

## SAME-SEX ABUSE OFTEN DENIED OR “EXCUSED”

A WOMAN’S VIEW Ginette Petitpas Taylor

Abuse in relationships occurs regardless of class, age or sexual orientation.

For people in same-sex relationships, an additional obstacle to asking for help when they are in an abusive relationship may be fear of giving their detractors any more fodder. They don’t want to reveal that same-sex relationships can be just as volatile and abusive as opposite-sex unions. And if they do look for help, stereotypes and false assumptions surrounding same-sex couples, along with the still-common homophobia and heterosexism, get in the way.

A woman being abused by her female partner is beyond the experience and often the understanding, of many people. The reaction to a man being abused by his male partner might well be “you’re a man, hit him back”.

Because, we are used to domestic abuse being perpetrated by males against female partners, usually as a way to maintain traditional power, we - the public as well as service providers – see power imbalances as occurring along a gendered divide. Where men are always aggressors and females always victims.

A Health Canada report recently surprised many by indicating that abuse is as frequent and severe in same-sex as in opposite-sex relationships. Few services for victims of domestic abuse are equipped to respond to these individuals’ needs at those times.

Nationally, there have been cases in which law enforcement officials, responding to abuse calls where the abuser and the victim were of the same sex, either arrested both parties or arrested the larger and more assertive-looking partner, assuming him or her to be the aggressor.

What of the victim who decides to seek emergency shelter? Female victims may go to a transition house. Few shelters have policies outlining how to respond to a female abusive partner who is also seeking access to the shelter. Furthermore, women are barred from bringing along children not legally “theirs”, which creates an issue for victims who may not be the legal adoptive or biological parent of their child, and yet are moved to bring the child with them out of love or fear for their safety. The victim may also be hesitant to disclose the gender of her abuser, further complicating the problem.

As the Ontario-based group, Coalition Against Same-Sex Partner Abuse, says, homophobia denies the reality of lesbian and gay men’s lives, including the existence of lesbian and gay relationships, let alone abusive ones. When abuse exists, attitudes often range from ‘who cares’ to ‘these relationships are generally unstable or unhealthy.’

The isolation commonly experienced by victims of domestic abuse can be heightened for those involved in same-sex relationships who are not “out” to family, friends or work colleagues. Threats to “out” a closeted partner against their will is a common form of abuse in same-sex relationships, especially where the partner has maintained their sexual orientation as a private matter out of fear for their job or potentially losing custody of a child.

Add to this the isolation of many who are bisexual, transgender, or two-spirited individuals and who feel they don’t have the support of either a heterosexual or homosexual community.

Now combine all this with the fear of not being understood or being treated with disrespect by service providers, and we can see how a difficult situation is exacerbated.

Education is key, as always. Service providers need protocols and training to guide them in rethinking how they provide service to the “non heterosexual” population. Service providers need to examine their attitudes and how these have been influenced by homophobia and heterosexism. The Coalition Against Same-Sex Partner Abuse recommends to professionals to “respect your client’s anxieties about disclosure of sexual orientation, which may be based on real fears of discrimination and its effects on child custody, family support, job security, and/or deportation.”

Consultation and active listening with New Brunswickers of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Two-Spirited (GLBTT-S) community would be a start, to identify not only what is needed but also how to design solutions.

In children’s “healthy relationships” courses, we must include discussions of all forms of intimate partnerships, not only that all relationships have an equal capacity for love but also the potential for abuse.

And we must *all* recognize the ways in which our society and institutions have been constructed on assumptions and privileges for the heterosexual community, re-evaluate the ways we think and act accordingly.

A number of experts argue that this problem had until recently not received much attention even within the lesbian and gay communities for lack of resources and fear of homophobic backlash. GLBTT-S groups have focussed on other serious issues. The battles surrounding recognition of their rights in Canada have been long-fought and hard-won. From the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1969, to the addition of “sexual orientation” to the prohibited grounds of discrimination in the Canadian Human Rights Act in 1996; from extending to same-sex couples the benefits and responsibilities associated with common-law relationships in 1999, to the enactment of the law in 2005 giving same-sex couples the right to marry. These groups have also been at the forefront in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

In the past couple of years a few of these community groups have begun offering limited counseling and support services for victims of domestic abuse, as well as publishing educational materials on the subject. Outside of GLBTT-S communities, victims of same-sex domestic abuse are too often left to fend for themselves.

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