



# **Naming the Unmentionable**

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# **Lesbian Domestic Violence**

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# Abstract

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Violence in intimate lesbian relationships is a hidden phenomenon. The gendered language and analysis of domestic violence put forward in much mainstream literature has effectively obscured the possibility of same sex violence. This has subsequently silenced survivors, making difficult the development of a specific analysis of this phenomenon.

The aim of this thesis is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of power, violence and the oppression of women within lesbian relationships. Six self identified survivors of abusive lesbian relationships were interviewed and their stories interpreted in an attempt to analyse the reasons for the silencing of this phenomenon within lesbian communities. This was done by way of describing participants beliefs in relation to the context in which domestic violence occurs and their beliefs about the nature of lesbian relationships.

Results from this thesis suggest lesbians are rendered silent about their experience of abuse in their intimate relationships by way of an acceptance of the dominant feminist gendered analysis of domestic violence and a belief in the egalitarian nature of lesbian partnerships.

I have attempted to document and interpret the experiences of the women in this study in a way that is meaningful to them and to those who seek knowledge and understanding about this phenomenon.

# Declaration

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This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any other university or tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Jan Thompson

# Acknowledgments

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Many women have contributed to the completion of this thesis by giving me their personal and professional support.

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# Introduction

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Power, gender and social control have been central factors in the feminist analysis of violence against women. This feminist framework of domestic violence that assumes heterosexuality, has failed to take account of the possibility of violence in intimate same-sex relationships thus effectively silencing lesbian and gay male victims / survivors from speaking about their experience. This has subsequently made theoretical discussion about the issue problematic.

Both lesbian and non lesbian feminists fear that the acknowledgment of the existence of domestic violence in lesbian partnerships will endanger the gender specific feminist analysis that views domestic violence as a consequence of male privilege and power in society (Morrow & Hawhurst, 1989).

However, feminist analyses of violence against women can be useful in developing an understanding of violence in lesbian relationships. If violence in lesbian relationships is seen as part of the continuum of violence against women in general and violence is viewed as a form of power and control then it is possible to assume that even lesbians learn violence and hatred against women. The context of violence in lesbian relationships is however different to that found in violent heterosexual relationships (Lobel, 1986).

An exploration of this context necessitates an understanding of the impact of internalised misogyny and internalised and institutionalised homophobia and heterosexism on the lives of lesbians. As the ideologies of homophobia and misogyny are both rooted in and perpetuate a society which fears homosexuals and hates women, they reinforce one another and constitute a sometimes overwhelmingly oppressive environment within which lesbians attempt to live their lives.

How then do we make sense of these ideologies and how do they shape community responses and affect lesbian identities? Celia Kitzinger (1987) argues that lesbian communities have been encouraged to construct identities that reaffirm the basic validity of the dominant moral order. She discusses the romantic love and true happiness scripts that lesbians may use to explain their relationship and identities. These scripts create a notion of a well-adjusted lesbian, an identity tailored to be acceptable within the dominant order.

The notion of the well-adjusted lesbian creates many barriers within lesbian feminist communities when trying to theorise about violence in lesbian relationships. These barriers are found in the diverse explanations that have been constructed to explain this phenomenon. Such explanations include: abuse between lesbians does not occur, abuse between lesbians does occur but it is 'different', only certain types of lesbians abuse their partners, abuse occurs because of internalised homophobia and misogyny (Ristock, 1991). These explanations demonstrate certain ideological assumptions that are made about lesbian relationships and lesbians. Perhaps most importantly, it is clear that a lesbian victim of abuse in her intimate relationship challenges the hope for and belief in the ideal relationship that lesbians hold dear.

Data for this thesis was arrived at by the researcher's interpretation of stories from six self identified lesbian survivors of abuse in their intimate relationships. Prior to collecting this data, the researcher worked for six months with a reference group of four women to develop a framework of questions that could be asked of participants that would contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexity of issues related to lesbian domestic violence.

This thesis will highlight many of the ideological positions and belief systems held by the researcher, her reference group and the participants in the study in relation to the phenomenon of lesbian domestic violence.



# Literature Review

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Partner abuse in same sex relationships is mostly shrouded in silence, much as spouse abuse and child abuse was twenty years ago (Renzetti 1988).

One reason for this silence in relation to lesbians is that

The reality of women battering other women challenges societal stereotypes of women and dismantles the structure of gender-based, socio-political domestic violence theory. In addition, for lesbians to acknowledge battering in their relationships stands in opposition to the lesbian myth of healthy, violence-free, egalitarian relationships. Consequently, the reluctance to acknowledge lesbian bashing has been significant, both within mainstream society as well as in lesbian communities. (Coleman, 1994, p. 139)

The issue of lesbian domestic violence was first placed on the National US domestic violence agenda as recently as 1986, at the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Conference (Morrow and Hawxhurst 1989).

This review of relevant literature will first define lesbian domestic violence, describe key studies undertaken in this area, explore various theoretical models which attempt to explain the phenomenon of same sex violence and finally raise some specific issues which contribute to the silencing of lesbian domestic violence.

## ***Defining lesbian domestic violence***

Whilst it is impossible to make generalisations about the incidence of lesbian domestic violence the form, as described by lesbians who name themselves as survivors of this abuse would appear to be similar to that described by heterosexual women.

Lesbian domestic violence has been variously described as:

that pattern of violent and coercive behaviours whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs or conduct of her intimate partner or to punish the intimate for resisting the perpetrator's control over her ... The violence may

include personal assaults, sexual abuse, property destruction, violence directed at friends, families or pets, or threats thereof. It may involve weapons and is invariably coupled with non-physical abuse including ... exploitation and psychological abuse. (Hart, 1986 p. 173)

Renzetti (1988) noted that violence between lesbian couples may include pushing, shoving, breaking things, hitting, food and sleep deprivation, and Hammond (1989) suggests that even more severe consequences may arise, including tissue damage, the breaking of bones and even death.

These behaviours are similar to those used when describing domestic violence in heterosexual relationships, however in addition, lesbians may threaten to expose the victim's sexual orientation to others and convince the victim that she will never be able to find help because she is a lesbian (Hart 1986).

### ***Key Studies***

Because the naming of violence in lesbian intimate relationships is a relatively new phenomenon. Literature about the issue is sparse and has been predominantly generated by a handful of studies conducted in North America, Canada and the United Kingdom documenting stories from survivors. (Lobel, 1986; Bologna, Waterman & Dawson, 1987; Kelly & Warshafsky, 1987; Renzetti, 1988, 1989, 1992; Lie and Gentlewarrier, 1991; Taylor and Chandler, 1995).

Clinical practitioners have also written about lesbian violence from their experience as counsellors. (Hart, 1986; Kanuha, 1990; Ray, 1991)

Lesbians themselves have been raising the issue of lesbian domestic violence for approximately 10 years via lesbian run magazines and broadsheets and pamphlets distributed at lesbian events. These articles have predominantly attempted to confront lesbian readers with this issue as one which needs naming, but the complexity of women's relationship to violence is not explored in any great depth.

The three most cited empirical studies in this area were conducted by Brand and Kidd (1986), Lie and Gentlewarrier (1991) and Renzetti (1992).

