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Comparing Domestic Abuse in Same Sex and Heterosexual Relationships

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Background

This report outlines initial findings from the most detailed UK research on same sex domestic abuse and first study in the UK to directly compare domestic abuse in same sex and heterosexual relationships. The research sought to increase knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse in same sex relationships and experiences of help-seeking via the criminal justice system and other agencies. It also aimed to examine similarities and differences regarding domestic abuse across same sex and heterosexual relationships, including how ‘narratives of love’ might be used across these contexts to make sense of violence in intimate relationships.

The research was carried out between January 2005 and November 2006, and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It was informed by an Advisory Group consisting of representatives from Broken Rainbow, the Northern Rock Foundation, Northumbria Probation Service, University of Portsmouth Equalities Unit, Central Manchester Women’s Aid, Glasgow Women’s Library, Scottish Equality Network, Stonewall Cymru and Devon and Cornwall Police.

While domestic abuse in heterosexual relationships has been of increasing public concern in the UK since the 1970s, domestic abuse in same sex communities has only more recently become apparent. A number of factors may be seen to have contributed to the greater invisibility of same sex domestic abuse, including fears of making obvious such problems within communities already considered ‘problematic’ in a homophobic society.

In the UK there has been a small number of local or national surveys and other research regarding same sex domestic abuse. The Sigma surveys of gay men and lesbians (Henderson 2003)¹ found that one in four individuals in same sex relationships probably experience domestic abuse at some time – similar to figures for heterosexual domestic abuse against women. The Government has also acknowledged that domestic violence takes place in same sex relationships and definitions and policies have begun to reflect this. The most recent Home Office definition of domestic violence specifically includes same sex relationships², and the *Domestic*

¹ Henderson, L. (2003) *Prevalence of Domestic Violence among Lesbians and Gay Men: Data report to Flame TV*. London: Sigma Research.

² The Home Office definition is as follows: *Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or who have been*

Violence, Crime & Victims Act 2004 has extended the availability of injunctions against domestically violent perpetrators to same sex couples. Several community and joint community and police projects have also been set up to raise awareness and provide some support to same sex victims/survivors of domestic abuse.

The research

In order to provide a detailed picture of same sex domestic abuse, while at the same time being able to compare same sex and heterosexual experiences of such abuse, the research used a multi-method approach, involving:

1. A **UK-wide survey** of domestic abuse in same sex relationships (total respondents=800, with 746³ usable questionnaires).
2. Five **focus groups** with lesbians, gay men and heterosexual women and men of different ages and ethnicities to examine perceptions of love and domestic abuse (total of 21 individuals).
3. Semi-structured **interviews** with 67 individuals identifying as lesbian (19), gay male (19), heterosexual (14 women, 9 men), bisexual (3) or queer (3), to compare experiences and meanings regarding violence and abuse in adult relationships.

Studying domestic abuse in same sex relationships presents particular methodological problems. The issue is sensitive and has only very recently been identified as such within LGBT communities in Britain. Because of the ‘hidden’ nature of the LGBT population it is not possible to recruit a representative sample. Also, focusing on particular geographical areas can compromise respondents’ confidentiality. We therefore decided to conduct a UK-wide ‘community’ survey in order to address these concerns and to maximise the numbers of participants in the research. The survey used a detailed questionnaire, distributed via community groups and organisations, local and national networks and through gay and lesbian websites. Most of the responses were obtained from the on-line version of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was designed to examine experiences of abuse as well as the context for the behaviour, and to ensure comparison with earlier surveys of heterosexual and/or LGBT communities. It asked about respondents’ same sex relationships: how decisions are made and conflict

intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality. This definition omits the mention of coercive control, a central feature of domestic abuse.

³ In what follows, not all totals add up to 746 as not every respondent answered each question

resolved; any experiences of emotionally, physically or sexually abusive behaviours from partners in the last 12 months and prior to that; and their own use of abusive behaviours; impacts of abusive behaviour; and experiences of help-seeking.

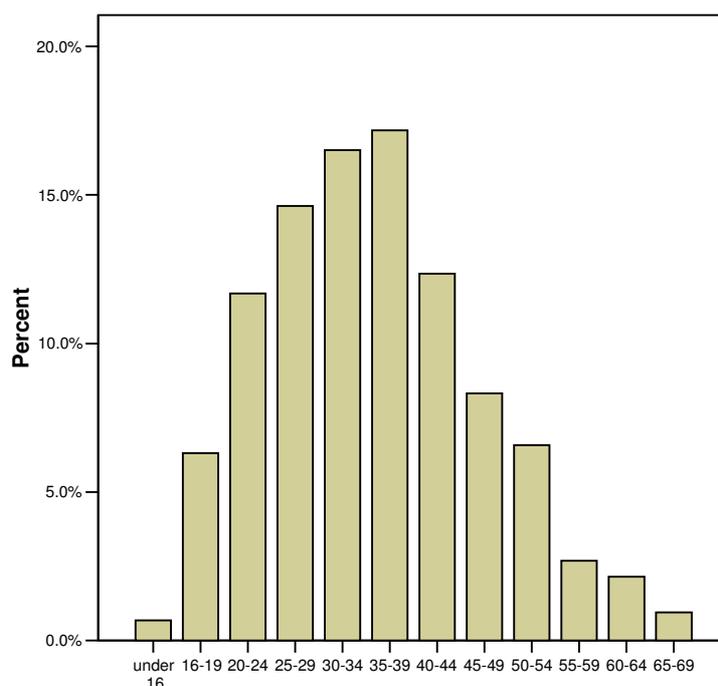
Focus groups were used as a precursor to one-to-one interviews, to begin to explore common sense beliefs that might provide some insight into domestic abuse; and to compare and contrast these across different gender and sexuality related experiences. Individuals were recruited from community groups and networks across the UK.

