

## Sexuality at Work: A Study of Lesbians' Workplace Experiences

Nicole L. Asquith\*

*Lesbians' workplace experiences are determined by a range of individual, institutional and social relationships. In particular, this paper seeks to address some of the gaps that currently exist in Industrial Relations theory regarding the implications of public disclosure of sexuality, the types of discrimination and harassment experienced in the workplace by lesbians, the types of actions taken after incidents of discrimination and harassment, and the level of participation by lesbians in community organisations, including trade unions. This paper endeavours to map out the broad issues that arise when sexuality becomes an issue in workplace relations.*

What we cannot name, I said, we cannot talk about. When we give a name to something in our lives, we may empower that something . . . or we may empower ourselves because now we can think about and talk about [it] . . . and thus we can begin to try to do something about it (Piercy *Body of Glass* 1992: 90).

### Introduction

Naming lesbians' workplace experiences is the main task of this research project. Whilst most industrial relations theory assumes heterosexuality, in doing so it also reveals those interests left out and thus silenced by such assumptions (Ingraham 1994: 90). The silencing of lesbianism in traditional social and industrial relations theory reflects power relations that seek to legitimate particular positions, such as heterosexuality, whilst delegitimising others - in this case, lesbianism. This paper begins the task of naming what is unique and not so unique about lesbian workplace experience, how it coincides with other analyses of work, sexuality and identity and how it contradicts, or undermines these other analyses. By naming what constitutes the specific experiences of lesbians at work, Piercy suggests we can then think about, talk about, and ultimately do something about the issues raised by such an investigation. The results of a questionnaire form the basis of naming lesbian workplace experience for this paper. From this naming - this articulation of the specific experiences of lesbians in New South Wales in the mid to late 1990s - this paper will then turn to the ways in which lesbians negotiate their way through heterosexual and usually homophobic individual, institutional and social relationships at work.

\* Postgraduate student in the School of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of New South Wales. Tutor in the School of Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour at the University of New South Wales and in the School of Behavioural Sciences at the University of Sydney. Acknowledgments must be noted for the contributions made by Dr Paul Jones, Dr Jocelyn Pixley, Ms Gail Mason and Ms Diane Fieldes in their recommendations for key changes to the structure and language utilised in this paper.

However, naming in itself, is not enough. It is a first, and in the specific case of lesbians' workplace experiences, a necessary step. In this sense, this paper is about subjectively constituting the field of lesbians in the workplace. Whilst much has, and continues to be written about lesbian sexuality, there exists very little primary data and few theoretical frameworks about lesbian workplace experience<sup>1</sup> - in particular, the Australian experience. I have employed a multi-layered analysis that places historical constructions, individualised notions of identity formation and empowerment, beside the emergence of new forms of social and political action. In the acknowledgment of various rather than dichotomous power relations we are offered a new, richer field of study. This is a study that neither privileges individuals nor institutions, and seeks to highlight areas of work to be done rather than to make concrete recommendations.

### **The project in context**

The research undertaken to complete this project was part of an Honours thesis submitted in October 1996 to the School of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of New South Wales. However, the topic and the direction undertaken were substantially influenced by my experiences whilst employed as Client Advocate with the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project. This combination of academic theory, paid employment and social activism has imprinted itself on this research through my need to combine empirical results and analysis with social theory. In this sense, this paper does not seek to list the results of an empirical technique, but rather, to lay these stories beside those of theorists: seeking out the disjunctures, as well as the harmonies.

In placing the project in context, two discrete issues must be addressed. First, a framework for understanding hate crime in NSW and secondly, the methods employed to complete this project. Both these issues are important as they limit the possible recommendations both in scope and resources available. Once the project has been contextualised, I will then provide a brief summary of the overall results of a detailed questionnaire, as well as comparisons with other research. In the final section of the article I will address four main findings of the questionnaire completed by lesbians. Whilst there are many nuances and surprising results within the larger work, these four findings stand out as substantial indicators of lesbians' workplace experiences.

### ***Hate crime in New South Wales***

An investigation by the New South Wales Police Service in 1992 found that lesbians were six times more likely than the general female population to experience an assault in a twelve month period (NSW Police Service 1995: 5). This, combined with the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project's (AVP) annual hate-crime figures, suggests that lesbians are not

---

<sup>1</sup> The rare examples encountered during this research process are Hall (1989 and 1986), Levine and Leonard (1985) and Schneider (1984).

excluded from the kind of intolerance and hatred evidenced in traditional street crime perpetrated against gay men. However, there are major differences in the demographic details of perpetrators of street based hate crimes from those in the workplace. Whilst the AVP is funded by the Juvenile Crime Prevention Unit because the majority of perpetrators of hate-based street crime are young anglo-saxon men, harassment, discrimination and violence perpetrated against lesbians in the workplace provides a different picture.

