

Lesbian moms vulnerable when abused, reluctant to seek help

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Lesbian moms who are experiencing intimate partner violence are often reluctant to seek help for fear of losing custody of their children, said two University of Illinois professors.

"A lesbian mom's abuse situation is unique in that she fears losing her kids to the biological father or the state instead of the abuser," said Jennifer Hardesty, a U of I associate professor of family studies.

The study, the first to examine help-seeking for intimate [partner violence](#) among lesbian or bisexual mothers, appears in the January 2011 issue of *Violence Against Women*.

The researchers recruited 24 mothers who had been abused by a same-sex partner and interviewed them about their experiences. On average, the women had been in their relationship for six years.

"Many of the mothers in the study believed that people were prejudiced against them, and they assumed that people with power would use that prejudice to hurt them. That perception inhibited their willingness to openly seek help," said Ramona Faith Oswald, a U of I associate professor of family studies and co-author of the study.

Oswald stressed that the vulnerability of these mothers has real consequences for the moms and their kids. That vulnerability could be remedied by support for these families and recognizing that lesbian women in this situation are as deserving of help as anyone else, she

added.

"We learned that you can't assume these women will be direct in the way they ask for help. That's why it's important that [health care providers](#), police officers, and other agencies that assist victims of intimate partner violence be aware of this issue," she added.

Of the mothers in the study, 11 sought help openly from police, health providers, and [domestic violence](#) professionals. Six mothers sought help without revealing the violence because they felt ashamed of being abused by a woman partner—"I thought a female-female relationship was supposed to be nurturing"—and six others tried to solve the problem alone, mostly because they were closeted and had no support from friends and family.

One woman who sought help had no qualms about calling the police to remove the abuser from her property. At the same time, she hid the abuse from the father of her children.

"My children are everything to me. He does make considerably more money than I do, and he's remarried and . . . it's like a perfect home life, a perfect situation. I just could not fathom if I lost them [the kids], let alone if I lost them because of the abuse. So I hid a lot from him," she said.

Unlike other mothers, the lesbian moms who sought help didn't discuss their children with the helper very much. "That's worth following up on. Do the kids fade into the background in these discussions because the mothers fear losing custody?" Hardesty said.

More information: The study is available online at vaw.sagepub.com/content/17/1/28.full.pdf+html

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