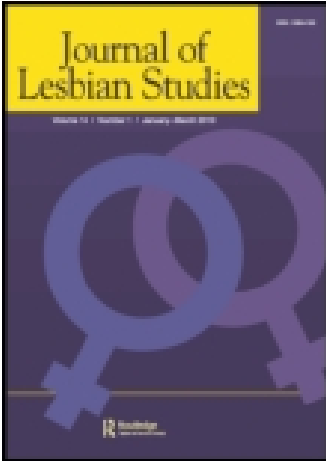


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## Journal of Lesbian Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wjls20>

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Published online: 12 Oct 2008.

To cite this article: Jenny Rankine (2001) The Great, Late Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Discrimination Survey, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 5:1-2, 133-142, DOI: [10.1300/J155v05n01\\_09](https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v05n01_09)

To link to this article: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J155v05n01\\_09](http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J155v05n01_09)

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# The Great, Late Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Discrimination Survey

Jenny Rankine

**SUMMARY.** This 1992 New Zealand survey of discrimination against 261 lesbian and bisexual women found comparable rates of public abuse and workplace discrimination to those reported by surveys in other developed countries. The women reported higher rates of assault in public places than a random sample of New Zealand women. Indigenous Maori women reported higher rates of assault, threats, verbal abuse, and workplace discrimination than the non-Maori women surveyed. Aggression against the women was often in response to public expression of affection for another woman or to rejection of men's public sexual advances. The respondents reported hostile educational environments that coincided with peer harassment of students attracted to their own gender. Around two-thirds of the women had hidden their sexuality on some occasions at work to avoid discrimination. No significant differences between the discrimination experiences of lesbian and bisexual women emerged, although the bisexual sample was too small for statistical analysis. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Bisexual women, coming out, discrimination, discrimination in education, harassment, hate crimes, lesbian, sexual identity, sexual orientation, New Zealand

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[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "The Great, Late Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Discrimination Survey." Rankine, Jenny. Co-published simultaneously in *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 5, No. 1/2, 2001, pp. 133-142; and: *Lesbian Studies in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (ed: Alison J. Laurie) Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2001, pp. 133-142. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service [1-800-342-9678, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com].

A New Zealand survey of discrimination against lesbian and bisexual women has reported rates of public abuse and workplace discrimination comparable to those reported in surveys in other developed countries.<sup>1</sup> This is despite high reported tolerance of homosexual identity in New Zealand surveys (AGB-McNair, 1990).

The survey was carried out in 1992, before sexual orientation was included in New Zealand human rights legislation as one of several new grounds for protection against discrimination. It aimed to provide a baseline against which changes in lesbian experiences of discrimination could be measured. It also aimed to identify any differences between discrimination experienced by lesbian and by bisexual women. It was carried out by a voluntary community-based group of lesbians, and difficulties in obtaining funding meant that it was not published until 1997.

The survey was distributed as a printed booklet through lesbian mailing lists, snowball sampling, and lesbian venues, mostly in Auckland, but also in other cities and provincial centres. It asked 49 questions about coming out, experiences of harassment and violence, and discrimination in employment, housing, health, education, services, religion, and parenting.

Two hundred sixty-one completed questionnaires were returned, from 229 lesbians, 27 bisexual women, and five women who did not want to label their sexuality. The small number of bisexual women who responded means that the survey's second aim could not be met, and their answers are reported separately only when they differ significantly from the lesbian responses.

The participants represented a range of ethnicities and ages, although women from the indigenous Maori population of New Zealand were underrepresented (6% compared with 9.7% in the 1991 Census), and immigrant women from European backgrounds were over-represented (11% compared with 9.2% born in the UK, USA, Canada, or Australia in the 1991 Census). Summaries of some of the results follow.

### COMING OUT

Just under half the women (49%) had been in a previous heterosexual relationship. The survey asked at what age women first thought and knew they were lesbian or bisexual. Women first *thought* they

might love women at a median age of 17. The lesbian women knew at a median of 23, while the bisexual women, who were overall a younger group, knew at 21. This realisation came slightly later than it did for UK women surveyed in 1990/1992 (Snape et al., 1995). The median age at which the New Zealand lesbian respondents first had sex with another woman was 23. This was also later than the female respondents to another UK survey (Stonewall, 1993).

