



SAME-SEX DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Strategies for Change

*Beth Leventhal
Sandra E. Lundy
Editors*



Sage Series on Violence Against Women



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SAW
Sage Series



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SAME-SEX DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



Sage Series on Violence Against Women

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SAME-SEX DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: Strategies for Change
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Introduction

In the 25 or so years of its existence, the battered women's movement has done a wonderful job of bringing the issue of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships to the forefront of public attention. Not long ago there were only a handful of battered women's shelters, arcane laws that sanctioned intrafamily violence, and widespread victim-blaming of those survivors who dared to speak out. Although no one would claim that the problem of heterosexual violence is perfectly understood, the fact remains that we now have a vibrant shelter network, powerful state and national domestic violence coalitions, and even federal laws against spouse abuse. Presentations about dating violence are offered in high schools, courses in violence against women can be found at colleges and graduate schools nationwide, and many police departments and police academies have incorporated training about domestic violence into their standard curricula.

Those of us who have survived or worked with survivors of queer partner abuse, however, have not been quite as fortunate. We often have met with hostility not only in the general public, the mental health professions, and the courts but also within domestic violence organizations and our own queer communities. We have had to shout to be heard. Like poor relatives at a banquet, we have been given scraps of attention and bits and pieces of available resources and have been told we should be grateful. The queer communities have been treated

as a monolith, and when the issue of queer domestic violence has been addressed at all, it has generally been in "one size fits all" terms that ignore and disrespect our diversity.

There are signs that things are slowly changing. In recent years, thanks to the tireless efforts of queer activists and survivors who simply would not shut up and go away, many state domestic violence laws have been amended to include victims of same-sex partner abuse. Mental health and community organizations (both queer and straight) are beginning to take the problem of same-sex domestic violence seriously. Most hearteningly, grassroots activists have done an impressive amount of creative work to address issues of queer domestic violence. This book presents some of those efforts in the hope of inspiring more.

Currently, people looking for practical strategies to address same-sex domestic violence find themselves in an informational vacuum. The few available books and articles on queer domestic violence focus primarily on convincing the reader that queer domestic violence exists and that "something" should be done about it. And very little of the work on queer domestic violence has addressed the specific needs of specific queer communities. Thus, the activist, the organizer, the practitioner, and the survivor are constantly reinventing the wheel as they search for antiviolence strategies that fit their unique contexts.

Both of us have worked with survivors of queer domestic violence for many years: Beth as an activist and advocate; Sandy as an activist and attorney. We have initiated and participated in police and court trainings, spoken at schools and to the media, lobbied, and organized. We know firsthand about the dearth of written material to provide guidance and inspiration.

We think it is time to go beyond "Queer Domestic Violence 101" and to offer a book that presents concrete strategies for assessing and stopping the violence in abusive queer relationships. We have compiled a broad range of essays on a variety of issues concerning queer domestic violence. Some of the chapters deal with specific communities (bisexuals, people with AIDS, immigrants), some focus on specific issues (batterer screening, S/M), and some are more general. We have also included the individual stories of survivors. What all of these essays have in common is that they were written by people who have been working on issues of queer domestic violence for many years and who have a wealth of experience to share. We have tried to represent

many different queer communities and present a number of different viewpoints. Unlike previous works, which tend to focus either on lesbians or gay men (ignoring bisexuals and transgendered people entirely), we address both woman-to-woman and man-to-man violence. We have also included chapters that address issues of batterer assessment and batterer accountability, two topics that are almost totally ignored in work on queer domestic violence.

Our goal is to provide comprehensive, practical information to the wide range of professionals, lay advocates, and activists who are likely to come into contact with queer people in abusive intimate relationships. We hope to encourage people to address the multifaceted issue of queer domestic violence not only on the individual level but also on the societal level. If you are looking for a book to convince you that queer domestic violence exists and should be taken seriously, this is not the book for you. If you are interested in effectively addressing the serious issue of queer domestic violence, then you will find a lot of information here to help you do your work.

It would have been impossible for us to compile this edition, or for the individual authors to contribute, if we did not all believe in the possibility of change and in progress. We like to think of this not as a book about violence but a book about *working through* violence in order to promote healthier relationships in our queer communities and beyond. As queer people begin to demand legal recognition of our partnerships, strengthening our commitments to each other becomes an increasingly important endeavor. Although domestic violence may seem like a dreary topic, we believe the contributors to this book offer fresh and hopeful perspectives that are a source of inspiration, not sadness.

Each of us has many people to thank for making this book possible. To list them all would catapult us way over our allotted page limit. Debra Reid has been a steady inspiration to both of us—a model of lesbian courage and survival. The indefatigable Claire Renzetti has been, as always, extremely generous with her support, her time, and her insights and was instrumental in bringing this work to press. The members of Boston's Same-Sex Domestic Violence Coalition, the Network for Battered Lesbians and Bisexual Women, and the Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project are a source of encouragement, good humor, and solidarity. We thank all of the contributors not only for their informative chapters but also for their patience. Sandy would

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P A R T I

PROLOGUE: HEARING
THE PROBLEM



Sharing My Story

KJ

I first met J. C. when I was 15 and living on the streets. Living on the streets at the time was safer than living at home because of the violence in my family. J. C. was about four years older than me, and I was comforted that she took me in and took care of me. Then I was sent away to another city to a juvenile home. Six years later I came home for a visit. I was in my early 20s and caught up in the excitement and wonder of “coming out” as a lesbian. I had never forgotten J. C. and had dreams about getting together with her someday. Back then it was difficult to find other Indians who were gay or lesbian.

