The Invisibilisation of Women-Loving-Women in South Tyrol
(mid-1970s–early2000s)

Lisa Settari

> »Well, I, er, I told her, and her reply was, I thought it was just brilliant, ›That's your problem‹. That was her comment, that's my problem, then I said, ›No, I don't have a problem‹, and we never ta-, well, that was her comment and then the topic was settled, she never asked me anything about it later, for her, this was just the way it was.« (Dorothea[1])

This chapter discusses invisibilisation, which emerged as one of three major practices from coming-out narratives of women-loving women in South Tyrol. These narratives stem from twenty oral history interviews which I conducted in 2022, with ten women-loving women, born in or before 1973, and who had grown up in South Tyrol.

Conceptualising Invisibilisation

While the ›sense‹ of the concept of invisibilisation crystallised at early stages of the interviewing period, a suitable term to denominate seemed tricky to find. I reflected on the concepts of ›taboo‹, ›silence‹ and ›non-topic‹, exploring relevant sociological research (Spain 1988, p. 296; Umpierre 1996, p. 265; Jay 2009, p. 153; Tebble 2011, p. 921), before I decided to employ a term that indicated an observable phenomenon, as well as an active, and indeed interactive, social practice. The invisibilisation concept does justice to both the invisibility of women-loving women in the private sphere, public and media discourses, or in popular culture, as constructed in the interview narratives; as well as to the maintenance of this invisibility by the workings of individuals and institutions. In their narratives, the participants have not presented women-loving women as a complete taboo, but rather as an occasionally perceptible and then invisibilised phenomenon. Moreover, this conceptual choice places this

1 Pseudonyms were used for all research participants.

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chapter in a line of studies within women's and gender history that focused on the absences, silences and invisibilities of marginalised individuals, groups and institutions (Firor Scott 1984, p. 7; Ciaputa/Struznik 2012, p. 12). While I preferred ›invisibilisation‹ over the concept of ›taboo‹, insights of social scientists on taboos confirmed the interest of invisibilisation practices in social and cultural history. Writing about language taboos, Jay highlighted that taboos are time- and space-dependent and shaped by authority-bearing institutions such as the law, religious bodies, educational institutions, or the media (2009, p. 153). Therefore, I expect that insights on the South Tyrolean historical context, and on invisibilisation practices can prove mutually insightful.

Invisibilising Non-Normative Sexualities

Before I asked the research participants any specific questions about their sexual orientation, I enquired how they encountered the topic of sexuality when they were growing up. The narratives suggested that sexuality was largely absent from discourses within families and circles of friends, and in the interactions between the participants and institutions such as schools, between the 1950s and the 1990s. At later interview stages, I asked the participants about their first encounters with the concepts of ›homosexuality‹, ›lesbian‹ and ›bisexual‹. The response narratives suggest that the only type of sexuality thematised in private and public discourses was heterosexuality, which was considered the norm (Rich 1980 cited in Ciaputa/Struzik 2012, p. 13; Biagini 2018b, p. 123; Brunner 2021, p. 13), while same-sex attraction was constructed as a non-topic. This invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities could occur by an omission of the topic, or by an explicit rejection of non-heterosexuality. Anja, Aydan, Dorothea and Frieda narrated that they read youth magazines from West Germany such as *Mädchen* (*Girls*), and *BRAVO*, which infamously included articles on sexuality and was therefore shunned by many parents, schools, and Churches in Germany (Sauerteig 2007, p. 160), and in South Tyrol. None of the participants remembered any content on same-sex attraction in these publications, which had been important sources for information on sexuality in German-speaking regions in Europe since 1956 (Nowel 2017, p. 235). These narratives are in line with findings of Sauerteig (2007, p. 175) and Nowel (2017, p. 239), who highlighted that *BRAVO* treated heterosexuality as the norm, even though by the late 1960s, and with the legalisation of male same-sex acts in West Germany in 1969, the topic of homosexuality found its way into *BRAVO* (Nowel 2017, p. 238). Frieda narrated that subsequently, when she was an active member of South Tyrol's LGBTQIA+ association *Centaurus* in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the most widely read German-language daily newspaper *Dolomiten* (*Dolomites*) refused to publish articles, advertisements or letters to the editor related to LGBTQIA+ topics. This was confirmed in the expert interviews I

