

**Confronting**  
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**Lesbian Abuse**  
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## INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet is designed to increase understanding of lesbian abuse, and to offer suggestions for all concerned with abuse in lesbian relationships. Until recently, the existence of violence in lesbian relationships has rarely been openly discussed. The silence around lesbian abuse has been maintained by a variety of factors; homophobia (fear and prejudice about homosexuality), heterosexism (the assumption of heterosexuality leading to the invisibility of lesbians and gay men), an unwillingness to believe that women could hurt other women, and several myths surrounding lesbians and lesbian abuse. Regardless of the reasons for the silence, the time has come to bring the issue “out of the closet”.

## SOME MYTHS ABOUT LESBIANS

- All Lesbians Hate Men

Lesbians choose to love women, not hate men. How lesbians feel about men varies as much as it does for heterosexual women.

- All Lesbians Are Either Butch or Femme

This is a common stereotype of lesbians. In reality, lesbians, like other women, exhibit a wide range of behaviour and appearance.

- Lesbians Do Not Have Children

Women with children are often assumed to be heterosexual. In fact, lesbians create families in various ways, including having their own children.

Such myths and misinformation about lesbians are still rampant and confound the understanding of lesbian abuse. For example, many believe that only butches abuse, that apolitical lesbians engage in violence, or that lesbian abuse has to be mutual. Myths such as these have prevented a full understanding of lesbian abuse.

The major issues surrounding lesbian abuse are illustrated within the context of three women’s stories. Although the details are accurately drawn from the experiences of women seen at the London Abused Women’s Centre, none of the following stories depict actual individuals.

Following each story is a discussion highlighting some of the unique difficulties that lesbians in abusive relationships face. However, parallels to heterosexual woman

assault are also drawn. It is becoming increasingly clear that many of the factors that contribute to the creation of woman abuse also contribute to lesbian abuse. Underlying men's, as well as women's, abusive behaviour in intimate relationships is the ongoing effort to exert power and control over another individual. Factors that reflect greater power for one partner, such as male privilege or a higher income, have the potential for being exploited by that person.

A systematic use of power and control tactics characterizes abuse in intimate relationships. Abuse is not simply occasional acts of violence, but a pattern of deliberate acts of control over another person. Even in the absence of physical violence, abusers often actively exert power over others by limiting options or eroding self-confidence.

In a culture that sanctions and maintains many forms of oppression (sexism, racism, ageism, ableism, classism, etc.), it is no wonder that anyone, male or female, may look to violence as a tool for control. Lesbians and gay men are not exempt from this aspect of intimate relationships.

### **ANECDOTE 1**

Karleen and Mary are two white women who live together in a small town, several hours drive from any major centres. Karleen, who has chronic arthritis, works intermittently as a clerical assistant, and Mary holds a responsible position as a manager in a large luggage factory. Even though Karleen grew up in this town, no one knows that she and Mary are lesbians. For leisure, they visit with Karleen's relatives, and play bridge with the community club. Mary plays softball and curls with teams from her workplace. While Mary is often busy in the evenings, she has few close friends.

As Karleen's health has slowly worsened, she has become more dependent on Mary for financial and emotional support. Mary has grown increasingly scornful of Karleen, mocking her efforts to continue cooking, working, and getting out on her own. In times of arguments, which are more frequent, Mary criticizes Karleen's attempts to improve her appearance and manage their home. When Karleen has twice tried to discuss changes in their relationship, Mary has threatened to hit her, and taunted her with her lack of financial prospects.

After a particularly hurtful argument, where Karleen was left with no car keys and no fresh food in the house, she phoned the London Abused Women's Centre "just

to talk". She was extremely scared, because Mary had, for the second time in a month, threatened to tell all of Karleen's relatives about their relationship. This was not something that Karleen thought she could tolerate, and she wanted to know how she should handle the situation.

## **DISCUSSION:**

Karleen and Mary's story reveals both similarities and differences to heterosexual woman abuse. As with woman abuse in general, a disability can act to increase a woman's vulnerability to violence. Karleen's options are limited by her greater dependence on Mary for financial and emotional support.

Secondly, as with heterosexual woman abuse, the violence includes psychological and emotional abuse, as well as threats of physical violence. Physical violence is always accompanied by emotional abuse.

There are important differences in the experience of abuse by Karleen because of her sexual orientation. One of the more subtle differences involves Karleen and Mary's increased isolation as a couple. This isolation is heightened for them as they live in a more rural area. However, there are also many lesbians in large urban areas leading insular lives. Homophobia and heterosexism often lead to the isolation of lesbians, who may fear living openly. This problem is heightened when abusers attempt to control their partners by isolating them.

Regardless of the reasons for the isolation, it has predictable effects: isolated lesbians have less support of friends or family. Rural lesbians have the added complications of less access to resources such as shelters or advocacy centres and less anonymity in rural communities.

"Coming out" or being "outed" (exposed) as a lesbian has led to loss of emotional support of friends and relatives, as well as to housing and job losses. An important aspect of Karleen's experience of violence is the abuser's threat of "outing" as a tool for power and control.

As much of society is still very homophobic and lesbian-hating this threat carries very real and serious implications. This threat of outing creates an extremely controlling and frightening situation for Karleen.

## **ANECDOTE 2**

Anita and Dari live in a large city, where they are both very active in lesbian feminist politics. Dari, a black woman from Trinidad, and Anita, whose family came from India two generations ago, were drawn together working in a Woman of Colour publishing collective. They had soon assumed leadership roles, and were both admired in their lesbian community.

Their relationship, while looking perfect to outsiders, was fraught with tensions and competitiveness. Even though they had been together for nine years, Dari had been hiding some of her achievements and publishing grants from Anita for at least six of those years. This helped “keep the peace” at home, and allowed them to carry on enjoying aspects of their relationship that were good.

Dari had, on several occasions, been slapped by Anita, and twice, had been locked out of their apartment late at night. Most of the time, however, Dari was belittled and constantly undermined by Anita, in ways that were extremely subtle and manipulative. Dari had been secretly visiting a feminist therapist for six months, who had concentrated on helping Dari analyze whether her emotional needs were being met by Anita.

Theresa and Marla, their best friends with whom they spent most of their holidays, had become aware of the tension between Dari and Anita when Dari had turned up at their home after being locked out. But they couldn’t believe that Dari and Anita, the “perfect couple”, could be having serious problems. When Dari insisted to them that she was, in her view, emotionally and physically abused, Theresa and Marla said she ought not to exaggerate and overuse the term “abuse”.

Privately, however, Theresa and Marla worried about their friends, even though they had no idea how to help. They sometimes wondered if the violence was mutual. They cared for both of them, and were determined not to take sides. Also, they were worried that Anita and Dari might break up. And worse, if Dari was being abused, and word of that got out, they worried about what effect that would have on their community. Eventually, Marla called the London Abused Women’s Centre for information and advice.

## **DISCUSSION:**

Anita and Dari are different in many ways from Karleen and Mary, but none of

these differences ensure that abuse will not occur. Lesbian violence occurs regardless of race, class, income, level of education, or politics, including feminist and anti-racist affiliations.

Indeed, a lesbian-feminist orientation actually serves as a barrier for Dari. Often other feminists, including lesbians, are strongly motivated to minimize or dismiss lesbian abuse in order to maintain their focus on the issue of men's violence against women, a serious and overwhelming problem. Even the therapist fails to see the primary issue of Dari's safety.

There is also a desire to maintain the image of a "lesbian utopia". This myth states that all women are naturally non-violent, and lesbian relationships are characterized by an equal sharing of power. It follows, then, that any violence observed is more likely to be considered "mutual". Sometimes, both partners in a relationship present themselves to an agency for assistance, both claiming to be victims. This creates a difficult situation for counsellors, who must determine what is actually occurring.

Several factors contribute to the perpetuation of these silences about lesbian abuse. There is the realistic fear that revelations of lesbian violence will be used against lesbians by the wider society to justify labeling lesbians as "sick", or to justify other forms of discrimination. In Dari and Anita's case, there is the added pressure of whites potentially explaining the abusive behaviour using racist stereotypes.

Theresa and Marla (Anita and Dari's friends) reflect these fears in their worry about the effect of exposing partner abuse on their community. In addition, Theresa and Marla may be concerned about potential rifts in the women's community, if other women were to take sides on the issue.

Such appearances of disunity are avoided by oppressed groups, lest they be used by others as a further source of power. Unfortunately, failure to take a stand against abuse inevitably means a failure to validate the victim/survivor of the violence, punishing her and maintaining her isolation.

### **ANECDOTE 3**

Marylou and Jan and their three children live in a modern bungalow in a subdivision in a small city. They met through their children knowing each other at day camp, and after a few months of visiting back and forth, they decided to move in together to save money. The children loved the arrangement, as they had more space and more luxuries than they had before when living with their respective mothers.

Jan and Marylou soon developed a sexual relationship, but never acknowledged this to any of their friends or family. Indeed, they did not even consider themselves lesbians, having no knowledge of any lesbians or any available community of similar women.

For entertainment, Jan and Marylou usually spent time with their kids, went camping, or got home videos. But every evening, they would drink together, especially after the kids went to bed. During these evenings, Jan, in particular, would get “rough” with Marylou, and on several occasions, while drunk, hurt her enough to require medical attention.

Once, Jan pressed Marylou into sexual activity that she did not want, and Marylou was extremely upset the next morning. Marylou would usually lie about the source of her injuries to the doctor and her children, but privately felt more and more scared, and alone.

She could not imagine moving her children again, nor could she figure out how to deal with her feelings about Jan. Although she was on good terms with her ex-husband, she lived in fear that he would learn more about her life, and demand that the children live with him. She knew of no self-help books or services that she could go to. She felt too ashamed and somehow guilty to even consider that anyway.

Eventually, Marylou’s cousin persisted in questioning her about her repeated injuries, and discovered that Jan was the source of them. When Marylou wouldn’t immediately move out, the cousin called the police and then the the local Women’s Centre for advice.

