

Beyond dental dams: a critical review of recent research on lesbian, bisexual and queer women's sexual health

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Background:

Lesbian, bisexual, queer, and other sexuality-diverse (LBQ+) women's sexual health is often de-prioritised in clinical and public health contexts. This neglect stems from the perception that LBQ+ women face minimal risks for HIV or STIs, and uncertainty around whether they have distinct sexual health needs. This paper presents findings from a critical literature review examining how LBQ+ women's sexual health is represented in recent research. We aimed to: 1) identify how their sexual health needs are presented in the literature, and 2) explore whether a broader definition of sexual health—as more than just the absence of disease—can help shape a clearer research and practice agenda.

Methods:

We conducted a narrative synthesis of English language literature published between 2012 and 2023. There were 91 publications included. A critical review followed, using Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) framework.

Results:

Findings show that LBQ+ women are diverse in their sexual identities, practices and experiences and that many LBQ+ women have sex with cisgender men, irrespective of sexual identity. Despite this, research often assumes that sex between cisgender women is the dominant sexual experience of LBQ+ women and that LBQ+ women face low HIV/STI risk. This has led to inconsistent conclusions and a lack of clear guidance on LBQ+ women's sexual health needs. Limited attention is given to how sexual identity, community connection or gender shape sexual experiences.

Conclusion:

We recommend future research focuses on LBQ+ women's navigation of safety and pleasure in their sexual encounters and relationships, with consideration given to identity and community connection, as well as the social and relational contexts in which LBQ+ women experience sex throughout their life course. This may have relevance to research and practice in areas such as women's health, ageing, mental health and general wellbeing.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. This was an unfunded study.