

Gaps in approaches to sexual health and pharmaceutical care for cisgender women who have sex with women: a literature review

Lacunas nas abordagens de saúde sexual e cuidados farmacêuticos para mulheres cisgênero que fazem sexo com mulheres: uma revisão da literatura

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ABSTRACT

This literature review provides relevant information on sexual health and pharmaceutical care for women who have sex with women (WSW). The objective of this study was to conduct a systematic review of the literature on pharmaceutical care focused on WSW sexual health, aiming to provide an overview of the topic and discuss the approaches and protocols currently available for this population. The review included studies and protocols published between 2018 and 2023, using the keywords: 'sexual health,' 'women who have sex with women,' 'pharmaceutical care,' and 'LGBTQIA+ health' in the PubMed, Scielo, Google Scholar databases, as well as various governmental and non-governmental databases. Among the resulting articles, two publications stood out for making significant contributions to pharmaceutical care targeted at WSW and the LGBTQIAP+ community more broadly. The findings of this review underscore the urgent need for greater awareness and visibility of WSW sexual health, as well as the promotion of inclusive health policies that address the unique needs of this population. The study also emphasizes the importance of revising health academic curricula to more effectively incorporate LGBTQIAP+ topics and suggests public health initiatives to ensure empathetic and equitable pharmaceutical care. Health equity for WSW, as concluded, will only be achieved through structural efforts that combat invisibility and ensure adequate care, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Keywords: Sexual health; Sexual and gender minorities; Female homosexuality.

RESUMO

Esta revisão bibliográfica apresenta informações pertinentes à saúde sexual e ao Cuidado Farmacêutico destinadas a mulheres que fazem sexo com mulheres (MSM). O objetivo desta pesquisa foi realizar uma revisão sistemática da literatura sobre os cuidados farmacêuticos voltados à saúde sexual MSM, com o intuito de obter uma visão geral sobre o tema e discutir as abordagens e protocolos existentes para essa população. Uma revisão bibliográfica foi conduzida com base em estudos e protocolos publicados no período entre 2018 e 2023 utilizando os descritores: 'saúde sexual', 'mulheres que fazem sexo com mulheres', 'cuidado farmacêutico' e 'saúde LGBTQIA+' nas bases

de dados PubMed, Scielo, Google Scholar e bases de dados governamentais e não governamentais. Dentre os artigos resultantes, duas publicações se destacam por oferecerem contribuições significativas para o Cuidado Farmacêutico direcionado às mulheres que fazem sexo com mulheres (MSM) e para a comunidade LGBTQIAP+ em geral. Os resultados desta revisão destacam a necessidade urgente de maior conscientização e visibilidade para a saúde sexual das MSM, além da promoção de políticas de saúde inclusivas que abordem as especificidades dessa população. O estudo também ressalta a importância de promover mudanças nos currículos acadêmicos das instituições de saúde, a fim de incorporar a temática LGBTQIAP+ de forma mais efetiva, e implementar iniciativas de saúde pública que garantam um cuidado farmacêutico empático e equitativo. Conclui-se que a equidade na saúde para MSM só será alcançada com esforços estruturais que combatam a invisibilidade e garantam atendimento adequado, independentemente da orientação sexual ou identidade de gênero.

Palavras-chave: Saúde sexual; Minorias sexuais e de gênero; Homossexualidade feminina.

INTRODUCTION

In the historical context of Brazil, the lack of visibility of cisgender lesbian and bisexual women, especially during LGBTQIAP+ movements as the Lesbian Feminist Movement in 1972, worsened in the 1980s due to the emergence of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) epidemic and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), when these women were overlooked as potential virus transmitters (FERNANDES and SOLER, 2018). Even after many decades, WSW (women who have sex with women) are still not recognized in society. This lack of inclusion hinders these women's ability to access appropriate healthcare services and complicates the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of specific sexual health issues faced by this group, often associated with reports of traumatic and negative experiences (RUFINO, 2018).