Just over two-fifths of the New Zealand women felt positive when they first knew they loved women, just over one in five had very mixed feelings, and one in five felt ashamed or in other ways strongly negative. One Pakeha lesbian said: "Good-it was like light dawning on why I hadn't felt and behaved like other women towards men." Another said: "I felt that I was abnormal, sick (insane), guilty and dirty. Ashamed and alarmed."

Almost two-thirds reported positive responses from the people they told. One-quarter of the lesbians reported negative reactions. More than half the lesbians did not know of any support services when they first came out, whereas most of the bisexual women did. This difference may be related to the high proportion of bisexual women's surveys returned by members of two bisexual support groups. Typically, all the women were most out to friends.

### *EDUCATION*

More than nine out of ten women had been told nothing about lesbianism or bisexuality during their secondary education. This is a similar proportion to the UK survey (Stonewall, 1993). Only 21 had been told anything in class, and for 13 this information was treated negatively. Forty-one percent of lesbians and 60% of bisexual women reported experiencing discrimination in education on the grounds of sexual identity. Incidents were evenly spread over the previous four decades. Forty-two women added comments about their school mates' regular and often virulent ridicule and harassment of lesbians and gays. As one lesbian said: "The things that I did hear through informal channels while at school were so terrible that I never related the word 'lesbian' to my feelings for women."

The New Zealand schools which this group of women experienced had created a hostile environment for and coincided with peer harassment of students attracted to their own gender. A qualitative study

since the passing of the Human Rights Act (Quinlivan, 1997) suggests that this has not significantly improved for girls who love other girls at secondary school. Effective programmes to counter peer harassment of lesbian, bisexual, and gay students remain urgently needed.

The current creation of education markets in New Zealand schooling is tending to ghettoise disadvantaged racial and socio-economic populations into certain areas and schools. This may result in a small number of schools where lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and teachers can more easily be out, but is likely to leave a large majority of students dealing with restrictive constructions of female sexuality in which same-sex love is invisible.

### *PUBLIC VIOLENCE*

More than three-quarters of all the surveyed women had been verbally abused about their sexuality at least once, and 9% had been verbally abused often. Reported rates of verbal abuse of lesbians in other surveys vary markedly, from 34% in a small sample of Sydney lesbians (Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 1991) to 92% in a small Wellington survey (Lesbian and Gay Rights Resource Centre, 1985).

In additional comments, 51 women commented on what they thought had provoked this abuse. Almost all were related to holding hands or otherwise expressing public affection for another woman (whether a friend or partner) or to disinterest in men's public sexual advances. Another seven said they had been abused near a gay or a women's venue. These comments provide strong support for Carol Ruthchild's conclusion that public abuse and violence is one way in which lesbians are punished for their sexual autonomy from men (Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 1991).

Thirty-one percent of the lesbians and 42% of the bisexual women had been threatened with violence. This is similar to the findings of overseas surveys which have asked this question: around one-third of participants commonly report receiving threats of violence (Herek, 1989; Herek et al., 1992; Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 1991; Fitzgerald, 1996; Mason et al., 1996). Around 13% of the New Zealand women had been physically assaulted at least once as a result of their sexual identity. Rates of assault reported in contemporary overseas surveys vary markedly, from 11% in a 1993 Victorian survey (Fitzger-

ald, 1996) to 52% in the small Sydney sample (Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 1991).

In comparison, 22% of a cohort of 1,000 21-year-old Dunedin women reported being assaulted in the previous 12 months, with 15% reporting multiple assaults (Martin et al., 1998). However, the bulk of these assaults were by partners. This sample experienced much lower rates of assault in public places than the lesbian and bisexual sample did.

Maori women reported higher rates of assault, threats of violence, and verbal abuse than Pakeha or immigrant European women. Women who were more out about their sexuality were more likely to report abuse. The bisexual women's experience of abuse was largely related to their affectionate behaviour towards other women in public. Seven comments from four women mention abuse based on their bisexual identity.

