

VIOLENCE AGAINST LESBIANS

A COAL Research Paper

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Lesbians are a little recognised social minority in Australia. Relative invisibility means that minimal attention has been paid to the considerable problems lesbians face. The most pervasive and dangerous

of these is anti-lesbian violence. Harassment, verbal abuse, intimidation and physical attacks are an all too common feature of lesbians' lives.

A NSW Police Survey (1992) of over 300 lesbians showed that 78% had experienced some form of harassment or violence. A Melbourne study (*Not A Day Goes By*, GLAD 94), which included nearly 500 lesbians, revealed that 70% had been verbally abused, threatened or bashed in a public place. Results from other surveys, quoted later in this paper, support these figures.

Lesbians are valuable citizens of this country who are forced to live in a state of siege. In order to feel safe they feel obliged to circumscribe their freedom on a daily basis. This affects their health and well being. The cost of this unnecessary restriction is shared by society as a whole.

Most Australians would agree that the freedom to live a life safe from the threat of violence is a basic human right. The high level of violence endured by Australian lesbians is unacceptable. This paper seeks to bring to public attention the alarming extent and nature of anti-lesbian violence and make some recommendations towards its elimination.

Nature of the problem

Sometimes the term violence is thought to encompass only physical violence. However verbal abuse, attacks on property, hate mail and ostracism also have the effect of violating a person's sense of security and dignity. The result is the creation of fear, caution and self censorship which limits the freedom and life potential of the victim.

Lesbians experience this violation of their personal integrity not only from gangs of aggressive youths in the street. They are also often treated with contempt, disregard, disrespect and ignorance by school mates, work colleagues, friends, family members, social and financial organisations, employers, government departments, the legal system, community services, the medical profession, media and virtually every institution in society.

Though discrimination based on a lack of awareness may not seem to constitute actual violence, a deeper look will reveal that sometimes the results are seriously disabling and even life threatening.

"The fact that lesbians are forced to risk cultural retribution over and over again in order to relate intimately is violence against lesbians and causes tremendous pain and damage ... (as) she may have to deal in a loss of self confidence, self-hatred, physical illness, nervous breakdown, alcoholism, marriage attempts ... wasted years of trying to be someone she isn't ... and suicide attempts." (Baetz, 1984 pp.45-6)

A lesbian may go through her life being abused by her school mates, rejected by her family, harassed by work colleagues, discriminated against by her employer, abused by her neighbours, unassisted by community services, bashed in the street or raped and then mistreated by police when she reports the crime.

Though this may seem an extreme scenario, a short glance through the records of the Anti-Violence Project, the Anti-Discrimination Board and published lesbian and gay surveys will reveal that it is all too common. There is no lesbian in Australia who has not experienced the violation of at least some of her basic human rights.

The intersection of anti-woman and anti-lesbian violence

Violence against lesbians stems from the notion that it is acceptable to discriminate against women who don't conform to narrow social norms of behaviour. Anti-lesbian violence differs from anti-gay male violence in that it is also anti-woman violence. It has repercussions for all women.

Anti-lesbian abuse is often based on a perceived transgression of a woman's assigned sex role. Women who do not make themselves sexually available to men are punished. This applies to heterosexual women as much as to lesbian women. In fact, to accuse a woman of being a lesbian is seen as a way of forcing her to re-assume a subservient position. Hence the use of the word lesbian as a term of abuse.

In a study of violent street assaults in San Francisco it was found "*that attacks often began as antiwoman and then added an anti-lesbian dimension*" (von Schulthess 1992, p.70). Many lesbians

interviewed believed that their lesbianism was invisible. It was only when they did not respond as expected by the male attacker that the assault escalated into anti-lesbian abuse.

The continued tolerance of abuse and violence against lesbians serves to limit all women's freedom of self determination and expression. None the less, although all women suffer from the threat of anti-lesbian violence it is lesbians who take the brunt of it.

