

# FROM THE BLACK DEATH TO AIDS

## A SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF EPIDEMICS

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## Violence on the rise

*Physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse constitutes domestic violence. It is not limited to married couples, but includes co-habitants, lovers, parents and children. Neither is it limited to one sexual lifestyle.*

BY HAROLD MOORE

The incidence of sexual assault and domestic violence in the United States is on the rise. According to current figures, 50 percent of all relationships encounter at least one act of violence in the form of domestic or sexual abuse. And yet, a study by the *Harvard Journal on Legislation* reported that 70 percent of police officers interviewed said they completed written reports on fewer than 20 percent of domestic violence cases. 13 percent said they never reported domestic violence.

According to Mary Li, volunteer coordinator for Portland Women's Crisis Line and co-facilitator of a support group for battered lesbians, the figures currently on record for reported acts of sexual violence in the community as a whole can be extrapolated into gay and lesbian context using the 10 percent Kinsey figure.

Although Li works primarily with male-female incidents of violence, she reports that domestic violence and sexual assaults between women are not uncommon. But it's almost impossible to find statistics which indicate that domestic violence is also on the rise in the gay and lesbian communities because records are not kept for these subgroups.

"At the Women's Crisis Line we deal with the issue of violence, no matter what the specifics," Li said. "Violence in a relationship, outside a relationship, anywhere, is violence. Our staff is trained to deal with the issue of oppression and is taught to deal with gay and lesbian issues just as they are introduced to the issues of racism, traditional sexism or any other of the circumstantial issues that are involved in the real issue — violence.

"Psychological, verbal and physical/sexual abuse are all violent. When the victim steps away, for just a moment, that breaks the silence. It is then that the chain of violence, in that life, can be dealt with," Li continued.

"The difficulty with a gay man reporting rape, domestic violence or other abuse is compounded by society's demand that men not be victims of power assaults. Plus, both men and women in gay and lesbian relationships are reluctant to identify themselves as homosexual because jobs, families and lifestyles many times depend on a person's sexuality remaining hidden."

Physical, mental, emotional and sexual

abuse constitutes domestic violence. It is not limited to married couples, but includes co-habitants, lovers, ex-spouses or ex-boyfriends, ex-girlfriends, parents and children. Neither is it limited to one sexual lifestyle.

Mary Li reports that persons calling the Crisis hot line frequently attempt to hide the non-traditional nature of the relationship in which the violence is occurring. Even in the act of coming forward and taking action against a violent situation, gays and lesbians find it difficult to be free with the facts. "Only after the victim has become clear that we are here to help, not to judge, do we hear the facts as they really are," Li said.

Victims often blame themselves for causing abusive situations and feel that they "deserve it." Gradually they find themselves accepting more and more of the responsibility for the increasing violence. They feel that the only need is to meet some set of nebulous expectations in order to earn approval of the abuser and to avoid more violence. In effect, violence becomes the norm.

Economic dependence, lack of alternative living arrangements, lack of job skills, fear that the partner will not be able to survive alone and fear of life change all argue against stepping away from the abusive situation.

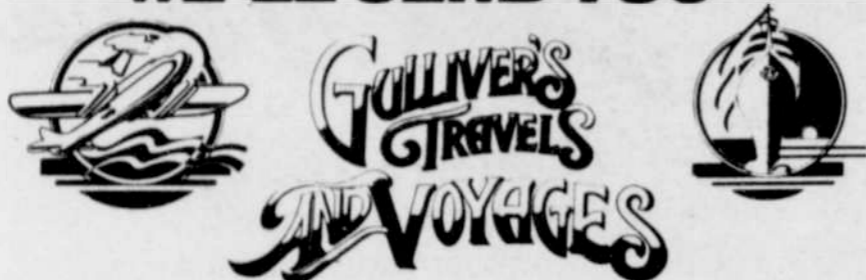
Yet reality speaks a frightening truth. Violent behavior does not stop on its own. It escalates. The only real solution to immediate threats, a single act or a continuing scenario of abuse or violence, is to withdraw, somehow, from the abuser.

Mary Li stated emphatically, "Violence is the problem of the perpetrator. If you are being victimized by these crimes, know, no matter what, that the perpetrator must take full responsibility for the behavior. And finally, call us. Call us collect if you must. But call."

The issue of violence among gay men remains grossly unreported. The need for communitywide education and resource development is critical. Men are encouraged to use the resources available at the Women's Crisis Line. Perhaps in the future, as the need for services grows, the community, gay and straight, will accept the truth: Violence is something we can do something about.

The Portland Women's Crisis Line operates 24 hours, every day, at 235-5333.

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## State-of-the-art AIDS law book available

National Gay Rights Advocates and the National Lawyers Guild have updated and expanded their book on AIDS-related legal issues. The second edition of the *AIDS Practice Manual* includes chapters on wills and trusts, public benefits, employment, insurance, housing, nursing homes, criminal law, prisons, child custody, the military, immigration and taxes as well as key medical and legal documents, surveys, and sample forms for lawyers to use when dealing with the special problems of people with AIDS and related conditions.

"The manual offers the most up-to-date legal information available, as well as strategic pointers for attorneys," said Benjamin Schatz, director of NGRA's AIDS Civil Rights Project. "We've made a great effort to ensure that our legal information is not slanted toward any one state or region, so that it will be helpful to attorneys throughout the country."

"Too often, those who discriminate have



more money and more legal resources than those who stand up for the rights of people with AIDS and ARC," said NGRA executive director Jean O'Leary. "Because of this, it's essential for attorneys who are fighting discrimination to have access to the best information available. That's why we published the manual."

The *AIDS Practice Manual: A Legal and Educational Guide* can be purchased for \$35 (\$25 for NGRA members) from NGRA, 540 Castro St., San Francisco, CA 94114. The book was edited by Paul Albert of the National Lawyers Guild AIDS Network; Leonard Graff, NGRA's legal director; and Benjamin Schatz. NGRA is a California-based public-interest law firm that has played a leadership role in defending the rights of people with AIDS and related conditions.