



**Trinity College Dublin**

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

Domestic Violence & Abuse (DVA) in Female Same Sex Relationships

**Irish Association of Social Workers Presentation**

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# Today's agenda

## 1. The PhD Research

- Methodological/ theoretical approach (brief intro)
- The sample

## 2. The experience of DVA

- Types of abuse
- Commonality & Critical Differences (heterosexual and non-heterosexual women)

## 3. Help Seeking Behaviours

## 4. The Importance of Context

# 1. The research

**Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with adult women who had experienced DVA with a previous female partner**

## **Interviews explored**

- The experience of DVA (types of abusive behaviours, dynamics)
- How women made sense of their experience
- Impact of the abusive behaviours
- Help –seeking strategies in response to the abuse

# Methodological/theoretical approach

## **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

- Ideographic focus on the participant
- Lack of empirical knowledge in Ireland
- Participant centred – interested in capturing how women subjectively made sense of their experience of DVA

## **Ecological framework**

Interaction/interplay environments

- Individual
- Relationship
- Community
- Societal

Sample Profile	(n=10)
Ethnicity	10 white women from UK & Ireland
Age	Range 32 - 68
Children	2 women had children, 1 dependent child
Sexuality	8 women identified as lesbian, 2 as queer
Living Arrangements	7 women lived with the abusive partner during some or all of the relationship
Experiences of Abusive Relationships	4 Reported abuse in more than one same sex relationship
Duration of Abusive Relationship	Range: 6 months – 26 years
Rural / Urban/ City	3 Rural, 3 Urban, 4 City

## 2. The Experience of DVA...

# Emotional Abuse

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Isolation from family & friends

Malicious/ pestering calls & texts

Frightened by things partner says/ does

Verbal abuse/name calling

Regularly insulted/put down

Made to do most of the housework

Told what to do/who to see/  
Control of 'out' status

Spending controlled

Property stolen/ damaged/ burnt

Pets abused

Blamed for partner's misuse of alcohol/ drugs



# Physical abuse

## Physical abuse

Slapped, punched, shoved, pushed

Kicked / Bitten / Choked / Spat at

Restrained / Locked In House

Physically threatened

Urinated on

Prevented from getting help for injuries

Threatened with an object / weapon

## Severe physical abuse

Stabbed

Broken bones

Beaten up / Beaten unconscious

Strangled until losing consciousness

Held Down / Suffocated

Hit with an object / weapon



# Psychological abuse

Disruption of eating & sleeping patterns

Not being allowed to go to bed & sleep

Being forced to eat unhealthy foods

Re-arranging furniture daily

# Sexual Abuse (Physical)

Touched in a way that caused fear / alarm / distress

Sexually assaulted / abused

Withholding sex / intimacy to punish

Sexual coercion – intimacy under duress, forced into sexual activity

Raped

Re-enacting a previous childhood sexual abuse experience

# Sexual Abuse (Emotional)

Evidence of sexual abuse which could be described as more emotional than physical involving:

- being critical of a woman's body, of her sexuality,
- rejecting and humiliating her immediately after intimacy and
- ultimately making her feel sexually inadequate.

# Financial Abuse

Complete financial dependency (partner)

Theft of cash, food, personal belongings

Unauthorised use of credit card & bank accounts

Unpaid loan agreements from financial institutions

Loss of their homes

**Table 6 Coercive controlling behaviours**

<b>Coercive control</b>	<b>P1</b>	<b>P2</b>	<b>P3</b>	<b>P4</b>	<b>P5</b>	<b>P6</b>	<b>P7</b>	<b>P8</b>	<b>P9</b>	<b>Total</b>
claiming victimisation (during)	*		*			*	*	*		5
claiming victimisation (post)	*		*	*				*		4
monitoring mobile phone		*	*							2
coerced drug taking				*						1
instigating arguments before an exam			*							1
threats to jeopardise business								*		1
threatening to prosecute				*						1

# Critical differences



# Identity abuse

*“Threatening to out or outing sexuality. It includes behaviours that undermine a sense of self as a lesbian, gay, bisexual man, or woman, controlling what she/he looks like, clothes she/he wears, threatening to, or withdrawing medication or hormones, and refusing money for gender transition. The definition also includes birth gender, gender identity or HIV status” (Donovan & Hester, 2014, 209).*