Interviews enabled us to explore in greater detail with heterosexual men and women, lesbians and gay men, issues asked about in the questionnaire. To ascertain how and when relationship experiences might be defined as abusive, questions were asked about best and worst relationships, and individuals' experiences and responses to domestic violence. Most of the same sex interviewees were recruited from the questionnaire sample (with an emphasis on those who had explicitly said that they had experienced domestic abuse), with the remainder of the same sex and the heterosexual interviewees recruited from a wide range of community groups and networks across the UK. The sample was largely purposive, with attempts made to include similar numbers of gay men, lesbians, heterosexual men and heterosexual women, from a range of ethnicities and locations.

The questionnaire sample

Gender and sexuality - Nearly two thirds of the questionnaire respondents were women (60.5%, 451/746) and a third were men (37.5%, 280/746). Women were most likely to identify as 'lesbian' (69.6%, 314/451). Men mainly identified as 'gay man' (76.4%, 214/280). More women than men defined themselves as bisexual -10.4% (47/451) compared to 3.9% (11/280) of men, or as queer - 2.9% of women (13/451) compared to 1.4% (4/280) of men. Four transgendered individuals identified themselves as bisexual, gay woman, lesbian and queer.

Age - The ages of respondents ranged from five individuals who were under 16 years to seven in their late 60s (see Graph 1 below).



Graph 1: age distribution

The mean age was 35.37. Most were in their 20s and 30s. Female respondents tended to be a bit older than the men, with a median age for women of 37 (mean 35.77), and a median age for men of 32 (mean 34.48).

Ethnicity - The survey generally reflected the ethnic composition of the UK population, with the vast majority and similar proportion of respondents identifying as white (94.8%, 704/743 compared to 92.2% in 2001 Census). The proportions identifying as mixed or Chinese were also similar. However, our survey had considerably smaller proportions of Asian or Black respondents, although the ‘other’ category was more than four times as large than in the Census, and may have contained what the Census termed ‘Other Asian’ and ‘Black other’.

Disability - Out of 713 individuals who answered the question ‘do you have a disability’, 79 (11.1%) said they did. Slightly more women (11.6%, 50/431) than men (9.7%, 25/269) said they had a disability.

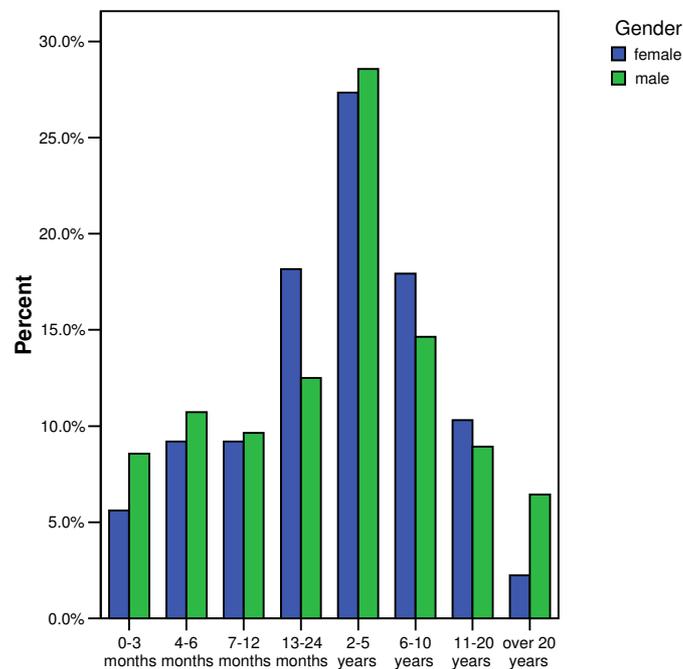
Income - The income level was slightly higher than the population generally. The median income for all the respondents was £25,500 with a mean income of £22,432.43 – rising to £23,569.67 if only those aged 20 and over were taken into account. The income distribution reflected the UK income inequality between men and women, with the biggest group of men earning £21-30k, and the biggest group of women earning only £11-20k.

Children - One in six of respondents (16.1%, 120/740) parented children, with the majority of parents – more than two-thirds (70.8%, 85/120) – having all or some of these children living with them. Women were almost three times as likely to be parents than the men, with one in five women parenting children (21.7%, 97/447) compared to only 7.2% of the men (21/279).

Current relationship

The vast majority of respondents (86.5%) had been in a same sex relationship during the past 12 months, with more than two-thirds currently in such a relationship (70.5%). For about one in seven it was their first same sex relationship (14.7%). This was similar for both women and men.

There were significant differences between men and women in terms of length of relationships (see Graph 2 below)⁴. Men predominated in shorter relationships, lasting up to one year, but also in relationships lasting two to five years or more than 20 years. Women were generally more likely to have longer relationships, lasting between one and twenty years.



