

# **Violence and Sexual Assault in Lesbian Relationships**

**Do you feel pushed to have sex when you don't want to?**

**Do you ever have sex just to "keep the peace"?**

**Does your partner want sex after a fight when you don't want it?**

**Have you ever just laid there during sex because you felt resisting was more risky?**

**Has she ever given you a hard time if you wanted to stop halfway through?**

**Does your partner use sexual name calling against you?**

**Does your partner make you feel ashamed about your sexual desires or fantasies?**

**In the context of S&M, are you ever confused about where the scenes begin and end?**

**Has your partner accused you of not being a real lesbian?**

**Does your partner threaten to have or have affairs when you both have agreed to be monogamous?**

(AABL Advocates for Abused and Battered Lesbians)

A lesbian is vulnerable to many forms of violence and sexual assault. A lesbian may be sexually assaulted by a heterosexual or experience violence or sexual assault or abuse within a lesbian relationship.

## **Who is a Lesbian?**

“Lesbians are women who have primary intimate/sexual relationships with other women. Approximately 10% to 15% of all women in Canada **identify** themselves as lesbians. Lesbians are present within every race, religion, socio economic background, occupation, political affiliation, age and category of physical and mental ability.’ (1998 Chelsely, MacAulay & Ristock). No one set of characteristics can define the diversity of the lesbian experience. Stereotypes are misleading and often harmful.

## **Prevalence of Violence in Lesbian Relationships**

There have been very few research studies done on this issue, but preliminary studies suggest that it is a growing concern. One study done in Toronto with 189 respondents found that 66% knew of lesbians who had experienced abuse in their relationships. Of those who identified abuse in their own relationships, 37 of the 189 described being psychologically or emotionally abused, 20 reported some type of physical assault and 4 indicated they had been sexually assaulted within the relationship (1998 Chelsely, MacAulay & Ristock).

Few lesbians in the study turned to traditional social, medical, or legal services to deal with the abuse. None of the respondents turned to the police, shelters or distress lines.

### **Some Ways Same-Gender Violence is Unique**

- It is frequently incorrectly assumed that lesbian or bisexual abuse must be “mutual”. It is not often seen as being mutual in heterosexual battering.
- Utilizing existing services (such as a shelter, attending support groups or calling a crisis line) either means lying or hiding the gender of the batterer to be perceived (and thus accepted) as a heterosexual.
- Seeking services can mean “coming out” which is a major life decision. If service providers are not discrete with this information it could lead to the victim losing their home, job, custody of children, etc.
- Telling a heterosexual about battering in a lesbian or bisexual relationship can reinforce the myth many believe that lesbian or bi relationships are “abnormal”.
- The lesbian or bi community is often not supportive of victims of battering or sexual assault because many want to maintain the myth that there are no problems such as child abuse, alcoholism, violence against women, etc. in lesbian or bi relationships.
- Receiving support services to help one escape a battering relationship is more difficult when there are also oppressions faced. Battered or sexually assaulted lesbians and female bisexuals automatically encounter sexism, homophobia and heterosexism. If they are also women of colour, they may face racism. These forms of social oppressions make it more difficult for these groups to get the support needed (legal, financial, social, housing, medical, etc.) to escape and live freely from an abusive relationship.
- Lesbian or bisexual female survivors of battering or sexual assault may not know others who are lesbian or bi, meaning that leaving the abuser could result in total isolation.

- Lesbian or bisexual females who are tied financially to their partner may have no legal process to assist in making sure assets are evenly divided, a process which exists for their married, heterosexual counterparts.
- The lesbian or bi community within the area may be small and in all likelihood everyone the survivor knows will soon know of their abuse. Sides will be drawn and support may be difficult to find. Anonymity is not an option, a characteristic many heterosexual survivors can draw upon in “starting a new life” for themselves within the same city.