For example;

Three lesbians rented a house in a small country town while they were grape picking. Gangs of youths drove by almost every night yelling anti-lesbian abuse and throwing missiles at the house. One night, when one of the women was home alone, the men broke in and gang raped her. (Sharon, South Australia, PC [Personal Communication])

A 33 year old lesbian called into her local shop late at night. As she came out she was surrounded by 30 youths chanting "Fuck the dyke." They grabbed her wallet. She managed to get into her car and drive away as they surrounded and thumped it. (LOTL [Lesbians On The Loose] Nov 95)

In Tasmania Judith McDonald was shot in the forearm by her lover's ex-boyfriend Steven John McGee because he was unhappy she had left him for a woman. Sentenced to 5 years for attempted murder and unlawful wounding his sentence was later reduced by a third. (LOTL Sep 95)

For over 6 months dozens of prominent Sydney lesbians received hate mail from a man who had cunningly collected their names and addresses. The letters contained phrases like "We have been paid to kill all fucking homosexuals and lesbians. One by one our top gunmen will shoot you dead." "A good hard fuck will cure you, or a bullet." The same man stalked one lesbian media personality for two years. (LOTL April 96)

A lesbian couple bought a home together. One was killed in a car accident. Her family successfully claimed her part of the property even though the couple had been together for 16 years. When the surviving partner, Jan Bell, took the matter to court they denied their daughter had been a lesbian. (LOTL Dec 96)

Dimitra owns a small business in Melbourne. Youths frequently come past and spit or throw things at the door, yell out "Leso!" and smear "Leso" on her door. She is constantly cleaning the door. (Mason 95)

Six Times As Likely

The recently released Australian Bureau Of Statistics survey *Women's Safety Australia* (Dec 96) shocked Australians with its revelation of the extent of violence experienced by women. It is therefore perhaps sobering to note that the NSW Police Survey *Out of The Blue* (1995) found that, based on crime statistics, lesbian respondents were six times as likely as heterosexual women to experience assault.

To be lesbian is to live with a constant threat of serious violation. This ranges from verbal abuse to gang rape. So far there are no well known instances of lesbians being murdered in Australia. However over the last few years lesbians here have been made aware of several brutal, anti-lesbian, hate crime murders in the United States. Lesbians live with the knowledge that death remains the ultimate penalty.

"Walking to her car from a bar a woman was verbally abused for being a lesbian then grabbed from behind, kicked, bashed and simultaneously raped by two men. When she fought back they tried to stop her breathing." (LOTL Feb 96)

Lesbians are not only endangered when they attend lesbian venues or events. They are also attacked in their own homes, their work places, while on holiday, at the businesses they own and even by their own families.

Family violence

The prevalence and therefore expectation of discrimination and violence means that many lesbians are unable to conceptualise certain instances in their lives as being actual attacks. Take this example;

Mechthild was asked if she had ever experienced any anti-lesbian violence in her life. She replied that she definitely had not and couldn't see that there was a problem. Yet earlier she had told the story of coming out to her parents. Her mother spat at her and yelled aggressively "I should shoot you." Her mother repeated this threatening statement several times over the next few years and also threatened to shoot her lover.

If Mechthild had encountered the same behaviour from a stranger in the street she would have been more likely (but not certain) to have recognised it as a form of violence. Yet to suffer such hostile behaviour from one's own mother as repercussion for disclosing one's identity is probably even more deeply wounding.

Numerous lesbians have experienced verbal harassment, abuse and physical violence at the hands of their own families. Leaving home may not be a solution to abuse.

"I moved in to a flat with my girlfriend. A straight friend of mine rang up my mother and told her where I was and what I was doing. My father and brother burst into the flat one Sunday morning and dragged me home. They virtually kidnapped me. They were hitting me and threatened my lover." (Linda, PC)

The experience of this young woman is not unique. Many lesbians, when their disapproving families have not been able to force them to stay at home, or successfully pressure them to get married, have been either completely or partially ostracised from the family fold. In the case of lesbians from minority groups this can be particularly distressing.

In Australian Aboriginal culture the primary value is family bonding which provides some measure of emotional protection against racist onslaughts. Exclusion from the family has serious consequences. The experience of this Ngunwal woman also reveals the problems of small town lesbians.

"I grew up in a small country town where there were a few Koorie families, all of whom were related in some way, so of course we all knew each other. ... It seemed like everyone in town had something against me because I was Black and outspoken, but as I grew older I was ostracised from my own family for being a lesbian. ... I was the only lesbian that anyone from this small country town had contact with. There was no way out for me ... I was losing my family, I couldn't have girlfriends because of their homophobia. And every male wanted to fix the situation. So I got out." (Connecting Cultures p.5)

The compounded problem of being a lesbian from a minority culture, be it indigenous or immigrant, leaves such women even more susceptible to violence. Surveys which have identified ethnicity (e.g. *Queer Bashing* 96) show that such lesbians suffer a 10% higher rate of attacks. As do disabled lesbians. They also at times face discrimination within the lesbian community.

