

DIFFERENT TAKES



Intimate Partner Abuse: Sexuality, Gender Identity, Feminism and Growth

by Ellen B. Gattozzi

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Editors' Note: The understanding of intimate partner abuse has deepened over the past few decades through feminist activism in the legal, academic, funding and social arenas. Author Ellen B. Gattozzi argues, however, that the response to violence in the intimate lives of all people — regardless of gender identity — still has a ways to go. Gattozzi writes that any response to intimate partner violence must evaluate the effect of police action and must be rooted in the specific needs of different individuals and communities.

— Co-editors Elizabeth Barajas-Román & Betsy Hartmann

White heterosexual women's experiences with abuse have shaped the response to and analysis of intimate partner abuse for years. Examining this issue solely from this demographic viewpoint, however, has serious policy consequences and raises questions for advocates and activists. This mainstream feminist approach to understanding intimate partner abuse minimizes important differences in relationships among people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ), genderqueer and intersex and threatens individual safety. Identifying and effectively addressing abuse in all communities calls for growth within the feminist analysis of abuse, a major shift in the language of abuse, additional research to delve into differences among relationships in every demographic, and responses that adequately address all experiences and complex identities.

The Language of Abuse

Intimate partner abuse is also referred to as domestic violence, domestic abuse and intimate partner violence. In order to understand the large-scale impact of abuse, it is necessary to understand abuse as a pattern of events rather than acts of violence occurring as isolated incidents. The U.S. Department of Justice incorporates this understanding in its definition of domestic violence: "a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner."¹

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Often, the pattern can be viewed as a spiral of abuse where abusive actions occur one after another, build and worsen over time. The result is an escalation in violence and abuse that is fueled by previous incidents.² Intimate partner abuse can take on various forms, including, but not limited to physical, sexual and emotional violence.

Naming abuse is necessary to ensure safety. The term “domestic violence” limits those who relate to the word “domestic” in its nuclear family-based form, consisting of a husband, wife and children. Marriage is also often presumed within the definition of domestic.

The word domestic does not describe the realities of people who are unable to legally marry their partners, do not want to be married, and/or do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes and gender roles. These limitations are legally supported by the U.S. government through legislation such as the Defense of Marriage Act signed by President William J. Clinton in 1994 and supported by President George W. Bush and President Barak H. Obama.³ The office of Violence Against Women, part of the Department of Justice, also refers to “domestic violence” and limits access based on the office’s focus on violence against women, rather than people of all genders. Access is further limited by funding granted from the Department of Justice (and other funding streams) that can only be used in certain ways to serve specific populations.

However, change is beginning to happen. Same-sex marriage is now legal in four states. The Department of Justice’s website explicitly includes same-sex partners in information about domestic violence and the Center for Disease Control uses the term Intimate Partner Violence.⁴ These steps help broaden the field and make critical, possibly life-saving information accessible to a much wider population.

Feminism and the Value of Difference

More than just wordplay is needed to address differences in experiences and complex identities. Shifting language must be accompanied by responses that encompass the differences in the lives of the LGBTQ community. The National Resource on Domestic Violence (NRC DV) holds the safety of all domestic violence survivors depends on recognizing, understanding and planning around difference.⁵ Responses built by and for communities are necessary to address abuse safely and effectively.

Race, citizenship status, gender, social class differences and differences in spoken language are neglected in order to maintain the analysis of abuse that seats the roots of abuse in patriarchy and sexism. Addressing abuse in same-sex or queer relationships calls for a new analysis of abuse that is not rooted in patriarchy, gender stereotypes or gender roles.^{6,7} A new analysis must be able to co-exist with an analysis of abuse that also accounts for men’s violence against women to continue ensuring the safety of heterosexual women already supported. Each analysis must make room for the other.

Emi Koyama cites working with difference as being “disloyal” to feminism as it breaks down the feminist foundation of sameness and similarity in women’s experiences and the egalitarian nature of women only spaces or relationships—a step that is necessary to expand and grow the feminist movement.^{8,9} Feminism must broaden its scope and analysis of abuse to be accountable to LGBTQ communities and individuals.