We finally ran into each other at a party. The intensity and excitement of our interaction were still there. We started seeing each other. At first the relationship was wonderful. We had fun times and gentle moments, and I felt an intensity I had never felt for another. I practically idolized her. She was my “first” relationship with a woman.

The abuse started immediately after I moved in with her. She was still living with her parents. From the beginning, her parents did not approve of our relationship. To get away from them, we would go out partying. At first I was concerned because I began to see that she had a problem with alcohol and drugs. Little did I know that I would get caught up in the addiction myself.

The emotional abuse started gradually. One night we got into an argument at a downtown bar. I didn’t want to go to a party with five

men she had met because it didn't feel safe to me. Because I refused to go, she started yelling and screaming at me, saying I was a no-good, worthless bitch and that I didn't trust her. Her rage even made her look scary. She gave up trying to convince me to go with her and stormed out, telling me not to bother to come home. I was stunned. I asked a friend next to me if I could stay at her place. She agreed, as long as J. C. didn't find out.

I was a wreck for the next three days. I kept wondering what I had done. I hoped and prayed J. C. was okay and would not stay mad. Against the advice of my friends, I finally went looking for her downtown. When I found her, she acted as if nothing had happened. I noticed she was holding on to one of the guys she partied with. I felt hurt and angry, but she swore it wouldn't happen again. She apologized for getting angry, saying she didn't know what had overcome her.

But the emotional abuse didn't stop. Often, J. C. resorted to put-downs (usually about my race, even though she was part Indian), name-calling, insults, criticism, and threats (usually of hurting me or my family). She often hid my medication from me or deprived me of sleep. Even when I caught her hiding something from me, she was so convincing and had such mind control over me that I *believed* her when she said she didn't do it. She often said that I couldn't do anything right and that I was stupid. Her words hurt and ate away at my self-worth and self-esteem, which were already affected by substance abuse, unresolved child abuse, and family violence. She often told me that I was ugly and no one else would want me, and I believed her. She said I should be grateful for what I had with her.

I am uncertain when J. C. crossed the invisible line, but the verbal abuse eventually led to physical abuse and sexual abuse. She punched me, kicked and choked me, pulled my hair, and threw me around the house. She pulled my hair because she knew I loved my hair, which at the time was very long and thick. She liked to hit me in the face and choke me until I passed out, and then she would kick me all over.

Afterward, she was remorseful, and she cried and promised it would never happen again. She would be tender and loving. I remember thinking, "Maybe this time she really means it." Eventually the remorse disappeared. All that was left was tension and violence.

J. C. also sexually abused me. She started by making suggestive remarks and comments about my body and making accusations of

infidelity. If I was five minutes late coming home from work, she said I was messing around with the boss or a coworker. If I smiled at a woman who passed by, or vice versa, she accused me of messing around with her and beat me. She even accused me of messing around with my own family. One of the most painful and humiliating times of my life was when she let a man rape me. In return she got cash and drugs. She acted as if nothing had happened and instead accused me of *liking it*. She also forced me to have sex with her. At this time in the relationship, I cringed when she touched me, but I felt powerless to say anything. Often, she was brutal and seemed to enjoy seeing me obviously in pain.

J. C. had double standards. It was okay for her to do whatever she wanted. It was okay for her to flirt with anyone and go to bed with whoever she wanted. If I told her I didn't like what she was doing, she beat me up. I had to give up a number of friends because she didn't approve of them.

Often, people asked me why I stayed, why didn't I get away, or why I kept going back. I must have left several times and usually stayed with an acquaintance or friend, but J. C. either found me and begged me to come back or threatened me by saying she was going to kill herself if I didn't come back. My self-esteem was so low that I felt that I didn't deserve anyone else. I also kept going back because I felt I had no place else to go. It seems crazy to this day, but at the time I *still* loved her.

I did finally leave the day she almost killed me. I am uncertain how the fight started. I was sleeping, and all of a sudden she got on top of me and was yelling. I pushed her off me and stood up, saying that I had had enough of this. I knew the best way to try to leave was to calm her down first. I tried to, but she started punching me, pulling my hair, and kicking me all over my body. For once, I fought back, or tried to, but this seemed to get her angrier. She pulled out a gun and shot at me. The bullet missed me by inches. After she realized that she had missed me, she tried to shoot me again, but the gun jammed. That was when I escaped by pushing her aside and stumbling up the stairs to the door. I remember thinking, "Please God, don't let her catch me! Don't let her parents stop me!"

I tried to go to my relatives, but they told me, "You made your bed, you lie in it." They said I must have deserved the abuse. J. C. had succeeded in isolating me from my family and friends. I had no one to turn to. I hid for a couple of days behind a hotel in the bushes and