
Some Thoughts on the Myth of Mutual Abuse

Karen Lee Asheran

The idea that lesbian couples are “mutually abusive” is one of the myths most dangerous to victims. It colludes with what an abusive woman is already telling her partner – that the violence is the responsibility of the victim. Abusive persons have an uncanny ability to frame themselves with charm and certainty as the true victims, and they pull others into that fraudulent reality.

Without proper investigation, attempts to regain stolen power (self defensive behaviors) on the part of survivors can appear “mutually abusive.” But when a victim seeks help and is told that she is in any way (even equally) responsible for the violence, she hears that the abuser is right. The message is that she is to blame, therefore has the power to fix the violence, and she returns to her critical self-dissection which is encouraged by her partner. This keeps her more deeply trapped in the relationship, and consequently increases the risk of lethality.

In addition, telling an abusive woman that her partner is equally abusive releases the abuser from responsibility, and eliminates any hope for accountability. She believes not only that she need do nothing to improve her behaviors, but also her sense of herself as victim is fortified.

When service providers (police, courts, therapists and other helpers) collude with the abuser by labeling a relationship as mutually abusive, they share the blame for increasing the risk to the victim. Following is a list of quotes which illuminate the danger of giving credibility to this common falsehood.

- It is not to say that battered lesbians have never been violent towards the women who have battered them. Many have. But the violence is largely self-defense and sometimes is rage at past violations.
– Barbara Hart, *Naming the Violence*
- A lesbian who has been battered often believes ... that her experiences of the violence have been “mutual” since she may have knocked her partner down to escape from a room ... or she may have violently ejected the batterer from her apartment ... or she may have picked up a baseball bat and threatened to assault the batterer if she approached one step closer, or she may have in a rage beaten the woman who had been battering her.
– Barbara Hart, *Naming the Violence*
- When I came to believe that I had been abusive to her, I was trapped. How could I leave the woman who sacrificed herself to such an extent as to love a monster like me? It was at that point that she didn’t even have to say ‘Jump!’ I was leaping as high as I could every minute in order to attempt to redeem myself. When I got exhausted from leaping, it was just more evidence that I didn’t love her, so I pushed myself until I started getting sick.
– Anonymous Survivor
- ... immediately after separation from the abuser, they were confused about whether they had been batterers, as well as victims. Their understanding of violence and battering in the relationship had become tailored to the belief system of the batterer, and it took careful reflection on issues of control and power for clarity to emerge. Often this process took several months.
– Barbara Hart, *Naming the Violence*

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- “I have always been volatile, I have never been abusive.”
– Anonymous Survivor

 - “... batterer will threaten to report acts of violence ... pointing out that if the battered lesbian has acted violently to such an extent that she could be criminally liable, then surely she is not battered and has engaged in mutual violence.”
– Barbara Hart, *Naming the Violence*

 - “Batterers [almost] always see themselves as the victims of the battered woman. This perceived victimization is repeatedly shared with the battered lesbian.”
– Barbara Hart, *Naming the Violence*

 - For four years I have thought I was the bad guy. She didn’t get power in the relationship by yelling, but rather by pouting or long hostile silences. I could never put the finger on why I was so edgy, but eventually I was always the one who blew up, and when I did, she’d point her finger and say ‘see, you’re crazy, you’re abusive.’ She’d talk about how difficult I was to live with, and could recite volumes on how I was trying to control her. Now, I’m starting to realize that I was always trying to ‘make up’ for past violations, constantly feeling guilty, and in a never-ending game of trying to win her elusive trust. It didn’t even occur to me to stop and wonder whether I trusted her.
– Anonymous Survivor

 - “Since all battered lesbians have engaged in extensive efforts to protect the batterer from exposure as a terrorist and from the consequences of her violence, battered lesbians may continue ‘taking care’ of the batterer by blaming herself, maximizing her violence and minimizing that of the batterer.”
– Karen Lee Asheran, *The Myth of Mutual Abuse*

 - “It was like she was constantly telling me that I was stepping on her toes. One day I realized it was impossible not to step on her because her feet were filling the entire room.”
– Anonymous Survivor

