

A Contradiction in Terms?: A Gendered Analysis & Same Sex Domestic Abuse

1. Introduction

In 2000 the Scottish Executive published its *Strategy to Address Domestic Abuse in Scotland* which contained within it a *gender-based* definition of domestic abuse, namely:

Domestic abuse (as gender based abuse) can be perpetrated by partners or ex-partners and can include physical abuse (assault and physical attack involving a range of behaviour), sexual abuse (acts which degrade and humiliate women and are perpetrated against their will, including rape) and mental and emotional abuse (such as threats, verbal abuse, racial abuse, withholding money and other types of controlling behaviour such as isolation from family and friends). (5)

The strategy goes on to state:

Domestic abuse is associated with broader gender inequality and should be understood in its historical context, whereby societies have given greater status, wealth, influence, control and power to men. It is part of a range of behaviours constituting male abuse of power, and is linked to other forms of male violence. (6)

As such, domestic abuse is set within a theoretical framework which acknowledges the influence of gender on men and women's lives: the decisions they may make, the status accorded them and the relationship between them. Importantly it places domestic abuse within a continuum of violence against women: as such viewing domestic abuse as an *equalities* issue.

Since the publication of the national strategy, discussion has taken place as to the usefulness and appropriateness of a gendered analysis of domestic abuse, which has been seen as excluding of people in same sex relationships. This paper will argue that, far from excluding or overlooking abuse in same sex relationships, a gender-based analysis of domestic abuse and contemporary gender theory can assist considerably in our understanding of such abuse. The paper will:

- Explore the links between sex, gender and sexuality, considering the part traditional gender roles, expectations and entitlement play in same sex relationships

- Consider how an ideology of superiority links sexism and homophobia as equality/inequality issues and helps explain the links between domestic abuse within a continuum of violence against women and domestic abuse in same sex relationships
- Examine how intersectional theory may help in the development of a conceptual framework for the understanding of domestic abuse in same sex relationships
- Argue that domestic abuse in same sex relationships is best understood within a continuum of violence experienced by the gay men and lesbians.

While the points above are outlined in a linear manner, the arguments throughout the essay will be less so, weaving between the various strands which are linked by an understanding of the social construct that is gender.

2. A Question of Sex & Gender

This paper distinguishes between gender and sex, arguing that gender roles are not biologically determined, but vary according to the prevailing culture of the time, and can even vary for individuals during the course of their lives. Hence, *sex* refers to the reproductive differences between men and women: sex does not refer to any abilities, attributes or qualities frequently ascribed to men or women. *Gender* is understood as a socially constructed phenomenon which *does* link certain – and different - abilities, attributes and qualities to men and women. Furthermore, gender refers to the relationships between men and women and the social, political and cultural environment they operate within. As such, most of the behaviour associated with gender is learned rather than innate, with people learning behaviour regarded in their cultural context as appropriate for masculinity or femininity. The World Health Organisation defines gender as:

the socially constructed roles, traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, responsibilities, relative power, status and influence ascribed to male and female humans on a differential basis. Gender identity (masculinity/femininity) is not biological, but learned. It is changeable over time, and varies widely within and across cultures. Gender refers not simply to women and/or men, but to the relationships between and among them. Gender identities condition the way human beings are perceived, and how they are expected to think and act.

(WHO website – www.who.int/gender)

This theoretical starting point when followed through means that, with regard to the issue of domestic abuse, men are not 'hard-wired' for violence nor women for, at best, passivity and, at worst, victim-hood; there is no such inevitability. Such a simplistic, though widespread, understanding of what is meant by a gender-based analysis of domestic abuse is both mistaken and misleading and, within the context of same sex couples, completely unhelpful as it seems to exclude the very notion of domestic abuse existing within lesbian relationships. While a gendered analysis of domestic abuse takes account of the differences in women's and men's experiences, status and opportunities considering the structures and ideologies which serve to maintain the status quo; it does not speak the binary of *man bad/woman good*.

