Violence and abuse in women’s same-sex relationships

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Overview of my presentation

• Key terms
• Brief review of current knowledge and statistics
• Outline of my study
• Findings:
  – Types of abuse experienced
  – Experiences of help-seeking: positive and negative
  – Barriers to seeking and receiving support
• Summary of key points and implications
Key terms: domestic violence (DV)

- DV includes **physical**, **psychological**, **financial** and **sexual** abuse
- Forced marriage, female genital mutilation and honour violence are now included in the Home Office definition
- DV can also happen in **non-cohabiting** relationships
- The Home Office defines DV as acts perpetrated by **current** or **former** partners (or other family members)
- Also referred to as **domestic abuse** or **partner abuse** – in preference to more dated terms such as battering or wife-beating
Key terms: same-sex relationships

• I refer to woman-to-woman relationships or women’s same-sex relationships
• *Why not just lesbian relationships??*
• Not all women who have same-sex relationships would call themselves lesbian
• The term **LGBT** (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) is more inclusive
• But – some women would not relate to this label either
• ‘woman-to-woman’ or ‘same-sex’ describes the relationship without making assumptions about the woman’s sexuality
Prevalence of violence and abuse in women’s same-sex relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Lifetime prevalence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pink Shield Project (2002)</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>UK (Birmingham)</td>
<td>Any physical/emotional/sexual abuse: 35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henderson (2003)</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>UK (3 pride festivals)</td>
<td>Any physical/emotional/sexual abuse: 22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donovan et al. (2006)</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>UK (national)</td>
<td>Physical/emotional/sexual abuse self-defined as domestic abuse: 40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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- But – a cautionary note on the use of these statistics…and why reliable prevalence figures are very difficult to obtain…
My study: aims

• To examine the **forms, dynamics and impacts** of abuse in women’s same-sex relationships

• To analyse how belonging to a **minority sexual identity** influences experiences of abuse in a same-sex relationship, particularly regarding **help-seeking**

• To explore the **long-term impacts** of abuse and how experiences of abuse might shape **women’s identities and lives** after the relationship has ended
Methods used

• Qualitative approach
• Fieldwork conducted 2004-2005
• 40 semi-structured, in-depth interviews
• Interviews lasted on average 1½-2hrs
• Widespread recruitment methods in order to reach a sample of 40 and to try to ensure a diverse sample
• The importance of sensitive ethical considerations
Sample profile

• 37 women in England/3 in South Wales  
• Age range 21-70, with two-thirds aged 30-39yrs  
• 36 women were white; the remaining 4 identified as white Caribbean; Black British; Indian; white Asian respectively  
• 29 women had lived with their abusive partner  
• Relationships ranged from 4mths-10yrs  
• 12 women had children under 16 at the time of the relationship  
• Multiple experiences of abuse were common: 10 women reported abuse in more than one same-sex relationship, and 18 reported abuse from a previous male partner
Types of abuse (1)

- Physical
- Emotional/psychological
- Sexual
- Financial
- Homophobic
Physical abuse

• 35 women
• Commonly: pushing, slapping, punching, kicking, choking, throwing objects, destroying personal property
• Rarely: use of weapons; burns; physically restraining

• Example: Hannah
• “I woke up [having lost consciousness] and I was in the bedroom, sort of half on the bed and half off, being beaten with a mop handle to a force that broke the handle”
Emotional abuse

- 40 women
- Includes:
  - Verbal abuse: 35
  - Isolation: 26
  - Jealousy and possessiveness: 24
  - Control over appearance: 18
  - Threats to kill: 7

Example: Anna
- “We were actually made redundant, cos of the job, cos we actually worked together as well, which was another bizarre thing – she insisted I work with her. So it’s like, if she wanted to go out, I had to go out cos I always had to go out with her, and I wasn’t allowed to go out on my own”
Emotional abuse: further examples

• Control over appearance:
  • “She wanted me to grow my hair, have long hair to look more feminine. Each time I’d get my hair cut, she’d scream at me and there’d be an awful argument over that, so in the end I caved in and started to grow my hair reluctantly. This obviously made me feel very ugly and err unattractive” (Rianna).