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conducted with Ingrid Facchinelli, who was *Centaurus*' president in the early 2000s (July 2022), and Georg Vescoli, who was a *Centaurus* activist in the late 1990s (Jun 2023). This refusal of the most influential written media publication in South Tyrol (Heiss 2002, p. 9) to confront an entire topic is an example of a structural invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities. Contrarily to *Dolomiten*, the province's second German-language daily newspaper, *Die Neue Südtiroler Tageszeitung* (*The New South Tyrolean Daily*), which was founded in 1996 to provide a left-liberal counterbalance to *Dolomiten* (Hillebrand 2003, p. 91), would however publish such content. The same applies to *Alto Adige* (*South Tyrol*), the leading provincial daily Italian-language newspaper (Hillebrand 2003, p. 91). This is coherent with previous findings of media researchers, who concluded that *Dolomiten* was particularly against publishing content on sexuality (Hillebrand 2003, p. 104) and on feminist activism, even taking a stance against the legalisation of abortion at the time of the respective referendum in 1981 (Clementi 2002, p. 122). Furthermore, apart from *Centaurus*' own publications, the South Tyrolean media landscape saw no LGBTQIA+-specific or -friendly publications emerge over time, in contrast with other German-speaking regions where a generation of popular magazines like *Freundschaft* (*Friendship*), *Blätter für Menschenrechte* (*Pages for Human Rights*), or *Insel* (*Island*) had been published since the late 1910s (Unterkircher 2007, p. 59), followed by a later generation consisting of *Der Weg* (*The Way*) or *Der Kreis* (*The Circle*) since the 1950s and 1960s (Brunner 2016, p. 256). Moreover, an Austrian homosexual movement began to sprout in Vienna in the mid-1970s (Brunner 2021, p. 16). In 1977, the debate programme *Club 2* of the public Austrian broadcaster hosted two gay men and two lesbian women, and the same year saw a meeting of approximately two-hundred gay men from Germany and Austria in Vienna. On the Italian side, the homosexual organisation *Fuori!*, which had been founded in 1971 as the first political organisation for homosexuals in Italy (De Leo 2021, p. 167), began to publish its magazine bearing the same name one year later (Borghi 2011, p. 41), followed by *Lambda* from 1976 (Biagini 2018a, p. 46). Moreover, the widely read *Quotidiano Donna* (*Woman's Daily*) installed a ›lesbian page‹ in 1979 (Biagini 2018a, 110), thus long before the beginnings of *Centaurus* and its publications. Overall, neither the collected narratives nor the existing historiography suggest that non-normative sexualities or any relative organising were visible like elsewhere in Italy or in neighbouring Austria, before the founding of *Centaurus* in 1993 (Ferrarini 2004, p. 11). I further asked all participants about portrayals of homosexuality in popular culture in their youth, i.e., the period between the 1960s and 1990s. Anja and Aydan, born in 1966 and 1973 respectively, into lower middle-class families in urban surroundings, narrated that non-normative sexualities were simply not approached:

> »Yes, I would say that it wasn't present [...] I can't remember that any of it would have been thematised at all, or on TV, it was simply not a topic, neither in South Ty-

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rol nor otherwise, like, now it's normal that some *[female]* singers talk about their wives in afternoon programmes and things like that, but that was, it didn't exist. Like, I can't remember at all that anything of the sort would have been present in the media.«
(Anja)

Aydan's narrative confirmed Anja's, and she explicitly linked the visibility of non-normative sexualities in the media and popular culture to the legalisation of civil unions in 2016, which Callahan and Loscocco considered an important legal progress for same-sex couples after decades of advocacy efforts (2023, p. 228) and strong resistance from right-wing politicians and groups, as well as the Vatican (2023, p. 229):

»Otherwise, you'd, I think, sometimes, see a scene in some film on TV, but also, you know [...] fleetingly, simply because until a few years ago, now however, and there you notice what a difference it makes when it's legally regulated.«
(Aydan)

The collected narratives suggest that the broadcasting of films discussing homosexuality like *Die Konsequenz* (*The Consequence*), which appeared on public Austrian television in 1977 (Brunner 2021, p. 15), represented rare exceptions. Like Aydan, Anja referred to the legalisation of civil unions as a turning point in the visibility of non-normative sexualities in Italian and South Tyrolean public discourses. Interestingly, this suggests that same-sex attraction was absent from German- and Italian-language popular culture and media outlets, which were both available to and consumed by South Tyroleans since the diversification of the TV programmes since the 1970s (Hillebrand 2003, p. 88). Anja, Dorothea, Frieda, and Luna also specifically narrated how the discoveries of their sexual orientations fell into the decades before computers and the internet became easily accessible in South Tyrol in the course of the 1990s (Clementi/Heiss 2003, p. 122), which precluded their options of circumventing this invisibilisation in the media and popular culture. Luna narrated:

