

# Domestic Abuse in Lesbian Relationships

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By Katy

There is a belief that women are the "gentle" sex. We are nurturing, kind, tolerant, compassionate, understanding, accepting, caring....and so, with that in mind, surely lesbian relationships are always founded on mutual love and respect for one another. Right?

Wrong! Whilst the vast majority of lesbian partnerships are positive, life-affirming experiences, there is a darker issue that is seldom talked about, even by those within the lesbian community itself. I'm talking, of course, about domestic abuse and sexual assault.

***Myth: DV and SA does not occur within lesbian relationships.***

Perhaps surprisingly, statistics have shown that lesbian people experience domestic violence at a very similar rate to that of heterosexual women (Waldner-Haygrud, 1997; AVP, 1992). It has been estimated that between 17-45% of lesbians have been the victim of at least one act of violence perpetrated by a female partner (Burke et al, 1999; Lie et al, 1991), and that 30% of lesbians have reported sexual assault / rape by another woman (Renzetti, 1992). Considering the lack of discussion that takes place regarding lesbian domestic violence and sexual assault, I find these figures staggering.

## **How does domestic / sexual violence manifest in lesbian relationships?**

Hart (1986) defines lesbian domestic violence as *"That pattern of violent and coercive behaviours whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs, or conduct of her intimate partner or to punish the intimate for resisting the perpetrator's control over her"*.

Domestic violence occurs when a partner / significant other, attempts to physically or

psychologically dominate another. It can take the form of:

Physical violence: hitting, punching, kicking, biting etc.

Emotional abuse: constantly putting down, humiliating, embarrassing, frightening, threatening. etc.

Isolating: Controlling contact with others, restricting freedom.

Financial control: Fostering dependency, controlling money, property rights.

"Outing" – threatening to "out" you.

***Myth: DV in lesbian relationships is not as serious as that experienced in heterosexual relationships because its woman Vs. woman.***

Even if two women have equal physical strength (which is unlikely), it does not mean that the distribution of power within that relationship is equal. DV is about power, and when there is a power differential, there is the potential for abuse. This "power" need not be determined by physical strength. For example:

A partner that has more money, may have power over a partner with less money because they may pay the bills, own the house etc.

A partner who is not "out" to family and friends by be threatened with being out-ed if they don't do as they are told.

A partner who is the "birth mother" of any children may threaten to take the children away.

***Myth: A woman cannot really rape / sexually assault another woman.***

Many of us have been brought up to believe that rape / sexual assault requires penile penetration – and so when it comes to women-on-women sexual violence, some dismiss that sexual assault can even occur between lesbians. This is a falsehood.

Sexual assault between women can include:

Forced vaginal / anal penetration with digits or objects;

Forced sexual touching;

Forced oral sex;

DV and SA perpetrated by a woman, on a woman, is every bit as wrong and serious as DV and SA that occurs in heterosexual relationships. The gender of the perpetrator or the victim is immaterial. There is a move to make more laws regarding sexual assault and domestic violence more gender neutral.

### **Special issues for lesbians in domestic violence situations**

It's incredibly hard for any person who is the victim of DV to come forward and report what's happening to them. Are there any additional concerns for those in lesbian relationships?

Although there has been little research done in this area, there is evidence that only six (16%) of lesbians who identify abuse in their relationships have sought help from legal and medical service PHAC 1998. Although, in most respects DV and SA within same-sex relationships has the same issues as that in heterosexual relationships, there are some areas in which it could be experienced differently, specifically in regards to reporting.

- **Reporting abuse to police / dealing with the courts:**

Many fear reporting the DV / SA to the police, either because they won't be taken seriously, or because of inherent institutional homophobia or prejudice. There is some weight to these fears as only 17% of police departments have specific policies on same-sex domestic violence. However, with the growth and proliferation of specialist domestic violence units, sensitivity to the relevant issues is slowly improving, perhaps reflected in the fact that over 80% of police departments are providing training on same-sex DV.

If you feel you have been treated unfairly by the police / legal profession regarding DV / SA, or you want more info on your legal rights or legal processes then you can make a complaint to the police directly, or contact:

*In the USA: NCLR legal helpline 1800 5286257.*

*In the UK: National Centre for DV: 0870 9220704 / Victim Support 08453030900*

*Galop (UK)0207 704 2030 (Shoutline) or [www.galop.org.uk](http://www.galop.org.uk)*

*In Australia: Enough is Enough: 61 2 9542 4029*

At present, lesbian survivors are not always treated in the courts in the same way as females in heterosexual relationships. Many family courts will only issue protection orders between married couples or heterosexual couples who have a child – and therefore lesbians can be forced to use the criminal courts instead. Using the criminal courts requires seeking a criminal charge, and usually doesn't afford the same closed proceedings as the family courts.

In addition to this, where restraining orders are implemented within domestic violence relationships, often the restraining orders are mutual. This can give the abuser another means of minimizing the pain suffered by the victim, as well as giving the abuser another means of control.