In its work of monitoring the levels of violence against gays and lesbians in New South Wales, the AVP often targets particular types of violence or harassment for its annual campaigns. In 1995, the "Violence Can Happen. Just Be Aware" campaign included a series of posters produced specifically for the gay, lesbian and transgender communities addressing issues such as street violence, violence against sex workers, violence on and around public transport and harassment in the workplace. The campaign resulted in an increase in general reports, and a substantial jump in the number of reports about workplace discrimination.

The 1995 summer campaign raised issues for the AVP about the ways in which it should advocate on behalf of and support survivors of workplace discrimination and harassment. The response taken at the time was three-fold: individual, institutional and educative. At an individual level, the AVP developed procedures to confront employers about levels of homophobia in the workplace, and its impact upon workers, clients and business productivity. This approach resulted in the provision of targeted training programs in organisations known by the AVP to be consistently discriminatory. This approach also resulted in the provision of more one-on-one advocacy and case management by the AVP, supporting individual workers through the procedures of the Anti-Discrimination Act. Due to this increase in direct advocacy, but a lack of funds to support this work, the AVP approached the NSW Labor Council to request changes to organisational procedures in order to bring about a more supportive environment for sexuality discrimination complaints to be lodged. The AVP, in conjunction with the Labor Council organised the development of a training package for trade union officials on the issues raised by homophobia in the workplace. This institutional response to workplace discrimination and harassment has resulted in an ongoing project that is seeking the appointment of a gay and lesbian liaison officer in each trade union affiliated to the Labor Council of NSW.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, at an educational level, the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project has, for a second year, run a unique campaign aimed at transforming homophobic understandings held by high school students. This campaign, "HomoPHOBIA. What are ya scared of?" aims to empower young heterosexuals to stand up against homophobia in the classroom and in their social networks. It utilises popular culture in a range of forms (comics, popular heroes in advertisements, Rock Against Homophobia, Websites) to legitimate the transformation of heterosexist constructions of sexuality.

---

<sup>2</sup> This project is based on a model successfully implemented by the NSW Police Service.

**Research methods employed**

Non-disclosure of sexuality in the workplace is sometimes a strategic and necessary coping mechanism employed by lesbians to limit harassment and discrimination experienced everyday. However, this silence makes it all the more difficult for concrete examples of lesbians' workplace experiences to emerge that might lead to more detailed analyses of their positions in the web of workplace power relations. As a result of this silence and the need to respect privacy, a snow-balling, or self-selective method (which relies on the use of personal networks to elicit responses to surveys) was employed to retrieve primary data on lesbian workplace experience. Using the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project's (AVP) client database,<sup>3</sup> in conjunction with a notice run in the *Sydney Star Observer*, *Capital Q* and *Lesbian on the Loose* and my own personal contacts and friends, I was able to develop a list of approximately 80 prospective respondents. These women were forwarded packages explaining the project and the survey as well as a questionnaire containing a minimum of 31 questions relating to work history and experiences of discrimination or harassment. In addition to these individual packages, bulk copies of the questionnaire packages were forwarded to a variety of community organisations such as the PRIDE Community Centre, Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and a range of health service providers in rural areas for distribution to individual lesbians. Of the total 120 questionnaires forwarded to organisations and individuals, 33 were returned. This represents a return rate of approximately 30 percent. The high refusal rate, I believe, reflects not only the density of the questionnaire, but also the logistics of forwarding bulk copies to community organisations for distribution and the trauma often associated with revisiting incidents of harassment, discrimination or violence.

In conjunction with the main questionnaire, a small survey of Labor Council of New South Wales' affiliates was undertaken in order to assess the knowledge of, and services provided for lesbians in cases of discrimination and harassment. This survey required unions to answer a minimum of 14 questions relating to their membership and the services provided; however, only 22 percent of surveys were returned.

Finally, five interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. These interviews were recorded and the recordings transcribed. Where these interviewees have been cited in this paper, they are in italics with alias names allocated by the respondents themselves. In addition to this, direct quotes from questionnaire respondents have also been included: these too are italicised. The respondents chosen for the interviews reflect both my commitment to interviewing women from a variety of backgrounds and experiences and the women's own indication that they wished to participate in further stages of the research.

---

<sup>3</sup> These clients were only approached if they had previously indicated that they would not mind being contacted for further information or participation in an Anti-Violence Project event.

## Results

One of the major problems with the employment of a snow-balling research method is the explicit reality of unrepresentative data. This fundamental problem, combined with the high refusal rate means that this research must be seen as a small section of a very detailed puzzle rather than the whole picture of lesbians' workplace experiences.