»I never thought of asking anyone for help, quote unquote, or a discussion with whoever, because in fact, I didn't even know the situation, I didn't, I didn't even seek any information, in the sense that now with, you know, with the internet, you find anything you want and more, so, it would have been very easy. At the time, like, no one had a computer at home, at school there were no classrooms with computers, it was all very far removed from life, going to do research, there were phonebooks, if you wanted to find someone or something, you had to... you know?«
(Luna)

Shortly before the provincial elections in 1998, *Centaurus* sent questionnaires about attitudes towards homosexuality to 402 election candidates, which thirty of them

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completed (Ferrarini 2004, p. 17). Since the majority ignored the questionnaires, same-sex attraction was thus invisibilised by political elites and far from a discussed topic in South Tyrolean political discourse, unlike in West Germany only decades before (Gammerl 2021, p. 65). Anja and Aydan thus juxtaposed decades of their lived experiences where same-sex attraction was invisibilised through lacking institutional and media attention. Interview narratives further included the invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities through an absence of respective organised communities in South Tyrol. Diesis recalled going on occasional club nights in gay and lesbian establishments elsewhere in northern Italy in the 1990s, juxtaposing these options to the lack of them in South Tyrol. In Italy, an LGBTQIA+ clubbing scene possibly emerged in the 1990s, but its history requires further research (Minacci 2021). Evidence from Austria suggests that small subcultural ›scenes‹ only developed in cities like Vienna throughout the twentieth century, which Unterkircher explains with the criminalisation of same-sex acts in Austria until 1972 (2007, p. 61). While a lack of visibility for minority groups can have detrimental consequences for their members, Frieda recalled its potential fruitfulness, given that just this invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities in South Tyrol motivated her to become a *Centaurus* activist:

> »That *[the motivation for activism]* was actually there for me immediately. Because I had the impression, like, it can't be, this feeling, I still remember, when I fell in love, I felt like, well, and now? There is nothing left, right, that, now I stand her with my child, and what am I supposed to do now? […] And then I immediately thought, actually, I want to see that we connect here […].«
> (Frieda)

While openly visible gay and lesbian scenes developed in Western Europe since the 1970s and 1980s (Ciaputa and Struzik 2012, p. 13), for instance in the shape of bars (Fullmer, Shenk and Eastland 1999, p. 141), this only happened later in South Tyrol. In contrast, Biagini highlighted the importance of bars as socialising and organising venues for lesbians in cities like Rome, Milan or Turin since the late 1970s (2018a, pp. 147–148). While some participants referred to three bars in Meran-Merano and Bolzano-Bozen as popular meeting spots for homosexual people, these were not branded as gay or lesbian bars. Moreover, since neither the interview narratives nor any previous literature referred to informal or ›hidden‹ LGBTQIA+ communities in South Tyrol, as they have elsewhere in rural areas (Stella 2012, p. 1823), the role of these cannot be evaluated at this stage. While the founding of *Centaurus* in 1991 certainly represents an important moment in the institutional history of LGBTQIA+ people in South Tyrol (Ferrarini 2004, p. 11), societal attitudes in the province did not change overnight. Indeed, the narratives point to a continuing invisibilisation through non-attention of lifestyles considered unconventional. When I asked Ay-

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dan, who spent a few months in the US as an upper secondary school pupil, about those societal attitudes in the 1980s and 1990s, she narrated:

> »About the topic of homosexuality or, er, being lesbian in South Tyrol, what comes to mind is often this American thing, ›don't tell, don't ask‹, so simply not to ask much, not to tell much, and believe that it *[inaudible segment]* homosexuals and lesbians are present in the whole world, in every society, that there are certain societies that totally, well, approach it openly, and as and tell and to and fro', South Tyrol sometimes seems to me, also with other topics, yeah, as long as you don't talk about it or as long as it doesn't go public...«
> (Aydan)