Comparing the prevalence of violence in lesbian and heterosexual relationships, Brand and Kidd (1986) found that approximately one third of the heterosexual women (27 per cent of 75) as compared to approximately half of the lesbians (25 per cent of 55) studied, had been physically abused by their partners whilst in a committed relationship. There was no significant difference in socio-economic status, race, age, or education between the two groups.

In terms of frequency of violence within lesbian relationships, Renzetti (1992 p19) reported that of the one hundred self-identified battered lesbians in her study, 54% identified more than 10 episodes of violence during the course of the relationship and 74% had experienced more than 6 incidents. Further she demonstrated that violence in lesbian relationships increased in frequency and severity over time. 77 per cent had experienced at least one instance of violence within the first six months of the relationship and 70 per cent reported that battering increased in both frequency and severity over time.

In 1991, Lie and Gentlewarrier attempted to document the incidence of domestic violence in a non-random sample of lesbian relationships to identify and describe the types of domestic violence experience and the perpetrators and to ascertain the availability and accessibility of community health resources to survivors and perpetrators after an abusive episode. One in two women in this non-random sample had survived at least one abusive relationship.

In each of these studies the non-random sampling procedures make any generalisation of the findings to the lesbian population at large problematic at least.

## ***Theorising about same sex violence***

### **Positioning same sex violence within a gendered model of domestic violence**

The gender based focus on women as victims of male perpetrators postulated by many feminist theoreticians in the area of domestic violence has been couched in terms of a critique of patriarchy. (Dobash&Dobash, 1979; Scutt, 1983; Bograd, 1988) A system which condones male domination and the subordination of women resulting in unequal gendered power relations which are institutionalised within the family unit. Being a victim of domestic violence has been constructed as a consequence of being a wife.

The use of physical violence against women in their position as wives is not the only means by which they are controlled and oppressed, but it is one of the most brutal and explicit expressions of patriarchal domination.(Dobash and Dobash 1979, p. ix)

Intimate relationships between homosexuals are not recognised as constituting a 'family' (even when there are children involved) and therefore victims/survivors of abuse within these partnerships are rendered invisible by the heterosexist language used to theorise about the reasons for and use of violence in intimate relationships.

Until very recently, this invisibility has prevented a fundamental challenge to gender based theories of domestic violence that would include the acknowledgment of the possibility of violence in same-sex relationships.

Whilst it is true that an acknowledgment of the existence of same sex violence calls into question the rigid gender categorisations of victims and perpetrators that are central to a strictly gender based feminist analysis of domestic violence, the fact that lesbians and male homosexuals are sometimes violent in their intimate relationships does not negate the importance of the role gender plays in the aetiology of heterosexual domestic violence. (Schneider, 1992)

However, some writers have chosen to utilise the recent challenge posed to gender based theories

of domestic violence brought about by the acknowledgment of violence between same sex couples, to critique what they believe to be the only feminist position in relation to understanding domestic violence; that violence is gendered. (Dutton, 1994; Hamberger, 1994; Letellier, 1994) These authors justify their support for an ungendered analysis of domestic violence based on the fact that because 'women do it too', violence cannot be ascribed to the effect of socially ascribed gender roles and subsequently believe that all violence is the same, no matter who it is done to or by whom or why.

This position is fuelled by the media response to certain sensational cases of women's violence whereby all women are then portrayed as being just as capable of inflicting harm as men and therefore just as culpable, through a process of typification. (Renzetti, 1994)

Theories proposing an ungendered analysis of domestic violence are informed by the disciplines of sociology and psychology.

### **Positioning same sex violence within a sociological model of domestic violence**

A sociological framework in relation to domestic violence was first articulated by Strauss, Gelles & Steinmartz in their book *Behind Closed Doors*. This analysis of domestic violence is predicated on social learning theory. These researchers claimed that both men and women are violent because physical force is something that men and women learn to use as children to gain control when all else fails. They believed that violence is built into the structure of society and the family system, and that to eliminate it requires changes in cultural norms and the organisation of the family. They suggest that whilst women may need more help because they are possibly physically weaker and therefore more vulnerable, they nonetheless "have the potential to be equally violent".(Strauss, Gelles & Steinmartz, 1980,p.44)

Note the use of the word "equally". Women's violence is by definition being seen as 'equal' to men's. Women are being judged by men's behaviour which is seen as normative. Therefore

within this analysis, violence is still 'gendered'.

When same sex violence has been mentioned by proponents of social learning theory it has been tailored to fit the dominant heterosexual paradigm of male/female sex role socialisation.

Most lesbians and gay men were raised in heterosexual homes where power differences between men and women fuelled the sex role socialisation patterns that they model in their own relationships. (Walker, 1991 p. xix)

This analysis assumes that the dynamics of power and control in gay male and lesbian relationships imitate those found in heterosexual relationships and implies the lesbians and gay men who are violent to their partners are merely acting out male/female sex roles. Lesbian perpetrators and gay male victims in this model become honorary men and women respectively. This attitude persists despite evidence that in fact many lesbians and gay men actively reject heterosexual role models in their lives (Peplau, 1991; Geffner, 1992)

#### **Positioning same sex violence within a psychological model of domestic violence**

The other powerful framework that is being utilised to explain same sex violence is that of psychology. This analysis utilises a combination of social learning theory and psychopathology to understand individual violent behaviour. Further, theorists in this area suggest that a range of variables including personality disorders contribute to a person being violent. (Coleman, 1994; Letellier, 1994)

Again, these variables are 'gendered' in that psychiatry has long been known to associate pathologic labels to certain personality traits when displayed by women, whilst describing similar traits in men as situational. (Chessler, 1972)

Many theorists working in the area of domestic violence have been loath to acknowledge individual variables as a significant aspect of battering, feeling that this would detract from the broader socio-political factors and operate as an excuse for violent behaviour.

### **Positioning same sex violence within a socio-political model of domestic violence**

A socio-political analysis of domestic violence contributes to an understanding of how cultural beliefs, social systems and political factors collectively perpetuate the occurrence of domestic violence. Social isolation, low socio-economic status, rigid sex role stereotyping and social stress, have been identified as factors which tend to increase the instance of violence in couples (Weidman 1986).

This model suggests that as a result of homophobia and heterosexism, lesbians and gay men face discrimination, social isolation and a lack of social support. (Garnets, Herek & Levy, 1992) Under such conditions they may develop low self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness together with internalised homophobia. Dominance and control over a partner may be used as a way of coping with these feelings of powerlessness and inferiority in a homophobic society.

The limited recognition of same sex violence in feminist, sociological and psychological literature, until recently, made the issue invisible. Some of the ways that lesbians silence themselves are:

#### *Community silence*

Domestic violence is still not acknowledged as a serious problem in the lesbian community itself (Lobel 1986; Renzetti 1992). This community denial will continue as long as spokespersons in the community continue to assert the myth that lesbians relationships are gentle and equal.

#### *Agency response*

Even when the phenomenon is named there are limited services provided in mainstream and women identified agencies specifically for lesbians. Most agencies assume, in the case of domestic violence, that the perpetrator is male and the victim/survivor is female. A lesbian in this situation will more often than not have to 'come out' to a service provider if she is to describe her situation in real terms. Coming out to homophobic police or health care professionals can have far reaching consequences and therefore accessing these services may not be seen as an option by

these women.