Graph 2: Length of relationship by gender

⁴ Significance was tested using Chi-square: $X^2=15.503, p=.03$

Experiences of domestic abuse

Saying that you've experienced domestic abuse

In the survey, more than a third of respondents (38.4%, 266/692) said that they had experienced domestic abuse at some time in a same sex relationship. This included 40.1% (169/421) of the female and 35.2% (94/258) of the male respondents⁵. Echoing this, individuals identifying as lesbian, gay women, or queer were most likely to say that they had experienced domestic abuse.

It has to be remembered that the questionnaire sample was not random, nor necessarily representative of the same sex community. Therefore the levels of domestic abuse experienced do not represent the prevalence of such abuse within same sex relationships. What the figures do indicate, however, is that domestic abuse is an issue for a considerable number of people in same sex relationships in the UK.

As much previous research on domestic abuse in heterosexual or same sex contexts has shown, it is often difficult to define one's experiences, however awful, as 'domestic violence' or 'domestic abuse'. Also, it may be easier to see physical abuse as part of domestic violence, but difficult to identify and define the threats and other more psychologically abusive and controlling experiences in such a way. Kay talked about this in the interview, posing questions about whether the controlling behaviours she had experienced from her girlfriend would count as 'real' violence:

...it was uhm, you know, the episodes where I couldn't get her out of my house ... You know and her questioning everything I did and ringing me up when I was out with people and asking me if there were any nice girls there....I do think it was quite a controlling relationship, yeah. And, ...when I was filling out the questionnaire .. I did think, 'well actually, is this really going to count'... because in comparison to what some of my friends have been through, you know, it's probably not on the greatest scale of long term, abusive, violent behaviour.... You know, it was pretty short term. Uhm but it does fall into it, I think. (Kay)

The interviews indicate that a small number of the questionnaire respondents said that they had not experienced domestic abuse, but subsequently re-defined their experiences as domestic abuse. For example, Edward answered 'no' in the questionnaire to ever being in a

⁵ Although this difference was not statistically significant.

domestically abusive relationship, but his experiences and discussion of these in the interview indicate that he did experience domestic abuse, involving physical and control elements, although he did not define it as such at the time.

How much and how defined?

While 38.4% of the questionnaire respondents said that they specifically saw themselves as having experienced domestic abuse, an even greater number of respondents indicated that they had experienced at least one form of abusive behaviour from their same sex partners. This is shown in Table 1 (below): individuals across the sample experienced varying degrees of the emotional, physical or sexual behaviours associated with domestic abuse, but those who explicitly stated that they had experienced domestic abuse were also the most likely to have experienced such abuse.

Table 1: Experience of abuse behaviours

Type of abuse behaviour	Time period	All respondents	Respondents self-defined as domestically abused
Emotional	Last 12 months	54.3%	59.8%
	Ever	77.8%	93.6%
Physical	Last 12 months	17.6%	30.8%
	Ever	40.1%	74.1%
Sexual	Last 12 months	21.3%	25.6%
	Ever	40.5%	59.4%

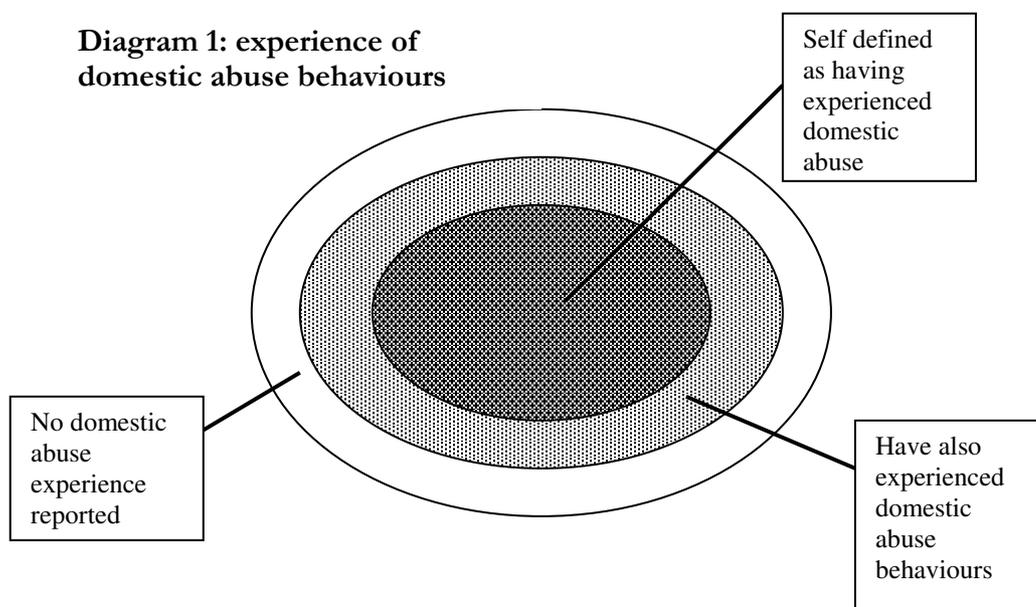
Thus, some of the individuals who did not self-define as having experienced domestic abuse may none the less have been in domestically abusive relationships. Some individuals however, might have experienced abusive behaviours without this being part of an ongoing pattern in their relationship.

