

When Does the Speaking Profit Us?: Reflections on the Challenges of Developing Feminist Perspectives on Abuse and Violence by Women

Liz Kelly in Hester, M., Kelly, L., and Radford, J., (eds.), 1996, *Women, Violence and Male Power: Feminist Research, Activism and Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

The title of this chapter draws on an Audre Lorde poem (Lorde 1984). A prominent theme in her life and work was to challenge the silence that has surrounded much of women's experiences. She was deeply committed to finding ways to speak and communicate which did justice to the range, depth and complexity of women's lives and circumstances. It is now over four years since I decided to talk about women's use of violence at a meeting of Sappho, a London lesbian discussion group. I took that decision, despite many misgivings and apprehensions, because I believed that refusing to discuss difficult issues has never profited feminism. Silence has been a major weapon in men's arsenal which has prevented women and children from talking about their experiences of sexual violence, let alone finding ways to get support and join in campaigns and movements for justice.

Since that talk was revised and published (see Kelly 1991), it has been the basis for a number of discussions and workshops, and a television programme used parts of it to set the context for a documentary on abuse by women¹. Two national conferences have also been organized on the issue and a book of papers published². The issue struck a chord (or number of chords) within and outside the women's movement, and in important senses some of the reticence which existed previously has shifted.

However, many of my original concerns remain. This chapter develops the original paper, and discusses the conditions which are necessary if public debate and discourse on abuse by women is to profit both those who have experienced it and the Women's Liberation Movement.

The current context

The reluctance of most lesbians and/or feminists to discuss women's use of violence reflected a justified anxiety; that the issue would be used to undermine the grudging acceptance of the extent and range of men's use of violence towards women and children and/or to reinforce negative stereotypes of lesbians. Feminists have never totally denied that women could be abusive. Our use of statistics, for example, that 95 per cent of child sexual abuse is committed by men (the figure common to many studies and commentaries) contains an implicit acknowledgement that 5 per cent is committed by women. It is possible, therefore, to argue that reluctance to focus on the 5 per cent was a strategic political decision; that only by drawing attention to the scale of men's actions were we ever likely to shift public perception. At the same time, though, there was some avoidance of the difficult and challenging questions which abuse by women raises. Both these factors informed, and continue to inform, feminists' responses to this issue.

During the early 1990s we have witnessed some individuals in the professions and the media seizing upon emerging evidence about women's use of violence to make outspoken attacks on

feminist analysis. Research findings, however spurious, which suggest that women are as, or even more, violent than men or that men are as, or even more, likely to be victimized are paraded before us, as if they invalidate dozens of previous studies. Each new case involving women as perpetrators of violence provides an opportunity for media features and speculations. For example, in two cases, Aileen Wuornos and Beverley Allitt³, the reporting turned in part on authors vying for the dubious privilege of designating the women 'the first' female serial killer. This climate is not conducive to thoughtful exploration and reflection; it frequently confirms our worst fears. Refusing to participate in the media circus can appear to be the best option in an impossible situation, where either including or excluding women's use of violence places it at the centre of discussions.

If we fail to develop a feminist analysis of abuse by women we are handing over this issue to the professionals and the media. Silence also means that we will continue to fail women and children who have suffered at the hands of women, and risk losing the clarity we need in order to hold on to what we have learnt and built in the last two decades. For example, as evidence of abuse by women emerges, and evidence grows of boys' and men's experiences of sexual victimization (predominantly at the hands of other men), women's organizations are being asked to justify in new ways why they continue to provide support *for* women *by* women (see Gillespie, Chapter 10, this volume). In attempts to demonstrate their 'awareness', policy makers, local councillors and officials, and many professionals have begun suggesting that victimization ought to be discussed and responded to in gender neutral ways. We need a strong, secure position from which to defend our frames and services; rather than seeing acknowledging abuse by women and victimization of men and boys as a challenge to our hard-won knowledge base, we need to approach them as extensions of what we already know.

