

***Intersections of sexuality and gender  
in intimate partner violence in  
lesbian relationships***

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# Contents of the presentation

- ⦿ Feminist discourse of domestic violence
- ⦿ Limitations and perspectives of the feminist approach
- ⦿ Violence in lesbian relationships
- ⦿ Intersections of gender and sexuality in lesbian IPV

# Feminist discourse of domestic violence

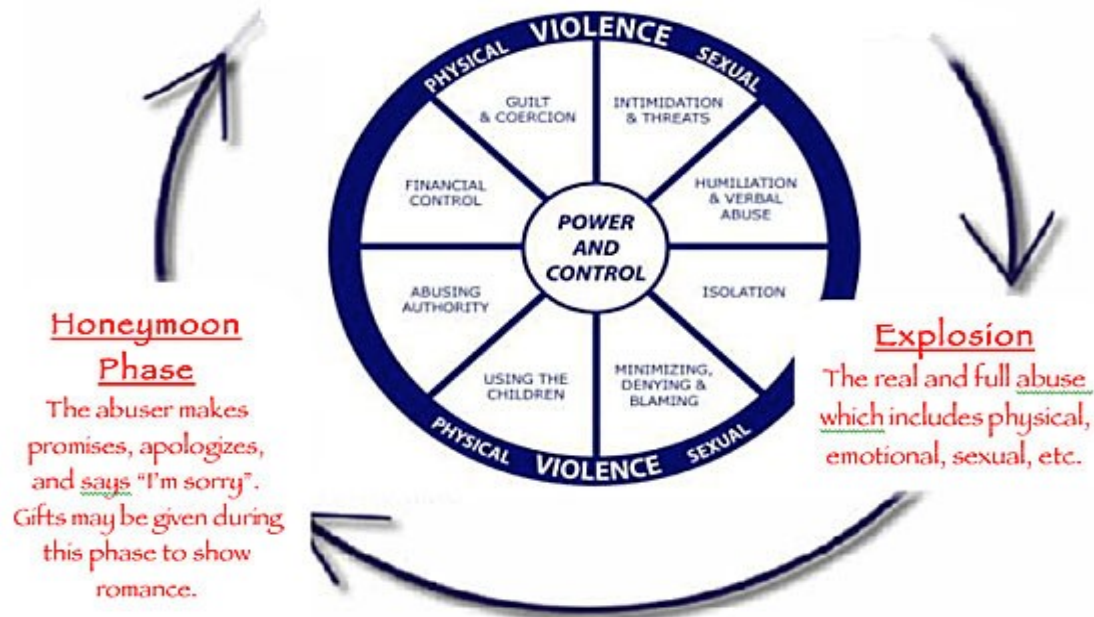
- emphasizes the gendered context of domestic violence
- supported by the statistics from criminal research and shelters that report 90 – 95 % women as survivors of DV (Dobash et al., 1992; Johnson, 1995; Belknap and Melton 2005).
- violence stems from (and maintains) gender inequality (Maynard, Winn 1997)
- „*One of feminism’s major contributions to domestic violence policy and practice has been to identify men as the primary perpetrators of domestic violence*“ (Itzin 2000: 360)
- Power and control are the most important aspects of domestic violence

# Theoretical models of DV

- The Cycle of Violence
- Power-control Wheel

## Tension Building (Longest Phase)

Victim is nervous around their partner in this phase. There are many small situations of physical or emotional abuse. In this phase the victim cannot



# Domestic violence definition in the Czech Republic

- follows the feminist notion of domestic violence as a gendered phenomenon, with women being the victims of domestic violence in majority of the cases
- Specific definition of DV with 4 key factors:
  - 1. repeating and ongoing
  - 2. escalating intensity
  - 3. clear identification of perpetrator and survivor
  - 4. private

*„In order to speak of domestic violence, all four characteristics must be present!“ (Domáci 2007)*

