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

National report: England

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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 organisations. 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 snap-shot was intended as a simple, un-scientific method to gather some basic information about the views of lesbian and bisexual women about domestic abuse. This would give each project participant an overview of attitudes within their own cities, and could be used to highlight differences and to provide an overview of the situation in each city. The snap shot was also intended as a tool to provoke discussion with interviewees at a later stage in the research.

### 1.2 Method

The snap shot was arranged early in the project and before partners had met together for a planning meeting. This made coordination and understanding of expectations more complex, but also acted as a good learning tool for all partners in how to improve communication in future work packages.

It was important to use the same questions in each country, in order to ensure consistency and comparability. This inevitably meant some compromise on language in order to make the questions understandable for all potential respondents.

In the UK, we used an internet based survey site (Survey Monkey) to launch the survey. The software also undertakes basic analysis of responses.

The snapshot was advertised on the front page of Galop's website, including a link to the survey itself. A link to the survey and a request to publicise it was emailed to more than thirty organisations working in the LGBT or criminal justice field in London. An advert was included in the Community Safety Advisory Service e-newsletter which goes out to more than 100 agencies in London. The snapshot was also advertised to the community by being press-released to more than ten different LGBT websites and magazines.

Unfortunately, despite these efforts, the response rate to the survey was low. This may be because similar surveys have been undertaken recently in the UK, including one for Broken Rainbow (a UK-based LGBT Domestic Abuse charity), and the fairly large amount of survey work undertaken in a fairly small community means that many researchers in the UK LGBT community now find it hard to secure participation in these types of surveys.

The snap shot was completed by 21 people.



## 1.2 Results

Question	Agree	Disagree
I can easily imagine that there is domestic violence in women-to-women/lesbian relationships.	90.5% 19	9.5% 2
I am aware of at least one example of violence within a women-to-women/lesbian relationship.	66.7% 14	33.3% 7
Violence in women-to-women/lesbian relationships is barely mentioned or discussed in the lesbian community.	81.0% 17	29% 4
I think that violence in women-to-women/lesbian relationships should be an important issue within the lesbian community.	95.2% 20	4.8% 1
I would know where to get help or advice if I experienced violence within my women-to-woman/lesbian relationship.	81.0% 17	29% 4
Violence in women-to-women/lesbian relationships should not be an important subject of discussion.	4.8% 1	95.2% 20
I think violence in woman-to-woman/lesbian relationships is less frequent than violence within heterosexual relationships.	61.9% 13	38.1% 8

## 1.4 Conclusions

The results are interesting but because of the small sample size, conclusions are very limited.

The results seem to show that awareness about the existence of domestic abuse within women to women relationships is fairly high, with two-thirds of respondents knowing of at least one instance, and with the vast majority considering that it is an important topic of conversation, and considering that it is easy to imagine this type of situation.

More than 80% of respondents stated that they would know where to go for help if they experienced domestic abuse. This is potentially very encouraging, although the limited nature of the snap shot means that we are unable to judge where this might mean – for example – do respondents mean that they would go to the police; to the doctor, to a generic domestic abuse service or to a specialist LGBT service?

This high level of awareness is not matched by a realistic assessment of the scale of domestic abuse in women to women relationships – with nearly two thirds underestimating the scale by agreeing that violence within women-to-women relationships is less frequent than in heterosexual relationships. Evidence actually shows that the frequency of abuse is approximately the same.

Finally, more than 80% agreed that the topic of abuse within women-to-women relationships is barely discussed, supporting the projects supposition that a taboo regarding this issue may exist.



## 2. Description of local L(G)BT communities

### 2.1 Kind and focus of organisations

London has an extremely wide range of LGBT organisations, venues, and community groups. Many are designed for both men and women, though there are some organisations, venues, and community groups that cater specifically for women.

#### **General LGBT - commercial**

There are many LGBT bars, pubs, and clubs across London. The majority of London's 32 boroughs has at least one venue, and some boroughs, including Islington, Lambeth, Camden and Westminster, each have a number (between three and 20+).

There are also a number of other commercial venues targeted at the LGBT community in London. These include a bookshop, gay shops (selling DVDs and other items), cafes and dating websites.

#### **General – non commercial**

Most boroughs have an LGBT forum where community leaders and local residents can discuss things that are going on in the local area in relation to LGBT people. These groups are mostly strategic rather than socially focused, but are open to any LGBT people who wish to join. A few of these forums have affiliated social groups for LGBT people.

Most trade unions have special caucuses for LGBT people. There are also workplace LGBT support groups in large organisations/corporations.

There are also many special interest LGBT social groups. There are more than a hundred different specialist groups such as these, which include:

- Singles – often targeted at particular groups, such as young professionals
- Special interests such as the Gay and Lesbian Symphony Orchestra, gay and lesbian choirs, a science fiction group, walking tours, book clubs, etc.
- Sports groups, including for football, running, swimming, walking and many many other sports.

#### **General - youth**

Most boroughs have a youth club for LGBT young people. Some are sponsored through an LGBT charity, while others are organised by the council. The clubs are social spaces that meet 1-2 times per month and are for people aged 16-26. They have some educational aspects, and introduce topics like safer sex, healthy relationships, further education, drink/drugs, working, bullying/hate crime, coming out, etc. Most services provide a one-to-one support service where young people can talk about their problems with group leaders privately. A few of these groups are for young men or young women only (separate groups) but the majority are for all LGBT young people.