By using an initial respondents' database that included my own network of friends and colleagues, basic demographic details such as age, housing arrangements, ethnicity and level of education closely match those of my own biography. As shown in Table 1 basic demographic details of respondents and their work histories are skewed towards 21 to 35 years old, anglo lesbians with substantially higher levels of education than the general Australian population. Further, the respondents were more likely to be employed on a full-time basis under award terms and conditions in non-government or community organisations with fewer than 50 employees (72 percent of respondents of this survey worked with less than 50 co-workers, whilst the national figure is 34 percent (Callus *et al.*, 1991: 229)). The most significant point raised by these details is the low level of income indicated by respondents. Contrary to the belief that lesbians have the opportunity to access higher paid employment (especially in light of the high levels of formal education), most respondents to this questionnaire were earning less than \$25,000 per year. However, consideration must be given to the unrepresentative nature of this data, in that those lesbians in better paid positions may have had fewer experiences of discrimination or harassment, and may not have participated in the initial survey.

In addition, whilst 53 percent of respondents indicated that they had experienced discrimination or harassment based on their sexuality at sometime in their working history, in only 35 percent of positions held in the last five years did respondents indicate they had experienced harassment or discrimination. The difference between the levels of discrimination and harassment in the last five years compared to those of overall work histories indicates that social and public policies and practices over the last five to ten years may have had a positive effect on the working experiences of lesbians. However, job mobility may also have contributed to the reduction in experiences of discrimination or harassment over the last five years. Further, the low age of participants often meant that many had not even been working for five years.

As indicated earlier, there are many differences in the profile of perpetrators of workplace discrimination from those of street-based hate crime. Table 2 shows:

Table 1 Significant details of respondents *variable respondents/responses*

| Sexuality | Race/<br>Ethnicity (1) | Age<br>(2) | Education<br>(3)                      | Current<br>Work Status             | Income<br>Levels        | Type of<br>Employer (4)                            | System of<br>Employment                   | Workplace<br>Unionisation<br>Level | Workplace<br>Size |
|-----------|------------------------|------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|--|---|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 33/33     | 33/33                  | 33/33      | 33/33                                 | 33/33                              | 27/17                   | 119/33   | 33/33                                     | 33/33                              | 28/17             |
| Lesbian   | None Stated            | 31 to 35   | Undergraduate<br>University<br>Degree | Employed<br>Full Time              | Less than<br>\$25,000   | Non-<br>Government<br>or Community<br>Organisation | Award Terms<br>and<br>Conditions          | Most<br>immediate<br>co-workers    | 6 to 10           |
| 25        | 13                     | 13         | 15                                    | 15                                 | 12                      | 39   | 19  | 12                                 | 3                 |
| Bisexual  | Anglo                  | 26 to 30   | Post-graduate<br>University<br>Degree | Student                            | \$25,001 to<br>\$35,000 | Private<br>Enterprise                              | Other: Self<br>Employment<br>and Informal | No one                             | 11 to 20          |
| 3         | 11                     | 10         | 6                                     | 8                                  | 8                       | 35   | 6   | 4                                  | 6                 |
| Queer     | Jewish                 | 21 to 25   | HSC or<br>Equivalent                  | Employed<br>Part Time or<br>Casual | \$35,001 to<br>\$45,000 | Government   | Informal<br>Workplace<br>Agreement        | A few<br>co-workers                | More than<br>100  |
| 2         | 3                      | 9          | 5                                     | 5                                  | 5                       | 31   | 4   | 4                                  | 6                 |
|           |                        |            | Incomplete<br>Undergraduate<br>Degree |                                    |                         |  | Registered<br>Enterprise<br>Agreement     |                                    | 21 to 50          |
|           |                        |            | 4                                     |                                    |                         |  | 3   |                                    | 5                 |

1. Imputed Anglo: 71 percent or 24 respondents 1988: 25) 2. Average age: 29.37; Minimum age: 21, Maximum age: 42 3. National average for Degree: 7.4 percent (Pocock 4. 119 responses: all jobs held

Table 2

Comparative significant details of perpetrator(s):  
Asquith (1996) AVP - Off our backs (1992)

Asquith: variable respondents/responses  
AVP: 42 respondents

| ASQUITH | AVP    | ASQUITH              | AVP                      | ASQUITH        | AVP            | ASQUITH         | AVP                  | ASQUITH                             | AVP                 |
|---------|--------|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Sex     | Sex    | Number               | Number                   | Age            | Age            | Relationship to | Perpetrator(s) Known | Discrimination /Harassment Ongoing? | Harassment Ongoing? |
| 17/29   | 42     | 17/26                | 42                       | 17/27          | 42             | 17/27           | 42                   | 17/29                               | 42                  |
| Male    | Male   | 1 or 2               | 1                        | under 25 years | under 25 years | Superiors       | Yes                  | Yes                                 | Yes                 |
| 15      | 37     | 12                   | 18                       | 4              | 26             | 12              | 16                   | 22                                  | 14                  |
| Both    | Mixed  | A few co-workers     | 2                        | 26 to 35       | 26 to 30       | Colleagues      | No                   | No                                  | No                  |
| 9       | 4      | 5                    | 3                        | 8              | 4              | 9               | 26                   | 7                                   | 28                  |
| Female  | Female | Just about everybody | 3 to 5                   | 36 to 45       | 31 to 40       | Subordinates    |                      |                                     |                     |
| 5       | 1      | 5                    | 13                       | 9              | 8              | 4               |                      |                                     |                     |
|         |        |                      | All immediate co-workers | more than 45   | over 40 years  |                 |                      |                                     |                     |
|         |        |                      | 3                        | 8              | 1              | 4               |                      |                                     |                     |