(LAMBDA Gay & Lesbian Anti-Violence Project)

## **Definitions of Abuse**

- Physical:** hitting, punching, slapping, pushing, kicking, strangling, biting, burning, hair pulling, using objects or weapons, locking up or confining, interfering with sleeping or eating, restricting the mobility or access of a differently abled partner.
- Sexual:** any non consensual sexual act or behaviour, demeaning sexual remarks about partner’s body, clothing, or appearance, minimization of partner’s sexual needs, berating partner about sexual history, forcing sexual acts, using knowledge or prior sexual acts or abuse to terrorize, intimate or re-traumatize.
- Emotional:** name-calling and use of abusive language, criticizing, humiliation, disproportionate anger, yelling to intimidate, irrational blaming of partner, withholding affection, obsessive jealousy and accusations, use of intimate knowledge to generate vulnerability.
- Economic:** controlling finances, stealing money, creating debt, interfering with employment or education, demanding partner sign over paycheques, demanding partner to account for all money spent, coercing partner to pay for all expenses.
- Intellectual:** lying in order to confuse, playing mind games, manipulating, scheming, plotting, planning to undermine partner’s sense of stability and security.
- Spiritual:** denial of spiritual expression, degrading beliefs or spiritual expression, withholding love.
- Property:** destruction of personal items or property
- Stalking:** following, appearing unexpectedly at or waiting outside workplace or home, repeated phone calls or mail
- harassing**

# Myths About Abuse in Lesbian Relationships

## **#1. Violence and sexual assault is more common in straight relationships than it is in lesbian relationships.**

There is no reason to assume that lesbians are less violent than heterosexual partners. Abuse is about power and control. (2002 gaymyths)

## **#2. Lesbian relationships are never abusive.**

It is false to assume that all partners are caring and supportive to one another. Violence can exist in any relationship. (1998 Chelsely, MacAulay & Ristock).

## **#3. Lesbian violence occurs only in “butch” and “femme” relationships. The butch is the perpetrator and the femme is the victim.**

Beyond the fact that most lesbians do not assume explicitly butch-femme roles, the roles themselves do not automatically dictate who has more power or desire to exercise more control in the relationship. (1998 Chelsely, MacAulay & Ristock).

## **#4. Abuse between lesbians is mutual. Both partners contribute equally to the violence.**

This view stems from the belief that lesbian relationships are always equal partnerships. In violent relationships there is often a perpetrator and a victim. A perpetrator cannot be distinguished by any features such as size, height or age. Defending oneself against an attacker must be examined closely as it may be mistakenly construed either as initiating or equally contributing to abuse (1998 Chelsely, MacAulay & Ristock).

## **#5. Abusive lesbian relationships involve apolitical lesbians or lesbians who are part of the lesbian bar culture.**

In fact, violence in lesbian relationships is not limited to any particular “type” of lesbian. Abuse cuts across the lines of race, class, age, political affiliation and interests. (1998 Chelsely, MacAulay & Ristock).

## **#6. Lesbian violence is caused by substance abuse, stress, childhood violence or provocation.**

Although such factors may help explain why an abuser acts the way she does, there is no simple cause-and-effect relationship. An abuser has choices. She is responsible for her behaviour and she can control it. There is no excuse or justification for abuse. (1998 Chelsely, MacAulay & Ristock).

## **#7. It isn't really violence when a same sex couple fight. It is just a “lover's quarrel” between equals.**

This myth draws on our inability to see violence between two people of the same sex as a violent situation. Violence or sexual abuse is about power and control and there is no equality when one person is victimized by another. (2002 gaymyths)

## **#8. It is easier for a lesbian to leave an abusive relationship than it is for a heterosexual who is married.**

Lesbian couples are as involved in each others' lives as are heterosexual couples. It is also possible that lesbians are more couple/family oriented than their heterosexual counterparts as many may be alienated from their own families. Leaving a same sex partner may entail leaving a lesbian community and becoming even more isolated within a heterosexual society. (2002 gaymyths)

## **#9. A lesbian can't be sexually assaulted by another lesbian.**

This myth is based on the idea that sexual assault means penetration by a penis. Sexual assault involves any sexual touching that takes place without consent. It could be a kiss, a touch, or even pressure to have sex when it is not wanted.

