

Intimate partner violence among lesbian, bisexual, and queer women students on campuses in South Africa: a qualitative study exploring, context, drivers and impacts

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BACKGROUND

- Research on IPV has mainly focused on cis-gender women in heterosexual intimate relationships
- The limited existing literature on IPV in same-sex relationships has been conducted in high-income countries, mainly from the USA; mainly focused on gay, bisexual, and queer men
- There has been limited research and a knowledge gap in understanding IPV occurring within same-sex relationships in the global South
- Prevalence rates of lifetime IPV victimization in same-sex relationships range between 40% - 50%; lifetime IPV perpetration between 3.8% - 67.5%
- Limits our ability to develop evidence-based interventions to prevent the occurrence of IPV in same-sex relationships of women.

AIM OF THE STUDY

- To explore experiences, drivers and impact of violence in same-sex relationships of lesbian, bisexual and queer women on campuses in South Africa.

METHODS

- Exploratory qualitative study, conducted in 3 campuses of a public University in South Africa
- Three FGDs among 56 students who self-identified as lesbian, bisexual or queer women, age between 18 – 30 years of age, enrolled in courses for one year and more
- Recruited by a research assistant - who was a peer student, identified as lesbian - through a word of mouth around the campuses and residences, and the LGBTQI+ Forum
- We used thematic analysis to inductively analyze the data
- Member checking with three groups of 10 students from each campus who participated in the FGDs, to assess the credibility of data and the extent to which we had accurately captured the insights and experiences – provided agency to participants to define priority issues and elaborate on the findings.



RESULTS

Nature and forms of violence experienced by LBQ women in intimate relationships

Drivers and context of violence experience and perpetration in intimate relationships of LBQ women

Impacts of IPV experiences among LBQ women students

Nature and forms of violence experienced by LBQ women in intimate relationships

- Complex nature of partner **violence that is often bidirectional** in its occurrence
 - “She hits me and I hit back. You see here, I have teeth marks because it became physical. It was an altercation now. Because she hits me, sometimes I am the one hitting...And it became viral because I was posted on Facebook that I am an abuser.
- LBQ women described bidirectional **physical, sexual**, and emotional IPV as common in their relationships:
 - “We hit one another, badly! We hit one another! It gets to a point where one person will be hurt, you see... we hit one another, I even have scars from my past relationship because of physical fighting”

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- **Sexual violence** occurs in context where sexual consent is taken seriously
“We do our thing [sex]. So, I am now used to this thing, then one day I do it when you are not okay, and then the girl cried saying, "You know this thing that we did, I didn't like it." So, this is now rape. It was not consensual”. (Campus 2)
- **Emotional violence** happens through verbal insults, use of derogatory terms and body shaming
“She ends up diminishing your image to other people. So, for me, because I have big feet, I wear size nine, she would say, "What kind of a girl are you? You were meant to be a man for real. You are a man. You are a chicken with testicles in the tummy (uyinkukhu enamasende esiswini).”

Drivers and context of IPV experience and perpetration

Childhood trauma and previous experience of violence

- Childhood trauma and witnessing their mothers being beaten by their fathers contributed to use of physical violence on their partners:

“So, for me the way it happened, people have past traumas from our childhood. So, for me, it was my mother. My father used to hit her. So, I told myself, no I don't want to be that person, but along the line, I found myself hitting a lady because of my upbringing”. (Campus 1)
- Use of physical violence described as retaliation for being continuously beaten-up by the partner

“How does it start? If a person was involved with someone who used to hit her, I don't want to make that an excuse, because I do not want to speak on her behalf... but the first time she hit me I was shocked. It was like she is playing, pushing down and stuff, and strangling me. Then the second time it happened, I just lost my temper too and slapped her”. (Campus 1)

Drivers and context of IPV experience and perpetration

Poor communication and conflict resolution skills

- Participants struggled to resolve conflict in a peaceful manner. Rather, sex was used as a strategy to resolve conflicts and disagreements and getting their partner to forgive them:

“There is this norm that when we quarrel, you get thrown on the bed, you see. It happened to one of my friends. There was a fight and so on... we know that this thing we will solve it by engaging in sex... we end up sleeping together and then you are okay, and you enjoy (ubamnandi)”. (Campus 2)

Drivers and context of IPV experience and perpetration

Heteronormativity and gender norms

- Participants' narratives suggested that heteronormativity often manifested in relationships of LBQ women
- Butch identifying lesbians expected to provide money and meet their partner's material needs:

“There, there are so many expectations for the butchies! "The butch must provide. Haibo!, the butch mustn't ask me out if she doesn't have money." You see. So, I think even us femmis there are things that we expect, that now you, if you are dating the butchy that is unemployed you will disrespect her. You will not give her the power and respect that you would give the butchy that is working because that one is a provider. (Campus 1)
- Participants explained that violence occurs when gender role expectations are not met:

“It is a sensitive subject to me because most of the violence I experienced happened because of a comparison with the ex [former partner]. So, most of the fights were about, you don't dress like so and so... You are embarrassing me"; and I will also be like, "How am I embarrassing you?" Then the fighting will start. We are just fighting over my appearance, that's all". (Campus 2)

Drivers and context of IPV experience and perpetration

Power dynamics and gender role expectations

- Relationships of LBQs were described as characterized by unhealthy power dynamics, and violence occurring over contestation for power

“So, the power dynamics become a problem in our relationship as lesbians because now she wants to be in charge and so do I. We end up fighting, even becoming physically violent”. (Campus 2)
- **Expressions of power and dominance** also manifested in the sex lives of lesbian women, in contexts where one partner would disregard the sexual needs and preferences of their partner.
- Those who provided money or material resources were described to occupy a position of power and dictated what happens in the relationship

“Some relationships are toxic because someone has money, and views themselves as more powerful than you, and you are always expected to sacrifice and fulfill their sexual needs, which I think is abusive. You cannot say anything, be yourself, or do what you like, power is not the same. (Campus 1)

IMPACTS OF IPV EXPERIENCES

- Participants described some of their relationships as toxic, not allowing the person to be who they are, leading to frustration and **emotional damage**:

“Actually, in our relationships...we don't do what you and I are supposed to do and enjoy ourselves. We live according to other people's expectations. This ends up causing problems for you and we end up frustrated and abusing one another in some way because now you are silencing me, you are abusing me in some way, also emotionally damaging me”. (Campus 3)

- Participants associated their violence experience with **depression**:

“It only damages you.” Because now, as much as I possessed a strong personality, but inside this was eating me up, that "Wow, I am being compared to so and so. I am not good enough. The pain of the fact that at night around 12 [midnight], I am checking my phone and searching for this girl that she is talking about, just to see her style. I had to go through that every night that wow, I don't look like so and so. I don't dress like so and so. Oh wow! So, it kind of leads to depression”. (Campus 1)

IMPACTS OF IPV EXPERIENCES

- Others described having developed anger, and low self-esteem:
“You end up with a low self-esteem. You end up having anger inside”. (Campus 2)
- Participants described that being emotionally damaged leads to self-hate, which in turn gets projected to others through violence:
“You are now emotionally damaged, you are your own demon, and you practically hate yourself and now you are giving out the hate that you get from people and you giving back the hate to your partner by being violent”. (Campus 1)
- Participants further spoke the negative effects of poor mental health on academic outcomes:
“While experiencing depression and stress we struggle to complete assignments on time and to concentrate when preparing for tests and exams”

CONCLUSION

- Interventions should be co-developed with LBQ women in the Global South for greater impact and contextualization for settings
- Institutions of higher education are potential entry points, and early adulthood a strategic development stage for intervention for greater impact on IPV prevention
- Skills acquired and mastered by students in early adulthood would be beneficial and protective throughout their life course.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION