
Think, Re-think: Domestic Violence in Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans Relationships

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FIRST, THE STATS

Domestic violence happens in same sex relationships at about the same rate as in heterosexual relationships. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence programs conducted a 10-year study in 10 U.S. cities which documented domestic violence at a rate between 25-33% in same sex relationships. A 1991 study found that 46% of the women responding had experienced 2 or more incidents of physical violence in their relationship (Coleman, 1991). The Survivor Project in Portland, OR is currently conducting a study of trans people regarding domestic violence.

Many survivors of same sex abuse indicate that they do not access mainstream domestic violence programs because the agencies are ill-equipped to handle the complex intersections of homophobia, abuse and isolation common for bisexual, lesbian and trans survivors. Many programs are uncertain how to support these survivors or are reluctant to address homophobic, biphobic or transphobic behaviors and attitudes of staff and program participants. However, more and more programs are considering these barriers and beginning to train staff, develop procedures and create values that will allow them to provide competent, safe support for lesbian, bisexual and trans people.

This article is offered to provide some baseline information regarding domestic violence in bisexual, trans and lesbian relationships as well as to frame a number of questions regarding our Movement's analysis of domestic violence. I encourage advocates to examine and critique our thinking in regard to these issues. It is my intention to keep the values of survivor agency/autonomy, survivor safety and batterer accountability central to my analysis of domestic violence.

To examine some of the differences between the experiences of lesbian, bisexual or trans survivors and the experiences of heterosexual survivors, we can start by looking at a few of the tools batterers use to establish and maintain abusive power over their partners.

ISOLATION

Because of heterosexism and homophobia, few people grow up having information about what an empowered, nurturing gay relationship could look like. Movies, books, music, and jokes routinely represent queer people as perverted and unnatural. We see love stories that romanticize heterosexual relationships – even when they are premised on violence or coercion – but we see few if any representations of gay people as loving, stable and happy. Heterosexism prevents us from having access to our own queer culture and to the information that would teach us how to thrive in queer family.

Abusive partners can point to the multitude of images that represent gay people as sick and violent and say, "See, this is what it means to be gay. You will have to toughen up if you are going to survive. I am not abusing you, I am only showing you the ropes."

Also, homophobia sets us up to be isolated when we are coming out as lesbian, trans &/or bisexual. Often when we come out, our friends and family subtly distance themselves from us or overtly disown us. Sometimes internalized homophobia can cause us to withdraw from people in anticipation of their rejection. Often, lesbian, bisexual and trans people are "allowed" to participate in family activities, work functions, church celebrations and other sites of community only as long as we keep silent about relationships and our lives with our partners.

Batterers can manipulate this insidious form of isolation to enforce their abuse. If a survivor's mother says she is worried about her daughter, the abuser can always insist that homophobia is motivating the mother's concern. And when our friends are saying things like, "That woman is no good to you. I would never put up with that from a woman – why don't you find a man and settle into a decent relationship" – it's hard to argue that homophobia is not at play. If we want to be supportive of trans, bisexual and lesbian survivors of abuse, we will have to examine our own homophobia with the same diligence that we examine victim blaming.

While people are particularly vulnerable when they are first coming out, the interplay between the isolation created by homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and the isolation created by batterers can be devastating to any survivor – even if she has been out for years.

SEXUAL ABUSE

Like the issue of isolation, the pervasiveness of sexual abuse by perpetrators of same-sex domestic violence has strong roots in heterosexism. Most of us grow up with distorted and conflicting messages about sex. For trans, bisexual and lesbian people, we are confronted with the ceaseless message that our sexualities are abnormal and shameful.

There is a lot of silence about sex in our communities. When we do make space to discuss it, we can become very invested in our sexual lives being seen as uniformly chosen, powerful and natural – partly because of our struggle to prove wrong the heterosexist stereotypes about our lives.

This silence, broken only for an occasional round of “everything’s fine here”, creates a very vulnerable space for batterers to exploit. Survivors are unlikely to disclose sexual abuse, or if they do – may feel intense shame for discussing such a taboo subject. Sometimes batterers will use sexual abuse to intensify isolation and control, while never otherwise physically abusing their partner, simply because they know the silence around sex and sexual abuse will prevent their partner from disclosing or seeking support.

THREATS

Threats to out survivors as having queer identities to family, employers, ex-spouses and others are a significant tool batterers use in maintaining systematic power and control over their partners. For example, a survivor may fear losing his children to an ex-partner if he is outed as an FTM (female-to-male) transsexual man.

Wisconsin was the first state in the Union to enact state-wide civil rights protections for gay, lesbian and bisexual people. This law protects gay, lesbian and bisexual people from being discriminated against in housing, employment and public accommodations. Prior to this law, it was legal to fire a person from a job because she was a bisexual woman, for example. Domestic violence advocates should learn about this law and its enforcement in Wisconsin. When educating in your communities about same sex domestic and dating violence, share this information with people – it is likely that many people will not know what their rights are or how they could report discrimination. It is also important to learn about the limits of these laws. Are the protections enforced? How? What custody cases have been before judges in your area? Have gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people been awarded custody of their children? How have ‘dissolution of property’ cases been handled?

