

Women and Children Only: How Rigid Systems of Heterosexism Disenfranchise Survivors

By Eva Wood: Outfront Minnesota Anti-Violence Program Director

Imagine reaching for a phone, nervous, terrified, because your partner might come back at any moment, and you will be severely punished for using their phone (yours was taken away a long time ago). Imagine summoning every ounce of strength and determination to dial a number, and ask for help from a domestic violence shelter.

Then imagine being told “Sorry, women and children only. Have you tried a homeless shelter?”

Still shaking, but determined to find somewhere safe to stay tonight where you won’t be battered, intimidated, and threatened, you dial another number.

“We only house women – if you’re interested in our resources for men, we have a batter’s group that meets once a week on Mondays.”

“Just women, and males under 15”

“Women and children only.”

How long would you keep calling?

I. Rates of Violence

Numbers vary in studies that track intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual violence (SV) in the LGBTQ communities, but the data that exists suggests that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people experience rates of IPV and SV at the same or higher rates than the heterosexual population. Findings from the National Violence Against Women indicate that 21.5 percent of men and 35.4 percent of women living with a same-sex partner experienced intimate-partner physical violence in their lifetimes, compared with 7.1% and 20.4% for men and women, respectively, with a history of only opposite-sex cohabitation.ⁱ Rates tend to be even higher for transgender individuals, with studies indicating that they are twice as likely as LGB identified people to experience IPV.ⁱⁱ

The CDC’s 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, released again in 2013 with new analysis, reported in its first-ever study focusing on victimization by sexual orientation that the lifetime prevalence of rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner was 43.8 percent for lesbians, 61.1 percent for bisexual women, and 35 percent for heterosexual women. Rates of this sort of violence was 26 percent for gay men, 37.3 percent for bisexual men, and 29 percent for heterosexual men according to the CDC report (this study did not include gender identity or expression). These studies refute the myths that only straight women get battered, that men are never victims, and that women are never perpetrators – in other words, that intimate partner violence and sexual violence are not LGBTQ issues. In fact, these sorts of violence pose serious health risks, affecting significant numbers within the LGBTQ

communities. The invisibility of LGBTQ IPV and SV is a huge factor in why many LGBTQ survivors of violence are underserved, or do not receive any services at all.

II. The State of the State

OutFront Minnesota Community Services' (OFMCS) target populations include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) crime victims (primarily people who have experienced domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and/or stalking) throughout Minnesota. 2010 census data indicates that LGBT people make up approximately 2.9% of Minnesota's population, or 118,556 adults.ⁱⁱⁱ We recognize that while sexual orientation and gender identity are often significant factors in victimization, we also need to address the larger societal frameworks of marginalization and oppression affecting the LGBTQ communities, especially as these influences are exacerbated as a result of the often multiple and complex layers of identity held by the survivors. To this end, OutFront works in collaboration with organizations that address multiple barriers to service. For example, we work closely with organizations that provide competent services to LGBTQ communities, address health disparities for transgender survivors, and provide culturally specific support to services.

Minnesota has a wide range of organizations that provide excellent services to many survivors of violence. However, the vast majority of those programs operate on a heterosexual paradigm that classify women as victims, men as batterers, and minimize or ignore violence in LGBTQ relationships. We have seen improvement in access to mainstream providers for LGBTQ survivors as a result of the current Office on Violence Against Women grant we receive – seven organizations covering 13 locations around Minnesota have agreed to be trained in LGBTQ service provision. The grant provided funding for up to ten organizations to receive comprehensive training at no charge as well as funding to cover staff time on the training dates from OutFront Minnesota's Anti-Violence Program. However, only seven organizations signed up, and over 30 turned down the invitation or failed to respond.

OutFront continues to be the only crime victim program in Minnesota that specifically addresses LGBTQ-targeted violence as our primary focus of work and our work is not duplicated anywhere in Minnesota or the surrounding states. In addition, we believe that current traditional service provision strategies will neither meet current nor emerging needs of LGBTQ victims. While great strides have been made as a result of funding from the Office of Justice Programs and the Office on Violence Against Women, there is a significant and ongoing need for additional work.