More than one-third reported being sometimes or often afraid of public harassment. Twelve women commented about the ways in which public abuse caused them to alter their behaviour towards their partners in public, although this question was not included. "My behaviour in public is *always* monitored, always aware, sometimes brave," said one lesbian.

### ***DISCRIMINATION AT WORK***

Being treated differently by and from heterosexual workmates were the most common forms of workplace discrimination, reported by more than one in three women. Twenty-three percent of lesbians had been harassed about their sexuality at work, similar to the 21% in a UK survey (Snape et al., 1995).

Ten percent of the lesbians had lost a job because of their sexuality, and a further six women were unsure whether their sexual identity was the reason that they had to leave their jobs. Rates in other surveys ranged from 4% (Snape et al., 1995) to 12% (NZAF, 1992). Some women reported the imposition of inappropriate and unnecessary restrictions on their work roles, although this question was not specifically asked.

Nine percent of the lesbians thought they had been denied promotion because of their sexuality, and another 7% suspected that might be the reason. This compares with 5% in the Less Equal than Others

survey by Stonewall in the UK (Palmer, 1993). Five percent of the lesbians believed they had been denied a job because of responses to their sexuality.

Maori women reported higher rates of unfair dismissal and denial of jobs and promotions than Pakeha and immigrant women. Women who were out to all their workmates and employers reported higher rates of denial of jobs and promotions. None of the women who were completely closeted at work reported being denied jobs or promotion. However, women out to all their workmates reported similar rates of harassment as women who had told nobody.

Most of the lesbians (63%) had hidden their sexuality in at least some situations at work to avoid discrimination. Many of the women described wearing carefully "feminine" clothes for key situations, going alone to work social functions, and avoiding discussions of homosexuality at work. These results indicate substantial institutional discrimination in New Zealand workplaces at this time.

Some of the women's experiences of sexual harassment appeared to differ from those which heterosexual women may experience. Lesbians are stereotyped as sexual aggressors, yet some of the lesbians and bisexual women who had been sexually harassed did not complain precisely because of this stereotype. One Maori woman said: "I was sexually assaulted by heterosexual women in the workforce. I felt powerless because I was a lesbian and never reported it."

Although the Human Rights Act 1993 now prohibits discrimination in employment on the grounds of sexual orientation, the impact of the Employment Contracts Act (ECA) 1991 may have cancelled out any gains which human rights protection brought for lesbians and bisexual women. By 1993, union representation of women had fallen by about a third (Sarr, 1993), and their bargaining power at work had decreased. By 1999, overall union membership was less than half what it was before the ECA, and it is likely that this is true for women too. The gap between men's and women's wages, which was slowly closing, has also started to widen again (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 1997). These losses may be somewhat reversed by new employment relations legislation planned by the current Labour-led Government.

The "more market" emphasis may also be undermining the implementation of workplace EEO policies, many of which now include sexual orientation. These policies are required only in the public sector, although some private firms have adopted EEO policies.



## LEGAL DISCRIMINATION

When asked how they thought same-sex relationships should be treated by the law, almost three-quarters of the lesbians said “the same” [as heterosexual relationships]. Another 18% of the lesbians and one-third of the bisexual women said other legal changes were still needed to implement full human rights for same-sex couples. Many women had obviously thought hard about this issue, and listed several rights “which straights take for granted and which are denied lesbians,” as one Pakeha lesbian put it. One Maori lesbian said:

I think the law should offer the *option* for same sex couples to have access to the same procedures available to heterosexuals. Also an *alternative* to those procedures, which would be after full consultation with the gay/lesbian community, and would recognise the intrinsic differences and specialness of same sex relationships.

Since this survey, six lesbians have unsuccessfully challenged the discriminatory administration of the New Zealand Marriage Act, and their appeal has been submitted to the United Nations. The issue of same-sex marriage, however, remains controversial in lesbian communities as well as in the wider society.

The state is currently inviting submissions about the legal status of same-sex relationships and New Zealand lesbians are engaging with these issues in more detail than ever before. It is likely that at least some of the legal changes which women said were needed in this survey will be passed by the current Labour-led government.