Domestic violence and abuse has been characterised, in both same sex and heterosexual relationships, as ongoing coercive control by one partner against the other using emotional, physical and/ or sexually abusive behaviours to ensure power and control (Hart 1986; Hester *et al.* 2000)⁶. This is also what Johnson (1995; 2006)⁷ calls ‘intimate terrorism’. This is shown in Diagram 1 (below) as follows: the shaded areas include all those who indicated in the questionnaire that they had experienced at

⁶ Hart, B. (1986) ‘Preface’, in K. Lobel (ed) *Naming the Violence*. Seattle: Seal Press. Hester, M., Pearson, C. & Harwin, N. (2000) *Making an Impact - Children and Domestic Violence. A Reader*, London: Jessica Kingsley.

⁷ See Johnson, M. P. (2006) ‘Conflict and control: gender symmetry and asymmetry in domestic violence’, *Violence Against Women* 12 (11) 1003-1018.

least one instance of emotional, physical or sexual abuse behaviour. And those in the darkest area self-identified that they were in a domestically abusive relationship. Thus in Diagram 1 the two shaded areas both include individuals who have experienced ‘intimate terrorism’, although the inner, darkest area, is most likely to do so.



What form of abuse?

As indicated in Table 1 (above) domestic abuse mainly involved emotional behaviours, followed by physical and sexual behaviours:

- More than three-quarters of the whole sample had experienced at least one form of **emotional abuse** at some time (77.8%), and half in the past 12 months (54.3%). This was similar for gay men and lesbians, although individuals identifying as bisexuals reported experiencing a greater number of emotionally abusive behaviours from same sex partners in the last 12 months, as did a considerably larger proportion of individuals aged less than 25 years compared to other age groups.

There were a few areas where the abusive behaviours used by men against men as compared to women against women were significantly different, especially when considered beyond 12 months. Men were more likely to have their spending controlled⁸. Women were more likely to have their sexuality used against them, be blamed for their partner’s self-harm or have their children threatened or used against them in some way⁹.

- Just over forty percent of the whole sample had experienced at least one form of **physical abuse** at some time (40.1%), and nearly a fifth in

⁸ Chi-square significant at $p < .05$.

⁹ Chi-square significant at $p < .05$, $p < .05$, and $p < .01$ respectively.

the past 12 months (17.6%). This was again largely similar for gay men and lesbians, although men were significantly more likely to be physically threatened, or prevented from getting help¹⁰ in the past 12 months than were women. Individuals identifying as bisexuals were also more likely to report more physically abusive behaviours from same sex partners in the last 12 months, as were individuals aged under 25 years.

- Respondents had generally experienced similar levels of sexual abuse to those of physical abuse, with 40.5% of the whole sample having experienced **sexual abuse** at some time and 21.3% during the past 12 months in a same sex relationship. Sexual abuse was, however, where the greatest gender differences occurred. Male respondents were significantly more likely than women to be forced into sexual activity, be hurt during sex, have ‘safe’ words or boundaries disrespected, have requests for safer sex refused, and be threatened with sexual assault¹¹. Moreover, gay men and bisexuals also reported experiencing considerably more sexually abusive behaviours than did lesbians during the past 12 months, as did individuals aged under 25 years.

There is some evidence from the interviews that men were more likely to name rape as ‘forced sexual activity’ because of the difficulty they have in naming their experience as rape. This suggests that the sexual abuse reported is an underestimate of behaviours such as rape.

The findings regarding age, that most abuse was experienced by those under 25 years, is similar to findings for individuals in heterosexual relationships (Walby & Allen 2004)¹². The findings regarding differences in abusive experiences by male and female respondents appear to reflect wider processes of gendering and gendered norms.

Impact of the abuse

- The impact of the **emotional abuse** was generally similar for male and female respondents, although with a few significant differences. Women were much more likely to report that the abuse made them work harder so as ‘to make their partner happy’ or in order ‘to stop making mistakes’, and/ or that it had an impact on their children or their relationship with their children¹³. The impact on men was to make them ‘feel loved/wanted’¹⁴.

¹⁰ Mann Whitney, significant at 0.04, 0.16 and 0.02 respectively.

¹¹ Chi-square significant at $p < .05$, $p < .01$, $p < .001$, $p < .001$, $p < .005$ respectively (during past 12 months)

¹² Walby, S. and Allen, J. (2004) *Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey*, Home Office Research Study 276. London: Home Office.

¹³ Chi-square significant at $p < .1$, $p < .01$ and $p < .001$ respectively

¹⁴ Chi-square significant at $p < .05$

- The impact of **physical abuse** was again generally similar for male and female respondents, with just a few significant differences. The impact on women in particular was to stop them ‘trusting in people’, to make them work harder so as ‘to make their partner happy’, and/ or that it had an impact on their children or their relationship with their children¹⁵. For example, Sarah says:

But yeah I did love her. ... I don't know. I think part of me wanted to help her, um, and I thought loving her would fix everything. (Sarah)

- The impact of **sexual abuse** was very similar across the sample. The one significant difference related to women fearing for their lives as a consequence of sexual abuse from their female partners.