'homophobic control' or  
'identity abuse' (control using  
sexual orientation)



Abuse manifested when  
participants, partners or both  
partners were concealing  
sexuality



Controlling a participants 'out  
status' & gaining power in the  
relationship



### Impact:

- Severely curtailed options for help-seeking with informal and formal supports.
- Isolation from formal support networks
- If you're not in a relationship – how can you talk about being abused



# Marginalised identity

- **Study found that LGBT supports were reluctant to acknowledge the issue of DVA for fear of adding further to ‘community stigma’ (also found to influence non-disclosure to family)**
- **Fear associated with concealing a lesbian sexual identity increased isolation & acted as a barrier to help-seeking (informal & formal supports)**
- **‘Double bind’: disclosure of abuse would entail disclosure of sexuality**
- **Small lesbian community, non-disclosure of abuse to LGBT networks because staff were friendly with abusive partners.**
- **Partners used the participants lesbian identity to manipulate & control**

# Critical differences...

*“My friend organised the DV workshop and she [partner] appeared at the workshop. I was in shock, I couldn’t say anything, I froze, it was the first time I’d seen her three months.*

*She stood up and she said, “I was in an abusive relationship for nearly three years and I was the abuser”*

# Where did Women seek help?

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# Where to for Support?

- Primarily opting for informal supports (friends and family)
- Counseling support – most sought formal option
- DV services least sought formal option
- Police response as positive
- LGBT community response as negative

# Experience / Response from counsellors

**Overall experience & support provided was positive for women**

*“I was finally thinking clearly for the first time in fucking three years. It was a lot to do with the counsellor, yeah I mean the counsellor was really supporting me”*

**However for some...**

*“I went to see her I think at the third occasion she said, “I can’t see you again. You’ve completely disabled my counselling skills” ” (in response to disclosure on sexual abuse)*

# Experience / Response from the Gardaí

**4 women involved the Gardaí**

**They were asked about their experience of reporting or why they hadn't reported**

*what I hadn't been getting from anybody up until I talked to the Guards was just, they just heard what I said and said, "Ok, this is not ok" you know what do we need to do here, that was all I was looking for [laughs]. I felt I didn't get that from my friends, our friends, or anybody from the lesbian community at all"*

*“yeah so I didn’t [report a sexual assault], I didn’t want to especially because I thought they are going to view it very fucking differently because it’s a woman you know, I knew that, I knew there’s no way they are going to take this seriously.”*

*“Well I didn’t think they would take it seriously you know being two women, I thought it would be handled better if they didn’t think it was a lesbian relationship”*



# Health services Experience / response

*“...then a nurse came into me and asked my friends to wait outside and the nurse said, **“Tell us his name, we can help you you now, you don’t have to deal with this”**. And then I was like, “Do I say it’s a woman?” and I thought, “If I say it’s a woman she’s going to judge me”, she’s going to think you know, “Ah it’s only a woman like, she should be able to fight back with a woman”*”

# When asked about DV services

**Perception that services were not available to lesbian women**

**Perception of a homophobic/ unsympathetic response**

**Women understood DV services as primarily for heterosexual women**

**Lack of visibility of SSDVA, specifically advertising campaigns**

**Reluctance to associate with victim**

**Non-recognition of the abuse as DVA**

*“there was nothing visual out there about same sex abusive relationships, all the images and literature I had seen before were showing straight couples, women being beaten by men”*

*“I didn’t avail of any of the [DV] services...there’s loads of kind straight services out there but if you were to Google lesbian or same sex DV support groups there’s is none”*

*“I think if DV happens in a same sex relationship, I think it’s undermined compared to if it’s a male and female, if a man’s being ill to a woman. I definitely think that’s out there”*

*“I never thought that, that it was open to me really because I always thought domestic violence is a married couple you know male female...I didn’t see it as domestic violence at the time”*

*...I never seen anything about  
two women anywhere until I  
saw your poster [study's  
promotional poster] (Saoirse)*

*...even just seeing the literature in that few  
minutes and just getting that message so  
strongly you know such a simple thing like,  
helped me so much to connect my  
experience and you know really name it as  
domestic violence (Aoibhinn)*

# 4. Understanding Context to Understand SSDVA

# Participant meaning-making

- Analysing the participant accounts, what became apparent was the significance of Context (Macro societal structure) to understand the abusive behaviours
- Context – specifically talking about
  - Heteronormativity/Heterosexism

**Shaped the lived experiences of the participants**

# DV through the lens of heterosexism

National governments VAW women plans do not prioritise or reflect an understanding of DV in LGBT relationships (Simpson & Helfrich, 2005; Walters, 2009).

A review of national DV plans in the “Global North” (n=101), found only one country, Sweden, had a national plan for LGBT persons (Wells, et al., 2014).

Researchers argue, this exclusion is indicative of *heterosexism* on a global scale (Hyman, 2008; Ristock, 2011; Wells et al., 2014).

# Adding another layer to Context

- Gender role stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, underpinned by heterosexism, reinforce societal ideas about who can be a victim or perpetrator of DVA
- Researchers argue that such assumptions and societal norms about perpetrators and victims act to minimise the existence of other forms of DVA, such as female to female, female to male, and gay male DVA.

(Corbally, 2010).



Participants in the study understood their experiences of abuse through the lens of heterosexism

**This context became pivotal to understanding their experiences of abuse.**

# Context of homophobia

**The fear of 'coming out' resulted in one woman remaining in an abusive relationship for 26 years:**

*"I was hiding my sexuality, because if I'd of left her and broke up with her... maybe I'd of been with somebody else then everyone would have known, it just seemed easier to stay"*

**On the flip side, having an abusive partner who is not 'out' resulted in one woman:**

*"I went back into the closet basically, that's what I did and it was killing me, it was absolutely killing me because being out was part of who I was"*

# Context of heterosexism

**Primacy of heterosexuality, not only are individuals assumed to be heterosexual but society's institutions, infrastructure, legislation and policy have embedded in them dominant heterosexist ideas**

**Dominant heterosexist story of what constitutes a DVA relationship – male perpetrator / female victim were reflected in interviews:**

- Perception around service providers response (previous slides)
- Non-reporting of abusive behaviours
- Non- recognition of abuse as DVA
- Help-seeking behaviours

*“I suppose when we learn about relationships and violence within relationships it’s, its men are always the perpetrators”*

*“I didn’t connect the dots in my head you know, I didn’t think this is domestic violence because you were always thought to think that domestic violence was between a man and a woman”*

*“...with my parents, if that was me and married to a man, and the man was doing that, they would not be talking to them on the phone, talking to them when they come to the house, allowing him, or allowing that person into their home, their front door knowing how I feel, how much it upsets me, and they still continue to this day”*

*“Who is going to believe a woman could rape another woman? I mean how do you explain that?”*

*“...some of my sister’s kind of were like, “Well you know, how hard really can a woman hit you?” That was the kind of reaction”*

# Some positives...

## **Recognition of abuse in subsequent relationships – ended relationship immediately**

*“Oh I would have stayed there, yeah definitely. But I knew the warning signs. I knew as soon as, as soon as she put her hand on me I thought you know if she does it once she’ll fucking do it again. I got out of there within two weeks”*

# Some positives

## **Positive impact on their professional practice – increased awareness & understanding**

*“I’m more aware of the support out there, not that there’s much support for gay couples or anything like that but definitely for straight couples you’ve got your Women’s Aid and you’ve got all of them like you know and I’m more...rather than just handing out a card and going, “Here, this is what you do” it’s a case of I’m more able to explain it more and just be more compassionate towards them”*

# To summarise

- Experiences of DVA for lesbian women – similarities and differences
- Understanding the differences of same sex DVA – Context is key
- Our perceptions about men and women and their capacity for aggressive behaviour, underpinned by heterosexist understandings of DVA, play a role in the experience of DVA for ‘other’ groups



# Finally,

Situating the abuse in context – allows you to see the  
blindside of abusive experiences:

The why of non-reporting

The why of not seeking support

The why of lack of awareness at the service level

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Thank You...