

CONSIDERATIONS IN STARTING  
A SUPPORT GROUP FOR BATTERED LESBIANS

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For a battered wimmin's organization wishing to start a support group for battered lesbians, there are a number of considerations to take into account. The following suggestions come from discussions with battered lesbians and activists, reading material on lesbian battering, and trial and error. The more forethought and planning that goes into the setting up of the group, the easier it will be to eliminate or minimize future problems.

PRELIMINARIES

Unless the organization is already identified as serving lesbians, you will need to think about how you will address the homophobia which is bound to arise as you do outreach. To start a group only to pull it is not fair and possibly not safe for the group members. It is much easier to be clear and direct with community people, funders, politicians, etc. if everyone -- board, volunteers, staff -- is clear that you work with battered wimmin; lesbians are being battered; therefore, you work with battered lesbians. If the organization as a whole is committed to the work, it will probably not be as difficult to prepare a strategy for dealing with whatever type of pressure is likely to arise in your area.

In order to get to this sort of clarity, it is important to address the homophobia (fear &/or hatred of lesbians/gay men) and heterosexism (assumptions of heterosexuality and heterosexual norms) within the organization. One way to begin this task is to examine how safe an environment it is for lesbians who work/volunteer there. Can lesbians be fully out and talk about their lives openly? Are lesbians actively recruited? Do formerly battered lesbians work there? Does the environment reflect lesbian culture? If it is not comfortable for openly lesbian wimmin to work in the organization, it will not be safe for lesbians seeking services.

As knowledge of the support group increases, it is likely that lesbians will call for other services such as shelter, advocacy, etc. Ongoing work on homophobia and heterosexism is necessary for all levels of the organization, and it is especially vital for anyone who will have direct contact with battered lesbians. If a shelter/hotline worker assumes heterosexuality and asks such questions as "Are you married or is this your boyfriend?" or "How long have you and he been together?", a battered lesbian is immediately invalidated. Language, both verbal and written (in forms, brochures, training materials, etc.) must be changed to reflect the possibility that the batterer is a womyn. Lesbians have also had their sexuality either questioned or seen as the cause of the battering. Role plays, where the sexual orientation of the battered womyn is unknown, are a useful training tool. Workers see more concretely the assumptions they make and can develop strategies for working effectively with lesbians.

Education about lesbian battering is also essential. The most thorough examination of lesbian battering to date can be found in Naming the Violence

(Seal Press, 1986). Reading this book will give you some ideas about ways that it is similar to and different from heterosexual male battering. It also gives the reader the opportunity to experience her own reactions to violence by lesbians against lesbians. Many wimmin, especially those who are not formerly battered, have found that knowing that lesbian battering exists is very different from actually doing the work. Lesbians in the battered wimmin's movement, despite being accustomed to hearing stories of violence, may start feeling vulnerable in a very different way when those stories come from other lesbians. Or wimmin may identify with what is written and begin to name their own (ex-)lovers as abusive. Working with wimmin who have been abused by wimmin can be overwhelming, angering, saddening, threatening, etc. Beginning the process of sorting through those feelings before the group starts is easier for the facilitators and will allow them to be more fully present in the group.

Another important step is to explore resources for battered lesbians. How likely is it that police or courts in your area will be responsive to a lesbian seeking protection? What other options exist for safety? How organized is the lesbian community? What are the possibilities of networking with existing groups? What services exist for lesbians with other needs, for example, child care, substance abuse programs, therapists, legal services, etc.? A working referral list will be very helpful.

## THE GROUP

Safety and confidentiality are two main concerns in having a group for battered lesbians. Unlike heterosexual wimmin, wherever a battered lesbian can go, so can her batterer, simply because she is a womyn. This means that a drop-in group -- where the time and location are given out so that wimmin can show up with minimal or no previous contact with the organization or facilitators -- does not provide adequate safety for the group participants. Screening becomes a high priority.

