

Teen Dating Violence among Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Girls

By Gunner Gurwitch

Dating violence or abuse, a systematic pattern of behavior in which an individual tries to control the thoughts, beliefs, or conduct of a partner or someone he or she is dating, occurs in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and heterosexual communities and crosses all social, ethnic, racial, and economic lines. One in four gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people is battered by a partner at some time in his or her life, a ratio comparable to domestic violence in heterosexual relationships.

LBT teen-dating violence has similarities to and differences from dating violence in heterosexual relationships. Both include a lack of experience with intimate relationships and unrealistic expectations, as well as a minimizing of the relationships by adults. A major difference for LBT teens is that we live in a world that is heterosexist and homo/bi/trans-phobic. Our culture assumes heterosexuality until proven otherwise. Positive role models frequently are lacking, as is family and peer support. The social pressure is to be straight. An abuser can use all these factors to control and isolate her partner.

Female abusers often define their relationships as an excuse, or justify abusive behaviors by saying, "This is how lesbian relationships are," "Your parents don't like me," or "No one else will want to date you because you're a freak." Abusers may use the myth of mutual abuse: "You yelled at me, so you're just as abusive as I am." The lack of experience in same-sex dating may make it difficult for an LBT teen to identify abuse in the relationship. In addition, an abuser can use cultural or identity abuse as a tactic of control, often by threatening to tell family, friends, or teachers about her partner's orientation, gender identity, or presence in a same-sex relationship. The consequences of "outing" may be loss of friends, intimidation, harassment, or physical violence from peers, and/or being thrown out, disowned, or institutionalized by parents. The possibility of outing can deter an LBT teen from seeking support or talking to friends, family, or other community members about what is going on in her relationship.

Additional barriers for LBT teens are their lack of acknowledgment of dating violence in the larger GLBT community and the myth that gender equality exists because the couple is of the same sex. "Women are safe; we don't hurt each other." Most information and education about teen dating violence is geared toward girls in heterosexual relationships or uses gender-biased language rather than stories, images, or information about LBT teens. A teen-dating violence-prevention program that does include GLBT dating violence usually only covers it as a small segment.

Breaking down barriers and isolation starts with generating a program or community that is welcoming and affirming to LBT teens. Here are some ways this can be done. Use gender-neutral language when talking about dating relationships, and include information about LBT teens through "out prevention programs." When putting together resources for teens, include GLBT youth hot lines and resources. Create a culture that includes all kinds of

people, relationships, and families, thereby empowering teens to explore their identities, ideas, and dreams to the fullest and opening doors to LBT teens who are seeking support for abuse in relationships.

The Network/La Red is an organization that aims at ending abuse in lesbian, bisexual women's, and transgendered communities. Gunner Gurwitch is its organizer and outreach coordinator. For more information or support services, call (617) 695-0877, email the networklared@erols.com, or visit www.thenetworklared.org.