

The article is a product of long-term engagement in providing psychological assistance to women and girls of lesbian orientation and working with educational programs dealing with diversity together with numerous women and other NGOs; during the period March-April 2005 the author provided psychological assistance to women as co-facilitator in the Support group for sexually different women; the article is published within the Labris psychological web counseling and is a continuation of the four previously published articles from January, June, December 2004, June 2005 and December 2005; As of April 2006, the author has been available for providing psychological assistance within the Labris counseling through personal contacts.

LESBIANS CHILDHOOD SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

It is extremely difficult to live in a non-friendly surrounding as a lesbian. Surviving sexual violence also represents a complex experience. The synthesis of these two identities in one person starts a number of questions regarding their potential mutual interconnection. Dilemmas opened up by the surrounding strengthen the (self) stigmatization. Patriarchal societies and their states are not ready to support, accept and understand women's existence either within the context of sexual diversity or within the context of violence, sexual violence in particular. Such a description of the circumstances is the most appropriate for Serbia at this moment.

This article deals with the prejudices against lesbians which are based on the lack of information, incorrect information, but also with the purposeful manipulation of the information regarding the phenomena of sexual abuse used by the larger part of the general and expert public in order to make lesbian existence more difficult, and also of non-lesbian women who were abused in their childhood. The article indicates that there is no connection between sexual victimization and sexual orientation, as well as perpetuating sexual violence and sexual orientation.

For those lesbians who survived sexual violence in their childhood, the following paragraphs contain an overview of the basic emotional effects. Also, the intertwining of these effects (internalized) homophobia and sexual violence effects is being stressed, and the fact that it is, for adolescents in particular, very complex to 'demarcate' these effects, and drawing a clear distinction is important so that both can be successfully dealt with.

The article, in its entirety, enables us to look into good practices of being an ally, which becomes possible only after questioning personal capacities regarding given topics and thinking about the personal and concrete ways of affirming lesbians, sexual violence survivors. At the same time, this stimulates possible study research by LGBT organizations that would include data on the amount of survived sexual violence in childhood with LGBT individuals and their specific indicators. For detailed insight in the issue of childhood sexual abuse relevant sources are recommended.

Discriminatory view of general and expert public on the interconnection between sexual diversity and prehistory of violence

Is she a lesbian 'because' she has survived violence? One of the ways to deny oneself as a lesbian is exactly the presupposition of survived sexual violence (in childhood) as being a 'determiner' of sexual orientation of a woman or girl. The social majority imposes such a presupposition, which makes girls and women of lesbian orientation often believe it and thus support self guilt and bad image of oneself. In this sense, the claim has been brought that the relevance of the perpetrator's sex and is therefore said that women and girls are 'certainly exposed to risk of becoming lesbians' because they were abused by the persons of male sex. Such narrow and straightforward understanding by its advocates comes to a dead end when the taboo of women sexual violence perpetrators is tackled?! Countries with a long history of respect for human rights and working in the area of violence and sexual diversity offer a scientific standpoint that there is no causal relationship between survived sexual violence and sexual orientation.

Both here and in the world the estimate of 'gray numbers' of children, sexual violence survivors, is based on various studies and ranges between every third and every eighth girl having survived some form of sexual abuse by their 18th birthday. The term 'some form' comprises the following: obscene phone calls, display of otherwise covered body parts, voyeurism, cuddling, attempted rape, rape, child prostitution and child pornography. Any of these forms of sexual abuse are most commonly perpetrated by a person the child is familiar with, a person the child trusts, and has authority and power over them. Out of four children that are sexually abused, three are girls and one is a boy. It is clear that if such a discriminatory presupposition were valid, we would be astounded by the geometrical progression of women-perpetrators of all forms of violence and lesbianism that would 'suddenly be all around us'. It is easy to refute this argument by mentioning that girls surviving any form of abuse in their childhood, adolescent or adult age, most often find themselves in a violent heterosexual partner relationships or other self destructive patterns of behavior where they relive victimization by the persons of male sex who recognize the opportunities for control and re-abuse just because of this vulnerability.

