Lesbian Domestic Violence: unseen, unheard and discounted

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Domestic violence in heterosexual relationships has been on the agenda of feminist activists, lawyers, police, health and welfare practitioners, and public policy analysts for almost two decades. However the existence of violence in lesbian relationships has taken much longer to acknowledge and, for many, there is still an level of disbelief around this issue. However more recently the existence and extent of lesbian domestic violence has become a topic of debate within the lesbian community and also the community at large. As a consequence there has been the development of literature and research (see for example Lobell, 1986; Pharr 1986, Renzetti, 1992; Renzetti & Miley, 1996).

The data presented in this paper is drawn from a research study which explored lesbians experiences of domestic violence, specifically in relation to support services they accessed. The focus of this particular paper is on lesbian’s experiences of police intervention in domestic abuse incidents.

Background

There is little dispute about the existence of lesbian domestic violence but there is dispute in the literature and research about how widespread it is. In the USA some studies estimate that seventeen percent of lesbians experience domestic violence while others estimate the numbers to be as high as seventy three percent ((Marguiles 1996). In Australia there have been no prevalence studies which makes it difficult to estimate the extent of lesbian domestic violence. However anecdotal evidence would suggest that it is widespread. Many of the forms of abuse that lesbians experience are similar to those experienced by heterosexual women including physical (eg hitting, kicking and use of a weapon, destruction of possessions), emotional (eg public denigration, belittling, blackmail, threats of abuse, interruption of eating and sleeping patterns), sexual (eg forced sex and rape), financial (eg not contributing income, having control over all assets and money, demanding financial support) and social (eg isolation from family and friends). However as well as similarities there are also differences. Most of these are related to the homophobic views about lesbians and the consequent discriminatory attitudes and behaviour. This has many implications for lesbians who are abused including the lack of appropriate support services and negative attitudes and practices of some personnel in mainstream services.

The research

The main aim of this research project was to explore the experiences of women who self identified as survivors of lesbian domestic violence - to give them the opportunity of ‘speaking’ about their experience - a chance to ‘break the silence’. A semi-structured interview was used for this purpose. It was considered that this would encourage lesbians to talk about their experiences in a way that was not constrained by a questionnaire or highly structured interview schedule. The participants generally talked freely about their background, their experiences of abuse, their sources of support and where relevant their use of health welfare and legal services. The initial interview took between an hour and a half and three hours. The interviews were transcribed and returned to the women for comment. Most of the women participated in a second interview, the purpose of which was allow them to comment on the transcript of the first interview and if they wished to elaborate on its the content. In some situations, however, a second interview was not possible.

A picture of the participants

There were twenty-one participants in the research. They came from all states in Australia except Tasmania and the Northern Territory and included lesbians living in both rural and urban areas. Participants included lesbians who were Indigenous Australians, Anglo Australians and lesbians from non-English speaking backgrounds. The ages of the participants ranged between 22 and 57. Their occupations were varied and
included teachers, social workers, lawyers, nurses, beauty consultants and factory workers. For the majority of participants, their experiences of abuse had been in the previous two years, but for some it had been several years previously. For all participants these experiences had a powerful effect on their lives. All of the women had experienced multiple forms of abuse.

The policing of lesbian domestic violence

The remaining part of this paper will elaborate the participant’s views of the police responses in their attendance and follow up of incidents of lesbian domestic violence. The participants had widely differing experiences in relation to police involvement in these domestic violence incidents. For some lesbians these experiences were positive, for others these were negative and for others their experiences were a mixture of both positive and negative. In analysis of the interviews the responses of the participants covered into three main areas. These were whether to contact the police, the action (or not) taken by the police took and views on police responses. These will now be explored in detail.

Police - contact or no contact

Nine of the twenty one women who participated in the study had contact with the police (see table 1). All of these women had experienced multiple forms of abuse, one of which was physical abuse. In all situations in which the police were involved physical abuse was present in combination with other forms of abuse. In four of these situations the women experienced extremely severe abuse which included physical, emotional, sexual, financial and social abuse. This included rape with a beer bottle, forced sex, an attempted drowning, being threatened with a knife and gun, being severely beaten, being tied up and beaten, being urinated on, being isolated from family and friends, being held captive.

