

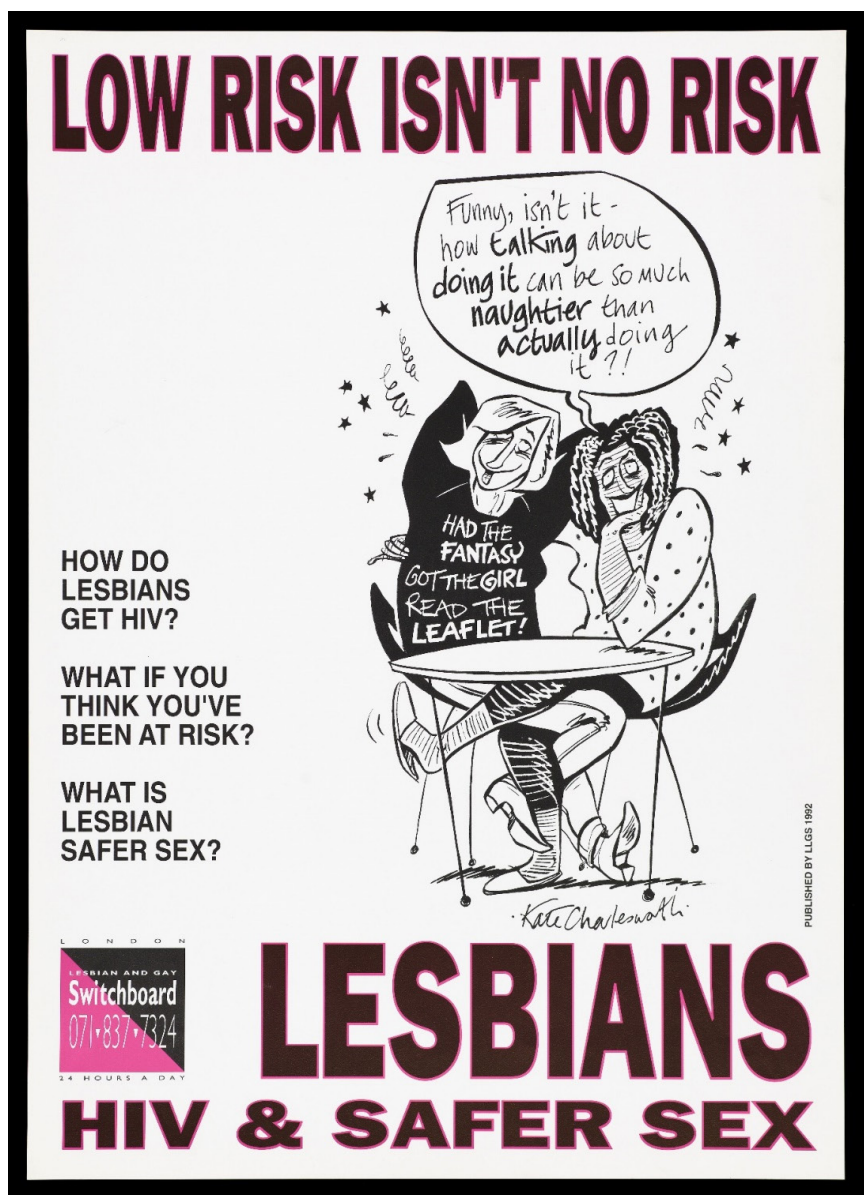
Activism

Primary Source Analysis

Hannah J. Elizabeth

This lithograph print, produced by London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard in 1992, was part of a campaign alerting women who have sex with women (WSW) to the potential dangers associated with sex between women. The London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard was a helpline established in 1974. Run by volunteers who identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual, it played an important role for LGBT folk in the UK, especially those living in and around London, offering information and advice on a variety of issues that affected queer communities.¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, Switchboard was a key player in tackling the AIDS crisis, answering calls on the subject, but also producing health campaigns. This lithograph was designed for a campaign that aimed to raise awareness around women's HIV risks and to discuss how WSW might practise safer sex. The campaign included posters, queer newsprint media adverts and a leaflet which featured the same cartoon that was distributed among queer women's groups across the UK. The print features a cartoon by Kate Charlesworth, a prominent British cartoon artist who often provided artwork for LGBT media and activist campaigns. Lithographs allowed images or texts to be reproduced and adapted easily, so they could be turned into posters, leaflets, or magazine and newspaper features at reduced cost. The simplicity of the design, using just two colours, could be a cost-saving measure – but it also creates a clear and impactful image, and made use of Switchboard's logo colours.

The cartoon depicts two women sandwiched between the pink and black words: LOW RISK ISN'T NO RISK. LESBIANS HIV & SAFER SEX. The women, a biracial couple, are sat at a small table, their legs entwined beneath it, giddy expressions on their faces. Above the couple is a speech bubble which reads: 'Funny isn't it – how talking about doing it can be so much naughtier than actually doing it?!' One woman is wearing a T-shirt



'Low risk isn't no risk' lithograph print from Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, with illustration by Kate Charlesworth, 1992. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/f35utm3x/images?id=w66ve3k8>

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which reads: ‘Had the fantasy, got the girl, read the leaflet!’ Combined, these sentiments emphasize talking about safer sex, and seeking more information on it, prompting the audience to engage in these health-seeking behaviours. The leaflet referenced on the T-shirt offered answers to the three questions written to the couple’s left: *How do lesbians get HIV? What if you think you’ve been at risk? What is lesbian safer sex?* Asking these questions worked to encourage the audience to contemplate the subject of lesbian safer sex and HIV. Alongside the provision of Switchboard’s phone number, these questions might be read as prompts for a conversation on the phone with a Switchboard volunteer, allowing the print to work as HIV awareness-raising, but also as an advert for Switchboard’s telephone services and a push for audience members to seek more information – to read the leaflet!