Profile of the lesbian population

The actual structure and size of the Australian lesbian population is unknown. There has been a dire lack of research into lesbians and they are generally excluded from wider surveys of Australian women even when the participation of minority groups (such as NESB, disabled, etc.) are sought. This effectively excludes lesbians from planned programs and cultural recognition.

Representative surveys in other Western countries have variously estimated that from 1%-10% of the female population is lesbian. Even if an Australian census was commissioned it would be unlikely to provide accurate figures until the admission of lesbianism becomes less socially dangerous. Highly closeted lesbians, for example in small country towns, would be unlikely to co-operate with even a nominally anonymous questionnaire.

Long term lesbian activists are able to form a rough profile of their population from experience. It's extent is likely to be very surprising to heterosexuals who are generally unaware of the large numbers of 'closeted' lesbians who move and live amongst them. It is quite common for a lesbian's own family to be unaware of her identity.

Lesbians belong to all social classes, professions and ethnicities. They exist in the highest echelons of the public service, industry and academia. They also exist in outback Aboriginal communities and veiled fundamentalist Islamic groups. Many masquerade as married heterosexuals. The relatively visible urban ghetto lesbian communities are just the tip of the iceberg.

It is because of their greater knowledge of the nature and extent of lesbian numbers, that activists often make claims like 10% that seem outrageously high to others. However even if we assume a medium figure of 5% from published representative surveys (e.g. Kinsey) the Australian lesbian population is likely to be several hundred thousand. A large number of women to be denied natural justice and social acceptance.

EXISTING RESEARCH

Lesbian Specific

Very little research has been done into anti-lesbian violence in Australia or overseas. This is a reflection of both the lack of interest by society in general and the lack of resources in the lesbian community. Despite this, mainly voluntary community organisations, have made some measures of the violence against the more visible section of the lesbian population.

The best known study into specifically anti-lesbian violence is *The Off Our Backs Report* (1992). The questionnaire was distributed to the Sydney lesbian community by the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (GLRL) in early 1991 through lesbian venues and publications. Despite being a relatively small survey the results are important because they gave evidence of the nature of attacks and the inadequate response.

91% of respondents were survivors of verbal, physical or sexual assault. All believed they had been attacked because of their lesbianism. A third of respondents had experienced on going violence and over 29% had sustained injuries requiring medical treatment.

"Five men wielding a broken bottle attacked a 23 year old lesbian in the street; outside a lesbian venue. The assailants stated that the right man would make her straight. The survivor sustained serious lacerations but did not contact the police or medical services, fearing further victimisation." (Off Our Backs, p.8)

The NSW Police Service distributed over 600 questionnaires at the 1991 Sydney National Lesbian Conference. Over 300 were completed and returned, making it the most substantial lesbian only survey conducted in Australia. Despite this it remains unpublished.

Only 16% of respondents claimed never to have experienced serious harassment or assault. 10% had experienced physical violence, 8% sexual assault, 15% physical intimidation, 34% verbal harassment, 5% attacks on property. Only a minority of these instances were reported to police and often no assistance of any sort was sought, except from lesbian friends.

Several surveys (e.g. *Queer Bashing, As Long As I Have Got My Doona*) indicate that young people encounter even greater levels of violence. In 1992 Vic Barbeler's survey (*The Young Lesbian Report*) of over 200 young lesbians 90% said they had experienced discrimination of some sort due to their lesbianism. Over 83% had been verbally abused, including threats of physical violence from groups of males. 13.5% had experienced physical violence or sexual assault.

The extent of violence revealed in these surveys cannot be explained away by the assumption that mainly those assaulted replied to these self-selecting surveys. Though to some extent this is probably true, especially of *Off Our Backs*, other more representative studies (see below) report similarly high levels of violence.

Lesbians also tend to notably under-estimate incidents of violence and discrimination. For example a column in a lesbian magazine (*LOTL* Dec 96) asking lesbians if they had ever been discriminated against elicited a substantial number of "No" replies. Yet the comments attached revealed that respondents hid their lesbianism to avoid harassment.