Universities have LGBT societies that function as social groups as well as bodies that lobby for LGBT rights at the university and in their local area.



### **General - older people**

There are groups in three boroughs for older LGBT people sponsored by Age UK, a mainstream charity for older people. The groups are separated into men's groups and women's groups, and run social activities and provide basic advice and emotional support to older LGBT people. There are also a few mixed groups for older LGBT people that are hosted by LGBT organisations.

### **General - culture**

London hosts a large LGBT film festival, where there are several films that are targeted towards lesbian/bisexual women. There are also organisations that put on arts festivals and cultural events (poetry readings, lectures, walking tours, etc.) throughout the year. The Hall-Carpenter Archives (national LGBT history archive) are based in London, as is LAGNA (Lesbian and Gay News Media Archive).

There is an LGBT symphony, choral groups, literary magazine, and ballroom dancing group open to women and men.

Occasionally mainstream museums will host LGBT events or exhibitions, usually during Pride or LGBT History Month (February).

### **General - self-help/support**

There are a range of self-help and support avenues for LGBT people in London. Most self-help groups are based within a charity that supports LGBT people.

The types of social/support groups are varied and range to include:

- Social/support groups for Black and minority ethnic women and men, including support groups for refugees/asylum seekers
- Telephone helplines/advice lines about general LGBT issues, hate crime, housing, bereavement, mental health, etc.
- Social/support groups for religious LGBT people (Gay Christians, Imaan, etc).
- Support groups for people with HIV, mental health problems, other health problems, and who are carers.
- Groups for people with substance misuse problems
- Social/support groups for trans people (some of whom are lesbian/bisexual women)
- Social/support groups for LGBT parents and for parents of LGBT people

There are also 17 sexual health clinics that cater specifically for LGBT people. Two of these clinics are for women.

There is one dedicated helpline for LGBT victims/survivors of domestic abuse, and the Domestic Abuse Partnership which provides support, advocacy, and advice to LGBT victims/survivors of domestic abuse.



## **Women only LB&T community**

The majority of LGBT groups and venues in London are either for all LGBT people or for men only, but there are a range of organisations, venues, and community groups that are specifically for women.

There are at least three bars which are targeted at lesbian, bisexual and trans women, as well as at least four more which have a club night for lesbian and bisexual women at least once a week. There are also a number of regular and one off clubs for lesbian/bisexual women, and a number of mainstream LGBT bars, pubs, and clubs which run special nights on occasions catering for lesbian/bisexual women, meaning that on average there will be between eight and ten club nights occurring each month targeted at lesbians and bisexual women.

Some support and social groups operated by LGBT charities are women-only, including ones that focus on specific support issues like coming out, mental health, drink/drugs, etc. There are also women-specific social/support groups for women from different Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, younger women, older women, and women who are in specific careers. These groups include (but are not limited to):

### **Support for women from diverse communities**

- Older people
  - Women's groups in Camden and Hackney
- Younger people
  - one youth group for women only (all others are mixed)
- Black and minority ethnic (BME)/faith communities
  - Kiss (Social group made up of women who identify as lesbian or bisexual and are of South Asian, Middle Eastern or North African descent)
  - BME social group at London Friend in Islington
  - Safra project (research/resource project for LBT women who are religiously or culturally Muslim)
  - Lesbian Christian group
  - Social/support group for Irish women
- Support group for lesbian/bisexual asylum seekers
- Support group and newsletter for disabled lesbian/bisexual women

### **Support for women with specific support needs**

- coming out group at London Friend (Islington)
- coming out/support group at ELOP (Waltham Forest)
- drug/alcohol misuse support group for lesbian/bisexual women
- health champion group at Pace
- discussion group for women at Pace



- three social/support groups for lesbian/bisexual women with children
- two sexual health clinics for lesbian/bisexual women

#### **Social group and special interest groups for lesbians and bisexual women**

- discussion group for women at Gays the Word bookshop
- networking/social groups for professional women
- social group for 'adventure'
- 2-3 film clubs for women
- Dinner club
- Meditation group
- groups in local London boroughs
- a wide range of sports groups for lesbian/bisexual women including:
  - cycling group
  - volleyball
  - football club
  - 2 walking clubs
  - Latin and ballroom dance club
  - Also 7 women-only football clubs that are not lesbian/bisexual exclusive
  - Swimming group

#### **Internet based**

- at least 6 different online dating sites for lesbian/bisexual women
- Gingerbeer (community listings and forums)
- Forums on Diva website (magazine)
- G3 exchange forums/social networking site

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

There is a very large and vibrant LGBT media in the UK and London specifically. This includes Diva, a monthly paid-for magazine targeted at lesbian and bisexual women, and G3, a monthly free magazine targeted at the same audience. In addition, there are some generic news websites including the Pink Paper and Pink News, both of which cover news relevant to the LBT communities in London. Fyne Times is a free magazine distributed in London and the south of England and targeted at the LGBT community.

There are also a number of publications primarily aimed at gay men, but which are sometimes read by LBT women. These include Boyz, QX and Out in the City. Because of the target audience, we did not review content in these three publications, however we are aware of some stories and news items about domestic abuse in the LGBT community, as well as adverts for support organisations, running in the last twelve months.



