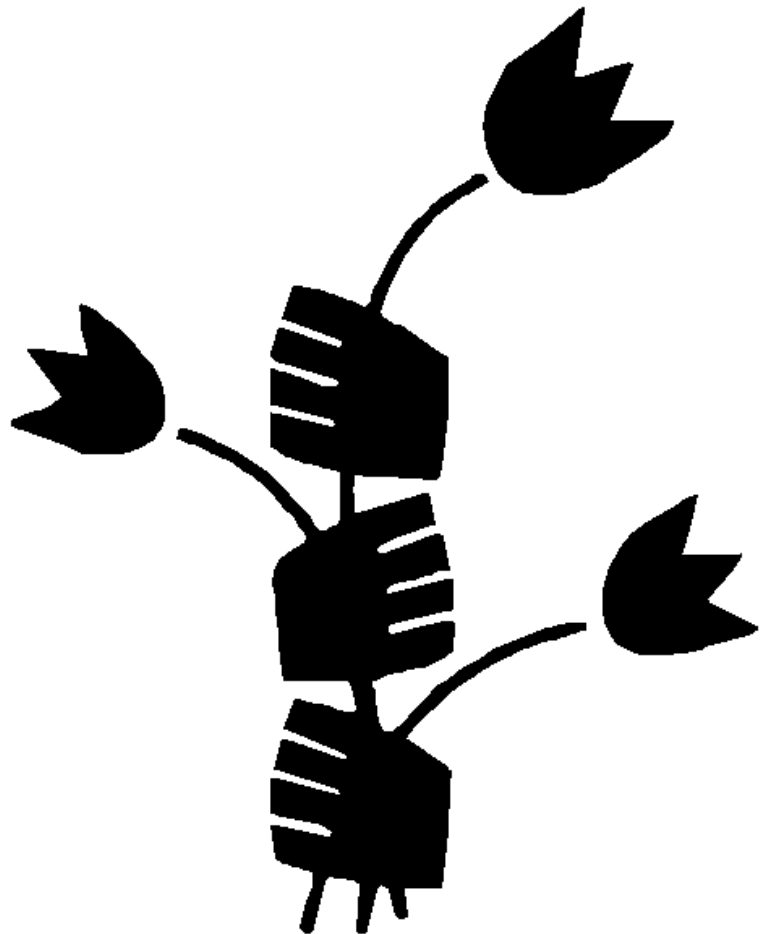


Abuse in Lesbian Relationships: Information and Resources



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*An up-to-date listing of services and supports in major cities across Canada is available in a resource titled, **Gay Guide Canada,'98**. It is available from **Marginal Distribution, Unit 102, 277 George Street, Peterborough, Ontario K9J 3G9** or by telephone/facsimile at (705) 745-2326. Its website is www.gayguidecanada.com.*

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Foreword

Violence against women has now been recognized as a significant health issue. We are therefore pleased to have our work distributed by the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence so that abuse in lesbian relationships can also be recognized as a major health concern in our communities.

This paper was first published in 1991 as a booklet entitled *Abuse in Lesbian Relationships: A Handbook of Information and Resources*. We had received a grant from the Ontario Women's Directorate that enabled us to make the booklet available free of charge through the Toronto Counselling Centre for Lesbians and Gays as well as women's bookstores, bars and social service agencies throughout Ontario.

Since the original publication was produced, there has been more work done on the issue of abuse in lesbian relationships. We have included many new references which reflect a growing recognition of this issue. We have kept the content intact to provide guidelines for lesbians, friends and helping professionals who are responding to lesbian abuse.

This version is limited to discussing abuse in intimate relationships. Yet violence against lesbians also occurs in other contexts, such as lesbian bashing and heterosexual raping of lesbians. Many of the principles that we have included will apply to these contexts, but additional dynamics will also be present in cases of abuse against lesbians outside their intimate relationships.

Introduction

Violence in lesbian relationships is an issue that has been kept "behind closed doors" until fairly recently. It has only been in the recent past that women have begun to name and discuss their abusive experiences. One reason for this may be that abuse in general has, until recently, been hidden. But additional factors have made it more difficult for lesbians to discuss abuse in their relationships.

Many lesbians view lesbian relationships as a positive alternative to heterosexual relationships. There is often an assumption that women interact in a caring and supportive manner and therefore cannot be abusers. Thus, abuse is thought to occur only in heterosexual relationships. Other factors are the stereotypes and prejudices that society has about lesbians. There is fear that open discussion about abuse will generate even more negative images about the lesbian community.