# Limitations of the feminist approach to DV

- The dominant DV discourse is based on the assumption of male perpetrator and female victim – this universalisation of heterosexual experience and binary categories excludes people who have experienced abuse in a non-heterosexual relationship, as well as those who do not fit into the categories (transpeople, intersex people, etc.)
- Simple conceptualization of DV according to the heterosexual norm reproduces heteronormativity
- The language used in DV discourse (with terms such as „battered women“ „male violence“) is exclusive and contributes to further isolation and silencing of the victims (Giorgio 2002)
- => **how can we theorize the intimate partner violence beyond heterosexual relationships without rejecting the concept of gender as a relevant theoretical framework?**

# Conceptualization of gender

Different frameworks of gender (Anderson 2005):

- ◉ Individualist – sex as a predictor of violent behavior, reifying essentialist notions of gender difference (or a lack thereof)
- ◉ Interactional - gender as an outcome of social practices rather than as an individual characteristic that predicts behavior
- ◉ Structuralist – gender organizes social institutions as well as identities, attitudes, and interactions.

# Violence in lesbian relationships

- The literature suggests, there are certain specifics that distinguish lesbian violence from heterosexual violence:

Ristock (2002) challenges universality of the feminist model of DV:

- 1) the cycle of violence: although most women described changing of violent and non-violent phases, others spoke about non-cyclical individual violent acts
- 2) clear power dynamics: some women were victims in one relationship and then became perpetrators in another; the dynamics of the lesbian relationships are less rigid (Townley 2001)
  - those with greater social privilege are not automatically those who abuse the power
- 3) the „ideal victim“ – experiencing fear, trauma and helplessness – many lesbian IPV survivors defended themselves or even used violence in retaliation; some didn't feel scared or helpless



# Preliminary results of my study

- Methodology:
  - Quantitative, internet-based questionnaire, focusing on the attitudes of lesbian women to the topic
  - Qualitative, in-depth interviews with women, who have experienced domestic violence in a same-sex relationship

- Survey data:

207 questionnaires, 2 interviews

- 157 (75, 8 %) lesbian, 43 (20, 8 %) bisexual, 7 (3, 4 %) queer
- 202 identify as female, 1 as FtM, 1 as „genderfluid“ and 1 as „half man, half women; physically a woman“
- In the survey, almost **1 in 5 women** (19.7%, 40/207) said that they had experienced domestic abuse at some time in a same sex relationship. Out of the 40 women, 8 (20 %) have experienced domestic abuse in more than one relationship.

# Characteristics of the abuse

60 % isolated violent acts

55 % one-time incident

35 % cycle of violence

30 % mutual violence

27, 5 % escalation of the violence

22,5% long-term violence

22, 5 % happened in public

35 % first relationship

10 % current relationship

The definitional features of domestic violence /all four must be present/

1. repeating and ongoing
2. escalating intensity
3. clear identification of perpetrator and survivor
4. private



Ristock (2003: 335) identified the pattern of first lesbian relationship as abusive in 49 % of the cases - the violence happens in a context of heteronormativity, which implies isolation and dependency on the (more experienced) partner in terms of social and information capital

# Interactional frame of IPV

Behavior is judged according to the gendered expectations – violence is associated with masculinity, which leads to the assumption that the violence in lesbian relationships is distributed accordingly with the butch – femme roles (Renzetti 1996)

The physical appearance is therefore used to determine who is the violent partner and who is the victim.

Hassouneh and Glass (2008) identified 4 myths surrounding IPV in lesbian relationships:

- ⦿ 1) women are non-violent
- ⦿ 2) myth of lesbian utopia
- ⦿ 3) violence between women can not be serious
- ⦿ 4) the feminine partner is the victim

# Women don't hit?

*I can't imagine one woman beating another. [survey #178]*

*I never thought of it. Probably the same as usual + some extra emotional abuse. [survey #65]*

The association with psychological or emotional abuse is quite strong - as 66, 7 % of all respondents think that lesbian IPV is mostly psychological.

