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Author(s): Claire M. Renzetti
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Building a Second Closet: Third Party Responses to Victims of Lesbian Partner Abuse*

Claire M. Renzetti**

This article examines the problem of violence in intimate lesbian relationships and the role of third party responses to victims in perpetuating or preventing future attacks. Based on questionnaire and interview data from a nationwide self-selected sample of 100 battered lesbians, the article first examines the incidence and forms of abuse in violent lesbian relationships. It then analyzes victims' help-seeking efforts, the responses of help providers to these requests, and the impact of these responses on both victims and violent episodes. The article concludes with recommendations for improving the ways third party help providers respond to lesbian victims.

In a recent analysis of spouse abuse, Dobash and Dobash (1984) report that the response of a third party to a battered wife forms an important part of the violent incident itself and also affects the likelihood of future violent events. More specifically, they argue that when a third party from whom a battered woman has sought help responds by supporting her and unequivocally rejecting the violence, it is understood by the victim as a challenge to her batterer's rightful use of force and provides her with a possible escape from future attacks. However, if a third party responds to a victim's request for help by blaming her for the violence or implying that she in some way caused it, the batterer's behavior is justified and the woman is isolated from support, thus reinforcing the status quo and leaving her vulnerable to further attacks. Indeed, it is frequently this sense of isolation, compounded by feelings of shame and guilt, that prevent a battered woman from seeking help in the first place. How much more difficult, it may be asked, is the quest for help when the relationship in which the victim is involved is itself stigmatized?

The present research addresses this question by examining the help seeking of battered lesbians and the effects that various responses to their requests for help may have on them individually and on the incidence of violence in their intimate relationships. The article is based on questionnaire and interview data provided by a self-selected sample of battered lesbians. It begins with a brief discussion of the problem of partner abuse in lesbian relationships then analyzes victims' help-seeking efforts, the various responses of third parties to victims' requests for help, and the impact of these responses on both victims and violent episodes. Finally, it explores ways in which third party responses, in particular those of counselors, therapists, and other professional help providers, may be improved to the benefit of battered lesbians and the community as a whole.

The Incidence and Forms of Lesbian Battering

Hart (1986) defines lesbian battering as a "pattern of violence [or] coercive behaviors 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" (p. 173). Like battering in heterosexual relationships, the abuse may be physical and/or psychological.

Despite the recent proliferation of studies on heterosexual domestic violence, little empirical research is available on the problem of partner abuse in lesbian relationships. Apart from anecdotal accounts (e.g., Lobel, 1986) and periodic articles in local lesbian and gay newspapers (e.g., Hietbrink, 1984), an examination of lesbian battering is surprisingly absent from the scientific literature with but a few exceptions.

Brand and Kidd (1986), for example, compare the reported frequencies of physical aggression (i.e., pain inflicted beyond consent when practicing sadomasochism, physical abuse, attempted rape, and completed rape) experienced by 75 self-identified heterosexual women and 55 self-identified lesbians. They found that male partners in heterosexual relationships committed a greater overall number of aggressive acts than female partners in lesbian relationships (57 and 28 respectively). Nevertheless, with respect to some forms of aggression, the differences in frequency reported by female heterosexual victims and lesbian victims were negligible. Twenty-five percent of the lesbian respondents said they had been physically abused by their female partners in committed relationships compared with 27% of the heterosexual respondents in committed relationships with men. Similarly, 7% of lesbian respondents reported they had been raped by female dates compared with 9% of heterosexual respondents who reported completed rapes by male dates.

Kelly and Warshafsky (1987) have also examined partner abuse among both lesbian and gay male couples, using a self-selected sample of 98 subjects (48 women, 50 men). The researchers asked their subjects to complete a 17-item version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) which was subsequently divided for analysis into four subscales: assertive tactics of conflict resolution, verbal abuse tactics, physical aggression tactics, and violent tactics. They report that 100% of their sample had used assertive tactics at some point in their relationships, 95% had used verbal abuse tactics, 47% had used physical aggression, and 3% had used violent tactics. Only one significant sex difference was found when the experiences of

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**Claire M. Renzetti is Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA 19131.

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their male and female subjects were compared: women tended to have less physically aggressive partners than men did.

