



Spotlight #6: Episode 5

Podcast transcript

C: Ruth, thank you so much for doing this podcast with me. So, we were talking in the office the other day. We were looking at some data that we've had come through around the numbers of bisexual women in domestic abuse services, and we were talking how, as bisexual women, how invisible you can often be, particularly when you're in a heterosexual relationship, and so we were saying that actually it would be really interesting to talk about some of the particular issues faced by bisexual women that are experiencing domestic abuse. Do you want to start by saying a little bit about what you do for SafeLives?

R: I'm Ruth and I'm the Communications Officer for SafeLives. So, I deal with things like our website, social media, press and just getting the message out to the public about domestic abuse and all its different forms.

C: And you've been working a lot on this spotlight series.

R: Yes. So, it's my job to make sure as many people as possible read about our spotlight stats and practice guidance, and the general public as well get more of an awareness that abuse doesn't always look one way.

C: So, we were looking at these figures and although it's a very small proportion of LGBT people that are accessing domestic abuse services, of those figures it looks like the majority of those are identifying as bisexual women. What are your thoughts about why bisexual women, might be reflected in the statistics more so than other people?

R: I think probably in the context of all LGBT groups, I think it's probably the case that women are more likely to access services. I think we've seen that and I wonder if there's something about bisexual women that means they're more likely to experience abuse than say straight women or lesbian women? I'm not sure if the statistics bear that out because we have such a small sample, but I think definitely women are more likely to access services than men.

C: Yeah, and there's something about the kind of the picture of domestic abuse that's portrayed, that I wonder whether it's easier for bisexual women when they're being abused by a male partner to recognise that because that's what's depicted in media and in how we talk about domestic abuse, and so that might mean that they're more able to recognise that services are going to be for them and they're going to meet their needs.

R: For sure, whereas I think if you are a bisexual woman being abused by a woman, by a same sex partner, I think for me I'm not sure if I was in that situation where I would go

because I wouldn't go to a sort of generic service that seems to cater for women being abused by men, and LGBT services are quite few and far between, and there's a thing when you're a bisexual person that you're not quite sure you fit into the LGBT umbrella.

C: Yeah absolutely so, there can be a feeling that LGBT services, the B is very small in that, and I think we were chatting about how that plays into abuse tactics if you like, and I think it's something that I've definitely heard described by people that I've supported; not being gay enough for their partner as a bisexual person and that their identity just being undermined all the time.

R: I think that's true and I think as a bisexual person you sort of change things about yourself depending who you're with. You know, if you're a bisexual woman and you're spending time with your boyfriend, you might behave a different way than if you went out with your lesbian friends say. You might talk about different things, dress a different way and I can imagine in an abusive relationship context, that would be magnified perhaps.

C: Yeah it's really...it really makes you vulnerable to someone exploiting that and I think the reason why there might a vulnerability is that is that it's sort of played out in all the myths to do with being bisexual that's reflected in society. So, I think that idea about you might change your behaviour to fit in with your partner is exacerbated by the fact there's lots of misunderstandings about bisexual identity and that you know, you might...you might just...if you're in a relationship with a woman, you might very easily go off with a man for example.

R: Yeah. I think there's a bit of a misconception sort of on both sides. Like having dated women, there seems to be an assumption that oh well you're just...this is a phase or an experiment and then you'll go back to being straight, so like I found sometimes other women were reluctant to date me because they knew I was bi rather than "fully gay", and then I think on the other side, there's all the myths about bisexuals, particularly I think about bisexual women, that we're promiscuous and experimenting and we want you know, we want it all. We're greedy. I know that when I came out to my ex-boyfriend, his immediate reaction was sort of jealous and insecure and "well now, you're going to just leave me for a woman," and it just became a thing that I didn't talk about after that because it was a thing that I was supposed to feel guilty about.

C: Yeah, and jealousy and insecurity like we see that throughout coercively controlling relationships. That's kind of a universal but for me it feels like if my partner is feeling insecure about my sexual identity, it feels to me that that's reflected a bit in what society also thinks about being bisexual and I think the danger with that is that you might start to believe that, because we're all growing up in a society with these myths and these influences, that you might start to accept things that are unacceptable. So, you might say to yourself well you know, it is understandable that my partner's feeling threatened in this scenario so I better play down parts of my identity because you know, that's only fair on them.

R: Yeah, and you can totally see how that is a sort of gateway for other abusive behaviour. If you're already putting part of yourself in a box of feeling like you have to change yourself to make...to appease them and then if there's you know, if there's more controlling behaviour involved, you can see how that will all just feed in.

C: Yeah, and I know somebody else recently said to me that she...one of the major things she'd found about coming out as a bisexual woman was that not existing, that the response that she got from people was that it wasn't possible for her to be bisexual. So, well you're in a process and at the end of that you will come out

as lesbian. It's not possible for you to have this identify of neither heterosexual nor gay.

