

WOMAN TO WOMAN SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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I wish I would have been more aware what woman to woman sexual violence was--what it looked like--so that I might have acknowledged for myself what had happened to me, that I had been violated. I felt violated but didn't have words to put to the experience or the knowledge to put words to it. (Judy)

Introduction

Woman-to-woman sexual violence is an invisible form of sexual violation because of our denial that women are sexual perpetrators and because violence among lesbians and bisexual women is hidden. But once we face that it exists--as sexual abuse and rape in battering relationships, as date and acquaintance rapes, as sexual abuse by professionals we trust, and as sexual harassment by co-workers--we must admit that our denial has sacrificed the well-being of survivors for the perpetuation of a myth.

It is impossible to document the actual prevalence of sexual violence among lesbians and bisexual women because we cannot do a scientific study of a stigmatized group. Our studies are usually convenience samples, such as women at the women's festivals or research based on participants who answered a study ad. But the studies do document the existence of a continuum of sexual violence that women are subjected to by other women. Research on battered lesbians, which has outpaced research specifically on sexual violence, has documented sexual abuse as one form of power and control (Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992; Taylor & Chandler, 1995).

Studies over the past two decades on lesbian sexual violence show a range from a low of five percent to a high of 57 percent of respondents claiming they had experienced attempted or completed sexual assault or rape by another woman, with most studies finding rates of over 30 percent (Brand & Kidd, 1986; Duncan, 1990; Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montagne & Reyes, 1991; Loulan, 1988; Renzetti, 1992; Sloan & Edmond, 1996; Waldner-Haugrud & Gratch, 1997; Waterman, Dawson & Bologna, 1989).

A study on 70 survivors of sexual violence by Girshick (2002) showed how serious the denial is. Lesbians were caught off-guard by sexual assault at the hands of another woman. Nora's comment is typical: *I have a hard time acknowledging that women can be violent and that a woman can rape another woman. In*

talking about her volunteer training at a domestic violence agency, Cecile said, *Obviously I was in some denial myself, but I think that their analysis of battering not only didn't include lesbian battering but made lesbian battering pretty much impossible.*

That same-sex abuse between women exists does not mean we have to throw out our feminist analysis about rape and battering. However, using a framework where male privilege is just one aspect of the broader hierarchical power-over model is more useful. This model allows us to be more inclusive of the interrelated issues of race, class, age, and ability, as well as sex, in terms of power and control dynamics and abuse.

Denial in the broader society that women might be sexual perpetrators or batterers is not the only problem. Denial in lesbian communities has also hindered acknowledgment of the issue. For some, admitting this abuse shatters the dream of lesbian utopia that our relationships are mutual, egalitarian, and nonviolent. For others, the motivation is self-protective. They fear how this information might be used against us as an already stigmatized population. An additional factor is the insular nature of our community and subcommunities. Who will hold the abuser accountable? She might be an advocate in an anti-violence agency or a leader in the community.

Unique Problems

While there are many similarities among all survivors of sexual violence, for women whose perpetrators are other women, there are some unique differences. First, the context of homophobia presents many problems. We may not be out and therefore might not feel comfortable telling anyone else what has happened to us. We might not be able to turn to family members who have disowned us because of being lesbian or bisexual. Daily we live with the negative messages that to be lesbian is perverted, twisted, and sick. We cannot marry, adopt our partner's children, or serve openly in the military. Homophobia affects our mental health and is a factor in the high rates of drinking and drug use in our communities. Internalized homophobia is a problem for all of us, including a possible reason why some lesbians abuse others. Furthermore, the homophobia of agency providers and funders means there are few targeted programs for us, especially in rape crisis and domestic violence programs. Where are we to turn?

Heterosexism, the belief that heterosexuality is normal, natural and right, and any other sexuality is wrong and unnatural, is found throughout our society. It is particularly a problem for lesbians in the legal arena. The law presumes heterosexuality, and assumes a female victim and a male perpetrator. So, for example, nine states specifically exclude lesbians from domestic violence statutes by either applying only to male-female relationships or presently or formerly married partners. Ambiguous language in many restraining order statutes seems to invite same-sex application but until cases go through the appellate courts, there is no guarantee of access to legal protection.

Program Needs

Most rape crisis and domestic violence agencies do not have specific programs for lesbians and bisexual women, such as targeted support groups, hotlines, literature or out lesbian staff and counselors. Yet this is what lesbians say they want and feel safest with. Nora recounts a common experience: *After I left [my relationship], I went to a domestic violence agency out of town. I wanted to join a support group, but was told that the other group members might feel uncomfortable with the lesbian relationship. I wish the domestic violence agency was more aware/responsive.* For lesbians in a mixed group the need to change "she" to "he" due to homophobia is a revictimization. Other women, such as Christy, wished for a gay and lesbian violence hotline. *The DV hotline I called said they trained all their volunteers in same-sex DV but obviously the one I got didn't get it.* And Cecile mentioned, *I wish there had been more education and outreach so I could have identified my situation and gotten support sooner.* Lesbian survivors of sexual violence by other women, whether in or out of battering relationships, have few places to go. They have great difficulty identifying their sexual assaults because there is so little validation in literature, agency training and agency programming that these assaults occur. If we want to serve these women, this will have to change.

Outreach Recommendations

Lesbians have not sought services at mainstream agencies because we are not sure the services are available to us or are appropriate for us. But agencies can help change that. If an agency commits to reaching out to lesbians, to training staff, and to creating targeted programming, lesbians and bisexual women will seek services. Lesbian survivors of sexual violence suggest the following: agencies need to use the words lesbian and bisexual in their mission statement, literature, community education and in outreach; media ads should depict female couples; and ads should be placed in local gay/lesbian media, at gay/lesbian-owned businesses, and at women's events. The best outreach word to use is probably "sexual assault" (rather than "rape") but a listing of sexually abusive behaviors might reach the most survivors.

Conclusion

Lesbians are beginning to speak out about their sexual violence at the hands of other women. There is no more denying that this occurs. Second wave feminists struggled to provide services for women in need and to produce an analysis about this violence. Woman-to-woman sexual violence presents a challenge to those efforts, but one that must be met. Stopping sexual violence has always meant confronting issues of hierarchy, privilege, power and control in society and that is just as true today. Let's stop sacrificing our sisters in order to hold on to myths of women's nonviolence. This must be foremost on our agenda.

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