

LGBT Communities and Domestic Violence

Information & Resources

KEY ISSUE

Dynamics of Domestic Violence



prepared by

National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

A project of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence

6400 Flank Drive, Suite 1300

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17112

Tel: 800-537-2238 ■ TTY: 800-553-2508 ■ Fax: 717-545-9456

www.nrcdv.org ■ www.vawnet.org

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KEY ISSUE

Dynamics of Domestic Violence

It is important to distinguish between the language and theory of the battered women’s movement and that used in law enforcement and the courts. Domestic violence advocates and activists understand domestic violence to be a pattern of abuse with emotional and spiritual components as well as physical violence. Law enforcement and the courts, however, often view domestic violence as a particular incident in which a perpetrator physically assaults or threatens another person and the victim is the person who has been threatened or assaulted. For example, one partner might routinely humiliate, threaten and force the other to assume all financial responsibilities for a shared household, and enforce dominance by attempting to kill a pet. The routinely victimized partner might hit the abuser in an attempt to protect the pet. A domestic violence program advocate would say the partner who tried to protect the pet is the victim, but the police might say that partner is the perpetrator because he or she committed a physical assault. For our purposes domestic violence will be defined as an ongoing pattern of interaction in which one intimate partner is forced to change behavior in response to the violence, threats, coercion, manipulation and or exploitation of another (Pence, 2005).

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As a result of homophobia and heterosexism, same-gender and gender-variant relationships often exist in an atmosphere of secrecy, isolation or, conversely, invasive scrutiny. For example, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy of the United States military requires LGBT service persons to hide the existence of intimate relationships. Asking “are you girls alone?” of a lesbian couple at a movie theater, a bar, a restaurant, or other social occasion automatically renders their relationship invisible. In their everyday lives, LGBT persons must constantly – at the grocery store, the bank, a party, at work – assess if it is safe, worth the time and aggravation, or indeed, anyone else’s business before correcting others’ assumptions, outing themselves and explaining their relationship (or explaining to some individuals who consider themselves to be “progressive” that the decision not to do so does not mean one is harboring internalized oppression).

Heterosexist and homophobic bias in society provide unique and specific opportunities for abusers to shape, manipulate, and control their partners (Burk, 2004). Abusers can use society’s messages that LGBT people are sick and violent by making such statements as, “this is what it means to be gay,” or “you will have

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to toughen up if you are going to survive,” or “I’m not abusing you, I’m only showing you the ropes” (Burk, 2004). They might, for example, convince victims that “everybody fights” and that abuse and violence are a normal part of every LGBT relationship. Sexism may be less obvious, but is nonetheless present when, for example a lesbian does not want her partner to appear “too butch” or a gay man uses the derogatory command to “take it like a man.”

“Coming out,” the decision-making process of determining who is safe to tell about one’s sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression, becomes another opportunity for abuse. Being in or out of the closet is not an either/or choice but rather a series of circumstances and choices that continue throughout a lifetime. Even individuals who are out to family or friends may not have an LGBT-friendly faith group, work place, landlord, physician, or former spouse, and being “outed” may have very serious consequences. Coming out to an employer may mean loss of the job or having to deal with a hostile work place; with a landlord it may mean harassment or eviction; with family it may mean loss of support, encouragement, holiday gatherings, inheritance; with an ex-spouse, it may mean loss of children, parental rights, child support, custody, visitation and even the risk of physical danger. Divorced LGBT individuals who are poor and/or identify, as people of color or as Native American are most likely to have children removed from their homes if domestic violence is reported. Batterers will often threaten to “out” their victims, using fear of the probable consequences to control and manipulate. The victim/survivor is understandably reluctant to go outside of the relationship for help and support because of the risk of the relationship itself being made public, or more public than the victim/survivor might wish. Both victim and batterer know that in order to access help and support in the larger community, the victim will likely be forced to come out or to engage in an elaborate set of lies and omissions to avoid it.

Domestic violence is also a failure of community. The community at large often supports both the heterosexual and the LGBT abuser’s sense of entitlement and superiority. Homophobia in the dominant community renders LGBT people invisible, judging them of no value and therefore acceptable targets. Even within LGBT communities there is reluctance to acknowledge or address domestic violence partly to avoid unfavorable political scrutiny of LGBT families. As a result, abusers are freer to manipulate and terrorize their victims with impunity and little fear of consequence.