the key similarities and differences between the perpetrators of these different forms of hate crime. Using the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project's statistics for hate-crime against lesbians (*Off Our Backs* 1992) as a comparison, it can be seen that the major difference between these two types of hate crimes is that whilst only 38 percent of the AVP's respondents knew their perpetrator(s), perpetrators of workplace discrimination are invariably known by the respondents. They are superiors, colleagues, subordinates and in some cases clients. Further, the number of perpetrators indicated in the workplace questionnaire, whilst difficult to compare to the AVP figures, can be seen to be higher in terms of density rather than sheer numbers. In this sense, whilst five thugs on a corner may seem confronting, 13 percent of respondents to the workplace questionnaire indicated that all immediate co-workers were perpetrators of harassment and discrimination. Whether the workplace had 5 employees or 100, the density of perpetrators makes it all the more difficult for individual lesbians to be able to negotiate issues raised by this level of homophobia.

Finally, the most significant difference between street-based and workplace-based hate crime is the ongoing nature of workplace discrimination and harassment. As a respondent Mas points out,

*[i]n my case it's not appropriate to speak of "incidents" - the workplace had quite a prevalent homophobic, anti-woman "pro hetero-nuclear family" (Hah!) atmosphere that resulted in a myriad of practically daily comments or discussions that I found offensive. The message was clearly given - stay in the closet (or, that lesbians and gay men didn't even exist). (Mas)*

In this sense, community organisations and government departments need to begin thinking about the differences in the experience of hate-based violence: that violence can be more than a fist in the face on Friday night. It can be an ongoing, constant pressure from a range of clients, co-workers and superiors.

Finally, the most significant results of the survey forwarded to trade unions affiliated to the Labor Council of NSW showed that trade unions thought little about the specific needs of lesbians in the workplace. Eighty-one percent of unions surveyed indicated that they did not provide any services and that they do not consider, or even perceive the need for specific services for lesbians (62 percent). This data, combined with a refusal rate of 78 percent reflects a high level of disinterest by unions in matters concerning lesbian workers. A few outstanding unions provided services ranging from gay and lesbian friendly/supportive staff and anti-discrimination training to gay and lesbian committees and union-supported changes to Award provisions to include gays and lesbians.

### **Lesbian workplace experience**

Whilst the basic demographic details of both survivors and perpetrators of workplace discrimination or harassment reveals some significant data, four main areas stand out as more indicative of lesbians' workplace experiences. These areas are: disclosure of



sexuality and perceived basis of discrimination/harassment; types of unwanted or disturbing incidents experienced in the workplace; actions taken after incidents of discrimination/harassment and the results of these actions; and, participation in community organisations, including trade unions. Using primary research, interviews and social theory, the remainder of this article seeks to highlight the role of sexuality in the workplace as it relates to lesbians.

### *Disclosure of sexuality and basis of discrimination*

For lesbians in the workplace, the everyday can often mean the construction of completely different life stories and daily tales. When the sexuality of a worker is considered a factor affecting the performance of work duties, lesbians must out of economic necessity construct ways in which to juggle the overt heterosexuality in operation in the workplace. Lesbians in the workplace employ a variety of coping mechanisms in order to overcome or avoid discrimination, harassment or vilification. Passing, practiced through neutralisation, denial, dissociation, avoidance, job tracking and token disclosure are all used by lesbians to negotiate workplace experiences (Hall 1989: 135-8). These mechanisms combine and vary from job to job, from co-worker to co-worker and from individual lesbian to individual lesbian:

... the old reductionist notion of "coming out" is not an act, but rather a never-ending and labyrinthine process of decision and indecision, of nuanced and calculated presentations as well as impulsive and inadvertent revelations - a process, in short, as shifting as the contexts in which it occurs (Hall 1989: 137).

The central coping mechanism employed by lesbians is non-disclosure of their sexuality (Hall 1989: 135). As seen in the Table 3 only 37 percent of respondents who experienced discrimination were mostly or completely "out" at work. Non-disclosure of sexuality is a fundamental factor in lesbians' ability to negotiate workplace discrimination or harassment. One can understand the need for protective behaviour, yet the silence that is inherent in non-disclosure also provides the space for stereotypes to develop and for perpetrators to utilise this in committing acts of harassment or discrimination free from the fear of reprimand.