Seeking help and support

Table 2: Where help sought

Help sought from	Self-defined domestic abuse – all %	Self-defined domestic abuse by gender	
		Women %	Men %
Your friends	57.9	60.4	52.2
Counsellor/therapist	32.6	33.7	30.4
Your relatives	25.2	24.3	27.2
GP	13.8	11.8	17.4
Lesbian or gay helpline/ organisation	13.5	11.8	16.3
Someone at work	11.9	11.2	13.0
Police	9.0	7.1	10.9

Of those individuals who said they had experienced domestic abuse, about one in five did not seek help from anyone (22.2%). Of those who did seek help most used ‘informal’ or ‘private’ means rather than voluntary or statutory sector services. More than half contacted friends – especially female respondents. Use of counsellors or therapists was also high, with about a third of respondents saying they had sought such help. More than a quarter had contacted relatives. GPs or colleagues were other favoured contacts – especially for male respondents. About one in ten contacted the police.

Comparing our data to that in the 2001 British Crime Survey (BCS) Interpersonal Module (Walby & Allen 2004) indicates some similarities as well as differences in help-seeking patterns between heterosexual and

¹⁵ Chi-square significant at $p < .1$, $p < .05$ and $p < .05$ respectively.

LGBT communities¹⁶. The biggest category with regard to help-seeking in both studies was friends/ relatives/ neighbours¹⁷. A stark contrast, however, was the apparently much greater use of the police by victims in the BCS, where this was the second largest category. Also, female victims in the BCS were much more likely to contact the police, while in our survey the proportions for male and female respondents were similar (with men slightly more likely to use the police¹⁸). With regard to use of GPs or medical services, the BCS only asked about contacting these services if injury had been sustained. In these instances the pattern was again very different to the general pattern of help-seeking in our survey, with women in the BCS most likely to contact GPs, while men in our survey were more likely to contact GPs. The BCS did not ask specifically about use of counsellors/therapists (a high category in our survey), although the use of mental health services by BCS respondents appeared to be very low.

Comparing Domestic abuse in same sex and heterosexual relationships: a view from the community

In the survey, respondents were asked whether they thought domestic abuse is different in same sex relationships than in heterosexual relationships. The vast majority (69%, 483/701) of respondents in the survey did not think there are any differences between domestic abuse in same sex and heterosexual relationships. Those who qualified their ‘no’ response, and those who argued that there is a difference, agreed that same sex domestic abuse is more hidden, less recognised and talked about; and that similar support mechanisms and services do not exist for those in same sex relationships as exist for those in heterosexual relationships.

For example:

*I don't believe it is [different] – it is perhaps a little more hidden and with less support offered to those who experience it.
(Homosexual man)*

¹⁶ While the BCS is not strictly a ‘heterosexual’ survey, the Home Office Research Directorate informed us that the figures for same sex respondents were too small for the data to be meaningful. We are therefore taking the BCS to represent heterosexual data. It should be noted that the questions about help-seeking in our LGBT community survey were construed to reflect the categories in the BCS, although we asked about help-seeking in relation to domestic abuse experiences generally rather than the BCS approach of asking about the worst incident.

¹⁷ The BCS combined these categories.

¹⁸ Our previous research has indicated that gay men are more likely than lesbians to be recorded on police databases as experiencing domestic abuse (Hester, M. and Westmarland, N. (2006) *Service Provision for Perpetrators of Domestic Violence*, Bristol: University of Bristol.

Yes, it's more difficult to get it recognised as existing. (Lesbian)

Interviews¹⁹

A number of themes emerge from the interviews that allow us to make more sense of some of the findings from the survey: the importance of first relationships in the experience of abuse; the ways in which sexuality is used as a way of controlling partners; the degree to which people experience post separation abuse; and help-seeking.

First Same Sex Relationships

In her study of domestic abuse in lesbian relationships Ristock (2002)²⁰ identifies first relationships as high risk for domestic abuse. We would agree that first same sex relationships present a particular set of circumstances in which abuse may occur: the survivor's investment in wanting a same sex relationship as confirmation of their identity and sense of self; their lack of confidence in what behaviours are acceptable in intimate same sex relationships; and their possible lack of embeddedness in LGBT friendship/community networks in which to air their concerns, see other relationship role models and seek support and help in addressing the abuse they are experiencing²¹.

For example, Audrey was 53 years old when she had her first lesbian relationship which lasted for nearly 3 years. This was an abusive relationship, but she says it took her longer to understand it as such because she was so exhilarated by her experience of it as her first lesbian relationship:

Well I think I'd always been very clear about what was going on but suddenly I realised actually I was beginning to abuse myself by staying in this relationship and if that – and I knew, I just knew that if that had been a man, with a man – because my worst relationship was with a violent man ... I would not have put up with three years of that actually. I would not. So why was it any different? Because this was a relationship with a woman and it was my first

¹⁹ The sample of interviews included self-identified lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and queer people across a range of ages, socio-economic class and race/ethnicity from across Britain. However, in order to protect the identity of interviewees we do not identify the race/ethnicity, age or location of respondents in this report.

²⁰ Ristock, J. (2002) *No More Secrets. Violence in lesbian relationships*. Routledge: London.