## PARENTING

Eighty-five women, almost one-third, were responsible for parenting children at the time of the survey. Of those, 74% were biological mothers, and the others were co-parents. More than four out of five of the biological parents had had their children as part of a heterosexual relationship. Another four women had used donor insemination to conceive, all through informal arrangements. In 1992 in New Zealand, lesbians were denied access to alternative insemination at public and private fertility services.

Thirty-six of the women said that neither they nor their children were discriminated against in childcare or at school. However, 28 said they were. Another nine were not sure whether difficult issues were a result of responses to their sexuality, and six were not out to those services. One Pakeha lesbian said: "Both my children were treated abominably by their peers because of my lesbianism. The teachers knew about it but didn't appreciate the degree of harm this caused. As a consequence, my children have had a very difficult time with their self-esteem, and accepting me and my relationships."

Thirteen women had experienced custody or access difficulties related to their sexuality. For several women, complaints about their lesbianism were used as a threat by their former partners.

### ***BOUNDARIES BETWEEN LESBIANS AND BISEXUAL WOMEN***

New Zealand lesbian and bisexual communities have collaborated on issues of common interest, such as the Homosexual Law Reform Bill Campaign in the mid-1980s, but their boundaries remain contested. Ten lesbians and eight bisexual women commented about the inclusion of bisexual women in the survey. The lesbians stressed the differences they perceived between lesbian experiences, choices, and perspectives, and those of bisexual women. However, few significant differences in discrimination experiences emerged from this survey. The public abuse and threats the bisexual women reported were associated in their comments largely with reactions to same-sex behaviour, rather than to their sexual identity.

The only marked difference was the bisexual women's comments about discrimination experienced from lesbians. Although five lesbians reported that their abuser was also a lesbian, none of them wrote any comments about this.

New Zealand lesbians have consistently expressed a desire for lesbian-only social spaces and political groups, which enable them to resist and temporarily escape the intense heterosexism they experience. However, in comparison to the pervasiveness of heterosexism, lesbians as a group have little social power, even over their own social events. For example, despite the "lesbian-only" tag on the long-running Auckland Lesbian Ball, bisexual women have attended, and organisers do not query women's identity at the venue door. With the greater visibility

of lesbians in the media, entertainment, and liberal workplaces,<sup>2</sup> it is likely that the embattled communities which several older lesbians referred to in their comments will gradually let down their drawbridges.

It is clear from this survey that discrimination against women's sexual relationships is a significant issue in New Zealand schools and workplaces. It is also likely that male harassment and violence against women who are affectionate towards other women in public happens at similar levels to that reported in other countries. Since the introduction of sexual orientation into the Human Rights Commission Act, there have been few government interventions to address these issues.

The survey recommended that:

- The Consistency 2000 Project, which catalogued the number of laws and regulations breaching the HRC Act, be completed;
- Laws on hate-motivated crime be introduced;
- The Ministry of Education develop an anti-heterosexism policy covering curriculum and the school environment;
- Schools have anti-harassment policies which include sexual orientation as a condition of school accreditation;
- Research be undertaken into the social and personal costs of hate-motivated crime;
- Pilot funding be made available for community-based projects supporting victims of hate crime;
- Women's refuges be funded to provide services for survivors of anti-lesbian harassment and lesbian and bisexual victims of partner violence;
- Researchers evaluate the impact of youth suicide interventions on young lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people;
- All EEO policies and procedures include sexual orientation.

Consistency 2000, which was dropped by the former National coalition government, has been restarted by the Labour-led government. Laws are likely to be changed in areas of current discrimination, such as adoption, fostering, custody, access, inheritance, next-of-kin, and relationship property. Women's refuges have started providing space for lesbians, but largely as victims of partner violence rather than anti-lesbian violence. Researchers are including sexual orientation as a factor in suicide. But the bulk of these recommendations have yet to be enacted.

## NOTES

1. Rankine, Jenny (1997). *The Great Late Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Discrimination Survey*, available from Discrimination Survey, PO Box 44056, Auckland 2, Aotearoa New Zealand.
2. *Shortland Street*, the long-running New Zealand soap opera, started a plot line in 1999 involving a core cast character in a lesbian relationship. This was a very daring move in the entertainment environment of 1992.

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