

## Violence Doesn't Distinguish Between Sexualities

Mira Ofreneo, a Filipina psychologist, and Bernadette Muthien, an activist for women's and LGBT issues in South Africa, met last April in Geneva during the ILGA conference. Strengthened by their experience, they run a workshop on the topic of violence in same-sex couples and united homosexuals around the world.

How did you become interested in this subject?

**Mira Ofreneo** : In 1991, during a forum on lesbians in Asia, a participant revealed the fact that she had experienced violence in a relationship. In the follow-up, she explained the different therapies that were offered in different cases. The subject interested me. Essentially, in a heterosexual couple, it is almost always the woman who is seeking help, and I asked myself how that happens in same-sex couples. Since then, the number of same-sex couples, both male and female, have come to ask me for therapy and assistance.



Mira Ofreneo and Bernadette Muthien gave a joint workshop on same sex violence at ILGA's 26th world conference.

**Bernadette Muthien** :

Originally, I was a young activist against Apartheid. Once democracy was established, when it was necessary to rebuild the country and reconcile the people, many problems emerged. In particular, I saw one of these : South Africa had a high rate of domestic violence, and these rapes and murders had to be understood as directly related to patriarchy. Of course, same-sex couples did not escape this. I was a victim myself.

#### Is there a specific type of violence in same-sex couples ?

**M.O. :** It's the same types of violence : verbal, physical, emotional, sexual, economic, etc. Without also discussing the perspectives of the violent person and the person who experiences the violence, there is a difference between what homosexual couples report and what is presented to the outside world. I think there's a fear of homophobia in a number of countries that prevents homosexuals from seeking help. Basically, these people who suffer stigmatization in their relationship also suffer a second stigmatization because of their sexuality. They are afraid to admit that there are marital problems in LGBT relationships or are afraid of losing their partner because that partner may be the only person who seems to understand them.

**B.M. :** Basically, violence does not have a homosexual face, even when same-sex relationships imitate categories of masculinity and femininity. On the other hand, the structure of therapy is heteronormative, without specific care for same-sex relationships. Queer and LGBT groups demand that same-sex couples are helped like the others.

#### In your sessions, what is the proportion of men to women ?

**M.O. :** There are definitely more women, because men are less likely to talk about it.

#### Is the violence that you see different between gay men and lesbians ?

**M.O. :** I've seen the same spectrum of domestic violence – the most extreme and the lightest – identically in both types of households. Violence doesn't distinguish between sexualities.

**B.M. :** There have been studies of this idea. But the Canadian and Australian studies indicate that violence is universal and that it defies distinctions of class or type. Like male households, female households can be violent with or without physical aggression. During workshops on violence in same-sex couples, the testimonies of men and women are boundless. In the case

of allegedly curative rape\* of one man by another as it is practiced in Africa, I wonder about the actual sexual orientation of the rapist and of his real intentions.

#### You make a distinction between " femme " and " butch " in violence in certain lesbian couples. Is there a reproduction of heterosexual roles ? And if there is, is it always the butch who commits violent acts against the femme ?

**M.O. :** It's somewhat standard and many women copy relationship roles from this model. Without speaking of reproducing heterosexual roles, violence does often proceed in this direction. But there are also cases where the femme is aggressive toward the butch.

**B.M. :** Violence also occurs in female couples or male couples where the roles are not so defined. I'm a perfect example of this, because I was subjected to violence twice during my relationships – once with an American, and once with a German – both human rights activists. I was strangled until I lost consciousness. The problem of violence is always present, even when it is unstated. Violent couples who are butch and femme can integrate that violence into a masculine and feminine character. So yes, there is a reproduction of roles. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they're related to physical force. I know small butches who have beaten heavier and larger femmes.

#### Over the course of the workshops that you have been running, women in Africa and South America have shared their traumatic experiences. Considering the conditions in the South and regions at war, does domestic violence take a different shape as a result of the environment ?

**M.O. :** It's very difficult to say.

**B.M. :** The reports from Amnesty International and the World Health Organization demonstrate that during periods of conflict, violence is everywhere. Unfortunately, though, it's universal. Countries that are poor and countries that are rich are on equal footing. Today, for instance, even as we talk, someone is suffering in Switzerland as a victim of violence. >

## Said and heard at

### ILGA's preconference on Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Health

> The aggressor and the person who is subject to aggression are both victims. How do you help both of them ?

M.O. : There is no universal formula or protocol for teaching people to communicate without violence. It has to be treated on a case-by-case basis.

Were the Truth and Reconciliation tribunals in South Africa modeled on therapies for coping with domestic violence ?

B.M. : Absolutely. I think that we had all needed solace and consolation. We all had to work through the fear and insecurity that are concepts which accompany most violence. You had to be conscious that we were living in a world that suffered from patriarchy.

Internationally, what progress have you made?

B.M. : LGBT Australians are very active. The country, for example, recently witnessed the opening of a shelter for battered homosexuals. A victim is said to love their abuser, and vice versa. So is love that is marred by violence still love ?

M.O. : There are people who tend to excuse the violence that happens in their own relationships. According to these people, it is very often the violence, idealized as a form of passion or a justification for romantic sentiment, which demonstrates the presence of love.

\*The idea of curative rape implies the desire to hear where someone allegedly went wrong in the process of abusing that person.

Can't Live in the Closet, Manilla :  
[www.salidumay.org/about/clic.htm](http://www.salidumay.org/about/clic.htm)

Engender, Cape Town :  
[www.engender.org.za](http://www.engender.org.za)

Emmanuel Coissy – Association 360°  
June 2006  
[www.360.ch](http://www.360.ch)

Translation from French into English by Ryan Thoreson

Lesbian and bisexual women's health: different from heterosexual women?  
A report by ILGA.

Sexual orientation per se does not directly have any influence on cancer or any other disease. But double discrimination based on gender and on sexual orientation can have a significant impact on the mental and physical wellbeing, preventing also some women to seek assistance from health care providers.

Because their specificities are particularly unknown or ignored even by the women concerned, ILGA decided to issue the report in English "Lesbian and bisexual women's health: common concerns, local issues". Read it, pass it around, and be inspired by the valuable initiatives that have been taken locally.

You can download the report, or the chapter you are interested in, from ILGA's website, clicking a banner on the left of the homepage or at :  
[http://doc.ilga.org/ilga/publications/other\\_publications/lesbian\\_and\\_bisexual\\_women\\_s\\_health\\_report](http://doc.ilga.org/ilga/publications/other_publications/lesbian_and_bisexual_women_s_health_report)

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