The print is aimed at sexually active women who have sex with women, especially women who identify as lesbians, as the text makes clear by naming this group. The depiction of a biracial couple in the cartoon also makes it clear that the print is attempting to reach women from different racial backgrounds. Switchboard in the 1990s was an organization with a committed interest in anti-racist politics, and lesbian activism in this period was increasingly alive to the ways racism made queers of colour more vulnerable to negative health outcomes. This growing interest in a more intersectional approach to lesbian health activism was partly influenced by American AIDS activism and women’s health movements, which had long campaigned about stark disparities in health outcomes along racial lines.² But it was also the result of newly formed UK-based organizations which specifically addressed the health experiences of queers of colour, and longstanding activism by individuals within existing LGBT organizations which still tended to be majority white.³

WSW’s HIV risk was a growing concern in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was feared lesbians might assume their sexual identity was ‘no risk’, protecting them from any HIV transmission risks, rather than understanding that it was specific behaviours, not identities, which presented risks. This is why the print states ‘low risk isn’t no risk’ and asks ‘how do lesbians get HIV?’ – making it clear that some lesbians had contracted the virus. However, the context behind this print is a little more complex than a need to raise awareness about HIV risks among WSW. In the 1990s, there was growing concern among some HIV/AIDS activists that lesbians might have a disproportionate perception of the risks associated with sex between women, resulting in stigmatization of HIV positive folk and a diversion of energy and resources away from more pressing AIDS-related issues.⁴ Indeed, the very concept of lesbian safer sex was a hotly debated issue around the time this print was produced.⁵ Some felt a focus on mitigating the risks involved in sexual activities between women was eclipsing awareness-raising around riskier transmission routes affecting WSW, such as the sharing of drug-injecting equipment.

Health promotion campaigns often try to engage their audience's emotions in an attempt to persuade them to do something for their health – taking positive action or avoiding unhealthy behaviours.⁶ While the early AIDS awareness campaigns of the Westminster Government often favoured negative emotions like shame and fear, queer activists often deployed humour and sex appeal to connect with their audiences and to promote safer sex. We can see this print as part of that tradition. This isn't to say only queer activists deployed humour and positive emotions in their health campaigns; the Scottish Government's response to HIV and drug use, for example, was also typically more lighthearted than Westminster's approach, and England's Health Education Association did eventually produce some more playful safer-sex education promotions.⁷ But humour here may have been more than a means of avoiding the censorious and gloomy tone associated with government health campaigns and engendering positive emotions in the audience. Lesbian safer sex campaigners were cast by some other AIDS activists as squeamish killjoys,⁸ so offering a humorous but intimate cartoon which seemed to celebrate sex between women firmly pushed back against this, enticing an audience that might be predisposed to being unsympathetic to a safer-sex view.

The print therefore speaks to a set of concerns around safer sex, lesbian identity, race and health activism that are specific to the moment of the early 1990s. It uses simple language, direct questions and bright colours to draw the audience in. In depicting intimacy and using humour, it promotes a positive image of sex and relationships in contrast to the dominant messaging from Westminster at the time.

Works cited

- Please note that some of the works cited and further materials include sexual images, swear words, and some challenging material.
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- Jason Okundaye, *Revolutionary Acts: Love & Brotherhood in Black Gay Britain* (London: Faber & Faber, 2024).

Notes

- 1 Vicky Iglkowski-Broad, "'Not Acceptable": Gay Switchboard's Attempts to Become a Charity', The National Archives: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/explore-the-collection/stories/switchboards-attempts-to-become-a-charity/> (accessed 1 September 2025).
- 2 Emma Day, *In Her Hands: Women's Fight Against AIDS in the United States* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1996).
- 3 Somak Biswas, 'HIV/AIDS and the Naz Project: Race, Sexuality, and South Asian AIDS Activism in Britain, 1990–2000', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 34:2 (2025), pp. 189–218; Jason Okundaye, *Revolutionary Acts: Love & Brotherhood in Black Gay Britain* (London: Faber & Faber, 2024).
- 4 Hannah J. Elizabeth, "'Low Risk Doesn't Mean No Risk": The Making of Lesbian Safer-Sex and the Creation of New (S)Experts in the Late Twentieth Century', in Cairtriona Beaumont, Eve Colpus and Ruth Davidson (eds), *Everyday Welfare in Modern British History: Experience, Expertise and Activism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).
- 5 Robin Gorna, *Vamps, Virgins and Victims: How Can Women Fight AIDS?* (London: Cassell, 1996).
- 6 Hannah J. Elizabeth, Gareth Millward and Alex Mold, "'Injections-While-You-Dance": Press Advertisement and Poster Promotion of the Polio Vaccine to British Publics, 1956–1962', *Cultural and Social History*, 16:3 (2019), pp. 315–36.
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- 8 Elizabeth, "“Low Risk Doesn't Mean No Risk”".

Further materials

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