

Dealing with Rape as a “Hate Crime” within the Lesbian Community.

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As many of us know, homophobia does exist, and that homophobia often goes further than personally held beliefs or attitudes.

For many members of the lesbian community, the threat of so-called “hate crimes” has unfortunately become a part of everyday life. A LGBT hate crime (or bias - motivated attack) is any crime that occurs as a direct result, either in part or wholly, of an individual’s sexual / gender identity. It can take many forms, including murder, violent physical assault, sexual assault / rape, robbery and vandalism. It's been estimated that 25% of lesbians have been the victim of some form of hate crime within the last 5 years (APA, 1998; SCH, 2006), although this figure could be higher as it can be difficult to ascertain whether the motivation for targeting a victim is their sexual orientation.

Rape and sexual assault can be used as a persecution weapon against lesbians. In fact it is estimated that approximately 10% of all hate crimes against lesbians includes some form of sexual assault (Comstock, 1999), and that members of the lesbian community are at higher risk of sexual assault partly because of explicit and implicit homophobic beliefs and attitudes (Gerard, 2003). Sexual assault in the context of a lesbian hate – crime, typically involves a male perpetrator or a group of male perpetrators. Therefore, for the context of this article, we will assume that the perpetrator is male.

Special considerations for the lesbian survivor of a sexual hate crime.

Any survivor of rape is likely to find the experience, and the aftermath of the experience, incredibly traumatic. Although every survivor's experience is unique, there are certain potential psychological and physical effects and issues that are common among all rape survivors, irrespective of gender, age, ethnicity, race, sexuality or sexual orientation. For an overview of this, please see the following Pandy's articles:

[Real Rape: What nobody's telling you.](#)

[Common responses to trauma](#)

However, as a lesbian survivor of rape, particularly when this was a hate crime, there are some special issues that you may find yourself dealing with.

- **An attack on your sexual identity:**

As a lesbian, our sexual identity is often a core element of our being. For many of us, the battle to understand and accept our sexual identity as a lesbian is a process that has been developing over a

significant proportion of our lives. Therefore, when we are raped because we identify as a lesbian, it can feel like a particularly personal attack on a fundamental facet of our being. It can feel particularly personal and dehumanizing because we have been violated because of who and what we are as a person, rather than being targeted randomly or opportunistically by our attacker.

It can be very difficult to come to terms with the fact that someone has been driven to hurt you because they purport to "hate" you. Try to understand that although this may feel very personal, the majority of hate-crimes are carried out by strangers (or very loose acquaintances) who do not know you personally and so cannot hate the person that you are. The perpetrators of hate-crimes are usually ignorant and ill-informed individuals who are afraid of anything they perceive as different - and the failing is within them, not you.

- **Changing attitude regarding your sexuality as a result of rape:**

Guilt and self-blame is experienced by the majority of rape survivors. Finding a reason to explain "*why me?*" is something many of us feel driven to do, and it can lead us to find reasons to blame ourselves for the sexual assault.

For general information on this, please see the following Pandy's articles:

[Was it my fault?](#)

[Countering self-blame](#)

In this tradition, many lesbian survivors of LGBT bias rape may conclude that it is their sexuality which is responsible for the rape and for the pain they are now enduring. This could lead you to feel resentment towards yourself for being a lesbian, rationalizing that if you were different from what you are, then you would not have been raped.

This can undoubtedly be exacerbated in women who are not completely at ease and comfortable with their sexual orientation, and there may be increased confusion and a need to revisit previous issues as a result of the attack (Garnets et al, 1990). If, for example, you harbour any residual negative feelings about being a lesbian, you may start to question whether in fact you *deserved* to be raped as punishment for being gay (Herek, 1992).

If the sexual assault occurs at a time that coincides with "coming out" or thinking about coming out, you may feel even increased confusion and hesitation about doing this. Please remember that "coming out" should be at a time which feels right for you - and it may be a good idea to put off coming out until you feel more able to deal with the complexities that this can involve.

Remember that NO ONE deserves to be raped. You are not to blame, and your sexuality is not to blame. The people responsible is the rapist and any person who encouraged him to hate.

- **A revision in public expression of sexuality:**

You may find yourself questioning the way you present yourself and whether you should revise your person appearance and sexual expression. For example, you may start asking yourself "*Do I look gay?*", "*Should I hold hands with my girlfriend in public*" or "*Should I really carry that banner at the Pride rally?*".

Although being a member of a lesbian community can largely be a great source of support, in the aftermath of a hate - crime, being a visible member of this community can also severely affect our perceived sense of safety. We can reason that as long as we are seen as a lesbian, then we have an increased vulnerability to be targeted for another assault, and hence withdraw from the lesbian community serves to protect us. Of course, not all lesbians feel the need to be publicly expressive of their sexuality or lesbian identification, but for those who have held this to be important, this questioning can result in a very real change in their public persona.

However, in the aftermath of a rape and hate - crime, you need to do whatever it is that makes you feel safest. If you would feel safest to not be so visible as a lesbian for a while - then that's okay. It may be worth trying to explain to your partner and / or friends that toning down your visibility as a lesbian does not mean denying who you are.

- **Questioning your "*lesbianism*":**

Some lesbians who have been raped by a man may feel a sense of shame because having sex with a man has somehow tainted their *pureness* as a lesbian. In particular, this confusion may be exacerbated if you experienced sexual arousal during the rape.

Firstly, it's important to try to realize that your sexual orientation is not in question. You were raped. You did not choose it or want it. In fact, rape saying nothing about you as a person at all.