 - Many battered lesbians are women of substantial physical prowess and power ... who choose not to use this power to control the perpetrator, or would do so only to protect themselves or stop the batterer. The powerful lesbian may not live in fear of the violence of her partner. She may, rather, live in dread of the violent episodes and in anxiety about control confrontations. Even though not fearful, she alters her life to accommodate the batterer and worries that her efforts will not suffice to avoid abuse.
– Barbara Hart, *Naming the Violence*

 - “Often batterers use the survivor’s self-doubt to their advantage. Batterers are notorious for labeling the survivor ‘mutually abusive’ in order to avoid taking responsibility for their own actions.”
– Karen Lee Asheran, *The Myth of Mutual Abuse*

 - I came to the conclusion that to get away from her I had to be the bad guy. Just about every attempt to put myself first was met with consequences. There was always a cost for anything I did for myself, and usually that cost was guilt. When I became willing to be framed as the bad guy not only by her but by most of our friends, I was able to get away.
– Anonymous Survivor
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- “There may be unhealthy psychological interactions that are mutual in relationships, but we need to be careful not to equate that with ‘mutual battering.’ Both lesbians may be irritating and hurtful to each other, but that’s very different from the power-over, ‘squashing’ behaviors of batterers.”
– Karen Lee Asheran, *The Myth of Mutual Abuse*
 - Our community can help stop lesbian battering. We can begin by reevaluating the terms we use which perpetuate violence against battered lesbians. We can support the healing of survivors ... by insisting that batterers and community alike not be allowed to hide behind the misconception of ‘mutual abuse.’
– Karen Lee Asheran, *The Myth of Mutual Abuse*
 - Lesbians who have fought back to defend themselves not only suffer from the battering, but also from feelings of guilt because they have acted violently. This feeds right into the false notion of ‘mutual abuse’; which continues to camouflage the fact that one woman is exerting ‘power’ over the other. When a battered lesbian believes she is ‘mutually abusing’ her lover, she actually protects the batterer from confronting herself, which preserves the relationship as it is, and helps the batterer avoid accounting for her actions.
– Karen Lee Asheran, *The Myth of Mutual Abuse*
 - “When I realized I would never pay off that huge ledger in the sky, all that I owed her for my past violations, I was able to leave her. Sometimes I wonder if she kept me indebted to her emotionally because I believed so strongly in justice, and because she knew I’d never leave if I thought I owed her.” – Anonymous Survivor
 - While I was involved in the relationship, one of the therapists we went to told me that if I would just trust that the abuser loved me, she would stop abusing me. Later, we went to a different therapist for couple’s counseling. After we separated, the batterer told me that our therapist had told her in an individual session that she thought we had been mutually abusive.
– Anonymous Survivor
 - By the time we got to couple’s counseling, I was so angry for all the stuff she had never taken responsibility for, that I was the one who looked out of control. It was the first time that I had any hope of getting support for what I thought was happening, so I let it all spill while she sat there calmly faking concern. Very quickly she was able to get the therapist to sympathize with her about how difficult it was to live with me. They agreed that I had an anger control problem, and I was sent to anger management classes. After learning to suppress my anger, I had no means of defending myself. I became really depressed, and eventually suicidal.
– Anonymous Survivor
 - “Invariably batterers blame battered women for the violence they inflict—alleging that if only the battered lesbian had not provoked her, the batterer would not have been violent; that the batterer is really under the control of the victim, helpless in the face of her behavior, and compelled to violence.”
– Barbara Hart, *Naming the Violence*
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- The analysis of lesbian battering assume that it is a rarity that a woman who is a victim of lesbian battering becomes a batterer later on in the relationship with the same person who battered her ... patterns of control and terrorism precipitated by battering are not easily undone. There would have to be an incredible shift in the power of the partner so that the battered lesbian acquires the power to use violence as a tactic to control and terrorize her mate. This might happen where the batterer becomes physically or mentally disabled and consequently loses the power behind the implied threat of violence.

Merely a realignment in economic security between the couple is not likely to shift power enough to make violence an effective tool for the victim in controlling the batterer. Furthermore, it becomes even less likely that the power and the availability of violence as an effective tactic of control will continue to shift back and forth between the partners as the imbalance of power shifts.

– Barbara Hart, *Naming the Violence*

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