Screening for us consists of speaking with the womyn both on the phone and in person before accepting her into the group. This time allows her the opportunity to tell her story to someone supportive, perhaps for the first time; help in devising a safety plan if needed; the chance to hear about the group and ask any questions she may have.

The interview also allows the facilitator(s) to determine that the womyn is battered and not the batterer. Batterers often feel victimized and may present themselves as abused, or a batterer may be trying to join the group to look for her partner. The battered womyn may have fought back and either see herself as, or have been told that she is, abusive.

As the womyn speaks about her experience, it is important to listen to the power dynamics and how she describes her partner, the abuse and her response to it. What types of abuse took place. Was she ever violent or did she do anything she or her partner considered abusive. Ask for details, examples of what happened. Ask her to pick a typical incident. What happened -- how did it start, how did it end, how did she feel, how did her partner react, how did she react. Listen for the typical ways that battered wimmin talk about their partners, their relationships, themselves. Listen to the dynamics of control. Who was afraid; who was "on eggshells"; whose life and resources became more and more narrow. If the

womyn questions her own role in what happened and maybe wonders if she should even be talking with you, it's no guarantee but it is more likely that she is battered. If she talks in a way that minimizes her own actions, blames her partner, says the partner deserved what she got and shouldn't have provoked her, etc., it's more likely that she's a batterer.

Remember that a battered lesbian may fight back physically even though the abuse she has received from her partner is not physical. We once got a call from a couple looking for services. One partner called saying that she had been abusive in the past but had stopped, and now the other womyn was being abusive. In listening to the other womyn (in a separate call), it became clear that although the first womyn had stopped her physical abuse, the dynamics of control had not changed. She was now just more subtle about it, and was still very emotionally abusive. The second womyn had hit her, but she was not being abusive -- what she was doing was not an attempt to control her partner but an attempt to defend herself in some way. (It is true that some battered lesbians batter in future relationships and vice versa, but we have yet to hear of a relationship where the power shifted so dramatically that a battered womyn became abusive and battered her batterer.)

Also pay attention to how you feel with her. Keeping in mind your own "isms" and what you're bringing to the interaction, try to focus on what it's like to be in a room talking with her. Does it feel like your usual conversation with a battered womyn or do you feel threatened, manipulated, or uneasy in any way? If she is upset in some way, how does she express that and how does it make you feel? For example, if you tell her that you'll need to get back to her with a decision about accepting her for services, how does she react? It's worth paying attention to in the context of the rest of your interaction.

In the screening interview we also go over the ground rules for the group and why they exist. They include the following:

1. We ask that wimmin come to group sober.
2. Because of the possibility of batterers showing up to the group, we ask that wimmin not give out the time and/or location of the group to anyone. This includes not bringing anyone with them to the group. If a womyn knows another battered lesbian who is interested in attending, we ask her to refer the womyn to one of the facilitators so that we can go through a similar process and make sure she can agree to the group rules.
3. Confidentiality: Because the lesbian community is not very large, it is vital for the safety of everyone that what happens in the group remains there. If a womyn wants to talk about her own experience in the group with someone outside, she should avoid any identifying information about other members (remembering that in a small community any information could be identifying). It is likely that wimmin will run into each other outside the group, and for safety reasons, we ask wimmin not to acknowledge each other unless they have a clear prior agreement that it's okay to do so.
4. Again because of the size of the community, it is inevitable that some wimmin in the group will know each other or their batterers. We ask each womyn to think about how she will deal with this if/when it comes up, and if she thinks she can still maintain confidentiality when it involves someone she is in social

contact with.

5. We ask for the batterer's name so that if she wants to join the group (whether for herself or as a way to find her partner) we know not to accept her. This is often the most difficult rule for a potential member to agree to -- it means coming out for her lover as well as having enough faith in her own experience to name her as a batterer. We explain that we need the name for her safety as well as that of the rest of the group, and that the name goes nowhere but on a list to check against when womyn call requesting services of any type. If a womyn is unwilling to name her batterer, we do not accept her into the group.