"No, I don't make a big deal (of being a lesbian)."
"No, not at all. I don't go outside the Oxford Street area."

"No, because nobody knows I am."

Gail Mason completed a Ph.D. thesis on anti-lesbian violence (1995) for which she conducted 73 intensive interviews amongst a broad range of lesbians. Despite initial denials from many, she nevertheless found all her subjects had experienced some level of discrimination or abuse. Her unique and important, qualitative study elaborates on the intersection of misogyny and homophobic violence against lesbians.

Workplace Harassment

Nicole Asquith, while working for the NSW Anti-Violence Project completed her honours thesis on lesbian workplace experience. This provides an instructive balance to other surveys which concentrated more on 'street' violence.

Of her respondents 33% said they selected workplaces they thought would be more 'lesbian friendly'. Despite this 20% disclosed their lesbianism to no-one and a further 38% only to close co-workers. Nevertheless 59% experienced discrimination or harassment based on their sexuality.

Though women are less likely than men to be perpetrators, especially of physical violence, Nicole Asquith's study of lesbian workplace experience found 18% of perpetrators were women.

The most common tactic adopted by lesbians under threat is to ignore the behaviour or avoid the perpetrator. Others leave the job or take sick leave. Only if the harassment was ongoing did a minority (36%) of lesbians make a formal complaint. In one instance this resulted in the complainant being sacked and complainants were twice as likely as perpetrators to be relocated - indicating a perception that the lesbian and not the homphobe was the problem.

From this Asquith concludes;

"The level of discrimination and harassment subjectively experienced by lesbians in the workplace is frightening - indicating a possible systemic and systematic attack against lesbians participation in work." p.24

Lesbian & Gay Australian Surveys

Australia gay and lesbian organisations have also conducted a number of surveys on the issue of violence. (Figures are not always directly comparable due to differences in questionnaire design.)

The *Not A Day Goes By* (GLAD Vic 94) report is the most quantitatively substantial and included 492 women. As well as discovering high levels of violence (70% had been verbally abused, threatened or bashed in a public place), it also included discrimination experienced by lesbians in employment (45%), education (29%), medical services (17%) by the police (22%) and in the provision of services (41%).

Police & You (LGCA S.A. 93) found that 32% of lesbians were survivors of physical hate crime attacks. Of these 83% sustained physical injury and 67% psychological injury. It describes incidents in which women were attacked verbally and with fists, knives, guns and projectiles.

Out of the Blue (NSW Police Service 95), which included 120 lesbians, makes some remarkable observations; especially as it was administered by researchers conducting face to face interviews on the spot at a major lesbian and gay event, and was therefore somewhat less self selecting than other NSW studies.

It found that lesbians are twice as fearful of suffering verbal abuse and harassment as women generally. They are also much more fearful of assault and sexual assault (71% to 41%). In the last 12 months 13% of lesbians had experienced physical assault, 52% verbal abuse and harassment, 19% physical intimidation and 13% attacks on property. Of these only 18% had reported it to police. All the surveys found that there is a marked reluctance to report attacks to the police, even in NSW which has the most lesbian/gay friendly police force in Australia.

"My lover and I were attacked by two drunken larrikins. We sought help from a family walking nearby, but they pretended we were not there and the incident was not happening. We did not call the

police because we do not believe the police would take our complaint seriously, due to our sexuality." (p.37 S.A. Police and You)

The Schoolwatch report (Griffin 94) was a national study of violence and harassment in schools. Despite the fact that 51% of respondents weren't 'out' to any teachers and 61% weren't open with any students, 67% of students had been verbally harassed, 30% threatened with violence and 30% physically attacked. Many had survived dozens and even hundreds of incidents. Teachers also experienced substantial violations. The result is that the education of lesbians seriously suffers.

"When I came out ... life at school became very tough. I received name-calling such as "leso" and "lemon" and wolf-whistling. Students talked about me behind my back. Someone wrote (about me) on the wall of the school toilets ... I particularly dread times in classes ... when we form small groups of pairs as I was often the odd one out. I felt ostracised and constantly on edge at school." (Jennifer Glass, Schoolwatch).

