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Empirical analysis I: L(G)BT communities handling domestic violence in women-to-women relationships

National report: Netherlands

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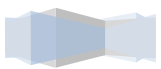


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Background of the LARS project

Violence and abuse in lesbian partnerships is almost no subject of discussion in the mainstream discourse about domestic violence. A European stocktaking study on the measures and actions taken in Council of Europe member States combating violence against women (2006, p. 8) states that most studies focusing on domestic violence against women define domestic violence “as the physical, psychological and sexual violence to women by men”. Policies of European countries combating domestic violence focus on heterosexual couples and provide service and support for female victims and male perpetrators. Nevertheless, recent research indicates that about 40 percent of lesbian women did experience “domestic abuse” at some time in a same-sex partnership (Donovan/Hester/Holmes et.al. 2006). Further, the risk being attacked by a male ex-partner is almost three times as high as being attacked by a female ex-partner (McLaughlin/Rozee 2001).

This extent of domestic violence is not reflected in the number of reported incidences to police, counselling services or to intervention organizations. This fact leads to the assumption that only very few lesbian victims are seeking for support and do use neither mainstream intervention chains nor specific counselling services. One of the major reasons for this imbalance between victimisation and the need for support is the tabooization of domestic violence within L(G)BT communities. L(G)BT communities have been established in middle and north Europe in the twenties of the last century and are meant to be a counterpart to the homophobic mainstream society. Naming domestic violence in same-sex couples may destroy the myth of a violent-free L(G)BT community.

The tabooization of domestic violence within the L(G)BT subculture is expressed in the assumption that domestic violence is a private matter and therefore should not be dealt with in public. This attitude has an impact on victimized lesbians and the perpetrators: The victims feel isolated, blame themselves, and even think that they deserve it since they are homosexuals (internalised homophobia). Furthermore, they rarely report to police or try to get support by counselling services since they want to protect their violent partners from being exposed to homophobia. And finally, not naming domestic violence or identifying with the perpetrator reinforce the violent behaviour of lesbian perpetrators.

Therefore, the aim of the **LARS project** is to develop and to implement awareness-raising actions within the L(G)BT communities to overcome the taboo of domestic violence. Community networks should be built and a community value established promoting the right for a violent-free partnership. Further, influential factors promoting the taboo like internalized homophobia will be uncovered and strategies of “community response” strengthened. In a first step research was conducted to describe the correlation between domestic violence and the L(G)BT communities as a hindering factor to end domestic violence in same-sex couples. In a second step promoting factors will be elaborated and exemplary actions implemented.

In this report results of our first research steps will be described: The “snap shot” aimed at the L(G)BT communities to get an impression of how domestic violence is discussed within the communities. In a second step the local L(G)BT communities have been mapped. Herewith the focus was put on the kind of organisations and not on its numbers. In a third step representatives of local communities have been interviewed about their impression of how the L(G)BT communities deal with domestic violence. Finally, results will be summed up and conclusions drawn.



PART I: Domestic violence in women-to-women partnerships and the L(G)BT communities

1. Snap shot research

1.1 Aim of snap shot

The aim of the snap shot was to get an overview for each participating country of the awareness of domestic violence in women-to-women relationships. The LARS project members wanted to know whether the women acknowledge the existence of violence in their relationships, if they know of women involved in a violent relationship, and if they consider domestic violence a topic of discussion within the lesbian community. We also wanted to know whether women know where to go if they encounter violence within their relationships. The snap shot may also be considered as a kick off activity for the LARS project

1.2 Method

A short questionnaire (7 questions) was developed by the LARS team. In the Netherlands the questionnaire was published on the Taboe Kwadraat website, from February 8th until May 20th 2010. We informed magazines and gay and lesbian organisations (mixed or female only) about the questionnaire, and asked them to bring this to the attention of their members or readers. Messages were published on their websites.

1.3 Results

In the Netherlands 107 women filled out the questionnaire.

		Nr. of clicks	%
1	I easily can imagine that there is violence in women-to-women relationships	68	63,6
2	I am aware of at least one example of violence within a woman-to-woman relationship	52	48,6
3	Violence in women-to-women relationships is barely mentioned or discussed in the lesbian community	59	55,1
4	I think that violence in women-to-women relationships should be an important issue within the lesbian community	62	57,9
5	I would know where to get help or advice if I experienced violence within my woman-to-woman relationship	28	26,2
6	I think violence in women-to-women relationships is less frequent than violence within heterosexual relationships	41	38,3
7	Violence in women-to-women relationships should not be an important subject of discussion	8	7,5
	Total response	107	

1.4 Conclusions

63 percent of the women who filled out the snapshot in the Netherlands are aware that violence exists in women-to-women relationships, and almost half of the respondents (49%) know women who are or were involved in a violent relationship with another woman. Furthermore, 58% of the respondents think that violence in women-to-women relationships should be an important issue within the lesbian community. This could mean that there is some support present for the awareness raising work that LARS wants to accomplish. Especially since 55% of the responding women feel the issue is as yet not discussed within the community.