Within a society masculinity and femininity may be defined differently by various groups, for example according to ethnicity, class and sexual orientation. Hence it can be argued that there is no single masculinity or femininity, but rather multiple masculinities and femininities, though these are often compared to and contrasted unfavourably with the dominant, or hegemonic, culture of masculinity or femininity eg a gay man may be described as *not a real man*. This too has been misleading, causing a belief that gay men, as more *feminine* (ie more sensitive and caring) than other men are less likely to abuse a partner.

It can be seen therefore that a lack of clarity or understanding about what is meant by gender/masculinity/femininity as social constructs, and a gender-based analysis of domestic abuse, can lead to confusion as to whether gays and lesbians are *able* to perpetrate abuse at all. It is a myth that abusers can hide behind and one that can act as a major barrier to those experiencing abuse disclosing or seeking assistance. This has led to frustration from some lesbian and gay activists and thinkers. Janice Ristock (2005, 3) argues that:

in spite of all the important work done by feminists to address male violence against women, the largely gender-exclusive frame-work that has been developed (the one that focuses on the roots of violence within sexism and patriarchy) ends up ignoring or misunderstanding violence in lgbtq people's lives.

However, Sara Scott (1994, 39) take a contrary view stating that:

recommendations that literature about domestic violence degenders itself and ceases to refer to batterers as 'he' and victims as 'she' because 'lesbians do it too'

is unhelpful, arguing that we do not:

have to cease to describe domestic violence as a problem of sexual politics. What is being confused here is whether lesbian violence is a problem the very existence of which disproves the existence of patriarchy, or a subcultural one within which heterosexuality still provides the dominant model.

Indeed it can be argued that calls to abandon a gender-based understanding of domestic abuse are often based on a misunderstanding of what that means and that these will, ultimately, not help those experiencing domestic abuse in same sex relationships.

3. Gender And The Myth of the Equal Fight

Unsurprisingly, research that has looked at domestic abuse in same sex relationships has found that there are many similarities with that in heterosexual relationships: that it can take physical, sexual and mental emotional forms. This is highly significant when considering the myth of the 'equal fight', or mutual or consensual violence, in same sex domestic abuse as it moves our focus away from individual acts of physical violence into considering the broader aspects of control acted out by the perpetrator and resulting lack of agency experienced by the person experiencing the abuse.

The Scottish definition of domestic abuse is clear in its focus, not on specific incidents of violence as constitutive of such abuse, but rather on a pattern of behaviour, a range of tactics and behaviours (which can include physical violence) the intent of which is to exercise control over the partner. Activist and theorist Evan Stark argues that the key to understanding most abuse is not the physical violence, but coercion and control, which 'jeopardises individual liberty and autonomy as well as safety' of the woman in question (Stark 2007). Stark's conclusion is that domestic abuse as coercive control is primarily a liberty crime rather than a crime of physical violence, because it results in gender-specific restrictions, preventing women from exercising their social, economic and political rights and responsibilities. This framing of domestic abuse as a pattern of controlling behaviour is vital to seeing clearly the experiences of those in same sex relationships.

Focusing only on the physical element of domestic abuse, Ristock asserts that the power dynamics can appear confusing given the

equality of size and strength between some same sex couples. She also reports that some who experience domestic abuse use physical violence as self defence or retaliation. With regard to the purely physical element of domestic abuse these are both important issues, with the problem of focusing purely on physical abuse as constitutive of domestic abuse outlined above. She then concludes, however, that 'these actions go against mainstream constructions of victims as passive.' (2005,4) This is, again, a misunderstanding of the gendered analysis of domestic abuse: feminist theorists and activists have, indeed, looked at this very issue in the context of women's experiences of domestic abuse from male partners (claims of gender symmetry, aggressive women and a fair fight being an oft heard in this arena also). Their theories can help us make sense of the phenomenon.

Johnson (2005), in addressing research findings which question the gendered nature of domestic abuse, describes three main types of intimate partner violence which directly explain Ristock's findings:

- *Situational couple violence* occurs when tensions or arguments escalate. It may be a one-off incident or more frequent but is not part of an attempt to gain coercive control of a partner. Some people Ristock refers to may fall within this category.
- *Intimate terrorism* describes a pattern of coercive control by one partner over another. Physical violence is seen as one of a number of tools used to gain control within this pattern.
- *Violent resistance* is violence used by someone experiencing intimate terrorism to fight back. It is often momentary but can be extreme. Some people Ristock refers to may fall into this category.

It is widely argued that men and women use and experience violence differently (this point is indeed made by Johnson, 2005, who says that even within situational couple violence within heterosexual couples a women's violence will be perceived differently by both parties and a woman's violence is less likely to introduce fear); this is more than saying that experiences as a *victim* and *perpetrator* are different but that the way in which gender ideologies influence these factors is significant. It has been suggested that, within the context of domestic abuse, both sexes tend to see their use of violence as not conforming to their gender with women generally being socialized not to use violence and men feeling emasculated by the fact that their power over their partner is so tenuous as to have to resort to violence (eg Dobash 1998). In relation to sexual violence in particular, it can be argued that rape and sexual assault confirms to a woman her position in society and for a man challenges it: that men are generally the *doers* and

women the *done to*. How does all this impact on abuse within same sex relationships?

The initial findings from recent research by Donovan, Hester et al (2006) give us an interesting insight: in analysing violence in same sex relationships they found:

- Men were more likely to have their spending controlled
- Women were more likely to have their sexuality used against them, be blamed for their partner's self-harm or have their children used against them
- Men were more likely to be forced into sexual activity, sexually assaulted, be hurt during sex etc.
- Experiences of physical abuse was largely similar though gay men were more likely to be physically threatened.

We are looking here at a gendered pattern of abuse which reflects 'wider processes of gendering and gendered norms' (Donovan, Hester et al, 2006, 10).

4. Gender Regimes & the Gender Order

R W Connell (1987) argues that gender theory has mainly focused on two levels: the one-to-one relationship between people, and society as a whole, missing out a vital intermediate layer of social organisation, of institutions eg a family, a workplace etc. Connell asserts that the 'state of play in gender relations in a given institution is its gender regime' (1987, 120). The gender regimes of individual institutions interact with one another, have a relationship with each other, sometimes in a complementary way, sometimes in conflict with one another. Connell describes these interactions as the 'gender order'(1987, 139), and explains that its:

processes include the creation and contestation of hegemony in definitions of sexuality and sexual character and the articulation of interests and organisation of political forces around them.(1987, 139)

A society's gender order, therefore, means that we can see an ordering of forms of femininity and masculinity. This structure also shapes relationships *between* men defining a form of hegemonic masculinity that is characterized both by its relationship to women and its relationship to other, subordinated, masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity in our society at this time is *heterosexual*. It is important to note that within this strand of gender theory hegemony is understood as an ascendancy achieved through social forces not brute force. As Connell say it is an ascendancy which is

'embedded in religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing' etc. (1987, 184)

There is not an equivalent hegemonic femininity, though forms of femininity are strongly defined at this societal level. As the explanation of hegemonic masculinity suggests, femininity is viewed in relation to the dominant masculinity. So forms of femininity can be seen as compliance with the gender order, what Connell describes as 'emphasized femininity' (1987, 183); resistance or non-compliance with the gender order; or some that are a combination of the other two forms.

We have therefore made the leap from viewing gender as belonging to individuals alone to viewing it as something collective and indeed historical. Furthermore, we are recognising it as dynamic, ever-changing or at least with the potential for change or contestation. This contention also recognises sexuality and a hegemonic masculinity that is heterosexual as key to the gender order. Where does this lead us and what connection does it have with domestic abuse within same sex relationships?