Often the choice for lesbians when accessing either the police, the legal system or the health care system, means that they have to decide between possible negative consequences when they reveal their sexual orientation, weighed up against the health and safety that these systems are actually supposed to provide. (Wertheimer, 1992)

There is a need for these agencies to address issues of homophobia and heterosexism amongst workers. More specifically, service providers need to look at their services and their policies to determine whether or not they are heterosexist in ideology or language and assume that the perpetrator in domestic violence is male and the survivor within a heterosexual relationship.

Again, because of the need to 'come out' to describe her situation, lesbians are less likely than their heterosexual counterparts to seek the support of family members. 'Family' in this case, could either mean blood relative or in fact the lesbian community, if in fact they perceived it as their family.

If the lesbian community is the only support system available to the survivor, this in itself raises problems as many lesbian couples share the same friends and some lesbian communities may be unwilling to address the issue of violence within itself.

Lie and Gentlewarrier (1991) believe that the individual help seeking behaviour of lesbians in relation to the violence in their lives may be affected by a paradoxical combination of "discomfort and pride with the lesbian lifestyle" (p.54) Lesbians who have a level of internalised homophobia with their lifestyle may not seek help because they view violence in their relationship as punishment for their chosen lifestyle. As is the case of victims of anti-gay violence generally (Garnets, Herek and Levy 1992), abused lesbians may actually associate their victimisation, and the pain and confusion that accompany it, with their homosexuality. Whereas other lesbians who have a pride in their lesbian status may equally not seek help because they feel it may stigmatise



the lesbian community even further.

Thus the stigma of pathology that lesbians know is attached to being homosexual together with the stigma attached to women who are violent, facilitates a complex system of denial and minimisation that prevents lesbians from dealing more openly with this problem.

### *The notion of 'mutual battering'*

Although some lesbians may feel they deserve to be battered because of their sexual orientation, this does not actually mean that they stand by passively. Quite the contrary, it is often assumed that in lesbian relationships both partners are equally violent because they are of the same gender and of the same physical size and therefore of the same strength. (Hamberger, 1994) This idea of equality in gender and size fosters an idea of reciprocal violence and maintains that both partners are equally capable of committing violence and that each partner is both a victim and a perpetrator and therefore equally accountable for the violence. Renzetti (1992) challenges this notion of 'mutual battering' when she writes that:

A major weakness in the mutual battering perspective is the underlying assumption that all violence is the same, when, in fact, there are important differences between initiating violence, using violence in self-defence, and retaliating against a violent partner. (p. 107-8)

This quote raises a crucial point. One must examine the motivation for the violence within the context of the relationship in order to understand who has the power in this relationship. Similarly, it is not sufficient to examine who has the worst injuries because both partners may be equally physically capable of sustaining injuries on each other.

Because of women's socialisation generally not to be violent, lesbians often question whether or not they were actually battered if they responded even once to the violence against them with violence of their own. Hart (1986) explains that a significant number of lesbians feel as if they are equally culpable

... especially if it worked in the immediate situation to stop the batterer, they are compelled to see themselves as equally culpable - as batterers. (p. 184)

For many lesbians then there may be no perceived difference between being abused and engaging in defensive behaviours. Victims identify as perpetrators regardless of the motivation for their violence. They also respond to the perpetrator's insistence that the violence is really 'a relationship problem' or 'our problem'. This has implications for their help-seeking behaviour as they often see themselves as part of the problem.

Thus believing in a notion of 'mutual battering' may generate unresolved issues of blame and guilt which contribute to a more complex level of denial and therefore issues of control and responsibility become obscured (Hart, 1986).

### ***Conclusion***

In summary, although some studies have been conducted and anecdotal evidence collected many questions still remain about the prevalence of violence in lesbian relationships, its patterns and correlates, what additional trust is betrayed when a woman is abused by her female partner, who will deal with the perpetrators and what needs to happen for existing services to provide a safe, non-homophobic service for these women?

Together with this, much work needs to be done to develop an abstract model that analyses same sex violence in a theoretical context of it's own. As opposed to the present contextualisation which places the phenomenon as a form of mimicry thereby describing perpetrators of lesbian domestic violence as 'honorary men'. This is far too simplistic an analysis but certainly serves to reinforce the normative nature of heterosexual behaviours by which all others are judged.

# Methodology

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In researching lesbian domestic violence I operated from a position which believes that the women who participated in this study are experts regarding themselves and their experience. Furthermore, I wish to state that whilst I do not presume to speak for these women, I have nevertheless used an interpretive analysis to contextualise their stories.

Semi structured in-depth interviewing was the method of choice for documenting the stories of six self-identified lesbian survivors of domestic abuse, which form the data for this study.

By listening to women speak, understanding women's membership in particular social systems and establishing the distribution of phenomena accessible only through sensitive interviewing, feminist interview researchers have uncovered previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience. (Reinharz, 1992, p. 44)

Whilst not specifically ethnographic in nature, several issues pertinent to ethnographic research guided the research process. These include:- What do these women know about their experience that I can discover? What concepts do these women use to classify their experience? How do these women define these concepts? What assumptions do these women fall back on to explain their experience? How can I translate the cultural knowledge of these women into a description which has meaning for those outside this culture? (Spradley, 1979).

This study was approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Adelaide in 1995.

## **Method**

### **The Reference Group**

Six months before I began to collect data I convened a reference group to work with on this study on the advice of a friend who, based on her experience as a lesbian counsellor in this area

believed that I may need support during the course of study as she was aware of a degree of animosity amongst some lesbians in Adelaide to naming the issue of lesbian domestic violence.

I had already experienced this animosity as several of my lesbian friends had responded quite negatively when I mentioned my intention to research this area. They believed I should take a more 'positive' view of lesbian relationships by looking at what are the 'good' things in these relationships. I was told that to make the issue of violence 'public' would somehow 'damage' the 'lesbian community' and by definition, I was being irresponsible and possibly even unethical.

Because of these conversations, I felt a degree of vulnerability about working on my own and working with a reference group who were interested in the area seemed a way of gaining support for myself and credibility for this area of study.

#### **Composition of the reference group**

This group comprised four women who were all white, tertiary educated professionals. Two were working as counsellors at two different Women's Health Centres in Adelaide, one was a project officer at a Women's Health Centre and the other was a counsellor/educator in the domestic violence unit of the South Australian Health Commission. All four women utilise a gendered feminist analysis of domestic violence in their practice. The three lesbians in the group were all 'out' at their respective places of work and have overlapping circles of friends within various Adelaide lesbian communities.

The basis for choosing these particular women was firstly because they all have extensive experience as counsellors in the area of lesbian and heterosexual domestic violence. Secondly, each member had expressed support for the project in the months leading up to the commencement of the study. Thirdly, as they were known to me and each other I thought we could work productively together.

### **Structure of reference group meetings**

No formal terms of reference were developed for this group except to say that members believed the topic to be extremely important and wanted to assist me by providing a sounding board for my research ideas. There was a desire on everyone's part to 'name' the issue so lesbian survivors could feel that they could speak out and be heard. (Nothing was said about perpetrators.)

### **Process of recruitment into the study**

Much discussion occurred in the reference group about how to recruit women into this study. I had already decided that the size of this thesis and my chosen method of indepth interview effectively restricted the number of participants in the study to a maximum of 6-8 women.