To build this security we must move on from the defensive posture many of us (including me) have previously adopted. Whilst not disputing that there has been a strong reluctance amongst many feminist/lesbian groups and communities to take on this issue, it has been constructed as an ongoing 'collective feminist refusal' by professionals and journalists outside the movement. I accepted this charge until recently; on reflection I want to acknowledge that there were informal communities and feminist organizations which attempted in the past, and which are continuing to address violence in lesbian relationships. There were, and are, rape crisis lines and refuges which support/ed women who had been abused by women, and/or work with women who were being violent to children. But this work is either not publicly documented, or only available in the form of annual reports and statistics in applications for funding. The fact that activists were often too busy to write their own history has provided fertile ground for outsiders to invest a past which supports their current arguments.

The complexity of relationships between women, including issues of violence and abuse, is a strong theme in the writings of many African and Asian women⁴. Whilst this may not have been the norm, we do our movement a great disservice when we participate in the rewriting of history. As Kum-Kum Bhavnani notes, what we are trying to create are feminist ways 'of writing [and speaking] history [in which] conflicting interests between women are made *visible*' (1993: 96, original emphasis). It is not as though everyone else was tackling the issue, and we were alone, steadfastly refusing to notice! The crucial question today is not whether feminists will face up to the issue of abuse by women, but *how* we use feminist politics to make sense of, and respond to it.

What was missing in the past, and in my view is not that well developed now, is thoughtful, collective reflection on what abuse by women means for us: how we locate it in our theoretical

framework; how we approach naming, defining and studying it; what kinds of support are needed for those who have been abused by women, and more contentiously, for women who have used violence. The remainder of this chapter explores my concerns about these issues.

The theory issue

The insecurity that many feminists and/or lesbians experience when beginning to address women's use of violence reflects a profound concern that it will undermine feminist analysis of both sexual violence and heterosexuality. But feminist theory is not that fragile. It has developed over time, become broader, more inclusive and sometimes unnecessarily more complex. Including women's use of violence is only a threat to a version of feminism which views men and women, masculinity and femininity as fixed, unchanging, biologically based, which defines violence as an inherent potentiality in men. A feminism which begins from understanding gender as a social construct, which recognizes the variability with which gendered selves and individual biography combine, can locate women's use of violence within its existing framework.

The linkage of power, violence and sexuality has been one of the foundations of feminist analyses of male domination; we have argued that, as in other political systems, men's gender power is ultimately backed by force, that force is used when power is in jeopardy. Hence sexual violence is the outcome of men's power as men and women's resistance to it (Kelly 1988). An extension and development of this analysis involved mapping how patriarchal relations were constructed through (hetero) sexuality and sexuality constructed through gender (Coveney *et al.* 1984; MacKinnon 1989). This theoretical work involved adapting and applying perspectives on public politics and violence to the interpersonal and private. Whilst women's use of violence was not a focus in early theoretical development, complex discussions developed, which are still the subject of debate. Explorations of our relationship to notions of 'femininity' included both a rejection of traditional constructions of it, alongside a reclamation and redefinition of what were termed 'women's virtues' (West 1991); feminists were interested in creating the possibility for women to be strong and tender, caring and angry, connected to others and autonomous. Revisiting these discussions in order to explore the reality of women's relationship to anger, aggression and violence would benefit us at this point.

The use of violence as a means of maintaining systems of oppression is not confined to gender relations. However, the use of interpersonal violence is more characteristic of women and children's oppression than that of other groups, and sexualized violence is differentially targeted at women and girls. What has not been done within or outside feminism is systematic comparison of the structures, form and justificatory ideologies of all forms of political violence⁵. Mapping the variations of state, institutional, organized and individual violence and noting particularly the cross-cutting examples where multiple power hierarchies are in operation - for example, war, rape and strip-searching of women political prisoners - might provide us with a wider framework for understanding both men's and women's uses of violence (see McCollom *et al.* 1994 for a beginning). For example, in other systems of domination we easily recognize that violence can be a reaction to/product of powerlessness. Disenfranchised groups may view violence as the only/a legitimate way to resist domination, although this too tends to be gendered with the majority of those taking up arms being men and the forms of insurgency frequently becoming a reflection of the actions of the dominating group (Morgan 1989).