Connell's theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding same sex domestic abuse in two major ways: firstly it shows us the milieu within which individuals learn about relationships throughout childhood, adolescence and into adulthood; secondly it provides us with the societal context within which a same sex relationship operates.

As Stevi Jackson puts it:

a child cannot locate herself in a gendered social order without a sense of herself as gendered, without being able to make sense of self and others as embodied, gendered beings. Moreover, the gendered others in most children's experience order their lives in terms of heterosexual relations – thus the gendered social order a child learns to navigate is for most, a heterosexually ordered one. (2005, 17)

It is important to note when thinking about this that most children learn an enormous amount about the *institution of heterosexuality* before they are aware of the sexual activities which may take place within individual heterosexual relationships. The sex act itself therefore, in this context, is less significant than the hegemony of heterosexuality.

5. Gender, Heterosexuality & Heteronormativity

Connell outlined a hegemonic masculinity that is heterosexual, as integral to the gender order. Jackson too has explored the intersections between gender, sexuality and heterosexuality extending a theory of heteronormativity which helps our understanding of domestic abuse in same sex relationships and its links with a gendered comprehension of violence against women.

Jackson views sexuality as 'a sphere of social life' (2005, 3) and heterosexuality as more than a sexual or erotic relationship between two people, a man and a woman, but as the dominant form of sexuality which is 'institutionalised as the privileged normative form of sexuality' (2005, 4). This concept of an institutionalised, privileged norm, or heteronormativity, has traditionally been viewed as a tool to control and sanction those who fall outside it, ie gay men and lesbians. It can also be used by abusers in same sex relationships, for example: Ristock (2002) identifies first same sex relationships as high risk for domestic abuse; Donovan, Hester et al agree that first same sex relationships present a certain set of circumstances in which abuse may occur citing a 'lack of confidence in what behaviours are acceptable in intimate same sex relationships' (2006, 13) as an important factor. Hence we see the abuser *using* the gender order and the hegemony of heterosexuality if not always as a tool to abuse then certainly as a tool to explain away the abuse and to establish within the relationship a gender regime based on the dominant heterosexual pattern.

We see that the pervading heterosexual order can impact on same sex domestic abuse in the following ways:

- Its very pervasiveness may allow an abuser to convince a partner that this is 'normal' behaviour and that (s)he does not understand gay/lesbian relationships.
- Abuse can be increased and hidden by portraying the violence as mutual or consensual.
- Within gay relationships it can be portrayed not as domestic abuse but as a reflection of or expression of masculinity.
- Images that show heterosexual relationships can isolate homosexual people, providing no reference point to their way of life.
- Individuals and relationships can become idealized: the egalitarian lesbian relationship and the 'more evolved' gay man as highlighted above.
- Contrariwise, gay and lesbian people can be shaped by heterosexual relationships as they are surrounded by them, and images of them. There can be an uneasy tension

between this being familiar (and therefore safe) and yet unrelated to their own way of life. Within this then is the struggle to define or redefine the relationship. This point should not be confused with the misconception that gay and lesbian people abuse due to the stress of living in a homophobic and heterosexist world.

Jackson argues however that the institutionalised pervasiveness of heterosexuality, what can be seen as compulsory heterosexuality, is 'double-sided social regulation' (2005, 3) in that it regulates and orders not just sexuality but gender also. Hence we could usefully view heteronormativity as being used to describe the social, cultural and political privileging of heterosexuality to regulate *both* sexuality *and* gender. As such this institutionalised heterosexuality is the link, the key in the ideology of superiority that normalises the oppression of women and lgbt people in our society.

Indeed feminists and gender theorists have long been concerned with the relationship between gender division and heterosexuality: how it, at one and the same time, depends upon and upholds the gender division. Likewise, queer theorists have focused on heteronormativity but with a view undermining it. Looking at heterosexuality through both lenses we can see the intersections between its public element (a sphere of social life) and its private element (how it is played out between individuals in their relationships), how it controls both gender and sexuality and therefore the impacts on domestic abuse in same sex relationships.