Points of interest are the low number of women who know where to go if they encounter violence in their relationships, and the high percentage of women who think violence is more an issue in heterosexual relationships. These responses might be related in the Dutch situation. Much domestic violence prevention and intervention work has been done the past 10 years with the aim to introduce the ASHG's¹ to the people. In the ASHG's first line professionals give advice and support to people. It is available for victims, perpetrators, witnesses and staff members of organisations who have suspicions of domestic violence (i.e. teachers, doctors, etc.) Further, much work has been done to reach ethnical minorities. However, LGBT men and women are not specifically addressed by the ASHG's. Even though gender neutral texts are used, this omission might lead lesbian, bisexual and transgender people to conclude that they cannot seek help there. And it might also support the idea that domestic violence is something happening first and foremost in heterosexual relationships.

Since a wide variety of groups was informed about the snap shot, it is unknown what kind of women filled out the questionnaire. It is possible that mainly women who encountered violence in their own or in their friends' relationships responded to this questionnaire. The image given by the snapshot might be skewed by an overrepresentation of a specific group. But even in such a situation one important conclusion can be drawn from this snapshot:

The respondents would prefer this topic to be openly discussed within the L(G)BT community, and it could be beneficial to them if they know of places where they could go for advice and support.

¹ ASHG's = algemeen steunpunt huiselijk geweld (general support centre domestic violence)



2. Description of local L(G)BT communities

2.1 Kind and focus of organizations: [NGOs, focus on youth, elderly, women only, focus on culture (like organizing parties), self-help groups, women/lesbian archives, etc.]

Taboe Kwadraat operates from Utrecht, in the middle of the Netherlands. For this project we have chosen to map the organizations in Utrecht and in the area of Nijmegen / Arnhem. These cities were chosen because the city councils are considering making their domestic violence work inclusive of LGBT* people (in the future). If this is going to happen, the outcomes of our LARS project might be strengthened by local activities in the years following our project. (see conclusions, chapter 4.4) The Netherlands are only a small country, however. Because of this I also included some organisations that are not specifically local or regional. Organisations like the Transgender Network, the Network for Bisexual people or “Genius”, the network for highly educated LGBT professionals, may not be local, but they might prove to be very useful for our targets.

2.2 Domestic violence in L(G)BT media (review of last 12 months)

Only one magazine in the Netherlands serves lesbian and bisexual women. Another magazine serves LGBT young people. Most LGBT media are directed towards gay men. Domestic violence in women-to-women relationships is a topic that is not often published in the (LGBT) media. Nevertheless, they are willing to publish announcements if research or activities are organised. Zij aan Zij magazine published an article on domestic violence in magazine no. 3 (March) of 2010. The subject returns approximately once every year or maybe two years.

One situation created more attention. The city of Hengelo’s project leader Domestic Violence asked Taboe Kwadraat for advice on how to make their domestic violence policies LGBT inclusive. As a first step in January 2010, local LGB organisations were invited to express their opinion on the subject. We also developed an internet survey questioning LGB’s on their local needs for advice and preferences for support. The survey was placed on the municipalities website from early February until early May. The city’s project leader alerted the local and regional media and the regional and national LGBT media. Calls and articles were published. Regional radio’s pink hour on Sunday paid attention to the subject for 3 x 20 minutes, interviewing people involved in this project.



Organization	Type of organization	Focus of organization	Target groups	Local/Regional/Country	Table of local and regional organisations (chapter 2.1)
UTRECHT					
7152 regio Utrecht	Community organisation	Culture Organises parties, walks, and other activities	LB	L / R (C)	
COC Midden Nederland	Community organisation	Culture Organises parties & activities for several target groups (age / handicap / ethnicity)	LGB	L / R (C)	
St. De Kringen	Community organisation	Culture In several areas there are circles of people with similar interests. / - 30 / 30 + / 50+	LGB	L / R (C)	
PANN	Community organisation	parties mainly for younger HLBT and heterosexuals. Also participate in project that further emancipation and integration	HLGB	L / R / C	
T&T Utrecht	Community organisation	Culture Organises meetings, workshops and events for transgenders, transvestites and relatives	T +	L / R	
CHJC	Community organisation	Culture Specifically for people of Christian religion	LGB	R (C)	
PinQ	Community organisation	Culture Christian religion is an important theme	LGB		
Sappho	Community organisation	Culture Organises 1 activity per month	LB	L	
Orpheus	Self-help	Organises support evenings for people who are in heterosexual relationships but have LGB feelings	LGB (H)	R	
Midzomergracht	Festival	Yearly festival with theatre, parties, lectures, activities, art etc. Each year some serious topics are scheduled	LGBT	L / R	
Savannah Bay	Bookstore	Originally a women's bookstore, now has a large LGBT selection	LGBT (H)	L / R	
Adviescommissie lesbisch homo emancipatiebeleid Utrecht	Advisory board	Advises the city of Utrecht on Gay and lesbian inclusive policies. Board consists of members of organisations in this table	LGBT	L	