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) is an impassioned account of how a black woman who has escaped slavery decides that killing her children is preferable to them being re-enslaved; an illustration of how context can create choices which are no choices, where the only power she feels she has, the only protection she can offer her children, is death. Her use of the power she has as an adult and mother is over-determined by an oppressive context which is itself violent and violating. To use violence from a position of powerlessness cannot have the same foundation or the same meanings as that from a position of powerfulness, even through the consequences for those it is directed towards may be the same.

If we begin from the current structures of social power then the least likely targets of violence for women are men, and it is usually only in extreme circumstances that women use violence interpersonally towards men: circumstances in which the woman (or her child, and in some cases sibling) has been abused/violated by the man in question (Justice for Women 1993). Women's violence to men is overwhelmingly responsive to prior abuse: acts of self-preservation, self-defence or responses to injustice. The most likely target for women's violence is children, over whom women have power by virtue of being adults. Mothers are also expected to 'control' their own children. The use of physical violence by women towards children has not been problematic for feminist frameworks, although it has not received the attention it should have (Wise 1984).

What has been problematic is evidence of sexual abuse of children by women, since the sexual is not constructed as a form of 'power over' for women. It is only problematic if we take the connections between masculinity, femininity and sexuality as 'naturalistic' essential qualities, which are inherent to people by virtue of their sex, rather than being the outcome of complex personal biographies in historical, social and cultural contexts. The stereotyped expectations of men and women, the creation of gendered selves affects all men and women, but its influences and outcomes are not uniform. Feminist theorists have created powerful criticisms of 'dualistic' thinking, whereby opposing characteristics are attributed to men and women, as if they apply universally and without variation (Hare-Mustin and Marecek 1990). At the level of massive generality they may be descriptive of gender stereotypes but lived experience is more complex. It is entirely possible for women to identify with, even want, the kind of 'power over' that the sexual frequently provides for men. Having access to it is more complex than for men, and we have not yet explored the conditions and circumstances which would facilitate this 'power over' for women; but logically we are most likely to find instances of it involving children.

Accounting for violence between girls and adult women is not necessarily problematic for feminism; factors involved here include the use of violence to create/impose hierarchies in groups, especially where other resources are not available, the ways in which divisions between women are encouraged and sometimes even created by men - one of the most common causes of fights between girls and women are heterosexual relationships. Again, we may have paid limited attention to these issues, but they are not in principle, outside our framework.

What has proved far more taxing is violence between lesbians, especially within lesbian relationships. It represented a profound threat to the feminist promotion of lesbianism as offering the possibility of non-hierarchical relationships. Acknowledging that some lesbians use violence does not undermine the fact that the power they hold within a relationship is not, and cannot, be the same as that held by men in heterosexual relationships. It is an interpersonal use of 'power over', not backed up by social systems outside the relationship.

Understand lesbians' use of violence also requires taking account of the context in which lesbian relationships exist. It is one of marginalization at best, and secrecy, deceit and fear at worst. Lesbians frequently have to manage contradictory public and private identities and meanings, and struggle to develop positive identities and meanings for themselves and their relationships in a context of invisibility, being defined as 'abnormal' and frequent subjection to hostility and abuse. This raises the complex issue of how to make sense of the use of 'power over' in contexts of relative powerlessness, how violence can be used as an interpersonal resource when not backed up by social power. We also need to explore how 'internalized oppression' affects the ways individuals see themselves and others, the ways we conduct relationships. One recurrent theme in accounts of abuse in lesbian relationships is the fear the abusive woman has of losing her partner; her controlling behaviour is directed towards ensuring she stays. This is not necessarily the same as a heterosexual man's sense of 'rightful ownership'; it could be connected to profound dread of isolation in a hostile world.