It was decided that participants would be drawn from lesbians known to reference group members either professionally or socially. The decision to recruit participants in this way was underpinned by many empirically untested assumptions.

Sealed envelopes containing information about the study were given to each reference group member to distribute to potential participants. This information included a copy of the study outline naming the investigator as lesbian and indicating that this study represented work for a Master of Arts (Women's Studies) thesis at the University of Adelaide. (Appendix 1)

It was decided that women interested in taking part in the study would contact me directly, to ensure that they did not feel obliged to take part simply because their counsellor had given them the study information or that their therapeutic relationship with their counsellor would be compromised if they decided not to take part in the study. Further, it was decided that I would not disclose to the reference group any identifying information about participants. As far as I know, reference group members do not know who has taken part in the study unless the women themselves have told them.

In all, 8 letters were distributed by reference group members. Of the 6 participants, 5 women

responded to these letters and 1 woman contacted me because she was a friend of a participant.

### **Some reflections on the chosen recruitment method**

I had initially thought that I would place an advertisement in the lesbian and gay press in Adelaide detailing the study and asking interested women to contact me. However, it became obvious that some members of the reference group felt uncomfortable about this method as I would not be able to predict the number of women who would answer such an advertisement. If more than six women contacted me, I would not be in a position to record their stories and group members thought that this would be unethical.

#### *“What these women need...”*

Reference group members assumed that lesbians who answered a request for participation through the lesbian and gay press would, by definition, be telling their story for the first time and that this would be traumatic for them - more so than keeping silent. Therefore these women would almost universally need/want fairly immediate ongoing counselling and furthermore, would only want to talk to lesbian counsellors who work within a feminist framework.

As their personal case loads were full, lesbian reference group members felt it was unethical/irresponsible to openly invite women to take part in this study without being able to provide ‘appropriate’ counselling services for them. ‘Appropriate’ in this case meant that the feminist lesbian counsellors in the reference group believed that they were best able to provide a counselling service for these women. Mainstream community health agencies were not seen as appropriate because of group members beliefs about the practitioners working in them (not lesbian feminists) and the nature of these agencies generally (heterosexist, bureaucratic, not confidential) as opposed to the workplaces of these group members which were women’s community health centres (lesbian friendly, collective, highly confidential).

In essence, it could be said that the lesbian reference group members essentially believed that they

'owned' this area of expertise by virtue of being lesbian, having had extensive experience counselling lesbians in violent relationships and because they utilised a feminist counselling framework.

I took the advice of reference group members in this matter because I acknowledged their clinical expertise in relation to survivors of domestic violence. I now question these assumptions for that very reason. In other words, reference group members were talking from a position of counselling, that is working with women who come to them. They cannot know for sure what women who answered an advertisement would have needed after telling me their story. These women may not have wished to seek counselling from anyone at all or from a lesbian in particular. One woman interviewed clearly stated that she would not choose to see a self identified lesbian counsellor to discuss this issue for reasons of confidentiality and another who had done this in the past would not do it again because her experience had been trivialised.

#### **Bias in the method of recruitment**

A major problem with the method of recruitment was that it meant that all participants had experienced a similar form of counselling which constructed their experience of the violence in their relationships within a gendered feminist analysis. Therefore their understanding of why the violence happened and I suggest their view of the relationship per se was now constructed within this framework.

This phenomenon was highlighted when reference group members said that most of their lesbian clients who were in violent relationships came to them describing their relationship as one which was 'not working'. They did not initially name their situation as being one of 'domestic violence'. This construction was put on the relationship in most cases by the counsellor. Whether at any stage these women would have named their unhappiness/distress with the relationship as 'domestic violence' by themselves and if not, why not, remains an unanswered question.

The method of recruitment allowed reference group members to make a personal judgement about who they gave letters to and thus who had an opportunity to participate in the study, based on their beliefs about a particular woman's 'suitability'. When this was discussed, albeit briefly in general terms by the group, words and phrases such as "strong", "fragile", "articulate", "got together", "angry", "still coming to terms with it" were used to describe women survivors who were known to group members.

Having said this, I believe that reference group members made their decision about a woman's 'suitability' and therefore possible inclusion in the study based on the 'best interests of the woman', as they saw it.

### **The Interview Process**

When women contacted me, none required any further information about the study and I simply made a time with each of them to conduct the interview. All participants chose their home as the venue. 4 interviews took place during the day when children were at school and 2 at night after work.

I began each interview by explaining my reasons for undertaking this study and asking the women to sign a consent form. (Appendix 2) This form advises participants that they would receive a copy of their transcript. If they wish they could make additions or deletions and return it to me within a given time frame. It also asks participants if they wish to receive a copy of the final research paper. All participants do wish to receive a copy of the study once it is completed.

I asked participants to tell me their stories from wherever they wished to start and indicated that when they were finished I would ask them some specific questions about the concept of power in lesbian relationships and the mechanisms that stop lesbians from talking about the violence in their relationships. I used a portable tape recorder with lapel microphones to record the dialogue.



## **Research Questions**

The following questions were raised within reference group meetings and formed the basis of questions that were posed to participants of the study.

### *Silence*

Who, what and how are lesbian domestic violence survivors silenced?

Do lesbians have 'extra 'layers' of silence in addition to the things that silence heterosexual women ?

### *Form & Frequency*

What behaviour do lesbians name as violent?

### *Power*

What constitutes a 'power imbalance' in a lesbian relationship?

What gives one lesbian power over her intimate partner / over other lesbians?

Each participant was sent a copy of her unedited transcript within 4 weeks of her interview. I have had three returned in which women have made minor editorial changes pertaining to identifying information about themselves and/or the perpetrator. I have assumed that the other three women are happy with the contents of their transcript. I presently hold the original transcripts of these interviews.

## **The ethical issue of confidentiality**

### *Maintaining participant confidentiality*

At the conclusion of each interview, I raised the issue of confidentiality in relation to having taken part in this study by asking each participant whether she wished us to acknowledge each other in 'public' (either on the street and / or at lesbian / women's only events and venues). This is an

important issue in a relatively small city such as Adelaide as the chances of us meeting particularly in lesbian / women only venues is quite possible. Two participants preferred that we did not recognise each other in public and the other four were happy to do so.

### *Maintaining perpetrator confidentiality*

Three of the six women interviewed asked me to turn the tape recorder off several times during the interview as they believed that they had given me information which would identify the perpetrator. Two reasons were given for this request. Firstly, interviewee's expressed a personal fear of retribution from the perpetrator if she found out the story had been recorded and secondly, a desire to protect the perpetrators' identity from those who will read the research. One participant also added that she didn't want to name the perpetrator during the interview because she didn't want me (as interviewer and lesbian) to think 'badly' of this woman. I stopped the tape at this point whilst these women thought of another way of phrasing their answer that would maintain the anonymity of the perpetrator in their story.

### **A discussion of some issues raised in reference group meetings**

#### *The tyranny of the 'idealised lesbian relationship'*

There was some unease amongst reference group members when it came to discussing the existence of unequal power relations in lesbian relationships.

It became clear that the lesbians in the group, including myself, had internalised what I will call a 'utopian lesbian ideal' that caused this process to become extremely problematic.

Comments highlighting this position included:

I can't get my head around the fact that women do this to other women.

Whilst I acknowledge power is multifaceted and always an issue in relationships, I'm still a believer that lesbian relationships are about nurturing, equality and support.



