

# POLICY AND PRACTICE BRIEFING # 4

## SAFEGUARDING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS AFFECTED BY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**NONE**  
*in*  
**3**

**Preventing Domestic Violence**

**Hazel Da Breo**

**Adele D Jones**

**Ena Trotman Jemmott**



*University of*  
**HUDDERSFIELD**  
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### Safeguarding the Rights of Women in Same-Sex Relationships affected by Domestic Violence

This Policy and Practice Briefing is drawn from qualitative research carried out as part of the None in Three Project, an EU-funded initiative for the prevention of domestic violence in the Caribbean ([www.noneinthree.org](http://www.noneinthree.org)). Overall 109 participants (49 women and 60 men) from Grenada and Barbados participated in the research, which was carried out between April and July 2016. (Full report available here - <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/30898/>). The focus of Policy and Practice Briefing No 4 is on safeguarding the rights of women in same-sex relationships who are affected by Domestic Violence. A total of five such briefings are available as follows:

- No 1 – Safeguarding the Rights of Pregnant Women affected by Domestic violence.
- No 2 - Safeguarding the Rights of Disabled Women affected by Domestic Violence
- No 3 -Safeguarding the Rights of Women living with HIV affected by Domestic Violence
- No 4 -Safeguarding the Rights of Women in Same-sex Relationships affected by Domestic Violence
- No 5- Engaging Men and Youth in Tackling Domestic Violence.

#### Overarching Themes from the Research

There is a high degree of intentionality that lies behind much abuse. Domestic violence is rarely a one-off incident of aggression which happens as a consequence of loss of control and for the women in this study was more likely to reflect a continuum of violence and abuse.

From the evidence provided by women, perpetrators often plan how best to inflict harm; they make choices that suggest the acts of coercion, control and violence they inflict are intended and targeted. Where violence was regarded as being a consequence of the loss of control, this was primarily because of the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Violent behaviour (physical, sexual and emotional) as a feature of interpersonal relations can become embedded within family and community life and in this, women as well as men are implicated in that this becomes the primary means by which children learn to emulate adversarial rather than non-violent conflict resolution skills.

There are clear links between early abuse in childhood (especially child sexual abuse) and domestic violence in adulthood – for many of the women in our research, these experiences simply could not be disentangled.

The influence of gender inequality, gendered identities and gendered role expectations is geared towards promoting patriarchal values and seems unremitting in protecting male privilege and sense of entitlement and in creating the social and cultural conditions in which domestic violence flourishes.

Men and youth are impacted by violence too (though to a lesser extent) but they have no avenues to access support. Male victims of abuse by women are treated in a derisory manner by peers and professionals since they are expected to be in control. Furthermore, there are few social spaces available for men to challenge cultural expectations and pressure to behave in dominant ways.

## KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Homosexuality in Grenada and Barbados is still unlawful and widely considered unacceptable
- Vulnerabilities do apply to this demographic, but women in same-sex relationships (lesbian) were not exposed to the type of battering described by their counterparts whose intimate partners are male
- Women in same-sex relationships suggested they were generally able to live with relatively more ease in Grenada and Barbados than the literature describes in the treatment of lesbians in other parts of the Caribbean
- With reference to Grenada, while the country is not known for a high number of anti-gay attacks, there were reports of homophobic discrimination in employment, housing and healthcare as well as verbal and physical assaults
- Women in same-sex relationships in Barbados and Grenada are not typically trapped in abusive homes due to economic dependency. Of the 14 women interviewed in this research, most had an average income
- By and large, they are not trapped in the relationship because of children they feel obliged to support. (Few in this research made the choice to have children)
- However, state-sanctioned emotional abuse in the form of discrimination, inequalities in the laws of protection, being rejected by church, community and family, and the risk of stranger violence, impacted them in significant ways and reduced their opportunities to access support when facing intimate partner violence
- Whilst there was little evidence of active or aggressive discrimination from police in the case of domestic violence, there was evidence of ridicule and shaming. This 'laughing off the situation', is an example of the subtle yet insidious ways in which violence against women is sustained. When victims of violence cannot trust the compassionate intervention of the state (police, law, court system), and cannot trust the impartial support of religion, and cannot trust the elders in their own families or communities, then a collective and insidious hopelessness or value-lessness sets in.
- The women in same-sex relationships in this study had fewer places to turn to for help than other women as they were often shunned by family, community and church
- Civil society organisations therefore have a crucial role in providing support to this demographic
- Regarding women as perpetrators of violence, our findings suggest that women are possibly as affected as men by socialization processes in which violence is common. They are likely to be impacted not only in learning how to be victims, but also in learning how to be perpetrators of violence (particularly to children) and as the bearers, together with males, from one generation to another of values and behaviours that promote adversarial relations. In this research there were some reports of physical and psychological violence amongst women in same-sex relationships.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The exclusion of people in same-sex relationships from domestic violence legislation, though discriminatory of itself in respect of individuals, sends a message at the macro level that violence against lesbians (and gay men for that matter) is not a matter to be taken seriously. This fuels homophobic attacks and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation
- Governments must ensure not only that all people are treated equally under the law but that the law is actually designed to protect all people from intimate partner violence equally
- Organisations that provide services for battered women should consider reaching out to the lesbian and transgender community to explore ways of working collaboratively to ensure a more inclusive approach
- The lack of equal rights for lesbians (and for gay men too) is reflected in the fact that domestic violence legislation in the region does not recognise their relationships and therefore does not apply to intimate partner violence that exists within them (although general laws on violence *do* still apply)
- Mainstream education in both primary and secondary schools needs to include a gender responsive curriculum, inclusive of age appropriate, comprehensive sexuality education.
- All training programmes focused on domestic violence should comprise a segment on working with the LGBT community. This is particularly urgent for police, medical respondents, and legal personnel
- In regards to data collection (this being an under-reporting group), data needs to be routinely collected on the experiences and prevalence of domestic violence among the LGBT in a manner that does not stigmatise or reveal the identity of the participants.

## PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

- An effort should be made to identify a cadre of trainers who come from the LGBT community, to first-hand deliver their community messaging
- An effort should be made to identify and advertise the clinics, shelters and other domestic violence services where the gay community is welcome, and this should be advertised (for example, through displaying signs that proclaim a non-discriminatory, human-rights based approach)
- Training programmes need to focus on violence as an issue of power and control, and not on something that men do to women exclusively. Care needs to be taken that the framing of DV as a 'gendered issue' is not misunderstood to mean that it is only about men hitting women. This common misunderstanding of the concept *de facto* leaves same-sex partners out

- Similarly, the term ‘intimate partner’ may infer a long-standing relationship. Our research showed that violence occurs in short-term relationships too. We need to make sure that DV and IPV also include coercive relationships among individuals who have just met.
- In the event that both women involved in a DV incident are taken to the same women’s shelter, it is imperative that the shelter staff identify which partner is the abusive one, and make alternative arrangements for their placement
- Batterers’ Intervention Programmes need to target and include abusive women as well, with a curriculum that is designed for violence in the LGBT community
- Curricula for battering lesbian women needs to include a component that addresses internalised homophobia. Homophobia is such an endemic part of Caribbean society, that it may be a contributing factor to the psychological reasons why women inflict harm on other women and on themselves
- Staff in women’s shelters need to be taught anti-discriminatory principles and supported in upholding them
- Service providers need to understand that the LGBT community, since it already fights stigma and discrimination as a community, always hesitates to report DV. It is an especially under-reported issue here. Lesbians may hesitate to bring any additional attention or speculation of a negative type upon themselves and service providers need specific training in identifying and working with abused women from within this population
- Although violence is violence, our research shows that violence among female same-sex partners can be different, depending upon their levels of education, social standing, income, and so on. Some of the most endemic forms of violence amongst the women we surveyed were less measurable, being verbal, financial or psychological. Service providers to this community need to be trained in recognising all forms of violence, and understanding that none of it is acceptable
- When women report that they have been abused, they should be believed
- When women make choices around their incidences of violence that service providers may not comprehend or agree with, the woman’s right to choose needs to be respectfully upheld
- Police and other service providers need to be disavowed of the idea that violence between women is of a ‘less severe’ type, due to the patriarchal idea of the fragility of women, or the fiction of a ‘cat fight’. The lethal nature of the violence that women can inflict on each other should be made clear, and taken seriously
- Police and other service providers need to be disavowed of the myth of a ‘lesbian utopia’, and place charges against women who abuse others as a matter of upholding the law according to the principle of equality
- Training curricula also need to include recognition of healthy same-sex relationships.

## REFERENCES AND USEFUL AND RESOURCES

<http://www.womensaid.org.uk/default.asp>

<http://refuge.org.uk/>

NICE guidance 2011 <http://guidance.nice.org.uk/CG110>

Responding to domestic abuse: a handbook for health professionals Department of Health (2005)

[http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_4126619.pdf](http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4126619.pdf)

Free online training on identifying and responding to domestic abuse: <http://www.seeabuse.com/>