This report provides general information about this form of violence. It has emerged from our work at the Toronto Counselling Centre for Lesbians and Gays. As counsellors, we began to see more and more women who spoke about the abuse that they experienced in their relationships. We felt there was a need to respond to this issue, so we offered support groups for lesbians abused by their partners. We also saw a need to gather more information about this phenomenon. We conducted a survey among lesbians in Toronto, distributing 550 questionnaires to

women who were attending a talk by a well-known lesbian. We received 189 responses. In the survey, we asked whether they had ever experienced abuse in a lesbian relationship, the types of abuse experienced, community responses, services used, and their opinions as to the resources needed to understand and respond to this issue.

Although our research is limited and not generalizable because it relies on a non-random sample and self-reporting measures, it provides certain insights into the dynamics of lesbian abuse, and our findings will be discussed throughout the paper.

This paper is written for lesbians who have been in abusive relationships, for friends and families, for lesbian organizations, and for those who work in the area of violence against women. We have used the word “lesbian” as well as “woman” in order to acknowledge that not all women in same-sex intimate relationships identify as lesbian.

Our objective in this work is to bring assault “out of the closet” and to provide preliminary guidelines for responding to this issue. Our examination of violence in lesbian relationships begins by addressing the diversity of lesbian experience and the social context surrounding lesbianism.

What Is Lesbianism?

Lesbians are women who have primary intimate/sexual relationships with other women. Approximately 10% to 15% of all women in Canada identify themselves as lesbians. Lesbians are present within every race, religion, socioeconomic background, occupation, political affiliation, age and category of physical and mental ability.

Likewise, there is a great deal of diversity in the physical appearances of lesbians. There are no physical characteristics that distinguish a lesbian. Her appearance, like that of her heterosexual counterpart, may or may not reflect current fashion, age, economic ability or personal preference. It is therefore difficult if not impossible to make generalizations about lesbians as a group.

Stereotypical assumptions about lesbians include the following:

- (1) That lesbians are masculine-looking or “butch” in appearance. **False.** In fact, as mentioned, lesbians fit all physical descriptions.
- (2) That lesbians can be classified into two categories — either “butch” (masculine in appearance) or “femme” (stereotypically feminine in appearance). **False.** Most lesbians do not explicitly adopt “roles” in their relationships. As in the heterosexual population, there is a full range of roles that might be adhered to within a lesbian relationship.

- (3) That lesbians are all feminists. **False.** Many lesbians are feminists, but feminism is a political perspective that some lesbians do not share.
- (4) That all lesbians are men-haters. **False.** A lesbian identity means that you choose to have a primary relationship with another woman. Attitudes toward men vary in the lesbian population as in the heterosexual population, but they do not determine a lesbian identity.
- (5) That all lesbians are promiscuous. **False.** Lesbian relationships are varied, just as are heterosexual relationships. Some lesbian relationships are monogamous, while others are non-monogamous. Some are short-term while others may be long-term unions.

These are only some of the stereotypes. They are erroneous and misleading. They are generalizations that cannot be applied to all lesbians. No one set of characteristics defines the diversity of lesbian experience.

However, despite this diversity, there are some common elements that may distinguish lesbians from heterosexual women. In most urban centres there are lesbian bars, services, clubs and groups where lesbians can share and celebrate their identities as women who love women. Within the lesbian community, there are sub-groups who share similar interests, cultural heritage, politics, activities and friendships. Often, lesbians know one another from contact and visibility in the lesbian community. As in heterosexual society, lesbian women are diverse in their backgrounds, ages, lifestyles, appearance, social experiences, culture and relationships.

The Larger Social Context

The larger context of lesbians' lives must always be acknowledged in our efforts to understand and speak generally about violence in lesbian relationships. Violence among lesbians may be rooted in social conditions such as hatred of women (misogyny) and fear of homosexuals (homophobia). It is also linked to other forms of domination within our society, such as racism and classism.

These structures of dominance can provide the framework that allows for and supports oppressive relations between people. For instance, in our society, women often experience being devalued or seen as sexual objects or property. Lesbians are often ostracized, discriminated against and seen as sexual deviants, threatening the social and moral fabric of patriarchal society. This may be in addition to and interwoven with racist and classist discrimination against some lesbians. These reinforcing ideologies of oppression are internalized by all of us – lesbians, gays and heterosexuals. Approximately 30% of the respondents to our survey named homophobia and isolation as factors which they felt contributed to the abuse.

