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2002

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Carolyn M West, *University of Washington*



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# Lesbian Intimate Partner Violence: Prevalence and Dynamics

Carolyn M. West

**SUMMARY.** Researchers have been investigating partner violence for more than 20 years, yet there is a discernible absence of research on interpersonal violence among lesbian couples. Three aspects of lesbian battering are reviewed here. First, the incidence rates and distinct forms that lesbian battering might assume are discussed. Next, the dynamics and correlates of lesbian abuse are highlighted. The concluding section focuses on suggestions for intervention. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Lesbian partner violence, battering, domestic violence, same-sex domestic violence, intimate partner violence, interventions

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Carolyn M. West, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Psychology in the Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences Program at the University of Washington, Tacoma. Her current research focuses on ethnic minority partner violence and the long-term consequences of child sexual abuse.

Address correspondence to: Carolyn M. West, PhD, Assistant Professor of Psychology, University of Washington, Tacoma, Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences, Box 358436, 1900 Commerce Street, Tacoma, WA 98402-3100 ([www.drCarolynWest.com](http://www.drCarolynWest.com)).

[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "Lesbian Intimate Partner Violence: Prevalence and Dynamics." West, Carolyn M. Co-published simultaneously in *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 6, No. 1, 2002, pp. 121-127; and: *Lesbian Love and Relationships* (ed: Suzanna M. Rose) Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2002, pp. 121-127. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service [1-800-HAWORTH, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: [getinfo@haworthpressinc.com](mailto:getinfo@haworthpressinc.com)].

Although researchers have discovered substantial rates of intimate partner violence among both heterosexual and same-sex couples, violence in lesbian relationships is understudied. This oversight has been attributed to discrimination, most notably homophobia, the irrational fear and hatred of lesbians, and heterosexism, or the belief that heterosexuality is normative. Partially due to these forms of discrimination, investigators have developed theories that conceptualize violence as involving male perpetrators and female victims, which contributes to the invisibility of lesbian battering. Moreover, the fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes has led some community members, activists, and victims to deny the extent of violence among lesbians (Renzetti & Miley, 1996). Despite the silence around this topic, literature reviews (Burke & Follingstad, 1999; West, 1998), empirical studies (e.g., Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montagne, & Reyes, 1991; Lockhart, White, Causby, & Isaac, 1994), interviews, clinical observations, and personal stories (Leventhal & Lundy, 1999; Renzetti & Miley, 1996) indicate that interpersonal violence is an alarmingly frequent occurrence among lesbians. Three aspects of lesbian battering are reviewed here. First, the incidence rates and distinct forms that lesbian battering might assume are discussed. Next, the dynamics and correlates of lesbian abuse are highlighted. The concluding section focuses on suggestions for intervention.

#### RATES OF VICTIMIZATION

It is difficult to obtain accurate estimates of partner violence in lesbian relationships. Researchers have relied on small, self-selected, nonrandom samples, which were often recruited from one geographical location, such as San Francisco, or participants who were contacted through lesbian social and friendship networks. Consequently, White, middle-class, educated lesbians who were open about their sexual orientation were overrepresented in most studies. To date, little is known about other members of the lesbian community, including adolescents, women of color, and bisexual women (Leventhal & Lundy, 1999).

In addition, the literature has been plagued by methodological problems. For example, researchers have used differing time frames (violence in a current relationship vs. any instance of relationship violence). Instruments to measure violence also have differed across studies. Some investigators have used subjective measures of violence, for instance, items such as, "If you are currently in a lesbian relationship, is it abusive?" In contrast, other researchers have used standardized measures, such as the Conflict Tactics Scale. In addition, many researchers have measured the occurrence of violence without de-

termining if the surveyed participant was a victim or aggressor. These limitations make it difficult to interpret findings and to compare rates of violence across studies (for a review of methodological limitations see Burke & Follingstad, 1999).

Despite these research limitations, it is clear that lesbian battering is a serious social concern. The reported rates of physical violence within lesbian relationships vary widely, with estimates ranging from a low of 8.5% to a high of 73% in former lesbian relationships. Most studies found that between 30-40% of surveyed participants had been involved in at least one relationship with a female partner where an incident of physical abuse occurred. Pushing, shoving, and slapping were the most commonly reported forms of abuse, while beatings and assaults with weapons were less frequent. Sexual violence also may be present in lesbian relationships, with estimates ranging from a low of 7% to a high of 55% in previous lesbian relationships. Victims experienced a broad range of types of abuse, including forced kissing, breast and genital fondling, and oral, anal, or vaginal penetration. Victimization rates increased dramatically when psychological and verbal abuse was assessed, with more than 80% of surveyed participants reporting this form of abuse. Common forms included threats and verbal abuse, such as being called names, yelled at, and insulted (for reviews see Burke & Follingstad, 1999; Waldner-Haugrud, 1999; West, 1998).