### **DISCUSSION:**

Marylou and Jan became involved sexually without labeling themselves lesbians. Marylou’s options for dealing with Jan’s violence are therefore more limited, and

unlikely to include searching for lesbian-specific or lesbian-positive social services or support groups. It's also possible that Marylou and Jan have internalized shame and guilt about their relationship, increasing their isolation from community supports.

Not having identified herself as a lesbian, Marylou is even less likely to be detected as a victim/survivor of lesbian abuse through her medical contacts. Health care professionals often operate under heterosexist assumptions, rarely asking the questions necessary to identify a lesbian sexual orientation. And while improvements are being made, medical personnel still often overlook evidence of intimate violence altogether.

Marylou justifiably fears her ex-husband finding out about her relationship with Jan. Lesbianism has often been made a factor in deciding custodial matters in the justice system. Marylou faces the threat of the loss of her children if her relationship becomes known to social agencies or to the police through reporting the violence.

Lesbians have few options in family law matters; restraining orders, spousal support and a division of assets are not easily available to abused lesbians. Lesbian abuse, like other woman abuse, is a crime. Marylou's cousin recognized this and called the police, a commendable act. However, Marylou faces repercussions when the police become involved, including being "outed", likely being subjected to stereotypes of lesbian abuse, and possible court proceedings. These are additional barriers to Marylou in seeking help from community agencies.

## **CONFRONTING LESBIAN ABUSE – TAKING ACTION**

IF YOU ARE BEING ABUSED (physically, sexually, and/or emotionally):

SEEK OUT SOME SUPPORT from a trustworthy friend, relative or social service agency.

**REMEMBER, YOUR SAFETY CAN BE INCREASED  
WHEN YOU TELL SOMEONE THAT YOU TRUST.**

HAVE A SAFETY PLAN in place. Advocate/Counsellors at your nearest Women's Centre can help with this.

IF YOU ARE IN IMMEDIATE DANGER, TRUST YOUR FEELINGS – you have a right to safety and support. Call the police. You may want to ask for additional support from the Women's Centre or the 24 hour Assaulted Women's Helpline (1-866-863-0511/416-863-0511, Toronto/1-866-863-7868, TTY ). If you are not safe at home, seek refuge at a shelter for abused women or at an identified safe home in the community.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS – You have the right to a violence-free relationship. No one has the right to abuse you. You have the right to make choices about your situation, and the right to assistance in making those choices. You have a right to specifically seek and check out lesbian-positive professionals (e.g., lawyers, counselors, etc.)

It is important to know you may not get emergency help that is sensitive to your situation or your sexual orientation. Emergency and/or counselling personnel may not be sensitive to lesbian issues or understanding of women generally. Be prepared for this.

Contact the Women's Centre for emotional support, counseling, information and advocacy.

### **IF YOU ARE A FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER:**

PROVIDE NONJUDGEMENTAL SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE. Help the woman find appropriate resources. You may need to educate yourself about the issues. Most of all, do not deny or minimize the violence in her life.

### **If possible, provide her with a safe place to stay.**

IF YOU ARE APPROACHED BY THE ABUSER, prioritize your safety. If possible, portray the attitude that she must take responsibility for the violence, and for getting appropriate help to end her abusive behaviour. Assist her in finding this help.

### **IF YOU ARE A PROFESSIONAL:**

EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT THE ISSUES and challenge your myths and stereotypes. Do not allow homophobia and heterosexism to interfere with the provision of a high standard of care.

ENSURE THAT THE WOMAN IS SAFE and is able to access helpful resources.

**IF YOU ARE A CONCERNED LESBIAN:**

THINK ABOUT AND TAKE ACTIONS TO HELP END VIOLENCE IN THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY. This may involve, for example, joining an action group at your nearest Women's Centre, or organizing a group of your own. Getting together with others can help in the development of strategies for dealing with the violence. Debate such questions as when to involve the police, how to deal with the abuser, etc. Challenge other lesbians when you hear myths about lesbian abuse.

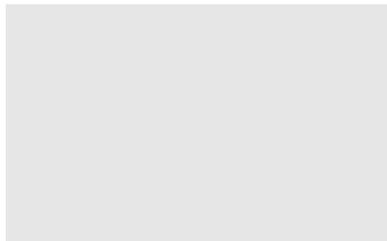
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Confronting Lesbian Abuse

Written by the London Abused Women's Centre  
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Your Local Resources



**Call 911 or your local police  
immediately if you are in danger.**

The Assaulted Women's Helpline  
(24 hours)  
1-866-863-0511 (toll-free)  
1-866-863-7868 (TTY)  
416-863-0511 (Toronto)

Sexual Assault/  
Rape Crisis Centres  
Go to [www.sacha.on.ca/other.htm](http://www.sacha.on.ca/other.htm)  
or look in your local telephone  
book.

Women's Shelters  
24 Hour Crisis Line:  
(519) 642-3000  
Go to [www.shelternet.ca](http://www.shelternet.ca) or look  
in your local telephone book.

Sexual Assault  
Treatment/Care Centres  
Go to [www.satcontario.com/centres/centres.shtml/](http://www.satcontario.com/centres/centres.shtml/) or look in  
your local telephone book.

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