As of 2012, there were fewer than 15 sexual assault and domestic violence organizations across Minnesota that received consistent annual trainings about the unique needs of LGBTQ survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking. Most of those organizations were within the Twin Cities area. At 12.5% of the population, Minneapolis and the Twin Cities area currently have the 4th largest LGBTQ community per capita in the country.^{iv} We know that LGBTQ people are facing violence and discrimination in every sector of their lives. With so few agencies and organizations identified throughout the state, Minnesota remains, on the whole, critically underserved. The fact that so few organizations took the opportunity to receive funding and training (only 7 when over 30 organizations were contacted) clearly

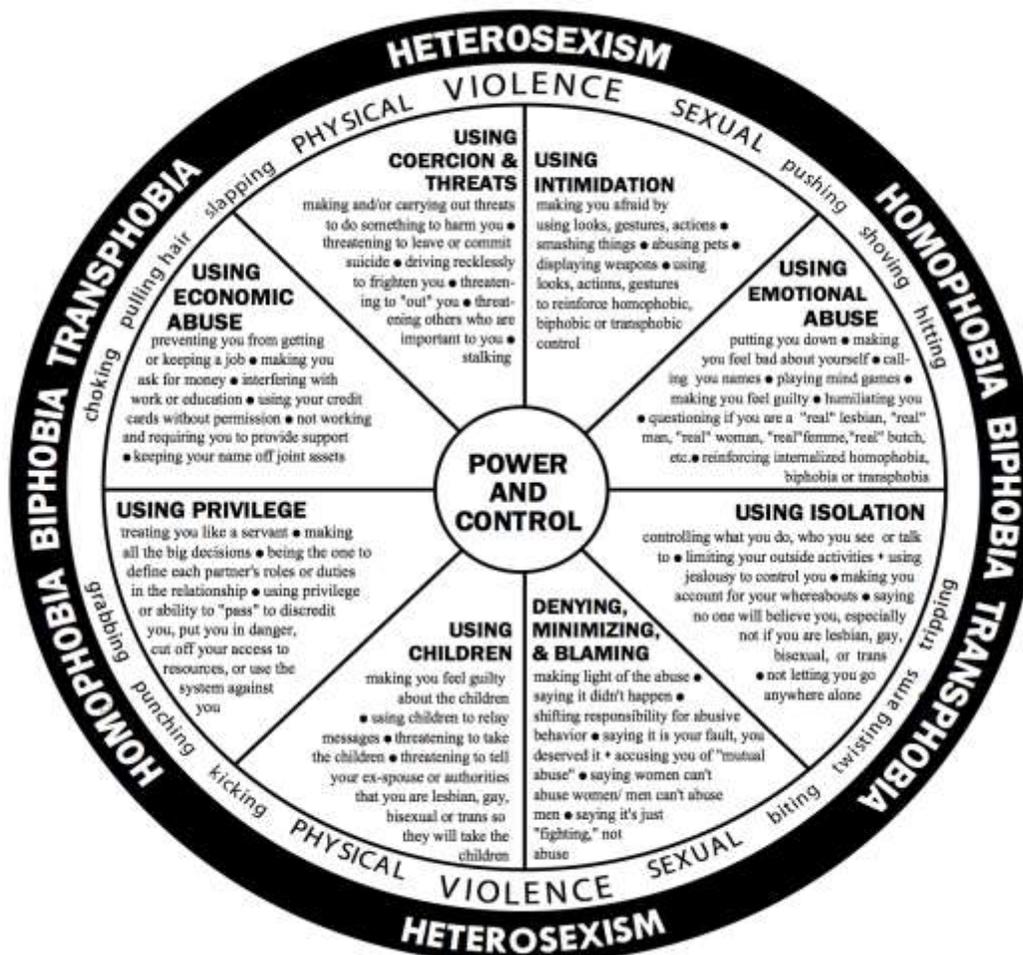
demonstrates that mainstream service providers need to place greater priority on LGBTQ IPV and sexual violence.

III. LGBTQ specific IPV

Abusers in LGBTQ relationships are able to use all the tactics and tools that abusers in heterosexual relationships use, but they are also able to uniquely implement tactics of power and control that involve their victim’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

For instance, abusers can traffic on stereotypes about specific sexual orientations or gender identity. Abusers can tell a transman or a transwomen that they are not “real” men or women. Children can be used as an especially powerful tool if the victim does not have custody or has not adopted the children.

Couples that appear heterosexual (for instance a bisexual woman dating a man), can also involve these specific patterns. Based on Outfront’s experience, heterosexual partners often accuse their bisexual victims of being promiscuous, or slutty, and using that as justification for engaging in other controlling behaviors, such as checking their phones constantly. The image below shows more examples of abuse that is specific to LBTQ couples.



IV. Barriers to Service

LGBTQ crime victims often face significant and unique barriers when attempting to access traditional services and systems-based support. While we know that although LGBTQ people experience domestic violence and sexual assault at similar or higher rates^v than the general population, they access services in far lower rates. These barriers are constructed both by internal community dynamics as well as previous experiences with external systems, or service providers. Common external community barriers include a fear of being “outed,” heterosexual-focused service provision strategies, heterosexual/cisgendered^{vi} implications of organizations’ names (Mid-Minnesota Women’s Center, Women’s Resource Center, etc), a fear that the available traditional services will be homophobic, transphobic or unsupportive of LGBTQ identities; and a fear of having to educate traditional providers when reaching out for services.

