learning from other people and learning from diverse communities, listening to them and uplifting their voices is how we become better allies by having that space, and that opportunity to learn and to keep pushing our understanding, and to share our own personal experiences.

And I think that's what's so beautiful about the Library is that that kind of allyship is so encouraged because we all spend so much time trying to be mindful of other people's experiences, but crucially like listening to other people's experiences and alerting that to lead us, both in our individual lives and in our lives at GWL. And that allows us to keep standing up like against injustice in whatever way we can and when we see it in the space and outside the space. And I know a lot of us don't come to GWL and act as an 'ally' - we have that ally ship in our whole lives - and we take that both in our work and out of our work.

Joy

You said earlier, Sue, that of course in the early days, in the 90s, nobody had any idea how it was all going to end up. You were going to end up here in Bridgeton in a lovely building. But if you, if you look back to those early days, do you think about 'well, if I'd known then what I know now', do you have any regrets? If regrets is the right word. Or anything you might have done, perhaps have done differently if you'd somehow had that knowledge back in the early days?

Sue John

Yeah, I mean, I probably have regrets all the time, to be honest. But I think, you know, sometimes you have to look at those in perspective and look at bigger pictures. And I think sometimes because we you know, we really care, every single person in this organisation really cares a lot. And otherwise we wouldn't be doing what we do. And I think sometimes it's, you know, we get more prone to, not focusing on celebrations so much.

So one great thing about the 30th anniversary of the **Three Decades Project** is it almost kind of orientated us towards that that's about reflecting, but it's also about celebrating what we've achieved. And so I think that was what I'd be prone to, to thinking, that there's always going to be regrets and things that we could have done better. We didn't, you know, sometimes I say all this was kind of an accident. And what is the Women's Library? Is it an art project? You know, what is it here? You know, it's a tangible thing.

But we, a lot of stuff we had to make up as we went along. The skills that we have now, we've made up as we've gone along, or, you know, we've never been trained to do anything, we've never had a budget to be trained to do all the things that we do, whether or not it's the accounting or the gosh, managing. I didn't get involved in the Women's Library to line manage a whole load of these albeit lovely people. But, you know, the managing, and that whole carrying the weight of it all is really, really burdensome. It is, it really is, whether or not that's kind of the care and stewardship of individual people that you work with or whether or not it's about responsibility for yeah, have we got enough money to keep going or managing the kind of social media backlashes and things like that. There's a whole load of things that we have to be equipped for now that we could have never dreamed of at the time, but I think, you know, we've tried to work really hard at getting tools together, learning how to do everything better, is what we've tried to strive for, for so long. And I suppose that's kind of all we can do is respond to those

needs, that are put in front of us at any one time and try and keep up with the sharpening of the tools and the investing in new tools.

Niamh

So we wanted to end on a bit of a more positive note, and ask if each of you could tell us like what gives you hope when you think about the future of LGBTQ+ work at GWL.

Ren

I think I feel really hopeful when I sit with like the history of the Library. And when I think about how many LGBTQ+ people have already come through the doors and shaped it and changed it and made it their own, and how much that's gonna continue happening into the future and like, excited to meet some of those people, but always sort of, even if I'm not here appreciate from the sidelines, the way that the organisation is being shaped and changed by people from my community. And also, I think, like, although this isn't a very hopeful thing to say, like the road to like queer and LGBTQ+ liberation is really, really long. And there's a really long way to go and a lot of fights to be fought. But I see GWL as being like a key pillar in being able to collect and archive that so that all the generations to come can keep learning and keep building on the work that's happened before them. And that makes me really hopeful.

Sue John

A road lined with cul de sacs and u-turns, uphill and downhill... <laughter>

Yeah, and I think hope is so important. You know, and I think, again, I don't think one would work in an organisation like this, or in broader equalities organisations if you didn't have that hope, because I don't think any of us are naive enough to think 'Oh, it's just the kind of this trajectory of getting more equal and more inclusive, and that's, that's the way it goes'.

I think, you know, we know that there are backlashes and all sorts of things but hope is really important and I do really believe that hearts and minds can be can be turned around as well as legal provision being fought for and kind of justice been sought in a kind of legal way, as well, so law changes are really important, but I think the hearts and minds is I truly believe that can happen. Because in my lifetime, I've seen it happen and we are in a better place now, and God, sometimes it doesn't feel like it at all, you know, week after week, sometimes it feels like it's a struggle. And, but I do, I do feel there is cause for hope. Because, you know, one thing here is that every day we have each other, but we have all the people out there and all the people on social media that are kind of with us, which is really good to know.

Mae

Yeah, I would also just like, say, on that, just my fellow staff members, and volunteers and student placements, everyone that's in the Library really gives me hope for this organisation, and trust in it. And then when I think about like, my work, what gives me hope in that is, you know, making our collections more accessible, whether that's through projects that are coming in the future to digitise materials. So that will just mean like access just grows and grows and in terms of us being like an educational resource, and people being able to use us from further afield, will be a fantastic aspect of my job.

Joy

Thank you very much, Mae, Sue and Ren for coming along today to answer our questions. We'd also like to thank the GWL staff and volunteers who have facilitated the making of this podcast. The next GWL podcast will be devoted to anti racism work.

Outro

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of the GWL at 30 podcast series. For more information about our Three Decades project see our website, and stay tuned for our next podcast.