

the myth of mutual abuse

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Many lesbians have internalized misconceptions about lesbian battering by associating it with “mutual battering or abuse.” It does great harm to battered lesbians to confuse these two distinctly different concepts. Our focus should be on the more immediate issue: *Batterers must stop abusing.*

At a San Francisco national conference on lesbian battering in May 1987, Kerry Lobel, editor of *Naming the Violence*, urged that our communities re-examine the term “mutual abuse.” Lobel explained that this phrase inaccurately presumes that battering is mutual in relationships where violence occurs.

According to Barbara Hart in *Naming the Violence*: “Battered lesbians describe the patterns of violence as terrorism and control... The same elements of hierarchy of power, ownership, entitlement and control exist in lesbian family relationships. Largely this is true because lesbians have also learned that violence works in achieving partner compliance. Further, lesbian communities have not developed a system of norms and values opposing power abuse and violence in our relationships.”

“Mutual abuse,” in contrast to battering, holds that both people in the battering relationship are equally responsible as perpetrator and victim. Often, this belief is maintained by the community and the batterer, as well as the survivor herself.

One of the most difficult steps for myself, as a formerly battered lesbian, as for other survivors, has been to realize that I did not cause the violence. We feel a tremendous confusion about provocation and this concept of “mutual battering.” Healing is promoted when survivors realize that no matter what we said

or did, we were not responsible for another person’s actions. We were responsible for keeping ourselves safe. Ginny NiCarthy, in *Getting Free* (1988), puts it simply: “Your imperfections do not give your partner the right to ‘discipline’ you with physical violence.”

Some battered lesbians try to physically protect themselves from abuse. According to Nomi Porat, it may be that lesbians “fight back” more often than heterosexual women, “as a result of widespread trainings in and acceptance of self-defense practices within feminist lesbian communities” (*Naming the Violence*).

Lesbians who have physically fought back to defend themselves not only suffer from the battering, but also from feelings of guilt because they have acted violently. This feeds right into the false notion of “mutual abuse,” which continues to camouflage the fact that one woman is exerting “power” over the other. When a battered lesbian believes she is “mutually abusing” her lover, she actually protects the batterer from confronting herself, which preserves the relationship as it is, and helps the batterer avoid [accountability] for her actions.

“Since all battered lesbians have engaged in extensive efforts to protect the batterer from exposure as a terrorist and from the consequences of her violence, battered lesbians may continue ‘taking care of’ the batterer by blaming themselves, maximizing their violence and minimizing that of the batterer.” (Barbara Hart, *Naming the Violence*)

Often batterers use the survivor’s self-doubt to their advantage. Batterers are notorious for labeling the survivor “mutually abusive” in order to avoid taking responsibility for

their own actions. The following account by J.E. is an example of this tactic:

“Recently, the batterer who was my lover six years ago called me up on the phone. I was surprised to hear her voice. Though I have asked her not to call, a few times a year she phones me anyway. It had been several years since I talked to her in person.

“I thought: What does she want? I feel suspicious and scared that she intrudes into my life again. She says she just called to say ‘hi’ because she was having some good memories. She says she wants me to meet her for lunch next week. I am stunned. I make no commitments, small talk, she nervously laughs. She says she’s doing great and by the way, she kicked her new lover out twice because she was acting like I used to. I am paralyzed. More small talk.

“Finally, breaking out of my fear, I tell her that I’m planning to get involved with the editing of the upcoming Matrix issue on battering. Silence.

“Suddenly, her voice changes. She tells me not to use her name, it would hurt business; it was ‘mutual abuse’ anyway. She says I was verbally abusive. Her voice sounds like an authority. She tells me that she physically battered me and that I verbally abused her. That made it ‘even.’ That made it ‘mutual abuse.’ Why can’t I just forgive and forget. She does.”

Battered lesbians not only have their batterer’s beliefs to break away from, but may find similar attitudes mirrored by some therapists in the community. A. Freeland recounts her experiences with several therapists:

“While I was involved in the relationship, one of the therapists we went to told me that if I would just trust that the batterer loved me, she would stop battering me. Later we

went to a different therapist for couple’s counseling. After we separated, the batterer told me that our therapist had told her in an individual session that she that we had been [mutually abusive.]

“I think it’s real dangerous that there are therapists who are telling batterers...’she’s equally responsible because she was emotionally battering.’ The other person may say things that are hurtful. Person A may say things to person B and person B has the right to leave, but person B does not have the right to hit person A.” (Jan, Santa Cruz Women Against Rape, December, 1987.)

There may be unhealthy psychological interactions that are mutual in relationships, but we need to be careful not to equate that with “mutual battering.” Both lesbians may be irritating and hurtful to each other, but that’s very different from the power-over, “squashing” behaviors of batterers.

Childhood environments may condition some battered lesbians to be dependent or expect mistreatment. Batterers may have learned that violence was a good method for getting their needs met when they were children. In these and other ways, there are mutual patterns which tend to keep lesbians mutually “hooked” psychologically. But that’s as far as the mutuality goes in a battering relationship.

“The problem with the term ‘mutual abuse’ is that it really diffuses the issue of responsibility. There’s something dangerous and violent going on and the person who’s being violent needs to be responsible for her actions.” (Jan, SCWAR, December, 1987).

We also need to be conscious of how we use the word “battering” as well as “mutual abuse.” The careless use of “battering,” which describes a very painful, life-threatening situation, trivializes the experiences of

battered lesbians.

Our community can help stop lesbian battering. We can begin by re-evaluating the terms we use which perpetuate violence against battered lesbians. We can support the healing of both survivors and batterers by insisting that batterers and community alike not be allowed to hide behind the misconception of “mutual abuse.” The lesbian batterer needs to be told that violence is not acceptable and will not be tolerated in our community. ■

About the author: Karen uses a pseudonym in order to protect herself from the possible reprisal by either the batterer or her community for “coming out” about lesbian battering. She wishes to thank all those who have given their support and encouragement during this often difficult process of being “heard.”