Because I was just - I was bruised, it was terrible. Around my neck. I had scratches. I was just - well, this whole side of my face, the left hand side of my face was just one massive bruise. From her punching and grabbing the hair and slamming the face into the concrete. And - yes, I was almost bald from the hair that was pulled out. So I just got in the car and drove. I was stunned, I think. If I had been thinking correctly, it probably would have been better to go to the local police.

For two of these women their experience was over a prolonged period of time as, despite the extreme abuse, they found it difficult to disentangle themselves from a relationship that had initially promised so much. For the other two women the abuse was over a shorter time span but extremely severe, with prolonged physical and emotional effects.
Table 1    Type of Abuse and Police Involvement

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<th>Physical</th>
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<td>Police</td>
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The other five situations in which the police were called also involved multiple forms of abuse, one of which included physical abuse. These situations were also severe and had lasting effects, but did not include the life threatening experiences of the four referred to earlier.

There were six participants who experienced physical abuse (in combination with other forms of abuse) who did not contact the police. Their reasons for not involving the police related mainly to not being believed, not wanting to be ‘out’ to the police and considering that there would not be a positive outcome.

I think the police say “What do I care? They’re women.” I mean, number one, I don’t think - the police, they wouldn’t really see our relationship as a real relationship anyway. And they’d probably say something like “just work it out yourselves”. Or “get out of the situation”.

My abuse came from non consensual S/M - who would ever believe me let alone take action. I didn’t agree to her tying me up and leaving me by myself for two days. I thought I was going to die but who would believe that certainly not the coppers.

Many of the women talked about their shame at involving anyone particularly the police especially when they themselves were involved in working to prevent domestic violence. However for some this worked positively.

I was feeling a bit like a fraud especially in a country town, where I was the chairperson of the domestic violence action group, and later on I ended up having to take restraining orders and involve police in my stuff. But I must say, amongst all that, they have all been remarkably discreet. And very respectful. And I think because I have really good credibility, and because I won’t take any shit from anyone, like “OK no, you’re not going to fucking breach the confidentiality. You will treat me-”. And so I hadn’t gone into the victim mode thing. I’ve gone, “I’ve got rights here, I might have been injured by this person, but these are the things I know your system can do.” So they respected that. And they’ve been very respectful, the police.

The six participants who had not experienced physical abuse but had experienced a range of abuses did not even contemplate calling the police. They, like many heterosexual women in these situations, were of the view unless their was physical abuse then it was very difficult to substantiate and there was no point in contacting the police.
I didn’t think it would be taken seriously - who believes women abuse
I was too ashamed to tell anyone
How can I prove what she did - it had a profound effect on me. It was because it wasn’t physical that it took me so long to call it abuse and by then I was a quivering mess and couldn’t do anything

For some women the decision to call the police was a difficult one. For one this was because of her partner’s previous experiences with police.

I called the police and that was a really hard decision, cause I knew she’d had a hard life. She told me she’d been pack raped by the XXX police. So that was hard. And she was a woman. And I don’t use police. I just don’t use them - you know, it’s not my way. And I’ve never had need to.

Another woman commented on her reticence to call the police because of the experiences she had in a South American country where the police were violent and oppressive. However the violence was so extreme at times, that either she or her neighbours did call the police. This woman was also ashamed that occasionally she had to constrain her partner and was fearful that this would be constructed as her also being abusive.

Because she used to slap me or hit me or punch me in front of C [eight year old child] and I couldn’t do nothing - I never hurt her. I used to hold her wrists. Because she’s tiny. She’s only size 8. She’s smaller than me. She’s such a strong person, physically - like an ox. And I didn’t want to get in trouble, first of all with the law, with police, I didn’t want to hurt her. I didn’t want to put myself in that position that I’d have to go to prison for nothing. It was not my fault. The second thing, I was in love with her. How can I hurt somebody that I love? So I couldn’t hurt her. And she always had, you know, dangerous stuff like knives and scissors. And wooden spoons. Even chairs - she used to get the chairs. She used to break all the furniture

Police - action or inaction?
In only one of the incidents where police were called did they assist the women to take out an AVO. In two situations they assisted the women to return to the premises to collect personal belongings. However in neither situation did the police initiate taking out an Apprehended Violence Order nor charge the perpetrator of the abuse.
No information or initiative in taking out AVO’s No, I never thought of it. Nothing like that. I don’t think they knew, cause they were really young cops. They were young children.