²¹ It is possible that the survey data showing a trend towards those aged 25 years and under reporting more abuse in same sex relationships is associated with the trend shown in the interviews that first same sex relationships can be abusive.

one and I think that's the very reason why. I think I invested a lot more and I think I was also (pause), um god! Because I was so disappointed in myself that I still couldn't even make [starting to get upset] a relationship with a woman work. (Audrey)

For most others for whom their first same sex relationship was abusive this happened when they were younger – often in their early to late teens or early twenties. Being in the relationship had given them the opportunity to explore the realities of being in a same sex relationship and signalled their coming to terms with their sexuality. For some, the importance of having a same sex relationship overrode their knowledge that the relationship was not 'right' (even if they would not necessarily at the time have understood the relationship as abusive). Sometimes this was articulated by them saying that they were in love with being in love. As William explains:

Most of the people I got to know in the gay community had partners, and there was an element I think looking back of, I was in love with being in love at that point. ... so I sort of wanted to have a boyfriend so I went with this chap for about five years and, um, I wasn't mature enough most probably for a relationship. I hadn't, I hadn't lived. I hadn't done all the things that perhaps somebody wants to do at that age. (William)

Some men in particular had abusive first relationships with older men, and survivors talked about not feeling skilled enough in how to conduct relationships, or, indeed, knowing enough about what they wanted in relationships to be able to resist the abuse they experienced. Here is Anthony explaining how he got into his first (abusive) same sex relationship when he was 16 years old and his abusive partner, who was also his boss and was 6 years older than him.

I don't know. I really don't know. I think [exhales] oh I don't know. It should never have happened, to be honest, but I (pause) wasn't forced into it. I sort of fell into it, somehow. (pause) Oh, I don't know. Cos I was young, and I was [coughs] not frightened but I was (pause) I didn't like any conflicts, I didn't like arguments and, ...He sort of... assumed that we were now in a relationship, and I didn't, I didn't feel as though I could say 'no, we're not in a relationship.' And because of that, that's how it suddenly got labelled a relationship. (Anthony)

Sexuality as a Tool of Control

Sexuality can be used in different ways to exert control over a partner's behaviour and access to support/friendship networks: by accusations that a survivor is not a real lesbian or gay man; by the abusive partner asserting their inability to be out; by their denigration of the scene; and by using jealousy as a way of keeping their partners from the scene. Women were more likely to have sexuality used against them in these ways.

Previous literature on domestic abuse in same sex relationships highlights the ways in which sexuality can be used as a way of controlling a partner's behaviour: by threatening to out partners to child care agencies if they parent or to employers, friends and family if they are not out. However what we found in interviews was not that abusive partners used their partner's sexuality to control them but that they used their own issues with sexuality (either that they were not out or did not want other people to know about the relationship) or the scene (that it presented a threat to their relationship in some way) as a way of controlling their partner's social life and friendship networks. For example, Jeb who was 16 years old when he started his relationship with his abusive partner, who was ten years older than him, talks about the way this partner tried to control his movements *vis a vis* the scene:

And when he was away I wanted to go out and make friends, and he didn't think that was necessarily the best idea because, you know, we had a house together and he didn't want me to be bringing people back to the house. Or people where we lived to be realising that we were gay. Because he wanted to keep all that very, very hush, hush because of his work and his parents and his parents were very strict Irish Catholics. So he was constantly trying to hem me in, box me in when all I wanted to do was, you know, grow ... I had no issues with my sexuality ... And all of a sudden to be put back in this box and being told to sit there and shut up, that was quite challenging. (Jeb)

Sometimes abusive partners' attempts to control individuals' access to the local LGBT scene was connected with their need to cover up their infidelities. At other times there seemed to be much more of an attempt to keep the survivor isolated, not only in terms of potential friendship/support networks but also in terms of keeping the partner and therefore the abuse contained in the private sphere. This was sometimes articulated as jealousy and a lack of trust by the abusive partner. Several women talked about how their abusive partner did not want them to go out on to the scene. Here, Kay explains:

When I met her, I was just beginning to have gay female friends in this area ... you know, it was all opening up for me, whereas she'd again, been there, seen it, done it really. And her attitude was, 'oh you don't' want to be going out on the scene, you know, it's awful' and all the rest of it, whereas yeah, I know that now, but to say that to somebody that's just beginning to dip their toe. You can't put restrictions on people like that. ... when she came up to see me, really she wanted to spend time with me and not really go out very much. So um, you know, I'd sort of say, let's go out and it would be, 'oh let's just stay in. I want to spend some time with you.'
(Kay)

Valerie's abusive partner became jealous if she suggested going out to meet friends for a drink on the scene:

But certainly when we moved to [city], if I said 'oh I'm going over to meet Sonia and Tara ... 'which bars are you going to? You're not going on the scene are you?' 'well what does it matter? A pub is a pub?' 'But I don't want you to go on the scene. I don't like it when you go on the scene without us,' and I'm like 'what!' Cos to me the gay scene doesn't mean – it's just a bunch of pubs, you know it's ...

I: so did you do it anyway or did you not do it?

