

“No, This Is Not Happening To Me” – (or Violence In Lesbian Intimate Relationships)

Violence in intimate relationships in its occurrence, and in understanding of its dynamics is firstly seen in a heterosexual partner relationship where her male partner exposes a woman to violence. This is quite true since when observing the manner in which the woman is treated in the patriarchal society and amid a reality of an everwhelmingly heterosexual population, most cases reported to different services are described within this context. Above 90% of all violence, perpetrators are persons of male sex and they often direct their violence towards their lawfully married wives. Certainly, not all men are violent nor are all women victims of violence. Practice indicates these parameters based on the sample of regularly reported cases to different non-governmental and state services and concerns persons directly found in the situation of violence where the roles are clearly differentiated with one person perpetuating violence and the other one enduring it – this sample does not cover the general population.

In order to shed some light on this problem, women non-governmental organizations in our country were and still are the leaders in prevention, education and interventions with partner relationships cases (and wider, domestic violence and sexual abuse of women and children). It is customary for women's movements in the world to lack sufficient analysis of female offenders, although women are much less represented in offenders' group than men – their representation and regularities falling under such behavior are looked at after some later phases in the movement's development occur. This is natural since the primary goal in fighting gender-based violence is the deconstruction of male power, which is deconstruction of the patriarchal society. Prejudices coming from the majority population are that all feminists are lesbians and/or that lesbians are all women that gather around certain public action aimed towards bringing about social change. In reality, according to the well known pattern that is used to marginalize any vulnerable/minority group, and within the term women's movement “diverse women” such as women of diverse nationalities, religion, physical and intellectual abilities, race, sexual orientation, age etc., put in additional effort in order to get affirmation of the “equal opportunities” principle in practice. This is also the case within the women's movement. With it, the lesbian sexual orientation and lesbian partner relationships await the proper visibility for a long time. The same situation is in our country. With this, another taboo duration is lengthened – the taboo of violence not existing in lesbian partner relationships.

The assumption that a woman is not violent towards her loved partner in its root starts from assuming women are never violent, as well as another assumption that they are never violent towards other women. This article is an attempt to demystify reality in a partner relationship between two women that is vulnerable to some issues and can be vulnerable in the fact that it has created the space for violence to happen. Existence particularities present in girls and women of lesbian orientation are of invaluable importance in understanding the beginning and occurrence of violence.

The same and the different

This section title puts women as the largest marginalized group under the same roof. Both of them, heterosexuals and lesbians will initially defend from violence with denial and minimizing: “No, this is not happening to me”, “It happened only once”, “It is my fault”, “It's not a big deal”. These will be followed by the feeling of shame, guilt, low self-esteem, and low self respect: “I'm ashamed to speak about it”, “Why me?”, “Nobody will believe me”, “She mustn't find out I told it”, etc.

The following are just some of the myths that follow female survivors regardless of their sexual orientation:

- “The cause of violence”, e.g. the violence is caused by drugs and alcohol consumption, stress, history of childhood abuse, inability to control anger and communication problems. The equal is “the cause” that is more adequately named GOAL, regardless of sexual orientation and it is comprised of controlling other person and demonstration of one’s power over other person.
- “Mutuality” – for couples where there is violence is often said that “they are fighting” instead of clarity that one person is exposed to violence while the other is the offender. Often the interpretations of this myth go that violence is the way of communication between the two persons in question or even more emphasized with lesbian relationships in a way that “lesbian relationships are always relationships based on equality”, wanting to stress that lesbian relationships do not entail inequality of sexes as heterosexual do.
- “Violence is inflicted by a physically stronger person”, this is how the behavior of violent men in heterosexual relationships is explained (read: justified), and the physical strength is even listed among the “causes”... Within the lesbian relationships, this myth stigmatizes the target group of those lesbians who authentically practice their relationships through “butch and femme” pattern and the belief of violence occurring only in these relationships is supported.

The effects of violent behavior are the same with all women exposed to violence: self-blame, anger and rage, sleep and eating disorders, the feeling of hopelessness, helplessness, depression, anxiety, inability to relax, avoidance of social situations, “being trained” in satisfying the needs of the person who is inflicting the violence (often repetition in the following relationships), physical injuries and constant pain in the body, head, etc.

THE PATTERN OF IN LESBIAN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

*In 1986 Barbara Hart gave the definition of violence in lesbian relationships in her book “*Naming the Violence: Speaking Out About Lesbian Battering*”. Violence represents a pattern of behavior that includes the violence and coercion with which a lesbian intends to control thoughts, beliefs and behavior of her intimate partner or to punish her for resisting. One incident of physical violence, according to this definition, does not give the pattern of beating in lesbian emotional relationships. The physical violence is not beating unless it does result in stronger control of the perpetrator over the victim. Further on the list of strategies/tactics is given and it created the core of the violence pattern.