The 2010 report (Gregoric et al, 1995) on lesbian/gay youth homelessness emphasises in its section on education that violence and harassment causes young people to leave school early. (pp.37-40)

Overseas Research

Overseas research substantiates the Australian experience. Von Schulthess's study of 400 self-identified lesbian and bisexual women in San Francisco (1992) found that 40% had been threatened with physical violence, 33% chased or followed, 15% physically assaulted, 6% sexually assaulted, 27% projectiles thrown and 10% had property vandalised.

Queer Bashing, a British national survey of 4200 respondents by the Stonewall organisation (1996), confirms the Australian findings on violence levels. It found that 24% of lesbians had experienced violent attacks, 32% had been harassed and 73% verbally abused because of their sexuality.

In the U.S. 21 surveys quoted in Berrill & Herek (1992) found that 80% of lesbians and gays had suffered verbal harassment, 44% threats of violence and 17% had been physically assaulted. Significant numbers had also been spat upon, pelted with objects, chased or followed and had their property vandalised.

Self selecting surveys

The figures obtained in lesbian and gay self selecting surveys cannot be seen as truly representative of the lesbian population. They have mostly focused on 'street' violence. They do not adequately survey hidden groupings such as rural, ethnic minority and non-scene lesbians. Due to lack of resources the numbers surveyed are also relatively small. They are none the less reasonably consistent and do provide evidence of grievous violence as an everyday occurrence.

Unique confirmation of exclusively lesbian and gay surveys has been provided by a representative survey, run as a sub-sample of the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles in 1995. It confirmed *Queer Bashing's* results. (Mason & Palmer p.102)

Differences in anti-lesbian and anti-gay violence

There are significant differences between anti-lesbian and anti-gay male violence. On the face of it surveys tend to show higher incidents of public physical violence against gay men who are predominantly attacked by gangs of youths.

Gay men are more visible than lesbians so violence against them is more overt, whereas that against lesbians more covert and pervasive in their lives. Surveys reveal that lesbians are far more likely than gay men to be attacked by people they know, by one assailant only and by older men. It is also more common when they are in couples than alone; a partner identifies them as lesbian.

Lesbians are much less likely to report assaults than gay men. This may be because the threat and reality of violence is so much more pervasive in women's lives that they become immune to even recognising it. They take it for granted. Men, including gay men, expect to walk the streets freely. When singled out for attack they recognise it as an outstanding assault and are therefore more likely to report it. For example, in *Police & You* one woman listed rape as a minor (rather than major) injury.

Further reasons could be the difficulty of distinguishing anti-lesbian violence from anti-woman violence, as mentioned earlier. Their experience as women also causes lesbians to modify their public behaviour more than gay men do. For example *Out of The Blue* found that 73% of lesbians and 51% of gay men modified their behaviour to avoid harassment.

The NSW Police Liaison Officer believes that attacks on lesbians are increasing. Though this may be because more are reporting incidents due to the higher profile homophobic violence is receiving in the lesbian community, it is quite possibly a result of the increasing visibility of lesbians in the media, Mardi Gras parade, etc.

Invisibility and Violence

Often tolerance of lesbians is based on an expectation of invisibility. Many heterosexual people agree with this social imperative. Even many lesbians subscribe to the notion that it is OK to be a lesbian only "in the privacy of their own homes". They fail to see the serious consequences of maintaining social invisibility.

Perhaps it would be instructive to draw an analogy. Many people are aware that the communist regime in China banned public expressions of affection such as holding hands or kissing between men and women. This was widely perceived as an excess of totalitarianism. Yet here in Australia many people advocate such a proscription against lesbians, even though it is social rather than legislative.

"Two dykes got thrown out of Cafe Sport (a popular coffee shop) for cuddling. Dykes have been spoken to by staff at other coffee shops for being 'obvious'." (W.A. COAL group, PC)

The imperative of 'stay invisible' is demonstrated by the consequences of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade held in Sydney every March and broadcast nationally on the ABC. Many see the popularity of this parade as indicative of the high level of acceptance and visibility possible in modern Australia. So it is sobering to note that, according to workers at the Sydney based Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, the level of reported anti-lesbian and gay violence goes up 300% immediately after the Mardi Gras (Asquith p.49).