The rates and types of abuse experienced by battered lesbians are comparable to those reported by their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, the pattern of abuse is similar across sexual orientation. More specifically, the limited research suggests that lesbian battering tends to increase in severity and frequency over the course of the abusive relationship (Renzetti, 1998).

However, there are several important differences between violence in lesbian and heterosexual relationships. A lesbian batterer can use homophobic control as a method of psychological abuse, which further isolates the victim. For example, an abuser may "out" her partner without permission by revealing her sexual orientation to others, including relatives, employers, and landlords, and in child custody cases. This form of abuse could result in a variety of negative consequences for the victim, such as being shunned by family members and the loss of children, a job and housing (Renzetti, 1998).

Another significant difference is that lesbians must contend with additional myths surrounding their partner violence. The role of the victim or aggressor cannot be determined based on gender in same-sex relationships. Consequently, researchers and members of law enforcement may falsely believe that violence is enacted by the partner who is more "masculine" in appearance or demeanor, while the victim possesses more "feminine" characteristics. The research dispels this myth. Lesbians do not generally mimic heterosexual roles,

and lesbian batterers are not consistently more masculine than their victims in terms of physical size, appearance, or mannerism (Renzetti, 1998).

Lesbian victims also must contend with the myth of mutual battering. Lesbian battering is seldom reciprocal violence; rather, it involves a primary aggressor and victim. Like their heterosexual counterparts, a lesbian victim may be quiet, withdrawn, and embarrassed, particularly if she has defended herself or fought back. Although she may blame herself, further questioning reveals that what appears to be "mutual abuse" is actually the victim's efforts to secure her personal safety, as opposed to hurting her partner. In addition, she may express concern for her partner's well-being and often continue to assume responsibility for the violence long after the relationship has ended. In contrast, batterers often loudly assert their victimization status, while simultaneously displaying controlling and intrusive behavior. They rarely express shame or even remorse. Although they may perceive themselves as partially accountable for the relationship violence, they seldom accept full responsibility. Instead, they blame the victim for provoking the violence (Leventhal & Lundy, 1999; Renzetti & Miley, 1996).

#### DYNAMICS OF LESBIAN BATTERING

Researchers have investigated various dynamics and correlates of same-sex partner violence. Some investigators have focused on risk factors that are unique to lesbians. For example, researchers argue that societal discrimination fosters homophobia, which becomes internalized when lesbians accept society's negative evaluations of them and incorporates these beliefs into their self-concept. This in turn may contribute to low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, denial of group membership, and difficulty establishing committed, trusting relationships. These negative feelings are then acted out in the form of lesbian battering. Although plausible, this theory awaits further empirical investigation. Other researchers have investigated the association between the intergenerational transmission of abuse, for example, witnessing or experiencing violence in the family of origin, and substance abuse, relationship dependency, and power imbalances. Although all these factors can be related to abuse across sexual orientation, there are some important differences for lesbian couples (Burke & Follingstad, 1999; Renzetti, 1998; West, 1998), which will be discussed below.

Regardless of sexual orientation, there is a complex association between intergenerational transmission of violence and adult involvement in intimate partner abuse. The difference is that lesbians may be at increased risk for verbal and physical abuse by family members when they reveal their sexual orientation (Leventhal & Lundy, 1999). Although some researchers failed to link

lesbian battering to violence in the family of origin, other investigators found an association between victimization and/or perpetration of violence in a current or past lesbian relationship and a history of child abuse or witnessing parental aggression (Lie et al., 1991).

The association between substance abuse and partner violence is also complicated. Alcohol use can facilitate and legitimate intimate violence; however, the general consensus among family violence researchers is that alcohol consumption does not cause the abuse. This is true for lesbian relationships as well. In fact, some researchers found no association between lesbian battering and alcohol/substance abuse (Renzetti, 1998; West, 1998). However, the centrality of bars in the social lives of some lesbians, coupled with societal discrimination that fosters alienation and isolation, may contribute to both heavy drinking and partner violence. Not surprisingly, other researchers discovered that the frequency of alcohol use by respondents was correlated with the number of abusive acts that were both perpetrated and sustained in lesbian relationships (Schilit, Lie, & Montagne, 1990).