Aydan thus located this continuing invisibilisation as a cultural trait of the province: non-normative sexualities are tolerated as long as they are not visible (Moscow Helsinki Group 2009 cited in Stella 2012, p. 1825). Indeed, Pedote and Poidimani argued that before a major protest took place against heteronormative stances expressed during a sexologist conference in Sanremo in 1972, homosexuality was hardly a matter for public debate in Italy (2020, p. 11). The narrative segment above reflects the period when Aydan came of age, and when she had her first contact points with the US, as the phrase ›don't ask, don't tell‹ is the commonly used expression for the legislation proposed by former US president Bill Clinton, who was elected in 1993 and had pledged to »end the ban on homosexuals in the military« (Borch 2010, p. 204) during his campaign. This slogan meant that homo- and bisexual individuals could join the military, albeit not openly (Lowrey 2021, p. 163). Indeed, it became law in 1994 and was in force until 2011 (Lowrey 2021, 165). The fact that Aydan referred to a US-American phrase rather than the Italian context expresses an important degree of cultural expansionism of the US. Interestingly though, the political and legal stance of the Italian state since 1889 (Milletti 2018, p. 35; Romano 2019, p. 56) towards same-sex acts could be read as following the ›don't tell, don't ask‹ principle, since it was not criminalised – thus tolerated, instead of accepted. Moreover, referring to a phrase closely associated with international affairs, Aydan does not narrate South Tyrol as a unique example of this practice. Anna spoke about an increased visibility of diversity regarding sexuality and gender identities in South Tyrolean public discourses, juxtaposing them with those she experienced as a teenager in the 1980s:

> »I do think it's more in people's conscience, also of more conservative people, even when they reject it, at least it exists as a topic I think, simply because it's more present [...] and I think most people have already heard of it.«
> (Anna)

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Overall, these narratives suggest that the invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities occurred through the active ignoring of these by individuals, the media, popular culture, and by political and education institutions. This represents both a source of and fuel for heteronormativity, i.e., the view that heterosexuality is the only (acceptable) form of sexuality (Tebble 2011, p. 928). Interestingly, the narratives did not include any references to the active silencing of non-normative sexualities. However, Ferrarini noted a relevant example from the late 1990s. *Young&Direct*, a youth helpdesk in South Tyrol, published an information leaflet which treated homosexuality as a ›normal‹ form of sexuality, which resulted in criticism from the *Bewegung für das Leben* (*Movement for Life*), a South Tyrolean association mostly focusing on anti-abortion activism (Ferrarini 2004, p. 17), but which has also repeatedly voiced its opposition to the work of *Centaurus*, as former president Ingrid Facchinelli remembered (July 2022). Moreover, following a decision of the provincial administration, *Centaurus* received its first proper venue in 2004, outside of the centre of Bolzano-Bozen, at the fringes of the industrial district (Ferrarini 2004, p. 19). *Centaurus* was thus hosted in the same building as associations providing social assistance (Ferrarini 2004, p. 19). Frieda perceived this as pushing the LGBTQIA+ community out of the town centre's visibility:

> »[...] and then, in the industrial district we came to such an area, self-help groups, mentally ill people, *Lebenshilfe* [an association for people with disabilities], and well, in an area, in a house where it was unpleasant, like, as a woman it was unpleasant, because it gave little safety, the room also [...] because you would get there via the garage [...].«
> (Frieda)

Frieda's narrative further suggested that she interpreted this political decision as associating non-normative sexualities with pathologies, which has a long international history. In Italy, psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso considered lesbianism as contagious and a sign of bad character (Milletti 2018, p. 31), and ›cures‹ against homosexuality were attempted in early twentieth-century Italy (Milletti 2018, p. 28). Further, in Austrian hospitals for male children and teenagers, same-sex attractions were considered as one possible expression of abnormal behaviour (Friedmann 2018, p. 80). The Kinsey reports, originally published in the US in 1948 and 1953, and the international dissemination of their conclusions that same-sex attraction was widespread and neither unnatural nor pathological were a »shock to the system« (Barbagli and Colombo 2007, p. 12; Friedmann 2018, p. 79). The strong links between same-sex acts and pathologies began to decrease after the Stonewall riots in 1969 (De Leo 2021, p. 167). The year 1973, when the American Psychological Association ceased to consider homosexuality as a pathology, is further frequently

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cited as a crucial moment (Drescher 2015, p. 565; Westwood and Lowe 2018, p. 61; Brunner 2021, p. 16).

