

Much has been achieved in the last three decades. The silence around domestic abuse has slowly been broken and it is now accepted by most people that domestic abuse can affect people of every background, culture, class, religion, gender, and sexuality. In past decades, if a woman approached the police to report violence by a male partner, she probably would have been told it wasn't their problem. It would have been inconceivable that a person in a same-sex relationship would have reported domestic abuse. These days the police take domestic abuse in heterosexual and LGBT relationships more seriously, and run campaigns specifically raising awareness of domestic abuse in the LGBT communities.

Domestic abuse is a significant problem in the LGBT communities. According to the Dyn Project, 1 in 4 LGBT people will experience domestic abuse at some point in their lives. Research carried out by the University of Southampton in Brighton in 2000 found that 1 in 3 people asked had experienced violence in the home, 62% of which was characterised by respondents as domestic abuse. Stonewall Housing is committed to securing safer spaces for LGBT people. We work with LGBT survivors of domestic abuse to help them find housing options that are suitable for them, so that they no longer have to feel unsafe at home.

Domestic abuse, as experienced by heterosexual and LGBT people, shares many similar characteristics, under-reporting being one important example. Many heterosexual and LGBT survivors who experience domestic abuse do not identify their experiences as domestic abuse, and minimise its impact with comments such as "it was just a few slaps when s/he was drunk..." Survivors can often be fearful of going to the police, be unwilling to tell family members, and be frightened of repercussions if they do report.

Anton was a client of Stonewall Housing's advice service and we were helping him to make a homelessness application. He had been experiencing violence and emotional abuse from his partner, but he hadn't told anyone partly because he didn't really acknowledge it himself, and partly because he was frightened of the consequences. He was unhappy and wanted to leave, but vocalising the abuse made it seem more real, and he didn't think he could handle it. So at first he didn't tell our Housing Advice Worker or the Council he was making the homelessness application to, and his application failed because he wasn't found in priority need. He knew that finding alternative housing was his only way out of the abusive relationship, so he summoned up the courage to tell us, and with his consent we told the Council and appealed their decision. The appeal failed because the Council didn't believe he was really experiencing domestic abuse.

Anton's experiences of domestic abuse are not dissimilar to that of many heterosexual people, and his situation is one that anyone, regardless of sexuality or gender orientation, could find themselves in. Yet while there are many similarities in the dynamics of domestic abuse as experienced by heterosexual and LGBT people, homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism can also affect LGBT survivors of domestic abuse in important ways:

- Ex-partners may threaten to 'out' an LGBT person to family members, work colleagues or friends
- There may be mixed issues of homophobic or transphobic hate crime and domestic abuse
- Mainstream services for survivors of domestic abuse are often inappropriate for LGBT people, as they are mostly targeted specifically at heterosexual women
- There is a lack of specific services for LGBT survivors of domestic abuse

Non-consensual disclosure of sexuality - being 'outed'

Fear of homophobic or transphobic reactions from significant others is one of the key reasons some LGBT people choose not to disclose their sexuality or gender orientation. Being 'outed', or being threatened with being 'outed', by an abusive partner or ex-partner can be a particularly damaging experience.

Shani was 19 when her violent ex-girlfriend outed her to her family to get revenge for ending their eight-month relationship. Shani's ex-girlfriend knew her family were very homophobic, which is why Shani had never told them about her sexuality. When her family found out, Shani was beaten up by her brothers and mother, and they threatened to kill her or send her home to Somalia if she didn't 'change her ways'. For Shani, being outed by her ex-girlfriend was much worse than the violence she had endured from her, as her family eventually disowned her and she was left homeless and alone.

Hate crime and domestic abuse

As Shani's story demonstrates, domestic abuse and homophobic hate crime can be interconnected. Home Office statistics suggest that 53% of reported homophobic hate crime happens in or around the home, and in 6% of cases the perpetrator is the victim's partner or another family member. Stonewall Housing has found that some mainstream domestic abuse service providers are reluctant to understand hate crime as a component of domestic abuse, believing that including hate crime in an understanding of domestic abuse 'waters it down'. But it can be difficult to separate domestic abuse from hate crime in some situations, and this narrow definition does not encompass the experiences of some LGBT people. As Abby's experience demonstrates, hate crime and domestic abuse can interact in significant and specific ways:

Abby was in a long-term relationship with her partner Sue. They were bringing up Sue's daughter together, and were planning a civil partnership. Sue's family had always made it clear they didn't approve of their relationship, but the hostility escalated when Sue and Abby told them about their civil partnership plans. Shortly after the announcement, Sue's family turned up at their home to confront the couple. The shouting and screaming quickly turned violent and Sue's father and brothers physically assaulted Abby, threatening her with a gun. Abby was seriously injured and shaken up and needed treatment in casualty. Abby and Sue's relationship deteriorated after the attack, and they split up. Sue's family wouldn't allow Abby to have any contact with her daughter and continued to threaten and intimidate her. Abby feared further attacks from her ex-partner's family and felt unsafe in her home. She was referred to a women's refuge where she was given a place in shared housing with three heterosexual women.

