

Sport and Sexual Orientation

This fact sheet is intended to expose some of the myths about sexual orientation and sport that give rise to homophobia and that undermine women's and girls' (and many men's) full and equal participation.



We cannot know for sure how many lesbians, bisexual and transgendered women and girls participate in sport because official statistics are not compiled, but we do know that they frequently experience discrimination and harassment because of their sexual orientation. Indeed, homophobia and bi-phobia are all-too-often targeted at *any* female who plays sport, regardless of whether she is lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual.

Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation is the term generally used when referring to an individual's physical and/or emotional attraction to the same /or opposite gender. "Hetrosexual," "bisexual" and "homosexual" are all sexual orientations. A person's sexual orientation is distinct from a person's gender identity and expression.

Issues relating to gender reassignment and transexuality are distinct and should be considered separately.

What are the stereotypes about sexual orientation and women's sport?

Stereotypes are common assumptions about people based on no evidence – in other words myths: they are often demeaning and may also be very hurtful and lead to low self esteem. Many lesbians and bisexual women in sport face discrimination simply because they are perceived to be different from the 'norm': this is called 'homonegativity'. In the worst cases, such negative treatment has led non-heterosexual female athletes to commit suicide.

Common stereotypes about sexual orientation in women's sport include:

- That heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation
- That all sportswomen are lesbian
- Lesbians are better at sport
- Lesbians have an unfair advantage in sport
- All lesbians like sport
- That lesbian sportswomen will prey on and seduce younger girls
- That lesbian athletes are always aggressive, muscle-bound and ugly
- That lesbian athletes are cliquy
- That lesbians are a danger to both men's and women's sport because they challenge the 'natural' order
- That bisexual sportswomen are traitors to both heterosexual ('straight') and lesbian ('gay') sport
- That athletes who have undergone male-to-female sex reassignment procedures are biologically advantaged and should therefore be banned from taking part in women's competitions

"She's here with her girlfriend, she's half a man already"
Martina Hingis referring to Amelie Mauresmo's lesbianism on the eve of their clash in the 1999 Australian Open final.

Where did these stereotypes come from?

Traditional norms about heterosexual and homosexual behaviour have infiltrated thinking about all areas of society but are especially prominent in sport. Stereotypes about sexual orientation are rooted in people's beliefs about how males and females ought to behave in society. Men's historical domination of sport organisations has led to many people thinking that this is the 'natural' order of things and that biological strength in men gives them social power over

women. For women and girls who do not choose a heterosexual identity, they face a double disadvantage: first, their sport choices are narrowed by men's assumed superiority. Secondly, their sport experiences are undermined because they do not conform to social expectations.

Homophobia – (the fear of non heterosexuals) is often driven by a lack of understanding which only serves to strengthen stereotypes and can potentially lead to actions that may cause lesbian or bisexual women to feel isolated or undervalued. If these actions are at an organisational level the organisation itself could be deemed to be “institutionally homophobic”.

“It is ridiculous that some people think playing football will make you a lesbian, if you're gay, you're going to be gay whether you play football or tiddlywinks” quote by Welsh International Footballer Andie Worrall in Diva magazine in 2008.

Why is this an issue for women's sport?

Whilst some lesbian and bisexual women find engagement in sport to be a very positive experience, homonegativity can affect participation in many ways, for example, by:

- making lesbian and bisexual women athletes feel unwelcome, belittled, harassed or bullied in sport (through gossip, name-calling, jokes and other hate acts)
- frightening women and girls, of whatever sexual orientation, away from sport
- reinforcing false ideas about sport, and about women's and girls' sport in particular
- restricting women's and girls' ability to express themselves and be honest about their own feelings within a sport setting
- inhibiting openness and instead forcing women and girls into secrecy about sexual orientation
- reducing lesbian and bisexual women athletes' trust in others such as coaches and peer athletes
- forcing lesbian and bisexual women athletes to question their own status and value

- raising doubts about the fairness of selection procedures or the partiality of coaches
- inhibiting lesbian and bisexual women athletes from complaining about unfair treatment for fear of further victimisation or retribution
- increasing the chances of drop out
- undermining the confidence that is associated with competitive success
- limiting the number of lesbian and female bisexual athletes who are prepared to be out and thus to act as role models
- reducing the range and number of sport and physical activities that are deemed 'suitable' for girls and women.
- limiting the leisure and health benefits available to them through sport and exercise

Homonegativity is also likely to have consequences for sport organisations, such as:

- increased friction between individuals
- higher attrition/turnover of personnel
- damaged reputation in the wider sport community
- increased risk of litigation by those who suffer discrimination
- greater absenteeism/illness of personnel including elite athletes
- reduced chances of meeting collective performance goals

Several strategies are available to non-heterosexual women and girls in sport:

Resistance: achieved by personal challenge (confronting the individual(s), trying to talk to them and asking them to stop the behaviour), making a formal challenge (taking a complaint, lodging a grievance), or whistle blowing (alerting authorities on behalf of a victim). However, LBT athletes may not want to rock the boat by confronting their oppressors for fear of reprisals and/or deselection.

Accommodation: This sometimes happen through denial – when the LBT female who cannot face either their own or others' homophobia or confront the consequences of coming out – or by 'passing' (pretending to be straight) and 'apologetics' (using behaviour, jewellery or clothing that makes one look

heterosexual). This strategy thus puts a strain on the lesbian or bisexual female as she has to keep up a consistent story and use emotional energy in remembering who knows and who does not.