Secondly, many women, irrespective of sexual orientation, become aroused during rape. This does not mean that you liked it or wanted it. Sexual arousal during rape is simply a response to sexual stimulation, and is a consequence of the way our bodies are wired. The intensity of the arousal, (i.e, whether there is orgasm or not) is only an indication of the physical reaction of our nerve endings to being stimulated, and all it says is that your body responded in the way it is designed to respond when touched in such a way.

You may also fear that your sexuality has been altered as a result of the rape because, like all survivors, you may experience some sexual dysfunction following the rape. The reasons for this can be very apparent when you are considering intimacy in a heterosexual relationship following a male-female rape. However, it can be very confusing for you and your partner to understand how a violent sexual experience with a male, can be transferred to a gentle and loving relationship with a female partner. However, in the words of one lesbian survivor, "*it's difficult to reclaim the path of pleasure from the*

source of pain", and to some extent, the gender of the perpetrator is immaterial to the violation.

Reclaiming your sexuality is likely to take time, patience and commitment from you and your partner. Please see:

[Reclaiming your sexuality](#)

[Book: Stolen Women - Reclaiming Sexuality](#)

[Book: Self-sexual healing](#)

- **The trauma of penetration**

If you have never previously experienced penetrative sexual intercourse before, you may experience additional trauma relating to physical pain / damage during the rape, as well as the psychological trauma of first-time penile penetration as the result of rape.

Penile penetration is obviously going to mean the possibility of STIs - something which many lesbian women may not have felt they needed to seriously address previously. For information on STIs, please see:

[Dealing with STIs as the result of sexual assault](#)

[Sexually transmitted infections \(RAINN\)](#)

Male-female rape is also going to introduce the possibility of pregnancy - particularly, as a lesbian, you are unlikely to be using any form of birth control. Firstly, its important to appreciate that pregnancy is not inevitable, and in fact statistics reveal that only between 1-4% of rapes result in pregnancy.

However, it may be that you have to consider the possibility of an unplanned pregnancy for the first time, and therefore you may feel very confused and unsure about the implications of this, and what your options are. Please see:

[Rape and Pregnancy](#)

USA: Advice on pregnancy options and STI's: 1.800.395.HELP

UK: Advice on pregnancy options 0800 028 2228

Australia: Advice on pregnancy options 1300 139 313

- **Gaining Support:**

All survivors of rape and survivors of hate crimes are deserving of support and understanding following the assault. Many women find asking for help very difficult, and you may even feel that you should be able to deal with all of the issues independently and self-sufficiently. However, asking for help is not a

sigh of weakness but a sign of strength and shows a commitment to recover from the ordeal.

Lesbians may feel comforted by the LGBT community, particularly as they are unlikely to be the only victim of a hate-crime known to them, and as such, peer support can be invaluable. If you live in a community with a larger LGBT population, you may have the luxury of access to LGBT support groups for victims of crime.

However, if you live within an area with a much smaller LGBT population, you may feel increasingly isolated, and be reluctant to seek support for fear that you may become very visible or that your experience may become sensationalized in a way which does not give you the support and understanding you need. The above phone lines are there to give you support.

As a lesbian survivor, you may also not have the support of family or friends because of issues surrounding your sexuality.

It's also worth noting that partners are not always able to be the source of support you believed they would be. As many of a third of lesbian women are survivors of rape or sexual abuse, obviously your assault can trigger all sorts of traumatic memories of their own if they are also a survivor. Obviously, you may or may not have been aware of this in your partners past, and this can be very traumatic for you to deal with as a couple. It is advisable for you to both get support for your own individual issues, and to appreciate that your own healing has to take priority. Unless you get support for yourself, it is unlikely that you will be able to support your partner - and vice versa.

National helplines for survivors of crime / hate crimes are as follows. They should be able to direct you to appropriate resources within your area:

USA: 206.350-HATE

UK: 0845 30 30 900

NZ: (04) 474 8862

OZ: 1800 063 060

If you wish to start therapy - and many find this helpful - you may prefer to see a gay friendly therapist who should be aware of the issues you are dealing with, and how hate - crimes and rape could especially impact you. Lists of gay-friendly therapists can be found:

[US friendly therapists](#)

[UK gay friendly therapists](#)

[Canadian gay friendly therapists](#)

Local GLBT organizations will also have lists of local therapists who are comfortable treating lesbian clients.

- **Reporting:**

There is certainly an issue with reporting hate crimes per-se to the police since both lesbians are about half as likely to report a crime perceived as a hate crime than a non-hate crime. You may find there are even more barriers to reporting rape for lesbian women than for heterosexual women, and you may fear facing additional victimization during the reporting process. Certainly, there is a general assumption among LGBT people that the police and criminal justice system are explicitly and implicitly homophobic. This general belief of inherent homophobia in society means that perpetrators may actually use this to keep their victim silent.

Many police forces now have specialized training for officers who deal with rape victims and victims of LGBT hate - crime. It is no longer the forgone conclusion that you will be treated insensitively and your rights violated. However, it may help to take a LGBT advocate with you, or at least a victim advocate, to ensure that you are supported throughout the process and your rights explained. Just having a friendly face can make the process much less daunting. Advocates can be requested from the following numbers:

USA: 206.350-HATE

UK: 0845 30 30 900 and GALOP 020 770 42040

NZ: (04) 474 8862

OZ: 1800 063 060

For further information on reporting a rape:

[Reporting a rape](#)

[Deciding to pursue legal action](#)

[Testifying](#)

[Evidence collection procedures](#)

[Reporting in the UK \(VERY helpful guide!\)](#)

****Remember: the problem is not YOU, it is the person who has so much hate inside them who has the problem****

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