Invisibilising Women-Loving Women

As I asked the participants when they first encountered concepts such as homosexuality, bisexuality or lesbians, their responsive narratives suggested that women-loving women were invisibilised to a higher degree than men-loving men. This points to continuities with Biagini's findings (2018b, p. 102) on lesbians during Italian fascism, and Gammerl's insights (2021, p. 94) on homosexual women and men in West Germany from the post-war period until the 1980s. These narratives are further coherent with Ferrarini's observations, according to which public meeting points for gay men in South Tyrol preceded the founding of *Centaurus*, while lesbians rather met in small private groups (Ferrarini 2004, p. 11). Similarly, the advertisement in the South Tyrolean magazine *ff* which resulted in the founding of the self-help group in 1991 which would develop into the association *Centaurus*, in 1993 (Centaurus 2022) attracted eight gay men to a first meeting (Ferrarini 2004, p. 11). Moreover, this group was mostly frequented by men during its early years (Ferrarini 2004, p. 12). Anna and Frieda narrated that when non-normative sexualities were visible, the subjects were men rather than women. According to Anna, the sexuality of (presumed) gay men was occasionally thematised in her family when she was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, however portrayed examples of otherness, oddness, and even criminality in the shape of intrusiveness; thereby, male homosexuality was rendered invisible as a potentially ›normal‹ phenomenon. This echoes Gammerl's observation on how non-normative sexualities were portrayed as negative and dangerous in a range of books and films in West Germany since at least the mid-twentieth century, e.g., in Klaus Mann's *Vergittertes Fenster* (*Barred Window*), Jean Genet's *Die Zofen* (*The Maids*), or *Mädchen in Uniform* (*Girls in Uniform*) (Gammerl 2021, p. 58). Frieda narrated references to gay men prompted by the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s as that the ones about same-sex attraction in her youth. Internationally, the emergence of HIV/AIDS rendered male homosexuality more visible and only strengthened previous associations between same-sex acts and pathologies and danger (Tebble 2011, p. 937). The same was true in Italy and Austria, where the first HIV/AIDS cases were announced in 1982 (Frei and Karner 2003, p. 144) and 1983 (Brunner 2021, p. 20) respectively, and where it became quickly branded as the ›gays' disease‹ (Frei and Karner 2003, p. 144; Brunner 2021, p. 20).

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The most striking examples of the invisibilisation of women-loving women across the collected narratives surrounded the participants' outer coming-out[2] stories. When I asked them about their outer coming-out, Anja, Anna, Aydan, Diesis, Dorothea, Esther, Luna and Mathilde narrated that their news was treated as non-events and thus invisibilised, mostly within their nuclear families – regardless of the families' linguistic affiliation, place of residence or socio-economic background. Recalling her coming-out to her father in in the mid-1990s, Anja narrated:

> »Well, he didn't really rea..., I can't remem..., I had the impression that it he didn't really care, that he was not particularly touched or upset or, I really can't remember that he reacted in any way, in any case he positioned himself fairly neutrally.«
> (Anja)

Anja's father thus appeared as a sidenote in her narrative, as he treated her coming-out as an invisible issue which did not resuscitate any further reactions. Dorothea is seven years younger than Anja and unlike her, she grew up in a family of farmers with devout Catholic parents in a small village. However, when she came out to her father in the mid-1990s, his reaction in Dorothea's narrative was similarly stoic:

> »Then I told him, and er, but he then didn't really react to it, like he neither said yes nor no nor anything, he, I told him and then we didn't talk about it any further like, er, I only said to him, well, if I now, I'm not looking for a girlfriend now, but if I had a girlfriend, what it would be like for him, if I brought her *[home]*, then his, he was so sober, ›I've never turned anyone away at the door‹, like my dad is pretty sober *[laughs]*.«
> (Dorothea)

This suggests that while Dorothea's father did not oppose her decision to live as a women-loving woman, he seemed to keep her sexual orientation a non-topic. This was echoed by the reaction of Hanni, who is now in her nineties and has lived with Dorothea's family since moving to their farm as a maid decades ago:

> »Well, I, er, I told her, and her reply was, I thought it was just brilliant, ›That's your problem‹. That was her comment, that's my problem, then I said, ›No, I don't have a problem‹, and we never ta-, well, that was her comment and then the topic was settled, she never asked me anything about it later, for her, this was just the way it was.« (Dorothea)

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2 In line with previous research and the participants' narratives, I distinguish between inner coming-out as a process of acknowledging, accepting, and appreciating one's non-heterosexuality, and outer coming-out, i.e., the communication of this insight to others (Ferrarini 2004, p. 106; Baiocco et al. 2022, p. 1).

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Esther has a similar family and religious background to Dorothea. She came out to her family in the early 2000s, narrating that her mother reacted somewhat like Dorothea's father and Hanni. However, Esther's mother seems to have been more vocal about the necessity to invisibilise her daughter's sexuality: »My mum actually reacted in a relatively positive way, but more in the sense of, one doesn't talk about those things, so to say, one does this, but one doesn't talk about it« (Esther).

Esther's father seemingly agreed with her mother, as Esther noticed that her sexual orientation became a problem for her father as soon as it was spoken about:

> »With my father, it was difficult. In the moment where I openly vocalised it, it was a problem. As long as nothing was vocalised, it wasn't an issue, but openly vocalising it was a problem and he then had many difficulties, long-lasting difficulties with my, er, following girlfriend […].«
> (Esther)

Despite the contrast in upbringing, Luna's mother also showed a desire to ignore and to invisibilise her daughter's sexual orientation. When Luna came out to her parents in the early 2000s, she narrated that her »mother entered a parallel world, my mother completely removed this topic«. Diesis' mother has been aware of her daughter's sexual orientation since finding out about Diesis' first relationship with a woman in the early 1990s. However, similarly to Luna's mother, Diesis narrated that her mother chooses not to acknowledge it:

> »My mother is 84 years old, but my mother really, doesn't want it, it's something she doesn't accept, she doesn't accept, despite, she knows it, er, but she doesn't accept it […] he, he knows, he also knows it, and he's much more relaxed, he doesn't care, he doesn't care about it, he is much more relaxed, but we never approached… The real conversation sitting around a table, no, I approached it with my mother. And when I saw the response… but my father is much more, like, now I have a partner and my father, he is super relaxed regarding her.«
> (Diesis)

Indeed, Diesis' mother continues to verbally construct the invisibility of her daughter's life as a women-loving woman through her choice in language (Allan and Burridge 1991; Irvine and Gal 2000 cited in Nuhrat 2020, p. 143):

> »For instance, if my mother isn't well, er, she needs to be taken to the hospital, *[if]* I have problems at work, she, she *[Diesis' partner]* takes her… But she's a ›friend‹, for, for my mother she remains a friend, you know […].«
> (Diesis)

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Frieda narrated a more reactive and more clearly negative attitude from her parents when she came out to them:

> »[…] family was a catastrophe, of course. That was, for my family this was very bad. They also, when I told them, the reaction was like, yes, but until, until Sonja hasn't come of age, that I shouldn't think about living this. That was their idea. And what they also did for a long time was pretend that I was still married, in front of certain people, because that simply fit into the picture.«
> (Frieda)

The use of the phrase »of course« suggests that Frieda did not expect anything else from her parents, whom she described as conservative and considerate to upholding the image of a happy and respectable nuclear family during her childhood and adolescence. Indeed, the invisibilisation aspect appeared rife in Frieda's memory, as she narrated that her parents wanted her not to live out her sexual orientation for a certain time and thus keep it invisible herself.

As mentioned above, while a reading and comparison of the present interview narratives do not suggest outright homophobic reactions, they can hardly be read as testimonies of openness or acceptance, but rather as tolerance, which can only be a steppingstone towards acceptance and which in itself cannot be expected to generate feelings of legitimacy to the individuals concerned (Fassinger 1991, p. 167), as Aydan narrated:

> »It's certainly not acceptance, like I don't believe that it's acceptance, rather, when, it's rather tolerating, but it shows perhaps a bit the fear of approaching this topic, there are a great many fears, er, I believe images, it also, yes, I mean have something to do with religion […] simply the unfamiliar, what you don't know, like with many other things as well […] Yes, and this, this social control, er, it's of course probably in rural areas somewhat more of a given than, than in a town, in a town it's just different. I mean, even though *[her hometown]* isn't a megacity, but it still makes a difference.«
> (Aydan)

Interestingly, this quote shows both how invisibilisation can be an alternative to outright opposition regarding marginalised groups, and how this practice has been used in the South Tyrolean context with its Catholic heritage. Concerning religion, South Tyrol is no outlier province in a country where the Catholic Church heavily influenced social norms and policies, even after Catholicism ceased to be the official state religion in 1986 (Beccalossi 2022, p. 655; Callahan/Loscocco 2023, p. 232). Indeed, different researchers cited the strong support of the Vatican's official doctrine for the uniqueness of heterosexual marriage and the heterosexual nuclear family model, as important reasons why civil liberties for LGBTQIA+ people were de-

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layed in Italy (Beccalossi 2022, p. 655; Garelli 2007; Lasio et al. 2018 cited in Callahan/Loscocco 2023, p. 232).