The Kelly and Warshafsky research (1987) is valuable because it clearly demonstrates that "gay male and lesbian couples use tactics to resolve relationship conflicts which can be physically aggressive and occasionally violent" (p. 5). However, a major weakness in the study is that the researchers focused on aggression per se and did not attempt to identify which subjects were batterers and which were victims. The difficulty with such an approach is that it assumes that all aggression is of the same character when in fact there are important differences between battering and self-defensive behavior. Failure to make this distinction may also perpetuate the myth that "mutual battering" is common in abusive relationships. Consequently, the present research recruited only subjects who identified themselves as lesbian victims of battering by their intimate partners, a point that will be addressed shortly.

The literature on conflict in lesbian relationships provides clues about the factors that may lead to partner abuse among lesbian couples. Recent research on two issues in particular—the relative dependency of lesbian partners on one another and the balance of power in lesbian relationships—suggests that abusers may be excessively dependent on their partners for emotional and/or financial support and that abuse is likely to occur in relationships in which one partner has greater resources than the other.

More specifically, Peplau, Cochran, Rook, and Padesky (1978), point out that although heterosexual couples often have difficulty balancing each partner's need for attachment and intimacy with the need for autonomy and independence, this conflict appears to be especially acute for lesbians. This is due in part to the lack of social validation that lesbian relationships receive outside the lesbian community. Research indicates that in response to the negativism and hostility of the larger community, lesbian couples may nurture their relationships as "closed systems" (Kreston & Bepko, 1980). While this tends to foster emotional intensity and closeness in the relationship, it may also generate insecurity by disallowing separateness or autonomy for the partners (Lindenbaum, 1985). "Each partner will tend to treat as rejection any attempts by the other to have separate friends, be emotionally distant, or have a different world view" (McCandlish, 1982, p. 77).

At the same time, dependency on one's partner is a trait associated with a destructive, culturally prescribed female role. According to Burch (1987), some lesbians develop a fear or hatred of dependency "because it represents identification with the old sense of heterosexual 'femininity.' . . . A woman who fears or even hates her own woman-ness will project this gynophobia onto her lover and feel further devalued herself by dependency on her" (p. 130). Nicoloff and Stiglitz (1987) hypothesize that one consequence of this fear or hatred of dependency is self-destructive behavior, such as alcohol abuse. Another may be violence against one's partner. Renzetti (1988) found significant correlations between partners' relative dependency on one another and violence in lesbian relationships. This analysis showed that the greater a batterer's dependency on her partner and the greater a victim's desire to be independent, the more likely the batterer was to inflict more types of abuse with greater frequency. Importantly, this finding is consistent with that of research on other forms of violence between intimates (e.g., Pillemer, 1985).

Conflicts surrounding dependency are also related to the balance of power in lesbian relationships. Several studies indicate that equality of power is especially important to lesbian couples and that when compared with male homosexual couples and heterosexual couples, lesbian partners enjoy the greatest degree of shared decision making and an egalitarian division of labor in the home (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986). However, Caldwell and Peplau (1984) discovered that although virtually all of the lesbians they interviewed (97%) expressed support for the ideal of equal power in their relationships, 39% reported a power imbalance in which one partner had greater resources (i.e., more education and/or higher income) than the other. Moreover, they found that this power imbalance lowers partners' satisfaction with the relationship.

Studies of heterosexual domestic violence have shown that an imbalance of power between partners is a significant contributing factor to abuse. According to Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980), violence is least likely to occur in egalitarian households in which the relative power of partners is balanced. However, it is still unclear in abusive relationships whether it is the batterer or the victim who is the less powerful partner. Some research (e.g., Finkelhor, Gelles, Hotaling, & Straus, 1983) indicates that violence is especially likely among heterosexual couples when the male partner perceives his power in the relationship to be diminishing. The violence becomes a means for him to assert dominance and control in the relationship. But others (e.g., Straus, 1974) argue that the batterer in a violent relationship is the partner with the most power.

With regard to lesbian couples, Bologna, Waterman, and Dawson (1987) report inconclusive findings: For some, a perceived lack of power was related to being the perpetrator of the violence, but among other couples, it was related to victimization. Kelly and Warshafsky (1987) also looked at the role of power in violent lesbian and gay relationships, but found no significant correlations between specific status differentials (income, education, race, religion, and age) and the incidence of partner abuse. However, they did find that respondents who reported having primary responsibility for major and minor expenses as well as cooking were more likely to be abused by their partners. Renzetti (1988) also reports significant correlations between some indicators of power imbalance in lesbian relationships and violence in these relationships. For instance, social class differences between partners were associated with an increase in the overall number of abusive incidents in violent lesbian relationships. In addition, certain forms of severe abuse (e.g., being pushed downstairs, being stabbed or shot) were more prevalent in relationships in which differences in intelligence between partners were cited as a major source of conflict. It appears, then, that the relationship between power and violence in homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships is a complex one that deserves further attention from researchers to be more fully understood.

