



Violence against the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning/Queer, Asexual, Intersex (LGBTQAI) Community

When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent we are still afraid. So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive.

Audre Lorde author, activist

Homophobia is like racism and anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry in that it seeks to dehumanize a large group of people, to deny their humanity, their dignity and their personhood.

Coretta Scott King

Introduction

Violence against people who consider themselves to be Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning or Queer, Asexual, Intersexual (LGBTQAI) is a complex and often quite controversial issue. Yet this is also a human rights and human dignity issue that must be addressed. This is also a social justice issue, a public health issue, a safety issue, an economic issue, a mental health issue as well an issue of societal mores, cultural values, and deeply ingrained prejudices. There are several forms of violence against people who consider themselves to be part of the LGBTQAI Community, including the following:

- Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence
- Hate Crimes
- Violence from law enforcement and the justice system
- Violence against LGBTQAI Youth: Bullying and other forms

In order to prevent violence in the LGBTQAI community, we must work to end inequality and homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, etc. By ending inequality, we create spaces where LGBTQAI people are seen as equal and reduce the amount of violence they experience, including sexual violence.

Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence

People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQAI) experience sexual violence at higher rates than people who identify as heterosexual.

According to the PA Coalition Against Rape (www.pcar.org), sexual violence is any type of unwanted sexual contact, ranging from sexist attitudes and actions to rape and murder. Sexual violence can include words and actions of a sexual nature against a person's will. A person may use force, threats, manipulation, or coercion to commit sexual violence.

There is a social context that surrounds sexual violence. Social norms that condone violence such as: using power over others; traditional constructs of masculinity; the subjugation of women; and, silence about violence and abuse, all contribute to the occurrence of sexual violence.

Not always afforded the same legal rights under the law as heterosexual people, LGBTQAI victim/survivors of sexual assault have less access to laws that protect them when they choose to report their experiences. Reporting their sexual assault may mean they have to come out as LGBTQAI which is not always possible or safe. Coming out can lead to more harassment from people who are in helping professions such as law enforcement and medical professionals. Because of the fears of judgment and violence from others, people who identify as LGBTQAI often do not report their experiences of sexual violence.

Transgender people are at increased risk for sexual violence. Those who commit such violence use it to enforce gender boundaries and to exert power and control over the people they target. For instance, murders against transgender people often involve sexual violence. When a person is murdered because of their perceived gender identity or expression, it is a sexually violent act. Often, the crimes that end in murder also include sexualized torture, rape and bodily mutilation. This gender-based violence is fueled by hate and rooted in misogyny.

Therefore, many transgender people are afraid of going to police for help, especially as police themselves are sometimes a source of violence. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that 46% of transgender people are uncomfortable going to the police, and 22% of transgender people have been harassed by police. Transgender people of color are especially vulnerable—15% of black transgender people and 9% of Latino transgender people have been assaulted by police. Transgender women of color are frequent targets of police profiling. (The National LGBTQ Task Force).

Hate Crimes

The National Coalition of Anti-violence Programs (NCAVP) strives to increase, power, safety and resources through data analysis, policy advocacy, education, and technical assistance. In 2014, NCAVP issued the following report: *National Report on Hate Violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and HIV-Affected Communities*.

According to the report:

- Transgender women, people of color, and gay men face the highest risk of homicide.
- Transgender people, low income people, people of color, LGBTQAI and HIV-affected youth and young adults, and gay men face the most violence.
- More than half of the survivors report hate violence to the police, yet the police classify only a small percentage of reports as bias or hate crimes. Those who did report violence were often met with police hostility and excessive force.

In order to change the dynamics of violence against the LGBTQAI community we must address and change the heteronormative attitude that can lead to homophobic and transphobic behaviors and actions. We must learn to become better allies. A way to begin this process is to become knowledgeable and understand the self-identifying terms proscribed by individuals who may consider themselves part of this community. (See definitions at the end of this article).

What You Can Do:

- **Work** diligently to end the homophobic, trans-phobic, and bi-phobic culture that fuels violence.
- **Recognize** and understand that gay and transgender people simply want the same things as all Americans – the ability to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, provide for their families, be safe in their communities, and take care of the ones they love.
- **Know** and understand that there are all kinds of families – two-parent families, single mothers raising children, single fathers raising children, foster care families, etc. All families need the support of the community, no matter the composition or the orientation/identity of parents or caregivers. Institutions of faith, schools, social and educational institutions must help them raise children, and provide relevant programs to address the diverse needs of families, as well as the needs of the community.
- **Speak** out against all hate crimes, including crimes against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. One's silence is another form of support for those who use violence to intimidate and cause people to live in fear. "Speaking Out" shows strength and bravery, as well as the right thing to do.
- **Call** for equal protection under the law, including protection from sexual violence, for *everyone* irrespective of their gender identity or sexual orientation.
- **Send** the message about what is acceptable in public spaces. Be mindful of gender-identity and expression in our everyday conversation. Speak out against inappropriate jokes or comments.
- **Hold** the media accountable for providing information that is accurate, reflective of all people, and that does not allow gender-based violence to live on in our culture.