• Jealousy and possessiveness:
  • “I wasn’t allowed to go to the toilet, and she would insist on staying out [at the pub], and this was the same for wherever we went out; I was not allowed to go to the toilet on my own. [Becky: Why was that?] In case I was having sex with women in the toilets” (Yvette).
Sexual abuse

• 33 women
• Includes:
  • Sexual coercion: 18
  • Withholding affection: 9
  • Forced sex: 4

• Example: Charlotte
  • “When we ever used to argue, she used to think that would resolve it by going to bed and I used to say, “That is the last thing that I want to do when you’ve just basically just nearly tried to strangle me”, but I used to [have sex] just to keep her quiet, so I can’t say that she ever actually forced me to, but she did force me to mentally because it was just easier for me to do it than not”
Financial abuse

30 women
• Includes:
  • Theft of cash/unauthorised use of credit cards, cheques: 8
  • Blackmail: 4
  • Unable to freely access or spend own money: 4

Example: Yvette
• “Becky: And so were you paying for like bills and food and rent?”
• Yvette: Bills, food [she later adds that she paid all of the rent too]. I had no money for anything. I mean, it would be that I would be scrabbling around for money at the end of the month; I had to ask her for money for deodorant, and soap, and sanitary towels...I found a five pound note in the street once and I was so relieved, I was crying; I actually had five pounds to myself”
Homophobic abuse

5 women

• All reported that their partners either threatened to or did disclose their sexuality to others

Example: Carol

• “But yeah, because I did actually find out eventually that she was telling people, it did have an effect on me in that I didn’t want to go out, I didn’t want to go in the places where any of them’d be…And sometimes for two or three weeks I wouldn’t go out”
Women’s experiences of help-seeking

• Two key forms of support: **formal** (e.g. police, health professionals, refuges) and **informal** (e.g. friends/family)
• Greater uptake of support and in general more positive evaluations than in other recent research (Donovan et al., 2006; Pink Shield Project, 2002; Ristock, 2002)
• Women in same-sex relationships experience both difficulties **in common** with heterosexual women, as well as **unique issues**
• Other factors may intersect with sexuality and make seeking support even more challenging e.g. age, ethnicity, physical disability, mental health difficulties
# Main sources of support used during relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>How many women?</th>
<th>Evaluations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Mainly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mainly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>More negative than positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health professionals</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Generally positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsellors</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mainly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s refuge</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No support sought</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>n/a</strong></td>
</tr>
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Positive experiences

• Receiving information, advice and support
  • Information on options; practical support from friends and family e.g. a place to stay, lifts to hospital, help moving out; medical assistance; emotional support
• Gaining alternative perspectives on the relationship
  • Others helping women to define the relationship as abusive and challenge women’s self-blame
• Receiving affirmation of one’s experiences
  • Being believed; having a professional recognise or name the partner’s behaviour as abusive; others challenging the perpetrator (in spite of the risks)
Positive experiences: what makes same-sex abuse different

- Receiving information, advice and support
- A hidden issue – lack of information; most posters, TV programmes, newspapers/magazines only focus on male-to-female abuse
- Gaining alternative perspectives on the relationship
- May not know that DV happens in same-sex relationships; lack of awareness of non-physical forms of abuse
- Receiving affirmation of one’s experiences
- Having a heightened fear of not being believed due to absence of male perpetrator; fear of being labelled as the abuser
Barriers to seeking and receiving effective support (1)

- Issues shared with heterosexual women:
  - Isolation
  - Fear of not being believed
  - Shame and self-blame
  - Not recognising the relationship to be abusive
  - Fear of the repercussions
  - Lack of confidence in responses of agencies e.g. the police
Barriers to seeking and receiving effective support (2)

• More than a quarter of the sample explicitly stated their view that being in a same-sex relationship had made it more difficult to access effective support

• 3 additional issues for women in same-sex relationships:
  • Secrecy and stigma
  • Fear or experience of discrimination
  • Misunderstandings/incorrect assumptions made about same-sex relationships and abuse
Barriers: ‘the closet’