Emotional/psychological abuse: humiliation, degradation, lying, isolation, and manipulation, withholding important information.

Economical abuse: income control, interfering with employment and education, usage of joint bank account without partner’s permission, accumulation of property in one’s person possession alone, refusal to work while requesting support.

Threats: threats to commit physical and sexual violence or property destruction, threats of violence directed to significant others, stalking, harrasment.

Homophobic control: threats to out the partner to her family, friends, employer, the police, church... “She deserves everything that is happening to her because she is a lesbian”, telling her partner that nobody would believe her because lesbians are not violent, that there is no solution for her within

the homophobic world.

Sexual violence: rape, sex on request, denial of sex, forcing to sex with another person, denial of reproductive freedom, usage of degrading sexual language.

Destruction of property: tearing up clothes, breaking household objects, plugging out the telephone, breaking into the apartment and entering, abuse of pets, puncturing the car tires, arson and theft.

Physical violence: attacks with the use of guns, knives, wire, high-heeled shoes, broken bottles, pillows, cigarettes, poison usage; scratching, kicking, hitting, slapping, pushing down the stairs, locking or other ways of punishment, tickling until losing breath or panic strikes; depriving the partner of sleep, warmth and food.

SPECIFICS SUPPORTING THE PATTERN OF VIOLENCE

Some myths on violence within lesbian relationships support the ongoing of a violent pattern and thus make the lives of lesbians who are exposed to violence more difficult. One of the myths supports the belief of lesbian relationships never being violent. The starting point is that women relationships are always gentle, delicate etc. This, at the same time, draws a conclusion that if violence in lesbian relationships occurs and is recognized it becomes taken less seriously. The experience of lesbians exposed to violence accounts this is a case of the “real” violence. Another myth, especially promoted amongst women, feminist and lesbian communities has to do with the assumption that apolitical lesbians make violent lesbian relationships. The given assumption claims further on that all those involved in the women’s movement politically and later on become activists are “immune” to violence and the stigma moves onto the others: their orientation and identity live outside this context, maintain contact or not with the activists and women’s movement. It is important to understand that it is actually they who are isolated and with reduced opportunities for receiving adequate help. With such an assumption, again the delay of facing reality of violence occurs and its possibility to show up in any lesbian intimate relationship – and it is this myth that “protects” the activists, it will impose expectations that would most often respond with later disclosing violence or they would keep this “secret” for a long time or maybe they will never speak out. The imperative is the one of “maintaining the image”, especially if a woman or a couple makes a sort of a role-model (e.g. outspoken activists, long-term relationship, etc). It is not a rare case that activists do not recognize violence on time. Reporting violence both by the victim or the offender minimizes to great extent the feeling of shame. The shame of one being beaten by a woman or that one is a woman beating another woman overcomes the need for finding available sources of help.

The lesbian community is very small and not sufficiently open and this narrows down the possibility of safe disclosure of violence. As with any other community, there are attempts of creating moral codes/ethics here. Significant drawback, when creating every “organized” codex having to do with lesbian existence, comes primarily from a feminist community that itself does not have sufficiently regulated ethics. In some cases, it is actually the taking over of “butch and femme” model in an inauthentic, but politically desirable way, that opens up a legitimate space for violence where the butch partner can “cover up” with different “macho” behavior, which from the outside looks like “a cozy house filled with love and care” but in its core is a utterly controlling relationship. The most difficult to recognize for the women are the violent acts expressed in the sphere of emotional abuse. Still, when a partner/partners recognize(s) such violence it is necessary she/they seek help – both the woman exposed to violence and her partner. Seeking help can be done, but not necessarily, together and at the same moment in time. A female offender who received psychological assistance has much better prognosis than with the male perpetrators.

What is important to know about lesbian intimate relationships in the context of violence?

Although there is a usual forethought on lesbian relationships as liberated from the power dynamics which derives from sexism and misogyny (as with heterosexual couples) - the reality is different. Apart from the cases when this power dynamics cause violence in lesbian relationships can bear similarities with the one in the heterosexual relationships – it is important to look at the differences. Lesbians lack the power guaranteed to men which is additionally strengthened through the usage of male privileges. The oppression to which lesbians are exposed can (opposed to the category of power) play a more important role in understanding the occurrence of violence. It is of outmost importance to be aware of the internalized misogyny and homophobia effects on the intimate relationship. A lesbian can feel hatred towards herself as a woman and a lesbian as well as towards other women and lesbians, and she can blame herself (and others) for her sexual orientation with intensive feelings of self-contempt and self-disgust (“Maybe lesbians are really sick and I deserve to be humiliated...” or “Mother finally accepted me again, I would never tell anything bad about my partner”). Should a woman not be aware of this process the consequences can be devastating on the relationship. Instead of recognizing and naming the violence, long depressions may take place as “a silent” symptom.