There is an urge for knowledge, information, visibility, and sexual education, as well as the recognition and understanding of all sexual orientations and identities, alongside the promotion of healthy ways to experience diverse forms of sexuality (FURLANI, 2008). In the year 2019, IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) conducted its first data collection on Sexual Orientation as part of the National Health Survey. The results of this survey revealed that only 0.9% of women identified themselves as lesbians, while 0.8%

identified as bisexual. However, it is worth highlighting that a considerable number of participants chose not to respond or claimed ignorance, surpassing the number of individuals who declared a specific sexual orientation. This phenomenon may be directly linked to the deeply rooted prejudice and stigma in Brazilian society (IBGE, 2022).

Pharmaceutical Care has been widely adopted both in Brazil and internationally. This term encompasses a set of activities conducted by the pharmacist, centered on the individual, with the purpose of providing targeted care and treatment, aiming to promote, preserve, and restore the patient's health (BRASIL, 2014). Within this approach, it is crucial to recognize the relevance of providing personalized and comprehensive care, highlighting interdisciplinary collaboration among various professionals, including the pharmacist. Through practices such as rational drug use and even more complex therapeutic interventions, all individualized, it is possible to meet the demands and needs of cisgender women who do not identify as heterosexual (KRÜGER et al., 2022).

A systematic review was conducted based on previously published scientific and technical sources prior to the update of the LGBTQIAP+ term. However, this work is being developed considering the most

current and comprehensive term of August 2023. The acronym LGBTQIAP+ will be adopted to refer to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender individuals, queer, intersex, asexuals, and pansexuals. The symbol “+” encompasses other sexual orientations and gender identities, symbolizing diversity and all forms of plurality. It is important to emphasize that if this work is used as a scientific and technical resource, readers should stay updated on the correct terminology when using this reference.

In light of this, this study aims to identify and analyze Pharmaceutical Care approaches and recommendations for the sexual health of women who have sex with women, investigating practices applied, both in Brazil and internationally.

METHODS

This is a systematic bibliographic review conducted to achieve the proposed objectives. A survey of publications was carried out, both freely accessible and accessible through the internet network of the Federal University of Ouro Preto, covering the years 2018 to 2023. The following databases were used: *PubMed*, *Scielo*, and *Google Scholar*, as well as databases from governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Brazilian Ministry of Health, “SOMOS” NGO, and the Brazilian Lesbian Archive. Two primary topics were established as focal points: the target population (lesbians and bisexual women) and sexual health. Terms such as “lesbians,” “bisexual women,” “women who have sex with women,” “sexual health,” “sexually transmitted diseases,” “pharmaceutical care” and “sexual education” were systematically combined to identify relevant articles. The keywords used were “women who have sex with women,” “lesbians,” and “bisexuals,” in conjunction with “pharmaceutical care,” “sexual health,” and their respective equivalents in Portuguese and Spanish. The

inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed studies on sexual health and/or pharmaceutical care for women who have sex with women.

After analyzing the articles resulting from the bibliographic search, those that lacked relevant keywords, did not align with the main topics, were duplicates, or were not openly accessible for reading were excluded. Screening was conducted sequentially, beginning with a title review to exclude articles unrelated to the primary topics, followed by an abstract review to exclude those not directly addressing the target theme. The remaining articles were fully peer-reviewed and assessed to ensure accuracy and alignment with the inclusion criteria: studies on sexual health and/or pharmaceutical care for women who have sex with women.

As this study is a literature review, submission to a Research Ethics Committee (CEP) is not required, in accordance with Article 1 of CNS Resolution 510/2016. This resolution exempts projects utilizing methodologies characteristic of the Humanities and Social Sciences from the obligation to submit to the CEP/Conep system. Additionally, Circular Letter No. 17/2022 from Conep reinforces this exemption, as the research is based on the analysis of existing publications and does not involve the collection of original data or direct interaction with participants.

