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Project Arts Centre, Dublin

The Lesbian Avengers and the Turk's Head 'Kiss In', 1996



The Lesbian Avengers were a direct-action activist group similar to ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). The group was formed in New York in 1992 by six long-standing women activists, some of whom were members of ACT-UP as well as ILGO (the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organisation).

The primary aim of the group was to increase lesbian visibility, but expanding chapters often added their own additional agendas. Together with what was felt to be a rise in misogyny within the LGBT community, one of the key motivations cited was a growing frustration with the invisibility of lesbian activists' contribution to platforms such as AIDS and abortion, and a lack of reciprocity in addressing lesbian issues. One of the wider-reaching legacies of the Lesbian Avengers was the inauguration of the 1993 Washington Dyke March. The Second International Dyke March was held in Dublin in 1998, and Dyke Marches continue to be held annually across the world.

The Dublin chapter of the Lesbian Avengers was formed in 1996. Following the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, lesbian activism had become almost invisible, resigned to political lobbying, education and support, all of which were vital but beyond public visibility. In GCN issue 90, November 1996, Sonya Mulligan explained the motivations behind setting up the Dublin chapter. Amongst them, it was felt that issues such as homophobia, harassment, and job loss needed to be visibly highlighted.

The first public demonstration by the Dublin chapter was a 'Kiss In' at the Turk's Head. In the article *"DISGUSTING"—Gays get the Chop from Bouncer in Turk's Head* (GCN, issue 77, September 1995), Derek Keegan and Deborah Ballard explain how the LGBT community were being ostracised. Formerly the Parliament Inn, the Turk's Head had recently been renovated and rebranded. As the Parliament Inn, it had long been frequented by the LGBT community without reproach. With the new look, management undertook to remove the LGBT community. Although it was never publicly stated, there was evident active discrimination by the bouncer and, on one occasion, a same-sex couple were asked to leave after kissing. As a protest against this discrimination, the Lesbian Avengers organised for a group to peacefully demonstrate by holding a 'Kiss In'.

We recruit!

Visibility or invisibility? Sonya Mulligan argues the case for the Lesbian Avengers



We have helplines and organisations where we can get useful information and people will understand and listen unbiasedly; lesbian and gay bars, regular events in nightclubs, gay friendly restaurants and bookshops. So why did I feel there was a need for a Dublin chapter of the Lesbian Avengers? Compared to what was available a number of years ago, it may very well be said that things are great and have come on so much, however, I am often difficult to please, and I'm simply not willing to settle for anything less than 100% equality and respect from society on any grounds, in particular my sexual orientation.

There definitely are many inequalities out there. Every day people suffer at the hands of homophobes. Women are harassed by men as they walk down the street. Lesbians lose their jobs if they come out. I decided I wanted to take a more pro-active role in the struggle for lesbian survival and visibility. I looked to the organisations out there and talked to some of my friends. We came to the conclusion that the path of the Lesbian Avengers was the one for us. We each got a copy of their handbook from Sarah Schulman's book *My American History*, sat and read it thoroughly, taking out material to use for fliers. It is time for things to change. It's time for a positive, active, vibrant, alert, in your face, not afraid to retaliate kind of movement.

Who do we have on our side? Recent press about the Dublin Lesbian Avengers has only looked for the opposition. Sergeant Finbar Murphy, liaison officer for the lesbian and gay community, was quoted in the *Sunday Times* October 6, 1996 as saying "As far as I am aware, nobody has

contacted us about an assault against lesbians recently." Besides thinking that Finbar is being rather innocent if he really thinks that this is true there haven't been assaults against lesbians, I don't see why lesbians are expected to reveal their sexual orientation when reporting an incident of physical violence. Obviously I understand that if we are to make people aware of the level of homophobia in our society we need to highlight such incidents. However, logic tells me that women suffering physical or sexual violence because of their sexual orientation would go to the Rape Crisis Centre or Women's Aid where they will get support and sympathy. The Gardaí don't have a good record on women or homosexuality. I am sure I am not the only person who has heard stories of people being poorly respected at the hands of the Garda Síochána.

