

OUTTING THE VIOLENCE

Recognizing domestic violence in our community starts with education, listening and believing.

by Ariel Waterwoman

We were all raised in a totally dysfunctional society that promotes violence as an acceptable means to get what we want. We are raised by people, 98 percent of whom, believe that using physical violence is healthy and necessary to raise children properly. We live in a country where the number one cause of injuries requiring hospitalization for women are the result of domestic violence. How can we, as a gay and lesbian community, believe that we are somehow immune to this?

Different surveys around the country show 25 to 48 percent of all gay male and lesbian couples experience some form of abuse. According to *Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them*, by David Island and Patrick Letellier, the third leading health problem facing gay men today stems from domestic violence. The violence in the lesbian and gay men's communities is real. The violence is life-threatening. I know. I am a survivor of domestic violence in a lesbian relationship.

Lesbian and gay men's battery is not something I thought much about, nor did I take it very seriously. I always thought that if someone ever hit me, I would just leave. No problem, it would never happen to me. In some ways I believed that if a person let themselves be injured, then it must be something they needed to do. The victim probably had a "victim's headset." Not very charitable of me. I also believed in a "lesbian utopia." I believed deeply that "real" lesbians wouldn't succumb to violence.

I had a long journey ahead of me filled with deep personal pain and shame. I had to accept that I was indeed being battered. I was battered by the woman I loved and planned a life around, and she never had to lay a hand on me.

Definitions of gay and lesbian domestic violence

According to *Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them*, "Gay men's domestic violence is any unwanted physical force, psychological abuse, or material or property destruction inflicted by one man on another. A central element to this, and any, definition of domestic violence is POWER. Through the intentional use of violence, or even the intentional threat of violence, the batterer creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation in which he is able to get his partner to do what he wants."

According to *Naming the Violence: Speaking Out About Lesbian Battering*, edited by Kerry Lobel, "Lesbian battering is that pattern of violence and coercive behaviors 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." It goes on to say: "Individual acts of physical violence, by this definition, do not constitute lesbian battering. If the assaulted partner becomes fearful of the violator, if she modifies her behavior in response to the assault or to avoid future abuse, or if the victim intentionally maintains a particular consciousness or behavior to avoid violence, despite her preference not to do so, she is battered."

Both of these books offer clear and concise resources for gay men and lesbians to learn from.



ILLUSTRATION BY JANE RONGERUDE

Warning signs of a batterer

- Abusive or exhibits characteristics of abusing a former partner
- Easily frustrated, has an explosive temper
- Enters into secret states of depression (known only to family members)
- Very "now" oriented (wants everything done now)
- Makes frequent 'promises' to change or improve in the future
- Will accept no blame or responsibility for failures (marital, family related or job related) or for violence
- Becomes enraged when you do not listen to his/her advice
- Jealous of significant other people in your life
- Displays an unusual amount of jealousy, may accuse you or joke about your being with others
- Expects you to spend all of your free time together. Needs to know your whereabouts at all times
- Accuses you of lying about where you have been
- Demanding and often times hurtful during sexual activities; at times punishes you with refusal to make love
- Exerts control over you by threats of murder or suicide
- Distorts reality to suit his/her needs
- Isolates partner from friends and family with a variety of tactics

They speak directly to our own experience of abuse. They break the silence about our violence and bring it out from the depths of our deepest closets.

Domestic violence is a learned behavior. It involves the victim only as a target. The batterer is responsible for his, or her, own actions. The batterer chooses to use terrorist tactics to achieve control over their partners. This is a choice. A self-expression. There is absolutely no shared responsibility for the abuse. The perpetrator of the violence is solely responsible for her/his actions.

Differences and similarities in same-sex domestic violence

Most lesbians are reluctant to identify with the victims of lesbian battery, which limits their ability to empathize with the victim. This seems to reflect lateral oppression of internalized sexism and internalized homophobia. We are often our own best oppressors. There is a deep level of internalized hate messages that women absorb from living in the dominant culture. These women-hating messages and attitudes are often used as a weapon by lesbian batterers. This is unique to lesbian domestic violence; although using sexism against women is a tactic perfected by male heterosexual batterers.

Internalized sexism certainly doesn't apply to gay men, and yet they have their own gender indoctrination that can be played out violently. The Rev. Gary Wilson from the Metropolitan Community Church served for three years on the board of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seattle, Wash., and theorizes, "Most men don't even recognize that violence is a problem. They see John Wayne solve a problem by slugging someone, and as long as 'the Duke' wins, it sends a powerful message that violence between men is a fair and equitable way to resolve conflict." Wilson goes on to say, "It's not 'macho' to admit having been on the receiving end of that violence, either." The victim's whole manhood may come into question.

Whatever the specific gender oppressions, combined with race-oppression, class-oppression, able-bodiedness, etc., the tactics used by the batterers are essentially the same. They will say and do whatever is necessary to initiate, manipulate and maintain absolute control. The abuse can only escalate.

"My lover was always screaming that I was 'out of control,' and it never made any sense to me," says one survivor who shared her story with *Just Out*. "A woman on a crisis line finally explained that my lover probably meant that I was out of her control. That really cleared it up for me. She would scream I was 'out of control' and start calling my friends and telling them I was 'out of control' and crazy. People wouldn't know how to respond, so mostly they kept away from me and I was further isolated. I think my friends liked me okay, but they probably didn't like being called at 2:30 am and told I was 'having a crisis.' Some crisis. Usually I had just refused to keep listening to whatever drama my lover was trying to involve me in."

"Sexual abuse worked really well for her [the batterer] on me. I would be 'really good' for a long time afterwards. I would submit and do whatever she wanted me to, thinking I was avoiding further sexual abuse," says another lesbian survivor.

"Sleep deprivation is what worked on me. I just wanted peace. At night is when the sexual abuse would happen," continued another survivor.

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