A message is clearly being given by a proportion of the heterosexual public that if you stick your head out of the closet we will bash it back in. *Not A Day Goes By* (GLAD 94) concluded "*The more open lesbians and gay men are about their sexuality the more likely they are to suffer discrimination and violence.*"

The U.K. survey (*Queer Bashing* 96) mirrors this observation. They included specific questions in their survey which asked respondents about how they avoided potential violence. For lesbians they state "*there was a straightforward correlation between greater openness and an increased risk of violence.*" (p.72) Significantly however, extreme avoidance tactics don't necessarily work. 20% of lesbians who always avoided telling people (about their lesbianism) had experienced violent incidents.

Out of the Blue (S.A) found that 72% of lesbian respondents modified their behaviour to avoid harassment. This included hiding their sexuality by modifying dress, showing no affection in public, avoiding certain locations and being generally more defensive.

"I feel the threat is ever present, so I'm usually very careful. This feeling of being constantly under siege is difficult to quantify ... yet very real. Like most lesbians I'm less honest and open about my life than I'd choose to be if I didn't think I'd be putting my well-being at risk." (p.80 Queer Bashing)

"After constantly seeing and hearing about homophobic attacks, I am too afraid to come out, except to close friends. Work is a problem area, with comments and ridicule bandied about the staff room about gays, which I find insulting and derogatory. Going out in the evenings is a worry re safety and "coming out" issues due to family, friends and associates finding out ... It seems very dangerous to be 'out' in any place." (p.78 Queer Bashing)

The consequences of the threat of violence is that lesbians adopt avoiding behaviour that is highly restrictive. It affects their health and limits their potential and joy in life. There is a resultant high cost to society.

RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE

Police

The first point of contact for lesbian victims of hate crimes should be the police. Yet surveys have shown only a small minority of lesbians report attacks to the police. Perhaps not surprisingly lesbians do not expect protection from police for anti-lesbian crimes.

"I lived in Darwin in the early 1980s. My friend and I were visible lesbians. The police were always picking on us. They'd stop our car and once when they took me down to the station they beat me up and abused me for being a lesbian. They kept threatening us. Eventually they threw us out of town. I could have gone back I guess but we decided it was too dangerous then." (Kathy, PC)

"We were walking down the street when there was a lot of publicity about Aboriginal deaths in custody. A police car drove past. I recognised the cop because he'd done me for some dope once. He leaned out the window and said "Hey dyke, next time you'll get a football sock," and made a hanging gesture round his throat." (White lesbian, Port Macquarie NSW, PC).

There have been some moderate moves in recent times to counteract this kind of anti-lesbian prejudice in police enforcement, which not only denies lesbians normal justice, but is part of the daily threat they face.

Most notable have been the efforts of the NSW Police Service. For several years it has employed a full time Gay/Lesbian Client Consultant, Sue Thompson. A number of initiatives have been taken to, not only improve policing of crimes against lesbians and gays, but also to change both public opinion and prejudice within the police force. It has set up a system of specialised Gay and Lesbian contact officers in a third of NSW stations.

W.A. is about to appoint a specialised gay and lesbian liaison officer but in other states such matters are handled by officers with multiple other responsibilities. Other states meet with community groups either regularly or only on a special needs basis. The ACT is experimenting with special contact officers in some stations. Surveys in Victoria and S.A. (GLAD 94 & LGCA 94) have revealed substantial problems for lesbians in their interactions with police.

In essence, although there are some weak bridges being built, precious little work is being done to address the serious level of crime and the problems within the police forces themselves. Even the exemplary attitude and efforts of the NSW Police Service are only scraping the surface of what needs to be done in the area of police attitudes, public perceptions and stamping out of anti-lesbian/gay hate crimes.

Elimination of Discrimination

Violence against lesbians is the end result of discriminatory attitudes in society and the reflection of these in institutionalised discrimination. The elimination of violence can only be preceded by the elimination of discrimination.

The subject of the broader discriminations that contribute to anti-lesbian violence is a huge one and can only be briefly touched upon here.

Briefly it is essential that government take the lead in outlawing discrimination and violence, and put in place the mechanisms and funding for the education of public servants, community service providers and the public about the civil and human rights of lesbians.

The Australian federal government still does not provide lesbians with human rights protection, nor do the states of Western Australia and Tasmania. The protection available in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Victoria is very limited and contains homophobic exemptions. All state Acts contain exemptions which serve to countenance discrimination in some form.