Of the LGBT or LBT publications we surveyed, in the last twelve months, coverage of the subject of domestic abuse in women to women relationships was as follows:

- G3 Magazine (free monthly)
  - adverts for Broken Rainbow (LGBT domestic abuse charity)
  - 1 editorial about LGBT domestic abuse for Broken Rainbow (a paragraph)
  - 1 article on stalking (did not explicitly mention domestic abuse)
- Pink Paper
  - 4 articles that mentioned domestic abuse, usually in the context of reporting about crime
- Pink News
  - articles about domestic abuse legislation in other countries
  - 2 articles about reporting domestic abuse to the police
  - 1 article promoting youth domestic abuse survey
- Fyne Times
  - Information page about Broken Rainbow on 'help' section of website.

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

In London there are statutory and voluntary organisations and systems that support victims/survivors of domestic abuse. Some of these are pan-London (work is done in every borough), and others are borough-specific (funded to provide services only to residents of that borough). Most of these organisations are mainstream domestic abuse organisations whose support services include service provision to lesbian and bisexual women, but are not LGBT-specific services. There are also a few LGBT-specific domestic abuse services and intervention networks.

#### **Mainstream Domestic Abuse Services**

Each of London's 32 boroughs has a branch of Women's Aid, which is a national charity that supports women experiencing domestic abuse. Women's Aid provides refuge space in some boroughs, and advice services in other boroughs. Women refer themselves to Women's Aid branches, and while Women's Aid organisations do not exclude lesbian and bisexual women from their services, they do not provide specialist services for lesbian/bisexual women. Some Women's Aid organisations work with trans women while others do not (especially some refuges). No Women's Aid organisation works with men who have experienced domestic abuse.

Most London boroughs have an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA) who is based within a local domestic abuse charity (often a branch of Women's Aid). The IDVA will carry out advocacy and support work for victims/survivors of high risk domestic abuse. The IDVA will also represent a victim/survivor at a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference



(MARAC), which is a meeting between voluntary and statutory organisations (domestic abuse advocates, police, child protection services, housing workers, social workers, etc.) to plan ways to increase the safety of individual high-risk victims/survivors. IDVAs work with any high-risk victim/survivor of domestic abuse, including men, and do work with LGBT people although they do not have specialist skills.

There are London-wide and national second-tier domestic abuse services that provide support to front-line service providers and help develop policy around domestic abuse. AVA (Against Violence and Abuse), the national second-tier domestic abuse organisation, includes LGBT domestic abuse in their work but does not focus solely on LGBT domestic abuse.

### **LGBT-Specific Domestic Abuse Services**

In London there are services catering specifically for LGBT victims/survivors of domestic abuse as well as a second-tier support/policy development body.

Nationally, Broken Rainbow provides telephone helpline assistance for LGBT victims/survivors of domestic abuse. Broken Rainbow also gives training sessions on LGBT domestic abuse to mainstream statutory and voluntary sector domestic abuse organisations as well as generalist LGBT support organisations.

The LGBT Domestic Abuse Partnership (DAP) works within London to provide support, advice, and advocacy to LGBT victims/survivors of domestic abuse. The DAP is a partnership of 5 different LGBT organisations that provide specialist domestic abuse services; some of the organisations provide other services to LGBT people are not domestic abuse related. The DAP provides an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA) type service that addresses the comprehensive needs of victims/survivors of domestic abuse, including high-risk victims who need representation at a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference. The DAP also provides a support group for LGBT victims/survivors of domestic abuse.

The LGBT Domestic Abuse Forum is a second-tier organisation that provides support and networking opportunities to organisations that work with LGBT victims/survivors of domestic abuse, including mainstream domestic abuse organisations and mainstream LGBT organisations.

Additionally, many boroughs provide basic training to local domestic abuse service providers on LGBT domestic abuse, and all Independent Domestic Violence Advocates receive brief training on signs and risk factors of LGBT domestic abuse.

## **2.4 Conclusions**

The size and complexity of London and the diversity of the lesbian and bisexual women's communities in London make defining the boundaries of the community impossible. In addition to many of the formal networks and groups which we have listed in this section, there are a multitude of small, community run groups which may only be locally advertised. T

One benefit of the relative size of the city and the community within it is that it has comparatively well developed services responding to a wide range of needs. In relation to



domestic abuse, this includes an organisation with the sole focus on LGBT domestic abuse (Broken Rainbow), a formal partnership between five LGBT organisations, providing a range of support services to victims of LGBT domestic abuse (The London LGBT Domestic Abuse Partnership) and a second-tier organisation providing support and coordination to frontline workers across the city who work with LGBT victims of domestic abuse (The LGBT Domestic Abuse Forum). None of these organisations specifically target lesbian and bisexual women, and all organisations receive higher numbers of calls from gay and bisexual men. This may be because some women contact mainstream domestic abuse service providers more traditionally associated with this work, such as Women's Aid or Refuge. A benefit of contacting these mainstream organisations is their network of refuges, which can provide emergency accommodation; however a drawback can be the lack of understanding of the specific nature of women-to-women violence, and an intervention model based on violence perpetrated by men, which is applied to violence actually perpetrated by women.