Some studies conducted abroad which deal with reporting violence, show that lesbians who report a higher need for control would more often report the usage of violent tactics in conflicts with their partners. In order to understand why a person decides for violence (behavior by choice) it is important to see what she gains through such behavior. The repeated usage of violence from the person’s perspective means she believes to achieve (whatever it may be) a certain goal. Lesbians are deprived of control in different aspects of their lives, no matter if they come out with their orientation or not. If a girl or a woman comes out with their lesbianism she can lose her (primary) family, friends, children, employment, (rented) apartment, etc. This goes for other different privileges that majority population has “for granted”. The moment a woman is out, she does not have any control over the reactions of others and she faces a threat of discrimination. If she is not out with her orientation, she has to put in constant effort to conceal the truth and is under constant stress. Within the remaining degree of control over her life, it is not uncommon for a woman to show the need for certain authority within these “remains”.

Further on, the lesbians that communicate a higher level of fusion would communicate more the usage of violent tactics in conflicts with their partners. The concept of “merging into each other” or “fusion” is used to explain the genesis of intimacy and conflicts in lesbian intimate relationships. Colloquially, lesbians recognize this occurrence as an outmost closeness, which is considered to exist in a special way only between two women”, and this often includes the relationships of dependence. One of the explanations for this fusion is that this is a response to the hostile environment; practically it represents a strategy for lesbians to maintain their boundaries as a couple within the constant integrity threats to the relationship itself. Within the good purpose of the fusion, it can support the feeling of sameness, which in the end brings frustration within the intimate relationship. If the merging of one into the other is recognized as a relationship value (“we” instead of “me”), any act experienced as a differentiation or distancing can be experienced as a threat. Other threatening reactions are the feelings of desperation, panic, “being provoked” and (killing) anger. It is most certain that the intensity of emotions is not causing violence; a lot of us do not resort to violence when we feel intensive emotions. This intensity creates urgency to which the violence is only one of offered responses.

These studies also indicate that lesbians who report more often the usage of violent tactics with their partners would also manifest the higher level of dependency as part of their characters. When

working with women and girls of lesbian orientation, the authoress often undergoes the learning process on building intimate relationships. Most often, there are questions of both partners' autonomy within the relationship and the need to reach the balance between separation and bonding. In the context of violence – the higher the desire of a victim-partner to be independent and the higher the dependency of an offender-partner, the higher is the probability for the offender to use more violent tactics on a more frequent basis. It is not uncommon to see mutual dependency as acknowledged relationship value as a kind of quality indicator. Reported incidents of physical violence are about these “battles” colored with dependency vs. autonomy topic.

Finally, the lesbians that communicate more often the usage of violent tactics in conflicts with their partners would also communicate the lower level of self-esteem as part of their characters. Often, the low level of self-esteem is given together with the bad self-image and relates to the gap between the desired and gained status in life (“inconsistency of status”). The bigger the gap, the bigger the risk of reaching for violent tactics and thus the violence serves as a means for overcoming the feeling of inadequacy and losing control over one's life.

Opposed to the view on offenders, foreign statistics shed light to more details to the history of girls and women exposed to violence, pertaining to possible prior experiences in verbal, physical and sexual victimization and within the context of violence against the sexually diverse. Apart from this, the numbers indicate that the current situation of violence can represent also a re-victimization when primary family is concerned.

CURRENT TRENDS AND HOW HEALING RESOURCES LESBIAN- FRIENDLY ARE

Some of the historical events regarding gender-based violence in Serbia are noted precisely in 2004: the state supports opening of shelters for women victims of violence, first three persons that are pardoned by the President are women that killed their husbands after suffering domestic violence for years. Here we have precious precedents that promise serious treatment of domestic violence by the state and send an important message to heterosexual women victims of violence.

Domestic violence is a taboo; lesbian relationships are taboo, violence in lesbian relationships... Do we understand a lesbian partner relationship as a family and when does it become a family? With the lack of officially acknowledged same sex marriages by the state which type of recognition and acknowledgement e.g. for a long term lesbian relationship is needed to happen so that this partner relationship should get its status of a “family”?