Even where anti-discrimination legislation exists it has not been effective in eliminating the daily onslaught of discrimination, harassment and violence against lesbians. Studies show that lesbians are loathe to pursue complaints. Some of the reasons are; fear of retribution, substantial time delays,

expense, fear of media publicity, the lack of adequate legislation in some States, lack of opportunity to lodge representative complaints and lack of advocacy services.

There is a necessity for adequate and over-arching federal legislation which will render invalid any inconsistent Federal, State or Territory laws. The currently under-resourced human rights bodies must be adequately financed for their public education roles and to ease the burden of pursuing a complaint.

Further elaboration on these issues can be found in the excellent submissions to the recent Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee's *Inquiry into Sexuality Discrimination* by a number of lesbian and gay community organisations and legal services. (e.g. COAL, GLRL, ICLS NSW)

Workplace harassment and violence is a major problem for lesbians yet very few resort to outside intervention from their union or anti-discrimination board. They are also cautious in seeking support from fellow workers or employers. Seeking support may only escalate the problem. As Asquith says;

"The most prevalent form of unwanted or disturbing incidents at work for lesbians was the public questioning, public disclosure or rumour and gossip about sexual preference. ... All these, while being fundamentally determinant of workplace experience, are not covered under any institutional or normative framework of proscribed discrimination and harassment." (p.40)

This shows that legislative protection must be accompanied by public education.

Education against discrimination

Neither violence, harassment nor discrimination will end until a substantial program of public education is pursued. Anti-lesbian prejudice is based on ill-informed opinion. To this end COAL applauds the grant allocated by the NSW Department of Women in November 1996 towards its education program.

Many government employees, NGO service providers and even unincorporated organisations are unaware of the existence of lesbian issues and problems. Very few community centres incorporate services for lesbians.

Many lesbians experience problems of homelessness e.g. young women thrown out of home. Yet the newly released Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) five year strategic plan includes extensive references to a number of minority groups but contains no reference to lesbians.

Public education programs in the health, community services, youth, etc. areas routinely neglect to include a lesbian (and gay) perspective or component. A notable exception to this was a public campaign to reduce violence against women conducted in 1995 by the NSW Department of Community Services. Lesbian participation was invited on the community advisory committee and lesbian representatives contributed valuable suggestions to the design and content of the program so that it would be lesbian inclusive. Heterosexist visual images were changed and contact numbers relevant to lesbians were included on the posters and contact cards distributed as part of the program.

The process of making people aware of lesbian issues and turning around prejudicial public opinion is an immense undertaking. It needs to begin in the schools. Ironically it is here that lesbians experience the most severe discrimination. (*The Schoolwatch Report*, 94)

Pressure from the lesbian and gay community has resulted in the inclusion of a section on violence against homosexuals in the NSW Department of School Education Resources for Teaching Against Violence kit. It is still not used widely enough, yet every child in Australia needs to be taught an expanded version of this package if violence levels are to be reduced..

Government and NGO Services

Lesbian survivors of assault, harassment or abuse either on the streets or in their homes or work places may need to use a number of resources ranging from the health system to community services, unions and other government instrumentalities.

Currently the norm for lesbians under attack is either to withdraw, to protect themselves in whatever way they can and to look for support from their lesbian friends. Just as they may fear prejudice or even

further harassment from police, they also fear that medical personnel, union representatives, counsellors, support services or government departments will be either non-sympathetic or inappropriate in their response.

"A woman living in a Department of Housing block of flats sought transfer out of the block due to ongoing physical and verbal harassment of her and her two children from neighbours. She received anti-lesbian service from the DOH. Only after intervention by the AVP, after 5 years of harassment, was she allocated a new house." (NSW Anti Violence Project, Violence Alert, August 95)

Service providers in all areas need to be trained to adequately service lesbian clients. In the interim advocacy organisations like COAL and the AVP must be resourced to educate providers on their responsibilities.

So far the lesbian and the mixed gay community have worked hard to bring the problem of homophobic violence to the public's attention and establish policies and services to counteract its prevalence and debilitating affects. This has been done with very little government or community assistance. All the same, the anti-homophobia campaigns developed in NSW by the Police Service and the Anti-Violence Project are effective and valuable exercises which could well be emulated in other States.