Identity-Related Response

Women-only shelters are often used within the feminist movement to provide survivors of abuse with temporary safe spaces, materials and advocacy services. These shelters rely on perceived gender identity and gender stereotypes to grant access to their services, threatening the safety of survivors who are trans, men and those who do not fit within traditional gender stereotypes. This is further complicated when both the victim and perpetrator are of the same sex or gender. Additionally, the mainstream anti-domestic violence movement relies on the collaboration of multiple systems of oppression including the criminal justice system, the medical system, the economic system and militarism. Many shelters operate with government funding or other funding sources that stipulate how money can be spent, and who shelters can serve. Re-establishing and reorganizing the responses to intimate partner abuse offer the opportunity to examine how these greater systems are connected and impact each other. The need for community organizing and community-based organizations is also heightened during this time of economic crisis. It is a bold step for the anti-violence movement, specifically the movement against domestic violence, to recognize that the continued reliance on systems that re-criminalize individuals, such as the criminal justice system, while effective for some, has harmed rather than protected many.

Often, law enforcement re-criminalizes and further threatens the safety of survivors and those experiencing abuse who identify as LGBTQ. Mandatory arrest has been used as an attempt to ensure the decreased threat of intimate partner violence. However, when both parties involved are of the same sex or gender often both are arrested because neither falls into the expected survivor or perpetrator roles.¹⁰ Transgender individuals also face the threat of re-victimization by law enforcement. In 2000 police perpetrated 48% of anti-trans violence in San Francisco.¹¹ Re-criminalization is exacerbated by institutionalized targeted violence and policing of people of color.

The lived experiences of internalized and societal homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and the norm of heterosexuality are crucial barriers to merely discussing abuse and accessing services for LGBTQ people. LGBTQ survivors often fear being met with homophobia and anti-gay and trans bias upon disclosing partner abuse and therefore will not seek services.¹² The need for community protection also acts as a barrier to addressing abuse and seeking services. This manifests in two ways: 1) in the protection of one's community by not exposing negative behavior and perpetuating homophobia;¹³ 2) in the silencing of abuse in order to protect friendship bonds and to prevent the threat of further isolation and the exclusion from a known and supportive community.¹⁴

Organizations in Action

A number of programs exist that specifically address intimate partner abuse in LGBTQ communities. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs conducts much needed research and advocacy for various forms of violence including intimate partner abuse specifically for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and HIV-affected communities.¹⁵ The Audre Lorde Project, a community organizing center for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Trans and Gender Non-Conforming People of Color, organizes Safe OUTside the System, the SOS Collective, a community-based anti-violence program. While not specifically focused on intimate partner abuse, the program emphasizes community accountability, violence prevention and intervention without police.^{16, 17} The Asian Women's Center in San Francisco features a program for queer women, Queer Asian Women's Services. They released a community survey and report highlighting community needs and suggestions for safety and accessibility of services and service providers.^{18, 19} The Network/La Red and the Gay

“ LGBTQ survivors often fear being met with homophobia and anti-gay and trans bias upon disclosing partner abuse and therefore will not seek services. ”

Men's Domestic Violence Project both exemplify organizations structured to provide services for and by the community.^{20, 21}

Call for Action

These realities underline the need for change within the movement against intimate partner abuse and for a cultural shift in the perceptions of abuse and the implications of community organizing. It is critical to examine the impact of these systems on LGBTQ individuals in order to address abuse in ways that are safe and effective for survivors. We are left with the question of the best way to respond to intimate partner abuse while taking into account multiple forces of oppression and the desires of individuals. It may be that we must let go of the idea that one response model exists for all individuals and every community.

Theories of and responses to abuse must encompass, acknowledge and legitimize the range of human experiences. Without this, the so-called solution will only re-victimize and support systemic oppression. Response models created for and by our own communities can directly address the needs we prioritize in a capacity that fits our lives, protects individuals and supports our communities. As shelters have become institutionalized and have continued to be gender-exclusive and reliant upon oppressive social systems for a range of things including funding, the need for community-structured responses has become even clearer. Responses must honor the needs and desires of survivors and emphasize safety in a way that resonates with this. It is important to develop new community responses to violence and abuse and also find ways to broaden the feminist analysis so that it is accountable to LGBTQ communities and individuals.

About the Author

Ellen Gattozzi is the Program Assistant at the Civil Liberties and Public Policy (CLPP) program and was the 2008-2009 CLPP Alumni Fellow. She graduated from Hampshire College in 2008 with a concentration in public, reproductive and sexual health. Her thesis focused on intimate partner abuse in queer contexts. Ellen worked as a Reproductive Rights Activist Service Corps intern at the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center in South Dakota and also interned with Tapestry Health in Amherst, Mass.

Notes

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