We once brought this issue to the group when there was a womyn who wanted to join but wasn't comfortable naming her batterer, and they were unanimous in their support of the policy. For their own safety they didn't want it to be possible for an unnamed batterer to join. They didn't want to worry when a new person joined that she might be some past or present member's abuser; they didn't want to deal with the fallout of a batterer who saw herself as the abused one discovering that her partner was/is in the same group; they didn't trust that a womyn who wouldn't name her abuser was not herself a batterer looking for her partner.

6. We expect group members to treat each other with respect, which includes such things as speaking from one's own experience rather than telling each other what to do, not interrupting, acceptance of each other's choices and lifestyles. We do not accept abusive behavior of any type which we make sure to define as including ageist, classist, homophobic, racist, etc. comments or actions. We let each womyn know in the interview that the group is open to all battered lesbians who have not been abusive in other relationships, so there may be womyn of differing ages, races, classes, physical or emotional abilities, religions, sexual practices, politics, etc. at any time. If she is not comfortable with that we can discuss the issues then and base her acceptance into the group on how much she is willing to work on those issues.

7. We do not prohibit but strongly discourage womyn from dating other group members. New relationships often bring up issues from the relationship with the batterer, and it isn't possible to talk about them in the same way when the new partner is another member of the group. And if the relationship ends, one or both womyn may lose the group as a resource.

Whenever possible, we try to have two of us (preferably both the facilitators) interview the womyn together so we can check out our perceptions with each other. We usually do not tell the womyn right then whether or not she is accepted but ask her to think about the issues raised, and let her know that we will think about it as well and get back to her. This gives her the chance to decide whether the group is what she wants and whether she can accept the ground-rules, and it gives us a chance to go over her story and our interactions with her. There have been times when a conversation with a womyn seemed okay enough at the time but discussion with each other led to important questions we would have otherwise missed.

The location of the group is also of concern. It should be accessible and someplace where homophobic and racist harassment is unlikely. However, holding it where many womyn come and go (such as a womyn's center or a YWCA) may not be safe. While a straight womyn's male batterer would be easily identified at such a place, a lesbian batterer could hang around or pass through unnoticed. We try to

move our group's location periodically so that it remains confidential.

It is not only group members we caution about giving out group information. There have been many cases of batterers working or volunteering at battered wimmin's programs and coalitions. In our organization, we tell only those who need to know where and when groups are held; the fewer people with group information, the better.

Different programs often have a preference for closed vs. open, structured vs. unstructured, time-limited vs. on-going. Our decision was to start with an open, unstructured, on-going group with the opportunity for group members to change that if they so desired. We did not ask for a commitment to come every week. Based on group feedback, we have experimented with different types of structures. We have remained an ongoing drop-in (once screened) group which runs for two hours, but what happens within those two hours changes periodically depending on group needs. At times we've spent the first hour dealing with current issues/crises and spent the second hour on a specific topic -- either following a line of discussion carried over from the previous group or by setting up a group-determined schedule of topics to cover. At times the group has preferred the unstructured format. We also at one time split the group into two, one remaining drop-in and one a closed, time-limited, structured group.

One other consideration: if you are going to have to phone the womyn for any reason (and you undoubtedly will) be sure to work out a system. Calling a battered lesbian is complicated -- when a womyn answers, you don't know if it's the battered womyn, the batterer, a roommate, etc. It will be easier and safer if the first person to have contact with the womyn gets information about when the best time to call is, what kind of message (if any) to leave if she's not there, etc.

## CONCLUSION

We cannot assume that our models for working with battered heterosexual wimmin will automatically transfer to lesbians. Hiring formerly battered lesbians who can take a leadership role in the work is essential. We must listen to lesbians' needs for safety and act accordingly. Thinking in advance about the ramifications of the choices we make about services will minimize the risk to battered lesbians and provide them space to share their experiences, get support for the decisions they make, and, through the telling of their experiences, develop an analysis of lesbian battering. If the battered wimmin's movement is committed to ending violence against all wimmin, we will take this responsibility for creating safe space for lesbians seriously and make it a priority.