**\*\*Many local GLBT support organisations or victim support organizations are able to provide victims with an advocate should they wish to go to the police or have to go through the court system\*\***

- **Accessing resources**

Specific resources within the local community for survivors of sexual assault within LGBT relationships in the community are very scarce, and therefore survivors are often forced into using traditional resources predominantly aimed at heterosexuals. Because of this, many may fear being met with homophobia or that your experience will be dismissed or misunderstood.

Therapists: Whilst most therapists are very comfortable at treating lesbian clients, you may want to consider opting for a therapist who has identified themselves as gay-friendly or gay-

affirmative.

Lists of gay-friendly therapists can be found:

[US friendly therapists](#)

[UK gay friendly therapists](#)

[Canadian gay friendly therapists](#)

Local GLBT organizations will also have lists of local therapists who are comfortable treating lesbian clients.

Refuges: In order to get to a place of safety, many women are forced to use refuges. According to Amnesty International USA, there are still some refuges / shelters that refuse to take lesbian survivors of domestic violence, and so these women may feel they have no choice but to stay with their abusive partner. Although there are very few lesbian-only shelters, most refuges and housing associations do now accept that lesbian women are in need of protection and hence will allow them equal access to the shelter.

For refuge lists for lesbian survivors of domestic violence:

**UK:** Shelter 0808 800 4444 or [Shelter](#)

Albert Kennedy Trust: 020 7831 6562 (London) or [AKT](#) - housing for 16-25 yo LGBT people.

Stonewall Housing: 020 7359 5767 or [hStonewall](#)

Refuge: 0808 2000 247

**New Zealand Refuges:** [List of NZ refuges](#)

**US:** NDV Helpline: 1-800-799-7233 or [List of shelters by state](#)

- **Coming out:**

Gaining help for DV as a lesbian, whether legal, social or medical, may mean to some that they have to “come out” to others – perhaps for the first time. Infact, the abusive partner may threaten to “out” the partner in an attempt to exert heterosexist control. Therefore, many fear not only the potential consequences of having to deal with the issues surrounding the abuse itself, but also the consequences of family, friends, colleagues etc. finding out they are a lesbian. Fearing rejection, anger, and homophobia from others in your life at a

time when you most need support, can feel like one step too far for some lesbian victims of DV - and so they opt for silence.

- **The Lesbian community:**

There is a wall of silence within the lesbian community about domestic violence, and to some extent, the lesbian community seems somewhat reluctant to address the fact that this does occur within our ranks (Ristock, 2002). It has even been referred to as "the second closet".

***Myth: The lesbian community is always supportive of each other.***

The whole concept of the lesbian community is based on the idea of equal human rights, and the need to join together in a cohesive unit to formulate activism towards this ideal goal. Therefore, there is an inherent fear that acknowledgement of domestic abuse within this world, will give lesbian partnerships a bad name and perpetuate the myth among heterosexual society that gay relationships are abnormal or dysfunctional. Speaking out can therefore result in divisive attitudes within the community.

*To advocate speaking out in the community: <http://www.thenetworklared.org/glbtdvc.htm>*

This wall of silence can be intimidating for the DV survivor to confront, believing they may be ostracized from their community, or become a source of embarrassment, or even anger. If more victims are to be able to encouraged to speak out, then the community as a whole needs to be more supportive and accepting of those that do.

There are organizations run by lesbians for lesbian survivors of domestic violence, which can be a wonderful source of support:

UK: Broken Rainbow: 08452 60 44 60 or [Broken Rainbow](#)

UK: Bede House: 020 7232 1107/020 7237 9162 or [Bede House](#)

USA: LGBT domestic violence hotline: 1-617-423-7233

- **Finiancial concerns:**

The denial of equal civil recognition of same-sex relationships prevents many people from accessing a range of other rights when the relationship breaks down due to DV. Lesbian couples who have built their lives together may have the added complication of often having no legal redress in terms of the fair and equal division of their finances and assets. The rules regarding the financial implications of a break up are complex, and unique to country, state and personal situations, and so its worth seeking legal help when dealing with this issue.

There is help out there - but at present, it largely means accessing resources traditionally set up for women in heterosexual relationships.

### **Books on the issue:**

Violent Betrayal: Partner Abuse in Lesbian Relationships" by Claire Renzetti. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1992.

Intimate Betrayal: Domestic Violence in Lesbian Relationships (Paperback)by Ellyn Kaschak  
Naming the Violence- Speaking out about Lesbian Battering, K. Lobel,Ed., Seal Press, 1986.

### **HELPLINES:**

In an emergency, please call the police:

UK: The National 24 Domestic Violence Helpline: 0808 2000 247

US NDV Helpline: 1-800-799-7233 or La red (ending abuse in same-sex relationships): 617-742-4911

Australia: Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project: Freecall: 1800 063 060

New Zealand: Preventing violence in the home: 0508 384 357

Canada: NDV 1-800-363-9010

South Africa: Stop Gender Violence Helpline 0800-150-150

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