Internal community dynamics, especially in relation to sexual or domestic violence, can include a fear that disclosing the violence will reflect poorly on the entire community; lack of awareness of crime victim rights and available systems support, and issues relating to self-blame and internalized homophobia. The fear of being “outed” or having to “come out,” in order to receive services can be a terrifying prospect for someone who has already experienced crime victimization. Many LGBTQ individuals avoid being “outed” at all costs, even if it means foregoing accessing advocacy and counseling services because the costs inherent in coming out, in many cases, are simply too high. For example, an internal survey completed in 2009 by OFMCS found that 50% of transgender individuals would forego seeking assistance relating to sexual violence if they knew that they would need to educate the provider about transgender-related issues.

a. Barriers to Shelter for Men and Transgender Men

Another significant aspect of the problem of barriers to service for LGBTQ survivors is the lack of knowledge and access to safety and services around male and male identified survivors. When VAWA was reauthorized in 2006, a provision was included addressing male survivors as well.^{vii} The 2013 re-authorization further explained while programs could have sex segregated facilities, they had to provide “comparable services” to those who would not be allowed in the sex-segregated facility.^{viii}

However, the vast majority of shelter providers in Minnesota do not provide any type of commensurate services to men. There is a distinct gap in service when it comes to shelter and housing for a male or male-identified survivor of violence, as well as transgender survivors. Unfortunately, after an informal survey of over 30 organizations in Minnesota, only 2 even provided any type of hotel stay for men who would potentially try to access their services. One organization capped the stay at three days (and that organization is the one nearly every other metro area shelter suggested when we asked about services for men), and the other organization stated that a male survivor had never tried to access their services, but they would provide a male survivor with a hotel stay for an undetermined amount of time, if a male survivor did try to access their services. This is despite that fact that VAWA’s 2013 re-authorization requires “comparable services.”

A hotel stay of three days when cisgender women are allowed to utilize the shelter for months at a time is hardly a comparable service. Three days is not nearly enough time for a survivor to find a new place to live, think about employment options, or even begin to heal from the abuse they have experienced. The choice of homelessness or abuse for so many men and transgender survivors is hardly a choice at all. “Comparable services” is a term that can be interpreted in many different ways, but it is difficult to think of any capacity where a three day hotel stay can be considered comparable to months in a domestic violence shelter.

The importance of this gap in service to male and transgender survivors cannot be overstated. Lives are on the line. When a man, transgender person, or gender-nonconforming person is faced with the choice of being homeless, or staying in an abusive situation, the chances they will ever be able to escape their abusive situation decrease significantly. Even if clients do manage to leave, the stark lack of services and access to shelter can push them back into an abusive situation because to them their abuser appears right – they really can’t make it on their own. If someone has been told for years that they will never be able to escape or leave, and then they try to leave and cannot because there are no services for them, it is unlikely they will be able to leave and find safety and healing. It is imperative that we work to decrease this gap in service.

As crime victim service providers, we all need to do more to ensure appropriate access to safety and services to male and male-identified survivors of violence. The dramatic lack of services and support available to these survivors is both a barrier to service, a gap in service, and a problem that must be remedied before we lose another life.

ⁱ <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/181867.pdf> at 6.

ⁱⁱ http://nbjc.org/sites/default/files/files/ncavp_trans_ipvtoolkit.pdf at 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Williams Inst. Census Snapshot, <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/category/research/census-lbgt-demographics-studies/>

^{iv} The Williams Institute, *Same-sex Couples and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Population: New Estimates from the American Community Survey*, 2006.

^v http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS_SOfindings.pdf

^{vi} Cisgender is a term for someone who has a gender identity that aligns with what they were assigned at birth.

^{vii} <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-109hr3402enr/pdf/BILLS-109hr3402enr.pdf>

^{viii} <http://www.saveservices.org/inclusive-vawa/inclusive-vawa/>

Eva Wood is the Anti-Violence Program Director at Outfront Minnesota. Eva is a 2010 graduate of U of M Morris with degrees in Sociology, English, and Multicultural Studies, with honors and distinction. After college, Eva attended UCLA School of Law on a Regents' scholarship where she did extensive work with undocumented immigrants, homeless LGBTQ youth, and survivors of domestic violence. She also worked with UCLA's campaign to end sexual assault, and taught rehabilitative classes for men who were on parole for domestic violence convictions. Eva currently develops and provides trainings to MN service providers on LGBTQ clients and barriers to service. She travels throughout Minnesota and the metro area, provides direct service to survivors, housing advocacy, and is conducting a community safety assessment with the Battered Women's Justice Project.