

SOAR Speaking Out Against Relationship Abuse – Creating an Inclusive SSDV Service Provision Model – Podium presentation SSDV Conference Sydney 11 September 2009 – Celia Hutton Specialist SSDV Support Worker

I am here today to talk about what it takes to create an inclusive service model to support SSA DV clients.....to Speak Out Against Same Sex Relationship Abuse. I would like to apologise in advance to the gay male population, my work has been focussed on women's services, however I do want to acknowledge the enormous gap in mainstream support services for SSA men experiencing DV.

Face Book..... is an amazing medium, recently joined and suddenly all these old friends, ex's.....coming out of the cyber woodwork.....a comment made to me last night, I thought was very fitting for today.....friend who has experienced long term DV in her lesbian relationships said ***“I am so glad you are making this visible, talking about this issue, it is long overdue.....it has been happening in silence out there for way too long”***

I am able to speak out today because after 27 yrs the abuse I had experienced in my first lesbian relationship and that has impacted all my relationships since was finally validated through my work environment as legitimate domestic violence. By clarifying the context in which I had been abused I regained the personal and social agency I needed to stand up and be counted.

Current statistics suggest up to 50% of the female population world -wide experience Domestic Violence whilst the NSW Rape Crisis Service has identified that one in three Australian women are at risk. Whilst current research attests that domestic violence occurs at a similar rate in SSA relationships as in heterosexual partnerships, SSA DV victims do not access mainstream services for support. Currently within the Women's Refuge Movement 92% of services support less than 1% of SSA women identifying they are at risk due to domestic violence.

Currently we have no statistical measure to capture the population of SSA people in Australia and whilst it has been suggested that GLBT people only represent 10% of the population I would like to guesstimate that at least one in five or possibly one in four people in Australia are gay however a lot of GLBT people are still in the closet about their sexuality directly because of homophobia.....both collective and individual.

Homophobia and abuse is a common experience for SSA females with 40% of young lesbians in a recent Victorian study claiming abuses ranging from having their clothes/possessions damaged to rape and hospitalisation for injuries.

Given all these potential measures I believe it would be fair to guess that 15-20% of the domestic violence experienced by Australian women every year occurs in lesbian relationships and that because lesbian victims fear further homophobic responses from services, family, community, on top of the stigma and shame associated with experiencing domestic violence that lesbian DV continues to remain grossly under reported, documented or understood.

If domestic violence can occur outside the dynamics of heterosexual partnerships it tells us that whilst domestic violence is not necessarily a 'gendered' crime it is a crime that innately thrives in a patriarchal society where there exists the unspoken assumption that in any intimate, domestic relationship one person will always have more rights and entitlements, more power and control than the other.....hence my personal experience of being commonly asked questions such as..... so which one of you wears the pants or who is the wife?

I have been working in women's crisis accommodation services for over five years in that time I have supported many women and children escaping DV. Less than 1% of these clients have identified as SSA. The challenge then is how to create an inclusive service provision model whilst

so much social stigma and fear remains attached to the victims seeking help. From initial research I conducted within the Women's Refuge Movement it has become apparent that SSA women legitimately fear:

- Inappropriate and unsafe homophobic responses from police, justice system and other essential services
- Minimisation of DV experience as it is not perpetrated by a man
- Further isolation and/or homophobic responses from other women in the refuge/support groups
- Being outed in their community and potential professional or family law repercussions.
- Confidentiality issues.....prevalence of lesbians employed in women's services.....quite likely a worker in the health or welfare sector..... will either know them or their partner.
- Being ostracised from their close knit lesbian community if they 'out' their partner's abuse, as this community maybe her only personal support network.
- Feminist Political backlash
- Not being believed
- That the abusive partner will allege mutual abuse

I had my first experience of SSDV 30 years ago.....the one and only time I contacted the police for help.....I was not asked to make a statement, my partner was not charged for the assault, no support agencies were provided, the domestic violence was not named and so.....without a context to process what had happened to me I lived silently with the abuse, shamed and personally eroded.

The watershed moment that defined my shift from silent victim to outspoken survivor was the 8 weeks I spent volunteering to create the WRM Float for Mardi Gras.....part of a small, dedicated, motley crew of lesbian refuge workers.....over sewing machines, needles, paint and glitter we bonded through laughter and shared stories.

