

Comparison of Bisexual and Heterosexual Women's Experiences of Domestic Abuse

Key Findings

- Bisexual women are more likely to face distinct forms of abuse as a result of biphobia and/or harmful myths about the behaviours of bisexual women.
- They are also more likely to have experienced previous domestic abuse and to have been through adverse childhood experiences, as well as to have additional needs in areas including mental health and finance.
- Domestic abuse services often provide good support for bisexual victims/survivors who do have additional needs.
- Bisexual victims/survivors are less likely than heterosexual victims/survivors to say the police made a difference to their safety and wellbeing, but twice as likely to say that specialist services had, highlighting the need both for the police force to improve its relationship with the LGBT+ community and also for specialist services to be given adequate funding.

Key Recommendations

- Increase funding for LGBT+ specialist services. SafeLives' A Safe Fund report recommends that £10 million would be needed to ensure full provision for LGBT+ victims/survivors of domestic abuse across England and Wales.¹
- Staff in non-specialist services to receive training so that they feel confident asking a victim/survivor about their sexuality and understand how their sexuality can affect their experiences of abuse and surrounding needs.
- Police forces to receive training to enable them to better understand the dynamics of domestic abuse when experienced by bisexual women so they are able to respond appropriately to these incidents and provide the necessary support to victims/survivors.

Introduction

This briefing looks at the experiences of domestic abuse survivors who are bisexual women and compares them to those of heterosexual women, particularly in relation to the types of abuse they experienced and the work done to support them by domestic abuse services.²

There has been limited research on the experiences of people within this community, and while some progress has been made through research on the experiences of the LGBT+

¹ SafeLives (2020). *A Safe Fund. Costing Domestic Abuse Provision for the Whole Family*. Available at: https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/A%20Safe%20Fund%20costing%20domestic%20abuse%20provision%20for%20the%20whole%20family%20in%20England%20and%20Wales_0.pdf.

² Where this report refers to 'bisexual' or 'heterosexual' victims/survivors, it is referring only to bisexual or heterosexual women.

community as a whole (including through SafeLives' [Spotlights series](#) and its [Free to Be Safe](#) report), it is important to understand that different parts of this community can experience abuse in different ways. Recent figures suggest that bisexual women are almost three times as likely as heterosexual women to experience any form of domestic abuse, and that domestic abuse is experienced by over 50% more bisexual women than lesbians.³ In addition, while the majority of bisexual victims/survivors have male perpetrators, those who are victims/survivors of female same-sex domestic abuse consider that their abuse is not taken seriously by the police.⁴ It is therefore important to look at this group in greater depth to better understand the abuse they are experiencing so that policies and services are better equipped to support their needs.

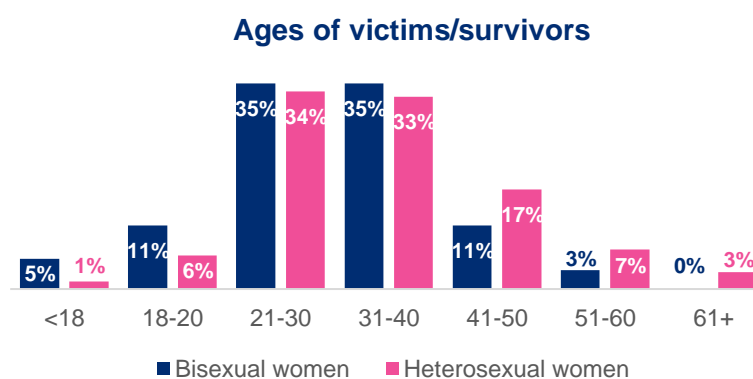
This briefing takes data from SafeLives' Insights national database, a database that collects information on victims/survivors of abuse from a number of domestic abuse services across the UK who work on the frontline (including Idva, Isva and outreach services), and uses this to take a more detailed look at the experiences of their bisexual victims/survivors. As this database was set up to collect data about victims/survivors at risk of serious harm or homicide, the data in this report is based predominantly on more serious cases and is therefore not a representation of the average case supported by domestic abuse services.

Insights data was taken from the beginning of April 2018 to the end of November 2020, during which time 15,361 cases were opened and 10,994 were closed across 23 services. Of these, 164 cases involving bisexual women and 13,239 cases involving heterosexual women were opened, and 123 cases involving bisexual women and 9,562 cases involving heterosexual women were closed. None of these services were LGBT+ specialist services, although some may have employed specialist LGBT+ Idvas (independent domestic violence advisors).