In terms of the 'form' of lesbian domestic violence we mutually agreed with the definition put forward by Hart (1986).

Having agreed on this definition, we then attempted to tease out how 'unequal power' is manifest in lesbian relationships since one lesbian's power over her partner cannot be explained simply by the feminist gender analysis of unequal power relations that all group members were familiar with and subscribed to.

We discussed the possibility that one woman for some reason may believe that she is 'superior' to her partner and that from this position she may see it as acceptable to 'control' her partner in some way. She may even from this position believe that she has a 'right' to or that in fact her partner actually 'needs' her to control her life. Such a woman may have a belief in personal superiority based on a variety of variables eg class, race, age, economic status, professional status. These variables are generally utilised in the heterosexual community to highlight 'difference' and subsequently attribute privilege and power to certain groups and individuals and we believed they are similarly used and understood in lesbian communities. This was highlighted by one interviewee who said "who would believe that a lesbian who teaches women's studies, for instance, would be violent?"

However, we also wondered if there were other indicators of status evident in lesbian communities. One that was mentioned was the length of time a lesbian had been 'out' and to whom. 'Out' lesbians were seen by group members to be "strong, brave, proud, comfortable with self", words which could imply 'power' in some lesbian communities. In others, being 'out' is seen as a threat.

Being in a relationship where any of these variables were seen by one partner to be 'unequal', could lead to a perceived power differential and potentially set the scene for violence.

### *Therapy versus Research*

Therapy and academic research suggest different agendas with respect to the final outcome of the research process. There were debates in the reference group that highlighted this phenomenon, specifically about 'intellectualising' the issue. Because group members were 'therapists', their focus in relation to this research was on documenting survivors stories including successful therapeutic interactions and intervention strategies. Some members felt that it was not actually necessary to theorise the phenomenon at all, rather just to tell the women's stories with no analysis or interpretation. On the other hand, as a researcher, I wanted to explore issues theoretically with interviewees and this different focus led to debates in the group where some opinions verged on anti intellectualism.

#### *'Insider' credibility:*

This issue was raised in the reference group by one member who, when asking a woman if she wished to take part in the study, was questioned as to what appeared to be my 'credentials' as a lesbian. As it transpired this woman decided not to participate.

Apparently, this woman was seeking information about me because she had previously told some members of her lesbian community about the violence in her life and the information had not been kept confidential. To feel safe to take part in this study this woman wanted to know who my lesbian friends were and what sort of venues I frequented.

As a researcher and a lesbian, I saw these questions as a of conflict of rights in that this woman was requesting me to offer confidential details about myself and my friends based on her need for confidentiality. I assume she probably would not have seen it necessary to ask a non-lesbian such questions.

### *Researcher responsibilities*

Shortly before I began to interview women a discussion arose within the group about 'ownership' of the study, I suspect because I had made evident my unease about some of the group member's assumptions which had driven the method of recruitment.

Having named myself as a lesbian feminist academic to the group and having decided to do this with the interviewees as well, to whom was I responsible for the results of this study? Clearly the study idea was mine and would contribute to my own higher degree. In the end I stated that as the researcher I believed that I was ultimately responsible for deciding the focus of the interview questions, the method of data analysis and that as a lesbian feminist I also had an obligation to disseminate the study results to the women who agreed to be interviewed, to reference group members, possibly women's health centres in Adelaide and in mainstream journals. Reference group members accepted this position. We agreed that I would acknowledge the contribution of reference group members by name and by way of detailing the working of the reference group.

### **Conclusion**

Convening a reference group was extremely worthwhile as we were all able to state our positions on a range of these issues in relative safety. This allowed us all to begin to theorise about the issue.

# Data Analysis

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## ***A cameo of each participant***

To ensure participant confidentiality, each woman has been assigned a pseudonym.

Mary is a white, tertiary educated woman in her late twenties. Her story is about a violent relationship that took place over a year ago and lasted two and a half months. At the time of interview she was not employed in paid work, was childless and not in a permanent relationship.

Sue is a white, tertiary educated woman in her forties with three children. She is a teacher and her story relates to a four year relationship that ended some years ago. At the time of interview, she was in a new relationship.

Kate is a white woman in her late thirties who works as a women's shelter worker. Her story is about an abusive relationship she had in her late teens which lasted several months. At the time of interview she was childless.

Lesley is a white woman in her mid thirties. She is a nurse and at the time of interview was employed part-time and had three school age children. Her story is about a three month relationship four years ago.

Wendy is a woman in her mid forties with three adolescent children. She works part-time and describes herself as semi-professional. Her story relates to a relationship that ended three years ago which lasted approximately four and a half years.

Liz is a thirty year old white woman with two young children. She works part-time and describes herself as semi-professional. Her story is about a relationship which ended a year ago and which lasted for two years.

## ***Philosophy of data analysis***

When undertaking an interpretive analysis of interview material, it is important not to impose cultural bias when theorising about behaviour if the group studied is different from the group for which the theory was developed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In the case of domestic violence, feminist theories developed to explain the occurrence of this phenomenon have been based on a gender analysis of power relations by which violence is seen to be used by men to subordinate women and is institutionalised within the family unit. When researchers are not cognisant of the cultural (heterosexual) bias in this analysis it is likely that lesbian domestic violence will simply be constructed as a manifestation of one woman in the partnership 'acting like a man'.

This construction of lesbian domestic violence is reinforced by literature about lesbian domestic violence which dwell on the fact that the form of violence described by lesbians is similar to that described by heterosexual women (Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992).

In quoting from and interpreting women's stories in this study, I wish to demonstrate the complexity of belief systems about women and domestic violence and lesbian relationships that these women utilised to understand their experience and that contributed to their silencing of themselves and being silenced about their experience.

## ***Method of analysis***

Coding of the transcripts was arrived at by a two-stage categorisation process. This was undertaken in order to analyse the data as objectively as possible.

In stage one, I coded the transcripts according to themes that had been discussed at reference group meetings and that had subsequently been incorporated into my interview questions. I then grouped these themes under two headings: participants beliefs about lesbian relationships and

participants description of the relationship being discussed.

In stage two, I approached five friends all of whom were lesbian, to conduct a separate analysis of one transcript each. Analysis of the sixth transcript was conducted solely by myself. Each woman was given a numbered interview transcript to read and asked to highlight important issues in the participant's story on separate cards. Readers determined between eight to fifteen issues each, per transcript.

Next, each reader was asked to group the issues under broad headings, the number of headings to be determined by the reader. A collective list of all the headings including my own, was then compiled resulting in following ten broad issues: power, belief system, isolation, excuses for perpetrators behaviour, silence, lesbian myths, what to do with perpetrators, form of violence, lesbian ethics, understanding of violence. These headings were then condensed into three focus areas during group discussion with four of the five women involved in this process. One woman was unable to attend this discussion due to illness.

The three focus areas decided upon were:

- A. the effect of these women's belief systems on their description of the violence in their relationships.
- B. the form of the violence experienced by these women.
- C. the women's understanding of 'power' in lesbian relationships.

### ***Participants beliefs that silenced them***

**A belief that violence in intimate relationships is a gendered phenomenon**  
This belief comes from feminist theories which have constructed domestic violence as something men do to their female partners in the privacy of their home. A belief in male perpetrators leads also to an assumption that physical size is important in the abusive dynamic because violent men



are portrayed as big and muscular.