*I think that girls can hurt each other the most by some psychological abuse... a guy just hits the woman, and he hits her so much that she can't get up afterwards. But girls hurt each other much more by what they say... It's like a dagger through your heart, and I think that's much worse than one slap each night.*

[Interview #1]

*She started throwing things at me... then it was psychological... she would lock me someplace and tell me „enjoy being helpless“. That was quite often, these psychological... And physical, that was various. Burning, hitting all over, that was very frequent. [I: And did you have to seek medical help after she had attacked you?] Approximately five times during the relationship.*

[Interview #2]

# Female non-violence

- *I think that domestic violence in lesbian relationships is not very common, because usually they are more mature and they have other problems – for example in the society – that they have to deal with, and they don't need to be bothered even at home. [Survey #106]*
  - the myth of lesbian utopia (Hart 1986: 13) – the ideal image of lesbian relationships as equal, loving and non-violent serves as a defence against the stigma of deviant relationships and sexuality
  - the context of societal homophobia
- *They are not women if they can do this. [Survey #112]*
  - This belief is a reflection of one of the myths of lesbian IPV – that women are not violent. And it reflects that violence is associated with masculinity.
- *Butch, behaving like a man. [Survey #197]*
  - The opinion that violent women are those, who are stronger, bigger or more masculine was, however, less prevalent than had been expected. Only 15, 9 % agreed with that.

# Structural effects of heteronormativity on IPV

- ◎ The context of abusive relationships framed by institutionalized heteronormativity and homophobia
  - the threat of being outed is used as a specific abusive form of intimidation
  - isolation, lack of rights and services (Rohrbaugh 2006)
  - homophobia of the police or the criminal and justice system (Renzetti, 1998).

# Naming the abuse in lesbian relationships

- McLaughlin and Rosee (2001) conducted a research comparing attitudes of lesbian and heterosexual women towards domestic violence showing that lesbians had better knowledge regarding domestic violence in heterosexual relationship than in a lesbian one.
- Among those women, who have not experienced IPV in same-sex relationship (N=167), when asked „What are your associations with the term „domestic violence in lesbian relationships?“

10 % claimed they never heard of it, 7 % wrote „nothing“, 7 % can't imagine it and 8 % think women are simply not violent (or should not be).

- => „denial, minimization, silence“? (Merlis, Linville 2006: 131).

# Speaking about the abuse

**Table 2a. Confiding about the abuse at the time of the abusive relationship**

Help sought from	Responses	
	N	Percent of Cases
No-one	20	51,3%
LGBT friends	11	28,2%
Heterosexual friends	6	15,4%
Family	3	7,7%
Therapist	3	7,7%
Someone at work	2	5,1%
Doctors	1	2,6%
Police	1	2,6%
Other – a woman at a dating website	1	2,6%

**Table 2b. Confiding about the abuse after the abusive relationship ended**

Help sought from	Responses	
	N	Percent of Cases
LGBT friends	18	47,4%
Heterosexual friends	15	39,5%
New partner	14	36,8%
Family	10	26,3%
No-one	9	23,7%
Someone at work	4	10,5%
Therapist	4	10,5%
Other – is hasn't ended yet	1	2,6%



# Coming out and speaking

## out

Levels of coming out (scale of 1 – no one to 10 – everyone)

		Coming out to family	Coming out to friends	Coming out at workplace
N	Valid	40	40	38
	Missing	0	0	2
Mean		7,40	8,90	5,82
Median		8,00	10,00	6,50
Mode		10	10	1 <sup>a</sup>

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Of those, who had experienced abuse in lesbian relationship, only 5 % were closeted to their friends or family; the overly high level of coming out should decrease their isolation

However, being out does not erase the effects of heteronormativity - as Balsam (2001) pointed out, the connection between heteronormativity and the silence concerning the abuse in lesbian relationships works at all levels of coming out:

1. Those who are closeted cannot talk about abuse in their relationship which makes them even more isolated (also the threat of being „outed“ can be used as additional form of violence)
2. Those, who are partially out but do not speak about their relationships also remain silent about problems in their relationships.
3. Those who are out and active in the community feel as if they have an image to uphold - being the role models and keeping alive the „myth of lesbian utopia“

# Reasons for the silence

Table 3: The Reasons for not telling anybody about the abuse at the time of the abuse

	Responses	
	N	Percent of Cases
I didn't want to admit it to myself	11	55%
Didn't perceive myself as a victim	8	40%
I was ashamed	6	30%
Didn't want to lose my partner	4	20%
I was scared of my partner	4	20%
I don't look like a victim	4	20%
Sexual orientation	3	15%
Didn't know where to seek help	2	10%
Fear of the reaction	1	5%
Other	6	30%



*„I didn't think it was serious. Mostly it happened when we had a severe fight, and I perceived it that these things just happen once in a while.“ [Survey #171]*



= the context of heteronormativity in which lesbian abuse takes place  
= the intersection of gender and sexuality in the way that gender appearance and the expectations of femininity associated with being „the right victim“ are in play.

# Problems

Table 4: What do you consider to be the biggest problem(s) for those who experience(d) abuse in a lesbian relationship?

	Responses	
	N	Percent of Cases
The silence	27	73,0%
Attitudes towards LGBT people	23	62,2%
The police and the justice system	18	48,6%
Media representations of domestic violence	13	35,1%
Reactions of other people	12	32,4%
Lack of services for survivors	11	29,7%
Attitudes of the LGBT community	6	16,2%

*I think there needs to be some major awareness raising and especially it should start early at schools. Just to tell the kids what is wrong and what is right. It is about the education. It's the matter of how they raise you as a kid. If someone is raised to keep silent and simply obey otherwise they get hit, they will obey in their adult life too. [Interview #1]*

*There should be some media visibility. It is all hidden, people hardly speak about it. [Interview #2]*

# Seeking help

- The survey results show that while majority (73 %) of the survivors consider the silence to be the biggest problem, at the same time they perceive the attitudes of the LGBT community as the least problematic. The victims often see the abuse as their own problem; something they have to deal with for themselves.
- *„What happens in the relationship, stays in the relationship.“ [Survey #164]*
- *[Have you ever considered seeking some „official“ help, some organisations?]*  
*No. I just thought I would deal with it on my own... I don't believe in this. It may be good for people, who can't deal with it alone, but – as I always say – I was raised that way that I deal with everything on my own, rather than looking for help. [Interview #1]*
- *When she [the survivor] doesn't have the will to change it, there is nothing you can do about it. [Interview #2]*

# (The fear of) institutionalized homophobia

- The survivors don't see the problem in the community, rather in the services and the attitudes of the society (towards violence and towards LGBT people). The criminal and justice system and the services for survivors are seen as rather dysfunctional and they don't trust them.

*When you end up in a hospital or a shelter, there should be some ways to keep you there. Because once you are there, they usually say „that's ok“ and there's no further investigation. If I had spent there more than those 2 hours and if they had talked it over with me, maybe it would have ended differently... [Every time] I would say „I don't want to talk about it“ and they would close their files and tell me „you can go home now“. [Interview #2]*

- *My therapist obviously had a problem with it [that it was a lesbian relationship]. She even told me something like „if you were with a boy, it wouldn't have happened to you“. [Interview #2]*

# Conclusion

- Domestic abuse is experienced in many different ways by those in lesbian relationships and the characteristics do not necessarily comply with the dominant definition of domestic violence.
- Intersections of gender and sexuality in IPV
- => Reflection and redefinition of the concept of gender used in the research of DV
- => Redefinition of the theoretical accounts of dynamics and definition of DV

*Thank you for you attention!*

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