Anger, fear and rage can be misdirected at partners who can come to represent the things we have been taught to hate in ourselves and fear in our culture where heterosexist and misogynist views exist. Lesbians, like all others in society, are also products of their upbringing. They could have been exposed to role models who displayed unhealthy patterns of dealing with conflict and anger. They could have learned

about relationships from abusive families. They may not have learned how to be in an intimate and caring relationship.

Similarly, lesbians may learn from their families and from society that violence can be used as a means to gain and maintain control over another. Some lesbians may choose to exercise their need for power and control within their intimate relationships. Thus, reflective of existing social norms, hierarchies and abuses of power, entitlement, ownership and control can exist in lesbian relationships. Our view of violence in lesbian relationships extends a feminist analysis of violence by looking at other factors in addition to sexism and patriarchy. The focus of our analysis is on imbalances of power, the desire to control others and the ways in which individuals choose to deal with these factors and use opportunities to be violent.

Types of Abuse

“Abuse” is a pattern of behaviour in which physical violence and/or emotional coercion is used to gain or maintain power or control in a relationship. A single incident of assault also constitutes abuse.

The following are examples of abuse:

physical: hitting, punching, slapping, kicking, choking, biting, burning, shoving, using objects or weapons, locking up or confining, interfering with sleeping or eating, restricting the mobility or access of a differently abled partner

sexual: forcing sexual acts; sexual assault with or without weapons or objects used as weapons; assault for refusal to engage in sexual activity

psychological or emotional: repetitive and excessive criticism, humiliation and degradation, which can include swearing, name calling and put-downs; restricting or controlling access to personal or social resources or friends; homophobic, racist, misogynistic attacks (degrading and hostile remarks about your sexual orientation, heritage or gender); threats or harm to pets

threats: direct intentions to harm you, your family or friends; threats that affect child custody, legal, immigration or sponsorship status; threats to reveal lesbian identity against your wishes

economic: controlling finances, stealing money, creating debt, interfering with employment or education

property destruction: destruction of property or personal items

stalking/harassing behaviour: following; appearing unexpectedly at or waiting outside workplace or home; repeated phone calls or mail to victim and/or family, friends, colleagues.

Prevalence of Violence

There are no reliable statistics that clearly demonstrate the scope of this problem. Studies have attempted to identify the incidence of lesbian violence, but there has been little consistency in the results. Lesbians must often rely on anecdotal reports to fully appreciate the scope of abuse within the lesbian community. The results from our survey indicate that 66% of the respondents (125 of 189) knew of lesbians who had experienced abuse in their relationships.

Of our respondents, 37 of the 189 perceived themselves as having been subjected to abuse. This was predominantly described as having taken the form of psychological or emotional abuse. Of these same respondents, 20 reported some type of physical assault by a partner, and four women indicated they had been sexually assaulted within the relationship.

Of the women who identified abuse in their relationships, 38% sought counselling to deal with the violence. However, few lesbians turned to traditional social, medical or legal services. For example, none of the respondents turned to the police, shelters or distress lines. Only six (16%) who identified abuse in their relationships sought help from legal and medical services. The majority of respondents stated that social service workers, health care officials and police need to be educated in order to address the problem.

The majority of our survey respondents were white, middle-class, able-bodied lesbians. This sample is not representative of the cultural and socioeconomic diversity among lesbians. In addition, our small sample does not provide enough information for us to make accurate and conclusive comments about abuse within the general lesbian population. Our research must be viewed as a preliminary look at this issue.

Myths about Abuse

There are many myth-based explanations for abuse in lesbian relationships. Generally, these myths reflect and perpetuate stereotypes, fears and prejudices.

The following are some of the more common myths:

Lesbian relationships are never abusive. False. Despite an assumption that lesbians are caring and supportive to one another, violence does exist in some relationships.

Lesbian violence occurs only in “butch” and “femme” relationships. The “butch” is the batterer and the “femme” the victim. False. Beyond the fact that most lesbians do not assume explicitly butch-femme roles, the roles themselves do not automatically dictate who has more power or desire to exercise more control in the relationship.