To make feminist sense of women's various uses of violence and abuse we need to begin from understand that dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity are ideologies/discourses which influence rather than determine self-concept, beliefs and behaviour. It is possible that the most powerful men have so much control that they can afford to behave 'nicely', the most disadvantaged women have always had to act in 'unfeminine' ways simply to survive. The fact that an individual man is gentle and nurturing does not mean he no longer has social power as a man, the fact that an individual woman is strong and challenging, not to mention violent, does not alter the structures which maintain and reproduce male dominance and female subordination.

Some implications of thinking seriously

Women's use of violence and strategies of power and control are issues which resonate in women's groups where the difficulty in naming and resolving conflict and power relationships remains little theorized; there are very few published accounts, and hardly any written collectively. We need accounts which access the potential difficulties and contradictions between the goal of increasing women's individual power and control in their lives and the creation of collective/communal ethics and contexts.

Some of the very early second wave feminist writings about structure addressed these issues. Joleen's 'The tyranny of structurelessness' (1973) was a reflection on how simplistic conceptions of non-hierarchy create situations in which power is routine - but operating in covert and implicit ways which makes it far harder to name and challenge. Our continued and repeated failure either self-reflexively, and/or group-reflexively to tackle controlling and manipulative actions has created ongoing difficulties in women's organizing. Whilst attention has been paid to how institutionalized forms of 'power only' such as race, class, sexuality and disability, affect the perspective of and actions within women's groups, not all 'power plays' in groups are reducible to these structures. Developing a more complex model of interpersonal power, the use of manipulation to control, would be a valuable resource which would have applications within group, friendship and partnership contexts.

We must also find ways of exploring the question of why some women use violence and abuse. In a number of recent discussions women have expressed strongly felt resistance to my suggestion that we need to ask why, arguing that this constitutes a search for ways to excuse women's

behaviour. I find this both alarming and disconcerting, since for me 'why' has always been a fundamental feminist question; unless we understand why and how women's oppression is so tenacious, we cannot hope to know how to end it. This unwillingness to explore various explanations has, at times, been so strong that differences between men and women's experiences (such as the fact that a high proportion of women who sexually abuse children have been coerced to it by a man who is abusing her) have been seen as tantamount to denying the women's actions. This simplified either/or position is not helpful; being victimized does not remove all responsibility, but it places actions and choices in a particular, constrained context. Men who coerce women into abusing children do so in the full knowledge that this will damage the relationship between mother and child, aware that the fact of their coercion will make little or no difference to the child's feelings about their mother at the time. Rejecting an analysis which sees differences between the position of the coerced woman and the coercive man means we remain within his construction of meaning, and as such are unable to locate him as the architect of the situation.

When discussing coercion of women to abuse, we must make connections to the experience of children and young people abused in organized networks, in which the recruitment and/or abuse of other children is a deliberate strategy used by the adults to entrap them. We have developed a clearer perspective in these cases; we can neither respond by saying that they had no choice, nor can we do the injustice of holding them as accountable as the adults who entrapped them in the first place and orchestrated and enforced subsequent behaviour. It matters whether women who have abused in coercive contexts experience the sex/power/pleasure connection which men do, or whether they experience it as another form of assault on them. We can only discover the answer to this question if we are willing to ask why.

The anger which has surfaced in discussions of this issue led me to reflect on the extent and depth of woman hating in western cultures. This woman hating is never far below the surface, and has been internalized in a variety of ways by all women. Internalized woman hatred was something consciousness raising enabled us to explore and struggle with. Women's use of violence seems to be a powerful activator of submerged woman hatred.