Taken together, these findings suggest several similarities between homosexual partner abuse and heterosexual partner abuse. Nevertheless, unlike heterosexual relationships, lesbian relationships are stigmatized and devalued in our society, and this itself may contribute to lesbian battering. Turning to the research at hand, it will be shown that this stigmatization may also affect lesbian victims' reactions to their abuse as well as the responses of those from whom they seek help.

Subjects

Subjects for the present study were recruited in several ways. First, brochures on the problem of lesbian battering were printed and distributed to Philadelphia-area women's organizations and agencies as well as women's bookstores and bars. Each brochure contained a postage-paid card that explained the study and that could be used to request a copy of the questionnaire. In addition, advertisements containing the same information were placed in local newspapers and in the national publication, *Off Our Backs*. Third, an announcement of the study with information on how to obtain a copy of the questionnaire was mailed to more than 200 lesbian and gay newspapers and over 1,000 lesbian and gay organizations throughout the United States and Canada. These recruitment strategies yielded 100 volunteer respondents, all of whom identified themselves as victims of lesbian battering, who completed a 12-page questionnaire. A majority of the respondents resided in the northeastern United States (34%), followed by the Midwest (22%), the West (16%), and the South (14%). Only 5 respondents (5%) were from Canada; for the remainder (9%), geographic residence could not be determined.

Despite efforts to recruit respondents from racial minority groups, 96% of the subjects were white, thus raising doubts about the generalizability of the findings to minority lesbians. In addition, the typical respondent was 26 to 35 years old (47%) and lived alone at the time of the study (44%). Only 8% lived with the partner who abused them when they completed the questionnaire. The overwhelming majority (85%) indicated that the abusive relationship had ended, and 63% had ended the relationship themselves. Only 15% reported that their batterers had ended the relationship. Consequently, the sample is probably overrepresentative of victims who have taken the initiative to free themselves from abusive relationships. One may also question the reliability of the self-report data they provided since it may be colored by hindsight.

Despite the serious methodological limitations this sampling strategy poses, other sampling techniques were considered unfeasible given the sensitive nature of the research topic. Indeed, it is doubtful that one can obtain a truly representative sample of battered lesbians.

Methods

Each respondent completed a 12-page questionnaire. Twelve respondents indicated that they had been involved in more than one abusive lesbian relationship in which case they were instructed to complete the questionnaire with reference to the most recent abusive relationship. The questionnaire was organized into three sections. The first section concerned personal attributes of the respondents and their batterers as well as characteristics of the relationship (e.g., the division of labor, perceived level of commitment of each partner, sources of strain, and the methods typically used by each partner to resolve routine conflicts in the relationship).

The second section of the questionnaire focused on the battering itself, particularly the incidence and forms of battering that occurred in the relationship. Other questions concerned the point at which the battering first occurred in the relationship, whether it grew progressively worse over time, and whether substance abuse played a part in the battering. It was in section two that respondents were also asked about their help-seeking behavior and the extent to which those from whom they sought assistance were actually helpful. Finally, section three covered demographics and the backgrounds of the respondents and their batterers.

The last page of the questionnaire provided respondents with the opportunity to volunteer for an interview. Of the 100 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 77 volunteered for interviews. Chi-square analyses revealed only one significant difference between those who did not volunteer to be interviewed and those who did: questionnaire respondents who did not volunteer for interviews were more likely than those who did to still be involved in the abusive relationship about which they were reporting ($\chi^2 = 11.76$, $p < .01$). Of the 77 respondents who did volunteer for interviews, 40 were actually interviewed. The remaining 37 were not interviewed for a variety of reasons (e.g., repeated attempts to reach them by phone to schedule an interview failed; a mutually convenient time for an interview could not be found; when the interviewer phoned to conduct the interview, the respondent did not answer). Chi-square analyses, however, revealed no significant differences between those with whom interviews were completed and those who volunteered to be interviewed but were not. Interviewers were unstructured, allowing subjects to tell their stories and elaborate on their questionnaire responses. The interviews averaged about one hour in length.