This briefing focuses on the experiences of one group of victims/survivors, bisexual women, and compares these to the experiences of heterosexual women, so as to ensure clarity of focus on the needs of this particular group. It would however be beneficial in the future to do similar analyses on other groups of LGBT+ victims/survivors, including potentially comparisons between groups, in order to better understand their experiences and the support they receive from services.

Bisexual women were younger, more likely to be Black, more likely to have a disability and more likely to be unemployed

The bisexual women in our dataset were younger on average than the heterosexual women, and 16% of bisexual victims/survivors were under 20 years old, compared with 7% of heterosexual women.⁵ There was also a higher proportion of bisexual women who were Black compared with the heterosexual cohort (5%



³ Office for National Statistics (2020). 'Domestic abuse prevalence and victim characteristics', year ending March 2020. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/domesticabuseprevalenceandvictimcharacteristicsappendixtables>.

⁴ Government Equalities Office (2018). *National LGBT Survey: Research Report*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/721704/LGBT-survey-research-report.pdf.

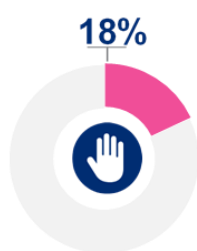
⁵ Wherever statistics are given for both bisexual and heterosexual groups, the difference between the two groups is statistically significant at the p=0.05 level.

compared with 2%). Bisexual victims/survivors were over twice as likely to have a disability than heterosexual victims/survivors (27% compared with 13%), with the most common forms of disability being a mental health condition (48%), a physical disability (29%) and a learning difficulty (19%).

Bisexual women were also more likely to be unemployed than heterosexual women, with 57% of bisexual victims/survivors being unemployed compared with 48% of heterosexual victims/survivors. However, this may be partially due to the fact that bisexual victims/survivors were more likely to both be younger and have a disability.

Bisexual women were more likely to have experienced previous domestic abuse and over two and a half times more likely to have been through an adverse childhood experience

Bisexual women were more likely than heterosexual women to have experienced sexual abuse (38% and 24% respectively) and harassment and stalking (70% and 59% respectively). Of those who had experienced sexual abuse, bisexual women were more likely to have been forced to perform sexual acts (22% of bisexual women compared with 13% of heterosexual women) and of those who experienced jealous and controlling behaviour, they were more likely to have been irrationally accused of infidelity (35% and 27% of bisexual and heterosexual victims/survivors respectively). The prevalence of these sorts of abusive behaviours may be connected to the fetishisation of bisexual women along with myths that they will be more sexually active and promiscuous, which can lead abusive partners to expect more sexualised behaviour from them both within and outside of the relationship.⁶



Almost one in five
bisexual victims/survivors
had a female perpetrator

Bisexual victims/survivors were also six times more likely to have a female perpetrator (18% of bisexual women compared with 3% of heterosexual women). This includes 16% of bisexual women with a female perpetrator who were experiencing intimate partner violence. Domestic abuse is often portrayed as a man abusing a female partner, which means that women with non-male perpetrators may be less likely to identify what they are experiencing as abuse or, if they do recognise that they are experiencing abuse, they may believe that services are unlikely to take them seriously.⁷

In addition, there is a misconception among members of the public and also sometimes among professionals that female to female abuse is less dangerous, which ignores both the fact that female perpetrators can still be capable of very significant physical harm (80% of bisexual women with female perpetrators had experienced physical abuse, of which 54% was high level physical abuse) and that non-physical abuse can be at least as damaging to a victim.⁸ Given the high proportion of bisexual victims/survivors with female perpetrators, it is important that domestic abuse services actively promote the fact that they support victims of same-sex violence as well as ensure that all staff are trained to understand the potential severity of female to female abuse.

In addition, it is important to note that 81% of bisexual women had an abuser who was a male partner or ex-partner. Over one-third (36%) of bisexual and lesbian women who have been abused say that health professionals assume that they are heterosexual, and this is likely to

⁶ Davies, R. (2018). 'Sophie's story', *SafeLives*, 18 April. Available at: https://safelives.org.uk/practice_blog/sophies-story; SafeLives (2018). *Bisexual women and domestic abuse – Ruth and Colette from SafeLives* [Podcast]. 6 March. Available at: <https://soundcloud.com/domestic-abuse-podcast/bisexual-women-and-domestic-abuse-ruth-and-collette-from-safelives>; SafeLives (2018). *Supporting bisexual and lesbian women: Evelyn Sharpe, Rise* [Podcast]. 14 March. Available at: <https://soundcloud.com/domestic-abuse-podcast/supporting-bisexual-and-lesbian-women-evelyn-sharpe-rise>.