• Closet = place of secrecy and anxiety
• Disclosing same-sex abuse may involve coming out of the closet and initially having to disclose being in a same-sex relationship
• Most participants were ‘out’ to close friends and family members – but the closet was a barrier for a few women
• Some ‘came out’ to friends during the relationship and in a few cases this led to the weakening of ending of those friendships
• A particular constraint for women in their first same-sex relationship – gives power to the abusive partner
Barriers: the fear or actual experience of discrimination

- **Homophobia**: a form of discrimination whereby LGBT people may be treated in an inferior way because of other people’s **condemnation, ridicule, or fear** of their sexuality
- Fortunately, few participants reported explicitly homophobic responses
- More commonly, **fear of negative judgement or inequality** was a barrier to approaching agencies, especially police
- Combined impact of experiencing **homophobic harassment** from other parties e.g. neighbours
Example 1: Colette

- Colette, whose neighbours called the police after her partner broke into her home:
  - “The police were dreadful; they were really, really poor, and they went and checked Sam [Colette’s son] who was, who must have been about eleven at the time, and asked if he’d been left on his own, and he said, “No, my mum’s been here”, and then they said erm, the police officer was on his phone to another one of [colleagues] saying, “There’s two girls in bed here”. That’s how he phrased it, and he was laughing”
Example 2: Simone

- Simone, reflecting on her stay in a women’s refuge:
- “I was in a refuge, and I was lying, because everyone else there was heterosexual, and I was so scared; I didn’t want it revealed that I was, I was a lesbian…[Becky: And did they find out?]…Yeah, and [fellow resident] accused me of trying to hit on her, and I was just devastated. Everybody knew then and then everybody was just bombarding me with questions and people were actually keeping away from me and people were saying you know, “It must have took you some guts to do that and you know, fair play to you”, erm so and she [partner] eventually managed to get hold of me and I went back home”
Barriers: lack of awareness and understanding of same-sex relationships and abuse

• Common assumptions:
  – that women who experience domestic violence do so from a **male perpetrator**
  – that everyone else is heterosexual, unless an alternative is explicitly stated (the **heterosexual assumption**)
  – that there are ‘male’ (butch) and ‘female’ (femme) roles in women’s same-sex relationships, and that the perpetrator is the partner who looks or behaves like ‘the man’

• These assumptions can put women’s safety at risk; prevent disclosure of abuse; increase fear of not being believed; and make women feel marginalized and alone
Example 1: Sara

- Sara, who went to A&E accompanied by her partner who had hit her over the head with a table:
- “The woman behind the desk said, “Well I take it this is an assault?”, and I said, “Yes”, and they said, “So where is the abuser now?”, and I looked at the woman, and Jenny’s [Sara’s partner] stood by the side of me, and I’m thinking, “Err…” [and the receptionist said] “Are they away from you now?”, and I’m like, “Erm, um, yes”, and she said, “Are you going to press charges?”, and I said “No”, and that was the most awkward, false, bizarre situation I’ve probably ever been in because she’s stood right beside me”
Example 2: Nina

• Nina, who was staying in a refuge after her partner tried to run her over with her car:
• “I felt safe there, I felt supported, but I just felt distinctly odd, because there were signs everywhere saying, “Don’t let men in at all” and I thought, that wouldn’t help at all! Because she’d done this thing of coming after me, coming after me, it seemed like the terminator or something, you know [so] I felt very afraid of being pursued and found. The rules there were totally geared to man-on-woman violence, erm so it felt very strange”
Example 3: Sam

- Sam, when asked why she did not tell anyone about the abuse during the relationship:
- “I just certainly wasn’t going to tell anybody about it thought, that I knew for sure. I mean I they’d have gone round to her house and seen her as tiny as she was and then me towering above her, they would think oh, that doesn’t look right”
Key points

- There are often **more similarities then differences** when comparing violence and abuse in women’s same-sex relationships and heterosexual women’s experiences.
- However, women in same-sex relationships have **specific vulnerabilities** which abusers can exploit in order to gain control and instil fear.
- Women in same-sex relationships seek support from a very different context: this may be one of **secrecy** or previous experience of **discrimination**.
- If agencies are not **seen** and **experienced** as safe, inclusive and non-judgmental, then women in same-sex relationships are unlikely to approach them for support.
Useful references


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