Truths are more important than myths – and it is correct, and natural, that a certain percentage of women who were sexually abused in their childhood by persons of male sex, develop unease with male individuals, that some of them love women, some do not engage in partner relationships (with either sex) etc, while they are most often heterosexual and living in a classical form of a marriage.

Secondly, it is true that the survivors fear the risk of damaging others through sexual violence. The author's experience after 12 years of working in assisting women psychologically with sexual traumas undeniably indicates that survivors have an increased awareness and personal responsibility to prevent violence repetition. Connected to this, women ask themselves additional questions regarding potential parenthood and parenting skills and this outstanding degree of responsibility is not to be seen in the same manner (or is not present at all) with persons who have not had sexual violence experiences as children. The same goes, since they have learned from their own experience, for the sharpness in recognizing sexual violence in their surrounding and thus can immensely contribute both preventively and through timely and adequately intervening in such situations.

The presupposition through which sexual orientation is connected with a prehistory of violence eventually serves to the 'justifying' stereotypes – (Something must have happened to them in their childhood, some trauma... which equals 'Well, they could not have helped it', and similarly, seeking 'proof that homosexual persons were 'born like that', to make homophobes 'feel better'). Knowing the difficulties in 'coming out' with one's sexual violence experience, inadequate presuppositions actually make things much worse. The starting point here is that only heterosexuality is acknowledged and accepted so we do not need to ask heterosexual individuals "What do you think caused your heterosexuality?". Contrary to this, the persistent demanding for 'justifications and explanations' never stops when explaining other sexualities. Undoubtedly, social consent regarding lesbians as being a healthy life style and choice and the idea that lesbian existence represents a basic human right is still a distant concept in Serbia.

"They are all pedophiles" – Is another presupposition by which a homophobic surrounding spreads hate for homosexual individuals equaling homosexual orientation with pedophilia. Also, the scientific standpoint for such claim does not exist, but it is merely a manipulative act by the homophobic majority. The permanent phenomenon of finding 'scapegoats' is recognized here, i.e. attaching negative, not sufficiently known or controversial phenomena to vulnerable social groups (e.g. well known AIDS issues on the onset of this disease). How many people in Serbia would hire an openly lesbian babysitter? To say the least, it can be concluded that there is an equal representation of both heterosexual and homosexual child molesters. Certain estimates claim that there is about 10% of homosexual population in all, and again it is easy to mathematically calculate the representation of sexual violence perpetrators within the important homosexual minority. Lacking domestic, studies conducted abroad indicate from 0% to 3.1% homosexual perpetrators of sexual violence against children, a remarkably lower rate than expected.

If you are a lesbian childhood sexual violence survivor / Emotional effects

Women who have survived sexual violence feel different in relation to other individuals. Likewise, lesbian orientation, for women living in heterosexist surroundings, arouses the feeling of experiencing oneself as 'weird, different...', filled with unease towards themselves. Homophobia and biphobia 'add up' to the problem of misogyny for a lesbian or bisexual survivor. Lesbians and bisexual women will oftentimes deny their sexual identity in order to feel 'less different'. Within the underdeveloped societies, both identities are stigmatized and a valuable survival mechanism is represented by denying some of these identities.

Women with a prehistory of childhood sexual violence manifest a number of difficulties in their daily functioning, both in their adolescence and adulthood. These difficulties can include an adolescent 'acting out' manifested through delinquency, school problems, authority conflicts, promiscuity, prostitution, oftentimes connected with running away from home. Also, the survivors can show manifestations of depression, guilt, low self-esteem, inferiority, drug and alcohol addiction, self-destructive forms of behavior, dissociation, isolation, suicidal thoughts and attempted suicides, as well as intimacy and sexuality issues, and problems in partner relationships. These mentioned difficulties seem to overlap with those occurring in accepting oneself as a lesbian (Labris web counseling article from June 2005 titled: "Lack of positive role models and their influence on lesbians coming out"), so it is not easy to distinguish what is causing a negative self image and feelings about the others in a given moment. It is most important to understand these as normal reactions – both those regarding survived childhood sexual abuse and those dealing with internalized homophobia. Every woman records the same, healthy reactions to these unhealthy circumstances (and manifests them uniquely). Both recovery from sexual trauma and forming one's sexual identity are parallel long-term processes with achievable aim.

