

# When the personal remains personal. Intimate partner violence in lesbian

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## Abstract

The past couple of years have seen a groundswell of women's voices speaking out about gender-based violence (GBV). However, even in the current climate of raising issues about GBV, including in the global #MeToo movement, and more recently #TheTotalShutdown, the issue of violence in lesbian relationships remains largely unspoken. As activists we are aware that it happens - through our own personal experiences and those of comrades and friends, yet it continues to be a taboo topic in certain lesbian circles, communities and organisations. Individuals who have experiences of intimate partner or domestic violence remain silent: as a community we are outraged (and rightly so) about the hate crimes of rapes and murders of lesbian women and yet we do not acknowledge, even to ourselves, the extent of violence in our relationships.

**Keywords:** lesbian; intimate partner violence; silence



Breaking the silence about violence in lesbian relationships

*Credit: Vicci Tallis*

*Lesbian relationships are expected to be perfect because two women are involved. Women are considered asympathetic, nurturing, kind-hearted and loving, so violence is something unusual and unexpected. Secondary vic-timisation at police stations, healthcare facilities and within the community at large is also a concern, we are afraid of being ridiculed and laughed at.*

Survey respondent)

## **Introduction**

How prevalent is intimate partner violence (IPV) in lesbian relationships? There is very little research on violence against lesbians (VAL) in general and even less on lesbian intimate partner violence (LIPV). Globally few studies have been conducted. A recent study by Triangle Project is the most comprehensive research done in South Africa. The study found that intimate partner violence among lesbian couples in South Africa is under-represented in research and trivialised by police, leaving victims unwilling or unable to access the protective service.

The limited literature to date hints at “high” levels of violence – the extent of which is unknown. Research on the types of violence and frequency is sorely needed, as well as studying the psychological impacts. In response to the silence around the issue, and knowing first hand of violence in lesbian relationships, we wanted to begin to open up the space to discuss and counter the denial. We wanted to begin to explore how lesbians experience and understand intimate partner violence. We developed a short anonymous online survey and reached out to lesbians via contacts, friends and lesbian organisations. We encouraged lesbian women who felt comfortable sharing their experiences to complete the survey. We also drew on our own experiences – and our work and our understandings of IPV and VAL – in developing some initial reasons for the silences around IPV in lesbian relationships in our community. We received 21 responses to the survey. Working in, and being part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) sectors and the violence against women sector, and being active in other sexual and reproductive health and rights spaces, we were also privy to discussions about VAL and LIPV. We also subscribe to feminist discourse on violence, using a power analysis: we wanted to see if in an anonymous space women would be more open about their experiences, thoughts and beliefs and whether their narratives when talking about their personal issues would match the political rhetoric. A big question for us was if there was a disconnect between what individuals say (and experience) and the community discourse what could that signify?

The LIPV narrative tries to make sense of violence in lesbian relationships as being heteronormative and mirroring gender roles – for example Ingrid Lynch noted that all the women in her study described their context as deeply patriarchal and homophobic. In our small study, and based on our experience, the reality is more complex; while the surrounding context may be patriarchal, homophobic relationships do not necessarily mirror that. Violence is just as prevalent in “equal” relationships where gender roles are fluid and power is not constrained to who controls the household finances. Our survey did not explore this in any detail – we did not ask any questions beyond whether the relationship embodied traditional role-playing or was more gender equal.

### **What does violence look like in lesbian relationships?**

All 21 women had experienced violence in their relationship at least once and just over a third of women acknowledged that violence had occurred in multiple relationships. Violence for the most part happens more than once, at the very least is occasional and for about 25% of women is frequent and ongoing.

Types of violence differed although all but one woman experienced emotional violence. Although the majority of women experienced emotional violence, their partners did not necessarily agree that this was abuse.

*My partner has a bad temper and throws violent tantrums, usually blaming me for them. She does not believe verbal violence can be categorised as abuse, I continue to disagree. Over many years I've come to understand that this is her way of gaining control over her environment, and has little to do with me in particular. I've learned to just leave the space when it happens so she can regain control over her emotions. As a society we permit spoken violence as somehow a release of frustrations. Social media has exposed how pervasive that belief is. I think we need a serious debate around 'tone policing' 'legitimate anger' and 'verbal violence'. In my relationship these political concepts have been used to emotionally devastate me - I've had to create emotional distance from my partner in order to regain a sense of dignity and trust in who I am as a person. We are still together because I know she loves me, allows me great freedom in all other respects, and has worked hard to change how she responds when she gets angry or frustrated. I've also learned that this is a distorted test of love on her part after a childhood of emotional abuse at the hands of her grandmother who also emotionally abused her own daughter, my partner's mother.*

(Survey respondent)

Physical violence was the next most common type of violence experienced, closely followed by psychological and financial violence. Interestingly, very few women reported being financially dependent on their partners (5% answered that their partner pays for everything and 19% said their partner pays for most things) yet 38% of women reported financial violence. Partners' denial of violence can lead to deep-seated psychological issues. One woman related her experiences of this.