This combination of beliefs meant that women in this study found it difficult to name their relationship as one of domestic violence and in most cases this was done for them by counsellors.

The following excerpts from transcripts demonstrate how profoundly each woman had internalised a belief in the gender analysis of domestic violence:

...about six or eight months after we'd separated, and I'd actually decided I needed to have some counselling to unravel this relationship, and much I was doing. I'd make an appointment and I was sitting there waiting to go into the counsellor, not even really clear about what I wanted to talk about...And then [I saw a stand with domestic violence literature]...I thought, "Now, if I change all the he's to she's, I've got it". And so, you know, I walked in for my counselling session. He said, "What are you here to talk about?" "Well actually this brochure - - -." And that's how it happened. You know, I was going in thinking, "What am I doing wrong in relationships that this one didn't work?" and I came out with a very different approach. (Wendy:14)

I'd have recognised it immediately if it was a male/female relationship, no doubt whatsoever. In fact I am certain probably that I would have recognised the financial and verbal stuff too. I was very strong about that never happening to me with a man. (Wendy:14)

I expected it (violence) from a guy I guess, but not from a woman. So that's the thing that shocked me most...I didn't expect it. I was never told that this could happen, you know, especially from a woman. I left my marriage because my husband beat up on me ... When it was happening to me in this relationship it was just a spin-out.(Liz:4)

It's just a thing you don't expect because it's a woman. Somebody dropped the question to me, you know, "What's the difference between a man and a woman? What's so different about her and your ex-husband?" I went home and I thought about it for a while. I thought, "Fuck it" because she's a woman! I don't expect it. (Liz:16)

At the time, and probably for years afterwards, I probably wouldn't have had the words to describe it, and it's still really hard...(Kate:1)

When I look back I see a lot of verbal and financial and social stuff that had happened long before she ever hit me. And even when she hit me...I wouldn't have used the word domestic violence then. I didn't use the word until I was a year out of that relationship, and then I identified what it was.(Wendy:3)

Several participants attempted to fit their partner's abusive behaviour into a gendered analysis of domestic violence by describing their partners as women who thought they were men. This then

gave them a language by which they could make sense of the woman's behaviour.

She'd had an awful childhood...and she hadn't had any information, so she basically thought she was a man in a woman's body by accident sort of thing....(Mary:5)

She did see herself in the role of the older, protective, jealous husband...She asked me to promise I'd be faithful to her.(Mary:5)

I'm not saying that all lesbian abusers are like this, but I do think that she really did see herself as a bloke, an honest country bloke with a girlfriend with long hair...(Mary:7)

I think she was sort of hooked into male/female relationships, so she was obviously bigger and therefore she was the butch. I don't think she'd have known that word, but I think she was the man of the house.(Wendy:23)

Mary also utilised class distinctions and male-associated characteristics to contextualise her partner's behaviour.

...she comes from the country, she had a rural background. So I suppose a bit of like roughness, political incorrectness, etcetera, I'd let go by the wayside.(Mary:2)

She'd drive me round everywhere and she wouldn't take petrol money and she'd say, "No, no, no, I drive my women wherever they want to go"...I can cook and she would be very impressed with this and she'd say, "Ah, I love it when a woman cooks for me". (Mary:6)

The use of the term 'violence' is linked with physical strength, size and ideas about 'masculinity'. Even heterosexual women have difficulty with naming their relationship as 'domestic violence' when the abuse has not involved physical attacks let alone lesbians who are also grappling with the fact that the perpetrator is a woman.

She would shout at me for hours until I'd be like a sobbing mess in the corner going, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, tell me what to say so that we can stop this," because she just wouldn't stop and she would stand over me and shout at me. I now will name that as abusive, but at the time I didn't because it wasn't, you know, the fist or whatever. (Mary:2-3)

...I feel there's lots of focus on physical stuff and you know, if I had had lots of bruises or broken limbs it'd be taken [seriously] ... maybe be listened to more. But the emotional stuff, I mean, leaves such an amazing...I suppose like wounds inside. Sometimes it is really difficult to explain.(Lesley:12)

...what was difficult about it is that...she is much younger than I am. She's also very tiny. But when she's furious she is so much more. I can't get out of a door,

I couldn't get out of a car. I've locked myself in rooms and taken all the knives in the house because I'm so frightened of her...how do you identify this petite, dainty woman?...How can I identify her as being as violent as she was? (Sue:4)

The following quotes highlight a belief that 'only men rape'. Because rape has been constructed as 'about power not about sex' the assumed egalitarian nature of lesbian relationships does not allow for a way of explaining rape in lesbian relationships.

...Who would believe me anyway? Women don't rape women" And also because she was quite small too, and ...I'm quite a lot bigger than her, and I just didn't think anyone would believe me. So I really didn't talk about it.(Lesley:7)

I didn't know that women would do that sort of thing to another woman. I mean I wouldn't have thought it was possible for a woman to rape a woman, but it is. I mean she has literally, literally, torn my clothes off, and she won't stop doing what she's doing until I bleed...and that happened over and over again.(Sue:4)

When I first met her it was like, "I'll touch you, but you don't touch much"...even my boundaries were crossed there [sexually]. Often I would say, "No", and then it was like "Yes, we'll go to bed". I'd say, "No, I don't want to pursue this any more", and that wasn't heard. So that was pretty bad, you know, to lose control of my physical body, not being able to be heard.(Liz:6)

### **A belief that lesbian relationships are nurturing, non violent and egalitarian**

The following quote illustrates how validity is given to lesbian relationships when they mirror heterosexual ones. The issues of class, age and education are also alluded to.

When I was fifteen I thought that dykes were the most amazing people on earth, and that they were all tough, strong but nurturing, that there was this amazing society ... which is of course...very good in one way because it's a very positive sort of view. I knew a few dykes that were older than me ... And they all seemed to have it together. You know, they had these sort of kitchens with polished floorboards and loving relationships and kids, and vegie gardens and, you know, puppies, and all the stuff that I wanted. So that's what I presumed that it was like. (Mary:10)

All participants shared a belief system that positioned lesbian relationships as 'better' than those between heterosexuals. Because domestic violence is about men and power, there was an inherent belief that since lesbian relationships are between women and 'equals' they won't be violent.

...[my idea of] women loving women in a sexual relationship [was] that it's two equals, two beautiful women sharing such perfect loving...Like a kiss [between women] is more intimate than sex with a man, as far as I'm concerned. And like

to me that implied that, you know, you wouldn't hit another woman. There'd be too much love, there'd be too much respect and too much of past knowledge that this is how men see us. Like men see us as objects. They [men] might bash us around but we've got too much respect for each other. It never occurred to me that it was even possible.(Wendy:14)

I would...dare to say that I'd see an unhealthy lesbian relationship as still healthier than an unhealthy heterosexual relationship because of the power stuff between the sexes.(Mary:10)

The lesbian community's safe...it's safe being a lesbian...I've got a sister who's [also] a lesbian, and one of my older sisters [who is heterosexual] thinks that we've got the best in the world.(Kate:16)

Well, I used to think that women were more nurturing and ...understanding, and a bit more caring.(Liz:4)

Lesley had been married to a violent man in the past. She describes an acute sense of betrayal when it eventuated that her female partner was capable of violence also.