He was just playing superman, and he was going to fix it all up for me and how wonderful and amazing he was. That there was an AVO going to be put in place. He was putting it in place. The whole thing never left his tray, as it turns out a month later the AVO stuff didn’t leave his tray. I thought I was protected by an AVO on one occasion. And when I wasn’t, because he hadn’t actually done it, cause he was playing superman to do all this.

In other situations although the police came and removed the perpetrator of the violence they did not charge her. As one women said about her contact with the police

She kicked my door in. So I rang the police. And they came to the house. They weren't charging her for it. They'd taken a brief statement- I got a phone call the following day from S [perpetrator] saying that the coppers weren't charging her. So I rang the cop back, and he said he just hadn't got round to it yet., I said to him "I'm not safe." He said "I haven't got round to charging her yet. I'm doing other things today. I don't know when that's going to happen." He said, "we're not here to make you safe. You're here to make yourself safe. That's up to you what you do." And that was the end of it with him.

Some women chose to lay charges against the perpetrator when the police took no action and then in some instances still experienced difficulties. As Robyn commented:-

I initially went to XXX Police - I’d been told that they had a good support officer. Initially my friend and I were the only two at the police, but the room gradually filled up, until it was sort of shoulder room only, and it was very noisy. And we had to shout out all details about the charges, and this particular sergeant put us right through the ropes about it, to the very intimate, nitty gritty stuff. I told him it wasn’t necessary to answer those sort of questions, that we were here to have charges laid against her. And all he needed to do was actually to file a charge sheet ... he then got really grotty Then an hour and a half later, he yelled out he’d hear my story, and then he’d consider whether it was worth while letting XXX police know, and if they didn’t want to run with it, well then that would be the end of it. And he told us that these matters were not a matter for the police - that the police - the good police - were very busy dealing with real life crime, and it was a whole waste of the police officers' time.

After this experience Robyn went to another police station and got a much more positive response. However the matter was referred back to the police in the local area where the abuse happened and it took several months to be investigated. However a year later it did go to court and the perpetrator was convicted. This was due almost entirely to Robyn’s perserverance and insistence in making sure the charges were pursued.

On some occasions the attending police also had to deal with abuse from the perpetrators and on some occasions this involved considerable risk.
The police came and she assaulted the police officers. I’ve got this really beautiful house. Double stained glass front doors, and she just put her foot straight through – and they were really good, cause she said “I want to go downstairs and get my bag”, and I knew that she didn’t have a bag. And I knew she’d get a knife. Cause she’d done that several times before. And so I said “it’s OK, I’ll go and get your bag. It’s OK”. By then you know, I thought, “I’ll just keep her calm”. And she tried to come and follow me, and that’s when they touched her, but they wouldn’t have touched her otherwise. You know? They held her and said, “No A. B will go and get the bag. You just wait with us.” And she just got her foot, “fuck you all!” through my beautiful doors.

It was in this situation that the police assisted the victim to take out an Apprehended Violence Order and also charged the perpetrator.

Several of the participants told how on some occasions they had protected themselves against the physical violence and when the police had attended the incident they had also been warned with assault charges by the police. If there are incidents where both parties are involved in physical violence then it can be quite difficult to identify who is the perpetrator of the violence. In some of the incidents described this could have been one of the reasons police did not take action.

Views on Police Responses

No-one that was interviewed experienced explicit homophobic treatment from the police. However some commented on how the police sometimes appeared uncomfortable in the situation.

They probably - seeing two girls - they probably think “those two dykes, fighting again” - they’d been up there a few times. And - yeah, maybe they see it differently. I don’t know.