Abuse between lesbians is mutual. Both partners contribute equally to the violence. False. This view stems from the belief that lesbian relationships are always equal partnerships. In violent relationships there is often a perpetrator and a victim. A perpetrator cannot be distinguished by any features such as size, height or age. Defending oneself against an attacker must be examined closely as it may be mistakenly construed either as initiating or equally contributing to abuse.

Abusive lesbian relationships involve apolitical lesbians or lesbians who are part of the lesbian bar culture. False. In fact, violence in lesbian relationships is not limited to any particular “type” of lesbians. Abuse cuts across the lines of race, class, age, political affiliation and interests.

Lesbian violence is caused by substance abuse, stress, childhood violence or provocation. False. Although such factors may help explain why an abuser acts the way she does, there is no simple cause-and-effect relationship. An abuser has choices. She is responsible for her behaviour and she can control it. There is no excuse or justification for violence.

The following sections are intended to provide specific guidelines for lesbians, friends and families, and for professionals who are responding to the abuse.

If You Are Being Abused

The Cycle of Abuse

Many women do not recognize when a pattern of abuse has developed in their relationship. Rather, they perceive abusive behaviours as isolated incidents that are unrelated to one another. Yet abuse can often happen in cycles, so that abusive episodes are interspersed with calm, loving periods, characteristic of those positive things that initially drew the two women together. However, the pattern that develops can become predictable and a source of tension even when an episode of abuse is not taking place.

The cycle of abuse can be described as follows. Tension may emerge within a relationship – for example, in the form of minor disagreements. The tension will continue to build over hours, days, perhaps months, until an “explosion” occurs. This will be some form of physical, psychological or sexual assault. A period of calm may follow. The abuser may buy her partner gifts or do something special for her. Often, she will feel sorry for what has happened. But gradually this will change. More small incidents will occur, tension will increase and the cycle will begin again. Both partners want to believe that each incident of abuse will not happen again. But it usually does.

Some women, however, may never experience a cycle, or pattern, to the abuse. Sometimes abusive incidents happen without any warning signs or build-up, or there may

be no periods of calm and no remorse shown by the abuser. In other instances, tension is always present. But because there can be a pattern to the abuse, there are signs that can alert you to take action to keep yourself as safe as possible.

There are some cues which might help you identify the onset of an abusive incident:

Think about and take notice of your partner's actions that have led to abuse in the past. Examples may include the kinds of things your partner says, the manner in which she says them or acts toward you, or specific activities (e.g., drinking) or actions (e.g., slamming or throwing things).

Pay attention to your own internal signals that alert you to danger. Examples of this may be increased fear, tension, worry and edginess, or abrupt changes in what you do or say because you are afraid of your partner's response.

Effects of Abuse

What we already know about the effects of abuse against women in heterosexual relationships has some relevance in anticipating the consequences for a lesbian who is abused by her partner. In addition, factors of homophobia and internalized oppression need to be recognized as compounding the effects. Physical injuries can result, some causing long-term health problems. Physical abuse is almost always accompanied by forms of emotional abuse (beyond the inherently emotionally abusive nature of the physical abuse itself). In fact, abuse can be predominantly or exclusively emotional and psychological in nature. A woman's reactions to abuse may be immediately evident or may persist long after the abuse has stopped. Her reaction is especially linked to how other individuals respond, as well as to how the community at large responds to disclosures about the abuse.

At times, it can be difficult to disentangle the emotional effects of abuse from other factors women may be struggling to overcome. **Some of the common effects of abuse that women report include:**

Self-blame. Most women who are abused believe that they have caused the abuse and can somehow stop it. A woman may feel like a failure for not making the relationship work.

Anxiety, tension, low energy, depression, insomnia, change in appetite

Physical aches and pains (such as headaches) or other difficulties not directly caused by physical injury

Shame. She will likely feel shame about what has happened, which may prevent her from confiding in anyone.

Low self-esteem and lack of confidence. There are almost always feelings of intense worthlessness and inadequacy as a result of abuse. These feelings may generalize to other areas of her life, affecting her belief in her self-worth and ability to manage her life. Some lesbians already have a negative self-image that comes from internalizing the social messages that degrade and reject lesbianism. This alone may prevent a woman from seeking help or telling others about the abuse. It is possible she may come to believe that because she is lesbian she somehow deserves abuse and does not deserve help. These feelings can be compounded for lesbians of other ethnic groups and differently-abled lesbians.