Social Service Agencies and Schools:

- **Become trained on the issue of inclusion and provide sensitivity training.**
- **Identify** ways to eliminate homophobic social work practice and policies.
- **Develop and institute affirming programs that provide needed resources such as, shelter and housing, employment, medical and mental health services.**
- **Consider instituting and providing support for organizations such as gay-straight alliances in schools.**

Law Enforcement and the Criminal Justice System:

- **Require** that all levels of law enforcement personnel receive LGBTQAI cultural sensitivity training.
- **Develop** and institute the sufficient resources to report violence by police: Be aware that transgender women are especially vulnerable, often being wrongly accused of being sex workers as a reason for harassment and possibly arrest.
- **Implement** policies to ensure that police are held accountable among their peers for violent acts against the LGBTQAI community.

Communities of Faith:

- **Attend** to the spiritual needs of those who have been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Make this commitment a part of the culture of *all* religions and religious institutions.
- **Seek to understand** the complex and unique needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered and questioning people and provide spaces for learning, dialogue and social justice action.

LGBTQ Youth

Centers for Disease Control Fact Sheet: Parent's Influence on the Health of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Teens http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/protective/pdf/parents_influence_lgb.pdf

Experiences with Violence

Most lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, asexual, and intersexual (LGBTQAI) youth are happy and thrive during their adolescent years. Some LGBTQAI youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience difficulties in their lives and school environments, such as violence. However, going to a school that creates a safe and supportive learning environment for *all* students and having caring and accepting parents are especially important. This helps *all* youth achieve good grades and maintain good mental and physical health.

Exposure to violence can have negative effects on the education and health of any young person. However, for LGBTQAI youth, a national study of middle and high school students shows that such students (61.1%) were more likely than their non- LGBTQAI peers to feel unsafe or uncomfortable as a result of their sexual orientation.

These youths were also more likely to experience:

- Being threatened or injured with weapons on school property
- Dating violence
- Homophobic teasing and bullying, (also cyber bullying)
- Substance abuse
- Depression
- Unexcused absences from school
- Dropping out of school
- Running away, becoming homeless
- Risky sexual behaviors, placing them at risk for HIV and other STDs (sexually transmitted diseases).

What Schools Can Do:

For youth to thrive in their schools and communities, they need to feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe and supported. A positive school climate has been associated with decreased depression, suicidal feelings, substance use, and unexcused school absences among LGBTQAI students.

Schools can implement clear policies, procedures, and activities designed to promote a healthy environment for all youth. For example, research has shown that in schools with LGBTQAI support groups (such as gay-straight alliances), LGBTQAI students were less likely to experience threats of violence, miss school because they felt unsafe, or attempt suicide than those students in schools without such support groups. A recent study found that such students

had fewer suicidal thoughts and attempts when schools had gay-straight alliances and policies prohibiting expression of homophobia in place for 3 or more years.

To help promote health and safety among LGBTQAI youth, schools can implement the following policies and practices:

- **Encourage** respect for all students and prohibit bullying, harassment, and violence against all students.
- **Identify** “safe spaces,” such as counselors’ offices, designated classrooms, or student organizations, where LGBTQAI youth can receive support from administrators, teachers, or from another school staff.
- **Encourage** student-led and student-organized school clubs that promote a safe, welcoming, and accepting school environment (e.g., gay-straight alliances, which are school clubs open to youth of all sexual orientations).
- **Ensure** that health curricula or educational materials include HIV, other STD, or pregnancy prevention information that is relevant to LGBTQAI youth (such as, ensuring that curricula or materials use inclusive language or terminology).
- **Develop** and publicize trainings on how to create safe and supportive school environments for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, and encourage staff to attend these trainings.
- **Facilitate** access to community-based providers who have experienced providing health services, including HIV/STD testing and counseling, to LGBTQAI youth.
- **Provide** access to community-based providers who have experience in providing social and psychological services to LGBTQAI youth.