# Planning Ahead to Stay Safe

## Safety while in the relationship

- \_\_\_ I will have important phone numbers available at all times.
- \_\_\_ I can tell \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ about the violence or abuse and ask them to call the police if they hear suspicious noises coming from my home.
- \_\_\_ I can rehearse an escape route from my home, workplace, or anywhere my partner might hurt me.
- \_\_\_ If I leave my home, three or four places I can go are:
- \_\_\_ I can keep change for phone calls with me at all times and leave extra money, car keys, clothes and copies of important papers with \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_ If I need to leave, I will bring \_\_\_\_\_ (check list below).
- \_\_\_ To build my independence I can: open my own savings account; take my name off accounts that my partner is misusing; develop contacts my partner doesn't know; talk regularly with a support person; and review this safety plan on \_\_\_\_\_ (date).
- \_\_\_ I can seek counselling from \_\_\_\_\_, and see if there is a support group I can join.

## Safety when you and your partner have separated

- \_\_\_ I can: change the locks, install heavier doors, a peephole, a security system, smoke detectors or an outside listening system.
- \_\_\_ I will inform \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ that my partner no longer lives with me and ask them to alert me or the place if she is observed near my home, my children or pets.
- \_\_\_ I can tell \_\_\_\_\_ at work about my situation and ask them to screen my calls.
- \_\_\_ I can avoid stores, banks, clubs, bars and \_\_\_\_\_ that I went to when I was living with my partner.
- \_\_\_ I can obtain a restraining order from \_\_\_\_\_, I can keep it on or near me at all times as well as leave copies with \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_ If I feel down and ready to return to a potentially abusive situation, I can call \_\_\_\_\_ for support or attend workshops and support groups to gain support. I can strengthen my relationships with other people, so I'll be less tempted to return to my abusive partner.
- \_\_\_ I can cancel any joint accounts we had with credit card companies, banks, or utilities and tell representatives of these institutions that I want to use a secret access code in future dealings with them (to guard against my partner misrepresenting me).
- \_\_\_ I can call 911 if I feel I am in immediate danger.

### **What I need when I leave**

- take my children with me
- identification
- divers license and registration
- medications
- money, bankbooks, credit cards
- keys: house/car/office
- change of clothes, toiletries
- address book
- passport
- birth certificate
- social insurance
- school and medical records
- insurance papers
- evidence of any previous battering
- other

### **Local resources that will be sensitive to your sexual orientation**

- Sarnia Police
- Distress Line
- Counselling and support groups
- Shelters
- Other resources

## **Social Context of Abuse in Lesbian Relationships**

Violence in lesbian relationships may be rooted in social conditions such as hatred of women (misogyny), fear of homosexuals (homophobia) and belief that heterosexuality should be the norm (heterosexism). It is also linked to other forms of domination within our society, such as racism and classism. These structures of dominance can provide the framework that allows for and supports oppressive relationships between people. Lesbians are often ostracized, discriminated against and seen as sexual deviants threatening the social and moral fabric of patriarchal society. Thus, reflective of existing social norms, hierarchies and abuses of power, entitlement, ownership and control can exist in lesbian relationships. (adapted from (1998 Chelsely, MacAulay & Ristock).

### **How social contact affects lesbian relationships:**

1. Anger, fear and rage can be misdirected at partners who can come to represent the things lesbians have been taught to hate in themselves and fear in a culture where heterosexism and misogynist views exist.
2. Partners could have been exposed to role models who displayed unhealthy patterns of dealing with conflict and anger.
3. May have learned about relationships from abusive families.

4. May not have access to counselling and supports that honour their sexual orientation.
5. Have no legal process to assist in making sure assets are evenly divided, a process which exists for their married, heterosexual counterparts.
6. Lesbians may have learned from their families and society that violence can be used as a way to gain and maintain control over another.

## **Stereotypes and Myths**

Stereotypes and prejudices of society hamper an open discussion about sexual assault or violence in lesbian relationships because of the fear that it will generate even more negative images about the lesbian community. (1998 Chelsely, MacAulay & Ristock).