Appropriation: Some more confident LBT women in sport turn the homophobic tables on their 'straight' colleagues by deliberately celebrating their minority status ('pride') as in 'out and proud' but this is a risky strategy as it can make homophobia and exclusion worse rather than better.

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What does the law say about sexual orientation in sport?

LGBT people in sport are likely to experience issues that are currently covered by a number of different legislative instruments related to:

- Employment
- Vocational training and qualifications
- Provision of goods, facilities and services
- The practices of members clubs or associations
- Individual discrimination, bullying or harassment

The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007 require *any* providers of goods, facilities or services to ensure that they do not discriminate against actual or potential users based on their sexual orientation. This applies to all individuals and organisations that provide services, whether these are paid for or not. These regulations cover:

Public authorities - individuals or organizations, and employees or any agents acting on their behalf, delivering public services such as PE in schools, local authority sports programmes or governing body services where these are publicly-funded, and

Clubs or associations - with more than 25 members, whether they are corporate or unincorporated, and whether or not their activities are carried on for profit, so most sports clubs and associations are affected

Under the Sex Discrimination (Amendment of Legislation) Regulations 2008, from April 2008, it became also unlawful for providers of goods, facilities and services to discriminate against or harass people on grounds of gender reassignment.

The Government's proposed new (2009) Single Equalities Bill is intended to promote fairness and equality of opportunity and also to challenge disadvantage and discrimination, including on the grounds of sexual orientation. The Bill incorporates nine separate pieces of legislation and should rationalize the previously piecemeal approach to equalities issues. It will introduce a new Public Sector Equality Duty. Groups like Stonewall hope that this will bring equality for [LGB] people into the mainstream of equality policy, provisions and practices.

What should be done to address this issue?

All individuals and groups engaged in sport, as well as sport organisations providing sport programmes and services, should acquaint themselves with the principles of the new Single Equality Bill and prepare for its enactment through appropriate education and training. In the meantime, it would be helpful follow the advice given in Sport Scotland's recent report on sexual orientation in sport, adapted overleaf into a checklist for a model sport organisation:

People perform better when they can be themselves.

(Stonewall 2008)

Whether you are a policy maker or involved in direct delivery you can use the checklist to benchmark whether your policies and practice promote equality for LGB people. Where necessary you can action plan for development in specific areas and at the end of the fact sheet there are a number of useful links identified to help you with addressing this.

WSFF would like to thank Celia Brackenridge for producing this fact sheet. Celia is currently the Director of the Centre for Youth Sport and Athlete Welfare at Brunel University and a specialist in child protection and gender equity issues in sport and leisure

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Does your sport organisation:	Yes Score 1 pt	No Score 0 pt
... have a written policy on equality/diversity that bars discrimination and explicitly mentions SO?		
... offer inclusive inductions?		
... a working group on diversity that encompasses LGB issues?		
... have a named lead individual for SO issues at executive/board level?		
... have an LGB support and consultation network group?		
... conduct regular audits to monitor compliance with Employment (SO) Regulations and the Civil Partnership Act?		
... offers diversity awareness training that refers explicitly to "sexual orientation" and gives practical, context specific examples?		
... provide support for and sponsorship of LGB organisations or events such as the Gay Games?		
... run organisational campaigns that highlight inclusion and safety for LGB members and staff, through materials, intra and internet sites etc.?		
... enforce SO equity policy compliance?		
... use LGBT media to place ads for staff, volunteers or members?		
... include SO-related questions on all member/staff/supporter surveys and other monitoring tools?		
... provide targeted mentoring on LGB issues, especially in relation to performance lifestyle programmes for elite athletes?		
... provide or offer referrals to counselling support services for those experiencing homophobia?		
... give opportunities for LGB leadership training and resources, sourced internally or externally?		
... celebrate key LGB individuals within the organisation, especially those at senior levels?		
... ensure that all members feel accepted and comfortable by avoiding assumptions about SO and partner status or partner gender e.g. references to "wives and girlfriends", giving gender-specific gifts such as ties for men or headscarves for women, describing "wives' " events on conference programmes?		
Total		

How did you do?

- 13+ Congratulations – your organisation is well on the way to promoting equality for LGBT people and could perhaps help others in sport towards achieving this goal.
- 7-12 Your organisation has made a start but has some way to go to achieve equality for LGBT people: you are advised to seek additional help to raise your overall score.
- 0-6 Your organisation is in danger of breaching the new Single Equality Duty and may also be missing out on the many benefits of diversity. You are strongly advised to seek advice from

Further Information

- <http://www.sportscotland.org.uk/ChannelNavigation/Resource+Library/Publications/A+Literature+Review+of+Sexual+Orientation+in+Sport.htm>
- ii There are several specialist sport organizations for non-heterosexual people, including:
 - <http://www.iglyo.com> The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth and Students Organisation (IGLYO)
 - <http://www.ilga.org> The International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA)
 - <http://www.eglsf.info/eglsf-media.php> European Gay and Lesbian Sport Federation (EGLSF)

- <http://www.queeryouth.org.uk/community> The UK's National LGBT Youth Organisation
- <http://www.stonewall.org.uk> Stonewall, a lobbying group for LGBT people
- www.pinkpaper.com
- www.outforsport.org
- www.gaygames.com/en/
- www.gendertrust.org.uk

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