**Table 3** Disclosure of sexuality by those respondents who experienced discrimination 29 responses  
17 respondents

|                          |    |
|--------------------------|----|
| Most or all co-workers   | 11 |
| Only close co-workers    | 9  |
| Only one other co-worker | 2  |
| No-one                   | 6  |
| Other                    | 2  |

With all its contingent penalties, this silencing strategy constitutes not discrimination but oppression of lesbian interests (Niland 1990: 7). It offers a heterosexist framework no resistance. It offers no alternatives to the constructions used against lesbians in workplace harassment, discrimination and vilification. And, as such, misses the social and cultural recognition necessary for participation in a social democratic system of government that requires articulate and powerful lobby groups in order to achieve basic power redistribution.

However, complete disclosure has its own contingent penalties: again, discrimination and harassment as seen (37 percent of respondents disclosed their sexuality and were subject to acts of discrimination or harassment), cultural appropriation, and the stereotyping of individuals as the collective lesbian. In this way, as Goffman suggests, openness about one's sexuality in the workplace ". . . thrusts a new career upon the stigmatized person, that of representing [her] category . . ." (cited in Hall 1989: 138). Just speaking our truths - being consistently out at work - does not necessarily result in empowerment nor the reduction of harassment and discrimination. Over 35 percent of respondents in this research project who had experienced discrimination disclosed their sexuality to most or all of their co-workers. The fact that they then experienced some form of harassment indicates, as Phelan suggests, that ". . . associating truth with speech and power with silence" (1989: 138) has in the past led to the belief that disclosure in and of itself would eliminate repression of lesbianism. Simply speaking the truth of their lives is not enough to change the way in which a heterosexist society constructs lesbian identities and acts upon those constructions.

Further, Phelan argues that lesbians may be ". . . 'queer' in existing models of citizenship, but this queerness is not itself a virtue" (Phelan 1995: 344); that lesbians are but a paradigmatic example of the instability of liberal-humanist and reductionist constructions of theory and practice. An example that can be found in a variety of other places and times in the last two decades (such as other social movements like People Living with HIV/AIDS, the Women's Movement, People with Disabilities and ethnic minorities and indigenous populations across the world). This paper will show that whilst lesbians may inhabit a sexual category of their own, they are first and foremost women working in a heterosexist society. As such, their experiences of work can not be divided between that of being a woman and that of being a lesbian. In Table 4, it can be seen that respondents themselves often had difficulty in determining whether the discrimination or harassment experienced was based on being a woman or a lesbian, or both. This stems largely from the realisation that misogyny at its worse is anti-lesbian violence.

**Table 4**                      **Basis of discrimination or harassment**                      29 responses  
17 respondents

|                      |    |
|----------------------|----|
| Woman                | 5  |
| Lesbian              | 11 |
| Combination of above | 10 |
| Other                | 3  |

For lesbians, multiple identifications are a necessary part of survival in a heterosexist society, whereby they employ a range of personal identifications to match the circumstances of the moment - ". . . you sort of choose the moment, you don't have to be out all the time but when you think the moment's right for you, you use it" (from interview with Sam). When confronted with a range of identifications, whether they be gender based, or sexuality based, or class based, or race based, or religion based, choosing between one or the other highlights that as individuals in the workplace, lesbians (like others) rarely fit into any fixed, singular categorical definition. However, for lesbians, the needs of non-disclosure of sexuality in the workplace (whether to reduce the possibility of discrimination and harassment, or for issues of privacy) often results in both implicit silencing (passing or non-disclosure of sexuality) and explicit silencing by keeping quiet about discrimination and harassment in the workplace. The reduction of human and social identity to a fixed sexual act alone, often means that lesbians in the workplace end up choosing between non-disclosure (with its surveillance of self and others), and disclosure (whether partial or complete). Non-disclosure reinforces public/private divisions, whilst disclosure can often disrupt the seemingly fixed divisions that operate at work. However, it can also bring down the full weight of anti-lesbian violence.

#### ***Types of unwanted or disturbing incidents in the workplace***

As can be seen in Table 5, the most prevalent forms of unwanted or disturbing incidents at work for lesbians were the public questioning, public disclosure and rumour and gossip about sexuality (57 percent, 49 percent and 74 percent). All these, whilst being fundamentally determinant of workplace experience, have yet to be tested under any institutional or normative framework of proscribed discrimination or harassment as it stands.