No Role Models

When prompted about their encounters with concepts like homosexuality, some participants narrated the absence of openly non-heterosexual individuals, either in their surroundings, or in public life (Fassinger 1991, p. 167; Fullmer, Shenk/Eastland 1999, p. 138; Biagini 2018b, p. 127); an absence which they univocally narrated as having disappeared by now. This is echoed by similar findings from the UK in the 1990s (Sparkes 1994, p. 93), and insights from Central and Eastern Europe where LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities are frequently absent or not clearly visible (Stella 2012, p. 1826; Borgos 2015, p. 96). The absence of a »cultural understanding« of non-normative sexualities can impede the creation of an authentic life for LGBTQIA+ individuals (Fullmer, Shenk/Eastland 1999, p. 142; Borgos 2015, p. 96). Interestingly, the only famous and historic (Milletti 2018, p. 37) women-loving woman mentioned in the narratives was Virginia Woolf, whose writing Anna has admired since her youth. Indeed, the fact that Esther mentioned an absence of role models in her response to my very first interview question about how she grew up further supports this notion. After pointing out that traditional rural and religious values were central in her family, she continued:

> »And, er, everything that concerns my later sexual orientation, it was really like I didn't have any role models, in no way, and er that therefore this path for me, to even recognise it as such and to realise that, that that was simply a difficult path […].«
> (Esther)

Frieda's narrative echoed this. She is slightly younger than Esther and grew up in a bilingual family in a small town. When I asked her where her described tendency to ignore her feelings of attraction towards girls and women may have come from, she said:

> »Er *[clears throat]*, I really thought about that many times, but I… it really was something that, that was not… supposed… to be, like. Something that simply didn't exist in my surroundings and in my life… like, er… I didn't have any contacts, I didn't have any, I didn't know anyone, neither among the men nor among the women, I didn't know anyone, not in my surroundings, not as I was growing up, where this topic was somehow present.«
> (Frieda)

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Anja's and Aydan's socio-economic backgrounds resemble Frieda's more than Esther's, and their narratives confirmed the invisibilisation of women-loving women in their youth. Similarly to Frieda, Aydan named this as a reason why she lived a heterosexual life until her mid-twenties:

> »But I grew up in a totally heterosexual context and then I lived a totally hetero life. It also didn't, well, in those years it wasn't necessarily a topic, I couldn't say that I suffered from it. Well, at some point I, I did think, women are also interesting *[laughs]*, but of course you, there were no role models or anything like that, I do think that was difficult then.«
> (Aydan)

Once Frieda had come out, she narrated that she was pleasantly surprised to find out about other people in South Tyrol who were homosexual, also among her acquaintances:

> »There really was a great element of surprise, when you would meet people you knew, you knew from sight, as I said, not in your own, direct surroundings, but people you knew nevertheless, because, because you had met them in childhood, skiing or during one of the courses you did. And it was always joyful, and these are acquaintances that last until today, a certain solidarity still exists and is also perceptible.«
> (Frieda)

Given these narratives, it should not come as a surprise that Asha, the eldest interviewee growing up in a modest and devout Catholic context, could not remember any role models when she came out to herself as a young adult. Instead, she became a lesbian and feminist activist, and a role model for others:

> »Er, I mean I also didn't look for role models, because there weren't any and there still aren't any, if there is a role model in South Tyrol with regard to homosexual women than I can really say it's me [...] maybe you also find some who know me and who can confirm this, because there are many who say, without Asha, back then, they all came to me.«
> (Asha)

Asha frequently referred to her feminist activism which, interestingly, seemed to have been hardly influenced by her sexual orientation. Indeed, her activism as a lesbian found expression channels rather within the feminist movement, coherent with a trend Biagini observed in her study of lesbian movements in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s (2018a, p. 39). Asha recalled discovering feminism in her twenties, i.e., the 1970s, and that she subscribed to the German feminist magazines *Courage* and

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Emma which were launched in 1976 and 1977 respectively (Lux 2017, p. 33). This suggests that she did look for feminist role models, or at least reference points, beyond South Tyrol's borders. Since Asha, a German-speaker, had completed a part of her upper secondary education in Italian, there was no linguistic barrier stopping her from getting involved with the provincial section of the nationwide left-wing *Unione Donne Italiane* (Union of Italian Women), which was rather exceptional given that most South Tyrolean women who were involved in institutionalised feminism at the time were Italian-speakers (Clementi 2002, p. 117). While Asha stressed that her feminist peers reacted positively to her homosexuality, sexual orientation apparently played hardly any role in South Tyrolean feminist movements. Further, there is no evidence for a lesbo-feminist movement in the province (Ferrarini 2004, p. 10). This shows coherence with the broader geographical and cultural context; in Italy, lesbo-feminism was fairly confined, temporarily and spatially, to the 1980s and urban centres (Biagini 2018a, p. 198); and in Austria, the very existence of lesbo-feminism has been subject of discussion (Repnik 2001, p. 12).

