

-when both abuser, victim are women

health issues and relationship dynamics, in both educational efforts and among the general public. This might be one reason, she notes, that cases of same-sex domestic violence are not well known.

Kat Carrick, an experienced domestic violence counselor and a current University of Pittsburgh doctoral student, concurs.

Carrick says common societal gender expectations strongly dictate that women are incapable of violence, and that these public perceptions are carried over to the medical community.

If there is intervention, Carrick notes, the reactions are sometimes strange, even dismissive.

"Someone might say, 'Oh, well, they're just having a catfight—it's not going to land them in the hospital,'" Carrick suggests, referring to a not-uncommon reaction among those who don't believe that abuse happens among female-female couples.

Carrick believes that new perspectives on the problem are necessary. When she worked at a shelter in New Jersey, she was astonished that cases were still being viewed from the standard "male as batterer" framework.

She recalls: "The telephone operator would ask [the victim, regarding her batterer], 'What's his name?' The forms were antiquated, too—they said, 'spouse's name.'"

She emphasizes a need for a different mental framework among counselors and clinicians, and the careful use of gender-neutral language in domestic violence cases.

Domestic abuse against women appears equally in hetero- and homosexual relationships. For gay and straight women alike, abuse occurs in roughly 25 percent of relationships, according to Lambda, a non-profit gay and lesbian resource center based in El Paso, Texas. Lambda's surprising statistics are backed by a number of research studies dating as far back as 1986.

Underreporting of cases is also a problem.

Many victims of domestic violence feel ashamed of their situations. Laurie Kessler, a psychology intern at the University of Pittsburgh's counseling center, notes that the tendency toward self-blame is common among all victims of domestic violence. It's a symptom of anger turned inward, she believes.

"I don't think I've ever worked with a victim of domestic violence who doesn't blame herself," Kessler says.

Kessler provides counseling services to all Pitt students and is a sound resource for GLBT students seeking counseling for emotional, relationship and identity issues. She says victims of abuse are reluctant to get help immediately because of shame and, sometimes, a fear of homophobia in the public health system.

"There's so much shame in the gay and lesbian community," Szajna agrees, referring to her experience with ELDA. "People don't report the abuse; they're afraid of losing family and social support."

It's become increasingly necessary to educate

mental health professionals and the general public about same-sex abuse, emphasizing issues unique to female-on-female cases, while not downplaying the importance of characteristics common to all abuser-victim relationships.

"Heterosexuals have a template for how to have a relationship," Carrick notes.

By contrast, she said, lesbians are sometimes unaware of the oppressiveness of the abusive situation because they haven't seen many examples of same-sex relationships, good or bad.

That was the case with Claire, a Pittsburgh-area professional and domestic abuse survivor who asked *Out* not to use her real name. She went through a lengthy process in deciding whether or not to leave her abusive long-term partner and today says she had no role models for a good lesbian relationship.

"I, for a long time, thought I couldn't survive without her," she says. "It took me a solid year of therapy to finally leave."

In addition, it's necessary to address in counseling what Carrick calls "multiple levels of identities"—the sum of attributes, thoughts and experiences that shape the personhood of the victim seeking help.

Often, the victim is "closeted," and seeking help can be perilous—to her profession, to her relationship with her family and to her ties to the gay community.

A victim who's not out is easy to exploit. Revealing her sexual orientation is sometimes a first step in getting the victim fired or cut off from her default support circle.

Interfering with someone's right to make a living is an especially powerful means of economic control, and a common one. But outing at work isn't the only way abusers control their victims.

In Claire's relationship, her abusive partner asserted himself as the breadwinner, demanding that Claire quit her job to suit her travel schedule. This resulted in Claire staying at menial, entry-level jobs and seriously hampered her earning power.

"[My jobs] were always low wage, part-time or seasonal," says Claire, illustrating how economic dependence made it more difficult to leave the relationship.

Furthermore, because gay couples are less likely to be legally joined, dividing property or savings after a couple splits can be a tremendous legal ordeal. The abuser may attempt to control the victim further by using bullying to manage the couple's assets.

Kathleen Schneider, an attorney who practices in Regent Square, discussed the process of splitting up assets after an abusive relationship.

The parties can divide the property on their own, she notes, but "in [abusive situations], the victim realizes that they may not be approaching this issue from an equal balance of power, if the power was already skewed."

That's when legal mediation becomes necessary.

Through research and counseling experience, Kessler found that if a woman's ties to the lesbian community are strong, she might face pressure to hide the realities of her abusive relationship from her peers.

Kessler notes that "the [second-wave feminist] notion that only men are capable of oppressing women"—often referred to as the "myth of the lesbian utopia"—conflicts with reality, but that the views of lesbians on domestic abuse issues have become much less black-or-white over the years. The younger generation, Kessler says, is especially open to the notion of a relationship as a relationship, and not solely as a statement about sexual orientation or identity.

This attitude change, coupled with community-wide efforts to raise awareness like Persad's ELDA Project, provides great promise to victims and survivors, who can share their stories with others. ●

A friend in need

Beth Baxendale, Blue Moon owner Liz and Shawn McGill at a February fund-raiser at the Blue Moon to assist former *Out* news editor Lisa Pasquini during her fight against cancer. Contributions can still be mailed to 204 Datura Dr., Pittsburgh, PA 15235.