The well developed LGBT media in London has also demonstrated some awareness of the issue of women-to-women violence, and there have been a small number of articles published on the subject in the last year. Print magazines are monthly, and there will be a limit to how much coverage a magazine will give any issue within a short time frame. There will have been other articles before the twelve month monitoring period for this project.

The development of community-led services and the coverage in the press, as well as the level of awareness demonstrated by the snap-shot respondents, suggest that in some ways, the London LGBT community has begun to confront the issue of LGBT domestic abuse. However, despite this, there has been a lack of focus specifically on women, and the interviews demonstrate that the taboo still exists and continues to work to ensure that lesbians and bisexual women may not be coming forward to access help when they are victims of abuse.



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

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Aim of the interviews

Galop undertook six in-depth interviews with 'community leaders' from the LBT women's community in London, 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.

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 London, and who could speak about when and how domestic abuse is discussed, and importantly, when it is not discussed.

### 3.2 Interview guide

The interviews were focused and guided. The guide was developed at the first partner meeting in Vienna in February 2010. The interviews were conducted in March and April 2010. They were taped notes and roughly transcribed. The analysis is based on methods of content analysis (Mayring 2002, Flick 2000). In the qualitative content analysis only information relevant to the leading research question was 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.

Each report author undertook three interviews. Five of the interviews were face-to-face (in four cases, interviews took place in a private room at the respondent's place of work, and in one case at Galop's own offices), and in one case the interview was over the phone because of the respondents availability.

Interviews were private. Although they were all recorded, participants were told that recordings would only be listened to by the research team, and that comments would not be attributed to individual participants. This was important given the personal and open nature of some of the stories shared by the participants.



## 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]*

1. *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.*
2. *What is your impression of how LGBT domestic violence is dealt with in the community?*  
*Do you think that there have been changes in the awareness in the last 5 to 10 years?*  
*How would you describe this development?*
3. *Have you ever come across domestic violence in your function/position in the community?*  
*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.*
4. *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:*  
*Present data*  
*Leave space for the interviewee to respond before you continue with follow up questions.*  
*Go through each question that hasn't been referred to in the spontaneous response.*
5. *To what extent do you think that domestic violence is discussed in our community and privately between lesbians?*  
*Can you remember any private or public discussions about it within the last year?*  
*Can you remember any event dealing with domestic violence within the last years?*
6. *Why is there this taboo? [If the interviewee thinks that there is no taboo, please continue with question no. 10]*  
*What do you think contributes to the taboo?*  
*What do you think would make it easier to discuss the taboo?*



7. *Have you any idea how the topic of domestic violence should be communicated, so that it can get a subject lesbian would talk about?*
8. *What do you think would be a good strategy to overcome the taboo?*
9. *Finally, would you like to add something to the interview?*

*Thank you for taking time and participating in this interview.*

10. *Continuing question (6) – there is no taboo:*

*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?*

*What do you think makes it possible for women to talk about domestic violence or potential domestic violence in their partnerships?*

*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?*

### **3.3 Description of key agents**

#### **Who we did and didn't interview**

We aimed to interview a range of women who represented, as far as possible, a cross-section of the lesbian and bisexual women's community in London. We interviewed six key agents, who worked in a range of roles including the media, the commercial LGBT 'scene' and in support groups.

#### **Who was missing?**

The lesbian and bisexual women's communities in London are large and diverse, and we would have liked to have been able to consider more closely how issues may have been different within smaller sub-groups – such as for black and minority ethnic women, or trans women, bisexual women, older and younger women etc.

We were however limited by the relatively small number of interviews which the project allowed, and felt that it was important to allow the 'big picture' to become clear. Some of the issues for these sub-groups did come up in the interviews, and where this is the case, we have identified them in the analysis to follow, however as with all such projects, the results are limited and there is much more we could learn if we had more time and more resources.

#### **Respondents experiences of domestic abuse in the community**

Respondents had very different experiences of domestic abuse, with two almost opposing stories to tell. For some respondents, abuse and violence were regular occurrences, to the extent that potentially abusive behaviour may have become normalised and therefore unchallenged. For others, it was rarely witnessed or discussed, and these respondents experienced a silence around the subject and often struggled to identify or name their experiences as abusive. These two experiences, of normalisation and of silencing, were recurring themes throughout the interviews, and are two of the ways in which the taboo seems to operate in London. We discuss these themes in more detail below.

There was a distinction between women's' experiences in *their role* in the community and women's experiences *in* the community.



When talking about their formal or semi-formal roles as community leaders, all women who were interviewed spoke about at least a basic level of awareness regarding the existence of women-to-women domestic abuse, and all were able to name at least Broken Rainbow as a potential source of support for victims (Broken Rainbow is the main LGBT Domestic Abuse organisation in England).

When respondents were discussing themselves on a more personal basis in the community – for example discussions amongst their groups of friends and acquaintances and their own personal experience, approximately half of the women interviewed had directly experienced or witnessed abuse such as women who had been abused by an ex of her current partner, and one had been abused by a partner and had regularly witnessed violence between other lesbian/bi partners in her social circle. One person said it is unusual not to go out and witness some kind of incident, and that she had seen someone in a violent fight only the last weekend. Others found it almost impossible at first to identify any conversations or experiences, though by the end of the interviews, all participants had identified at least one or more instances of abuse in someone they knew.