Sense of hopelessness or helplessness. She may feel increasingly powerless if her efforts to stop the abuse fail.

Anger. She may have difficulty expressing her anger about the abuse. She may also turn the feelings of anger toward herself.

Isolation from others. She may isolate herself or feel isolated from her friends, family, resources and communities (e.g., ethnic, racial, religious or social communities). Her isolation might stem from the threats and manipulation of the abuser, from a desire to keep the nature of the relationship secret, or from a sense of shame about the abuse taking place.

Fear that the abuse will not be acknowledged by others. Some women have found that when they did tell others about the abuse, the violence was condoned, minimized or excused. This left them without immediate resources and with the belief that there was something wrong with themselves.

Fear of future incidents of violence by the abuser

Self-regulation and hyper-vigilance. She may restrict or modify her actions and words as an attempt to prevent further abuse.

Avoidance of social situations. If she has left the abusive relationship, she may avoid activities that might bring her into contact with her former abusive partner. She may also avoid situations in which there are mutual friends who may be unsupportive or wish to remain neutral.

For Emergencies

Your personal safety is of first concern. When your partner has been violent or you believe she may become violent, **have a safety plan** for yourself in mind. Abuse does not have to be a direct physical assault on you. Psychological assault can be as frightening and devastating. Your safety plan applies in these situations as well.

You may choose to follow any or all of these steps:

Leave the situation. Go to the nearest safe place and call for help.

Call the police (911). Assault is a crime and charges may be laid. You can request that police be in attendance to keep the peace while you leave or return at a later time to collect your belongings.

Have a bag packed and ready to go. Keep a small amount of money, identification, credit cards, extra car keys and clothing readily available. You may want to have this hidden outside your home or left with someone you trust.

Memorize important telephone numbers.

Have a place in mind where you can stay.

Contact the assaulted women's helpline in your area.

Go to a shelter for assaulted women.

Take your children with you. They need protection. They may be in danger of being harmed by your partner.

It is important to know you may not get emergency help that is sensitive to your situation or your sexual orientation. Emergency service personnel may not be sensitive to lesbian issues or understanding of women generally. Be prepared for this.

Getting Help

A. It is important that you seek further support after the initial crisis.

Tell someone what is happening to you. You need not be isolated. Get support from friends, family, lesbian or gay organizations, and/or assaulted women's helplines and services. Some of the people close to you may not know how to respond or may not want to take sides by openly supporting you. Seek out someone who can support you. Remember, it is important that you have someone safe to talk to. If you live in a smaller community with few resources, you may need to seek help outside of the usual resources.

Learn about other resources in your community in case you need to use them. You may require the services of a medical centre, employment agency, child care centre, etc. It is important to know of these resources and how you can use them.

Find out your legal rights. You may need police or legal protection. These services may be intimidating, so, if possible, take someone with you for support. Legal Aid services are available if you cannot afford a lawyer. Information about Legal Aid is available through legal clinics.

Seek counselling. It is important that you find a counsellor who is knowledgeable and empathetic to lesbian issues and experienced in working in the area of violence against women. A counsellor can help you locate other resources that you may need. Available at most women's bookstores are handbooks about how to choose a counsellor.

Join a support group. The best group to join is one specifically for lesbians who are survivors of relationship abuse. However, such a group may not be available in your area. It is not known whether general groups for assaulted women would be supportive of a lesbian member. Joining such a group would have to be carefully considered. It would require active and willing advocacy by the facilitator, as well as a willingness by the facilitator to educate the group members about lesbianism and the similarities and differences between the issues you are dealing with and those the heterosexual members experience.

Remain active. Stay involved in personal activities and interests as much as possible to reduce your isolation and to increase your self-confidence and independence.

Remember:

You cannot control or change your partner's behaviour.
She must take responsibility for her actions.
No one has the right to abuse you.
You do not have to be alone when dealing with abuse.
You can tell someone what is happening to you.

B. Friends or Relatives Can Help.

If a woman who is being abused comes to you for help, you can:

Listen to her. Let her talk about what happened. Recognize that no one has the right to abuse someone else.

Do not offer excuses for the violence and do not minimize the seriousness of what has happened.

Don't worry about "taking sides" if you know and care about both of the women involved. It is not taking sides to give support and to help your friend find resources that can assist her.

Respect her confidentiality.

