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Lesbians Confront Domestic Violence

By Kathleen O'Brien, Star-Ledger Staff

(Newark, NJ) – Drunk and angry, Lorene's partner first threatened to extinguish a cigarette on her face, then brandished the shards of a broken drinking glass at her.

Lorene fended off the rampage, barricading herself in a bedroom while her attacker slept it off. But she never called police, never went to a battered women's shelter, never even perceived herself as battered.

After all, she was the same size as Meredith, her lesbian partner.

Like many people, she had been slow to realize domestic violence could infect lesbian relationships, too. Having ended a 13-year marriage for her first serious lesbian love affair, the Somerset County executive assistant had expected an idyllic partnership between two nurturing women.

"You think, Oh, utopia! I'm going to be in a community of people who are just like me," Lorene recalled. "Wrong." (Names have been changed because Lorene is not "out" at her workplace and does not want to "out" her former lover.)

The National Institute of Justice estimates 1.5 million women are battered annually. Two percent – or roughly 30,000 victims – are attacked by a female lover.

Battered lesbians also face additional obstacles:

- In order to get help, the victim will have to "out" herself.
- The batterer can threaten to "out" her to her family or employer.
- The lesbian community has been slow to acknowledge some of its relationships are as flawed as heterosexual ones.
- Given public ignorance about this hidden topic, often the victim's claims are doubted or dismissed. The thinking goes, how much harm could a woman do?

While a male batterer could never gain entry into a women-only shelter, an abusive woman could. This makes some victims reluctant to seek help.

Somerville attorney and therapist Christine Heer, who helped train domestic violence responders, recalls her initial bewilderment when learning of battered lesbians.

“I didn’t understand it. I could understand gay men, but women? If you are physically equal, how can there be violence? I thought, “That doesn’t make sense,” she said.

The explanation, she discovered, was no more complicated than human nature: Some people are willing to resort to force to get their way, no matter what their gender or sexual orientation.

DEALING WITH IT

Men commit 85 percent of battering, according to the U.S. Justice Department. That, combined with women’s weaker physiques, leads to the assumption that women can’t be batterers. Or if they are, it is assumed the battering is the stereotype of the hot-tempered wife abusing her husband.

Although lesbian batterers in general do less physical harm, their violence is no cartoonish slapfest. Preferred methods include kicking, slapping, or throwing objects. While they are less likely than men to use guns or other weapons, there have been fatalities.

“The lesbian and gay community has opened its eyes and said, ‘We have to deal with this,’” Heer said.

That is a far cry from 20 years ago, when the gay movement assumed lesbian relationships would be untainted by masculine power and control.

“There was this thinking that it would be paradise: We’ll just get rid of all the men, sit in a circle and sing ‘Kumbaya,’” said Lisa Smith, chair of the battered lesbian task force of the New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women. “And of course, we found out this doesn’t happen. Women can be – and are – violent to their partners.”

Lesbian activists also didn’t want people to think their relationships, already disparaged by society, could be flawed.

Battered lesbians have a few things in their favor, however. Since fewer lesbians are mothers of young children, they are slightly less likely than married women to be economically dependent on their partners. And lesbian batterers are slightly less likely to use lethal weapons, studies show.

Yet these relationships also have their own set of concerns.

Given the typical woman's preference for monogamous commitment, a relationship between two women can progress quite quickly. Both Smith and Heer cited a common joke lesbians tell about themselves: "What does a lesbian bring on a second date? A U-Haul."

That means lesbians tend to jump into a new relationship with both feet, often mingling their finances and moving in or buying a house together. This doesn't allow much time to pick up on warning signs that abuse may be just around the corner.

Lorene, 62, says she and other older lesbians now counsel their younger counterparts to take it slowly for precisely this concern.

That's a lesson she learned the hard way. She met Meredith two decades ago when they were both volunteers for a youth group. Each was married with children.

Within months, they had bought a house together as they each sought a divorce. There was immediate friction over their kids. Lorene's son was 3 and her daughter 12. "My kids could do nothing right. Her kids could do nothing wrong," she said.

She soon discovered Meredith was a late-night drinker, sitting alone in a darkened kitchen to finish off a gallon – "yes, a gallon" – of wine, she said.

After the episode when Lorene barricaded herself in the bedroom for her own safety, Meredith checked into rehab and Lorene attended Al-Anon. Despite counseling, the relationship continued to sour. Lorene moved into the guest bedroom. The romance was over.

"It was a long time ago, so I probably sound pretty calm," Lorene said. "But it was horrible. The only thing I didn't do – which I probably should have – was call the police."

FIGHTING ISOLATION

Even when violence ends the relationship, lesbians end up shortchanged again, as friends and family might fail to understand it's just as heart-breaking as any divorce, said Anne Ciemnecki, who volunteers for Mercer County's domestic violence victim response team.

"It's just as difficult for gay or lesbian people to leave, whether they're married or not," she said.

While victims of domestic violence typically feel isolated, lesbians can be even more so. If they haven't come out to family, friends or co-workers, they have fewer sounding boards for their troubles. "If you can't talk about your relationship, you can't talk about problems in it," Ciemnecki said.

Also, because the lesbian community is so small, victims worry the battering or break-up will soon be everybody's business. "Someone may not admit they're battered because they'd be closed off of their entire social network," Ciemnecki said.

Smith also is coordinator for Domestic Violence Services at Rutgers University, where she sometimes sees gay college kids, unmoored from the stability of home, land in unhealthy relationships.

College-age abusers have another arrow in their quill: threatening to tell the victim's parents their daughter is gay.

Despite these special concerns, lesbian battering resembles heterosexual battering more closely than one might think, Smith said. She bases that conclusion on her experience overseeing victim support groups.

"You could be talking to three different victims – a heterosexual woman, a lesbian, and a gay man – and they'll all say the same thing," she said.

That makes sense to Smith, who sees abuse as a learned behavior. "Most people learn it at home, by the people who raised them," she said. Once that "lesson" of how to treat a loved one is mastered, it won't matter if the relationship is gay or straight.

"It will carry over into a gay or lesbian relationship because that's what has been modeled to them," Smith said. "How is it that women can be batterers? They may have grown up in a violent home."

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