The discourse on domestic violence often concentrates on violence against children and on violence between husband and wife, or to be more specific, on violence of husbands against their wives. Considering the number of women and children affected, this is hardly surprising. Even more so since in heterosexual families issues of power and control can be discussed in the light of gender differences and the position of men and women in our society. In same sex relationships however domestic violence is just as prevalent. But it is rarely discussed in mainstream articles, and very few researchers include same sex couples in their research. Because the gay and lesbian communities themselves deny the problem of domestic violence in their midst, there is no movement comparable to the women's movement of the '70s to fight for a better understanding and services for victims and batterers. Fortunately times are changing, and knowledge about same sex domestic violence has become increasingly available. In this article I will briefly describe the nature, scope and dynamics of violence in same sex relationships, before I will elaborate on the differences between domestic violence in same sex and in heterosexual couples.

Prevalence

The first publications about same sex domestic violence emerged in the '80s. This was mainly activist work from advocates who worked with victims, or survivors as they called them. Many personal experiences were conveyed in the struggle for recognition and with the intention to support others with similar experiences. In Europe research into same sex domestic violence research is still scarce, but since the '80s a reasonable amount of research has been accomplished in the United States. Exploration of the research findings shows that most studies do not meet the necessary requirements to measure prevalence because of nonrandom sampling methods. Respondents were found through their participation in lesbian/gay festivals, membership of organizations, through ads in magazines aimed at the population, and by the snowball method. Respondents obtained this way are not necessarily representative of the lesbian and gay population. Based on the available research however, it is estimated that domestic violence in same sex couples is just as prevalent as in heterosexual couples. This means that approximately one in four or five gay men and lesbian women experience physical violence in their relationships.

Types of abuse

The forms of abuse used in same sex couples are no different from the abuse in heterosexual couples. Victims are beaten, kicked, choked and thrown down the stairs. Sometimes weapons, like knives or firearms, are used, and occasionally violence results in the death of the victim. Physical violence is always accompanied and often preceded by psychological violence. When victims think back of the early days in their relationships they often mention, that what was experienced as loving behaviour at that time turned...
into excessive control as time passed. The partner that expressed his or her desire to spend every minute together in the beginning, turned physically violent when the victim spent some time with friends in a later stage of the relationship. Once the violence has started it intensifies in nature and frequency. And, contrary to expectations, the physical abuse is not mutual.

When describing domestic violence, the similarities between same sex and heterosexual couples are far more striking than the differences. There are however a few differences in the types of abuse that I wish to address. One type of psychological abuse is known as homophobic control. This means the abuser threatens to reveal the victim's sexual orientation to others. It is also used to devalue the victim's self esteem by telling him or her it's what they deserve and that homophobic society will not be there to help. The possibility to resort to homophobic control may depend on the society the couple lives in. It is found to be very effective in the US, but it did not come up as a result in my research amongst gay men and lesbian women in the Netherlands. Another difference can be seen in the use of sexual violence. Intralesbian violence is often estimated to be less sexualised. When taking a closer look at the available research, some points are noteworthy. First of all, it has not been common for researchers to ask explicit questions about sexual violence in lesbian couples. And second, the language that is used for certain types of sexual violence does not meet the experience of lesbian women. The word 'rape' for instance is not commonly used. If and when they have the courage to break the silence, victims say their partner forced them to have sex. They might be penetrated vaginally with an object, fingers, or fist. In the Netherlands, but in the UK as well, these women have not found legislation on their side, since the term rape has been reserved for a long time for penetration with the male penis. This reinforced the hesitation to use the term rape in lesbian relationships. Sexual violence in gay couples on the other hand is often emphasized. It is remarkable that gay men are just as hesitant to use the word rape when speaking about sexual violence they experienced as lesbian women are. "I never called it rape. I called it rough sex", Patrick Letellier wrote about his own experiences of being raped by his male lover. Gay men are supposed to always want sex, consequently force is never an issue. Forced sex in gay relationships contains an extra dimension, since the rape is usually performed without a condom. The victim is confronted with a heightened risk on HIV infection as well as being raped.