Trouble-shooting with a survivor about coming out at work, school, church or where-ever an abusive partner might be threatening to out them can be a powerful antidote to the threats. Is there someone who might be open to hearing that she is trans? Can she come out to a supervisor who has supported her on other issues in the past? How about a neighbor or family member? Listen carefully. Don’t dismiss her fears.

It is also vital not to minimize or dismiss physical threats made by women who batter. Sometimes advocates assume that a batterer who is a woman will be less dangerous – whether she is abusing her partner physically, sexually and emotionally – than a man who batters. To be blunt, this is a myth. Though this article does not have the space to itemize the stream of brutalities that survivors report, suffice it to say they are as varied, terrifying and immobilizing as those survived at the hands of male batterers.

USING CHILDREN

Many sexual minority and gender variant people co-parent children. Like heterosexual families, some parents adopt, some utilize donor insemination and some have blended families from prior relationships. Although many people co-parent, few children have two legal parents of the same gender. In most cases of adoption, only one parent is allowed to legally adopt the child. In other cases, the birth-parent is the only parent with legal rights regarding the child.

When a survivor who is being battered in a same sex relationship is not the birth-parent or legally adoptive parent, to leave the violent partner means to leave her child. In these cases, it is extremely rare – virtually unheard of – for a court to award visitation (much less custody) to the survivor. Even in the few instances when a survivor has legally adopted their partner’s biological child, it is rare for courts to award custody to the adoptive parents.

As for heterosexuals, these custody battles are long and expensive. Unlike heterosexual custody cases, however, in many communities it is difficult to find attorneys with substantive experience in pursuing these cases.

SAFETY PLANNING IN SMALL COMMUNITIES

Like faith communities, immigrant and refugee communities and other close communities – it is often very easy for lesbian batterers to gather information about their trans, bisexual and lesbian partners. Most towns and even larger cities have only one or two places where people “in the life” gather for parties, evenings out, etc. While it is a myth that all queer people know one another, it is true that the size of our communities makes overlapping friendships, partnerships and other relationships a common occurrence.

Unlike safety planning with women in less insular communities, safety planning with survivors of same sex domestic violence must include plans for routinely running into her batterer, being in meetings and community events with her batterer, being seen by and seeing her batterer. If we don't work with survivors to anticipate and plan for such meetings, survivors lose community because it is impossible to stay safe. Supporting survivors to reconnect and build community – in spite of her batterer's attempts to intimidate, isolate and humiliate her – is a major role of our program.

It is also important to recognize that women who are battered by their female partners may be accompanied by their batterers to the women's bathroom, a women's changing room, a doctor's examining room and even a domestic violence shelter. Women have told stories of being asked about domestic violence by emergency room nurses while their violent partners, who were assumed to be a helpful friend or sister, looked on. Of course, it is wonderful that nurses are asking about domestic violence, however, we must be aware of our assumptions about survivors' lives and what impact these assumptions can have on their access to support. In short, it is impossible to assess levels of physical danger without considering batterer access to the survivor and so-called “safe” women's space.

Gender variant and sexual minority survivors tend to access their close friends for support primarily – if not exclusively. Many of us have extreme distrust for law enforcement, mental health systems, physicians and other institutions which have historically incarcerated and institutionalized us in order to enforce homophobia, racism and classism. As the recent brutal rape of a Haitian man in New York City by police who believed he was gay attests, this violence is not simply historic. While this terrible attack in New York has rightfully received national attention, we each know of violent or humiliating encounters with police in our own cities and towns that go unreported and unaddressed. Even where law enforcement and other systems are working diligently to address systemic racism, classism and homophobia within their agencies – officers on the scene rarely have enough time, support or expertise to successfully determine who is the primary aggressor in same sex domestic or dating violence cases.

As we continue to seek system reform, we remain aware of how batterers manipulate current institutions. Batterers may call the police and report their partner as the abuser, especially if they believe their own class, skin color, age or other privilege might work against the survivor. Batterers may make false child abuse reports or throw away a trans person's monthly supply of hormones – knowing that the consequences to the survivor will be compounded by the institution's heterosexism and transphobia (as well as racism, ageism, anti-Semitism or any other oppressive attitude).

What is the survivor telling you about her experiences with these institutions? Support survivors in using their critical thinking skills as well as their intuition in determining when and if it is safer for them to contact these institutions than not. Be prepared to advocate for survivors who choose to make these contacts as well as those who don't.

USING VULNERABILITIES

While advocates often talk and learn about how batterers use their strengths to manipulate survivor's vulnerabilities, we rarely talk about the reverse – how batterers use their vulnerabilities to manipulate a survivor's strengths.