R: Yeah. It's really erasing. It's feel like almost every space that you're in, a part of you doesn't exist. If you're in the LGBT world, you're in a gay club or wherever, then you're being your same sex attracted self but then when you're with your heterosexual partner, it's like that part of you just doesn't exist. People meet you and you seem to be straight and I think all of that sort of chips away and like contributes to this feeling of having to hide part of yourself, and if you also have to hide that part of yourself from your partner or tone it down, I think it just makes you feel very small.

C: Yeah, and I think from a practice point of view, what's really risky is bisexual women coming into domestic abuse services and the focus being on their heterosexual relationship and any previous female partners that may have been abusive or controlling may just be completely invisible to services if they make that assumption that they're heterosexual or that their previous same sex relationships don't need examining or exploring in any way. Like not even asking the question, you know, actually are there other previous abusive relationships that need talking about?

R: And we've seen in our Insights data on bisexual women that 16% of bisexual women accessing services have been experiencing historic abuse from previous partners and we don't have the genders of those partners but if a service hasn't asked them about their orientation when they went in, you know, a good chunk of those could just not have been mentioned. If you go to a service because your heterosexual partner is abusing you and nobody asks you if you're bisexual, they're not going to ask you about previous girlfriends.

C: Yeah, yeah absolutely, and I think there's also a kind of a risk issue around if somebody leaves a heterosexual relationship and is now with the same sex partner, that can be something that the abusive partner can use. So, particularly I think when children are in the family, that threat of well if you're in a same sex relationship, the courts are not going to look favourably on you or you know, I've even heard people say that their ex partner had made comments about it being a Child Protection issue; that this is a Child Protection concern that you're now living with a woman and our children are at risk and just how very frightening that will be for somebody who is anxious that actually the services will look differently on them as a result.

R: And very shaming. even in heterosexual situations, we know that perpetrators use children to manipulate and will control their ex partners but when you've got an added layer of 'now I'm in a same sex relationship and all the society baggage that comes with that and I'm at risk of having my children taken away', it's just an extra level of control and stress.

C: And the other kind of aspect to the research that we were talking about, there's really very shocking statistics particularly around mental health. So, we know that LGBT victims of domestic abuse who were accessing support experienced far higher levels of complex needs compared to other clients, but there are numbers around mental health, particularly for bisexual women which really shocked us. So, 34% had attempted suicide. 39% had self harmed. Really high figures and I wonder whether there's a...I suspect there isn't, an awareness of that issue as well that bisexual women in the service, another really important reason to ask people their sexual identities. There might be these additional needs that are just not being looked at.

R: Yeah. I think it's also known that bisexual people generally outside of domestic abuse have quite bad mental health outcomes. I think it...and I think that might be about the sense of not fitting in to specialist services or to generic services, and not being asked the question and all the other stuff we've talked about now being...having your identity erased all the time, and I think probably the lack of specialist provision.

C: **Yeah, absolutely. I think the other thing that can happen in terms of like specifics or forms of abuse is instead of somebody's identity being eroded, it gets kind of fetishised, so around sexual abuse in particular that somebody coming out as bisexual, their abusive partner may use that then as like well now you're consenting to threesomes or group sex or you know, something that they are uncomfortable with, and something that reduces their identity down to sexual behaviour rather than love and relationships and how they feel about people.**

R: Absolutely, and I think that attitude is something that again is reinforced throughout society and all the depictions of bisexual women that we see, like there are hardly any to begin with and the ones we do see are promiscuous women who will take part in threesomes willy nilly and for the...exist for the amusement of men especially, rather than women who have agency and make their own choices and legitimately are attracted to people of both genders. I think that being reinforced throughout society and culture, it sort of justifies, maybe that's the wrong word but it normalises that kind of abuse I think.

C: **Yeah, yeah. It becomes something else doesn't it? It's not...doesn't stand out as abuse. It kind of gets dressed up as where you can...it's an understandable response to somebody to give or an understanding of what sort of process of somebody to have. I think the other, the kind of issue for me is around family and about support and that's really difficult for anyone who's LGBT you know, to come out and the response they might get from family but I wonder whether for bisexual women there's a particular pressure that because it's seen that they might be able to just choose whether to have a same sex or opposite sex partner that there's a potential for families to put a lot of pressure on them to pick an opposite sex partner rather than the same sex partner.**

R: Yeah, and I think we were talking before about if somebody has come out to their family as bisexual and then has been with a same sex partner, if the family had reacted badly to that and then now they're with an opposite sex partner, the family might be so relieved that oh you've finally you know, seen sense and now you're straight again, that even if that partner then is abusive, it could be very hard to talk to your family about it because you know, they're just so relieved that you're with a man instead of a woman.