**Dynamics of the violence**

As in heterosexual domestic violence there are no specific external traits by which victims or batterers can be identified. It is not the more masculine partner, or the partner with greater physical strength. Batterers can be seen as more emotionally dependent on the partner. “They also tend to be narcissistic and entitled in the sense that they expect all of their needs and demands to be complied with immediately, but they do tend to have a

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double standard because they can be callous to their partners’ needs.”. It is not uncommon for a gay or lesbian couple to have a rather intense start of the relationship. In my research some of both the male and female respondents stated they were cohabiting with the partner within weeks, or sometimes even days. The batterer plays a very important role in this process, through his or her intense courtship. She, or he, seduces the partner into the relationship by expressing the feeling that the partner is the love of his/her life, the best thing that ever happened. “She told me I was the love of her life, that everything between us was destined to be. Of course later on I discovered she’d said that to her previous lovers as well.”. The intense feeling of being loved pulls the victim into the relationship. This is most effective if the victim desires a long-lasting relationship, but not convinced about his or her chances to fulfil this desire. As soon as the relationship is established however, the roles change. It is the victim’s turn to give, and in order to keep the dream alive, they pay by giving up their own activities, friends, and even their own opinions.

An important question is which factors give rise to the abuse in same sex relationship. Intergenerational transmission, alcohol or drug abuse, conflicts around dependency and autonomy, and imbalances of power, have all been explored. In most cases the findings are comparable to domestic violence research in heterosexual couples. There are differences however when it comes to the balance of power in the relationship. Same sex relationships in general tend to be more equal on a practical level. With both partners ‘earning and caring’ power imbalances become visible through the extent in which the victim is allowed to have autonomy. “We did everything together, just everything. And she corrected me if I said ‘I’ instead of ‘we’. Everything was about us, I just didn’t exist anymore.”. Autonomy and dependency issues are considered to be an area of discomfort for lesbian women. Women are socialized to define themselves in relation to significant others, and to place high value on intimacy. The result might be that in a lesbian relationship it is even more difficult for both partners to establish a sense of self. Both gay men and lesbian women suffer from a lack of social validation and support for their relationship. This might lead to a greater attachment to the partner, which in turn can fuel the emotional dependency of the batterer. Extreme jealousy is a manifestation of these feelings of dependency. It is also one of the factors that is most clearly present when violence starts to occur in same sex relationships. I found that the lesbian batterer will appeal to her lover’s feelings of empathy first. “I don’t want you to leave tonight, because I don’t feel well” or “I’m afraid you’ll like her more than you love me”. The victim, who wants to reassure her partner, lovingly cancels her plans. Until she realises her life is no longer her own. Once she stands up for herself the abuse starts. Many lesbian victims follow indirect strategies to regain their autonomy. They will stimulate the partner’s activities to acquire more freedom for themselves. Because of the batterer’s double

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4 ibid, p. 41
standards this is often in vain. She does not restrict herself in the same way she restricts her partner. The gay batterer will express more direct controlling and humiliating behaviour, and as with lesbian batterers, when he is ignored his partner is at risk of abuse. “When we met he told me how special and beautiful I was. A few weeks later we went to a party, and we and this group of people had this interesting conversation about/…/. On our way home he said that next time I had better not mix with anyone because I was too stupid. Once we were home I just said I’d go to bed. I didn’t really want to listen to him. He followed me upstairs and started kicking me.”.

Same sex batterers that are not in an enduring relationship tend to have a series of abusive relationships. Most of these follow the same pattern of intense courtship, disappointment, anger and violence, in order to end abruptly after a serious incident.

**Differences**

Even though the nature of same sex domestic violence was only briefly discussed, it may be clear that there are many similarities, with a few small exceptions here and there. Similarities in the types of abuse, in batterer and victim behaviour, and in factors giving rise to the abuse. What then are the differences between heterosexual and same sex couples when thinking about domestic violence? These differences can be found mainly in society’s failure to recognize the existence of same sex domestic violence, homophobia, and stereotyped thinking about masculinity and femininity. “Although the same dynamics of coercion and control are evident no matter who the partners are, the sexual orientation and gender identity of the partners strongly influence exactly how the batterer will achieve that control, how the battering will affect the battered partner, and whether there will be any resources for safety and support.”.