RESULTS

From this survey, a total of 1,226 articles were initially identified. After applying the established inclusion and exclusion criteria, this search yielded a final total of 107 publications. Out of these, 59 articles were selected for peer review to ensure their suitability for inclusion in this study. Ultimately, 30 articles met the criteria for inclusion and were analyzed (Figure 1). Chart 1 presents the key findings from the articles included in this review.

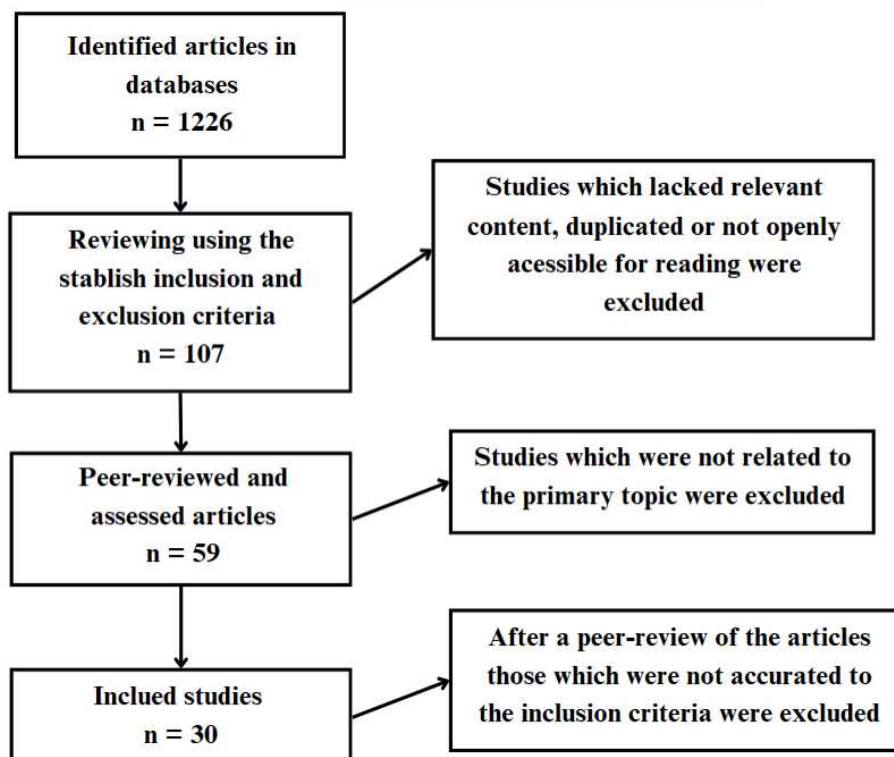


Figure 1: Flowchart according to the established methodology.

Chart 1: Articles selected to compose this review.

Authorship	Study design	Country	Objectives
Fernandes (2018)	Review	Brazil	The study aims to examine the health of lesbian women in Brazil using a multidisciplinary approach, emphasizing the importance of qualified listening and the women's own life experiences
Rufino (2018)	Interviews	Brazil	Describing sexual practices and healthcare considerations for WSW.
Oliveira and Polidoro (2018)	Course	Brazil	The course aims to train health promoters working with LGBTQIAP+ individuals within the SUS, focusing on basic concepts and best practices in healthcare for this community
Grabski (2018)	Review	Poland	The discussion focuses on the nature of sexual relationships between women, considering their social and cultural context
Lewis (2019)	Cross-sectional	USA	The study aimed to compare health outcomes and identity uncertainty among three subgroups of WSW
Lino (2019)	Review	Brazil	Historical synthesis of the Lesbian Women's Movement in Brazil