Abby's experience of domestic abuse was quite different from the experiences of the women she ended up living with, because of the added element of homophobia from her ex-partner's family, which was integral to the abuse she suffered. Yet because the mainstream service provider was only used to working with heterosexual survivors of domestic abuse, they were unable to give Abby the specific support she needed around being a victim of hate crime.

Inappropriate mainstream service provision

There is currently no suitable emergency accommodation for LGBT people fleeing domestic abuse in the UK. Women's refuges are not set up to deal with lesbian, bisexual or transgender women, as Abby found, and they may experience homophobia or transphobia from other residents.

Johanna was living in safe accommodation in a women's refuge after fleeing a violent relationship with her male ex-partner. She got along fine with the other residents until she told them she was bisexual, and started seeing a woman. She was taunted with homophobic insults from some of the residents, others refused to talk to her, and a group of women would whisper about her and leave when she walked into a room. The workers did their best to be supportive of Johanna but they were unable to stop the bullying, and Johanna was left feeling isolated and rejected once more.

Current mainstream provision, when it is available, is often not set up to deal with the specific experiences of LGBT people and, as with Johanna, it may be unable to meet the needs of LGBT survivors of domestic abuse.

Gaps in specific LGBT service provision

There are also very few specific services for LGBT domestic abuse survivors. There is no emergency accommodation for men fleeing domestic abuse at all. If a man does not have support needs he may not be suitable for supported hostel accommodation and may not be found in priority need for other housing.

Farid was 22 and had lived in his family home all of his life, but came back one evening to find all of his immediate family gathered to discuss him. His brother had found a copy of a gay magazine under Farid's bed, and his family endeavoured to 'beat it out of him'. Farid suffered being beaten, bitten and strangled by his family, and was left badly injured and devastated by their actions. But he was determined to stick it out and improve relations with them, so over the next twelve months he did his best to please them. Some of the time it seemed like everything was ok, but his family would become suspicious of where he was going and who he was seeing, and they would imprison him at home or starve him in order to keep him 'on the straight and narrow'. Eventually Farid realised he couldn't take anymore and decided to leave home.

However Farid's options were limited. He was too old and had too few support needs to be found in priority need for housing, and he didn't have enough money to get a room in private rented accommodation. He obviously wasn't eligible for a women's refuge, and there are no alternative emergency hostels for men. He slept on a friend's sofa for a while, but he feared that his family would track him down, and he didn't feel safe there. So Farid was forced to sleep rough in parks, on the streets and on night buses, and when he couldn't bear this, he would go home with random men he had met in bars rather than sleep out.

Specific LGBT services

Specific housing support for LGBT survivors of domestic abuse is incredibly limited, but there are some services available. Threshold Gay Men's Shared Housing project provides accommodation for gay men fleeing domestic abuse which is a real life-line to the gay men they are able to accommodate.

Stonewall Housing employs a specialist Domestic Abuse Housing Advice Worker who provides ongoing advocacy and support to LGBT survivors of domestic abuse, and works with clients in a number of ways depending on their wishes and the options available. This might include assisting the client to develop safety plans, obtain extra security for the home, make homelessness applications and look at other housing options. We also work in partnership with Broken Rainbow, the LGBT domestic abuse charity.

Farid read about Stonewall Housing in an LGBT magazine he came across in a bar one evening. He got in touch with us and we were able to offer him specialist advice and support, and our Domestic Abuse Housing Advice Worker managed to find him a place in safe temporary accommodation. Farid made a housing application to Stonewall Housing's supported housing for young LGBT people, and eventually moved into one of our shared houses. He now has a safe place to live and is receiving counselling. Relations with his family haven't improved, although Farid continues to hope that they will.

Challenges for the future

Domestic abuse has devastating effects on survivors, and the fact that there are so few options available to LGBT people fleeing home means that leaving becomes almost a practical impossibility without adequate support and advice. Stonewall Housing believes that all LGBT people should have a safe space to live in, and welcomes the increasing awareness of LGBT domestic abuse as a first step in the right direction. But current mainstream services can be heterosexist and specific provision is not sufficient.

Stonewall Housing would like to see funds made available for the development of more comprehensive services specifically targeted at the LGBT communities. This should include emergency accommodation and ongoing survivors support groups. Stonewall Housing also believes that the mainstreaming of LGBT domestic abuse in service provision is essential so that existing services become equipped to support LGBT people. Monitoring of sexuality ([link to page](#)) and training ([link to page](#)) for staff would be vital for this to be successful.

Stonewall Housing challenges Local Authorities, housing associations and mainstream service providers, as well as the LGBT communities, to take up the challenge and help us ensure that LGBT survivors of domestic abuse have access to safe spaces to live in.