**Three Strikes: The Economic Reality of Black Lesbians**

The Williams Institute recently conducted a study entitled, Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community, which offered some insight as to why Black Lesbians have been the hardest hit by the economic crisis in the United States. In the general culture there is a perception of gay affluence, but that is nothing more than a stereotype. That stereotype might lead some to be shocked that Black lesbians would be at the bottom of the economic barrel, but it really should not be all that surprising. No other racial demographic was as negatively affected by the recession as Black Americans, and no group within the Black community was hit as hard as Black women. Even though women make up roughly half of the country’s population, they are still considered a “minority” group, so it makes sense that the minority (women) within the minority (Black people) would be hit hard. Black lesbians take that theory one step further... the minority (lesbians) within a minority (women) within a minority (Black people). The discrimination Black lesbians struggle with is thrice compounded.

The recession in the United States included a collapse in home values and high unemployment and took the greatest toll on Black wealth. From 2005 to 2009, median wealth fell by 53 percent among blacks, compared with 16 percent among whites. 13% of the entire United States population is living beneath the poverty line and 24.7% of Black Americans live below that line. These losses have left Black wealth at its lowest levels in at least 25 years. Black wealth does not have the same generational, ancestral and historical foundations as does its white counterpart, which makes it difficult to bounce back after these kinds of setbacks. This is the first hurdle Black lesbians must overcome.

A study done by the National Women’s Law Center reported that Black women have lost more jobs during the recovery (258,000) than they did during the recession (233,000). [[1]](#footnote-1)Black women represented 12.5% of all women workers in June 2009. But between then and this June, black women lost 42.2% of jobs lost by women overall. [[2]](#footnote-2)According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, at the close of 2011, while the nation’s overall unemployment rate declined from 9.0 to 8.6 in November, the unemployment rate for black women increased from 12.6 to 12.9.[[3]](#footnote-3)There seems to be a mass prioritization to put men back to work first, which really means putting white men back to work first, which places Black women at the bottom of the totem pole when it comes to job creation and recovery. This is another strike against Black lesbians.

The Williams Institute found that lesbian couples have much higher poverty rates than either different-sex couples or gay male couples.[[4]](#footnote-4) African-American same-sex couples, according to the Williams Institute, are significantly more likely to be poor than their married heterosexual counterparts and roughly three times more likely to live in poverty than white same-sex couples.[[5]](#footnote-5) The study ultimately came to the conclusion that major factors contributing to the poverty in the gay and lesbian community are their vulnerability to employment discrimination, lack of access to marriage, higher rates of being uninsured, less family support and family conflict over coming out. [[6]](#footnote-6)Many of these factors are issues that the Black community can rally behind in an effort to support our gay and lesbian community.

The Black community needs to embrace the minorities within our minority. We cannot cry discrimination and then discriminate against our own. We must support our women, and support our gay community. Only in coming together as a whole community, minorities within our minority included, can we progress, and build a strong economic foundation.

We must call upon our President Barack Obama to sign an executive order prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in federal contracting. Such an order would cover over one fifth of the U.S. Workforce and can be done without waiting for congress.  Starting in 1941, every President from Roosevelt to Johnson expanded civil rights protections for racial and ethnic minorities and women for federal workers and employees of contractors before passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. It’s time President Obama exercise that power as well.

1. Black Women Were Hit Hard With Job Losses in Economic Crisis. Courtland Milloy. December 11, 2011. Washington Post. http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/2011/12/11/gIQAEo5GoO\_story.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.gaypeopleschronicle.com/stories09/march/0327093.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community. The Williams Institute. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)