I think their attitude is, that they’re bashing each other up. It’s one less - or two less. They can knock each other out. Yes, I didn’t find them sympathetic to that at all.

They weren’t wonderful. It’s very difficult to get onto a police gay and lesbian liaison officer. The only time I actually got onto one was for advice over the phone - actually before I was out of the house. My rings were missing. I had two that were quite expensive, and I knew where they were - they’d been - and I actually rang up - and I suspected that X had taken them - and I rang up and I got some advice over the phone. But apart from that, there wasn’t a great deal of help. I think - I don’t think that they were ever interested, really - it’s just not a police thing.

Another participant from a rural area commented on how the police she had contact with were supportive but struggled to make sense of lesbian domestic violence. One said the police officer said to her
Listen mate - the thing is, we've got to stop treating it like lesbians are different. The thing is, there's the bloke and there's the woman. And she's the bloke and you're the woman."

Some women talked positively about the support the police gave them.

Went to the cops. Got the cop who she'd assaulted last year. It was really nice, cause I got in there, very defensive and said “look, if you breach confidentiality, blah blah.” He said “you don’t recognise me. It’s OK. I’m the police officer that X assaulted last year. And we respect your situation. We understand that these situations are really difficult” and so on. And he was great. He just said “what do you want us to do? Do you want us to charge her? She could be doing six months. These are serious charges. Do you want us to warn her? Do you want to warn her?”

Physically you can’t stop her. She is strong, she’s violent. A bit of paper is not going to make any difference. The police do extra patrols now. The police are around. I have them on quick dial. I lock my doors.

Mira who had experienced extreme abuse and was kept captive, commented on her dealings with police at two different locations.

two different perceptions from different police, in a sense - one that’s accepting your story and one that’s not.

After she was able to escape from her abusive situation she was extremely distressed and went immediately to a friends house. When the friend was not there she went to the closest police station.

And the girl there was brilliant - she was absolutely wonderful - you know, took photos, we’ve got photographs... we went to the doctor’s. And she just examined me - yes, bruises everywhere of course. And she made a report. I had all if we went to court. And the police said “Well we should - she should be charged. You should take out an AVO against her straight away.” The policewoman also told me about a woman to go and see for counselling

This was then followed up by the police in the location where the abuse happened and it was decided that, despite the evidence of Mira’s abuse, the perpetrator would not be charged.

The policewoman that I reported it to in the first place was appalled that nothing had been done. The police officer at the police station where it happened said “well, she’s denying everything, and she’s saying that you - she couldn’t possibly hit you because she’s got arthritis. And I believe it because I’ve seen her hands.”

One of the women interviewed was the victim of a serial perpetrator as she discovered when the police took her back to the property to recover her belongings. However the police although they had been called to the property to assist other women in similar situations did not take action.

Yes, I thought she was going to kill me. So the police came with me, and they said to me that they had been here, only they didn’t know quite when it was. Maybe about a year before. And they said it was for a similar thing, they said that a woman was beaten up. “Worse than you”. And they also said that two years before that there’d been another woman - she had been suspended on the twelve foot high compound fence, with a dog on either side of the fence, all night and for half the next day. Then they said “Well you have to press charges”. And I said “look, I’ve still got goods here and I have to get them out - I don’t know why I have to get them out, but I do. I feel I do”.

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Conclusion

The participants in this research did not identify explicit forms of homophobic behaviour or treatment from police officers. Despite this it could be argued that homophobic attitudes and beliefs could provide part of the explanation for inaction experienced by lesbians who are survivors of domestic violence. Given the extreme physical violence experienced by some of the women it is difficult to believe that heterosexual women experiencing the same level of violence would be treated in a similar manner.

Gender is another issue that needs careful consideration. In all situations outlined here the attending police were male. Other research has indicated that gender is an important factor when dealing with domestic violence. While the data in this research is insufficient to confirm this, it is an area which needs further exploration, specifically in relation to lesbian domestic violence.

The police can play a critical role in challenging and preventing domestic violence generally. For this to happen in relation to lesbian domestic violence regular education in relation to both domestic violence and anti-homophobic practices need to be an integral component of police training.
References