Valerie: *No I didn't do it. I gave in. (laughs) As I say I didn't start, you know, it's really since we've split up and certainly the only argument I provoked was probably the one where we did end up splitting up.*

In addition there was some evidence that abusive partners accuse their partners of not being real lesbians or gay men and that this also has the effect of undermining their confidence and exerting control over where and with whom they associate. Those in their first same sex relationships might be vulnerable to this kind of control but women seem particularly susceptible as Audrey exemplifies:

The other worst thing which affected me much more than I ever realised and still affects me and I still struggle with is Gerri had ... always had same sex relationships and ... was quite a strident feminist really and um, (long pause and tears coming into her eyes) I didn't know how to be. I didn't know what being a lesbian meant and there ... [were] markers and I didn't necessarily know what these markers were so I, you know, I wasn't necessarily attaining them and I can remember one day we'd been on holiday and

actually saying to her um, ‘am I a lesbian now?’ ... and her actual words were ‘you’re getting there’ and I, like ‘what! what does that mean?’ ‘Well, you know, when you start to spend all your time with women. When you, you know, are reading mainly female written books or you’re listening to female music or, um, you know, when you start to have more lesbian friends etc. then I think you can call yourself a lesbian.’ I was just really shocked. (Audrey)

Post Separation Abuse

Another theme to emerge from the interviews was the degree to which survivors of same sex domestic abuse experience on-going abuse after the relationship has ended. As with heterosexual women survivors²², this clearly has implications for help-seeking. For a significant number of lesbians and gay men leaving an abusive relationship does not signal the end of the abuse and may in some cases escalate it. Post separation abuse ranged from continuing contact through mobile phone text messages, email and telephone calls, through to the abusive partner turning up at workplaces, pubs and clubs frequented by the survivor or the homes of survivors and/or family and friends, through to episodes of physical violence and the use of courts to demand financial settlements or to challenge child care arrangements. Maintaining contact through telephone, email, text and personal contact is done manipulatively to seek rapprochement and this is often the hardest to resist; this was the experience of most of those suffering post separation abuse.

Edward talked about how he was persuaded twice over a three year period to go back to his abusive partner. When he finally left his home and his abusive partner, changed his mobile phone number and moved over three hundred miles to another city he thought this would end the relationship. However, his abusive partner rang Edward’s family home (Edward was not out to his father), to get his new mobile number, moved to the same city and continued harassing Edward over an 8 month period before finally Edward was able to make him stop contacting him.

Men appeared more likely to experience this kind of post separation abuse. Anthony whose rape by an abusive partner brought their four month relationship to an end was contacted over a 2 month period – until Anthony’s mobile phone contract came to an end and he got a new mobile phone number. His abusive partner used various tactics to keep controlling Anthony including telephoning him in the early hours of the

²² Hester, M. & Radford, L. (1996) *Domestic Violence and Child Contact Arrangements in England and Denmark*, Policy Press in association with Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Walby & Allen (2004).

morning to say that he was desperate and needed help. The harassment became increasingly severe as he explains:

And then, sort of like the texts and the phone calls started happening and then I was like getting really, really – first I was like angry and then I was like frustrated and then sort of like scared about what he could do. D’you know – and then he told me about him being raped, which I’m not sure if I believe, cos he did like lie quite a bit, and then him not using a condom on me, which again, I don’t know whether that was true. And then, that, he just started to turn really nasty. (Anthony)

Women (in much smaller numbers) seemed more likely to experience assault or court action as post separation abuse. Sarah, after finishing with her abusive partner was abducted by her three weeks later, subjected to an assault, driven miles from home and eventually dumped to get home on her own. Valerie’s abusive partner, at the time of the interview, was challenging Valerie for contact with Valerie’s daughter. This was experienced by Valerie as another way in which her abusive partner was continuing her control over her.

Ella’s mother was assaulted by Ella’s abusive partner and, by the time of the interview had been involved in a protracted court case to settle their finances and been threatened by her abusive partner’s brother to meet the abusive partner’s demands. It had been fifteen months since the end of the relationship but Ella was still experiencing the impact of her ex-partner’s abusive behaviour:

Every bloody day. Every day. Yeah. [breathes out slowly] Because, you know, I can’t do anything in terms of making any progress with it [her business]. ... and I’m thinking to myself right do I spend weekends and weekends clearing it off, tidying it up, making the place look nice and then when it comes to court they value the house and all the work I’ve done is added value to the house and I have to give half of it to her? It’s just stupid that I can’t even decide to do little things like that because everything has an implication. And so every aspect of my life now is chained down by this stupid decision that I made (sighs). (Ella)

Help Seeking

Several problems emerged with help-seeking for those in abusive same sex relationships, the net result of which is that very few of the individuals interviewed reported or talked about their experiences with anybody or any agency. Domestic abuse is understood in Britain and by our respondents as a problem largely of heterosexual women being physically abused by their male partners. In consequence, most respondents had not understood their experience at the time as domestic abuse and it had not occurred to most of them to report their experiences to any agency. Hazel is typical of those who believed that they were in a difficult relationship that they had to work out by themselves:

No I didn't really talk about it with anybody. Simply because again at the time I didn't, I didn't see it as anything other than she was really angry and, you know, she didn't mean to take it out on me and, you know, it was – I was just the catalyst that, you know, something had happened and, you know, I don't know. I was very reluctant to admit to anybody that it wasn't, you know, it wasn't what I'd got in my head it was, do you know what I mean? (Hazel)

This lack of naming their experiences as domestic abuse was more acute for those, as with heterosexual women survivors, who had experienced emotional rather than physical abuse.