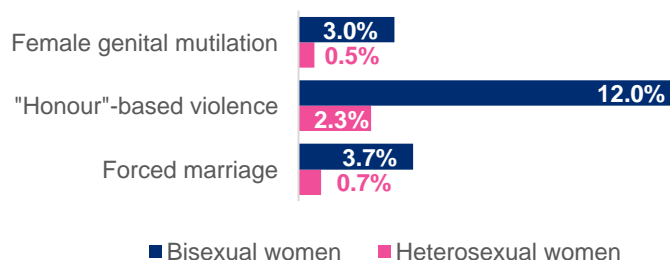
⁷ SafeLives (2018). *Supporting bisexual and lesbian women: Evelyn Sharpe, Rise*

⁸ Ibid.

be more prevalent for bisexual women who have been abused by a man, particularly when the male perpetrator was their partner.⁹ Making these sorts of assumptions about a person's sexuality can make the process of disclosing abuse even more difficult for the victim/survivor as the burden is then placed on them to contradict these assumptions.¹⁰ In addition, in assuming that bisexual women are heterosexual, services may overlook the likelihood that these women may have faced distinct forms of abuse as a result of biphobia, as well as any potential additional needs that a victim/survivor may be more likely to have, which are discussed below.

Almost three times as many bisexual women had multiple perpetrators compared with heterosexual women (22% and 8% respectively), and bisexual victims/survivors were much more likely to have previously experienced domestic abuse (65% of bisexual victims/survivors compared with 44% of heterosexual victims/survivors). Of those who had been abused previously, bisexual women were more likely than heterosexual women to have experienced domestic abuse by a previous partner (35% and 21% respectively), abuse by a family member (9% compared with 4%), and over five times as likely to have experienced direct abuse as a child or young person (16% compared with 3%). They were also around five times as likely to be subject to forced marriage (3.7% of bisexual women compared with 0.72% of heterosexual women) and 'honour'-based violence (12% compared with 2.3%). All this suggests that bisexual women's sexuality not only increases their chances of experiencing particular abuses from partners, but also increases their risks of being abused by family members, some of which may occur as a result of biphobic family members learning of the victim/survivor's sexuality. It is clearly necessary therefore for services to consider these risks when working with these victims/survivors.

Victim/survivors experiencing other forms of abuse



Bisexual women were also two and a half times more likely to have experienced an adverse childhood experience than heterosexual women (48% compared with 19%), of which the most common were exposure to domestic abuse (46%), verbal abuse (43%) and parental separation (42%). They were also more likely to have experienced childhood sexual abuse (37% of bisexual victims/survivors compared with 24% of heterosexual victims/survivors).

Bisexual victims/survivors were more likely at intake to have additional needs in all areas studied, including mental health, immigration and alcohol and drug misuse

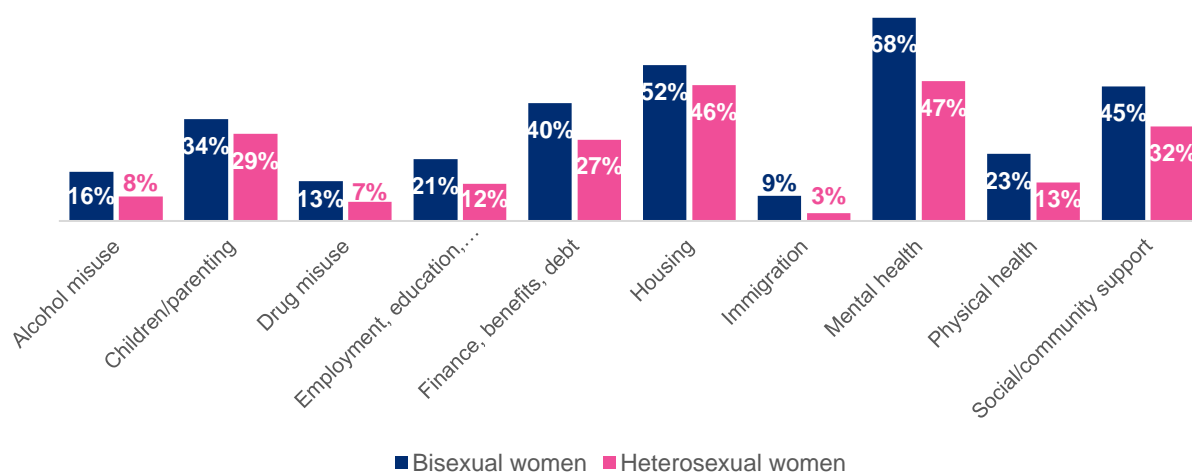
Bisexual victims/survivors were around twice as likely as heterosexual victims/survivors to have additional needs at intake around alcohol misuse (16% compared with 8.3%) and drug misuse (13% compared with 6.5%), and over three times as likely to have additional needs around immigration (8.5% compared with 2.6%). They were also more likely to have additional needs around employment, education and training (21% compared with 12%) and finance,