Some of the women had direct experience of women-to-women abuse in the *role in* the community. The bar manager had experienced incidents taking place in the bar on occasion, and the respondents who worked in journalism or websites discussed occasions in which people had written to the magazine problem page, or posted in discussion forums for advice on these issues. On these occasions, all said that the victims had received positive responses from other website users, including their experiences being named as abuse, being identified as unacceptable and being signposted to appropriate LGBT support services.

Where respondents had witnessed abuse taking place in bars and commercial settings, they experienced a range of reactions from others. One woman who spoke of witnessing violence 'on the scene' very regularly, spoke of the way in which this violence is normalised:

*Everyone knows lesbians tend to be in high voltage relationships*

For this respondent, her experience was that witnesses did not step in and respond to incidents. It was only with hindsight that the respondent questioned this reaction and wondered why behaviour which might have been seen as abusive in a heterosexual relationship was not seen in this way in women-to-women relationships.

The bar manager had a contrasting experience, and spoke of an incident in which one bar customer slapped her female partner in the bar. On this occasion, the respondent stated that there was a definite reaction from others, that the perpetrator left immediately and that the victim was offered support, including being signposted to appropriate support organisations. This respondent had also had outreach taking place in her bar from LGBT support organisations, which included discussing women-to-women abuse, and had experienced bar customers talking to her for advice about violence in their relationships.



## 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

Respondents talked about a range of ways in which individuals and the community as a whole have coped with women-to-women abuse, though these strategies were often not identified as such by the respondents themselves.

Some respondents identified the ways in which women in abusive situations will seek help from the community itself. Many of these methods of support included some degree of anonymity, or speaking to people outside of the direct circle of friends. These included:

- Posting messages on discussion boards on community website and lesbian magazines
- Writing in to the problem page of a lesbian and bisexual women's magazine
- Speaking with the bar manager of a lesbian and bisexual women's bar.

In each of these examples, respondents described an appropriate and friendly response to the victims, including the following key factors which were common to all examples:

- A positive and empathetic response from other website users/magazine staff/bar owner
- Naming of the experiences described as domestic abuse, and as wrong
- Offer of practical advice including signposting to LGBT domestic abuse organisations.

In some cases, where magazines have been contacted, they have responded by writing a feature article on the issue and by responding to the individual with advice.

One respondent raised the fact that there have been a number of surveys and studies on the issue of LGBT domestic abuse and that completing the survey itself can be a method of raising awareness of the issue within the community.

One respondent discussed a kind of community warning system in which she might warn new partners of known domestic abuse perpetrators, explaining their past behaviour. This respondent also discussed the way in which known perpetrator may be isolated from the community as a way of making itself safe. The respondent recognised some of the problems inherent in this approach, including that the perpetrator may not get the support needed to challenge her behaviour.

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

Respondents discussed a variety of ways in which the taboo works, and a number of clear themes emerged from this discussion. These included the silencing of the issue using a variety of mechanisms which mean that it may not be discussed and considered by the



community and the normalisation of abusive behaviour, again preventing this behaviour from being challenged or confronted by the community.

#### 4.2.1 Silencing

Some of the respondents considered that the issue of domestic abuse was not one that was ever discussed within their circle of friends and acquaintances. In some cases, these respondents had an increased level of understanding about the issue, because of the formal or semi-formal role as a community leader, and this led them to express surprise around some of their assumptions which had been challenged.

One respondent was particularly surprised that the abuse was not a 'provincial issue' but that it was just as prevalent in London itself. Another respondent was very surprised to learn that incidents were not clustered around specific communities, most particularly lower socio-economic groups:

*. . . perception is also perhaps socio-economic as well, so from a [unintelligible word] perspective, professionals who earn a certain wage – it wouldn't come up in conversation, whereas actually there may be a lot going on that you don't know about, the perception is that it would be on more of a socio-economic level.*

In both these cases there was a degree of 'othering' about the problem – that this is the kind of thing that might be expected to happen to other women – perhaps from rural areas, or from different social classes. This expectation may make it more difficult for women who experience abuse to voice it within these communities.

Two of the respondents also expressed concern about talking about this issue in a way which might feed into negative stereotypes about lesbians and bisexual women. One, who felt that the issue was rarely discussed at all –

*. . . it's quite kept on the quiet*

- also expressed her concern about playing into stereotypes and not wanting to think that it's something that goes on in the community. Another specifically expressed concern that in talking about she might be seen to be

*. . . slagging off lesbians.*

Finally, a respondent discussed the way in which community members can be disbelieving that the issue exists, even when confronted with it – for example the respondent described seeing a film at the annual lesbian and gay film festival which touched on these issues and that her group of friends were surprised and unconvinced that the issue existed.

#### 4.2.2 Normalisation

Many of the women interviewed described episodes in which they had witnessed or heard about episodes of abuse within the women to women community. In some cases these were one-off occurrences, in others respondents described regularly witnessing abuse and aggression, especially when out on the commercial scene. Respondents described a range of responses which acted to prevent the community from recognizing this behaviour as problematic, by normalizing it and explaining it away, and in this was undermining its potential seriousness.