Instead of a notion that “a family is where the love is”, the corpus of patriarchal values amongst others prescribes that “family equals children”, more precisely – having children. By this, heterosexual women, i.e. heterosexual couples that for whatever reason do not have children, do not receive this “social acknowledgement” and have already experienced that the majority / dominant group does not forgive anyone. For lesbians and lesbian couples an open cooperation with the state, including giving birth to children, is inconceivable and the practice of developed countries is still far away from us.

However, one of the current trends produces mixed feelings. Namely, the question goes whether it is “needed to send the last warning” to the state regarding the latest Family Law of Serbia. The Law (in its adjustments with the European legislation or in the realization of the trend in alternative childcare for children without parental care, so called de-institutionalization?) offers a new possibility in adopting children by individuals up to the age of 45. This possibility would no longer

be the one of heterosexual married couples and an equal opportunity is opened for individuals of both sexes, by this for lesbians (and their partners) to officially take over the parental role. As usual, until a set of legislation is brought that regulates same sex unions, the state sends a double message: you can adopt a child if you fulfill all those publicly listed conditions, but still, do not be out about your sexuality during the adoption procedure! Remain hidden because this is the best way for the state/the majority to control the sexually diversities!

Regarding violence in heterosexual partner relationships the services of the state institutions still manifest a significant lack in understanding and providing adequate assistance, they take sides with the offender, become part of his violent pattern, blame the woman, suggest reconciliation, etc. There is a justified concern how would an adequate service be given to a lesbian exposed to violence in her emotional relationship, starting with a dilemma whether she would turn for help since making violence visible leads to a basic coming out. The same goes for assisting a lesbian couple that would seek assistance because there is violence in their relationship. And looking at the Article 118a of the Penal Code of Serbia that carries the title “domestic violence” that was passed in March 2002 the question poses itself: is there, in this truly revolutionary Penal Code Article, room for a lesbian intimate relationship?

Similarly, when reporting: a) various health problems where girls and women of lesbian orientation almost always represent themselves as expected “as if...” (they are heterosexual); b) gay bashing situations (beating up of lesbians and gay men) that are not being reported, not even by lesbian/gay organizations that are well aware of these; c) etc... It is certainly comfortable for the state institutions that there is a lack in reporting present problems by the organizations, that were formed in order to work on the issues of sexually diversities, thus a critical mass of reported problems is not formed and real changes cannot be made.

If all of the previous questions would be commented that it is too early in our country to talk about the sensitiveness of legislation and institutional practice when needs of sexually diverse are in question, it is important to make a pause and reassess one’s own prejudices, stereotypes, resistances, one’s own actions aimed to exclude the Others, often one’s own hatred towards the sexually diverse. Allowing personal experiences of violence and discrimination that happens to the Others still not to be “good enough” trigger for one’s own different action from the present, draws a complete responsibility, on every individual, for ongoing hate crimes.

CONCLUSION

Through analysis of violence in lesbian intimate relationships it is clear that it goes further than heterosexual context analysis, in other words, the relation between power and violence is much more complex and contradictory than it was previously thought. The problem of violence in lesbian intimate relationships is followed by non-recognizing, denial and misunderstanding – both inside the relationship itself and by the lesbian community, state and society as a whole. It is difficult for the members of lesbian and feminist community and women’s scene in general (whether they are lesbians or not) to accept that amongst them there are women that batter and abuse women.

It is not enough to understand the violence dynamics within heterosexual relationship. As far as the treatment of this problem is concerned, a frame that goes for heterosexual offenders and their victims would be inadequate to use and this would rather intensify the complexity - than bring about recovery for women exposed to violence and taking over responsibility by the one who perpetuates violence. Stress that follows minority groups and, in this case, both internalized misogyny and

homophobia within the lesbian couple – has a special place in understanding the problem. Because of lack of basic support network within the private surrounding of the sexually diverse, it is very difficult to make a real change.

There is a question whether the state is ready to deal with the problem of violence in partner relationships/domestic violence and the question of accordance of the institutions with the specifics of sexually diverse persons' existence. Having in mind that there is a considerable lack of lesbian-friendly approach in state institutions, NGO sector will remain the main source of assistance. As opposed to this, there is a daunting presence of homophobia among the helpers. Intervention in cases of violence in lesbian intimate relationship will remain just one of the services that NGOs as safe places for the marginalized social groups offer instead of the state. In front of all services - no matter which sector they belong to – is a long learning process in the future.

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*The authoress has facilitated a three-hour workshop themed “Violence in lesbian partner relationships” in 1998. Numerous women's NGO activists were present. It can't be claimed that in the meanwhile there was significant change in awareness raising on this problem while, in practice there are girls and women of lesbian orientation that, lacking the recognition, communicate situations that belong to the context of violence. Their personal experiences are invaluable and demanding towards the opening of this issue.

Serbian-English translation by [A](#)