The ambivalent relationship many feminists have to women's use of violence is also illustrated by an almost opposite response; a 'heroizing' of women who 'fight back'. Women who kill abusive husbands seldom view their actions at the time, or later, as self-conscious political resistances to patriarchal domination, and many continue to be troubled by what they did. Aileen Wuornos (a poor white American woman, tried in the early 1990s for the murders of a number of men) is not an 'amazon warrior' revenging her wrongs and the wrongs experienced by all prostituted women, but a woman who experienced serial abuse throughout her life, who lived on the margins of survival. To not recognize the damage male violence, in all too many forms, has done to her is to create a feminist mythology as a counterpoint to the 'woman/lesbian serial killer' mythology the mainstream media invented. Neither construction does justice to the reality of this woman's life.

The definition and prevalence issue

Naming violence and abuse by men has been a central principle and arena of creative development in this wave of feminism; unlike our forefathers last century we were determined that our experiences of violation should not be 'unspeakable'. It is, therefore, fitting that the first

volume of accounts by lesbians about their experiences of abuse in relationships should be entitled *Naming the Violence* (Lobel 1986). Without a name, behaviour remains an individual concern, it lacks social reality, social meaning or social recognition. Within this central principle though are complex issues which require us to do our thinking and research with clarity and thoughtfulness.

When I first wrote about this issue I drew attention to the ways in which non-feminist researchers and commentators were defining sexual abuse more broadly when women were the actual, or hypothesized, perpetrators. I questioned the way in which women's route caring for the bodily needs of babies and children was being constructed as offering unparalleled opportunities for abuse. Since that time I have been witness to, and been told other accounts, of women, some of whom would identify themselves as feminists, using different definitions of abuse when women are identified as abusers. For example, one woman recently attended an incest survivors group in which everyone but her said they had been abused by their father and their mother. Her initial shock at this rapidly transformed into dismay when it became apparent that none had been sexually abused by their mothers, and all were defining their mother's 'failure to protect' as equivalent to repeated assaults by their fathers². I have had several discussions with women researching abuse in lesbian relationships, in each case their definition of abuse is far broader than that used in relation to violence in heterosexual relationships, including manipulative behaviour, dishonesty and disrespectful treatment.

Clearly the behaviours of these mothers and lovers were experienced as hurtful, forms of betrayal even, and in that sense they are problematic. But I am deeply concerned by the implications of using such wide definitions that all mother/daughter, and/or lesbian relationships come within the remit of abuse. I have never supported exclusionary definitions, but we are in danger of the very concepts we have striven to imbue with powerful meaning becoming devoid of it. We need to devote serious feminist attention to what the words violence, assault, abuse, conflict and disrespect mean and where the boundaries (however fuzzy) are between them. When I proposed using the concept of a continuum to cover both the range of, and connections between, the violations women and girls experience at the hands of men (Kelly 1988) I never intended that be understood as suggesting that all events were the same. In that work, and subsequent research with other women in the Child Abuse Studies Unit, we have challenged the presumption that impacts of violence can be 'read off' from the form of assault. Nonetheless, there are differences in physical and emotional damage. We must find ways at the same time to notice connections, similarities and difference between forms of violence and abuse.

Within this discussion we must explore the consequences of transferring the concepts we have created or redefined in the last two decades from abuse by men to abuse by women. Erin Solaro, writing in the US feminist newspaper *Off Our Backs* (1993), uses word 'rape' to name sexual assaults by women without comment. In the context of the US a number of reforms of the law on rape defined it in gender neutral terms. In Britain this issue was debated in the early 1980s within a coalition of women's groups who were preparing a submission to the Criminal Law Revision Commission (Ginsberg and Lerner 1989). Although there was no absolute consensus, that group agreed that the definition of rape (penetration of a vagina by a penis) remain, since it was (and remains) the only gender specific crime against women on the statute book. The group suggested changing the relative importance - in terms of sentencing tariffs - of other offences, but rejected removing the word rape from statute or changing its definition (see Gillespie, Chapter 10, this volume for a discussion of this issue in relation to 'male rape'). What are the implications of changing the law in the interests of 'equality' so that women can be charged with rape? Do women

who have been sexually assaulted by women think that it is only if the word 'rape' can be used that their experiences will be taken seriously?