As in the survey, if interviewees talked to anybody they were more likely to talk to friends, family members or counsellor/therapists. This privatisation of help-seeking is indicative perhaps both of the lack of confidence those in same sex relationship have about public agencies, and also that they see themselves as the problem. Talking to friends, family members or counsellors did not necessarily result in help that survivors found useful and often friends' advice to leave their partner, or their assumption that this would be their friends' advice, was the reason for not talking to them. In addition, the abusive relationship might well have resulted in survivors losing friends either because they disapproved of the relationship or as a result of their partner's controlling behaviours. However, there were some respondents for whom friends' interventions were extremely helpful in their realising that the relationship was not good for them. William, for example, talks about his friends' assessment of his increasingly abusive relationship:

I think my feelings had started to change, had started to grow up a little bit. I don't know whether I categorised the violence with part of loving but I supposed I just accepted that it was part of the

relationship and I was in a relationship where I liked the person but the love had sort of stopped, and when Lonnie and Nigel told me that they thought I was in love with being in love, and I remember sort of thinking really long and hard about that it sort of, I thought 'wow yes! They could be right actually'. (William)

As a result of homophobia and heterosexism, community knowledges (Weeks et al. 2001)²³ exists in LGBT communities that public agencies are not able to respond appropriately to the needs of those in same sex relationships i.e. that they actively discriminate against or stigmatise same sex relationships or that they are not trained or equipped to respond with knowledge to the circumstances of same sex relationships. This common sense knowledge – built for some on personal experience – meant that most respondents would not have thought to report their experiences or seek help from public agencies. On top of their own lack of naming of their experience as abuse, most respondents using a heterosexual model of domestic violence in which the (female) survivor is understood as the physically smaller and therefore more vulnerable person against the physically stronger and more powerful (male) perpetrator, did not think that they would be believed, taken seriously or understood if they presented as a survivor. Here is Ella talking about her misgivings about talking to anybody about what was going on in her abusive relationship:

Because, actually, if two strangers saw me and Marnie together, not knowing either of us or anything about either of us, I think they would probably assume that I was the one with the power in the relationship. Because I am physically bigger than her. I probably come across verbally as more confident than her, probably come across more educated than her. (pause) ... But I think anybody who spent a weekend with us would quickly realise where the power lay in that relationship. (Ella)

The few who had contacted public agencies had mixed responses which often depended on the individual professional dealing with them. What was clear is that many police, domestic abuse agencies, GPs and LGBT services do not have coordinated responses for responding to domestic abuse in same sex relationships even though some individual practitioners within them may respond sympathetically and be of great support. Many of the problems lie in agencies being governed by a domestic abuse model that is heterosexual and it is this that often prevents an appropriate

²³ Weeks, J, Heaphy, B. Donovan, C. (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies. Families of Choice and other life experiments*. Routledge: London

response because of assumptions made about who might be the survivor/perpetrator. Other problems arise because of the heterosexism of the individual professionals. For example, Ted was referred to a counsellor by his GP when his 15 year abusive relationship was coming to an end:

He arranged for the counsellor to come to the house and I saw him I think three times but basically I didn't – I just got the impression he didn't really want to be talking to gay people if you like. ...

I: and did you tell the GP?

Ted: *Yeah and he said well we can't really pick and choose. It's what we've got.*

A few who did report to the police got a mixed response. Some had a sympathetic response but no follow through in terms of applying the law to the abusive partner - including since 2004²⁴. A small number had very unhelpful responses from the police though these said this had happened a long time ago.

There is also the problem that some agencies who those in same sex relationships might expect a more sympathetic response from, like LGBT agencies and counsellors/therapists have little understanding of domestic abuse and are then unable to respond to same sex domestic abuse.

Very few of those who experienced post separation abuse reported their experiences to any agency and this highlights the ways in which same sex relationships are perhaps more privatised than heterosexual relationships: even when a relationship has ended and the ex partner continues to be a threatening presence but without the 'permission' of being an intimate partner, the survivor does not make public the abuse they are experiencing.

²⁴ In the *Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004* adult same sex relationships are included as being entitled to the same protections as heterosexual couples.

The research found that:

- Domestic abuse is a sizeable problem in same sex relationships.
- Domestic abuse is experienced in very similar ways by those in lesbian and gay relationships although men were more likely to experience sexual abuse.
- Any differences in experiences reflect gender norms.
- As with surveys of heterosexual communities, those aged 25 years and under are more likely to report domestic abuse.
- Those who self define as having experienced domestic abuse are more likely to have experienced intimate terrorism than those who do not self define as having experienced domestic abuse but who do report having experienced abusive behaviours.
- There is evidence that domestic abuse may not be recognised as such by large numbers of those in same sex relationships. This may be because many experience emotional and sexual abuse rather than physical abuse.
- There is some evidence that some behaviours e.g. rape are underreported by men because of the difficulty they have in naming their experience as such.
- Sexuality is a tool of control used especially by women and often involves the abusive partner using their own lack of being out, or denigration of the scene to control their partner's access to friendship/support networks.
- As with heterosexual female survivors, post separation abuse is a sizeable problem in same sex domestically abusive relationships.
- Most survivors of same sex domestic abuse do not report to public agencies. This is partly because they see their experience as their own problem, and partly because they do not believe they will receive a sympathetic response.

Recommendations

- Awareness raising campaigns about domestic abuse in same sex relationships are needed nationally and locally in LGBT communities
- Training and awareness raising about domestic abuse in same sex relationships is needed in public agencies, particularly Criminal Justice, Domestic Violence and LGBT agencies to:
 - i. Raise awareness that domestic abuse is not only a heterosexual problem
 - ii. Increase knowledge and skills in professionals about LGBT relationships and the particular features of domestic abuse in those relationships
 - iii. Enable agencies to present themselves as accessible to those experiencing domestic abuse in same sex relationships

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