

Black Lesbians Matter

An examination of the unique experiences, perspectives, and priorities of the Black Lesbian community

Executive Summary



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*A Zuna Institute Publication by Francine Ramsey,
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I. Executive Summary

“Probably the most serious deterrent to black lesbian activism is the closet itself. It is very difficult and sometimes impossible to organize around Black lesbian issues, such as homophobic violence, child custody, and right-wing initiatives, when you do not want people to know who you are.” **Barbara Smith, (1998).** *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writing on Race, Gender, and Freedom*

As the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) movement gains momentum around the country, it’s important to ensure that the perspectives and priorities of Black lesbians are represented. Research studies show that Black lesbians are among the most vulnerable in our society. For example, a recent study by the Williams Institute found that Black lesbians in same-sex couples had poverty rates of 21.1%, compared to 4.3% for White lesbians, and 14.4% for gay Black men.¹ Such disparities speak to the need for a fresh assessment of the unique experiences of Black lesbian communities.

As mainstream LGBTQ organizations set their agendas, many times the most important concerns and priorities of Black lesbians are not represented. There are only a few Black LGBTQ organizations operating nationally. Additionally, outreach to the Black lesbian communities by mainstream LGBTQ organizations has been minimal. As one survey respondent commented, “[For Black lesbians] out of sight many times translates to ‘out of hearing;’ and ‘out of hearing’ sometimes translates to ‘out of luck.’” Representatives from the Zuna Institute organization understand the importance of “having a place at the table” when decision-makers and funders set priorities to support the LGBTQ community. However, in order to adequately represent Black lesbians, a national needs assessment was necessary. This survey, the *National Black Lesbian Needs Assessment* asks, **“Who are we? And what issues/concerns do Black lesbians view as important?”**

This groundbreaking survey conducted over several months in 2009-2010 provides a contemporary broad brush overview into the lives of Black lesbians. This study presents descriptive statistics. This is not an in-depth look at one person’s struggle or a collection of personal writings.² This study does not include youth members of the Black lesbian community; it focuses on Black lesbians ages 18-70. This

quantitative study is akin to a Black lesbian “census.” Regional, statewide, and local organizations that support Black LGBTQ individuals asked Black lesbians to speak up and be heard, to stand up and be counted; 1,596 women answered that call by participating in focus groups and through an on-line survey.

This is a representative sample of Black lesbians with participants from every region in the United States. The largest percentage of the population surveyed is between 40 and 49 years of age with 84% of the participants holding undergraduate degrees and maintaining an annual salary of at least \$51,000. In this survey, over 36% of the women are from the southern region of the United States, in localities where homophobia is a daily occurrence. The survey respondents challenge the view of who is traditionally viewed as Black lesbians.

Often research representing Black communities, and by extension Black lesbian community, focuses on individuals living in poverty. Even so, the statistics gathered in this study show that the impacts of invisibility and discrimination have debilitating effects in the lives of Black lesbians; these effects are similar to those reported by Black Americans who live in poverty. The literature documenting the lives of Black lesbians is not vast; it is scattered among medical studies, poverty studies, and studies on identity development. Black lesbians face triple jeopardy,³ the idea that gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity hinders our advancement in society. Data reveals that many women in this survey have had direct experiences with discrimination: in areas of employment, with health care providers, and in creating and protecting their families.

As the nation struggles with issues of marriage equality for gay and lesbian people, Black lesbians are continuing to create families together. This study reveals that 69.5% of the women surveyed either have children or are planning to have children. One survey respondent commented, “Most Black lesbians don’t see marriage as an important issue-- because they haven’t had the opportunity to be in a legal same-sex marriage and have never experienced how it transforms community attitudes about homophobia, lesbian parenting, workplace acceptance, etc.” The call for visibility is the call to be recognized as a family unit with all the legal rights and privileges granted by law through legally recognized marriages.



The *National Black Lesbian Needs Assessment* found that domestic violence experienced by Black lesbians is rarely reported to authorities, but has occurred in the lives of 41.9% of the respondents. Respondents reported they had experienced domestic violence either with a man (14.1%) or in a same-sex relationship (27.8%). The study revealed that the needs of Black women in violent same-sex relationships have been overlooked on local and national levels. The call for Black lesbian visibility is the call for safety and protection.

How we define ourselves, what we call ourselves, and when we disclose this information to health care professionals can have life or death consequences. The invisibility of Black lesbians, combined with our fluidity of identity poses health care concerns around HIV transmission. Additionally, upholding the myth of the “strong black woman” along with the lack of adequate mental health support can lead Black lesbians to higher rates of suicide. The call for Black lesbian visibility is the call to save lives.

The study also provides a peek into Black lesbians and issues of aging. The research literature focuses primarily on White gay and lesbian groups and paints a bleak vision of aging in the gay/lesbian community. The focus group data collected revealed that long-term health insurance coverage and residing in retirement communities with other Black lesbians were among the most important concerns for aging Black lesbians. The recommendation is that additional quantitative data be collected specifically focusing on older Black lesbians. At this time, no conclusions can be summarized about their specific needs. This is an area for further investigation.

This study shows that advocacy needs of Black lesbians persist in the areas of financial security, healthcare, access to education, and marriage equality.

This study has implications for helping organizations in program planning. Long-term and short-term strategies should be used to address the needs of Black lesbians. In the short-term, issues of financial security, healthcare, and access to education should be addressed. Strategic partnerships must be cultivated to provide support and to focus on civil rights for lesbian families with children. In the long-term, issues facing younger Black lesbians, as well as those facing the aging population should be further investigated.

The *National Black Lesbian Needs Assessment* revealed that Black lesbian visibility is an essential element in the political and economic landscape. This survey brings to the forefront information from a traditionally marginalized group. This survey also highlights the needs and concerns of Black lesbians as defined by them.

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- 1 Albelda, R., Badgett, M. V., Schneebaum, A., and Gates, G. (2009). Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community. Los Angeles, CA. *The Williams Institute: UCLA Law School*.
 - 2 Battle, J. and Bennett, N. (2006). “Closets are for Clothes: Tearing down boundaries to freedom for Black American sexual minorities,” in *Free at last? Black America in the Twenty-First Century*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
 - 3 Bowleg, L., Craig, M., And Burkholder, G. (2004) Rising and surviving: a conceptual model, in *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 10(3), 229-240, 231.



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