Table 5 Unwanted or disturbing incident(s)

30 responses  
30 respondents

|  | Never | Once | Occasionally | Repeatedly |
|--|-------|------|--------------|------------|
| Sexual jokes, stories or looks         | 12    | 1    | 10           | 7          |
| Sexually explicit material             | 21    | 2    | 5            | 2          |
| Deliberate sexual touching             | 16    | 4    | 9            | 1          |
| Being addressed in a sexual manner     | 16    | 2    | 9            | 3          |
| Asked to have sex with a co-worker     | 27    | 2    | 1            | 0          |
| Threatened with loss of job            | 24    | 3    | 3            | 0          |
| Did not get promotion/salary increase  | 26    | 2    | 1            | 1          |
| Excluded from bonuses/offers           | 25    | 1    | 3            | 1          |
| Public questioning about sexuality     | 13    | 2    | 13           | 2          |
| Rumour and gossip about sexuality      | 8     | 2    | 12           | 8          |
| Public disclosure of sexual preference | 15    | 4    | 9            | 2          |
| Threats of physical violence           | 26    | 1    | 3            | 0          |
| Anti-lesbian verbal abuse              | 20    | 3    | 5            | 2          |
| Anti-woman verbal abuse                | 15    | 2    | 8            | 5          |
| Vandalism                              | 26    | 2    | 2            | 0          |
| Harassing phone calls                  | 24    | 2    | 2            | 2          |
| Physical assault                       | 27    | 1    | 2            | 0          |
| Sexual assault                         | 27    | 1    | 2            | 0          |
| Refused leave to look after sick lover | 29    | 1    | 0            | 0          |

Examples of incidents experienced by lesbians in the workplace include not only the more prevalent actions such as verbal harassment (that is; rumour and gossip or disclosure of respondents' sexuality) but also far reaching and significant acts such as:

*Harassing and threatening phone calls - obscene letters to both my workplace and home - rumours spread throughout work related circles regarding my relationship, my partner and myself. NB the offenders did not work at my workplace but an associated organisation. Effected my relationship with co-workers and one also took it on. (Colleen)*

*I was unable to apply for positions overseas as my partner was not eligible to accompany me (this changed in October 1994). (Marion)*

*Employers heard that I was a lesbian (I wasn't closeted about it), two days later, fired me for stealing. (Stevie)*

*[I] was harassed by a client in their own home due to my sexuality. He made a very obscene reference to dykes and talked very explicitly about sex. (Lynne)*

*Property damage, telephone calls, absolute insubordination. (Jacqueline)*

Whilst verbal harassment may have played a significant role in the respondent's workplace experience, this form of discrimination often led to more severe and damaging forms of harassment. Often the more severe the harassment, the more likely respondents chose to remove themselves from the environment rather than confront the perpetrator(s) head on (see Tables 6 and 7).

Gendered and sexualised power relations in the workplace form and are formed by the functions of not only state practices and structures, but also the individual relations one has with the world at large. In Australia, the role of sexual politics in the workplace has become predominantly articulated through institutional rules of workplace relations and parliamentary politics. Anti-Discrimination and Equal Employment Opportunity legislation have been active for over ten years. These institutional responses to discrimination and equal opportunity in Australia have not resulted in the demise of the family as suggested by conservatives at the time of their implementation. Nor have they fulfilled the hopes of many feminists seeking equitable employment relations. The significance of these laws and programs lie in the "... attention they focus on existing inequalities and inequities" (Poiner and Wills 1991: 100). However, Anti-Discrimination legislation based on post-active complaints is fundamentally foreign to the needs of lesbian workers, as it hides rather than focuses on the inequalities and inequities experienced by lesbians in the workplace. Systems such as this require complainants to "out" themselves over and over again - an action usually associated with the complaint being lodged - and thus reduces the possibilities of this type of discrimination legislation being utilised. For lesbians, whilst there exists particular legislation under which harassment and discrimination is proscribed, Niland suggests many lesbians who complained under the Anti-Discrimination Act, complained under gender grounds. Complaint processes around cases of lesbian specific discrimination "... were camouflaged within the sex and marital status provisions" (Niland 1990: 2) in order to ensure non-disclosure of sexuality.

### ***Action taken after incident and the results of these actions***

Whilst the government and unions seek to eliminate discrimination and harassment against lesbians in the workplace through public or state sanctioned means such as Anti-Discrimination, Anti-Vilification and unfair dismissal legislation, lesbians surveyed for this project preferred a more personal approach to negotiating workplace conflict. The results (seen below in Table 6) suggest that more often than not, survivors of hate-related harassment or discrimination prefer to deal with problems on a "private" basis,<sup>4</sup> reflecting the possible need or desire to have sexual preferences not disclosed in any formal way.

---

<sup>4</sup> However, it could be argued that the conciliation process required under the Anti-Discrimination Act could also be considered "private", in that this process takes place behind closed, "in camera" doors unlike "public" legal cases.

Considering the high levels of education attained, and the trade union membership and community organisation participation of respondents in this research project (see Table 8), the low levels of respondents initiating formal actions through their unions or the Anti-Discrimination Board suggest that the institutional "remedies" available may not effectively address the concrete, everyday experiences of lesbians in the workplace, especially for those wishing no formal disclosure of their sexuality.

So whilst most actions and reactions to harassment and discrimination in the workplace are perpetrated and "resolved" through personal or interactive approaches, as can be seen in Table 7 below, more often than not this results in negative outcomes for the survivors only; that is, continued discrimination, relocation away from the perpetrator, forced resignation, or termination of employment.