C: **Yeah, and I guess the flipside of that is if it's been a struggle to get your family to accept your identity and your girlfriend is then abusive to you, you can see how it would be difficult for someone to share that with their family because they may feel a real pressure about I have got to show that I can be in a same sex relationship and make that work because I'm worried otherwise it's going to feed into all this negativity that my family have.**

R: ...and I think we see that more widely as well. I think sometimes there can be a resistance in the LGBT community to even talk about domestic abuse because people worry that it's going to feed into the myths around same sex relationships that they're dysfunctional, they're not healthy. The norm is a man and a woman and that's how it should be and that if we admit that there is any abuse in same sex relationships, that it will undermine the cause in a way which obviously is not true and we know there's

loads of abuse in heterosexual relationships too. But I think there is an unhelpful sort of silencing sometimes for the benefit of the community as people see it.

C: Yeah because if you struggle for so long, and people have struggled for so long to have their relationships and their identities acknowledged as legitimate and positive, then it can feel risky to then say actually but also we also had problems in our relationships and they're sometimes issues for fear that people with an agenda might take that as a big kind of stick to beat us with.

R: So, given everything we've talked about, what do you think domestic abuse services are missing? What do you want them to be doing differently to support bisexual clients?

C: So, I think first of all monitoring needs to be a lot better so people need to be asking all their service users about their sexual orientation and gender identity but I think in order for that to happen really effectively is that workers need to know why they're asking that question and what happens with that information. It's not uncommon to hear in the training room that people are quite anxious about asking because they often feel it's a very private and personal issue, and yes it is personal information but I think sometimes there is an insinuation that it's not just personal but it's shameful in some way, and I never have an issue with someone asking me my sexual orientation. In fact I quite like it because it makes me feel that people haven't made an assumption about me, and it means that I have an opportunity to kind of claim my identity, but I think also I'd like to know where that information's going and what it's been asked for.

So, I think that's one thing making sure staff are equipped to ask that question confidently and asking it and not making assumptions. I think not assuming that because somebody comes to your service they're in a heterosexual relationship or were in a heterosexual relationship that you then don't need to ask that question because you kind of know what their identity is. That's really important, and I think if you are supporting someone that's bisexual, being curious around any potential problems that that could pose for them in terms of their family response and the support network that they have, problems that they might be facing in accessing services, I think asking questions around previous relationships and whether there is a risk from previous partners, whether there is you know, a current partner. Just everything that we know that Idvas are great at, that curiosity around you know, where the risk might be and not making assumptions but really being prepared to talk to someone about, so you know, where are the risks for you and you know, tell me more about what's going to help you. What's going to be supportive? And I think in terms of safety planning, it's just really helpful if Idvas have an idea around what some of the barriers might be to somebody accessing all the safety options we would usually sort of recommend. So, you know, how...if this is a bisexual woman who's being abused by a female partner, how confident is she to report that to the police for example? Does she feel able to do that? If you know, if refuge was going to be an option presented to her, does she feel confident about going into refuge or is she concerned about biphobia for example? So, not assuming that things will be difficult for people but being prepared to have a conversation with them and ask.

R: What do you think can be done about the way services will advertise themselves or make themselves available to bi people? Because you said that you know, you might not feel gay enough for an LGBT service for example?

C: Yeah, and it's...I think there's a balance because we know that domestic abuse is a gendered crime and so you know, that's just borne out particularly by our homicide statistics, but I think it's really important that services don't assume

that bisexual women are going to feel that a service is for them just because they say you know, you're not excluded. It's not enough to just not exclude people. You have to be really proactive in your inclusion, so that means your imagery needs to depict same sex relationships. You know, the language, the not assuming that it's a male partner that you know, when somebody is talking about a previous relationship not using the word ex-boyfriend or ex-husband because you've applied this heterosexual lens and it's not easy because I think even as somebody as you know, that's bisexual and you might have had this experience as well, but because we grow up in such a hetero-centric world that I even...I think I catch myself doing that sometimes because you're so...it's so engrained in you to see the world as heterosexual that it is easy for people to slip into that. So, it's just being really aware I think.

R: Yeah.

C: So, it's been really good to record this podcast with you because you know, something we said is that there can be a tendency for LGBT to be lumped together in a really unhelpful way and that people's identities can get a bit lost in that. So, it's been really good to be able to have a focus on bisexual women, and obviously this is part of our week of focus on lesbian and bisexual women and we've got lots more coming up in the Spotlight series. Is there anything in particular you're looking forward to hearing more about or reading more about over the Spotlight series?

R: I think I'm quite looking forward to reading and hearing more about relationships for gay and bisexual men because it's something that's so far removed from my own experience and that doesn't get talked about enough I think in the context of domestic abuse. I think that will be really interesting.

C: Brilliant. Thank you Ruth. Thanks so much for joining me on this podcast.

R: Thank you.