### **Stereotypes**

#### **1. Lesbians are masculine-looking**

There are no physical characteristics that distinguish a lesbian from her heterosexual counterpart. Her appearance is a matter of personal preference, current fashion choices, age, economic ability. It is not possible to generalize about a lesbian 'look'.

#### **2. Lesbians can be divided into 'Butch' and 'femme' categories. The butch plays a 'male' role and the femme is the 'female' role.**

Every person, heterosexual or lesbian, expresses their gender differently. Gender identify has nothing to do with sexual orientation. There is a full range of roles that people choose within any relationship and lesbians do not adopt certain roles because they are in a lesbian relationship. In fact 'Butch' does not mean taking a male role. Lesbian relationships are not based on roles in heterosexual relationships.

#### **3. Lesbians are all radical feminists.**

Feminism is an ideology that any person may choose to share. It is a belief in the power differences between males and females within our society that have resulted in inequality, lack of opportunity, and violence against women. It has nothing to do with sexual orientation.

#### **4. All lesbians are men-haters.**

Attitudes towards men vary amongst heterosexual and lesbian populations. A lesbian identity means that a woman has chosen to have a primary relationship with another woman and has nothing to do with her perception of men.

#### **5. Lesbians are promiscuous.**

Some lesbian relationships are monogamous, some are non-monogamous, some are long-term and some are short-term. A relationship, whether lesbian or heterosexual, is as individual as the people involved in it.

# What Professionals Need to Know

(adapted from Abuse in Lesbian Relationships: Information and Resources)

It is vital that professional counsellors and caregivers examine their own perceptions and feelings about lesbians so they may acknowledge any homophobic or heterosexist attitudes they may hold. Professionals need to become aware of negative societal attitudes based on stereotypes, myths or ignorance they may have assumed before they are able to change them.

Homophobia and heterosexism affect all of us - - whether we are lesbian, gay or heterosexual, whether we are in an abusive situation or not, whether we are friends, social service providers, health care workers, police, legal workers or judges.

**The following are guidelines and special considerations for working with lesbians:**

**1. Do not assume that an abused woman's partner is male.**

In the first contacts with you, lesbians may disguise the gender of the abuser. She is more likely to reveal that the abusive partner is another woman once the helping process is underway, and particularly if you use language that demonstrates that you do not automatically assume that the abusive partner is male and that you don't judge her choice.

**2. Upon disclosure, it is very important that you impart an attitude of acceptance about her sexual orientation and continue to support her in her acceptance of herself as a lesbian.**

A lesbian may be mistrustful of any helpers she perceives as homophobic. She may also be more likely to seek out a female rather than a male helper. A clinical issue that may arise is initial wariness and mistrust of female helpers because of her experience of abuse by her female partner.

**3. Be aware of the prevailing myths about lesbian relationships.**

**4. The first priority is to assess safety issues and to help set up a protection plan.**

**5. Document the abuse and begin to address the medical and legal issues as you would with any assaulted woman.**

**6. A lesbian who has been abused will likely be anxious over confidentiality about her sexual orientation.**

Disclosure of her sexual orientation must be her choice. She is the only one who can decide to disclose to her family, caregivers, children, friends, co-workers or members of her ethnic or racial group. Her choices need to be respected and supported.

Reassurances that you will respect and honour her choices will need to be repeated.

**Be aware that:**

- She may not feel able to turn to her family for support if she has not disclosed her lesbianism to them or if she has received a negative reaction from them.
- She may fear that they will condemn her orientation along with the relationship.

- She may be afraid that she will cause her family grief over the disclosure of her lesbianism.
- She may be fearful of losing her job if her lesbianism is disclosed in the process of dealing with the sexual or physical abuse.
- She may fear losing her spiritual community if her church finds out about her sexual orientation.