**Table 6** Action taken after incident(s)

|                                      | <b>First Incident</b><br>(111 responses<br>17 respondents) | <b>Other Incidents</b><br>(31 responses<br>6 respondents) |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| Ignored behaviour or did nothing     | 16   | 0   |
| Avoided the person                   | 14   | 0   |
| Told/asked the person to stop        | 12   | 3   |
| Told a colleague                     | 10   | 5   |
| Told a supervisor                    | 10   | 7   |
| Made a formal written complaint      | 6  | 4   |
| Contacted union                      | 4  | 1   |
| Contacted the ADB                    | 1  | 0   |
| Took sick leave                      | 6  | 0   |
| Told person outside of the workplace | 13   | 6   |
| Applied for transfer                 | 4  | 0   |
| Left job/resigned                    | 9  | 4   |
| Other                                | 6  | 2   |

Table 7 Result(s) of action(s) taken

|                                   | First Incident<br>(30 responses<br>17 respondents) | Other Incidents<br>(13 responses<br>5 respondents) |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Discrimination continued          | 19   | 8  |
| Perpetrator reprimanded/relocated | 1  | 1  |
| Perpetrator sacked                | 1  | 0  |
| Respondent relocated              | 2  | 2  |
| Review of organisation's policies | 2  | 0  |
| Resigned                          | 2  | 2  |
| Employment terminated             | 1  | 0  |
| Other                             | 2  | 0  |

The power exercised against lesbians in the workplace operates not only at the level of rules and regulations governing organisational behaviour, but also in the informal exchanges between workers through heterosexual banter at the photocopier or lunch room. The strength of sexuality as a tool of organisation in the workplace lies in its unclear, ambiguous interplay between these institutional and personal practices of power. This interplay also therefore challenges the notion of a fixed, legislative or normative response that requires clear definitions of what constitutes discrimination and who the players in this game are. In the case of anti-lesbian discrimination and harassment, it is not possible to adequately address the minute exchanges of power inherent in workplace relations by relying alone on institutional responses for social change.

### *Participation in community groups and trade unions*

Within a democratic system of politics, Phelan argues that the fundamental task for contemporary social actors "... is not whom to work with, but how to work with them; or, it is both" (Phelan 1995: 349). She argues that we must begin building bridges between the many different "politics of interest", whilst maintaining the belief that justice and equality are essential components of any productive coalition politics and, as a consequence, of transformations in workplace relations. However, successful coalition politics is not easy. Its success relies upon sympathy and affinity rather than on any fixed notions of shared ground. As such, coalitionism or alliance building is not so much about seeking out one's allies, but rather "... how to *make* them allies" (Phelan 1995: 352). It also means that as social actors we must make a commitment to improve the position of all citizens: gay and lesbian, queer and straight. A decidedly queer response to discrimination and harassment against lesbians in the workplace is to begin making

alliances with those who, in the past, may have seemed like foes, but who, through confrontation, may be the project's strongest allies.<sup>5</sup> The last two decades of social movement activism have shown that in order to achieve the individual choices that resistance demands, collective activity is essential in providing the options from which to choose (Weeks 1986: 119). Table 8 below shows that lesbians are quite aware of this need to act collectively. This community organisation participation, combined with respondents' indications that they were more likely to be members of trade unions than the general population of workers (51 percent compared to 47 percent) (Goot 1996), indicates that lesbians are possibly involved in efforts to change their lived experiences of hate-crimes and anti-lesbian discrimination and harassment.

**Table 8** Participation in community organisations

65 responses  
32 respondents

|                                   | Participation Only | Activist | Leader |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|----------|--------|
| Political parties or lobby groups | 9                  | 9        | 1      |
| Social groups                     | 12                 | 1        | 1      |
| Welfare groups                    | 14                 | 5        | 1      |
| Education/training groups         | 7                  | 2        | 3      |

The movement that grew out of gay liberation no longer needs to guard its doors, and resist the outside as *the* exclusive avenue for change. Individual perceptions need social engagement for recognition, and ultimately transformation to occur. Without the realisation, through theory and practice, of a dynamic and inclusive interrelationship between the individual and the institutional, mediated through coalition social movements, lesbians will remain tied to choosing one identification over the many available: woman over worker; worker over lesbian; Jewish over lesbian etc.

---

<sup>5</sup> This can best be illustrated by the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project's current award winning campaign titled "HomoPHOBIA. What are ya scared of?" in which role models from a range of areas such as *The Footy Show*, *Gladiators* and *JJJ* are used to undermine homophobia in youth networks.



