

Reflection

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There comes a time. A time when the secrets that undergird oppression must be revealed. A time to risk the antipathy of those among the oppressed people who believe that disclosure will compromise the gains achieved and invite an escalation of injustice. A time to name the oppression despite the resistance of theorists who assert that the wrongs identified do not fit within the parameters of accepted theory. A time to name the oppression even if in naming it, a fiercely held dream of utopian lifestyle is called into question.

There were intense pressures to remain silent.

Naming “lesbian battering,” exploring its behaviors and constructing theory about this violent and coercive conduct, raised huge challenges for a lesbian community that was working against discrimination to create justice for lesbian and gay people and to celebrate same-sex relationships and community.

Simultaneously, homophobia in the battered women’s movement in the early ’80s was emerging. Many advocates feared that acknowledgement of the leadership and dedication of lesbians in the work to end violence against women would undermine strides made in establishing solid funding for shelters, in coordinating the work of community agencies, and in achieving legislative reform. Some state coalitions were contemplating withdrawal from the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, hoping thereby to distance their organizations from accusations of being “man-hating” or lesbian.

Furthermore, feminist analysis conceived of woman abuse as an outgrowth and essential underpinning of patriarchy. Men’s violence against their women partners was supported by sexism in the culture. Tolerance of men’s coercive controls and violence was embedded in Western religious and cultural mores.

Those lesbians who talked about violence by lesbians against their partners too often concluded that it was a class-based phenomenon—that only poor and working class lesbians were violent. Beyond this, many lesbians figured that the violence was being inflicted by women who were “male-identified.”

This was the political and personal context of my life. Yet, I recognized that the above perspectives of society, the battered women’s movement, and the lesbian-feminist community did not fit with my experience.

In late 1982, Suzanne Pharr, then co-chair of the Lesbian Task Force of NCADV, and I began talking about the invisibility of lesbian battering and the social bankruptcy of a movement that denied this reality either from disbelief or in order to promote shelter, services, and advocacy for heterosexual battered women. We decided to convene a meeting of workers in the shelter movement. We faltered and did not then name the violence “lesbian battering.” Instead, we put out a one-page call for people to gather to discuss “violence in the lesbian community.” More than 100 women responded. We met in Washington, D.C., in September, 1983. The gathering had no firm agenda and no budget. Suzanne and I agreed, with significant trepidation, to facilitate conversation.

The conference was the first in the country to explore lesbian battering, to listen to the voices of battered lesbians, and to forge an analysis about lesbian battering. Space does not permit a report on the process and conversations of the meeting. The most significant product of that gathering was the “Letter to the Lesbian Nation,” which offered the first analysis of lesbian battering, stated our unequivocal opposition to it, and suggested responses.

Thereafter, the Lesbian Task Force decided to craft an anthology to create public discourse on lesbian battering. I was invited to write an article. “Lesbian Battering: An Examination” was my contribution to this ground-breaking collection. *Naming the Violence: Speaking Out on Lesbian Battering*, remains the definitive work on lesbian domestic violence.

In preparing to write this reflective piece to accompany “Lesbian Battering” in *Classic Papers on Violence Against Women*, not only did I re-read the article (which I still like, although it is, not surprisingly, too wordy and a tad redundant), I also asked activists and advocates in the battered women’s movement and leaders in the LGBT field to offer feedback about the impact of *Naming the Violence* and “Lesbian Battering” on their work and lives.

Some responses were very personal:

Up until that time, my friend and I had never spoken of the violence in our relationships; never knew what the other was going through, and never had . . . until *Naming the Violence* . . . offered the language with which to discuss it. Years later, we both ended up working in the domestic violence field, both of us concentrating our efforts on ending same-sex domestic violence. I’ve bought numerous copies of *Naming the Violence* and have witnessed firsthand, the light that snaps on when one knows there is a name for what they’ve withstood; and that they are not alone.

You got people to start talking and thinking about lesbian battering, as well as addressing the myths.

Others talked about these writings as a resource for education of young professionals.

I always teach this piece in the Domestic Abuse law class I teach. At the time we get to it, we have been struggling through the “why does battering happen,” and most particularly the feminist analysis of “men do it because they can, because societal sexism backs them up, etc.” vs. the various psychological/social reasons. When we read your piece, it really helps crystallize the abuse of power dimensions of the dynamics, as well as the universality of the effects and sub-causes, e.g. isolation.

Others noted that the writings were an impetus for making lesbian battering visible and the precursor to legislative reform.

Many state protection order statutes did not include same sex relationships. When statutes were amended dating relationships were added to statutes. Same sex partners are now offered the same protections as heterosexual partners.

Some noted that in the '90s there appeared to be a hiatus in activity. However, they are encouraged that new vision and energy is now focused on enriching services, advocacy, theory-building, and movement growth. They note that “Lesbian Battering” and *Naming the Violence* still offer a theoretical and experiential foundation for the work to end partner battering by LGBT people.

For example, the 2002 Report of the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs offers preliminary research on the prevalence of LGBT battering, enumerates the legal remedies available to survivors, and lists many organizations providing services and advocacy to LGBT survivors and perpetrators. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence continues to offer leadership on intervention and organizing against LGBT battering.

Naming the Violence gave birth to a vital justice movement.