Nat Utrecht	Sports club	Swimming	LGB	L/R	Table of local and regional organisations (Chapter 2.1)
Pink Condition	Sports club	Fitness	LGB	L	
Gay Squash	Sports club	Squash	LG	L	
Cantate zus en zo	Choir	music	LB	L	
Step by Step	Dance school	Ballroom & Latin dancing	LB	L	
NIJMEGEN / ARNHEM					
COC Nijmegen & COC Arnhem	Community organisation	Culture Organises parties & activities for several target groups (age / handicap / ethnicity)	LGB	L / R (C)	
7152 Arnhem -Nijmegen	Community organisation	Culture Organises parties, walks, and other activities	LB	L / R (C)	
Villa Lilla	Community organisation	Culture Art, theatre, and projects about integration for multicultural groups	LGB	L / R (C)	
Dito	Community organisation	Culture Organises activities especially for LGB young people in the age of 12-25	LGB	L / R	
St. De Kringen	Community organisation	Culture In several areas there are circles of people with similar interests. / - 30 / 30 + / 50+	LGB	L / R (C)	
Transgendercafé Nijmegen	Community organisation	Culture Organises meetings, workshops and events for transgenders, transvestites and relatives	T +	L / R (C)	
Lesbisch Archief	Library	Lesbian Archives	LB	L / R	
De Feeks	Bookstore	Originally a women's bookstore, now has a large LGBT selection	LGB	De Feeks	
Adviescommissie lesbisch homo emancipatiebeleid Nijmegen	Advisory board	Advises the city of Nijmegen on gay and lesbian inclusive policies. Board consists of members of organisations in this table	LGBT	L	
Pinkball	Sports club	Squash	LGB	L	
Second Sunday	Sports club	Hiking	LB	L / R	



					Table of national organisations (Chapter 2.1)
NATIONAL					
Schorer	NGO	Health	LGBT	C	
LNBi	Community organisation	Culture Handles the interests of bisexual people, publishes agenda of activities organised throughout the country	B	C	
Malaica	Community organisation	Culture & education. Works on acceptance of homosexuality by cultural or religious groups who have negative feelings about LGB	LGB	C	
7152 50 plusminus	Community organisation	Culture Organises a variety of activities for 50+ women. The organisation has local subdivisions, but 50+ is excluded from this.	LB	C	
Genius	Network	Organises mix of business and private activities for highly educated LGB professionals	LGB	C	
Gay and School		Develops material and arranges projects to further the acceptance of homosexuality in schools for both teacher and pupils	LGB	C	
FemFusion	Internet Platform	Forum Organisation specialises in emancipation of LB women	LB	C	
LaVita	Internet Platform	Forum Organisation specialises in activities & reading	LB	C	
Ouder Roze	Internet Platform	Forum Organisation specialises in 50+ people	LGB	C	
St. Onderste Boven	Internet Platform	Culture / education	LB	C	



2.3 Local intervention networks fighting domestic violence and L(G)BT participation

The Netherlands have a centralized intervention chain for domestic violence. This means that (besides calling the police for serious incidences of domestic violence) there is **one** organisation where people can go if they need help. These organisations (ASHG²) for advice and support can be contacted by victims, perpetrators, witnesses and staff of organisations in the case of suspicions of domestic violence (i.e. teachers and doctors). Domestic violence workers will advise and/or give whatever support is needed, and will refer to other relevant organisations. If necessary they will make all the arrangements. The ASHG's offer counselling, shelter houses, and prevention activities. The ASHG organisations come from traditional women's shelters. There are approx. 40 ASHG's throughout the country. They cooperate with all organisations needed to tackle the problem of domestic violence: institutions for addictions, psychiatric problems, forensic psychiatry, welfare work, child protection, police, public prosecutor, probation services, shelters etc. Within the Social Support Act which includes domestic violence as an area of work, municipalities have a coordinating role. The Dutch organisation for Societal Development, Movisie, supports the national and local authorities in their approach and in the development of methods. They have for instance started a national page www.huiselijkgeweld.nl where all professionals can find and publish information.

The websites of the ASHG's provide information and phone numbers for people who seek help immediately. Their language is considered to be gender neutral. But all information they provide about violence in the relationship concerns violence that is committed by men towards women. The stories from perpetrators in child- and elder-abuse are about women, and the abuse is connected with care situations. The shelters have traditionally always been for women and their children only. Recently this has changed. The 4 biggest cities in the Netherlands now have beds available for male victims of domestic violence. These beds are in fact created for male victims of honour related crimes, but can be used for male victims of domestic violence as well. Utrecht is one of these cities.

A discussion with professionals working in the field of domestic violence at a national meeting made it clear that not all of them see the need to be educated in the subject of LGBT domestic violence. These men and women view themselves as being non-homophobic. They would treat a lesbian woman in the same way as heterosexual women, and think that is an appropriate way to support lesbians. A gay man would be treated the same way as a heterosexual man. During our presentation they responded positively to heteronormative and blatant homophobic situations mentioned. They recognized the heteronormative behaviour we discussed in our presentation and they felt empathic towards LGB people. Arguments against education are based on recent changes in thinking about domestic violence in general: In 2010 domestic violence is considered as being characterized by a more mutual dynamic. Men and women receive support for both perpetrator and victim positions. Consequently domestic violence workers feel they are already working with an open mind towards any kind of dynamic they come across. It is very difficult for them to understand that a history of stigmatisation brings its own dynamic into violent relationships. Transgenders are quite a different

² ASHG's = algemeen steunpunt huiselijk geweld (general support centre domestic violence)



issue, it is much more difficult to talk about providing support for them. As it seems transgender people are considered to be different to heterosexuals, whereas gays and lesbians are considered to be more or less the same.

