

Domestic Violence in Same Sex Relationships

BY CELIA CUDDY

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are safe from hooking up with that kind of person. We know better.

I am a formerly battered lesbian. When I met the woman who would become my abuser, no red flags came up for me: she and I met at a training for volunteers at a battered women's shelter in Massachusetts. She identified as a feminist, was soft-spoken, and politically active. During the eight months we were together, she became emotionally, psychologically, and finally, physically abusive. Even as I worked the hotline at the shelter, I resisted recognizing what was going on in my own life. To admit that, to put that label on myself — battered woman — would feel humiliating and disempowering. And isolating, for at the shelter I worked in, we really didn't talk about battered lesbians (or if we did, we called it mutual abuse, because women would be of equal strengths and certainly not really dangerous to each other). Three friends, at different times, told me they were concerned about me, and that I deserved to be treated better. I responded with anger: how dare they think that I, enlightened and strong feminist, was being abused? Most of my friends just seemed to think this was a "bad" relationship, but at least I was finally kissing girls (she was the first woman I ever dated). It took me a long time to understand what was going on for me. It took me longer to finally escape her harassment and stalking.

When I tell my story, often times another woman or man will later confide to me their own experience with abuse. Generally, these stories are framed by sadness, anger, or confusion at the lack of response in the community — our community — to battering in same sex relationships. As in my own situation, it seems that often abusive relationships are perceived as just bad relationships, where maybe the partners just need some couple's counseling. Maybe we don't really believe that the relationships we've fought so hard for — their celebration, their recognition — could sometimes be dangerous for one of the

partners (we've had so many experiences with danger coming at us from outside our community). Maybe we think our community is so fragile, that any of this talk will be divisive and hurtful. Maybe we're afraid that if we talk about this, gay-bashers will use our stories as proof of how sick and dangerous we are. Maybe, like me, our pride can limit our vision: my excitement and hopes in entering a community of womyn-loving-womyn didn't leave a lot of space for the possibility of women who are beaten by women. But pride can also mean the pride in ourselves to know we have the right to be treated well, and to be safe in our relationships.

In Vermont, there are some resources available for victims and survivors of violence in same sex relationships. Men's Health Project and Women Helping Battered Women, both in Burlington, offer hotline numbers and individual counseling meetings (see OITM's resource list). During the past year, a collection of survivors, community members, allies, and workers have been meeting to develop resources and services for survivors. This group — The Same Domestic Violence Subcommittee of the Chittenden County Domestic Violence Task Force — has organized a community forum to discuss this issue, provide information, and continue working to develop responses to battering in GLBT relationships. This forum is open to all people who support safety, self-determination, and dignity in same sex partnerships.

Safety and Dignity in Our Relationships: Creating Responses to Domestic Violence in the GLBT Community, Thursday, November 6, 1997, 6 p.m. - 9 p.m., Contois Auditorium, Burlington. For more information on the forum, contact Men's Health Project at (800) 649-2437 or Women Helping Battered Women at (802) 658-3131. For more information about the work of the Same Sex Domestic Violence Subcommittee, contact us c/o Chittenden County Domestic Violence Task Force, 31 Elmwood Avenue, Burlington, VT 05401.

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