...I came in thinking "This is going to be warm, caring, supportive, friendly, loving", and it's not like that at all. Maybe it is sometimes. But, yes, I had this real fairy tale idea of [what] lesbian relationships were all about, and they're not like that at all. Sometimes they're actually worse than some male relationships. Yes so that [realisation] was really quite sad.(Lesley:8)

Lesbians' belief in the idealised, gentle, egalitarian relationship may be so strong that it leads to a belief that lesbians who are violent are so odd as to be recognisably different in some way. Thus victims/survivors are silenced because they believe that there's 'something wrong' with women who firstly get into violent relationships and even more 'wrong' with women who stay in them.

...you know someone, even if you don't know very much about them, you just think, "No, they wouldn't do anything like that -they couldn't do anything like that"...It's only people that you don't know [who] do bad things...you don't want to believe that people that you know and that you like would do anything that you didn't like them doing.(Kate:9)

...there's shame, being a victim...shame of being a victim that [heterosexual] society gives. Then there's shame of being a lesbian victim who should know better, because obviously a lesbian perpetrator of violence is someone so bizarre and weird, and they have signs painted on them that you should have seen it coming [and] been big enough and strong enough and tough enough to get out of it...(Mary:10)

I didn't know very much about violence, and certainly not about lesbian violence. I had this ideal that women don't do that to other women - it doesn't happen - and if it does happen then it happens with other women. It certainly wouldn't happen to anyone that I knew. I wouldn't be attracted to somebody

who could be violent or abusive. So that was probably part of my not doing anything about it until it was extremely bad. I still was ignoring that this was actually happening. (Sue:2)

Liz found the idealised picture of lesbian relationships particularly overwhelming when it was put to her by her lesbian friends. She was left with the distinct impression that these women believed that no matter how bad a lesbian relationship was...it had to be better than being heterosexual and sexual with men.

When I actually started to get over some of the domestic violence stuff, I...did think about going straight for a while. That actually scared a lot of women. (Liz:17-18)

...the message that I was getting was [that it was] better for me to stay there because you couldn't possibly leave. You know, you've come all this way. You've spent like six years being a lesbian. I mean why in the fuck go back to men? But for me it wasn't about men, it was about the violence and it was about the behaviour that was happening in women's communities as well. (Liz:18)

...it was like keeping me back there, if I [had sex with men] I was outside the circle of the women that I was with. (Liz:18)

It was like I was the enemy [because] I was fucking with the enemy. (Liz:18)

For me it's not about what sex it is, it's about behaviour. It's not about gender...People don't want to hear that at all. (Liz:17)

Participants believed lesbian survivors remain silent because they view lesbian communities as being fragile and in need of protection.

...to make sure that we keep our communities together...We give ourselves an illusion of safety I think, more than we [really] have. (Mary:10)

Some of it is a survival tactic. While you're living with it, [violence] you can't afford to actually acknowledge how dangerous it is, how fucked it is, and it can take years to actually realise how bad it was, and maybe never. Because you can't afford to when you're living from day to day - be conscious of it so much. (Kate:15)

The following extract demonstrates a broader sense of 'gender loyalty' that inhibited Wendy from speaking.

...I was silent for a long time when [ex-partner] hit me because I couldn't tell anyone a woman had hit me. I felt like I was betraying my gender to say that...I didn't have to have [ex-partner] beg my silence. I did it voluntarily. I chose not

to speak because I felt like I was letting all womanhood down if I said, "A woman's hit me".(Wendy:27)

There are many ways by which long term intimate relationships are rewarded. One way is to link to notion of 'adult' to long term relationship. Further the emotional aspects of intimate relationships are the responsibility of women - in lesbian relationships it is assumed that this responsibility will be shared equally, because the relationship is between two women. This belief may not be particular to lesbians in that women in general have internalised messages about relationships that say they (women) are responsible for the making the relationship work. Lesbians however may feel this more than heterosexual women because lesbian relationships are not accorded the same status as heterosexual relationships, not taken seriously, not seen to be fulfilling and are all about sex - therefore not adult and promiscuous. Possibly to counter these derogatory messages from the heterosexual community, lesbians often ascribe status to the length of time a relationship lasts.

...one of my reasons for silence when all this was starting to go really sour, was [that I thought] mature people have relationships that last longer than two and a half months...the fact that it started very quickly but was ending really quickly made me feel that there was something very adolescent about it ...Almost [like] going out with someone wrong when you're fourteen ... I knew that it was going nowhere but I wanted to persevere because at least six months would have been a decent interval, you know, and it would have been much more...Oh, just that adult thing. (Mary:18)

### **Form of the violence experienced by participants**

The violence described by all of these women involved acts of physical, psychological, emotional, financial and sexual abuse. Those perpetrators who were not actually physically violent threatened physical abuse on a number of occasions. Two of the perpetrators were also verbally and emotionally abusive to the children in these relationships and one used the threat of 'outing' as a powerful weapon. The following extracts from transcripts illustrate the form of violence.

She started off with put-downs until I got very nervous about certain subjects around her. And the put-downs got worse and the controlling got worse, and then one day she assaulted me twice... (Mary:1)

...there would be these episodes where I'd just get shouted at for hours and

hours and...accusations of me being insecure and crazy. (Mary:6)

...basically everything I stood for was being undermined by her. My confidence was being undermined. It wasn't not just my belief systems...She told me that I was crazy and insecure and paranoid...She undermined my sense that I knew what was happening. (Mary:16)

...I wasn't allowed to go to the toilet on my own. I wasn't allowed to go to the bar and get a drink on my own. If anybody spoke to me, just a casual acquaintance...then it would be on...Initially it was verbal only, and it would only be verbal when we were alone. Then it became verbal in public, verbal at my workplace...(Sue:1)

She had me isolated from everybody within a couple of weeks. We were too busy having a good time. I was working really long hours and when I wasn't at work I was with her, and it sort of coincided with my household breaking up. Some of my best friends at the time were heterosexual so it was very easy to get isolated from them. (Kate:3)

She'd isolated me from my family, who were all straight, and then isolated me from my friends. I guess that was two and a half years in, when I was totally alone, and that's when she started hitting me. (Wendy:3)

[She was] incredibly jealous and possessive. She'd say things that used to really disturb me like, "If you ever sleep with a man I'll kill you, no sorry, not kill you, I'll kill the man". And I felt that what she was actually trying to say was, "If you ever sleep with a man I'll kill you". (Mary:5)

I certainly hadn't come out to my family at that point and that was one of the threats that she used constantly...I teach young children. It's just not appropriate for parents to know...She started coming to my workplace and threatening to tell my staff. (Sue:3)

### **How is power manifest in lesbian relationships?**

All participants described the perpetrator of the violence as having greater power and control in the relationship. This was seen to be central by these women in identifying their experience as abusive. Several general questions were asked about power in lesbian communities and power in intimate relationships to elicit an understanding of how participants believed that lesbians become powerful.

All sorts of things. You can have a good job, you can have a lot of money, you can have a nice car, you can have a lot of personal power in the community [by] being around, being knowledgeable. (Mary:12-13)

I think we establish power in different ways. I think being around is definitely one. Like people go, "Oh, who is she? Who does she know?" you know, "Which circle is she known in?" It can be hard for people that come from

interstate or come out late. You need to have your little circles. (Mary:14)

There was a belief that personal power was to be avoided, that personal power is, by definition, oppressive.