CONCLUSION

Lesbians in Australia are systematically subjected to the constant threat and reality of both petty and serious violence. The nature and extent of anti-lesbian violence and prejudice is unacceptably high and needs to be addressed urgently.

Increasing visibility results in an escalation of violence. Yet maintaining invisibility is equally restrictive of freedom and the ability to function as fully participating and accepted members of society.

The response from police, government, community services and the wider society to this pandemic of anti-lesbian violence is inadequate, and results in unnecessary suffering for a large number of lesbian citizens.

Further research into the problem and the implementation of suitable legislative protection, police procedures, community resource provision and widespread institutional and public education programs aimed at eliminating discrimination and violence against lesbians is urgently needed.

Until this is done hundreds of thousands of Australian lesbian women are being denied social acceptance, natural justice and their basic human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the issues raised in this paper COAL recommends that:

Anti-Violence goals -

All State and Federal Police forces adopt the NSW Police Service model for lesbian and gay community policing; including liaison officers, police training and public awareness programs.

The NSW Police Service model be developed and expanded upon until lesbians receive the same level of security as other citizens.

Community based Anti-Violence Projects with significant lesbian participation be adequately funded in all states of Australia to research and provide client support and advocacy.

Anti-homophobic violence packages be provided to and actively promoted in all schools.

Anti-discrimination goals -

Federal human rights legislation to protect lesbians from discrimination be enacted as soon as possible
Western Australia and Tasmania enact anti-discrimination legislation to protect lesbians.

The states of Queensland, Northern Territory and Victoria upgrade their anti-discrimination legislation.

All states with existing human rights legislation eliminate homophobic exemptions.

Government provide adequate funding to human rights/anti-discrimination/equal opportunities bodies to ensure adequate and support and educational personnel and speedy resolution of complaints.

Unions develop programs to deal with harassment of lesbians in workplaces.

Research -

Adequate research funding be provided to survey the numbers, profile and needs of the Australian lesbian population.

Adequate research funding be provided to do quantitative and qualitative research into the incidence and nature of anti-lesbian violence in all states and the commonwealth.

All surveys of the Australian population, whether government or private, include lesbians in their terms of reference.

Community Service Provision -

Adequate funding be provided for lesbian specific resources for survivors of anti-lesbian violence.

The policies and practices of government funding programs enable the development and promotion of lesbian specific services within existing organisations.

Education goals -

Human resources departments of all major organisations put in place anti-homosexual discrimination and violence awareness programs and training for all staff.

Government fund community education programs designed to eliminate anti-homosexual discrimination, harassment and violence in government departments, media, community groups, community services and other institutions.

SURVEYS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST LESBIANS -

The table below summarises the findings of a variety of surveys into anti-lesbian violence.

The figures given from mixed lesbian & gay surveys relate to lesbian respondents only (unless otherwise stated).

Please Note: The figures are not directly comparable because each survey differed in its construction of questionnaires, sampling methods and definitions.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

NAME OF STUDY	FINDINGS
<i>NSW Police Service Lesbian Survey</i>	78% experienced harassment or assault, 10% physical violence, 8% sexual assault.
<i>The Young Lesbian Report NSW</i>	83% threatened and abused, 13.5% violently assaulted.
<i>Not A Day Goes By (Victoria)</i>	70% verbally abused, threatened or bashed in public, 11% bashed, 12% harassed by police, 45% harassment or discrimination at work.
<i>Police & You (S.A).</i>	32% survivors of hate crime attacks, 53% did not report these to the police.
<i>Out of the Blue - NSW Police Service</i>	84% some form of harassment or assault. 6 times more likely than other women to be assaulted.
<i>A Study of Workplace Experience (NSW)</i>	59% discrimination or harassment.
<i>Schoolwatch</i>	67% verbally harassed, 30% threatened with violence, 30% physically attacked.
<i>Queer Bashing (UK)</i>	74% verbally abused, 32% harassed, 24% assaulted.
<i>Hate Crimes Summary (USA)</i>	80% verbal harassment, 44% threats of violence, 17% physically assaulted (includes male figures).
<i>San Francisco study (USA)</i>	15% physically assaulted, 40% threatened with assault, 6% sexually assaulted, 27% projectiles thrown, 10% property vandalised, 33% chased.

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