Fear of disapproval of same sex relationships can lead to secrecy about sexual orientation. It is more difficult to tell someone you’re being abused, if you can’t be open about the fact that your lover is of the same sex. Asking for help from family, friends or co-workers, means you have to ‘come out’. These men and women are in a way doubly isolated. They are isolated by their abuser, and by society’s disapproval. I think it is important to realize that even though it is difficult, a battered heterosexual woman can benefit from positive feedback on her personality. Colleagues might mention how well she organizes her workload with her family life. Her friends and family might complement her on how good a mother she is for her children. But when you live in a world that is unknown to people around you, the batterer’s constant criticism, humiliation, and coercive behaviours carry a different weight.

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5 S. KERS, A. NIJMAN, & S. RAMAEKERS, Geweld in mannenrelaties. een verkennend onderzoek naar de aard, de dynamiek en de gevolgen van geweld in mannenrelaties, Amsterdam: Schorer, 2004, p. 26

The degree to which homophobia is a problem depends in part on the society the couple lives in. The Netherlands for instance are considered to have quite a 'gay-tolerant climate'. Gay men and lesbian women have the same rights as heterosexual men and women. They can marry and have children, and legislation protects them in matters like discrimination at the workplace. And at first sight one might think that no one really cares whether you're gay or not. This might be why homophobic control was not found as a significant form of abuse in Dutch same sex couples. There is one exception. Gay men and lesbian women with an ethnic background in which homosexuality is not tolerated are vulnerable to homophobic control. It was striking that the few respondents in our research who came from a Muslim culture did suffer from this type of abuse. We also found that in our sample of 51 gay men 6% of the respondents and 22% of the partners had not revealed their sexual orientation to anyone. On top of that 16% of the respondents and 20% of the partners disclosed their sexual preference only to a limited group of people. Many of these men had an ethnic background.

Another difference can be seen in stereotype thinking about same sex relationships. It is often thought that same sex relationships are easily dissolved. Heterosexual family life is, as it's called in the Netherlands, the ‘cornerstone of our society’. It is the place where we rear our children, the place for intimacy, providing care, and sharing responsibilities. Even though more and more children are brought up by same sex parents, raising children is not seen as a core function of the same sex family. In most cases same sex partners will be financially independent. There is nothing that binds the two together seems to be the common sense opinion. On top of that gay couples suffer from the image that they change partners easily and frequently, and even when they do have a stable and enduring relationship they might have sex on the side with many different men. In spite of all this, gay men and lesbian women can be involved for years with an abusive partner. Gay men especially expressed the opinion that they were reluctant to leave their partners, because of their desire to have a meaningful relationship. One male respondent in our research said “Sex is available everywhere for gay men, so it's all about love. It's difficult to find a meaningful relationship, and in order to stay together we'll do anything, be it positive or negative.”.

Ideas about masculinity and femininity influence our thinking about domestic violence in same sex couples as well. As a result of their socialisation women are supposed to be less violent in nature. Their capacity to talk about their feelings and empathic behaviour are often emphasized. Violent behaviour by women is considered to be much less socially acceptable than the same behaviour in men. And if women do use physical violence, it is thought they cannot really inflict serious damage. For men on the other hand, it is just as socially unacceptable to be a victim. If they are abused by their partners, they are supposed to fight back.

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7 S. KERS, A. NIJMAN, & S. RAMAEKERS, Geweld in mannenrelaties. een verkennend onderzoek naar de aard, de dynamiek en de gevolgen van geweld in mannenrelaties, Amsterdam: Schorer, 2004, p. 64
Gender is often used as a means to distinguish victims from batterers. Stereotype thinking about same sex relationships and our notions about masculinity and femininity both lead to the supposition that domestic violence in same sex couples is reciprocal. It is difficult to imagine the victim not fighting back, because same sex partners are more equal in power and physical strength. It can be even more difficult to believe someone is being abused if he or she is much stronger or more masculine than the batterer. These common sense notions all tend to minimalise the impact of the violence, and unfortunately it is not only heard when speaking to friends and family, but also when seeking help from police or counsellors.