2.4 Conclusions

The Dutch approach was initiated because professionals realized that domestic violence is very often not a single problem issue. Other problems, like addictions or psychiatric problems may be involved. Many elements were considered when this approach was created. This comprehensive approach meant to develop a new systems of registration and to establish cooperation and goodwill with new or other organisations.

It is quite disappointing that these changes excluded any provisions for LGBT people. People from other ethnicities were explicitly included in the governments' plans. Education in cultural differences and intercultural communication was provided. The general opinion seems to be that lesbian and bisexual women can use the provisions for heterosexual women. A cultural difference is perceived between for instance women from Dutch, Moroccan or Surinam background. But this is not the case when thinking about sexual diversity. It is important however to know how the lives of LGBT clients might be influenced by living in a heteronormative society. Denial of sexual diversity and its different mechanisms of gaining control and power does neither help the victims nor the perpetrators of partner violence.

It is also true however that the LGBT communities have not asked to be included. In the past few years only a few LGB organisations have paid attention to the subject. The largest Dutch community organisation, COC, is mildly interested. They are very forthcoming, as are for example magazines, to put news on their websites. COC Nijmegen and Arnhem are a little further, since they accept that violence in women's same sex relationships happens. Schorer, the national institute on LGBT health and wellbeing has organised two workshops on the subject in the past 10 years. They also participated in one small research project on male-to-male domestic violence.

There are quite a number of organisations available for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women. These are mainly community organisations organising cultural activities. Their main goal is to create safe places and atmospheres for LBT women to meet, and to promote activities for like-minded people. Some organisations focus on L(G)BT emancipation and rights. Anti-violence projects focus on hate crime.



PART II: Empirical research: Qualitative Interviews with key agents of the L(G)BT communities

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim of the interviews

Taboe Kwadraat undertook five in-depth interviews with ‘community leaders’ from the LBT women’s community in the Netherlands, in order to find out more about whether a taboo exists concerning women-to-women domestic abuse, and if so how it operates and how it could be effectively challenged. A 6th interview was scheduled, but this interview had to be cancelled because of the ash cloud in April. Unfortunately it could not be rescheduled in time for this report.

The interviews were based around a standard set of questions which were developed cooperatively with other LARS partners, and which were general enough to apply to all countries.

By interviewing community leaders, we were specifically not seeking those who had specialist knowledge of issues relating to women-to-women abuse, rather we were seeking to speak with a range of women who understand the lesbian and bisexual women’s communities in Utrecht, Arnhem and Nijmegen, and who could speak about when and how domestic abuse is discussed, and importantly, when it is not discussed.

Taboe Kwadraat was also involved in making the short documentary “Speaking in Silence”, about the taboo on domestic violence in same sex relationships. This documentary provided further valuable background information.

3.2 Interview guide

The interviews have been focused and guided. The guide was developed at the first partner meeting in Vienna in February 2010. The interviews have been conducted in March and April 2010. They have been taped and transcribed. The analysis is based on methods of content analysis (Mayring 2002, Flick 2000). In the qualitative content analysis only those information which are relevant for the leading research question are extracted (cf. Gläser&Laudel 2006). The aim is a structured and comprehensible analysis which allows interpretation and conclusions. Thus, the material will be sorted according to fixed categories which have been functions as classification criterion. Subsequently, the structured material will be reduced to main contents (cf. Mayring 2007). Computer based data analysis programs have been used to ease the analysis.

The interview guide

My name is [name] from [organisation]. Our organisation is partner of a European project called LARS – lesbian awareness raising strategies to overcome the taboo of domestic violence in women to women partnerships. Other partners are from Sweden, Germany, Netherlands, UK and Austria [please delete your country]. The project is based on the results and experiences of former European projects within the Daphne programme



which dealt with domestic violence/abusive same-sex partnerships. Aim of the project is to develop a concept of how the taboo can be overcome and to implement an action in 2011.

In our research we would like to know more about how domestic violence and abusive partnerships are discussed in our community here in [city]. The interview will last around 30 to 40 minutes.

First of all, I would like to ask you if you agree that the interview will be taped.

[Yes/No]

In the very beginning I would like to ask you explain who you are, what your involvement in the LGBT community is, since when you are part of the community and what your motivation was to become active.