Help her find a safe place to stay. Her safety is of utmost importance. In the crisis of the moment, it will be helpful for you to stay calm and assist her in identifying options, such as a shelter.

Support her if she decides to call the police. Help her locate additional resources such as legal information and counselling.

Be clear about the limits to which you are willing to be involved and in what ways you can help. Do not breach her trust. Let her know if you intend to do anything and, if so, what.

Be supportive of her decisions even if you might not totally agree with them, unless of course these decisions are clearly dangerous, harmful or illegal.

Be respectful. Don't be offended if your advice is not followed.

Examine your own feelings and responses. If you are a lesbian this may be a difficult issue to face. You may feel more comfortable explaining away the incident than acknowledging that violence can occur in lesbian relationships. If you are not a lesbian, examine your assumptions. They may reflect an adherence to certain myths about lesbian relationships.

According to our survey results, almost one third of abusers also turned to friends for help. **If someone who has been abusive confides in you:**

Let her know that her violence and abuse are unacceptable. Perpetrators often believe that an apology will solve the problem. It does not.

Support her and encourage her to get help for herself. She must take responsibility for changing her behaviour.

Assist her in finding a counsellor, support group or other community resources that work with abusers. She needs help to understand the consequences of her violent behaviour and to control it. She may link issues such as substance use, a history of childhood abuse or other stressors to her own abusiveness. These are not excuses or causes for an abuser's violence, but are issues that will also need attention.

Remain in contact with her and provide continued support for her getting help and stopping her violent behaviour. The community may isolate her because of her behaviour and she may withdraw without seeking the help that she requires.

C. If You Are Abusive

Your abusiveness represents many emotions. You may think that you are only feeling angry. You are not. You are probably feeling many intense emotions such as vulnerability, anxiety, fear, confusion and helplessness. When you use violence to deal with your uncomfortable feelings, it is to feel in control again and it is at someone else's expense. Unless you deal with the feelings underlying your violence, it is likely that your violent behaviour will be repeated.

The following are some of the things you need to do to stop your abusive behaviour.

Take responsibility and be accountable for your actions. Stop blaming your partner or other factors in your life, such as alcohol, drugs, job stress, life problems or your past. She is not responsible for them. Your partner does not make you act violently. You choose to be violent. You can also learn to be non-violent. Apologizing and being sorry is not the answer. "Making up" is only a temporary response and it does not prevent further violent episodes. Your partner does not want to be harmed and it

is likely that she will leave you if you continue. If you want a healthy relationship, you have to change for good.

Recognize you are committing a crime.

Assault is against the law and you can be charged. You do not have the right to abuse your partner.

Seek the help of a counsellor. You can change. You will need help to understand and stop your violent behaviour and to learn new ways of coping. You will have to confront and deal with the various problems you have used to excuse your behaviour, such as blaming your partner, alcohol, drugs or an unhappy childhood.

Learn to behave differently. You may use a variety of excuses to explain away your violence. A common excuse is “I lost control”. There is no justifiable excuse or explanation for violence. Violence is a dangerous and frightening means you use to take control of a situation and to have control over your partner. Abusiveness is not limited to physically striking out. Being emotionally cruel and demeaning to your partner is extremely hurtful and is as harmful as physical assault. You can learn new ways to deal with your feelings. Some initial steps that you can take are to:

Think back to incidents when you have been violent. Identify what was happening, what you were thinking and feeling and what you were doing before becoming violent.

Learn to recognize signs or signals that indicate when you may become abusive. Take alternate actions, such as leaving the situation immediately, calling a distress line or seeing a counsellor.

Leave the relationship if necessary to stop your abusiveness.

D. How Professionals Can Respond

It is vital that professionals and caregivers examine their own perceptions and feelings about lesbians, and that they acknowledge and deal with any homophobic feelings they may have. It is essential that we scrutinize our responses in order to change those based on negative stereotypes and ignorance.

In abusive situations, a major difference between lesbians and heterosexuals is the impact of the social and political surroundings — which include the reality of homophobia and heterosexism.

Homophobia is the irrational and often unconscious fear and hatred of lesbians and gay men, and the fear of getting close to someone of the same gender. For instance, it is homophobic to subscribe to myths about lesbians or to approach the process of helping a lesbian without acknowledging the positive aspects of her identification and, instead, over-focusing on the negatives. **Heterosexism** is based in the structures and institutions of our society, which establish and perpetuate heterosexuality as the norm. One example of heterosexism is the pervasiveness of questions on forms that assume everyone is heterosexual (e.g., “what is your marital status?”).