The reciprocal violence myth is reinforced by the same sex couples themselves. Both victim and perpetrator tend to minimalise the batterer’s behaviour. Victims, especially the lesbian victims, see their own behaviour as just as determinative as their partners behaviour. The batterers deny their own feelings of guilt, and blame the victim for the abuse. It is not uncommon for a batterer to consider herself or himself to be the victim. I didn’t really know how strong this feeling could be (and how difficult it would be to escape stereotype thinking even when you’re aware of the trap) until I interviewed some lesbian batterers for my research. In their minds they really were victims, even though they were quite open about the fact that they used physical violence. One batterer had even sought protection in a women’s shelter. She told me that every time her two children spent a weekend at her ex-husbands house, they were afraid they’d find her hospitalised on their return. In other words, this woman used the classic heterosexual battered women’s scenario to prove her victimization. Another batterer had sought protection from the partner by calling the police, which is yet another way to prove victimization.

Since same sex victims do tend to defend themselves with physical means from time to time, it can be quite challenging to identify the roles of both partners. “In dealing with same-sex domestic violence, however, the practitioner cannot necessarily assume that the patient is the partner who is the victim. If a patient identifies as a victim or abuser, it is important to recognize that her or his representation may not necessarily be accurate. This is not because of an intent to deceive, but because roles in same sex relationships usually do not follow the same gender role behaviour as heterosexual relationships”

Screening criteria have been developed and are being used by American crisis intervention hotlines. In same sex domestic violence it is very important to uncover the history of the violence. Most batterers are not very specific about the sequence of events and details of the violence, but they will express motivation for the abuse. Victims will recall details of the abuse, but can often not express what caused it. We asked questions about the first violent incident that occurred and both partner’s behaviours during this incident. Then we continued with the same questions about consecutive incidents. It is during this process that partner’s roles can be clarified. The batterers mentioned above

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could not mention one instance in which the partner had initiated violence against them. Even in self defence the victims physical responses had been minimal. The batterers did speak about their partner's flawed characters however. The partners were alcoholics, difficult for everyone to get along with, jealous, and humiliating. Every detail of perceived negative behaviour by the victim was communicated. And unfortunately these batterers are reinforced in their victimization by the stereotype notion that women are not violent by nature, and by the guilt ridden partner who blames herself.

The availability of services

Lesbian women and gay men who experience violence in their relationships try to find help in solving their problems provided that is safe enough. Whether they use formal or informal resources depends in part on the country or state they live in. In some states in the US for example, homosexuality is still considered to be a crime. Also in the US, there are some states where domestic violence legislation is restricted to heterosexual violence only. Seeking judicial help is no option in these areas. There is an abundance of stories about police homophobia and brutality towards victims who have felt the need to protect themselves by calling the police. Besides not being taken serious, the victim might be humiliated because of his or her sexual identity. It is conceivable that these problems are not restricted to the United States. However, a positive development can be seen in England. London's Metropolitan Police dedicates a chapter to domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships in their domestic violence scenario. Police officers who are called to such a situation will know how to help both victim and perpetrator in the best way possible at the time.

Unfortunately the gay and lesbian communities themselves have a hard time accepting domestic violence can occur in same sex relationships. Fear of reinforcing society's homophobia and the reluctance to recognize power differentials in same sex relationships are responsible for this lack of attention for domestic violence. Battering is therefore easily dismissed as a problem for some other part of the community. The violence is therefore easily dismissed as a problem for some other part of the community. The violence is delegated for example to butch femme relationships, relationships that are modelled on traditional heterosexual relationships, to so-called S/M relationships, where consensual violence is an intrinsic part of the relationship, and to gay men with many sexual partners. But just like in heterosexual relationships, domestic violence may occur in any relationship.

Men's shelters are still a rare phenomenon, and traditionally lesbian women are not welcome in women's shelters for a number of reasons. Fear of loosing funding, and an inability to protect the victim because the batterer might know the shelter's location, are two of such reasons that might be typically American. The fact that gender can't be used as a means to distinguish victims from batterers seems to be more global. The task of deciding if and when a woman is really a victim, or which of the partners is 'the' victim, would be on the shoulders of the women who work there, and they repudiate this responsibility. Lesbian women themselves might fear homophobia from fellow occupants of shelter workers. In larger urban areas in the US the gay and lesbian communities have
succeeded to provide some services for same sex couples in domestic violence situations. There are a few shelters and crisis intervention hotlines that cater to the needs of the victims. One can find many pages on the internet with information about violence, help options and advise for victims as well as batterers. The majority of abused gay men and lesbian women however have to survive their experiences without any formal help, unless they can afford a counsellor.