- (1) What is your impression of how LGBT domestic violence is dealt with in the community?
 - a. Do you think that there have been changes in the awareness in the last 5 to 10 years?
 - b. How would you describe this development?
- (2) Have you ever come across domestic violence in your function/position in the community?
 - a. Depending on the function/position of the interviewee: Has it been a subject of discussion in your magazine, in an internet forum you are hosting, in your LGBT centre, did you ever witness DV in your bar/restaurant and was there any reaction from other guests etc.
- (3) At the beginning of this project we did a little online snap shot and asked women who love women if they know violent couples, if they think it is an important subject of discussion or if they know where to get support in case needed. There have been following results:
 - a. Present data
 - b. Leave space for the interviewee to respond before you continue with follow up questions.
 - c. Go through each question that hasn't been referred to in the spontaneous response.
- (4) To what extent do you think that domestic violence is discussed in our community and privately between lesbians?
 - a. Can you remember any private or public discussions about it within the last year?
 - b. Can you remember any event dealing with domestic violence within the last years?
- (5) Why is there this taboo? [If the interviewee thinks that there is no taboo, please continue with question no. 10]
 - a. What do you think contributes to the taboo?
- (6) What do you think would make it easier to discuss the taboo?
 - a. Have you any idea how the topic of domestic violence should be communicated, so that it can get a subject lesbian would talk about?
- (7) What do you think would be a good strategy to overcome the taboo?
- (8) Finally, would you like to add something to the interview?

Thank you for taking time and participating in this interview.

Continuing question (6) – there is no taboo:

- (9) Can you give examples of the times when people discuss it and how they discussed the phenomenon of abusive partnerships in women to women relationships?
- (10) What do you think makes it possible for women to talk about domestic violence or potential domestic violence in their partnerships?
 - a. The idea of the question is that there obviously have been no obstacles to discuss domestic violence. So what could have been conducive factors for having the discussion?
For example: No shame, no concernment, idea of that community is a safe space; idea that women are not aggressive etc.

- (11) Finally, would you like to add something to the interview?

Thank you for taking time and participating in this interview.

3.3 Description of key agents

Role in the community & Did they come across DV in their role in the community?

We aimed to interview a range of women who represented, as far as possible, a cross-section of the lesbian, bisexual and transgender women's community in The Netherlands. These roles were:

All key agents came across domestic violence in either their professional/community role or their private lives. In the latter case they were able to look at these situations from their professional view.

4. Reflecting how L(G)BT communities handle the phenomenon of domestic violence in same-sex partnerships/women-to-women partnerships

4.1 Coping strategies

Even though the key agents have numerous experiences with domestic violence, they do not mention many activities dealing with it. Two agents spoke about violence they observed privately. Friends and colleagues appeared to be supportive to whom they considered to be the victim in the violent situation. They might express the opinion that the relationship should be ended. In situations where the violence is not regarded as inflicting (bodily) harm, they might hold back so as not to become a threat to the abusive partner. Anger is not expressed towards the perpetrator, but it is felt. There is a tendency to exclude the perpetrator from activities and general friendly treatment. People did discuss when they would be willing to call the police for intervention. Key agents 2 and 5 also mentioned anger, meaning that LBT women feel that heterosexual women are well supported by professionals such as police, counseling services and shelters, but that the same support is not available to them.

COC in Nijmegen organized a theme evening about domestic violence. A short documentary was filmed in which two women were interviewed about their experiences with domestic violence in a woman-to-woman relationship. Three experts on domestic violence were also interviewed in this documentary, and they formed an expert panel during the theme evening. 110 women visited this evening, which is quite a large number for such a topic. After the documentary was shown, there was a lot of discussion between visitors and the members of the expert panel. There was notably more discussion and awareness about domestic violence in that community the first weeks, or maybe months, after that evening. Since no follow up activities were developed, discussion died down after a few weeks/months. We can learn from this project that it is necessary to keep the attention alive.

COC Arnhem also organized an evening about domestic violence in same sex relationships (for men and women). Except for a few women from the organization there was only one visitor. A few days later it was "coming out day", and Taboe Kwadraat organized a information stand at COC Arnhem's venue. But its presence was more or less ignored. This could be seen as denial within that specific community. But it might also reflect the fact that this community does not organize such activities on a regular basis.



Key agent 4 has experience with domestic violence from a professional point of view. She observed how colleagues in shelters and support agency work with and talk about lesbian women seeking support. In her opinion lesbian clients are not supported adequately in shelters, not even when the person working there is a lesbian herself.

“I think the counselor strengthens the taboo by her own behavior. For example in a shelter they do not promote lesbian clients to be open about their sexual orientation. They think this is to protect the client. They sort of say: ‘you can come to me with all your vulnerable subjects. I am there for you at all times.’ Unfortunately many lesbian counselors themselves are not open about their sexual orientation in the shelters. The population there consists mainly of women from cultures that disapprove about homosexuality. So if they would want to support the lesbian client properly in her situation, they would first have to be open about their own sexual orientation.”

Key agent 4 expresses a very important dilemma for domestic violence support workers connected to the devaluation of homosexuality in general. She also noticed that colleagues in the organization whisper about it when there is a lesbian couple seeking support. It is considered interesting and noteworthy but also a little ‘sensational’.