My accidental access to peer support, personal validation and information, provided the context for me in which I could start processing the violence and abuse.....since then my personal and professional life has irrevocably changed.....today I speak out with pride about being a lesbian survivor of SSDV. I felt immense pride, resolve, completion.....to be OUT and celebrating on a Mardi Gras float support services for lesbians experiencing DV.....

I operate from the belief that.....If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem..... and keeping silent is a big part of the problem. Lesbians are not speaking up about relationship abuse and mainstream DV services are not identifying that having so few SSA clients is a genuine service provision gap.

Possessing social agency is gift not realised until one gains it, having processed my own experience of DV I was then internally driven to address the silence. Out of my social agency in February this year was birthed SOAR.....A Community Education ProjectI initiated out of Wimlah Women and Children's Services.....the DV service I am employed within.

SOAR'S purpose is to raise awareness of lesbian specific DV both within the local community and across the state. The postcard resource was completed in time for Mardi Gras Fair Day. I wanted to put something out there that really sent a message home to women that DV happens to lesbians, after all why would the Women's Refuge Movement have a stall on Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day if we were not advocating support for lesbian victims of DV?

The broken rainbow heart had significant meaning to me.....I hoped it would for other women, if these cards can assist one woman to seek help, get out of the cycle of violence, they have served their purpose. SOAR is at its beginning visionary stage, I am hopeful this project will assist outer western Sydney services to come together to create a SSDV interagency out WEST.....and I invite anyone with ideas to contact me, lets get together and talk about what we can do next.....beyond this conference.....lets keep the vision alive and happening.

Language and communication play a pivotal role in becoming SSDV inclusive, Wimlah recently updated our flyer, intake forms and welcome packages to reflect our intent to respond to SSDV.....we have made a commitment to have a Specialist SSDV worker in our service and to promote this locally, and across the state regardless of the number of SSDV clients we currently support.

To be inclusive, DV services cannot continue to assume non-heterosexual women and their children will feel welcome, simply because we provide DV services. We need to actively promote DV services for SSA women with the same vigour as we promote our services to ATSI and CALD clients.....

If we as DV services, do not raise our service profile and publically name SSDV as a gap in service provision because we rarely support SSA clients, then collective homophobia and ignorance will continue to be the core barriers inhibiting lesbian victims from seeking outside help.

In March this year I booked to attend the first SSDV core training the Education Centre Against Violence had been able to run for three years, due to lack of community interest. At that time another worker in our service said to me 'why do you need to do this training, lesbians do not represent our core clients, we seldom support them. This attitude clearly illustrated to me why it was so important for me to attend this training.

If we are not capturing SSDV clients in the service we are in, it is not the fault of the clients, for they are out there. If we are not currently supporting SSDV clients it clearly demonstrates we are not getting our service delivery model right. Even the most specialised DV service cannot assume it is doing everything to capture SSA clients. All services, workers need to think outside the current box of support/response, to remain flexible and committed to on-going review and reflection of their own internal homophobic reactions/responses and remain open to expansion, ideas and change.

Like everyone else who has been born and raised in a heterosexual society, I carry my own internal homophobia. This training really helped me understand this, providing me with a context and assisting me in highlighting these issues to others. In May this year I undertook initial research within the NSW Women's Refuge Movement to find out as a feminist body, how we were currently responding to SSDV. I made contact with 50 of the 56 refuges.

In conversation, most workers I spoke to agreed that they believed SSDV is common. Alarmingly 91% of these services indicated they support less than 1% of SSA women with or without children who identify experiencing DV. Many services stated to their knowledge, they had never supported a SSA client.

When I asked workers why they thought these numbers were so low many inferred that possibly homophobic judgement was a barrier, however most also stated they:

- believed their services already promoted inclusive DV support.
- could not identify why so few of their DV clients were SSA
- did not know how they might better promote inclusion within their services to capture SSA DV victims.

Which leads me back to the point that if you believe you are already doing it right you are not going to be open to seeing how do it differently.