Homophobia and heterosexism affect all of us — whether we are lesbian, gay or heterosexual, whether we are in an abusive situation or not, whether we are friends, social service providers, health care workers, police, legal workers or judges.

When working with lesbians in abusive relationships, it is important to remember that the many reasons for staying in an abusive situation are similar for lesbians and heterosexual women.

The abusing partner may be charming, emotionally supportive, nurturing, friendly and sociable between abusive episodes. Just as in heterosexual relationships, there may be economic factors that prevent the abused woman from leaving. She may continue to blame herself for the abuse, or believe that if she keeps trying hard enough to understand and care for the abuser, she can make the abuse stop.

However, there are many additional reasons that keep lesbians in abusive situations, including the issues of disclosure and fear of facing additional hardships as a result of disclosure of sexual orientation. At times, internalized homophobia can significantly impair a lesbian's self-esteem. **Internalized homophobia** means believing that the negative stereotypes and myths about one's own lesbianism are true. Fear of homophobic responses, as well as internalized homophobia, can isolate lesbian couples and add considerable stress to their relationships. Fear of homophobia affects an abused lesbian's ability to turn to social services and legal systems. It increases her fears that she will not be believed, that there will not be an adequate response to the abuse, and that she or her partner will somehow be punished for being lesbians.

Further, a lesbian may believe that women are not abusive and she will therefore excuse or deny the violence. For the lesbian who is abused, leaving the partner or giving up on the relationship may feel to her as if she is giving in to the negative stereotype that lesbian relationships are pathological or transitory.

The following are Guidelines and Special Considerations for Working with Lesbians:

- 1. Do not assume that an abused woman's partner is male.** In the first contacts with you, a lesbian may disguise the gender of the abuser. She is more likely to reveal that the abusive partner is another woman once the helping process is underway, and particularly if you use language that demonstrates that you do not automatically assume that the abusive partner is male and that you do not judge her choice.
- 2. Upon disclosure, it is very important that you impart an attitude of acceptance about her sexual orientation and continue to support her in her acceptance of herself as a lesbian.** A lesbian may be mistrustful of any helpers she perceives as homophobic. She may also be more likely to seek out a female rather than a male helper. A clinical issue that may arise is initial wariness and mistrust of female helpers because of her experience of abuse by her female partner.
- 3. Be aware of the prevailing myths about lesbian relationships.**
- 4. The first priority is to assess safety issues and to help set up a protection plan.**
- 5. Document the abuse and begin to address the medical and legal issues as you would with any assaulted woman.**
- 6. A lesbian who has been abused will likely be anxious over confidentiality about her sexual orientation.** Her choice to make disclosures to family, caregivers, children, friends, co-workers or members of her ethnic or racial group is hers and hers alone. Her choices need to be respected and supported. Reassurances that you will respect

and honour her choices over disclosure will need to be repeated. Be aware that:

- she may not feel able to turn to her family for support if she has not disclosed her lesbianism to them, or if she has received a negative reaction;
- she may fear that they will condemn her orientation along with the relationship;
- she may also be afraid that she will cause her family grief over disclosure of her lesbianism; and
- she may be fearful of losing her job if her lesbianism comes to light in the process of dealing with the abuse.

A lesbian will need additional support and counselling regarding disclosure of her sexual orientation in order for her to access shelters, the police and the legal system. Most shelters do not have policies and procedures that would guarantee the lesbian a safe place or automatically keep the abuser from finding her or gaining admission to the shelter — although they will take such steps once they are aware of the woman's situation. Nor is there any guarantee that there will be non-judgmental, non-homophobic responses by police or legal workers. Advocacy might be an important part of your work. Be aware, for example that:

- she may have well-grounded fears about losing custody of her children or her partner's children;
- she may fear loss of her immigration or sponsorship status; and
- lesbians of other racial groups may fear racist and discriminatory responses.

7. Self-blame, guilt and shame are common emotional responses for women abused in their relationships. These will be primary issues to address in counselling the client. She will need to talk in detail and to express the multitude of feelings she has about what has happened to her. To do so, she must feel that she is in a safe, accepting environment. She needs to know that she is

not to blame for being abused. She will want to gain an understanding of her situation and continue to make choices about what she is going to do.