The city of Hengelo involved LGBT organizations in their domestic violence plans. A survey was placed on the internet asking people about their knowledge of domestic violence in same sex couples. People involved in a same sex violent relationship were also asked about their preferred institutes for counseling provisions. Unfortunately only a very low number of people responded to the internet survey. And from this low number of respondents only 6 people encountered violence in their own same sex relationships. They stated to prefer help from their own community organizations. But they also stated police and social workers should offer LGBT inclusive services.

4.2 Tabooization of domestic violence within the L(G)BT communities

Key agents mentioned thoughts and behaviours that they recognized as furthering the taboo on domestic violence in women-to-women relationships. They can be grouped under the following terms:

1. Denial:

- Same sex relationships are mainly talked about in terms of fun / excitement
- If you don’t talk about violence it does not exist
- We do not have severe power differences in our relationships (which is a condition for violence for some people)
- Life without her is worse than life with her.

2. Gender issues:

- Women are not violent.
- Women cannot inflict serious injury, violence committed by a woman is not taken seriously
- I will not be abused by a woman

3. Lack of recognition/education:

- Psychological violence and light physical violence are not recognized as domestic violence. They are perceived as bad times in a relationship, and partly discussed as such. This is connected to the very strong heterosexual image of domestic violence, where for a long time the violence has been perceived as an inequality problem between men and women. And where men were the only perpetrators and women the only victims. LGBT's do not recognize themselves in this image. When violence is discussed in terms of relationship problems the taboo is not as bad.

4. Feelings of shame or guilt:

- We do not air our dirty laundry
- Victims hold themselves responsible and do not want to talk about it because they feel ashamed about themselves
- No one wants to be a victim. Feelings of shame can be strengthened because of LBT orientation. Meaning that it is 'unacceptable' for a lesbian woman to be a victim.
- Domestic violence in general is a subject of disapproval

5. (Internalized) homophobia (also called minority stress):

- Because women-to-women relationships are negatively valued LBT women do not want to express the negative sides of the relationships. Many women have had a hard time coming out. They have told family and friends time and again that their choice is a good one. This makes it difficult to express negative experiences. It is important to maintain the illusion that our relationships are not violent.
- People in LGBT relationships do not want to reproduce mistakes and problems from heterosexual relationships. That makes it harder to accept that violence is happening in LGBT relationships as often as in heterosexual relationships.
- Internalized homophobia also works on a deeper level. It enlarges the taboo and makes it extra necessary to accept violence.

4.2.1 Silencing DV (rarely mentioned in L(G)BT media)

As far as key agents know violence is not discussed on the larger LBT platforms on the internet. The one and only lesbian magazine in the Netherlands (ZijaanZij) has published articles on domestic violence in the relationships of lesbian and bisexual women at regular intervals. They are also always willing to publish calls in the magazine or on their website if some kind of research is done.

4.2.2 Other tabooization mechanisms

Key agents identified some processes that are connected to larger subjects than 'just' domestic violence or (internalized) homophobia. These processes might further the taboo on domestic violence, and are therefore important to take into account.

1. The dynamics in female same sex relationships: Women can be very strongly connected in a woman-to-woman relationship. In such cases it is very hard to feel one's own autonomy, and also to let the other partner do her own thing. Disappointments are hard to handle, as well as

feelings of inferiority if the relationship does not have the desired longevity. These subjects are difficult to discuss, and this leads to violence being denied or silenced.

2. Acceptance of homosexuality in our society has also led to disappearance of differences in the LGBT community. Many men and women have conformed to appearances that are acceptable within the larger society. Activism is hardly present anymore in the Netherlands. This contributes to tabooing mechanisms because it makes things happen behind closed doors.
3. Feminism: In the 70's under the influence of feminism women were considered to be the more peaceful sex/gender. Political lesbians (women who left their husbands to live together with a woman without having sexual desires for women) introduced the high pressure on lesbian women to be peaceful, gentle and compassionate. Abuse was male, and therefore not openly discussed in lesbian community. Violent acts in lesbian relationships disappeared behind closed doors because this did not stroke with feminist thought about women.
4. In general it is very difficult to find funding for research into subjects that concern the (mental) health of lesbian women. Therefore what happens in women-to-women relationships stays unknown. It has other consequences as well. Because there is no research no provisions are developed for this group of women. One key agent (3) expressed this situation as follows:

"If you don't know where to go when it happens, what's there to talk about? Violence will be more easily discussed when one knows what actions to undertake. When one knows what to do in such a situation."

5. Society in general finds it hard to handle inconvenient truths. Domestic violence is one such truth. People find it hard to realize violence is much easier to encounter at home than on the street. The world gets furious about paedophiles, but who behaves the same way when parents sexually abuse their children? In gay terms: we speak about insecurity on the street because of Muslim / Moroccan boys hassling gays and lesbians, but who speaks about our own abusive partners?

4.3 Discussed strategies to overcome the taboo

Key agent 5 expresses the following opinion:

"You can't overcome the taboo on domestic violence. This did not happen for heterosexual women either. Violence in a relationship is too painful to talk about. But you can pave the way for women to find advice and support for violence problems in their relationships."