Sexual abuse in childhood is sometimes called "the rape of trust". The experience of sexual abuse and regaining control over one's life with a lesbian are included equally in the struggle to overcome powerlessness, paralysis where other (sexual abuser / heterosexual majority) make decisions about one's life. The attempt to achieve lesbian existence often repeats the feelings of powerlessness and not having a grip over one's own life – the exact feelings woman has met within the trauma of violence. Additionally, an open coming out with one's survived sexual trauma and current lesbian orientation is burdened with the risk of being rejected by dear and important individuals. The presupposition of one's lesbian sexual orientation (e.g. according to their appearance) or open coming out with woman's lesbianism, bears the risk of a woman being raped (again) and such events are those that remain least talked about.

These are some of the processes and difficulties when different experiences and identities encounter in one person. The most important thing to know is that you are not a lesbian because you survived male violence or because you hate men, but that you are a lesbian because you love women. And that you are a valuable person, in spite of being a survivor of sexual violence. Bearing one's lesbian identity with the same pride is just as important, as well as being aware of one's value and the fact that you deserve everything you want for yourself. If you are uncertain about your sexual orientation, do not rush it, it is perfectly all right not to know it in a given moment. Should this process of self insight bring you fear, that is normal as well.

Discrimination and violence against the sexually different, as well as sexual violence against women and children, all those constitute hate crimes. Often, masked professional tolerance takes place within the real giving up of power and hierarchical demonstration of that same power. It is frequently heard that: "Homosexuality has not been on the list of psychiatric disorders, but I think...". Rarely will a therapist or helper of any other profession, say that they come out openly before his or her clients with such a sentence or that such a thought 'just crosses their mind'. It is important for a girl or a woman of lesbian orientation and those that have survived sexual violence in childhood, when choosing your helpers, to be aware and judgmental about some ethical issues:

1. When a helper discusses pathology, they have in mind homophobia, not different sexualities.
2. They do not accept your possible request, at the beginning of a therapeutic process, to work together on changing your sexual orientation (from lesbian to heterosexual), but redirect the issue to (internalized) homophobia that could be behind such a request. Should they "be led" by your request, inadequate assistance would again have a direct influence on your self-esteem (what will happen to the women that 'are unable to change' their sexual orientation?).
3. They avoid patronizing regarding the client's "not knowing exactly" their sexual orientation, so that their initial request ("for change") needs to be respected.
4. You have the right, if it is for therapeutic reasons, to ask about your helper's sexual orientation and to get an answer. This question principally, does not differ much from the usual situations that include answering personal, private information about the helper, but it is important to bear in mind that the options of different sexual identities include careful approach (e.g. if your helper is heterosexual, it is important for you to be convinced by their concrete statements that it will in no way be discriminatory for you).
5. When you are a childhood sexual violence survivor, choosing the helper is especially difficult. A helper needs to possess attitudes, expertise and experience that enable her to confront the difficulties in daily lesbian existence and effects to the prehistory trauma survived in childhood. Basically, they need to always believe in your experience of sexual abuse ("even if you have just as an adolescent" understood that there are dreams or flashbacks that indicate sexual trauma surviving)*.
6. In order to achieve the set goals in the best interests of girls and women of lesbian sexual orientation, a helper needs to be under constant supervision (or personal learning therapy) in order to recognize her response to sexual diversity and violence context. These questions can also be asked for you to know your helper. Ask her what type of training in dealing with violence she has gone through and about the number of women and girls she had worked with on the issues of sexual trauma.

Dušica Popadić

June 2006.

*More details on sexual abuse survived in childhood, "Courage to Heal: A guide for women survivors of child sexual abuse" and on necessary qualities in a helper working in sexual violence context see www.incesttraumacentar.org.yu