## Conclusion

Whilst work and sexuality may both play central roles in individual lesbians' lives, the two operate at very different levels. As Shirley proposes,

*... my work is about my sense of self-causation, it's about my right to take up a certain amount of space in the world, it's about an ability to be independent. My sexuality is about who I am at the very core, it's about the way that my skin feels, it's about the way that I interact emotionally with other people, it's about what it means to have a body that feels and looks and shapes the way that it is. My work is a justification for taking up space, and it's a really intellectual basis of achievement, and my sexuality is [the] core (from interview with Shirley).*

The cost of anti-lesbian discrimination and harassment in the workplace is not born by individual workers alone. The impact of workplace discrimination and harassment spreads out from survivors to their family and friends. From individual acts of violence, community organisations and trade unions must carry the burden of representation and support. And from discriminatory acts of violence against individual lesbians, workplaces must incorporate the costs of sick leave, stress leave, occupational health and safety provisions, and the increased costs associated with additional recruitment processes.

Whilst anti-discrimination and anti-vilification legislation in New South Wales provides a moral and ethical framework that clearly articulates the government's rejection of homophobia in the workplace, this legislative response is not enough. Like sexual harassment, racial and sexual discrimination, any major advancements in the reduction of hate crimes requires an educative response by the government and the community in addition to legislative responses. Therefore, programs such as anti-homophobia courses for high school students and Anti-Discrimination Board forums in the workplace need to be given more emphasis, and more resources. Further to this, I would argue that rather than centering on reactive legislation (that is, anti-discrimination or anti-vilification), both Federal and state governments need to begin addressing the contradictory position of maintaining anti-discrimination legislation whilst discriminating against gays and lesbians in a variety of other areas such as superannuation, probate law, marriage rights, adoption rights and health care benefits. Finally, the NSW Police Service must acknowledge the need for a specialised hate-crimes unit within its department. This structural addition would enable the Police, and the government generally, to adequately respond to the unique qualities of hate-crimes, not only against gays and lesbians, but also hate-crimes perpetrated against racial and religious communities in Australia.

The intrusion of "private" sexuality matters such as disclosures of sexuality have the potential to fundamentally change "public" workplace power relations. In order to do so though, lesbians must acknowledge the need to work in coalition with others, as well as

"nation" build behind the safety of barred doors. It also means acknowledging that reliance upon community affirmation in itself cannot undermine reductionist notions of sexuality and as such, it needs to be matched with a politics of equality. This politics of equality, a politics based on a clear ethical stance, needs to be inclusionary rather than exclusionary and as such must be based in a framework of coalitionism: coalition between gays and lesbians, between queers and straights, and between paid workers and unpaid workers. This politics of equality resides in the conflicts, contradictions and compromises that arise when we meet each other on common ground, without reductionism dictating the terms of our encounter.

## References

- Callus, R.A., Morehead, A., Cully, M. and Buchanan, J. (1991), *Industrial Relations at Work*, Canberra, Australian Government Printing Service.
- Goot, M. (1996), *Newspoll Results*, Sydney, Labor Council of NSW.
- Hall, M. (1986), The Lesbian Corporate Experience. In Kehoe, M. (ed.), *Historical, Literary and Erotic Aspects of Lesbianism - Journal of Homosexuality*, **12(3/4)**, New York, Haworth Press.
- Hall, M. (1989), Private Experiences in the Public Domain: Lesbians in Organizations. In Hearn, J., Sheppard D.L., Tancred-Sheriff, P. and Burrell, G. (eds), *The Sexuality of Organisation*, London, Sage Publications.
- Ingraham, C. (1994), The Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender. *Sociological Theory*, **12(2)** July.
- Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project, (1992), *Off Our Backs - A Study into Anti-Lesbian Violence*, Sydney, Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby.
- Levine, M.P. and Leonard, R. (1985), Discrimination Against Lesbians in the Workforce. In Freedman, E.B., Gelphi B.C., Johnson, S.L. and Weston, K.M., *The Lesbian Issue: Essays from SIGNS*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Niland, C. (1990), The silent twin - lesbian discrimination. In Lavender? (ed.), *What is Lesbian Discrimination?* ADB Proceedings from Forum October 1987, Sydney, ADB.
- NSW Police Service, (1995), *Out of the Blue*, Sydney, NSW Police Service.

Phelan, S. (1989), *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.

Phelan, S. (1995), The space of justice: lesbians and democratic politics. In Nicholson, L. and Seidman, S. (eds), *Social Postmodernism - Beyond Identity Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Piercy, M. (1992), *Body of Glass*, London, Penguin Books.

Pocock, B. (1988), *Demanding Skill: Women and Technical Education in Australia*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin.

Poiner, G. and Wills, S. (1991), *The Gifhorse: A Critical Look at Equal Employment Opportunity in Australia*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin.

Schneider, B. (1984), Peril and Promise: Lesbians' Workplace Participation. In Darty, T. and Potter, S. (eds), *Women-Identified Women*, California, Mayfield Publishing Company.

Weeks, J. (1986), *Sexuality*, London, Tavistock Publication Ltd.