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Others were more hopeful and gave quite a few suggestions of ways to encounter the taboo on domestic violence in same sex relationships.



1. **Making it a subject of discussion:**

Key agent 2 called it

"... political shamelessness: Making it an issue to discuss less pleasant parts of our relationships instead of always and only expressing the positive and exiting sides."

All key agents felt that publicity would be a good way to start overcoming the taboo. Write articles in public magazines, on the internet, in newsletters for self help organizations. Discuss it in your own circle of friends, joke about it if you have to, but make sure that people start thinking about the subject. Organize theme- or discussion evenings in community organizations. Maybe include theater. Include the bigger LBT platforms, use modern technology and the new media to create 'goodwill' on the subject. It is also important to express that talking about the subject is not only negative. *"One can look at it as having something to lose, but also that you win something by making it a topic"* (Key agent 2)

2. **(Psycho)education:**

Educate women to create more insight in female same sex relationships. Especially into the dynamics of women-to-women relationships. Teach women what kind of problems they can expect. Relationships are also about emotional maturity, which might be problematic in some sub-communities. Therefore it is necessary to have accurate knowledge about the values of each community and there subdivisions. It might also be necessary to pay attention to the societal components in our relationships, to the reproduction of patterns seen in other parts of society. A relationship is never only about two people. Society forms part of this relationship. This is what is not recognized by LGBT communities for a long time. Provide training for COC's and other LGBT organizations.

3. **Have a clear image of the groups / categories the LARS-project has to work with:**

According to key agent 3 we cannot rest at informing the community. Our activities have to reach out to (local) governments, to domestic violence professionals (including police) and (LGBT) counselors, and to the LBT communities. If we do not recognize this we might have to start over and over. All key agents mentioned informing / education professionals and counselors.

4. **Create visibility** (literally and figuratively):

The subject of domestic violence is not easy to talk about. One can see this for instance by the fact that there is hardly any image material available. In the Netherlands a poster was created, depicting two men in a violent situation. The rights on this poster have already expired, so this cannot be used any longer. It is even more difficult to find acceptable images of women in a violent situation.

Organizations already working on domestic violence should explicitly reach out to LBT women and make their organization LBT inclusive. This means that people now working on domestic violence should be trained, in the same way they were trained to serve people from different backgrounds and cultures.

4.4 Conclusions

People in a community have values and expectations. The phenomenon of domestic violence is discussed or silenced according to these values. Key agent 3 mentioned that violence within the relationship was not always as taboo as it is now:

“In the 70’s, with the old style dykes, domestic violence was quite openly discussed. Of course they did not call it domestic violence. But it was considered to be normal to drink heavily in the evening, and the next day they would speak smilingly about being drunk and slapping their partner.”

These days are long past, and the general opinion at the moment seems to be that abuse by men is terrible, but to be abused by (or letting yourself being abused by) another woman is despicable. Women are still the weaker sex, and this reflects upon their victims, whether they are male or female.

All key agents express their opinion by saying that in the L(G)BT community domestic violence is a ‘non-topic’. They also see no change over the past 5 to 10 years. Key agents mentioned a few more or less successful activities, but it is also clear that when activities are not continued or followed up by new activities the communities concern is short lived. Lack of funding for LGBT health issues is mentioned as one reason for lack of progress in this area. One of the consequences of this lack of funding is that LBT women are not seen as a target group for domestic violence professionals. Not knowing that this group exists, no outreach work is done and no provisions are made for this group.

Another reason is the strong heterosexual image of domestic violence. In spite of the fact that LBT women realise they have unpleasant situations in their relationships, that might even be called violent, they do not call these situations domestic violence. Even women with experience as shelter workers have a hard time seeing violence in a woman-to-woman relationship as domestic violence. This might be connected to a different power balance and lifestyle arrangement as is seen in many heterosexual relationships. This could make it more difficult to recognize violence patterns.

In my own experience most community organizations react positively when some kind of action is taken to pay attention to this subject. It is more difficult to mobilise the individual LBT-woman. If you combine the fact that the subject is not talked about with the lack of recognition of domestic violence in female same sex relationships you get a very strong attitude of *“this is not my concern, I don’t know this problem, it has nothing to do with me.”* To overcome this attitude, that might also be called a form of denial, it might be necessary to ask women who have experienced violence in a woman-to-woman relationship to come out on this subject. Their support might make it easier for other women to start recognizing (potential) violent situations.



PART III: Summary and conclusion

5. Summary

The first research steps in project LARS consisted of three steps. Our first action was placing an internet based questionnaire on our websites, asking women to give their opinion on seven questions about the issue of speaking on domestic violence in women's same sex relationships. In the Netherlands 107 women filled out this questionnaire. 63% of these women were aware that violence exists in women-to-women relationships, and almost half of the respondents know someone who has experienced violence in such a relationship. 58% thinks it is desirable if the topic could be discussed within the LBT communities. Only 26% of the respondents would know where to go if the situation of violence would present itself in their relationships.

