



Domestic Violence

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Historically, violence, abuse, and battering within families have been hidden issues. They were brought into the public and clinical domain through the advocacy efforts of feminists in the 1960s. Heterosexual battered women and female rape survivors were a focus of the early women's liberation movement's critique of patriarchy.

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse, as well as victims of bias-related violence, began to receive media attention in the 1970s. However, it was not until the 1980s, following the growth of lesbian and gay activism, that attention to violence directed at, and within, the glbtq community came to the attention of domestic violence advocates.

Violence against Glbtq People

Violence against glbtq people includes sexual assault, child abuse, bias-related violence, and domestic violence. The word domestic violence is often used to subsume all kinds of violence within the home, including sexual assault in intimate relationships, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. It is a prevalent, although under-recognized, problem in the glbtq community.

It is thought that the incidence of domestic violence in glbtq families mirrors that of heterosexual families, which has been estimated to affect 25 to 30% of families. However, it is extremely difficult to gather accurate statistics on glbtq domestic violence, in part because the majority of glbtq people remain closeted and are unlikely to participate in research.

Moreover, the research that has been conducted tends to focus on either lesbians or gay men, either ignoring bisexual people or subsuming them under other categories. Transgender and transsexual people have been the focus of very few studies of abuse or violence in domestic situations. It is, however, known that transpeople experience vicious physical violence from stranger assault, and preliminary research shows that this abuse is also experienced within families.

Additionally, because of the prevalence of homophobia, glbtq people rarely seek aid from social services programs for domestic violence, which in any case are not geared towards the unique needs of glbtq survivors of battering. Historically, the treatment model for examining domestic violence has employed a gendered paradigm, which assumes that men are the perpetrators and women the victims of domestic violence. Although this is often the case in heterosexual couples, this model does not give treatment providers a way to recognize abuse among same-sex couples.

Shelters for battered women will rarely admit a battered man or transgender person. Conversely, because staff-members are poorly trained in understanding the dynamics of same-sex abuse, female batterers are sometimes admitted to shelters. Moreover, outside large metropolitan areas, survivors of violence have few options for shelter, treatment, or advocacy. Perpetrators have even fewer services to assist them in breaking out of abusive patterns, which means that they may continue to find other victims to abuse.

Deconstructing Myths

Examining same-sex domestic violence requires deconstructing some cherished ideas of lesbian and gay male relationships. Glbtq people, as well as outsiders, often assume that lesbian and gay relationships are always built on "equality." In addition, it is often assumed that women are incapable of acting violently towards one another, and even victims of violence sometimes find it hard to admit that another woman is acting violently towards them.

When gay men engage in domestic violence it is often minimized, with friends as well as law enforcement officials treating the violence between men as if it is just "boys being boys." Gay men sometimes feel shame at being the victim of violence, since it reinforces society's stereotype of gay men as not "real men." Sometimes it is assumed that domestic violence happens only to glbtq people who frequent bars, or who are into butch/femme relationships, or who participate in S/M activities. These myths only serve to further marginalize glbtq people who are victims of abuse. Domestic violence can take place in all relationships, regardless of class, lifestyle, or sexual and gender expressions.

Power and Control

Domestic violence is essentially about power and control in relationships. By definition, mutual battering does not exist. Lenore Walker first promulgated the theory of domestic violence that is most commonly used in understanding abuse in relationships. Walker found that domestic abuse is more than an isolated act of violence; it includes a circular pattern of power and control. She discovered that there is commonly a period of tension that precedes the violence, and a period of forgiveness that follows it; this 3-part cycle (tension, violence incident, and the "honeymoon phase") solidifies the power and control within the relationship.

Domestic violence is more likely to occur in couples who have power imbalances, even when sex is not the primary difference between couples. There are numerous power issues that can affect glbtq couples, including differences in financial or occupational status; differences in class, race, or ethnicity; differences in disability or HIV status; and variables such as age and legal relationship to children.

Effects of Homophobia

Additionally, glbtq relationships are always affected by homophobia--both internalized shame and institutionalized heterosexism. Glbtq people are often isolated within their coupled relationship, and fear interference and judgments from outsiders. If they have homophobic family members, they may be afraid to come out to them, let alone tell them that a gay partner is abusing them.

Given the lack of social approval or legal protection for gay and lesbian people with children, glbtq victims of violence are often fearful of calling the police or involving the criminal justice system. This is especially the case for people of color who have been mistreated by law enforcement officials. Sometimes victims hesitate to contact the police when a batterer is a person of color, knowing how poorly he or she may be treated within the criminal justice system.

Domestic violence can occur between partners who are abusing alcohol or illegal substances. However, substance use is not causative; these are two co-occurring phenomena, and treating one will not necessarily decrease or "cure" the other. Alcohol or substance abuse issues do, however, complicate people's ability to seek support when relationships become abusive.

Forms of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence can take many forms in addition to physical battering and sexual assault. It can also be

emotional or psychological; it can involve stalking or isolation, economic abuse and destruction of property, and threats regarding children or "outing" someone at a job or with family.

Abuse can include psychological intimidation such as name-calling, yelling, and blaming. Abusers often try to isolate their victims, not allowing them social or work-related friendships, and controlling their access to the telephone or the Internet. Sometimes perpetrators will threaten to harm children or pets as a way to maintain control over their partners.

"Outing" is a unique glbtq relationship dynamic, where an abusive partner will threaten to tell an employer, child, or relative that a person is gay. Going public with information about sexual identity can be damaging not just psychologically; it can also assist courts in removing children from alternative families.

Leaving Abusive Relationships

Violence in relationships tends to become more frequent and more lethal over time. However, it is often very difficult to leave abusive relationships, because the threat of violence tends to escalate when an abused person tries to leave.

Because of the silence regarding glbtq domestic violence, the absence of support and treatment programs, and the general lack of education and information available about domestic violence in glbtq families, it is difficult for people to leave abusive relationships. Victims often feel isolated and afraid, and struggle with feelings of shame and public stigma.

People stay in abusive relationships because they see no other options and because they are afraid of retaliation if they leave. Perhaps they have no experience or expectation of being in a violence-free relationship. Additionally, financial considerations, concern for the safety of children, and lack of safe houses or shelters may also keep people in abusive relationships.

Commonly, victims of abuse experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and even after leaving a relationship have intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and nightmares that affect their healing and their ability to establish non-abusive relationships.

The Need for Increased Research and Improved Services

There is a great need for increased research on glbtq people who are victims, as well as perpetrators, of domestic violence. Researchers need to examine the relationships between domestic violence, sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse, and bias-related violence.

Social service agencies and law enforcement officials need increased training in glbtq domestic violence issues, and therapists--including both those who specialize in working with glbtq people and those who are generalists--need education and clinical skills to recognize and treat glbtq domestic violence.

Additionally, the glbtq community must acknowledge the existence of domestic violence and sexual assault within the community, so we can better support our friends, as well as assist in the development of public policies that protect glbtq families impacted by domestic violence.

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