The path between substance abuse and lesbian battering appears to be mediated by relationship dependency. Researchers speculate that lesbians who feel dependent may use alcohol to feel more assertive and powerful. When inhibitions become loosened, the aggressor may then resort to relationship violence. Equally as important, a correlation was found between a batterer's dependency on her partner and the frequency and severity of abuse inflicted. Alternatively stated, the greater the batterer's dependency and the greater the victim's desire to be independent, the more likely the batterer is to enact more types of aggression with greater frequency (Renzetti, 1998).

Similar dynamics also may exist in violent heterosexual relationships. The difference, however, is that women are socialized to define themselves in relation to significant others and to place a high value on intimacy. Thus, when two women are romantically involved, it may be even more difficult for them to establish a sense of independence and autonomy in their relationship. In addition, the lack of social validation and support may lead lesbians to establish a greater attachment to their partners. Although this sense of intimacy may act as a buffer against discrimination, it also may create a sense of "fusion" or "merging," which can make it difficult for each partner to have a sense of independence and separate identity in the relationship. As a result, having a different opinion or initiating social activities without the partner might be perceived as rejection, which in turn leads to conflict and possibly physical violence (Renzetti, 1998). Empirical studies support this contention. Lockhart and associates (1994) discovered that lesbians who reported severe levels of physical abuse perceived that their partners had a high need for social fusion, as measured by such beliefs as couples need to do everything together. Severely vic-

timized respondents also reported more conflict around issues of independence and autonomy, such as a partner's emotional and financial dependency, a partner socializing without the respondent, and a respondent's intimate involvement with other people.

Conflicts around dependency and autonomy may be exacerbated by power imbalances in the relationship. Although the link between power imbalances and battering is less clear among same-sex couples, it is worthy of consideration. Social class and intellectual differences between lesbian partners have been associated with batterers hitting, choking, and pushing their partners. In addition, lesbian battering has been associated with an imbalance in the division of household labor, such as cooking and managing finances (Burke & Follingstad, 1999; Lockhart et al., 1994).

In conclusion, the research on dynamics and correlates of lesbian battering is limited and often contradictory. Internalized homophobia may be a significant contributor. However, it appears that prior exposure to violence, alcohol use, relationship dependency, and power imbalances can contribute to partner violence across sexual orientation. Nevertheless, it is important to consider how these dynamics differ in violent lesbian relationships.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERVENTION

Based on a review of the literature (Leventhal & Lundy, 1999; West, 1998), the following recommendations are made:

1. Identifying the problem is the first step to motivating the lesbian community and service providers to recognize and confront same-sex battering. This entails such actions as broadening the language in partner violence laws to ensure that victims are equally protected regardless of sexual orientation. Defining the problem also involves conducting more empirical research on the prevalence and incidence of same-sex partner violence, characteristics of the violence, and dynamics.
2. Extensive training is needed for service providers in law enforcement, social service agencies, and the medical and mental health professions. Professionals need to address homophobia and discrimination against lesbians in their agencies and to develop written and spoken language that is inclusive of same-sex relationships. This will enable victims to feel more comfortable revealing their sexual orientation and their abuse.
3. Massive intervention efforts should be directed toward the lesbian community. These intervention strategies could include newspaper advertisements, telephone books that specifically list services for same-sex partner violence, and flyers posted at parades and conferences that attract

large gatherings of lesbians. A special effort should be made to reach lesbians of color and adolescents. Services based in the lesbian community, such as shelters and advocacy, need to be expanded and made available outside the few large urban areas in which they currently exist.

4. Finally, factors that contribute to same-sex partner violence must be addressed within the lesbian community and by help providers, including denial of the problem of abuse among lesbians, internalized homophobia, prior exposure to violence, and substance abuse.

### CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that intimate partner violence occurs among lesbians. Evidence indicates that it may be as prevalent as among heterosexuals and that a full range of types of violence occurs, including verbal, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. Some of the dynamics associated with such violence appears to be unique to lesbians due to the social stigma and discrimination they experience. In addition, resources to help lesbian victims are lacking. However, research uncovering the extent of the problem has begun to suggest what interventions might be effective.

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