Our second action was mapping the L(G)BT communities and the local domestic violence intervention networks. We also looked into media attention for domestic violence in L(G)BT relationships. In the Netherlands two areas are mapped: Utrecht en Arnhem/Nijmegen. Both areas have small but active LBT communities. They are well organised. Most organisations are community organisations, organising safe spaces and activities for like-minded people. Our best choices for cooperation in the LARS project would be 7152, COC, De Kringen, T&T, and maybe Orpheus. Only 7152 is a lesbian/bisexual dedicated organisation. The other organisations are mixed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and sometimes inclusive of transgenders or heterosexuals. T&T is transgender specific. Both the Utrecht and the Arnhem/ Nijmegen areas have municipal advisory boards for LGBT issues.

Domestic violence networks are heterosexual and centralized in the Netherlands. So far no specific provisions have been taken to serve LBT women. In spite of the fact that these organisations have received training on cultural diversity, it is quite difficult to make them look at sexual diversity in their organisations. Many staff members find it very difficult to understand that lesbian lives are different from the lives of heterosexual women. Growing up in a heteronormative society makes LBT women vulnerable, and this vulnerability is not recognized. Domestic violence is still such a big taboo in L(G)BT communities, that they have not yet given much recognition to the subject. General consensus is that our focus should be on hate crimes. Considering that the LGBT community is already stigmatised, the norm seems to be that only positive aspects of our relationships should be emphasized.

The third step in this project was to interview key agents. The aim was to uncover mechanisms that further the taboo and mechanisms that are helpful in discussing domestic violence in women-to-women relationships. The five tabooing mechanisms we described for the Netherlands are denial, gender issues, lack of recognition/education, feelings of shame and guilt and internalized homophobia. Most mechanisms work by minimising either the prevalence or the effect of domestic violence in women to women relationships. It might be explained away as being "*part of life*", or "*not very serious, because women are not very violent*". Other tabooing mechanisms that are described are feminism, lack of funding for research, and unwanted side effects of equality. Key agents were very explicit about the silence in the community around the topic of domestic violence. When asked how the community dealt with this problem they answered unanimously with "*the community does not deal with the topic at all*". They mentioned quite a few actions that in their opinion could be



taken. Creating visibility was the most mentioned strategy. Even if not very creative, the most mentioned forms were writing articles for magazines, internet platforms, organising discussions and maybe theatre. They also advised us to get a very clear picture of the groups that need to be involved in breaking the taboo. Consensus was that both the communities themselves, local and national authorities and domestic violence workers need to be involved.

6. Conclusions

We received a satisfactory number of reactions to our snap shot. However, we do not know much of the women who filled out the questionnaire. They could be mainly women who encountered violence in their own or in their friend's relationships. This is why it is called only a snap shot instead of for example a short survey. In spite of this limitation there are a few things that we can conclude from the results. The high number of women who think the topic should be discussed in the LBT communities indicate there is support for the awareness raising work LARS wants to accomplish. The low number of women who know where to go in case of violence in their relationship, might be an indication for the work we have to do. It means breaking the taboo so that domestic violence can be more openly discussed and people can be knowledgeable.

There are many active community organisations in the area that LARS wants to cover. Projects are mainly focussed on positive aspects of L(G)BT life. It might prove to be quite a challenge to divert the attention to a subject as taboo in our communities as domestic violence. We will have to be careful in thinking up and planning activities that attract many women, and we need to provide safe space and atmosphere when discussing and thinking about the subject of domestic violence.

It could be that the taboo and the lack of support systems work in close balance together. *"Why talk about something if there is nowhere to go?"*, one of the interviewed key agents asked. It might look like LBT women do not seek support for domestic violence issues. But mainstream domestic violence organisations have also not considered these women a target group for their work. No outreach work has been done so far. If asked about the subject, domestic violence workers will react with a little surprise that to them *'everyone is equal and welcome'*. Changes in the discourse on domestic violence include a different view on roles of men and women. Counsellors and other domestic violence workers seem to draw the conclusion that working with an open mind towards male and female roles in the violent dynamics of relationships provides enough openness to work with lesbian clients as well. The individual history of stigmatisation is ignored in this line of thinking. Literature provides enough emphasis on the fact that giving support to LBT women on this basis might lead to revictimization because of heteronormativity. Besides that, there is also some proof that in spite of these changes work methods have not changed as much as is desirable.

In spite of the tolerant image the Netherlands have when it comes to homosexuality there are hardly any places where people can find any form of L(G)BT specific counselling. Besides a few individual counsellors throughout the country, only Schorer in Amsterdam, and Rotterdam Verkeert in Rotterdam offer some counselling services. Consequently creating places of domestic violence support for LBT women should be an issue when creating awareness. Educative work needs to be directed towards the mainstream domestic violence support centres as well as towards lesbian specific counsellors.



To bridge the gap between domestic support centres and L(G)BT communities, local governments should take an interest in these issues. From our interviews I can draw the conclusion that project LARS is a very welcome project. It is important that LBT communities take on the responsibility to accept that there is violence in our relationships. Breaking the taboo on domestic violence in women-to-women relationships may bring about the necessary change.