It can be helpful for the woman to know she is not isolated in her experience, that others have similarly been abused. It is also helpful for her to understand abuse as a means for her partner to gain and maintain power and control over her. Underscoring all your work with the client is the need to assist her to regain self-esteem and confidence so she can come to be in control of her own life again.

8. Be aware that within lesbian communities there may be some idealization of women and lesbian relationships. Consequently, there can be either a reluctance to recognize or a minimization of the seriousness of abusive relationships.

9. Sexual assault and sexual coercion (or coercion to take part in sexual activity) are not uncommon forms of abuse. This is an important area for caregivers to explore and to give the abused woman permission to talk about. We have found it particularly hard for lesbians to disclose this form of abuse, just as it is difficult for heterosexual women to talk about it. Caregivers not only have to be comfortable themselves in exploring this aspect of abuse but need to be prepared to return to these questions with the client as she may initially be reticent to discuss it.

10. It may be helpful to consult with a lesbian therapist who is knowledgeable about abuse.

11. The matter of establishing supportive social networks needs to be considered. Within the lesbian community, resources that can help the client may be available. Referral to a support group for lesbians who have been abused is desirable. At present, not many groups of this nature exist. Therefore, if a

lesbian asks to be part of a group that is primarily composed of heterosexual women, it is essential that group leaders support her in the group. They must be prepared to respond by raising lesbian issues in the group. The group needs to be adequately informed that abuse occurs across sexual preferences as well as across racial and class lines and that homophobia, as well as misogyny, oppresses all women. Consider the following when establishing supportive networks:

- You can educate yourself about lesbianism and resources within the lesbian community that your client can use for support.
- Your client may not identify herself as a lesbian, but rather may see herself as loving a particular woman. She may therefore lack some of the supports available in the lesbian community.
- With some women of other racial or ethnic groups, the primary identification may be racial or ethnic. Lesbian identification may not be as relevant.
- Disabled lesbians need even more support given the experience they often report of being oppressed and devalued by sexism, heterosexism and ableism.

12. If you do couple counselling with lesbians, interview the partners separately if you suspect that there is abuse in their relationship. When violence has been disclosed, do not engage in couple counselling unless the abuse has stopped for a reasonable period of time, the abuser is receiving help, and the partner is no longer afraid of her. Otherwise, you risk perpetuating the abuse.

Educate yourself. Know that lesbians belong to every race, class, age and profession. Learn about the positive aspects of lesbianism and the array of services that exist as part of the lesbian culture. Knowledge of the positive aspects of being lesbian and “lesbian pride” is essential if we are to eliminate the social causes of abuse in lesbian relationships.

We encourage shelters, helplines and professional associations to have educational materials, discussions and workshops about lesbianism, unlearning homophobia and heterosexism. Work toward creating an atmosphere where gay and lesbian colleagues can be comfortable and open about their orientation. This will enhance the response to the problem of abuse in relationships.

Conclusion

We have only begun to scratch the surface of a complex and deep-seated issue. Although our research findings are preliminary, this may be a first step toward understanding abuse in lesbian relationships. It is important that we continue to name the violence in lesbian relationships. We must also continue to combat heterosexism, racism and homophobia, as well as explore the effects of internalized homophobia and misogyny on lesbian relationships.

More specifically, our survey results indicate a need for many services and resources in order to respond adequately to this issue. Many lesbians mentioned the need to educate the lesbian community, as well as to develop appropriate social, medical and legal services that address abuse in lesbian relationships.

Women also expressed a need for self-help groups and treatment groups for victims of violence and for perpetrators of violence. Shelters that are safe for lesbians are also needed, in addition to other specialized services such as legal clinics and counselling centres that are informed and supportive. Overall, much work is still needed to respond to this issue. It is unlikely that separate specialized services for lesbians can be developed across the country; therefore, it is incumbent upon existing social service agencies to respond to this issue. This can include hiring “out” lesbians, creating a safer environment for lesbians – as clients and staff – and engaging in public education campaigns that acknowledge lesbian abuse.

Above all, lesbians who are being abused need safety and support. Abusers must take responsibility for their behaviour and get help. Professionals and caregivers must acknowledge this issue and ensure that their services meet the needs of lesbians. Friends and families need to become aware of how they can be supportive.

Violence in lesbian relationships is part of the continuum of violence against women in our society. We all have to break the silence and address abuse in lesbian relationships. Only then can we stop the cycle of violence.

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