6. Homophobia: Its Role in Same Sex Domestic Abuse

Lee Vicker asserts that:

the role of homophobia and heterosexism in maintaining silence is profound, both on individual survivors and the level of community acknowledgement. (1996, 5)

It is essential for us to consider homophobia and the impact it has on gay men's and lesbian's experiences. Homophobia is an insoluble reality of life for lesbians and gay men and integral to that reality, not an addition to it: as such these factors relate to the way individuals conceptualise themselves, the narrative they tell themselves and the impact it has on their sense of identity.

Homophobia can be defined as a fear of homosexuals, homosexuality, or any behavior, or attitudes which do not conform to rigid gender-role stereotypes. It is a fear that enforces sexism

and heterosexism. Homophobia is therefore linked to sexism and violence in that it is based on a deep-rooted and long held ideology of superiority which holds a certain type of (white) heterosexual masculinity above other ways of being.

When looking at the issue of homophobia in this context it is important to address both the externalized and internalized forms it can take and the impacts these forms can have. Specifically, the impact of homophobia and its connection to domestic abuse in same sex couples can include:

- The threat of outing a partner to friends, family, employer, the wider community.
- The control of a partner's expression of their sexuality due to their own desire not to be 'out'
- Stating that no-one will help the abused partner as the police, justice system etc are homophobic.
- Stating that the abuse is deserved because (s)he is homosexual.
- Stating that (s)he is not a *real* homosexual because of the sex of previous partners or preference/dislike of certain sexual practices.
- For gay men it can also include the amplification of *masculine norms* as a result of internalized homophobia. This can similarly be argued where two lesbians take on butch/femme identities.

Homophobia also impacts on gay and lesbian people's experiences of domestic abuse by placing additional barriers to them accessing support. This can come about by:

- A feeling of betraying an already besieged community.
- Fear of exposing a partner to a homophobic justice system.
- Fear of being ridiculed by support agencies because of their sexual orientation.
- Risk of alienation from the gay and lesbian community.
- Fear that the issue will not be taken seriously, or downplayed as an argument or mutual violence.
- The concern that domestic abuse is seen as a heterosexual issue.
- In response to the homophobia they face, lesbians may have placed great importance in building an image of people with very egalitarian relationships. The worry around shattering this image is silencing.
- Gay men may also build an idealized image of themselves as *more evolved* than other men and therefore less likely to use violence. Again, the worry around shattering this image is silencing.

7. Gender, Sexuality, Identity And Sense of Self

Our relationship with ourselves and our sense of self shifts during the course of our lives, depending on the situations we find ourselves in and the experiences we live through. It would be fair to say that our relationship with our own power or sense of power shifts likewise. So how do these shifts impact on the way in which people in same sex relationships perceive and experience abuse and how they feel about themselves as a result of this? Jackson says:

it is not only the past that shapes the present, but the present significantly re-shapes the past in the sense that we are constantly reconstructing our memories, our sense of who and what we are in relation to the sense we make of the present. (2005, 16)

Hence she uses the example that gay men and lesbians are able to tell the story of *always knowing* they were *different*, stating that many heterosexual children may feel 'different' too but would not tell the same story in adulthood.

A parallel of this within another context might be how a black woman identifies herself at different times in her life: for example, for many black women experiencing domestic abuse their sense of themselves as a woman comes to the fore, however for many black women experiencing racial harassment within their community their sense of blackness comes to the fore. How does the experience of domestic abuse impact upon a lesbian's sense of herself and likewise that for a gay man? It seems, therefore, that any work addressing same sex domestic abuse must grapple with fundamental questions of identity: to what extent a life is constrained or influenced by sexuality and how far by other aspects of identity, whether this is gender/race/ability/class.

8. Is Intersectionality the Key?

Alison Symington states that intersectionality

starts from the premise that people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history and the operation of structures of power. People are members of more than one community at the same time, and can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege... Intersectional analysis aims to reveal multiple identities, exposing the different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occurs as a consequence of the combination of identities. (2004, 2)

Thus intersectionality is a tool developed by feminists to help explain how the current order perpetuates discrimination and how certain groups within society face multiple discrimination. While it was primarily developed to assess, address and explain the lives of black women it is a useful conceptual tool for considering the experiences of domestic abuse in same sex relationships.

Hence intersectionality proposes it would be unhelpful to view same sex domestic abuse simply as similar to heterosexual domestic abuse but with the additional factor of homophobia layered onto the picture: an additive approach whereby one form of discrimination compounds another misses the fact that something new and different is created at the intersection of multiple discriminations. In other words, if we are to start simply by taking domestic abuse in heterosexual relationships as the *norm* against which we measure that of same sex relationships we will fail to develop an understanding of the dynamics which shape that abuse. As Ristock argues a

framework of intersectionality expands a gender-based analysis of violence to all systems of oppression and takes a both/and stance. (2005, 10)

That is not to say that we ignore the gender issue but that we look to move beyond the binary of male/female, heterosexuality/homosexuality. We need to see same sex domestic abuse as sitting within the gender order and shaped by it, linked to violence against women in the way in which heteronormativity is a tool of control for both gender and sexuality. It is important to understand that there will be 'shared mutual experiences' of survivors of heterosexual and same sex domestic abuse at an individual level: but that we are looking at something unique. Intersectionality can allow us to understand the way in which the multiple identities and discrimination combine to make up an individual's experiences of both oppression and privilege.

9. Conclusion: A Continuum of Violence?

In pulling together the themes outlined above, it is perhaps useful to reflect on one final model of contemporary gender theory that may shed light on domestic abuse: that of a continuum of violence. The term, now widely used, was proposed by Liz Kelly (1988) who has been a leading proponent of the view that, in order to understand the complexities of women's lives and the violence they face we must make the links between the different forms of

violence. Her aim was to move from viewing violence against women as deviant and recognize them a normative, part of a spectrum of socially sanctioned male violence and an everyday reality or backdrop to the lives of women. As such, Kelly uses the term continuum in accordance with the two Oxford English Dictionary definitions, namely: 'a basic common character that underlies many different events'; and 'a continuous series of elements or events that pass into one another and which cannot be readily distinguished'. The first meaning enables us to discuss abuse in a generic sense, identifying unifying elements of that abuse while not inferring any hierarchy within it. The second meaning enables us record the range of abuse whilst acknowledging no clearly defined and discrete analytical categories. In this way, we can see 'stranger' rape as one end of a continuum of sexist jokes, sexual harassment, partner rape.

The question therefore arises as to whether it is right to focus on same sex domestic abuse or on the continuum of domestic, family and community based abuse faced by lesbians and gay men, to include but not exclusively, domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, abuse by family members on account of an individual's sexuality. If our purpose is to develop an understanding of the dynamics of the abuse experienced in same sex relationships in order to enable the development of effective and sensitive interventions, then it can be argued that focusing solely on domestic abuse may be a lost opportunity. Indeed, it has been argued in Scotland that the development of a strategy which focused on domestic abuse alone, separate from the theoretical and policy context of all forms of men's violence against women was a missed opportunity. It is advisable that we do not replicate this mistake in work developed about lesbian and gay relationships. Furthermore, focus on the full continuum of abuse may in itself further distinguish the features and dynamics that are specific to domestic abuse experienced by lesbians and gays, thus increasing further our understanding. This approach would enable us to make the links between domestic abuse experienced by women in heterosexual relationships, same sex domestic abuse and wider homophobic abuse informed through an understanding of dual control nature of heteronormativity, the importance of hegemonic masculinity and the current gender order.

Nel Whiting, November 2007

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