Findings

Respondents were asked to identify the types of abuse they experienced and the frequency with which each had occurred. As Table 1 shows, the most common forms of physical abuse were pushing and shoving (75% frequently/sometimes); hitting with fists or open hands (65% frequently/sometimes); scratching or hitting the face, breasts, or genitals (48% frequently/sometimes); and throwing things (44% frequently/sometimes). The least common were carving numbers, figures, or words into the skin (1% frequently; 1% rarely); putting guns or knives up the vagina (2% frequently; 2% rarely); deliberately burning with a cigarette (1% sometimes; 3% rarely); and stabbing or shooting (4% sometimes; 1% rarely). However, that these very serious forms of physical violence occurred at all is reason for concern; that they occurred more often than rarely in even a minority of relationships is alarming.

In general, psychological abuse was more frequent than physical abuse. The data in Table 1 show that verbal threats were the most common form of psychological abuse reported by these respondents (70% frequently/sometimes). This was followed by abusers verbally demeaning respondents in front of friends and relatives (64% frequently/sometimes) or strangers (59% frequently/sometimes), interrupting respondents' eating or sleeping habits (63% frequently/sometimes), and damaging or destroying respondents' property (51% frequently/sometimes). It also was not uncommon for batterers to abuse others in the household besides their intimate partners. At least 35 of the respondents lived with children, either their own or their partners'. In almost one third of the cases these children were abused by the violent partner as well. Pet abuse was only slightly more common; 38% of the respondents who had pets in their households reported that their partners had also abused these pets.

With regard to overall frequency of abuse, slightly more than half the sample (54%) reported more than 10 abusive incidents during the course of the relationship. Seventy-four percent

Table 1.
Selected Forms and Frequencies of Abuse Experienced by the 100 Respondents

	Frequency			
	Never Percent	Rarely Percent	Sometimes Percent	Frequently Percent
Physical Abuse				
Was pushed or shoved	8	15	32	43
Was hit by partner's open hands or fist	16	16	32	33
Was scratched or hit in the face, breast, or genitals	33	15	29	19
Had something thrown at them	34	20	30	14
Was stabbed or shot	91	1	4	0
Was deliberately burned with cigarette	92	3	1	0
Partner put guns/knives up her vagina	93	2	0	2
Had numbers, figures or words carved into her skin	95	1	0	1
Psychological Abuse				
Was verbally threatened in some way	11	14	25	45
Was verbally demeaned in front of friends or relatives	19	11	29	35
Was verbally demeaned in front of strangers	22	15	24	35
Her sleeping/eating habits were interrupted	19	13	29	34
Her property was destroyed or damaged	27	16	28	23
Partner abused her pets	50	16	14	1
Partner abused her children or partner's own children	27	3	3	2

Note. Due to space limitations, Table 1 has been abbreviated. The author will supply upon request a copy of the complete 35-item list of the types and frequencies of abuse reported by the study subjects.

of the sample experienced at least 6 or more abusive incidents.

Sixty-five percent of the respondents had maintained their relationships with their batterers for more than 1 year, but less than 5 years. Fourteen percent maintained the relationship for 5 years or longer. Only 21% reported being in their abusive relationships for less than a year. Yet, 77% of the sample stated that the first abusive incident they experienced occurred less than 6 months after the relationship began. Almost all subjects (89%) had experienced their first abusive episode by the time the relationship was 23 months old. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents indicated that they did try at some point in the relationship to defend themselves against their batterers, but that these attempts were unsuccessful or only temporarily successful in stopping the abuse. Why, then, did they remain in these relationships despite their victimization?

Studies of heterosexual domestic abuse, as noted at the outset, indicate that responses of third parties from whom victims seek help play an important part in either reinforcing an abusive relationship or helping victims to free themselves from the abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 1984; see also Bowker, 1986; Ellis, 1988; Loseke & Cahill, 1984). By excusing a battering incident, a third party help provider may increase a victim's sense of self-blame and isolation and reinforce her partner's sense of justification, thereby leaving her vulnerable to future assaults. If, on the other hand, the help provider challenges the legitimacy of the partner's use of violence, a victim may be empowered to end the abusive relationship. Apropos to the present research, the question becomes to what extent do the responses of third parties facilitate or alleviate abusive incidents in violent lesbian relationships?