I think the temptation is to give it [power] away to be loved and accepted - "If I'm too strong, she won't love me, so I won't appear too strong". Like I see that happening between men and women a great deal, but it also happens between women and women, which is really strange. And it doesn't necessarily seem to be an economic thing with women. (Wendy:20)

I gave my power away I really did...between lesbians [because] we're such a minority [and] we're fighting mainstream constantly I think when we find someone... the danger is that you might give your power away to keep that [relationship] as a protection against the world. (Wendy:20)

Power was also discussed more positively.

Power is a shifting thing within a healthy relationship, and that's as it should be. (Kate:17)

I decided when it all ended [that]if I remained silent, she still had power. I think violence, whether it's between men and women or women and women, is about power. That's the primary motive I think - having control and power over someone else. (Wendy:19)

## **Conclusion**

The effect of participants' belief systems in relation to domestic violence and lesbian relationships arrived at by an interpretation of these transcripts leads me to believe that participants were silenced from talking about their experience because they did not have a language to describe their situation that fitted with their existing understanding of domestic violence.



# Conclusion

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This thesis has explored some of the ways in which lesbians are silenced about their experience of abuse in their intimate relationships. The primary reason for this is that the possibility of same sex violence is rendered invisible in mainstream literature about domestic violence because of the focus on violence in heterosexual relationships.

Further, the thesis also addresses some of the reasons why lesbian participants in this study silenced themselves. These included:

Their situation didn't fit with the dominant (heterosexual) language of domestic violence, ie: men do this to their female partners in the privacy of their home.

Their experience didn't fit with their own feminist analysis of domestic violence. This analysis could be summarised as: men do this to their female partners because patriarchy leads to a system of unequal gendered power relations which are institutionalised within the family unit.

Participants strongly identified with a belief in the possibility of and personal desire for a lesbian relationship that is caring, respectful, nurturing and egalitarian. They believed that lesbian relationships are 'safe' and that lesbians by definition, are committed to attempting to live their lives in a non aggressive way. When this idealised vision was not realised women in this study felt confused, angry, ashamed and betrayed.

Thus participants couldn't identify or name their experience as one of domestic violence because their relationship experience was with a lesbian, in a supposedly egalitarian partnership and not with a man where they expected (either through personal experience or their feminist analysis) unequal power relations and the possibility of violence. This inability to 'fit' their situation into

established models of domestic violence caused them to become enveloped in many layers of silence.

There are however many issues worthy of research in this area that are unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis. These issues include:

What denotes an 'insider'? There are a range of sometimes contradictory views about research conducted by 'insiders' in the community being researched. Is an 'insider' in this case simply someone who names themselves as lesbian? What constitutes this definition of lesbian and who decides?

Is there such a thing as 'shared lesbian experience', universality of lesbianism or all encompassing definition of the category lesbian?

How do lesbian communities deal with difference within their communities and friendships ?

Would some participants have been more comfortable if the researcher had either not identified herself as or not been lesbian? This question was not asked of participants as it was assumed they would feel safer with a lesbian researcher. However for reasons of confidentiality they may not have. Although simply not identifying myself would not have solved this dilemma.

How is the assumption of 'responsible to her community because she is lesbian' made manifest?

In summary, much research still needs to be done to develop a theoretical model of analysis of the phenomenon of violence within lesbian partnerships. Such an analysis would encompass an examination of the category 'lesbian' and an exploration of the multi layered complexity of lesbians' belief systems about the desired nature of their intimate relationships.

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# Appendix 1

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## ***Participant information sheet regarding a research project entitled "Naming the unmentionable: Lesbian domestic violence"***

My name is Jan Thompson and I am undertaking a research project as part of my Masters degree in the Women's Studies Department at the University of Adelaide.

As a part of my study process, I am working with a reference group that I have established for myself to provide me with advice and support. These women are all skilled counsellors in the area of domestic violence and they have offered to give these letters to women who may be interested in taking part in my study.

**You are however, under no obligation whatsoever to participate in this study and your counsellor will not be informed by me as to whether or not you have responded to my request for you to participate.**

### ***The Aim of my study***

In this study I wish to interview 6 lesbians who name themselves as survivors of domestic violence. I do not wish to engage in 'therapy' with participants but to record stories to form an understanding of participants experience. I will take the first 6 women who contact me.

As a lesbian I want to open up dialogue in our communities about this issue with the aim of making it safer for us to discuss our experiences of this phenomenon. Because I believe it is important that such a study have a wider purpose than forming part of my Masters degree, I am planning to publish parts of the study in various lesbian and gay networks locally and interstate. However, should you agree to participate, your anonymity will be assured as nothing that you say will be reported in a way that you or any other individual or specific organisation or institution would be able to be identified.

If you wish to participate in this of the study, please contact me on either of the telephone numbers below and I will organise a time and place that suits us both to meet. I estimate that the interview will take approximately one to two hours and will be more like a 'conversation' than a formal interview.

I would like to tape our conversation and then have it transcribed word for word. This will enable me to have a written record of the interview to analyse. Your real name will not be connected with the tape and the tape will be erased as soon as it has been transcribed. I will send you a copy of this transcript to keep. I will also give you a time by which to contact me should you wish to change or delete anything in the transcript. We may meet again at this time if there are things to clarify in the transcript.

You can be confident that no personal or identifying information will be included in this study. I will invent a name to attach to your interview tape.

Should you agree to participate, you are not obliged to answer questions or to discuss any issues that you do not wish to discuss. Furthermore, if you do decide to participate in this study, you are free to change your mind and withdraw your transcript up until September 15th. 1995. You do not have to



give me any reason if you do decide to withdraw from the study.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you want more information about this study. If you have concerns which you do not wish to discuss with me directly, please contact Dr Margaret Allen ( ) who is the post graduate co-ordinator of the Women's Studies Department and a member of the Departmental ethics committee.

**If you wish to participate in this study, please contact me at home or work on my telephone numbers below.**

I look forward to your participation and thank you for your willingness to share with me your personal experiences of domestic violence.

Yours sincerely,

Jan Thompson

# Appendix 2

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## ***Participant consent form: study of lesbian domestic violence***

**Research undertaken by Jan Thompson as part of her Masters in Women's Studies Degree within the Women's Studies Department at the University of Adelaide.**

I (print your name)..... have been provided with a description of the aims and purpose of this research. I wish to take part in this research.

I understand that my name will never be connected with any information that I provide, and that Jan Thompson will create a pseudonym to identify me. Neither will the identity of any person, organisation, group or institution I name be revealed in connection with this interview.

I agree to have the interview tape recorded.

I am aware that my participation is completely voluntary and that:

I can withdraw the information that I provide up until SEPTEMBER 15th. 1995 and that I do not have to give a reason or justification for doing so.

I am under no obligation to divulge information or to discuss issues if I do not wish to do so.

I understand that Jan Thompson will provide me with a copy of the transcript of our interview for me to keep.

I understand that Jan Thompson will provide me with information about the results of this study if I so desire.

YES I do / NO I do not wish to receive information about the results of this study. (please circle your choice)

If you have answered YES to the above, please provide a postal address and telephone number:

.....

.....

Signed (participant).....

Signed (interviewer)..... Date.....