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## IX COMMUNITY RESPONSE

### 1. Introduction

Research on domestic violence shows that “system matters” (Gondolf 2002:199). A close cooperation of batterer counselling programmes with intervention networks significantly increases the safety of victims and decreases the risk of reassault and growing severity. Further, a change of societal values deprives male perpetrators of a societal backbone of moral support for their battering. So, according to Gondolf, emphasis should be put on system development rather than on new counselling approaches and innovations. This chapter will scrutinize the intersection of intervention systems, subculture and societal values.

### 2. Silence about DV in the lesbian community

Lesbian partnerships are embedded in society in general as well as in a sub-cultural context providing sub-cultural norms and values. In addition to specific perpetrator programmes for (lesbian) women and developing an intervention system that also considers lesbian lifestyles, it is necessary to have a close look at the LGBT community as well. Domestic violence is not a problem that the LGBT community is tackling openly and offensively. The majority of lesbian victims and lesbian perpetrators are looking for support in their circles of friends – where the incidence is usually kept secret. The silence of the LGBT community adds weight to the idea that violence-free partnerships are not a shared community value. Instead, violent incidences in lesbian spaces are met with, e.g. barring the participants, keeping their “private matters” out of the community. In the community’s self conception, the fear that making domestic violence public may support and strengthen prejudice against homosexuals (see [chapter 9.1.1](#)) is deeply embedded.

Another cause of not speaking out about violent partnerships may be found in the definition of domestic violence itself: According to [Hageman-White](#) (2006:8) in most European countries, domestic violence is defined as “the physical, psychological and sexual violence to women by men”. Since this definition excludes violence in same-sex partnerships, it contributes to an invisibility of the problem within LGBT communities. Furthermore, this definition supports a sub-cultural collective exclusion of the LGBT community which then again reinforces lesbian/female perpetrators perception of acting righteously.

#### *2.1 Fear of stigmatisation*

According to international research, most lesbian women have had experienced various forms of discrimination (Stein-Hilbers 1999, Eurobarometer on Discrimination 2006) and/or violence because of their psychosexual identity. Discrimination is an expression of marginalisation. A self-conception of a lesbian community is one of a social minority facing marginalisation. This may explain the lesbians’ fear that they could face even more discrimination if there was an open discussion about violence in their partnerships. Speaking out about domestic violence could promote the bias that lesbians per se are violently/criminal. The fear of misuse for lesbophobic and homophobic ‘propaganda’ may also have kept this issue from being discussed openly for such a long time.

## *2.2 Impact of silence on violent lesbian partnership*

The general definition of domestic violence as violence by men against women and the silence of lesbian communities contribute to tabooing domestic violence in lesbian partnerships. This taboo has a strong impact on lesbian partnerships and violent dynamics. Victims do not look for support at counselling services, only rarely report to the police and foremost, still try to protect their lesbian partners and perpetrators. They do not want to contribute to ostracising or exposing them to a homophobic system. Consequently, abusive partnerships are regarded as “private matters” where no interference or discussion is needed. This collective coping strategy is fatal for the victim and strengthens the perpetrator.

### 2.2.1 Normalisation of violence

Consequently, a ‘normalisation of violence’ takes place within the lesbian community: Abuse and violence is viewed as a normal aspect of lesbian living. The boundary between ‘normal’ acceptable and abusive/violent behaviour is blurred. Lesbian victims feel unsure about experiencing abuse or violence and do not seek help; they do not know if their experience is “severe” enough to be named abuse or violence. Lesbian perpetrators presume that their violent behaviour is acceptable because no-one interferes. The circle of friends who are the first persons of reference, may feel uneasy or unsure what to do. But without any response the victim may get the impression that a violent situation is commonly accepted. This might reinforce her blaming herself for causing the abuse/violence. Even worse, since abusive and violent behaviour seems to be an accepted part of lesbian life, it is more difficult for victims to realise that they are in an abusive partnership; they may take it as “destiny” or even “deserved” for being a lesbian.

Domestic violence in lesbian partnerships cannot be analysed without taking into account the impact of discrimination/marginalisation on lesbian couples. Hence, looking at the effect on lesbian partnerships, domestic violence can be described as a continuation of discrimination. The risk of a “second victimisation” prevents victims and perpetrators from seeking adequate help. This again promotes normalisation as a collective and individual coping strategy.

### 2.2.2 Silence enforces behaviour of perpetrator

As long as no one challenges her behaviour, the perpetrator has no motive to stop using violence and change her behaviour. As in any other case of criminal action, if bystanders do not intervene, perpetrators feel righteous or even backed in their action. Thus, silence, not naming the violence, supports perpetrator’s perception and may even convey the message of shared values.

If the community acts, it is quite often more an expression of helplessness than of mature deliberation: Occasionally violent women are simply banned from places or excluded from groups. The problem seems to be solved as soon as violent women are excluded and removed. But indeed, this is not the case. Even worse, violent women may feel victimised because their way of thinking and reflecting on the world is not challenged.

Community action needs to be based on careful consideration and discussion and lead to joint action.

### 3. Model of good practice: Community action by the [lesbian community in Vienna, Austria](#)

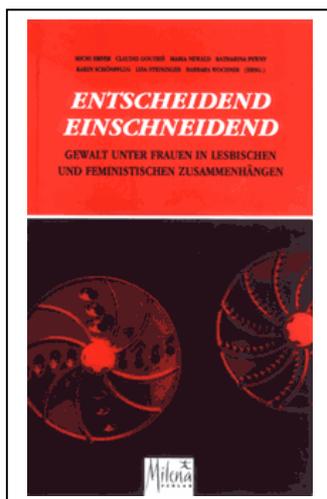
In 1997, the staff of the lesbian counselling centre in Vienna decided to break the silence about violence amongst lesbians. Discussions started first in their own group, later on they invited lesbians from other organisations in Vienna to join in.

No-one denied the fact of violence between lesbians and within lesbian relationships, but all the concerns about lesbophobic reactions, about misuse and about their own resistance towards this issue had to be discussed before the idea of organising a series of workshops and discussions was agreed. From December 1998 to April 1999, more than 20 activities took place. Discussions, lectures and workshops were organised in different community places, a questionnaire was developed and distributed.

The organisers offered a wide range of events from a lecture about lesbians as perpetrators to a closed group to talk about experienced sexual violence within lesbian partnerships, from discussions about the patriarchal influence on lesbian partnerships to a workshop about the fine line between gossip, social exclusion and mobbing within the lesbian community. Not surprisingly much more women were prepared to listen to a lecture or a talk than to join a small group to talk about their own experiences.

The participants said that raising the issue of violence within the lesbian community was an important initiative, but even in Vienna it is quite a small community and the fear of too much publicity made it difficult to exchange personal experience.

Finally, the organisers published the development of the idea and the content of the workshops in a book, [“Entscheidend einschneidend: Mit Gewalt unter Frauen in lesbischen und feministischen Zusammenhängen umgehen”](#) Ebner Michi et al. (Hginnen), Wien: Milena Verlag, 2001



#### **Literature:**

**Gondolf, Edward W.** (2002): *Batterer Intervention Systems – Issues, Outcomes, and Recommendations*. Thousand Oaks, London, Sage Publication.

**Hagemann-White, Carol** (2006): *Combating violence against women – Stocktaking study on the measures and actions taken in Council of Europe member States*.

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