Victims' Help Seeking and Third Party Responses

Given the frequency and severity of abuse reported by the subjects in this study, it is not surprising that the majority sought help to deal with or to end the battering. Seventy-eight percent of respondents indicated that they had sought help, thus alerting others to the problem. Table 2 shows those from whom respondents sought help and the extent to which they found these agencies and individuals helpful.

First, we observe here that many sources of formal or official help frequently available to heterosexual victims of domestic violence are not perceived by lesbian victims to be sources of help available to them. Few respondents sought help from hotlines and women's shelters and of those who did, most said they found them to be no help at all or only a little helpful. Other institutional sources of help, such as the police, attorneys, and physicians, proved to be least helpful of all. As one respondent summed it up, none of the professionals from whom she sought help seemed to take a serious interest in her situation.

Subjects stated that official help providers typically responded negatively to them rather than offering support or challenging the batterer. For example, one southern respondent who called the police for help reported that the officers who responded insulted her by calling her a "queer devil" and told her she deserved trouble because she is a lesbian. Studies of police responses to heterosexual victims of domestic violence have documented the low priority police often assign to domestic violence calls and their tendency to blame the victim (Bowker, 1986; Martin, 1976; Skolnick & Bayley, 1986). With lesbian victims, it appears that police responses may also be heterosexist.

Unlike heterosexual victims who typically find women's shelters to be a highly effective source of help (Bowker, 1986), most of the lesbian victims in the present study who went to shelters said they found them to be of little help or no help at all. Although they encountered less blatant

Table 2.
Frequency and Respondents' Rating of Sources of Help

Source of Help	Number Who Sought Help From This Source	Number Who Rated This Source as:			
		Not Helpful at All	A Little Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Very Helpful
Friends	69	16	14	20	19
A counselor (e.g., a psychologist or social worker)	58	8	12	14	24
Relatives	35	13	7	7	8
Police	19	9	6	4	0
A religious advisor	15	9	5	1	0
A hotline	14	5	3	3	3
A shelter	13	8	1	0	4
Neighbors	10	6	2	1	1
An attorney	10	5	3	1	1
A medical doctor (other than a psychiatrist)	9	7	0	1	1
A psychiatrist	7	3	1	2	1

prejudice at shelters than when they called the police, subjects who went to shelters reported that they were sometimes turned away, or that staff members made them feel unwelcome or unsafe. It cannot be determined from the data why this occurred; perhaps staffers were fearful of losing funding and/or credibility in the community if it became known that they accepted lesbians. A few subjects who went to shelters also noted that staffers seemed reluctant to label their experiences as battering. Again, we may only speculate as to why. It may be due to the fact that shelter staff are trained to think of domestic violence in terms of male/female relationships. In any event, the data indicate that one important source of help for heterosexual victims is perceived by many lesbian victims to be unresponsive to their needs.

Heterosexual victims of domestic violence frequently turn to relatives for help, and research indicates that family members are usually effective help providers (Bowker, 1986). In contrast, just slightly more than one third of the respondents in the present study sought help from relatives. Of those who did not go to relatives for help, many said they could not because their relatives did not know they are lesbians. Several respondents who indicated that family members were aware of their lesbianism but critical of it reported that they did not go to relatives for help because they felt this might reinforce their relatives' disapproval of lesbian relationships. Those who did seek help from relatives, however, were slightly more likely to find their relatives not helpful or only a little helpful than somewhat or very helpful (see Table 2).

As Table 2 shows, it was counselors and friends from whom respondents sought help most often. Counselors appear to have been most helpful, with 65% of respondents who sought help from a counselor rating her/him somewhat or very helpful. However, while 57% who sought help from friends found them to be somewhat or very helpful, a substantial minority of respondents (43%) rated their friends as being only a little helpful or not helpful at all. Friends, subjects said, frequently responded negatively to their requests for help by denying the problem, blaming the victim, or cooperating with the batterer. The following reports from two respondents are not atypical:

> My friends brushed it off, didn't believe [my partner] was abusive, said it was a two-way street. One said a good fist fight might clear the air. [a graduate student living in the northeastern United States]
>
> [My friends] could have believed me. Also, when I hid, they could have kept my hiding place confidential. Instead, they called [my partner] to tell her, then she'd come "catch" me. [a respondent who is herself a counselor practicing in the southern United States]

Lesbian victims, then, like heterosexual victims, often seek help from friends, although in comparing the results of the present study with those reported by Bowker (1986) for heterosexual victims, it appears that lesbian victims are somewhat less likely to rate their friends' help highly.

It was hypothesized that the responses of help providers play a major role in reinforcing or breaking the cycle of violence in abusive lesbian relationships just as others have argued they do in abusive heterosexual relationships. A statistical analysis was undertaken to determine if those who rated third party responses to requests for help highly were more likely to terminate their abusive relationships sooner than those who gave third parties lower ratings. Using Kendall's tau C, only one significant association was found: the more helpful respondents found their relatives, the sooner the relationship was terminated ($\tau = .216$, $p = < .05$).

Other data, however, do lend support to the hypothesis. For example, most of the respondents in this study had lived with their batterers and, for 50%, having "no place to go" was one of the reasons they remained in the abusive relationship. It was the practical assistance of others that prompted many to finally leave their batterers. For instance:

> The responses I would have appreciated were some of the ones I did get from friends. Friends offered to put me up. One helped me network to find new housing. [a cook/housekeeper from a northeastern state]

Another respondent said:

> Physical help in moving out was important. I was most afraid of leaving because she'd tried to kill me three times, each as more of a threat than an attempt, but I thought she'd be more serious if she knew I was serious about going. [a woman who works on the west coast in the film industry]

Similar to heterosexual victims of domestic violence (see, e.g., Barnett & Lopez-Real, 1985; Bowker, 1986), most respondents in the present study also said that the battering experience had substantially lowered their self-esteem and that they felt they needed help from others to regain their sense of self-worth and, as one respondent put it, "to deal with the emotional aftershocks of being abused and being a victim." Perhaps most important is "being believed" by others when they tell of their battering experiences and being reassured that it was not their fault. Respondents who received this kind of support told of its positive effects on them. Unfortunately, the majority of respondents—even those who rated others' helping responses highly—reported confronting denial of the problem by some friends and professionals and being shunned by others. While third parties often provided assistance, they also exhibited reluctance to label respondents' experiences as battering. The following remarks by respondents illustrate how such reactions can exacerbate the confusion, despair, and frustration of lesbian victims. When asked to describe the kinds of responses that were most helpful (or that would have been most helpful) to them, they replied:

> For others to have seen beyond the "abuse must be black eyes" ideas. The threat of physical injury was always there, however, not always resorted to. Hence, when I tried to get help, their nonresponses and excusing of my lover continued the myth that it was my fault or my imagination. [a minority woman who works as a bus driver in a western state]
>
> Belief is essential. In my situation I was perceived as more powerful, therefore, others could not believe that I could be a victim. [This respondent, whose geographical residence could not be identified, listed her occupation as law enforcement]
>
> Encouragement to talk about it. No victim blaming. No judgemental crap about how my batterer is really my sister. Treat me as you would treat any woman who has been a victim of a violent crime. [an unemployed woman living in the Midwest]

Negative responses from others inhibit victims from leaving abusive relationships because first, they reinforce victims' already low self-esteem. In the words of one respondent, "You feel like the scum of the earth when in a battering relationship; you need to hear you're okay." Second, such responses increase victims' sense of isolation; 72% of the respondents in this

study stated that they remained in the abusive relationship because they felt isolated from friends, family, and others. As one respondent wrote, "Most of my friends just stopped calling when I most needed to feel loved."

In sum, though the majority of lesbian victims seek help from third parties to cope with or end the battering, they report receiving little useful assistance. They frequently perceive the responses of official or formal help providers, such as the police or shelter staffs, as homophobic and sexist. Relatives', friends', and counselors' responses, though rated more highly, also often seem negative rather than supportive of the victim or challenging to the batterer. These responses, however, may themselves be an important part of the violence in that they may contribute to either the continuation or cessation of future abusive incidents. More specifically, the data indicate that refusing help, denying the problem, excusing it, or mislabeling it "mutual abuse" may serve to undermine victims' efforts to effectively address their circumstances. By adding to their low self-esteem and feelings of isolation, such negative responses may inhibit victims' attempts to leave these relationships and prevent them from recognizing alternatives to remaining with their batterers. Most importantly perhaps, these responses may also perpetuate partner abuse because batterers are left unaccountable for their actions. Even if third parties respond by helping victims leave abusive relationships, the problem of lesbian battering itself remains unaddressed as long as batterers go unchallenged. They are then free to victimize others with few consequences to themselves.

How, then, can third party responses be improved? This question is taken up next.