Araújo (2019)	Descriptive study	Brazil	Describing and analyzing the care provided to lesbians by nurses and doctors in the field of sexual and reproductive health.
Lúcio (2019)	Review	Brazil	Understanding the sexual health of WSW with the aim of preventing STIs
Plummer (2019)	Cohort study	Australia	Investigating the impact of sexual practices and previous infections on vaginal microbiota in WSW
Andrade (2019)	Cross-sectional	Brazil	Identifying the dimensions of vulnerability among WSW associated with STIs
Lima and Saldanha (2020)	Cross-sectional	Brazil	Analyses of vulnerability in sexual health and preventive practices concerning STIs in lesbians relationships
Rodríguez-Otero (2020)	Review	Mexico	Reviewing studies WSW
Agwu (2020)	Review	USA	A study of the risk of acquiring HIV and other STIs among adolescents in the USA.
Silva and Gomes (2020)	Review	Brazil	Analyzing the access of lesbian women to healthcare services
Smith (2021)	Review	USA	A discussion of the invisibility of bisexual women in healthcare and its consequences.
Rahman (2021)	Cross-sectional	USA	The article compares WSW, WSB, WSM attending two STI clinics in Baltimore, Maryland.
Silva (2021)	Review	Brazil	Analyzing public policies aimed to lesbian healthcare, understanding principles, guidelines, potentials, and barriers.
Waugh (2021)	Case study	Canada	Analyze preventive screening guidelines for WSW
Milanez (2021)	Review	Brazil	Understand the meanings attributed by primary care nurses to healthcare practices with lesbians.
Cavalcante (2022)	Correlational Study	Brazil	Analyze the sexual practices of WSW and their association with condom use.
Engel (2022)	Cross-sectional	Australia	Compare differences in sexual practices and positivity for STIs and other genital infections among women and whether these differences have changed over time.
Obón-Azuara (2022)	Review	Spain	A scoping review that explores gaps in research on the sexual health of WSW.
Gil-Llario (2022)	Cross-sectional	Spain	Understanding the factors that lead to risky sexual behavior in WSW, in order to design preventive strategies
Kruger (2022)	Pharmaceutical Care Guide	Brazil	Initiate an in-depth study on sexual orientation, gender identity, and healthcare through targeted Pharmaceutical Care for the LGBTI+ community.
Gomes (2022)	Narrative Review	Brazil	Analyze narratives from gay and lesbian group representatives to identify structural elements in developing health agendas for these groups.

Bezerra (2022)	Review	Brazil	The study aims to understand the HIV epidemic among WSW in Brazil, presenting the temporal scenario of the epidemic among these women and comparing it with WSM
Grundmann (2022)	Commentary	USA	The reasons for healthcare access disparities among LGBTQ patients and discusses ways to improve efforts to meet their needs.
Pereira (2022)	Interview	Brazil	Understanding the establishment of bonds in the healthcare of lesbian and bisexual women.
Parenti (2023)	Cross-sectional	Brazil	The study of the knowledge of WSW about Sexually Transmitted Infections and AIDS.
Rahman (2023)	Interview	USA	Factors affecting interactions between patients and healthcare providers among a diverse sample of WSW in New York.

Source: Articles collected by author in 2023.

Upon analyzing the selected articles, it was observed that there was an absence of protocols exclusively focused on Pharmaceutical Care directed toward the sexual health of WSW within the defined time frame in the methodology. However, by expanding the scope of the included articles, it can be noted that there is a substantial amount of research discussing the topic of invisibility of WSW, their social and clinical vulnerabilities, and their access to the healthcare system.

An educational resource called the “Pharmaceutical Care Guide for the LGBTI+ Community, 2nd Edition,” authored by Krüger and collaborators (2021), was found. It is important to emphasize that resources like the “Pharmaceutical Care Service Flowchart for LGBTI+ People” present in this guide can provide guidance for the proper management of these cases. Although not specifically focused on lesbian and bisexual women, the information can serve as a starting point for pharmaceutical care. Another significant educational resource identified in this research was the first section of module 2 of the “Training Course for LGBT Health

Promoters for Professionals in the Unified Health System (SUS).” This section specifically addresses the health of lesbian and bisexual women. The training course was developed in 2018 through a partnership between the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul and the Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Sul, with the support of the Brazilian Ministry of Health. Its central purpose is to reinforce the implementation of the National Policy for Comprehensive Health Care for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites, and Transsexuals (PNSI-LGBT) in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

The training course covers the access barriers faced by WSW and their specific health needs. It presents relevant data on the risks and prevalences of sexually transmitted infections, sexual practices and their associated risks, and discusses methods for STI prevention. Additionally, a section with pertinent information on the reproductive health of lesbians and bisexual women is dedicated, aiming to provide a solid knowledge foundation that contributes to the training of healthcare professionals capable of ensuring humane and optimal care for these women.