Insights and Outlook

This chapter focused on the practice of invisibilisation, which prominently shaped the coming-out narratives of women-loving women who had grown up in South Tyrol in the second half of the twentieth century. A sense of invisibility and an inability to name the phenomenon of women-loving women were discussed by historians like Biagini, regarding the 1930s and 1940s (2018b, p. 97), as well as the 1970s and 1980s in Italy (2018a, p. 7); further, by Borgos, who focused on twentieth-century Hungary (2015, p. 94); as well as by Ferrarini (2004, p. 7, p. 131). This is hardly surprising given that Ferrarini's and ›my‹ participants mostly belonged to the same birth year cohorts (Ferrarini 2004, p. 29). While the concept of invisibility has been abundantly discussed in the literature on marginalised groups (Borgos 2015, p. 88; Westwood/Lowe 2018, p. 60; De Leo 2012, p. 700), the active creation and upholding of such invisibility at the individual or the collective and institutional level deserved focused attention here; similarly, South Tyrol as a research field remains largely unexplored from a queer history lens. An analysis of the present interview narratives suggested that the topics of sexuality, non-normative sexualities and women-loving women were not simply absent or invisible from the participants' lives as they were growing up, but rather invisibilised by media discourses, popular culture, and practices implemented by institutions such as the Catholic Church, schools, and actors like parents or even feminist activists. Invisibilisation was conceptualised as both precautionary and interventional actions to remove references to non-normative sexualities, either before or just after they had appeared in conversations or publications. Crucially, invisibility was also a recurring theme during the research process,

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as I only managed to recruit a modest and fairly homogenous group of participants, in terms of age, language group affiliation, socio-economic status and educational background. Therefore, I expect that many women-loving women living in South Tyrol do not wish to come out to (heterosexual) researchers. Beyond the relatively low recruitment rate, I remarked low levels of interconnectedness and networking, especially between generations, among LGBTQIA+ individuals or small groups in South Tyrol, which further strengthens the impression of invisible realities concerning women-loving women to this day. This impression mirrors Ferrarini's observation of a missing collective memory and chronology of lesbians in South Tyrol (2004, p. 7), which Borgos also observed regarding lesbians in twentieth century Hungary (2015, p. 90). While this chapter cannot explain why invisibility is so frequent in the interview narratives, a strategy of invisibilising non-normative sexualities, i.e., exercising control over sexual behaviour, may have been an attempt to bring calm to a province experiencing social and political conflicts in the twentieth century. Similarly, De Leo argued that the backlash against non-normative sexualities in Germany before the Second World War and after a period of a degree of relative relaxation was created to suggest that order had returned (2021, p. 93). Of course, some of the present findings also stand in contrast with previous insights from similar studies. While Borgos found that many of her participants relied on private networks to find a community of women-loving women (2015, p. 104), this applies only to Aydan in the present sample. Diesis and Mathilde narrated that they never searched for a women-loving community, because they consider their sexual orientation as only one part of their lives, and the other participants found this community via structures such as *Centaurus*. Reynolds and Robinson (2016) presented findings from oral history interviews with gay and lesbian Australians, and thus citizens of a country further away from South Tyrol geographically than Hungary, but closer in terms of geopolitical and cultural alignment during the Cold War, as both Italy and Australia were part of the geopolitical West (Verdorfer 2020, p. 22). Apparently, greater gay and lesbian visibility in Australia emerged earlier than in South Tyrol, as participants in the cohort born between 1949 and 1956 narrated the beginnings of communities and clubs despite difficult legal circumstances (Reynolds and Robinson 2016, p. 370). Reynolds and Robinson observed early political organising, partly prompted by the contemporary HIV/AIDS issue, which was important for the cohort born between 1957 and 1966 (2016, p. 370). With only three of ten participants born in this period, the present findings can neither convincingly confirm nor challenge this finding. They do, however, seem to mirror Reynolds' and Robinson's subsequent findings on participants born between 1967 and 1984, i.e., the period in which seven of my participants were born. Regarding this period, Reynolds and Robinson pointed to increasing representation in popular culture and a decrease in outright hostility (2016, p. 370). What is missing from South Tyrolean history, according to the collected narratives and existing historical studies, is a homosexual movement in the 1970s and 1980s, which

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emerged in other contexts such as Italian cities (Biagini 2018a), or other Western countries (Reynolds/Robinson 2016, p. 371). Despite this (seeming) absence of a homosexual movement before the founding of *Centaurus*, the history of sexualities in South Tyrol represents a plethora of research gaps for those ready to dig and listen.

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