Strategies for Improving Third Party Responses

The problem of lesbian battering is closeted much the same way that heterosexual partner abuse and child abuse were 20 years ago. However, it may be argued that the problem of lesbian battering is even more hidden, since lesbian victims are doubly stigmatized—because of their victimization and because of their sexual orientation—by a sexist and homophobic society. This is compounded by reluctance within the lesbian community to openly address issues, such as lesbian partner abuse, that could be used to fuel heterosexist stereotypes and anti-lesbian sentiment.

Consequently, one strategy for improving third party responses to lesbian battering and its victims is education—within the lesbian community and within formal social service agencies—about the problem. This must include an analysis of the many myths about partner abuse (e.g., it is a male/female problem, it typically involves mutual battering). A good starting point for such an educational program is a thorough reading and discussion of Kerry Lobel's (1986) book, *Naming the Violence*. This may be undertaken in the context of community speak-outs in which participants are assured safe space, as well as in the context of formal training programs for official help providers. It must be emphasized, however, that in order for any educational endeavor to be effective, participants must be forced to address the issue of homophobia—their own and that inherent in the social structure. Police personnel, shelter volunteers and paid staff, counselors, physicians, and other help providers should be required to participate in homophobia workshops as part of their routine training, just as they should receive training in how to effectively respond to domestic violence cases, both homosexual and heterosexual. Help providers must be educated with regard to an important difference between battered lesbians and battered nonlesbians: "the battered nonlesbian experiences violence within the context of a misogynist world; the battered lesbian experiences violence within the context of a world that is not only woman-hating but is also homophobic. And that is a great difference" (Pharr, 1986, p. 204). Help providers then must be made aware of how their responses form an integral part of each violent event to which they are called to respond.

Apart from educational training programs, what practical measures can help providers use to assist lesbian victims in ending and recovering from abusive relationships? The literature on heterosexual domestic violence suggests possibilities.

One is mediation. The role of the mediator is to facilitate communication between partners so that they themselves can develop a mutually beneficial and impartial resolution to their conflicts (e.g., separation, a signed agreement in which the abusive partner promises to end the violence) without resorting to formal legal action (Felstiner & Williams, 1978; Folberg & Taylor, 1984). The informal and private nature of mediation may make it especially appealing to lesbian victims, particularly if they are not "out" about their sexual preference. However, Ellis (1988) and others (e.g., Bahr, Chappell, & Marcos, 1987) warn that mediation may have limited success in ending partner abuse. Their research indicates that the more hostile the relations between partners, the less likely they are to successfully complete mediation. In addition, mediators, in their effort to be impartial, may overlook inequalities of power between partners, not only with regard to economic resources, but also in terms of fear or psychological domination. Weighing these findings against the potential value of mediation for lesbian victims, research should be undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of existing mediation programs in assisting both lesbian and heterosexual clients.

Other studies have documented the success of mandatory arrest policies in decreasing recidivism among abusive husbands (Sherman & Beck, 1984). Some states, such as Pennsylvania, have also enacted civil laws designed to protect partners (homosexual or heterosexual) and children from domestic violence. For instance, Pennsylvania's Protection from Abuse Act provides for the eviction of an abusive household member for up to one year and serves as a restraining order to protect victims from future violence. Violation of the order is a criminal offense punishable by up to 6 months in prison. Again, evaluation research is needed to determine the success of such third party interventions in preventing and ending violence between homosexual partners.

It must be kept in mind, of course, that laws such as the Protection from Abuse Act are likely to be effective only if they are consistently enforced—a point that again raises the issue of professional training and education. Ultimately, a major goal should be to transform all help providers—be they the police or other professionals, friends, or relatives—into advocates, "providing positive emotional support and material assistance for the [victim] while posing a direct challenge to [the batterer] and violence" (Dobash, Dobash, & Cavanagh, 1985, pp. 162-163). The data from the present study indicate that lesbian victims seeking help most frequently request emotional support and also expect others to recognize or name their experiences as battering. In addition,

they seek practical assistance: help in moving, shelter, transportation, money, and so on. But such responses are not enough; help providers must also hold batterers accountable for their behavior and directly condemn their use of violence to control their partners' behavior or to settle disputes. As Dobash et al. (1985) have pointed out with regard to heterosexual battering, this requires resources, referral systems, and back-up networks. Certainly, as they conclude, these are not easy tasks. Yet, they are essential tasks if domestic violence in all its forms is ever to be eliminated.

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