One respondent described the way in which people may witness abuse and minimise it:

*I think everybody else just though “oh, she’s crazy”, and I think that’s an escape route for people, they just say “ oh she’s crazy” and they leave it at that, I wonder if maybe that’s a way out of saying that this could be domestic violence.*

Some respondents described the ways in which stereotypes about lesbians are used to explain away problematic behaviour, for example that lesbians are

*dykes who like bar brawls,*

or that lesbians are aggressive, and territorial, and that therefore this type of behavior is to be expected;

*I can think of a lot of examples of relationships that may be a bit more volatile than would be considered normal in other situations, and I don’t know whether I’m playing it down . . .*

Another respondent described the way in which stereotypes about butch and femme roles can be used to explain away behaviour.

Other respondents described a slightly different response in which the issue is women-to-women violence is treated as a joke, which again minimises and normalises the behaviour. For example one respondent described being aware of behaviour in her social circle including one woman getting drunk and punching her partner, and this being treated as funny by her friends. The respondent questioned whether her friends would have had the same response of the perpetrator had been a man. Another respondent described a discussion she had with friends after finding out about domestic abuse in her role as a community leader. When asking acquaintances about their thoughts, she explained that many wrote the behaviour off as a joke and seemed to believe that as both victim and perpetrator were ‘girls’, that the victim could just push back – this response also plays into stereotypes about physical strength and its correlation to domestic abuse – discussed further in the section below.

One respondent discussed the sheer number of incidents that take place, stating that it would be unusual to go out and not witness some kind of incident, but that it would not be normal for witnesses to step in, where this may be expected in incidents of male-on-female violence.

#### **4.2.3 Stereotypes**

Respondents discussed a range of assumptions based on lesbians, bisexual women and domestic abuse, all of which helped to maintain the taboo.

Several spoke of having come across the mistaken idea that idea that women are smaller and therefore less able to inflict injury.

Others spoke about a range of factors which allowed community members to explain away abuse. These included the view that lesbian relationships tend to



*last too long*

which can lead to increased tensions; and the belief that because it is difficult to reconcile violence with typical female behaviour, people blame the victim, assuming she is responsible for extraordinary provocation. Another respondent discussed the way in which there may be an expectation that abuse cannot be perpetrated by the 'smaller' partner, or that women who have been the victim of abuse perpetrated by a smaller or shorter perpetrator may find this harder to discuss. This may also lead to less sympathy for the victim, with the view that the victim is weak for not having left the perpetrator.

#### **4.2.4 Silencing in the media**

This theme was not something that was mentioned very much by respondents as being responsible for any taboo. Only one respondent referred to the media in her interview, stating that violence in women-to-women relationships is not mentioned very much on television, she gave the L-Word as example of this, and stated her surprise.

Interview respondents who worked in the media were familiar with the issue and had covered it in their publications in the past. Our review of media over the last twelve months did demonstrate that there were some adverts from LGBT domestic abuse organisations as well as some articles on the issue.

#### **4.2.5 Other tabooization mechanisms**

Some respondents mentioned the fact that the lesbian and bisexual women's community is relatively small, and that women may know each other. This may make it more difficult for women to come forward to their friends and name a partner as a perpetrator. This may be further complicated by the way in which partner-violence may become intra-community violence when several people are partners and ex-partners in a small friendship group.

Some respondents also discussed individualised reasons why there may be a taboo preventing victims from telling anyone or seeking help. These may include the difficulty in naming their experiences as abuse, and therefore seeing services for victims of abuse as relevant. One respondent eloquently described how victims of abuse are

*in the closet*

about their abuse, in the same way that lesbians and bisexual women may be in the closet regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity.

### **4.3 Discussed strategies to overcome the taboo**

We asked respondents about any ideas they had about how we could work with women to overcome the taboo. In general respondents found this a difficult question to answer. A theme running through every answer was the need to challenge people's preconceptions regarding the scale and patterns of domestic abuse within women-to-women relationships, as well as identifying what a healthy relationship looks like. Respondents also identified the need to challenge some of the mistaken assumptions that people make, for example the



mistaken perception that relative physical size and strength are relevant in abusive relationships.

One respondent strongly felt that any campaign should focus on the need for the community to step in and challenge abuse when they witness fights, and that material should particularly target young women who may not have good role models in this area.

Respondents also all spoke of the importance of making this issue relevant to people – that people often do not consider that they are in an abusive relationship so clearly marketed material about domestic abuse may not reach the right people. Some respondents spoke of the power of first person narratives and feature interviews, and suggested that a successful approach might include using these in LBT magazines to raise the issue and connect with people.

Another respondent suggested that using the analogy of coming out – in that victims of abuse may have to come out in order to access support – might be resonant with many LBT people because of their own coming out experiences. A campaign might feature this analogy – encouraging people to come out whilst also challenging the community to make the process easier.

Some respondents warned that any campaign should be careful to take a sensitive and nuanced approach, in order to ensure that we don't encourage further policing of our private lives, and to challenge the community whilst ensuring that we don't reinforce negative stereotypes.

Every respondent stressed the need to have a creative response that was more subtle than simply producing materials or events 'about domestic abuse' – they all suggested a film as the most likely successful response – as a way of generating debate and engaging people. Many suggested that any film or event should also be interactive to allow people to engage, and might include a workshop to assist people to engage with the material.

