

Standing at the gate to a US military base in the UK, a police officer with an automatic machine gun was questioned by white, female protesters, as to why he was so heavily armed. “To stop terrorists entering the base”, was the prompt reply. “Would you shoot us, if we went through the gate or over the fence?” asked the women. “Of course not,” replied the police officer, “you're not terrorists.” “How do you know? What does a terrorist look like?” asked the women. There was no response; the police officer had been caught out on the way he would have profiled people differently, and how he would have treated some with lethal force but not others, based in this case, on skin colour or ethnicity.

The story above illustrates how different people will have different experiences of the police and the legal system. While some entering that base would not expect a bullet, others would have legitimate fears for their life.

Someone's ethnicity, race, gender identity, class, age, or a whole host of other social characteristics can mean some people encounter greater levels of direct violence or discrimination than others, be it during actions, as they are arrested, or while in custody. It is important to talk as a group, recognising that some people may be treated differently, and for legal observers to be ready to respond appropriately. Be ready for the unexpected, too; for example, when being removed from a blockade, able-bodied men may be treated more roughly than their elder, female counterparts. When in custody, detainees will often be expected to conform to a traditional gender structure; for those who don't fit into such a structure the experience can be extremely difficult.

Legal observers can respond to violence by:

- documenting violence when it occurs;
- making sure the police know that they have been witnessed;
- not leaving those being treated violently alone;
- lawyers can monitor conditions and make sure detainees are treated respectfully;
- groups can act in solidarity with victims of violence by refusing to cooperate until everyone is treated equally, demanding that individuals are not left isolated, and making sure those likely to be targeted by the police are not the last to be processed.

Sometimes, official channels – like police complaints procedures – can be used to make sure that a particular officer is reprimanded after the fact. Some activists feel empowered by making sure some form of justice takes place.

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