Whilst recognizing that the evidence we currently have about women's use of violence is limited, I am going to focus here on the two most problematic areas: women's sexual abuse of children, and violence in lesbian relationships.

At a recent conference (see note 2) Michelle Elliot claimed that the reason we do not have data recording a greater prevalence of sexual abuse by women is that researchers have not asked the 'gender question'. This is simply not true. All of the broad sample prevalence studies in the US and Britain (see, for example, Finkelhor 1979; Russell 1984; Kelly *et al.* 1991) have included questions which allow the gender of abusers to be analysed, and in each case the percentages for adult female abusers are between 5 and 7 per cent. Whilst some local figures for reported cases have been cited recently as indicating a much higher incidence the NSPCC, in a section of their 1990 Annual Report (which interestingly was not picked up by the media) stated categorically that their figures did not support the popular 'tip of the iceberg' view of women as abusers. That any child is abused by a woman is sufficient for it to be taken seriously. One has to ask, however, why so many people want the prevalence to be greater than research findings, why they insist that there has to be far more than we are currently aware of, and why the iceberg of hidden cases is always gender specific.

The information we have currently about violence in lesbian relationships is even more limited. There has been an increase in personal accounts published in the women's and lesbian press and cases are being reported to formal agencies such as police domestic violence units. Cases are also becoming more public knowledge; for example, in 1991 a very large criminal injuries compensation award was made to Susan Craker for an assault by her ex-lover (*Guardian* 11 December 1991) and an article in the US women's newspaper *Sojourner* details the case of Debra Reid, a black woman convicted of murdering her abusive lover.

The most detailed study to date is by Claire Renzetti (1992), in which 100 lesbians responded to advertisements (which specified that the study was about abuse in relationships) in the lesbian and gay press in the US (see Scott 1994 for a detailed critical review). All completed a questionnaire and 40 were interviewed. She discusses other US research, some of which involves large samples of over 1,000 participants. Many of these studies have used a problematic research instrument - the Conflicts Tactics Scale - which has been the subject of much debate in studies of violence in heterosexual relationships. The main criticism centre on the use of composite figures covering a range of behaviour (from pushing through to 'beating up'), the lack of any assessment of the effects of behaviour - whether it created fear and/or resulted in injury - and no assessment of whether the actions of individuals were offensive or defensive (see Dobash and Dobash 1992 for detailed critique). Relatively high proportions of lesbians, in these studies, were deemed to have abused a partner (30 per cent) and a higher percentage defined as having been abused (52 per cent). In none of the discussions of these findings have either the problems with this research instrument, or the possibility noted that lesbians may be more sensitive to, and therefore more likely to report, power imbalances in relationships, been discussed.

Renzetti recognizes that none of the studies conducted so far have been 'true prevalence studies'; that is based on a random sample of the lesbian population, and she notes how complex it would be to do such a study⁸. Yet she concludes her book by stating that violence is as prevalent in

lesbian as in heterosexual relationships. There is currently no empirical base from which to make this claim. The challenge for researchers is to create methodologies which are sensitive to both similarities and differences between violence and abuse in heterosexual and lesbian relationships, and which take seriously the possibility that there may be different definitions of abuse operating which will influence naming and reporting.

The impacts issue

In many discussions of abuse by women the assertion is frequently made that it is 'worse' than abuse by men. One factor which has exacerbated this claim is the lack of public recognition offered to survivors, which in turn created a context where women who have been abused by women have felt obliged to stress the negative impacts in order to be taken seriously. It has, however, been an important feminist principle not to create hierarchies of oppression/abuse; to insist that experiences which the law and institutions define as 'minor' may have major consequences for women and children; and to recognize that many women and children are able to marshal internal courage and strength and find external support in surviving brutal attacks without permanent or inevitable damage.

