

# Sexism, misogyny and homophobia

## Violence against lesbians in the USA

In 2004 a lesbian from Athens, Georgia, filed a civil lawsuit alleging that a former Gwinnett County Deputy raped her because she is a lesbian. The officer reportedly forced her into her apartment at gunpoint before raping her. The woman said the officer vowed to "teach her a lesson" and said the world "needed at least one less dyke and he was going to make sure that happened." The officer was charged with rape, false imprisonment, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, aggravated assault with intent to rape, and violating his oath of office. According to the Athens-Clarke County District Attorney's office, the officer was acquitted of most charges, but found guilty of violating his oath of office. The officer agreed to a deal whereby he received two years' probation during which he was to have no contact with the victim. The officer was banned from Athens-Clarke County and promised not to appeal the decision.

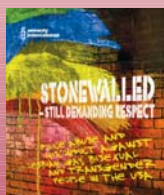
In virtually every culture in the world women experience gender-based violence. Survivors of violence against women tell of their profound feelings of shame and of the scepticism and disbelief with which society responds to them. Violence against women is often an invisible crime, usually committed behind closed doors and frequently dismissed as a "normal", and therefore unchangeable, fact of life. Even in countries where laws criminalize violence against women, tolerance of such violence may be found at all levels of society.

Gender discrimination is often combined with other forms of discrimination, including discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity and class. Sexism, misogyny, racism and homophobia often occur together and Amnesty International's research has shown that the prevalence of such discrimination puts lesbians and bisexual women at grave risk of abuse in a range of situations, including in the home and in the community. In most societies having a public or private identity that challenges or differs from the sexual and gender roles expected of men and women can put both men and women at risk. However, as a result of sexism, gender-based discrimination and misogyny, lesbians often face additional or different obstacles in defending their human rights from those faced by gay men. In short, lesbians are at risk of further human rights violations simply because they are women.

In the USA, as elsewhere, violence against lesbians and bisexual women is part of a spectrum of violence to which women can be subjected if they depart from accepted codes of sexual behaviour. Such violence is generally underreported, in large part because of the discrimination and marginalization faced by women who – in terms of their sexuality or gender expression – do not conform to social and cultural norms of femininity. Because women's sexual experience can more easily be controlled by the family and community, lesbians and bisexual women may face a different range of obstacles in resisting ill-treatment or seeking redress.

Amnesty International's research showed that discrimination means that lesbians and bisexual women are often blamed for the violence targeted at them. The violence is seen as a "punishment" for their failure to conform to social conventions. Activists told Amnesty International that lesbians and bisexual women who are perceived as "too masculine" fear reporting abuse and violence as all too often they are seen as responsible for the violence committed against them.

A lesbian living in St Paul, Minnesota, reported that in July 2000 a man repeatedly pushed his shopping cart into her partner, eventually knocking her to the ground. She told Amnesty International: "an officer stationed at the front of the store said that if we wanted to press charges then he would have to arrest both my partner and the man since he did not know 'who started it.' When I informed him that the man had been following us for several minutes and had called my partner a 'dyke', he told me that if we 'chose that lifestyle we had to expect some people to have a problem.' He refused to take a report." She took down his badge number and reported the incident to the police precinct, where she was informed that since the officer had not filed any incident report, she could not file a complaint against him. Shortly afterwards she was reportedly fired from her job working for the state of Minnesota. She told Amnesty International she was informed by her employers that her involvement in the incident was "conduct unbecoming to a state employee".



For more details see AI's report: *Stonewalled – still demanding respect*  
*Police abuses against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the USA* (AI Index: AMR 51/001/2006), available from [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)  
For further information see [www.amnestyusa.org/outfront/](http://www.amnestyusa.org/outfront/)

A lesbian told Amnesty International in February 2004 that she was pulled over by police as she was driving one evening. She reported, "They patted me down, spending too long in the wrong places. Then I was told to lay on my stomach on the ground. They were asking me if I would like to know how it felt with a man. I was asked by one of the officers if I had a 'hot babe girlfriend' that I could call to meet us for 'fun'. When I tried to report them, I was laughed at and asked to leave."

Amnesty International's research shows that women whose sexuality or gender expression challenge society's stereotypes of what women should be often face particular difficulties when trying to report violence against them, including threats of further abuse or violence. As a result they may either not report the abuse at all, or tell only part of the story. The discrimination faced by lesbians and bisexual women in society at large also means that breaches of confidentiality by police, judges, prosecutors or other services can pose very real threats to their lives both at home and at work. Reporting violence can put them at risk of extortion, blackmail or public repudiation.

Lesbians have been subjected to violence by law enforcement officers because of their sexuality. In particular, women perceived as "masculine" tend to be seen by officers as non-compliant or resisting arrest and are generally treated with greater physical harshness.

Campaigners have told Amnesty International that some police officers respond to domestic violence involving lesbian couples, by trying "to get the girls to calm down and get along", or see it as a "fair fight". This failure to see such situations as "real" domestic violence stems from a misconception among many law enforcement officials that a determination of domestic violence is based primarily on the sex of the people in the couple. As a result many simply assign the label of "mutual abuse" and arrest both parties in a situation involving violence in a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) relationship.

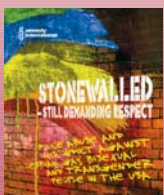
A Latina woman living in Chicago was arrested and ordered to undergo counselling after her partner called the police, claiming she had been abused. The Latina woman had reportedly been beaten by her partner over a period of time, and neighbours had repeatedly called the police, who usually did not intervene. Despite this long history of abuse, when the police finally took action it was to arrest the long-term victim. An LGBT domestic violence activist told Amnesty International in February 2004 that the abusive partner was fluent in English and was for that reason taken more seriously by police. The victim was monolingual Spanish and unfamiliar with her rights in the USA and so was unable to defend herself verbally with police. As with most same-sex domestic violence cases the police assume both parties liable, and the one that can speak up and makes the first accusations is considered the victim.

## What needs to be done

LGBT people in the USA continue to suffer serious police abuses, in some cases amounting to torture and ill-treatment. Despite some positive initiatives by law enforcement agencies and the justice system, much more needs to be done to protect LGBT people from police abuse and misconduct.

The US authorities must stop police violence against lesbians and bisexual women, including by taking the following steps:

- ⊗ Take positive measures to prohibit and prevent rape and sexual abuse by law enforcement officials. The authorities should publicly recognize that rape by law enforcement officials constitutes torture and will not be tolerated. Sexual abuse is a form of ill-treatment that includes the deliberate use of body searches to degrade or humiliate and the use of sexually explicit language.
- ⊗ Promptly and impartially investigate all allegations and reports of police abuse and misconduct, regardless of where they take place. All officers responsible for abuses should be disciplined appropriately and brought to justice. The US government must ensure that the victims receive fair and adequate reparations, including compensation.
- ⊗ Ensure that law enforcement agencies conduct prompt investigations into all reports of LGBT domestic violence. They should ensure that officers are thoroughly trained in how to investigate such allegations, including how to identify the abuser.
- ⊗ Ensure that all law enforcement training programmes are based on human rights standards and include LGBT sensitivity training.
- ⊗ Establish at a local level an independent and effective mechanism for reporting complaints of sexual, physical or verbal abuse by law enforcement officials so that victims, relatives and witnesses can file complaints without fear of reprisal. Investigating and prosecuting authorities should respond with sensitivity to the difficulties faced by LGBT survivors of alleged ill-treatment in pursuing their complaints.



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AI Index: AMR 51/026/2006