*The morning after she would come to me and see marks and bruises and say what happened to you? I used to look at her in disbelief and say you did this to me. She would deny it and I would think I was going mad. Then I would go to work and someone would say what happened to you and then I would feel sane again – because I knew that she had beaten me.*

Three women reported sexual assault and a further three reported rape. There is even greater silence around rape in lesbian relationships – whilst the lesbian community make some reference to acknowledgement of physical violence the reality of forced penetration is never discussed. Lesbian women who have been raped are even less likely to disclose or report than heterosexual women. A framing for physical violence in lesbian relationships exists (despite the lack of discussion about the issue) and most lesbian women would acknowledge that it is at the very least theoretically possible. Rape within a lesbian relationship is a different story – forced penetration is not part of the discourse on violence and is never discussed.

## **Perceptions of why violence happens in lesbian relationships**

Our understanding of why violence happens in our relationship is important. As the general discourse on violence in relationships becomes mainstreamed, and movements such as #MeToo “normalise” disclosure of violence, more women are able to see the perpetrator is to blame. There are some indications that lesbian women feel the same - more than 50% of women surveyed noted that they had a partner who has “anger management” issues, and almost 40% said they had a violent partner. One woman noted that her partner “gets violent when she does not get her way”. Another shared that her partner “has psychological issues,

*trauma, attachment issues or mental health issues which make them controlling, avoidant or emotionally manipulative as a defence mechanism or to try and control me or punish [me] when they are not getting what they want.”*

Triggers for violence included being financially dependent, not meeting the partner’s sexual needs and partners being seen as jealous. Other “reasons” given for the violence were being emotionally distant or being perceived as unfaithful. Drugs and alcohol also played some role. Partners’ insecurities were also seen as inciting violence. *“My partner was insecure and expressed this through violence. They were threatened by my academic and financial standing”*. This to some extent mirrors violence in heterosexual relationships. In cases of once-off violence, the context was put forward as the reason for the abuse *“this was toward the break-up and during about a week of heavy arguments. I guess that a lot had not been said to each other up to that point. She hit me in the face and threw my glass against the wall. Can one ever really put this down to one reason? She had never exhibited violent behaviour before, and even in the moment I wasn’t scared of her.”*

## **Why the silence?**

In general, as noted in the initial quote, lesbians do not have a reference for the violence. “Men as perpetrators” is a lens that we understand, expect and can rationalise. Women as perpetrators is not so easy – social scripts around women’s behaviour are ingrained and hence we do not have a theoretical framework for understanding what is happening. This lack of understanding means that we also do not have the language to express our experiences and so we don’t talk about LIPV. We fight against using heteronormative analogies for our experiences – and the violence / power narrative does not always fit our experience. Assumptions are made about lesbian relationships mimicking heterosexual relationships – and that the “butch” partner is most likely the perpetrator. This does not match the lived realities of lesbian women and does not provide a useful framing for our experience of violence.

Another important reason for the silence is that if we raise issues of violence in our relationships we will be seen as dividing our community. There is a need for us to close ranks and often the main focus is on the hate crimes against us. Seeing the perpetrator as in our midst makes it very difficult to address – we are unable to point to the “other”. How we deal with the perpetrator among us has even greater resonance in lesbian relationships and communities. We close ranks because we are under attack from homophobic, misogynist, patriarchal men – and it is easier on many levels to concentrate on the enemy outside, the one we can legitimately fear rather than the one from inside, who is like us, and is seen as part of our community.

One woman highlighted that *“the silence could be because lesbian (and GBTIQA) identities are marginalised and to speak of violence within the community would attract added negative attention to the community.”* We also have fears about how we will be treated: *“we cannot talk about the perpetrators because our fellow friends and the police do not take us seriously. It becomes like a joke to them.”*

Other reasons cited for our silence by the survey respondents were that we do not want to put our partners in a “bad light” to our community, friends and family, and a sense of deep shame that this could happen in *my* relationship. *“We don’t want to feel, or be seen as inferior, like we have somehow failed and we would rather pretend that all is rosy when it is not”*. Some

women felt that no one would understand them – how this could happen between two women – and others said they thought people would not believe them.

*Why was I silent for ten years? I was deeply afraid – I thought that people would not believe me and if I spoke out I would be forced to act. I was involved in the violence against women sector but somehow this was different. I felt immobilised, I was inextricably linked to my partner and I did not know how to extricate myself. It was simpler to stay silent and stay put.*

(Survey respondent)

Often we justify our partners' behaviours – “we don't” want to give up on someone as we all have trauma”.