Because of the so called ‘tolerant climate’, the situation in the Netherlands is somewhat better. We found no blatant incidences of police brutality in our researches. Both male and female respondents did resort to the police for help when in a situation of serious violence, even though gay men especially were quite hesitant to do so. Some respondents reported their complaints were taken seriously, and they found the police helpful. Most respondents however complained about not being taken seriously. Two examples might describe what respondents experienced as homophobic behaviour. “So why are you here, you want revenge?” a police officer asked when a gay man wanted to put down a complaint after being raped by his HIV positive lover. “Ladies, you had better sit down and talk” the police said before leaving a lesbian couple to themselves after one of them had used a hammer to bash in the bedroom door.

It also seems to be quite difficult for counsellors to understand the situation of violence in same sex couples. One male victim told us the counsellor believed his lover when he stated that the victim was imagining things. The victim was prescribed tranquillisers and advised to seek psychiatric care. This is in fact very much similar to the situation heterosexual women were in some thirty years ago, but it happened in 2002. None of the male respondents that sought counselling during the relationship or in situation of crisis found the intervention helpful or satisfying. The female sample had somewhat different experiences when it comes to couple counselling. For them the subject was too much of a taboo to speak openly about physical violence. None of the counsellors asked them if violence was problem in the relationship. They also did not respond to the couples signals of domestic violence. These women did not feel rejected but ignored. I can be brief about the possibility for male and female victims to escape the violence by seeking shelter. These men and women have to resort to their own support network of family and friends, because there are no shelters available for lesbian women and gay men. Times are changing though. The city council of Amsterdam has incorporated gay men and lesbian women in their domestic violence campaign that started November 2004. Some safe places will be made available, the city council promised. This recognition of the existence of domestic violence in same sex couples is furthermore supported by the creation of a poster depicting two gay men in a violent situation.

Conclusions

Domestic violence is just as prevalent in same sex relationships as in heterosexual relationships. There are strong similarities in types of abuse, even though batterers in each situation use cultural norms and values to their best advantage. Speaking about the violence and seeking help however are encumbered by not only the taboo on domestic
violence, but by fear of discrimination because of sexual identity as well. It seems outdated to mention homophobia as a distinguishing factor, but in reality stereotypes and myths are still very much present. People react surprised when they hear violence occurs within lesbian relationships, and thoughts about ‘fair fights’ and mutual battering prevail. Lesbian batterers and gay victims do not spring to mind when thinking about domestic violence. The psychological impact is intensified because of the lack of recognition. Even now, when domestic violence has found its way to the public agenda, same sex domestic violence is rarely mentioned. There is one unfortunate exception. Results of research into violence in lesbian relationships have been gratefully adopted by the “women do it too movement”. These people, who want to prove that it is not men especially that are violent in relationships, use and distort research results to cater to their need to make women just as responsible for domestic violence as men. Somewhere in between this lack of recognition on one side and misuse of findings on the other side, is a group of people who seem to be invisible. They are not seen or heard of. They are not mentioned or included in mainstream domestic violence discourse. Many simple ways to improve the situation for gay men and lesbian women can be thought of. It is for example inconceivable that in a statistically random research project with a thousand or more respondents all of the respondents are heterosexual. Could we think of ways to include lesbian women and gay men into these research projects? On a more practical level it could be useful to also mention same sex domestic violence in outreach materials, TV-programmes, and newspaper articles. This might be obvious to all of us, but as yet it is hardly ever practiced. There could be more attention for the needs of these people in the institutions that already cater to the needs of victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. How for instance do we see the position of same sex batterers? Should gay men and lesbian women join a batterer programme for heterosexual men? Or would they have specific needs that are not met in these programmes? Are gay and lesbian victims asking to much, when they ask for a safe place and protection? Protection not only against the partner but also against homophobia of fellow occupants of shelters? For services to become available it is necessary to recognize the problem first. It might be interesting to study why in heterosexual relationships it is predominantly men that use physical violence against their wives, since apparently in same sex relationships prevalence is approximately in the same ratio, but not connected to the gender of victim or batterer. The fact that violence is just as prevalent in same sex relationships as heterosexual relationships, in spite of the differences between them, could be used to gain a better understanding of domestic violence as a whole, whatever the type of relationship.