DISCUSSION

The gap in data and studies focused on sexual health care for WSW underscores the need for greater attention and the development of specific strategies to serve this population, as highlighted by Araújo and colleagues (2019). They point out the lack of recognition of the importance of both research studies and the development of new prevention technologies for STIs.

To comply with the National Humanization Policy, it is fundamental for pharmacists to be aware of the importance of adapting clinical care practices and providing inclusive and sensitive care to the specific needs of WSW. This includes being attentive to the prevention and treatment needs for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (BRASIL, 2013b). It is worth noting that even in the absence of specific protocols and guidelines for WSW, recognizing and having knowledge about their vulnerabilities and demands, it is the responsibility of healthcare professionals to use existing protocols and guidelines and adapt them for this community. For example, in the case of STI screening, the Brazilian Ministry of Health recommends conducting diagnostic tests on asymptomatic individuals with the objective of establishing early diagnosis to reduce potential health complications. Although it does not establish a specific subgroup for WSW, the available material for STI prevention and reduction can be utilized for this group. In this context, it is also important to emphasize the role of the pharmacist in providing immunization for HPV and hepatitis B, as these infections can be related to sexual practices between women (BRASIL, 2022).

Furthermore, there needs to be open and collaborative dialogue among the entire multidisciplinary healthcare team to promote an integrated, humane, and respectful approach to sexual health care for lesbians and bisexual women, using terminologies and concepts well understood by professionals that

promote dignity in their existence and sexuality experiences (KRÜGER *et al.*, 2022). It is also crucial that pharmacists remain committed to providing welcoming, prejudice-free care that addresses the individual needs of each patient, even though specific resources for pharmaceutical care directed at this population may still be scarce. The pursuit of inclusive and equitable sexual health should be a constant in pharmaceutical practice, driving the construction of a fairer and more respectful society for all (GRUNDMANN *et al.*, 2020).

In the provision of pharmaceutical care, there are important factors to consider. According to the National Humanization Policy (BRASIL, 2013b), in addition to knowledge about gender identity and sexual orientation, it is essential for professionals to abandon any moral principles and judgments that may affect or influence the healthcare process for the patient. Respectful and efficient care for lesbians and bisexual women is primarily facilitated through a welcoming, safe, and inclusive environment, and it is the responsibility of the professional, including pharmacists, to provide this environment where women can share their stories and express their needs and demands (KRÜGER *et al.*, 2022).

It is emphasized that in pharmaceutical care, during consultations, the language used is crucial for conveying safety and trust, establishing an essential therapeutic relationship for the effectiveness of care. Therefore, professionals who provide this clinical service must have communication skills for the execution of clinical care (BRASIL, 2013b).

Thus, an inclusive and prepared professional who can address the diverse needs of the community should invest in ongoing training and periodic updates. This applies not only to lesbian and bisexual women but to the entire LGBTQIAP+ community, which often faces a lack of understanding regarding their specific needs. Krüger (2022) highlights information about the

health vulnerabilities faced by this population, such as low awareness of sexually transmitted infections among cisgender lesbian and bisexual women, as well as barriers to accessing gynecological and assisted reproductive services.

The prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among lesbian and bisexual women can be attributed, in part, to the lack of specific and adequate preventive methods for sexual practices between women. The absence of developed options in Brazil for this reality results in a scenario where many women resort to improvised methods, such as the improper use of male condoms or gloves during oral sex and vaginal contact (CAVALCANTE *et al.*, 2022). Although some women are aware of the risks of infection and the importance of prevention, reports indicate low adherence to these preventive methods. This may be influenced by several factors, including a lack of awareness of the availability of specific methods for sexual practices between women and a lack of proper guidance from healthcare professionals (GIL-LLARIO *et al.*, 2023).

It is unquestionably important to share accurate information with these women about STI prevention methods and to provide them with proper guidance on the safe use of sexual toys, including hygiene and condom use. Additionally, raising awareness about the signs and symptoms of the most common STIs transmitted through bodily fluids is an effective prevention strategy. It is necessary to disseminate scientific knowledge and promote reflection on the topic, encouraging new research, care and prevention approaches for STIs and HIV/AIDS, as well as public health and sexual education strategies (LÚCIO *et al.*, 2019).

To improve the quality of care provided to LGBTQIAP+ individuals, healthcare professionals urge the development of a strong theoretical and technical foundation, as well as appropriate behavioral skills for this population. This requires training for both

undergraduate health students and professionals already working in the field (DULLIUS *et al.*, 2019). A promising solution is the inclusion of specific content and disciplines related to LGBTQIAP+ health and care in pharmacy school curricula. Some institutions are already adopting a more humanistic and cross-cutting approach, and have observed positive results, such as increased knowledge and confidence among students when interacting with LGBTQIAP+ patients. Competent training of future pharmacists is essential to ensure the provision of appropriate and inclusive healthcare to all patients, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The implementation of such measures can significantly contribute to reducing disparities in healthcare faced by the LGBTQIAP+ community and promoting a more inclusive and sensitive approach to pharmaceutical care (GRUNDMANN *et al.*, 2020).

Another important step is the establishment of a physically welcoming environment, such as displaying a rainbow sticker or specific LGBTQIAP+ health materials and discrete cues that indicate a safe zone for this community. Communication also forms the foundation of welcoming care, establishing a relationship of safety and trust between the pharmacist and the patient. Professionals should never make assumptions about orientation or gender identity based on stereotypes, such as clothing and names. Using gender-neutral language is a good option when unsure about the correct pronouns to use, and in case of an error, an apology is indispensable and can make a significant difference.

Disparities in healthcare among LGBTQIAP+ community members remain a significant concern within the healthcare system. The articles reviewed have discussed the need for awareness of patients' human rights to gain a better understanding of the specific challenges faced by the LGBTQIAP+ population when accessing healthcare services. Pharmacists play a crucial role as healthcare providers

and have the opportunity to have a significant impact on the counseling, care, and health promotion of MSM or any other members of the community. However, the results of this research show that there is still limited scientific literature providing the necessary training for pharmacists to adequately serve LGBTQIAP+ community members, including MSM.

This study has referenced cisgender lesbian and bisexual women who have sex with women. However, it is impossible not to point out the invisibility of transgender lesbian and bisexual women, who also have sex with women. It is crucial to emphasize the importance of comprehensive protocols for both cisgender and transgender women, with a focus on the specific nuances of each group. The implementation of these protocols should aim to address all the specificities of all women to ensure that none are overlooked in healthcare services, thus preventing them from being marginalized in society.

This review presents some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The primary limitation concerns the limited quantity of sources and evidence available on the specific topic of pharmaceutical care for the sexual health of lesbian and bisexual women. As this is an emerging field, the existing studies are scarce and often vary in quality, which restricts the breadth and depth of the conclusions. This lack of robust sources highlights the need for further research into pharmaceutical care practices focused on this population, aiming to build a more comprehensive understanding and better address their specific needs.

CONCLUSION

There is an urgent need for improvement in pharmaceutical academic training on cross-cutting topics related to sexual orientation. It is essential for pharmacists to pursue ongoing education through targeted training, capacity-building initiatives, and active participation in LGBTQIAP+ healthcare events.

Such efforts are necessary to develop gender literacy and a feminist-informed perspective that can guide inclusive healthcare practices.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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