The frequency of this statement demands that we explore why and ask what sits underneath and attribution of 'worse'. Whilst not disputing that some women can be extremely vicious and cruel, the claim seldom rests on demonstrating that the forms abuse takes are 'worse'. What is at issue is what being abused by a woman means; the issues and questions it raises are deep and profound, they resonate with, and affect, our sense of ourselves as women (and in some cases as men). It is never the same at the level of meaning to be abused by a woman. This is not because it is less common, less validated, although that is part of the context in which meaning is created, but simply that it *means something different* to be abused by a man or a woman, and that meaning will have additional dimensions if the abuser is the same or different sex to the child or woman they abuse. Whilst no two experiences are the same, the meanings of abuse relate to gender, and impacts are also to some extent engendered.

As many have noted, for a man or boy to be victimized fits uneasily with stereotypes of masculinity; the most usual comment which follows this observation is that, therefore, it must be 'worse' for boys to be abused, especially by a woman. Apart from the revealing other side of this statement - the relative acceptability of the victimization of girls, and normalization of men's abusive behaviour - this is not necessarily how boys and men respond. A substantial number of young men reporting abuse in a recent prevalence study (Kelly *et al.* 1991) were able through constructions of masculinity to 'rewrite the script', defining experiences as seduction, or something they actively wanted, or initiated, or enjoyed, and this was more likely if the abuser was female. This interpretation protected these young men from the impacts which accompany defining experiences as victimization. This is not to recommend this coping strategy - it probably contributes to a belief that childhood sexual experiences are not damaging - but to highlight how central gender is to the ways events are experienced and understood. Such rewritings are not as easily available to girls or women, although there are women who report minimal impacts of coerced sexual experiences. What is important here is paying attention to the details of how and why the gender of abusers matters, how and why that influences the consequences of abuse, and building from that an awareness of differences which do not have to be hierarchically graded or compared.

Where abuse occurs within a lesbian relationship there are likely to be layers of meaning that form the context for the impacts on women. One's abuser is someone who shares not only a gender but also a sexual identity, someone from within a small and frequently beleaguered community. If the women also profess a feminist politics the present of abuse represents a betrayal of strongly felt beliefs and principles. If the abusive woman holds other forms of advantage, such as financial, racial or educational, these may enhance her ability to control her partner. If on the other hand it is the victimized woman who occupies a position of advantage, the violence may be excused as the expression of powerlessness. The pain which many lesbians experience when abused by a lover is evident in the virtually ubiquitous statement that writing or speaking about it was one of the most difficult things the woman has ever done. It is so difficult because of the additional meanings involved, what the experience calls into question, rather than the forms of violence or abuse being 'worse'.

The practical support issue

Some principles of feminist support work with women and children who have been victimised by men apply in supporting those abused by women: belief, validation and respect. As feminist services have developed a sense of history and security in their practice, more complex formulations have emerged, whereby it is possible to acknowledge that for a variety of reasons (fear, shame, distrust) women may not always tell the truth. So belief has become a more nuanced and complex matter. Validation has been a central principle in contrast to the denial and minimizing which predominated in the mainstream. It connects to the principle of naming violation and placing responsibility on the abuser. Feminist services have, however, never worked with a principle of validating everything a woman might say; we have, for example, always attempted to question (in a supportive rather than interrogatory way) ways women blame themselves for abuse. As public discourses on violence and abuse become stronger, and non-feminist explanations abound, there are many things women might say which we would seek to offer alternatives to, such as 'cycle of abuse' models through which women come to think that they will inevitably hurt a child, despite never having felt an impulse to do so.