#### **4.4 Conclusions**

We began these interviews with the concept of testing the hypothesis that there is a taboo, which prevents discussion of the issue of abuse in women-to-women relationships. We have found that a taboo exists, however silencing is only one of a set of more complex mechanisms.

The development and relative high profile of LGBT domestic abuse (as distinct from specific abuse in the lesbian and bisexual women's community) meant that all community leaders that we spoke with were familiar with at least one key organization providing help, and we did not experience any resistance to the idea that the issue is prevalent and problematic; although some respondents expressed surprise at the high levels. The significant difference in experiences between respondents – some of whom considered that violence is regular enough to be considered the norm when out on commercial venues, and those who had never witnessed any abuse when out, was stark. This difference needs to be explored further, in order to understand the factors that contribute to these different experiences.



It was clear from the respondent's description of their own experiences of abuse in the community, that despite their relative awareness regarding domestic abuse, the taboo had affected many of them in different ways. For some, it meant that they had not ever been knowingly confronted with situations of abuse, and it was only after challenging some of their won assumptions during the interview process itself, that they were able to identify situations they may have written off as 'volatile', as potentially abusive. Others described witnessing significant abuse but not seeing this as something that was challenged by the community.

The respondents described a number of ways in which the taboo works. The first significant mechanism was that of silencing the issue. By acting to silence discussion about domestic abuse, we close the space in which potential victims are able to come forward. The silencing described by respondents was not a neutral one, not so much a silence and a *silencing*. In enforcing this silencing as a community, and by assuming that abuse happens to 'others', never to 'us', we fail to create the circumstances in which victims can seek help.

The second significant mechanism of taboo was the normalisation of violence. By minimizing abuse, by not challenging it, by treating it as a joke, or buying into the idea that lesbians and bisexual women are somehow 'pre-destined' to be abusive, or 'volatile', we act to prevent women from being able to name their experiences as abusive, or as unacceptable, and therefore from seeing services designed for victims of abuse as relevant to their situation. In this way we risk isolating victims from a community which may provide a key source of support. We also prevent ourselves (as individuals and as a community), from taking responsibility for challenging abuse and preventing it.

Clinging onto unhelpful stereotypes about abuse also makes individual abuse harder to identify, and risks causing the victim to blame herself – as if, if she does not fit the acceptable model of abuse (bigger, stronger perpetrator, smaller weaker victim), she must somehow be responsible.

All of these factors are further complicated by a number of very personal reasons which may prevent women from coming forward to access help, and by the small size of the LBT communities.

The taboo seems to work to disconnect our individual experiences from what we know about domestic abuse, so that somehow we fail to connect *this abuse, this time* to what we know. This disconnect may affect victims, preventing the naming of their experiences, but it also affects the community, excusing our writing off of abusive relationships as simply volatile, and our witnessing of public abuse without intervening.

Respondents were relatively unconfident in suggesting ways in which the taboo might be challenged – and to some extent this is not surprising, given that there were few current coping strategies identified. However all respondents were united in their opinion that any community response needed to challenge and provoke debate, and in the suggestion that a film may be the most appropriate intervention.



## PART III: Summary and conclusion

### 5. Summary

#### 5.1 Snapshot

We undertook a basic snapshot using online questionnaire software, with a link directly to our website. This was advertised widely using press releases and email contact lists. Despite this, response rates were very low (21 respondents), possibly because of other similar surveys recently undertaken by other organizations.

The results of the snapshot indicated a high level of awareness of the existence of domestic abuse within women to women relationships, however this was coupled with an underestimate of prevalence, suggesting actual awareness is lower than perceived awareness. The vast majority of respondents agreed that the topic of domestic abuse is barely discussed within the L(G)BT communities.

#### 5.2 Mapping of L(G)BT community and press

There are a bewildering number of services and groups which cater to the LGBT communities in London. The majority of these are targeted at either gay men specifically, or the entire LGBT communities, though even these more widely targeted services are used in the majority by gay men.

There is a fewer services and groups targeted specifically at the LBT communities, however provision is still wide-ranging. There is some kind of provision in most of London's 32 local boroughs. There are a number of bars, targeted at LBT women, plus clubs and one off events. Groups exist which cater to people in their local areas, as well as diverse parts of the LBT communities; cultural issues; sport; specific support needs and special interests.

There are also a number of publications targeted at the whole LGBT community, as well as some magazines and a number of websites specifically targeted at lesbians and bisexual women. Between them, these magazines, papers and websites have covered the issues of LGBT domestic abuse to some extent in the last twelve months.

Many lesbian or bisexual trans women may access trans specific spaces rather than women only spaces.

#### 5.3 Response to domestic abuse

The mainstream response to domestic abuse in London is well developed. All boroughs have workers responsible for combating domestic abuse based both the local authority and also the police, as well as most having a refuge run by Women's Aid. These refuges do not provide access to men, and many also do not provide access to trans women. Many boroughs also have an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (some of whom also work with men), who work with high-risk clients and are trained by CAADA. Their training includes a short section relating to LGBT abuse.



There is the beginning of a developed community repose within the LGBT community – though this is still in its infancy. This includes:

- The LGBT Domestic Abuse Forum – a network of organizations which work in the field, providing advice support and best practice to frontline workers as well.
- The London LGBT Domestic Abuse Partnership – a partnership of five LGBT organization which work together to provide a multi-agency service to victims including advice on housing and safety, support groups and emotional support.
- Broken Rainbow, a national LGBT Domestic Abuse charity which provides training to mainstream service providers and a telephone helpline to victims of abuse.

#### 5.4 Tabooization of domestic abuse

We undertook six in-depth interviews with ‘leaders’ from the lesbian and bisexual women’s communities, and from a range of areas including the media, commercial venues, and professional groups. These respondents discussed very mixed experienced of domestic abuse within the community. These ranged from not knowingly having ever experienced witnessed or known of abuse, to witnessing it on a weekly basis when out at lesbian and bisexual women’s venues. These contradictory experiences lead to different methods of tabooization.

The respondents described a small range of coping strategies undertaken by the community, an these included accessing help in an anonymous or non-personalized way, such as posing problems on an internet forum, writing to a problem page r speaking with a bar manger for advice.

The interviews revealed the range of ways that the taboo works:

- *Silencing*

For some respondents, domestic abuse was not discussed at all within their circle of acquaintances. Where it was discussed, ‘othering’ was used to indicate that it was a problem for other women, for example women who live rurally or women from lower socio-economic groups.

Other women were concerned about discussing the issue for fear of feeding into negative stereotypes about lesbians, and giving the community a bad name.

These experiences seemed to work in a non-neutral way to close the space for discussing these issues.

- *Normalisation*

Some respondents regularly witnessed incidents in groups of acquaintances and out ‘on the scene’. Nonetheless, these incidents were not, as a rule, challenged. Instead witnessed tended to minimalise the behaviour and it was not named as abusive, rather as volatile, or high voltage.



Behaviour was viewed as normal and explained away using stereotypes of lesbians, including that relationships last too long, that relationships are volatile, and that lesbians often fight in bars and this is not unusual.

Finally, when confronted with potentially abusive behaviour, some respondents described this being treated as a joke, rather than a serious issue.

- *Stereotypes*

Respondents reported use of stereotypes to justify, explain away or question abusive behaviour. These included the idea that a smaller, shorter person could not be responsible for the abuse, or that a larger woman was weak for not leaving when in such a situation. It also relied on the stereotype that women are not naturally violent or abusive, thereby the victim must in some way have been responsible for extraordinary provocation – blaming the victim.

## 6. Conclusions

London is unique within the LARS project in a number of ways that may affect our response and activities in later stages of the project. These differences begin with the sheer size, complexity and geographical spread of the city, and therefore the lesbian and bisexual women's communities within it. It also includes the level of basic awareness regarding domestic abuse within women to women relationships, and the stage of development of LGBT specific community responses.

This range of groups, services and media targeted at the community are both a help and a hindrance. They provide options for LGBT women, and respond more effectively to their diverse needs. However they also mean that there is no one clear channel of communication, and that reaching a significant proportion of the community will be very challenging.

The community response to domestic abuse within the L, G, B and T communities in London is still in its fledgling stages, however some structures are developed. The LGBT Forum is well established, and now receives funding and has a worker attached. Likewise, the DAP (a multi-agency partnership) is now in its second year and is a formal partnership sharing information and targeting specific groups.

As might be expected in a city which has developed a community response, and which has a national organization providing a helpline, the level of awareness of the fact that domestic abuse exists within the women to women communities is relatively high. This is also supported by the coverage the issue has had in the media, with most outlets having covered it in some way in the last twelve months. This means that community leaders who were interviewed for the project were all, at the very least, able to identify Broken Rainbow as a place for potential victims to go for help. This awareness of the issue and of where to go for help was supported by the snapshot results.

However the detailed interviews also supported the snapshot results in revealing that despite a basic level of awareness, many community leaders and snapshot respondents believed



that the prevalence of abuse was less than it was, and it is clear that the taboo in discussing the issue, and recognizing the, also exists in London.

It is clear from the interviews that the taboo works in a number of complex ways, and that respondents had significantly differing experiences. Further exploration of the factors leading to these differences may help to highlight further the ways in which a potential community Responses can be effective.

The silencing which was revealed in the interviews works as an active, preventing a space from opening up in which victims can come forward and discuss their experiences or seek help. In this way, the silence not neutral but instead creates dichotomy in which abuse always happens to the 'other' and never to 'us'.

The normalisation of abuse works to prevent women from being able to name their experiences as abuse, and to prevent the community from naming experiences as unacceptable, and responding appropriately. This normalization therefore isolates the victim and excuses the community from taking action.

The stereotypes employed within and outside of the community work in a similar way, and again can prevent us from naming experiences and can cause the victim to blame herself. Other issues such as the small size of the community further complicate the situation and can contribute to the difficulties victims may face.

Despite this basic level of awareness demonstrated by snapshot and interview respondents, reporting of incidents to support services in the UK such as Broken Rainbow and Galop remains relatively low, with far fewer women making contact than men.

The research has shown that there is a complex taboo, which works to separate individuals from their knowledge about abuse - e.g. we know *in theory* that it happens, but somehow don't connect our knowledge to *this specific abuse*. This means that publicity which simply states that abuse happens and identifies where a victims can get help, may not reach victims who cannot name their experiences as abuse. Any community response developed as part of the LARS project needs to work to overcome this disjointedness between what the community thinks it knows, and what it actually knows.