The failure of dominant and LGBT communities to acknowledge domestic and sexual violence in same gender/gender variant relationships provides the LGBT batterer with multiple means with which to abuse their victims. Their violence is often characterized by the dominant culture as being mutual and involving people of equal strength. This myth discounts the experience of the victim, reinforces the self-blame many victim/survivors feel and allows mainstream systems to ignore the prevalence and lethality of domestic violence in LGBT communities. Abusers can amplify the effects of this minimizing of the abuse and blaming the victim simply by saying, “no one will believe you,” knowing they are very likely correct. They can take advantage of the beliefs that women do not perpetrate violence and that men engage only in mutual combat. Both myths place victim/survivors at increased risk. And

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police often arrest both parties, effectively reinforcing the abuser's blame of the victim. At another level, information about LGBT violence is used to reinforce the concept that lesbians, gay men, bisexual and trans people are immoral, unstable and therefore undeserving of ordinary human rights. An abuser can use these attitudes to shame a victim into silence because, "what will people think?"

It is apparent that oppressions foster an environment that provides unique and potent opportunities for manipulating, threatening, intimidating and terrorizing an intimate partner. Some of these opportunities are obvious and some are not. An abuser can use bias in the law enforcement system to control an intimate partner with threats such as "go ahead and call the police, you'll end up in jail too and you know what they think of/do to 'us'," or "how can you turn me into the cops, you know what they think of/do to 'us'." A victim/survivor's struggle for protection from violence is further complicated by their status in the society. A compounding factor for people of color, native people, people with disabilities and other marginalized people is that oppressions endemic in the dominant culture are also endemic in LGBT communities. LGBT people from various other oppressed groups encounter additional barriers, and batterers can use these added barriers as further means to abuse their victims (Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women, 1992). This often leaves a victim/survivor feeling there is no real sanctuary anywhere. For example, An LGBT individual with physical or developmental disabilities is more likely to have children removed from the home after being assaulted. In the United States, immigration policy is intended to reunite families, therefore "if you are an abused spouse or child of a lawful permanent resident or US citizen, you are eligible to self-petition to gain lawful status under VAWA [the Violence Against Women Act]" (WomensLaw.org, n.d.). On the other hand a lesbian, gay or trans immigrant partnered to an abusive US citizen or permanent resident is ineligible to self-petition under VAWA. LGBT victims can therefore, be held hostage by an abusive partner who threatens to disclose their immigration status to the authorities, and calling law enforcement is not an option for fear of deportation.

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Isolation, another common abuse tactic, is possibly even more potent in LGBT relationships because it is not just about being kept from the sociability and support of significant people in the community by the abuser. It can include being outed and then rejected by some of those same people. Isolation also increases the inter-dependence of partners and heightens a victim's fears about losing the relationship. Cut off from family and friends, a victim/survivor suffers not only from loss of identity and support, but also from an invisibility imposed by a culture that has difficulty acknowledging domestic violence, LGBT people and same-gender/gender-variant relationships. The threat "no one but me will ever want you" goes much deeper than romance or sex. It goes to the core of whether there will ever be anyone who truly understands who you are or validates your personhood.

Among LGBT elders and youth, especially trans people who may be particularly vulnerable, ageism also exacerbates the effects of isolation and becomes a factor for an abuser to exploit. People over the age of 60 grew up during the era of McCarthy witch-hunts. Many in this age group are still closeted and isolated. They are almost twice as likely to live alone as elders in the general population (Swan, 2005). Their experience and living circumstances often leaves them particularly vulnerable to the physical domination and/or financial exploitation of a younger partner, family member or trusted loved one. They are also, of course, subject to common ageist threats and humiliation by abusers. “You're senile,” “I'll have you put in a nursing home,” “You're old and ugly, who else but me will want you” are threats that may keep a victim from reaching out for assistance. Conversely, youth abused and forced to leave home by family intolerance may be reluctant to leave an abusive relationship fearing that with nowhere to go, they may end up on the streets.

An LGBT person grows up knowing that society thinks their love is disgusting, that they are perverted or at the very least not valued and are, therefore, an acceptable target of discrimination and violence. Much of this is internalized, but even if not internalized, others in the community believe it. Distinguishing factors of domestic violence in same-gender/gender-variant

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relationships are, therefore, the overtly sexist, heterosexist, and profoundly homophobic nature of social norms combined with an internalization of homophobic, heterosexist and sexist conditioning that encourages and/or reinforces an abuser's violence. These oppressions foster an environment that provides an abuser with unique and potent opportunities for manipulating, threatening, intimidating and terrorizing an intimate partner. LGBT victim/survivors must overcome obstacles including concerns about community and systems response; lack of culturally sensitive support and services; and fear of seeking support because of the disbelief or disapproval of friends, family, colleagues, children, employers and others in their community and society at large (Boulder County Safehouse, 2002). For more information, please refer to the information packet *Intervention/Prevention Services*.

Additional information on lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people and domestic violence is available through the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (telephone 212-714-1184, TTY 212-714-1134).

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