What Parents Can Do:

How parents respond to their LGBTQAI teen can have a tremendous impact on their adolescent’s current and future mental and physical health. Supportive reactions can help youth cope with the challenges they may face. However, some parents react negatively to learning that they may have an LGBTQAI daughter or son. In some cases, parents no longer allow their teens to remain in the home. In other situations, stress and conflict at home can cause some youth to run away. As a result, such youth are at greater risk for homelessness than their heterosexual peers.

- **Be supportive: talk openly with their teen about any problems or concerns and be watchful** of behaviors that might indicate their child is a victim of bullying or violence—or that their child may be victimizing others. If bullying, violence, or depression is suspected, parents should take immediate action, working with school personnel and **other adults in the community.**
- **Take** steps to support the health and well-being of their youth:
- **Talk and listen in a way that invites an open discussion about sexual orientation: this** can help their teen feel loved and supported. Parents should have honest conversations with their teens about sex and about how to avoid risky behavior and unsafe or high-risk situations.
- **Provide** support. Parents who take time to come to terms with how they feel about their teen’s sexual orientation will be better able to respond calmly and use respectful language. Parents should develop common goals with their teen, including being healthy and doing well in school.
- **Find** supportive communities for yourself with other families who have already gone through this process. Reach out to them for support and guidance.
- **Create** support communities with other families where there are none.

- **Stay** involved. Parents who make an effort to know their teen's friends and know what their teen is doing can help their teen stay safe and feel cared about.
- **Be** proactive. Parents can access many organizations and online informational resources to learn more about how they can support their LGBTQAI teen, other family members, and their teen's friends.

Resources

- *Project Silk*: Provides services and a safe space for young adult members of the LGBT community in a partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Health and the University of Pittsburgh. 810 Penn Ave., Eighth Floor, Pittsburgh, PA 15219; <http://projectsilk.org/>.
- *Garden of Peace Project*: Nonprofit networking group that provides resources for medical and mental health care for marginalized populations, as well as legal name-change assistance. Teaming with Project Silk, it offers HIV and STD testing, hormones, mental health, substance abuse and linkage to social services. <http://www.gardenofpeaceproject.org/>.
- *Persad Center* is a human service organization whose mission is to improve the well-being of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning) communities, and the HIV/AIDS communities. We serve our target populations and their loved ones, cradle to the grave, across western Pennsylvania, with service centers in Pittsburgh, Washington and Erie Pennsylvania. www.persadcenter.org
- *Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)*: provides anonymous and free group counseling for LGBT individuals and their families. It holds monthly meetings where anyone is invited to participate and gain support or create a network www.pflagpgh.org
- *Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)*: focuses on educating students about the issues surrounding the LGBT community. It also works to ensure a safe learning environment for all students in schools regardless of their sexual orientation. www.glsen.org
- *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Helpline*: Hotline provides telephone and email peer counseling, as well as factual information and local resources for cities and towns across the United States. <http://www.glnh.org> Phone: (888) 843-4564
- *GLAAD*: Rewrites the script for LGBT acceptance. As a dynamic media force, GLAAD tackles tough issues to shape the narrative and provoke dialogue that leads to cultural change. GLAAD protects all that has been accomplished and creates a world where everyone can live the life they love. www.glaad.org

Definitions

(<http://tahoesafealliance.org/for-lgbqtia/what-does-lgbqtia-mean/>)

- **Gender Identity**: How a person identifies their gender, which may be different than social norms and/or stereotypes of the sex they were assigned at birth.
- **Cisgender**: A term used to describe an individual whose self-perception matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

- Sexual orientation: A person's physical or emotional attraction to people of a specific gender or multiple genders; the culturally defined set of meanings through which people describe their sexual attractions.
- Heteronormative: A viewpoint that expresses heterosexuality as a given, instead of being one of many possibilities for a person's sexual orientation. Often expressed subtly where heterosexuality is accepted as the default sexuality.
- Lesbian: A female-identified person who is attracted romantically, physically, or emotionally to another female-identified person.
- Gay: A male-identified person who is attracted romantically, physically, or emotionally to another male-identified person.
- Bisexual: A person who is attracted romantically, physically, or emotionally to both men and women.
- Transgender: A person who is a member of a gender other than what is expected based on anatomical sex.
- Queer: An umbrella term which embraces a variety of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of those who do not adhere to the heterosexual and cisgender majority. The term queer includes, but is not exclusive to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans-people, and intersex persons, traditionally, this term is derogatory and hurtful, however, many people who do not adhere to sexual and/or gender norms use it to self-identify in a positive way. (Can refer either to gender identity or sexual orientation, or both).
- Intersex – Someone whose physical sex characteristics are not categorized as exclusively male or exclusively female.
- Asexual – A person who is not attracted to anyone, or a person who does not have a sexual orientation.

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