**Be aware that:**

- She will have to disclose her sexual orientation in order for her to access shelters, the police and the legal system unless her perpetrator was male.
- most shelters do not have policies and procedures that would guarantee the lesbian a safe place or automatically keep the abuser from finding her or gaining admission to the shelter.
- There is no guarantee that there will be a non-judgmental, non-homophobic, non-heterosexist response by police or legal workers.
- support, counselling and advocacy will be an important part of your work.
- She may have well-grounded fears about losing custody of her children or her partner's children.
- She may fear loss of her immigration or sponsorship status.
- Lesbians and other racial groups may fear racist and discriminatory responses.

**7. Self-blame, guilt and shame are common emotional responses for women abused in their relationships.**

**8. Be aware that within the lesbian communities there may be some idealization of women and lesbian relationships.**

Consequently, there can be either a reluctance to recognize or a minimization of the seriousness of abusive relationships.

**9. Sexual assault and sexual coercion (or coercion to take part in sexual activity) are not uncommon forms of abuse.**

This is an important area to explore. It can be particularly hard for lesbians to disclose this form of abuse.

**10. It may be helpful to consult with a lesbian therapist who is knowledgeable about abuse.**

**11. Be aware of lesbian issues in any group work.**

If a lesbian is part of a group that is primarily composed of heterosexual women, it is essential that group leaders support her in the group. They must be prepared to respond by raising lesbian issues in the group. The group needs to be adequately informed that the abuse occurs across sexual preferences as well as across racial and class lines and that homophobia and heterosexism, as well as misogyny, oppresses all women.

**12. Establishing supportive social networks needs to be considered.**

Within the lesbian community, resources that can help the client may be available. Referral to a support group for lesbians who have been abused is desirable. Educate yourself about lesbianism and resources within the lesbian community that your client may use for support. Learn about the positive aspects of lesbianism and the array of services that exist as part of the lesbian culture. Have educational materials, discussions and workshops about lesbianism. Work to create an atmosphere where gay and lesbian colleagues can be comfortable and open about their orientation.

**13. Be aware of the importance of listening to how your client self-identifies so you can provide the appropriate support.**

Your client may not identify herself as lesbian, but rather may see herself as loving a particular woman. She may therefore lack some of the supports available in the lesbian community. With some women of other racial or ethnic groups, the primary identification may be racial or ethnic. Lesbian identification may not be as relevant. Disabled lesbians need even more support given the experience they often report of being oppressed and devalued by sexism, heterosexism and ableism.

# Resources

## Phone Lines

**Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Youth Line** 1-800-268-9688  
(free Ontario peer support and info.)

**Gayline** (613) 238-1717  
(National Capital peer support and info. line for gays, lesbians and bisexuals)

**Gai-Ecoute** 1-888-505-1010  
(free support line for gay, lesbian, and bisexual francophones)

## Websites

www.

[gaybluewater.com](http://gaybluewater.com)

[gaypartnerabuseproject.org](http://gaypartnerabuseproject.org)

[ncweb.com/org/rapecrisis/safersex.html](http://ncweb.com/org/rapecrisis/safersex.html)

[gayguidecanada.com](http://gayguidecanada.com) (listing of services and supports in major cities of Canada)

[web.ca/clgro](http://web.ca/clgro) Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario

[thevoice.on.ca](http://thevoice.on.ca)

[proudlife.com](http://proudlife.com) (London, Ontario)

[halolondon.ca](http://halolondon.ca)

[pridesource.com](http://pridesource.com)

## **Books**

Gender and Sexual Identify: The Journey Begins. Calgary Regional Health Assoc.

The New Loving Someone Gay. Don Clark

Free Your Mind. Ellen Bass and Kate Daufman

Is It A Choice? Eric Marcus

Abuse in Lesbian Relationships: Information and Resources. Chesley, MacAulay & Ristock.

## **Magazines**

Out

The Advocate

Ten Percent

The Voice

## **Local Resources**

<b>Youth Services</b>	383-7704 (individual support, groups, crisis counselling, education and resource centre)
<b>Young &amp; Proud</b>	383-7704 (support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning youth 14-26)
<b>PFLAG</b>	344-9236 (for parents, families & friends of GLBT youth)
<b>Bluewater Pride</b>	(810) 984-8251