My research was not all disheartening, to their credit; a small number of refuges within the movement stated they regularly supported SSA clients both outreach and in-house. Commonly these services were all Aboriginal run refuges who agreed that inclusion involved ***“Getting out there in the local community and talking about the nature of Domestic Violence. Participating in on-going consultations across local services speaking to women, men and children about the impacts of relationship abuse and that our service WELCOMES ALL WOMEN.”***

It has become apparent to me that for a service to become SSDV inclusive the service is required to talk the talk, publically, openly, with local services and the community. To make a commitment to educate and raise awareness about the silencing nature of SSDV whilst recognising that at every turn this process will trigger individual as well as collective levels of homophobia and as a service to have the courage to manage this amongst workers and management alike no matter what.....

Most women’s refuges are group houses, families or single women having a private room inside a larger communal living environment. This in itself can be a daunting experience for a woman in trauma, fleeing violence and feeling shamed by the abuse. To come into a place that is unfamiliar, sharing close living quarters with other women and children who are also in crisis.

For a woman experiencing abuse from another woman.....managing the anxiety of being judged for her sexual orientation by essential services, workers, other women, family, friends or community, on top of the shame and trauma of escaping the abuse can make it harder for her to confront than staying in the familiar cycle of violence.

This was certainly true for an 18 young woman in a rural Northern NSW community who died in March this year due to partner abuse. Whilst she wanted help, she felt vilified by family, friends and the local community because of her sexuality. Despite lengthy support from a local DV service, she was overwhelmed by external homophobia and continued to return to the only person she felt loved and supported her.....her violent girl friend, tragically.....this decision finally cost her.....her life.....

For lesbian victims of DV the fear of homophobic response..... is a genuine barrier in seeking help. Homophobia in this context is seen as another layer of power and control that creates further fear and shame increasing social exclusion and further disadvantage.

The National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) statistics help to drive new models of service provision by highlighting current service gaps. The Australia Government’s document ‘Social Inclusion Principles for Australia’ - aspires to reduce the gap of disadvantage by encouraging all services to promote within their service delivery equitable access to Australians in all their diversity.....and to invest intensively in those peoples most at risk of experiencing social

exclusion.....Using evidence and integrated data to inform policy which includes statistics from the NDCA.

As services, women's refuges fall under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) and are required to provide to the NDCA the percentage of ATSI and CALD women and children escaping Domestic Violence however there is no current requirement to capture the percentage of SSA DV victims supported. This statistical oversight alone successfully ensures that the incidence of SSDV remains both silenced and hidden within SAAP services.

Women's refuges need to start collecting this data regardless of whether it is required or not. We need to petition to have these statistics added on grounds of gross social exclusion and disadvantage. It is not good enough that in 2009 we can only assume and guess the needs of SSA DV victims in Australia.

If SSDV is not publically named in DV media campaigns, its victims have no context in which to process their experience of personal disempowerment other than their own shame.

To date, government driven DV media campaigns, the police and the justice system fail to portray that relationship violence equally includes all forms of psychological, spiritual, sexual, verbal, financial and/or social abuse and that these forms of DV are not only as damaging as the physical abuse, they are more often the precursors of the physical abuse.

They also fail to portray that DV can occur between any people involved in an intimate, romantic, caring, domestic relationship regardless of the individual's chosen sexual orientation or gender. If you don't see the violence mirrored out there in the media how do you know its happening to you..... and that its not okay?

This year the federal government introduced their 'couples are couples' legislation. Now all SSA couples in receipt of individual centrelink benefits who are sharing the same domicile are required by law to inform the government of their relationship status for the purpose of having their combined incomes reassessed as partnered.

Whilst this piece of legislation is purely economically driven I say it is timely that if the federal government sees our relationships as economically viable relationships that our communities demand the federal government also celebrate through the media, the healthy and viable nature of SS relationships within all other aspects of public and private life.

In conclusion I believe the way forward for services..... Inclusively supporting SSDV clients is to keep talking publically about this issue..... to undertake research and apply for funding..... to create resources, run consultations and continue community, interagency and political dialogue that puts pressure on our governments..... through media and community campaigns.....to publically address and deconstruct those insidious levels of individual and collective homophobia that continue to underpin, silence and perpetuate DV within our communities.

In 2009 Wimlah has begun this journey forward. In May when I began the research, our service had supported no more than four women over a six-year period. Less than 4 months on, in my role as Specialist Same Sex Domestic Violence Worker, I am currently supporting two clients.