Providing feminist support for survivors of any form of violence or abuse always involves more than belief and validation. It ought to be a mark of our respect for the woman we work with that we articulate our political understandings, and engage with her in a process through which we attempt to arrive at a 'joint interpretation of meaning'.

Feminist practice has always begun from, although not limited itself to, what women who have been abused say they want and need. Until recently belief and validation for women abused by women has not been automatically forthcoming; that is undoubtedly changing. There is a lot to be learnt from looking in detail at how women seek support. In Renzetti's (1992) study 75 per cent of the lesbians had sought help, a minority using formal sources of support such as the police and lawyers, the majority looking to counsellors and friends. What the women in her study said that they wanted most was for friends to listen to and support them, to name abuse and to encourage and help them leave the relationship. This is the challenge to the lesbian community; lesbians who are being abused, understandably and reasonably, want support from their community, from those who already know and care for them. As with abuse in heterosexual relationships, the target for change in discussions of abuse in lesbian relationships has tended to be on formal institutions,

rather than informal networks (Kelly 1993). Like many other issues in this chapter this is not an either/or option, rather a both/and necessity.

We also have to face the contentious issue of who should work with women who have abused. Can we afford to take the view we have with men, that we will not work with abusers? If we think men should work with abusive men, isn't the logical corollary that women should work with abusive women? Here again the relevance of gender, and the similarities and differences between man and women's behaviour, motivations and understandings are critical. I have not yet discovered any accounts of feminist work with lesbians who have abused their partners, but the one detailed account of work with women who have sexually abused children highlights the importance of working with women as women.

Ruth Mathews and her two co-workers report on a programme they developed which has involved 16 women convicted of sexual offences against children in the US (Mathews *et al.* 1991). Almost two-thirds abused with men, most of this group being coerced to abuse. All 16 had an extensive history of victimization by men in both childhood and adulthood. They note that this is a different profile from male offenders, further illustrated by the fact that when they began the programme all but one of the women admitted what they had done and did not seek to project blame onto children. Most discussions of work with male sexual abusers report that much early work is devoted to breaking down denial and projection.

Some of the women had already failed in male orientated programmes for sex offenders. The groups used a model of women's self-development in their work, which began from a recognition that these women had no basis for a positive or autonomous sense of self. To use the frameworks underpinning work with male abusers would have stripped these women of the few resources they had which could be the basis for change.

Whilst I have been critical of the 'cycle of abuse' explanation for all sexual abuse (Kelly 1992), we do have to take seriously the persistent finding amongst women convicted of sexual offences (albeit very small samples), that they have histories of repeated victimization by men. Why, for a minority of women this translates into becoming the victimizer and for the majority does not, is an important issue for future research. In refusing to accept simplistic cycle of abuse models, we need to leave open the possibility that in particular instances and circumstances they may be complex connections between victimization and victimizing.

Reclaiming a politics

Working on this issue has constantly involved a return to what I understand as the principles of feminism, the origins of our perspective. This revisiting has led me to ponder on the implications of the shift in feminist goals and directions, which I see as a move away from the struggle for women's liberation, and which required nothing less than transforming the societies of which we are part. We have moved towards a quest for women's equality; equal access to what in the public realm afford men power and advantage is no longer focused solely on economic areas such as pay and career opportunities, but has, for some, extended to pornography and institutions such as marriage. This 'right' of lesbians and gay men to marry is a very different goal to that of abolishing the institution altogether. How does this reduction of feminist ambition affect our expectations of, and behaviour towards, each other?

In terms of theory and explanation feminists have rightly focused on the differences between men and women in relation to power, violence and sexuality. In recent years many feminist academics have defined this work as 'essentialist' and pointed to neglected similarities between women and men. If we are to make sense of women's use of violence, whilst holding to on our hard work knowledge and clarity about male sexual violence, we must refuse this either/or option, and be courageous enough to look at both.

©Liz Kelly (1996)