

## Some Lesbian Issues

Article by Abby Tallmer. Taken from National Gay Task Force Newsletter

We all take for granted that feelings of anger, fear, and confusion are natural reactions for those who are recent survivors of a violent crime. Rape survivors, for example, often feel guilty and responsible for the crime which was committed against them. But what kind of emotional after effects are common to victims of anti-lesbian violence? No one knows for sure, largely because anti-lesbian violence itself has remained a wholly neglected phenomenon until recently.

This article, based on interviews with women who counsel lesbian victims and on the scant amount of literature available, is an initial inquiry into the common reactions of the lesbian violence victim, as distinguished from the straight female victim or the gay man. It is intended as an initial discussion of issues which may be present in and specific to the lives of lesbians in general, and the lesbian violence victim in particular.

### PRACTICAL ISSUES:

Lesbian victims share all of the usual practical issues with other victims of violence: where to get medical help, where to report crimes, where to get counseling, how to be reimbursed for financial losses incurred through crime, etc. In addition, however, lesbians have specific practical problems that other adult crime victims might not have. Since rape or sexual assault is perhaps the most common form of attack against lesbians (as it is against all women), it follows that many purely practical issues would arise for lesbians who victims of rape or sexual assault. Some of these are:

- **PREGNANCY:** Pregnancy is a factor which many lesbian women have deliberately excluded from their lives. Many lesbians are unsure when they had their last period, or when they are at greatest risk to become pregnant. If they are pregnant, the issue of whether or not to have an abortion may cause substantial additional trauma.
- **RISK OF Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD's) and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs):** Since lesbians are the lowest risk group in the adult sexually active population for all forms of STIs and STDs, many lesbians are unfamiliar with these diseases. Thus, it is particularly important that follow-up care for lesbian rape victims include counseling and information on when to get testing.
- **PAINFUL PENETRATION:** For those lesbians who have never had sexual relations with a man, the act of vaginal or anal penetration itself may be particularly traumatic, medically as well as emotionally.
- **INSENSITIVE TREATMENT BY POLICE OR MEDICAL PERSONNEL:** Often the treatment for rape and sexual assault can be as traumatizing as the experience of the assault itself, particularly for lesbians. Inexperienced, insensitive, or downright homophobic hospital workers, doctors, or policemen can make a rape an even more brutal experience. The former head of a rape crisis center at a major Greenwich Village hospital related an incident to me that she had witnessed which illustrates this point. A doctor in the emergency room, preparing to perform a pelvic exam on a woman who had just been raped, asked the woman what kind of birth control she used. "I don't use any," she replied, "I'm a lesbian." "Oh," the doctor said, "but you're so beautiful!"

Unfortunately, examples like this one, which occurred merely four years ago, still happen almost every day and will continue until proper training is provided to those who deal with victims of anti-lesbian assault. A particularly bad experience like this can leave a lasting impression on an already vulnerable victim.

- **SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION:** Sexual dysfunction is common to victims of sexual assault, and lesbians are no exception. Many lesbians, however, are puzzled by this, since they do not understand why their violent experience with a man carries over into their sexual/sensual/loving relationship with another woman.

### EMOTIONAL ISSUES:

The emotional issues which follow rape and assault are often much more complex and harder to pin down than the practical ones. Of course, lesbian violence victims share most of the usual responses of crime victims - anger, helplessness, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, crying spells, depression, nightmares.

There are, however, also some emotional issues that are specific to lesbians. Some of these are:

- **SENSE OF ISOLATION:** Rape or assault is always an isolating experience. Many women find that a lesbian who has been raped serves as too direct a reminder of their own vulnerability as lesbian women and, consciously or unconsciously, they avoid the recent victim. Even a victim's lover may find it hard to cope with the experience. Since many lesbians already perceive themselves as isolated from the mainstream culture, and since many are in fact separated from their families, isolation from the lesbian community as well can be especially painful.
- **SENSE OF VULNERABILITY:** For many lesbians, an experience of assault serves to enforce the myth that a woman without a man is fair game in our society. Even if a woman was with her lover or other women at the time of the attack, she may feel that it was her status as a single woman (i.e., a woman without a man) that got her into trouble. Thus, a woman may come out of an assault unconsciously blaming her own lesbianism for the attack.
- **SENSE OF PUNISHMENT:** Carrying the sense of vulnerability one step further, some lesbians, particularly those who are highly religious, or those who have been rejected by their families because of their "evil" lifestyle, will react to an assault by a suspicion that they are being justly punished.
- **SENSE OF PARANOIA:** Beyond the usual feelings of uncertainty most women experience in the streets, many lesbians have an added concern: their visibility. They ask themselves: "Do I look gay? Is that why he picked me? Did he see us come out of the bar?"

National Gay Task Force Violence Survey statistics indicate that women are more likely than men to modify their behavior to avoid violence; concern about visibility is a legitimate concern for women, who are much more likely to be targets for violence if they are perceived to be lesbians. And an assault can heighten concern over visibility tenfold, as well as creating anxiety in even the most seemingly harmless public situation.

- **FEELINGS OF SHAME DUE TO THE GENDER OF THE ATTACKER:** Many lesbians feel a particular shame at having been violated by a man. Because the rape of a lesbian involves enforced sexual acts with someone of a gender other than her sexual preference, it takes on an extra dimension beyond the experience of either straight female or gay male rape victims.

For lesbians, rape by a man is not only a bodily violation; it is a violation of a lifestyle. This sense of violation is particularly strong when one woman is raped in front of her lover, in a calculated attempt by the rapist to destroy the bond that the two women share.

- **DIMINISHED SENSE OF SELF:** The sense of shame at having been assaulted by a man may also damage a lesbian's sense of self. Many lesbians pride themselves on their independence and cannot reconcile their self-sufficiency with the vulnerability they feel after an attack.
- **SEXUAL CONFUSION:** Lesbians, like straight women, frequently wonder if an incident of rape was their fault. But there is an additional twist: sometimes a rape brings up deep-seated sexual confusion in a gay woman ("Did I really want this to happen?" "Do I look straight?"). Although fleeting, such thoughts add to a woman's confusion after an attack.
- **HOW ANTI-LESBIAN VIOLENCE CAN AFFECT LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS:** It is obvious that a sexual assault affects not only the victim, but those closest to her. However, unlike straight couples, in which the man may be sympathetic but basically a stranger to the issue, assault may be a personal experience for both partners in a lesbian relationship. "More often than not," comments a woman who has counseled victims of anti-lesbian violence, "when you're dealing with a lesbian couple, you're dealing with someone who's been raped ten years earlier, and someone who's been raped recently."

In other words, so many women are victims of assault at one point in their life that one woman's assault can trigger upsetting or traumatic memories in her lover. This may either allow the partner of a rape victim to be especially supportive; or it may lead to tension and distance if she is unable to cope with her own memories. And like all partners of rape victims, the partner may feel inadequate for not having protected her lover properly, or even angry at her lover for letting the assault happen. All of these reactions are common ones, and a combination of both individual and couple counseling is generally recommended when a lesbian couple is affected by an anti-lesbian assault.

In conclusion, it is crucial to the well-being of lesbian violence victims that rape crisis counselors, violence project volunteers, hospital staff members, and others who routinely deal with them, begin to obtain accurate information about lesbianism in general and about anti-lesbian violence in particular.