Why do we need the Avengers? There is a wide spectrum of opinion in the lesbian community about what kinds of strategies to employ. Some people want to provide social services. Some people want to do theoretical development. Some people want to be in therapy groups. Some people want to work on legal reform. As a direct action, activist group, the Lesbian Avengers is not for everyone, nor should it be. It is for women who want to be involved in activism, work in the community, be creative, do shitwork, take responsibility on a regular basis, have their minds blown, change their opinions, and share organising skills. Other strategies are also valid but the Avengers reason for existing is direct action.

I hope to live up to what the Dublin Lesbian Avengers are:

- Non-violent, compassionate
- Pro-sex
- Fearless and angry
- Leaders, not dictators
- Fun on the dance floor
- Informed
- Survivors
- Share resources
- Willing to poster and distribute fliers
- Open to suggestion

Every Avenger chapter works on local issues and employs suitable tactics. For example, the Vancouver, Canada chapter says on their web page "Strategically, the Vancouver girls are less aggressive [than their U.S. counterparts]. Their actions are subtle: they are not always obviously political, but they effect social change nonetheless. For Estella, what has been most empowering is not being afraid anymore "Most of the time we are afraid to hold hands in the street, and why can't we? It's such a simple thing. I do it now as an action. Physical affection in the street. Most people will learn not to notice it anymore. That's part of how we want to operate. For people to even read the word lesbian while they are on the street is excellent. That's what we're out there for." The San Francisco Avengers have had mock funerals at prisons protesting the care given to women inmates with HIV, protested an anti-homeless project and joined a Food Not Bombs campaign. Just as the Vancouver and San Francisco chapters have their own style, The Dublin Lesbian Avengers are about your issues. So calling all lesbians - WE RECRUTE. We will welcome your support and applaud your activism. Tá ár lá ann anois.



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Vienna Woods Ho

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We Recruit! by Sonya Mulligan. GCN, issue 90, November 1996
Courtesy of GCN magazine

“DISGUSTING”

Gays get the Chop from Bouncers in Turk’s Head



The Parliament Inn, as it was when Dublin’s gay community spent its money there (top) and now, as the Turks Head Chop House, with its new door policy and doormen (bottom).

By Derek Keegan and Deborah Ballard

A GCN reporter and four friends were told that being gay is “disgusting” by the doormen at the former *Parliament Inn*.

The pub has re-opened under the new name of *The Turk’s Head Chop House*. It had been a local for many of Dublin’s gay community.

The door policy of the pub has generated anger and confusion in the capital’s gay community.

GCN has received several complaints from readers who have been refused entry to the venue.

Pub proprietor Ms Rita Barcoe said that she expects her customers to have “proper dress and proper behaviour”. Asked if shorts were acceptable, Ms Barcoe said: “It would depend”.

But *Evening Herald* columnist Dermot Hayes reported in his column that “three expensively dressed gay men” were refused admission. Mr Hayes, who had just been refused entry himself, was wearing a pair of jeans with a designer jacket!

GCN has also received a report from a Belfast reader who was asked to leave after he gave his boyfriend ‘a peck on the cheek’. Unknown to him the bouncers were assigned the job of monitoring the group he was with for nearly an hour before they were asked to leave.

The two gay men – who were with a mixed sex group of family and

friends – were asked to go upstairs where they were told they were being asked to leave. The manager initially refused to give an explanation, but eventually confirmed that they were being asked to leave because of the kiss.

On August 7 a GCN reporter and four friends were refused entry by a doorman who identified himself as ‘Jules’. When the reporter told ‘Jules’ that he had been a regular when the pub was known as the *Parliament Inn*, ‘Jules’ asked the reporter if he was gay. When the reporter confirmed that he is, ‘Jules’ said: “That’s disgusting”.

‘Jules’ refused to ask the proprietor, Ms Rita Barcoe, to come to the door, saying: “She’s too busy to talk to your type”.

‘Jules’ taunted the women in the group asking them “are you’s lesbians or lesbeens”.

When contacted by GCN, Ms Barcoe denied that the incident had happened, “I know what the doormen are saying”. Commenting on what the doormen said to the GCN reporter she said: “I don’t believe it ... write whatever”.

“Disgusting” by Derek Keegan and Deborah Ballard, GCN, issue 77, September 1995
Courtesy of GCN magazine