

# ***„The wall of silence“: Domestic Violence in Lesbian Relationships***

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# Structure of the presentation

- ⦿ Domestic violence in general
- ⦿ Feminist approach and the family violence approach
- ⦿ Gender (a)symmetry
- ⦿ Silence surrounding the topic
- ⦿ Violence in lesbian relationships
- ⦿ Situation in the Czech Republic
- ⦿ My dissertation project

# Domestic violence in general

- Research topic since 1970' (mostly in the USA)
- Two main approaches:
  - Feminist
  - Sociological

# Feminist approach to DV

- domestic violence as a part of a broader problem of violence against women
- emphasizes the gendered context of domestic violence and the male domination
  - „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)*
- DV is a product (and a cause) of the relations of gender inequality in (patriarchal) society
- (Patriarchal) Power and control are crucial aspects of DV

# Feminist approach to DV

- For some authors violence (in different forms) was a key concept in their theorizing of gender inequality (e.g. MacKinnon, Brownmiller)
- Universalism and essentialism of the binary notion of male perpetrators and female victims was criticized by subsequent authors (e.g. Flax 1987, Segal 1993, Featherstone, 1997), as well as the conceptualization of gender within the domestic violence discourse as such

# Sociological approach to DV

- ⊙ the original aim was to free the discourse on DV from the psychiatric definitions of perpetrators (and victims) as psychopathological personalities without considering the structural and cultural-societal context of the violence (Freeman 1980)
- ⊙ i.e. the discourse of family violence - defines domestic violence in a wider context of the violence in the family and assumes gender symmetry (based on the results of quantitative studies of DV)

# Gender (a)symmetry

- ⊙ **Gender symmetry** assumes that men and women are equally violent, the violence can be reciprocal, therefore gender is not important in the matter (e.g. Straus, Gelles 1986; Gelles 1997; Moffitt, Robins, Caspi 2006).
- ⊙ **Gender asymmetry** points out the different impact of domestic violence on women (Straton 1994 ,DeKeseredy, Schwartz 1998) and 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).

# Sources of the gender (a)symmetry controversy

- Different conceptualization of violence (Dixon 1995)
- Different data and different types of violence (Johnson 1995)
- Different conceptualization of gender (Anderson 2005)



# Violence in non-heterosexual relationships

- in 1990 various critics of existing DV discourse in relation to LGBT violence
- DV discourse has been based on „heterosexual imaginary“ (Ingraham (1994: 204); domestic violence needs to be theorized in relation to social structure and the forms of social differentiation (such as heterosexuality)
- There is a growing body of research, especially in the USA, that shows that lesbians and gay men experience domestic violence at similar rates as heterosexual couples (e.g. Renzetti 1989, Renzetti 1998, Ristock 2002, Rohrbaugh 2006).

# Reasons for the neglect of the topic

- Definition of domestic violence in terms of gender-based violence
- The gender asymmetry debates narrowed the discussion to the question of men's violence against women or vice versa
- Silence within the LGBT community (to preserve the „lesbian utopia“ (Hart 1986: 13))

# Violence in lesbian relationships

- The literature suggests, there are certain specifics that distinguish lesbian violence from heterosexual violence:
  - Renzetti (1989) speaks of various forms of violence, such as violence specifically targeted at survivor's soft spots (e.g. diabetic forced to eat sugar, disabled woman left alone without help, etc.); and homophobic violence (Rohrbaugh 2006) )
  - Lesbian women defend themselves more often (78 % - Renzetti 1989)
  - Shifting dynamics of the relationship (Townley 2001)
  - The societal context of heteronormativity and homophobia (Ristock 2002)
  - Silence (outside and within the community) (Merlis, Linville 2006).

# The silence

- The society:
  - Heteronormativity of the DV discourse (Renzetti 1998)
  - Heteronormativity in the services for survivors of DV (not a single shelter for gay or lesbian survivors (Messinger 2011: 2229))
  - Gender stereotyping (Renzetti 1998)
- The survivors:
  - Internalized homophobia of the survivors (they believe they deserve it or that's the way the non-heterosexual relationship is supposed to be like) (Balsam, Szymanski 2005).
  - Lack of positive role-models (Lehman 1997)
  - Lack of support from close relatives (Kurdek 2010)
- The community:
  - fear of the negative image
  - „denial, minimization and silence“ (Merlis a Linville 2006: 131).

# Domestic violence in the Czech Republic

- domestic violence has not been addressed until 1990 in the Czech Republic
- The dominant approach sees domestic violence as a broader issue of violence between various family members, not only in an intimate relationship, following the sociological approach of the family violence discourse (Straus, Gelles 1986; Gelles 1997).
- In case of partnership violence, it draws on 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 ; and „in order to speak of domestic violence, all four characteristics must be present!“ (Domáci 2007)
- The issues of violence on men have been addressed in the last five years as well.
- Nevertheless, no research has been carried out on the violence within same-sex relationships and the issues that surround it.

# Domestic violence in the Czech Republic – non-heterosexual relationships?

- Specific definition of DV with 4 key factors:
  - 1. repeating and ongoing, 2. escalating intensity, 3. clear identification of perpetrator and survivor 4. private ; and „in order to speak of domestic violence, all four characteristics must be present!“ (Domáci 2007)
- Violence in non-heterosexual relationships has been ignored so far – no research, no article
- Recently a single chapter in a book on domestic violence has been published („LGBT jako oběti domácího násilí“ Hunt, Špatenková 2011) - addressing violence of family members against LGBT people and LGBT partnership violence in context of heteronormativity of the family and society

# My dissertation project

- ◉ *Domestic violence in lesbian relationships (in the Czech Republic)*
- ◉ Aim: To find out, what are the attitudes and experiences of lesbian women with domestic violence in lesbian relationships in the Czech Republic
- ◉ Research questions:
  - ◉ What is considered as a domestic violence within the lesbian community? How is it described, understood, and perceived?
  - ◉ Is domestic violence in lesbian relationships considered a problem? Does it exist (in the opinion of lesbian women)? Do the women have knowledge of the violence? Have they experienced it?
  - ◉ The main focus will be on the experience of lesbian women with domestic violence – How is the violent behavior described? What is considered to be violence, how is it perceived? What forms does it have? What problems do lesbian survivors deal with?

# My dissertation project

- Methodology:
  - quantitative „pre-research“, focusing on the attitudes of lesbian women to the topic, using an internet-based questionnaire,
  - qualitative research will focus on the experience of lesbian women with domestic violence, using in-depth interviews with women, who have experienced domestic violence in a lesbian relationship.

Communication partners for the interview will be approached through the above mentioned questionnaire (which will serve as a call for those interested in participating in further research), and also through the network of LGBT organizations in the Czech Republic and community groups, which will be asked to send the call for participation in the research to their contacts.



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*Thanks for your attention!*

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