Sometimes women who batter have experienced violence in their past – they may have survived childhood sexual assault, gay-bashing, battering and/or other forms of violence. These women may use their prior experience surviving violence as an excuse for their current behavior. Some batterers insist they cannot be held accountable for their abusive behaviors because they originally learned them as survival skills. One survivor who was battered by a woman who had been abused as a child put it this way, “I spent my whole time trying to support and protect her. I saw how badly her family continued to scare and hurt her. I thought I could be strong enough for both of us. I didn't want to be the next person in her life to let her down. Over time though, I began to dread waking up to another day with her. Whenever I tried to make a decision for myself or see my family, there was a consequence. She would attack our friends as soon as they left the house. I began to hate people who made her mad or upset her because I knew she would take it out on me. Whenever I tried to confront her on her abusive behaviors, she became angry, frightened and accusative. But I also saw how hard she worked to stay present in a world that had hurt her since she was a baby. I saw how hard she tried to fight off her own fears – even if that meant projecting them onto me. It wasn't until I finally was able to move away that I made the connections between my experience and domestic violence – even though we both worked at a domestic violence program while we were together.”

ACCOUNTABILITY

It is important to hold people who are engaged in battering their partners accountable for their abuse – even as we have compassion for them. Becoming accountable for the abuse they are perpetrating is an important step for batterers to heal from whatever violence they may have experienced. We also recognize that people who systematically take power and control over other people are with us in our communities most all of the time. When attempts are made to ostracize or isolate batterers, we find that:

1. the person simply moves to a new community where people are unaware of their abusive behaviors,
2. the community divides over the choice and blames the survivor for the division, or
3. the survivor is the one ostracized instead of the person using power over.

We continue to be challenged by the need to build community based systems of accountability for batterers. As we develop those systems, we remain aware of batterer's access to women's “safe space” such as confidential shelters, women's anti-violence collectives, Clothesline Project shirt making tents, support/education groups, etc. – it is necessary for programs to evaluate their own safety and confidentiality procedures. Do you screen for abusers prior to intaking someone into your program? Have you received training to help you successfully conduct these screenings? Finally, do you routinely communicate your processes for maintaining safety and confidentiality to lesbian, bisexual and trans people?

TOWARD A NEW (RETRIEVED?) ANALYSIS

In order to begin to understand same sex domestic violence, we must be willing to think critically about our analysis around domestic and dating violence. In an attempt to make our message understood in a sound-bite world, we have dropped much of the complexity that is necessary to understand women's experiences with violence and abuse. In the workbook, *In Our Best Interest* (Minnesota Program Development, 1987), this need for complexity was addressed over a decade ago in a passage written by an education group facilitator:

I used to think that battering was caused by sexism in our culture and that men battered women because they were socialized as males to be more powerful than women and control them. Women were the ones being beaten because they were socialized in our culture to submit to male authority. I was deeply challenged in that perception when I began to read about lesbian battering. My first assumption, when I came to accept that [lesbians batter their partners] too, was that it was women imitating heterosexual relationships. That myth was shattered when I discovered that women active in the women's movement and operating from a feminist ideology physically battered their partners. My entire thinking on the relationship of sexism to battering was shaken to the core. This is when I first began to understand the pervasiveness of patriarchy. Patriarchy is not only a gender issue, but a form of dominance and control that permeates the thinking of all human beings subjected to patriarchal environments. I began to see battering not just as a gender issue, but as a much deeper manifestation of the concept of power and dominance in our culture. I also began to see that the enemy was not men or males. While males definitely enjoyed more freedom, privilege and status in a patriarchal structure, I no longer believed that if women ran things instead of men, everything would change and be better. This realization made me understand how complete the cultural transformation must be in order to realize a non-violent society. (p. 18)

A definition of patriarchy that considers only sexism – instead of examining the complex interconnections of racism, colonization, classism, biphobia, transphobia, homophobia, anti-Arab oppression, anti-Jewish oppression, anti-fat oppression, ableism, ageism and all forms of oppression – will invariably marginalize the survivors from these oppressed groups.

We see this marginalization occur over and over. In her book, *Compelled to Crime*, Dr. Beth Richie writes about the increasing number of survivors of battering, particularly African-American women, who have been incarcerated. Many First Nations women have continuously called for an analysis of domestic abuse that names the violence committed against their whole family – not only women. They have addressed colonization as the driving force behind violence in their families. If we are to build a movement that can actualize a world free of violence – first we will have to adopt an analysis that looks beyond sexism alone as the fundamental cause of battering. Then we will have to place this analysis at the center of our everyday work so that support groups, shelter policies, house meetings, counseling protocols, and coordinated community responses incorporate complex understandings of culture stealing, forced removals, coerced labor, incarceration, orchestrated poverty and the many other issues that are central to marginalized women's experience of violence.

In order to begin to seriously address the experiences of lesbian, bisexual and trans survivors of domestic violence – we must be willing to expand our understanding of the roots of violence and the conditions which will support liberation. We have to look at relationships between women in our movement – how do, for example, heterosexual as well as sexual minority women use white skin privilege and class privilege to establish and maintain power over their co-workers, women in their communities or with survivors? In patriarchy, we are conditioned to access our un-earned privilege to take power over others as well as to internalize the beliefs of those who have power over us. We have to intentionally work to divest of our power over other people, to root out internalized oppression and to build communities based on shared values of accountability and empowerment in order to end domestic violence.