## **Support received**

A critical part of the story on lesbian violence, and the silence that surrounds it, is the lack of services and resources available. Even if we wanted to speak out where would we go? *“It is time lesbians are able to talk about their issues freely. When we have a platform that allows for free dialogue on these issues, lesbians will be able to come out and share their experiences, sometimes seek advice and most importantly get the help they need.”*

Most women had disclosed to at least one person yet almost 70% said that the support they received was below expectation. Counselling for those affected, and friends and families is non-existent. We need *“healing from family legacies through access to psychotherapy, substance abuse services that are evidence-based not typical mainstream moral models.”*

Lesbian women carry a double burden: in a country where access to justice for heterosexual women is denied, the added layer of sexual orientation makes access to justice even less likely. We see how women are (mis) treated when reporting IPV in the media, in the courts, by the police – and fear that we would be treated even worse if we decided to go the legal route. We know that despite a progressive Constitution that upholds the rights of LGBTIQA communities, the South African Police Service (SAPS) are ineffective or not sufficiently trained to deal with violence. Legislation and national instructions/policy prescribe that justice and health sectors need to be trained in dealing with GBV and LGBTIQA issues but personal experience in working with SAPS shows that this has yet to be implemented.

For many women who experience violence in their relationship, reporting to the police is not an option because of the perception (based on experience) that police and other service providers see LIPV as a “joke” and do not acknowledge lesbian relationships as “real”. There is also a belief that women are not violent and therefore LIPV is not taken seriously or as life-threatening.

These challenges are greater for lesbians in countries with no legal protections or with homophobic legislation. As one participant put it: *“Report, then what? In a country like Kenya where same sex sexuality is criminalised you run the risk of getting arrested and further harassed.”*

Internalised homophobia and fear add to our lack of disclosure and reporting. Access to services for survivors of LIPV is non-existent partly because laying a charge of rape against

your lesbian lover, or getting a restraining order after repeated abuse, would require a set of actions that for most lesbians are impossible. We don't trust, rightly so, that our issues will be adequately understood and addressed.

*I do think we discuss it with our friends. In my case, my friends have experienced similar abuses at the hands of their partners. As women we are taught to practise our frustrations on ourselves and by association, other women. I think this kind of abuse is partly internalised because we are told our whole lives that we are not good enough - not as women, not as lesbians. We bring this into our relationships.*

(Survey respondent)

Lesbian women in abusive relationships don't seek out help *"because of stigma and shame about abuse in same sex relations. It is like we are selling out as in hetero relations because we should be better, knowing the challenges of women and being with women. So in lesbian relations IPV is an unspoken issue. When you do speak, the judgement will send you back into the closet. Even health care and psychosocial support is judgmental. A point of entry for health care providers is listening to the victims. There doesn't seem to be a place for help. Even local helplines for abuse and violence are not equipped to support same sex relations, at least in my experiences. Mental health is crucial, and needed. Most turn to drugs and substance abuse to cope."*

Many women believe that support should come from, amongst others, the lesbian community, that we need safe spaces where we can discuss and debate, community outreach and support groups to tackle LIPV. Acknowledging that lesbian relationships can be sites of unequal power and violence is a starting point. *"Within our own lesbian communities there needs to be open conversation on Intimate Partner Violence - what it is even. Discussions on feminisms so that we are not an oppressed group that re-creates oppression in our own relationships."* In short, as one woman noted *"we fear being ostracised"*.

## **What next?**

Intimate Partner Violence in lesbian relationships is complex. The way we experience it is intersectional and multi-layered. As a community we have not adequately dealt with the issues: the "outside" world is so dangerous for lesbian women, especially black lesbians (as the continuous rapes and murders attest) that we focus our energies on fighting homophobia and patriarchy. We have a clearer analysis and understanding of violence in heterosexual relationships and can theorise why violence against women is so rife but the same analysis does not make sense when we look at the violence in our relationships, so we remain silent.

Our silence has huge consequences for lesbian women: we do not give "permission" for women to speak out, or report, or act against intimate partner violence. We certainly do not support women who are in violent relationships. Our silence does more than condone – it also invisibilises – makes LIPV a non-occurrence. Whatever our collective motives in not naming the realities within our intimate relationships, including promoting the notion that we are protecting ourselves from any criticism or negativity from broader society, we do a great injustice to ourselves

When it comes to violence against women we have to fundamentally believe that there are no 'holy cows' – and we must call out any form of violent behaviour. We need to acknowledge

too that all forms of violence occur in lesbian relationships – physical, sexual, emotional, economic and psychological.

It is clear that the community as a whole needs to address LIPV urgently. Some immediate actions include opening up the discourse and acknowledging that IPV is a real issue for our community. There is a need for education around IPV, rights and the legal remedies – understanding what we can do about violence in our relationships. The lesbian community must think about how we can encourage lesbians to talk about IPV without fear of letting down the community. It is also critical to talk about the complexities of GBV and about how power is experienced and exercised in same sex relationships. Safe spaces are important for these conversations. We need to engage service providers so that we build their understanding of the lived realities of lesbian women and ensure the application of the Sexual Offences Act and the Domestic Violence Act in cases of LIPV.

More research will deepen understanding of the extent of violence in lesbian relationships – it is important to analyse the drivers, types, scale and consequences of LIPV. We need to look at the continuum of violence and advocate for, and develop LIPV prevention programmes. Counselling, support groups and other services are urgently needed – both to address violence against lesbians in society and in our intimate relationships – and resources need to be available to set these up to scale.

## **Correction Statement**

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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