

Domestic Violence: Not Just a Straight Problem

Stephanie Lind

Gays and lesbians are not untouched by domestic violence. Although there are few reliable statistics on its prevalence, those who work in the field of domestic violence and gay and lesbian rights suggest that battering in same-sex relationships occurs at about the same rate it does in heterosexual relationships: thirty to forty percent. David Island and Patrick Letellier, authors of *Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them*, estimate that 500,000 gay men are victims of domestic violence each year. For these men and for lesbians, battering is just as lethal as it is for their heterosexual counterparts.

Power is a significant factor in abusive relationships. One of the individuals in a same-sex couple is attempting to gain power and control over the other in a variety of ways, including physical abuse, property destruction, sexual abuse, isolation, financial abuse and emotional abuse. One survivor wrote, "She accuses you of sleeping with other women (and your male friends). You are expected to account for all your time away from her. She is jealous of your friendships and your family. You feel set up to choose between her and your friends, her and


your children, her and your work. You gradually isolate yourself from the world to try to make her feel more secure and more loved—and to avoid another fight" (Donna J. Cecere, "The Second Closet", in *Naming the Violence*, ed. by Kerry Lobel). It is a myth that battered gays and lesbians are in a mutually abusive situation.

For a long time, battering has been a secret. Battered gays and lesbians are not only isolated within their relationships, by their partner. Homophobia in the larger society further increases the isolation of the victim. When her friends are her partner's friends, when there is only one gay bar to go to in all of Vermont, when her partner threatens to "out" her to employers or family—the feeling of being trapped looms larger and larger.

In heterosexual relationships the male partner has permission from our sexist society to batter his female partner. For lesbians sexism operates in a similar manner. This society gives us all permission to beat women. We also have permission to commit acts of violence against gays and lesbians. This fact can enter into our personal relationships.

"I think that once hitting starts, a barrier is broken that afterwards is too easily crossed. What was once unthinkable behavior is no longer. Once hitting starts, it's like taking something precious and valuable and smashing it on the ground, and seeing it lying there broken and knowing it can never be repaired" (Lisa, quoted in *Naming the Violence*).

Thankfully with the successful passage of the gay rights bill, gay men and lesbians are now protected in domestic violence cases. Through Family Court the battered individual can receive a Temporary Relief from Abuse order, which has the potential to legally provide for their safety. Violence against gays and lesbians and violence against women as a group has not been acknowledged as a violation of our human rights. November 25th will mark the first day of a concentrated "Sixteen Days of Activism" against domestic violence and violence against women in particular. Join women and men around the world in the struggle to recognize our right to safety in our homes as a basic human right. End the violence now. ▼



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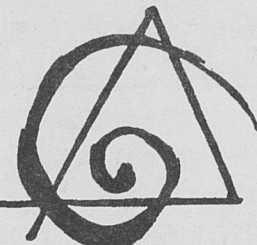
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