⁹ SafeLives (2018). *Justin Varney, Public Health England: Lesbian and bisexual women experiencing domestic abuse* [Podcast]. 12 March. Available at: <https://soundcloud.com/domestic-abuse-podcast/justin-varney-public-health-england-lesbian-and-bisexual-women-experiencing-domestic-abuse>.

¹⁰ SafeLives (2018). *Free to be Safe: LGBT+ People Experiencing Domestic Abuse*. Available at: <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Free%20to%20be%20safe%20web.pdf>.

benefits and debt (40% compared with 27%), which may be partly explained by the fact that they were more likely to be younger and have a disability.

Victims/survivors with additional needs at intake



In addition, bisexual women were more likely to have needs around mental health, with over two-thirds (68%) of bisexual victims/survivors having needs in this area (compared with 47% of heterosexual victims/survivors). Given that research has shown that bisexual women in general experience worse mental health outcomes than both heterosexual women and lesbians, it is perhaps unsurprising that this pattern continues for women who have experienced domestic abuse, particularly when this group is more likely to have been through previous abuse and adverse childhood experiences.¹¹ Of those in our dataset with mental health needs, bisexual women were over three times more likely than heterosexual women to be stressed (34% compared with 10%), and almost twice as likely to self-harm (30% compared with 16%) and to be experiencing emotional instability (27% compared with 14%). They were also more likely to have been diagnosed with a mental health condition (69% of bisexual victims/survivors compared with 57% of heterosexual victims/survivors).

Bisexual women had longer cases on average and received good support for their additional needs

Bisexual victims/survivors had longer cases on average than heterosexual victims/survivors, with the average case lasting 21 weeks compared with an average of 14 weeks for

Case length of bisexual victims/survivors



Case length of heterosexual victims/survivors



heterosexual women, and 28% of cases lasting over 8 months compared with only 13% of cases of heterosexual victims/survivors. This may be linked to the fact that bisexual victims/survivors were more likely than heterosexual victims/survivors to have additional needs in all areas recorded by the Insights database, and services therefore needed more time to provide this extra support.

¹¹ Colledge, J. et al. (2015). 'Poorer mental health in UK bisexual women than lesbians: evidence from the UK 2007 Stonewall Women's Health Survey', *Journal of Public Health*, 37(3), pp. 427-437.

Bisexual women also tended to be well-supported when it came to helping improve their safety as well as their additional needs. Given that bisexual victims/survivors were more likely to have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, it is encouraging to see that upon exit from the domestic abuse service, those bisexual victims/survivors who had been supported with their mental health needs were more likely to have been accessing mental health services than their heterosexual counterparts (47% compared with 31%), and that almost a third (32%) had been referred to counselling services and 27% were accessing medication for a mental health condition.

Support provision was also particularly good for bisexual women in the area of alcohol misuse, where 67% of bisexual victims/survivors who were given support regarding alcohol misuse were accessing alcohol support services, and they were also more likely to have reduced their frequency of alcohol intake than heterosexual victims/survivors who had been supported with alcohol misuse (58% compared with 27%). Furthermore, with regards to education, employment and training, the bisexual women who were supported in this area were over three times more likely to have accessed education (60% compared with 18%) upon exit from the service, three times more likely to have accessed training (60% compared with 20%), and over three times more likely to have attended workshops (47% compared with 15%). This suggests that, while bisexual victims/survivors are more likely to have additional needs in many areas when they start working with domestic abuse services, these needs are often identified and steps are taken to address them.

Bisexual victims/survivors were more likely to say they felt safer following support, but less likely to say that the police had made a difference to their safety and wellbeing

The impact of the support provided to bisexual victims/survivors seemed to be mixed, but predominantly positive. While on the one hand, once their case with the domestic abuse services had been closed, fewer bisexual women than heterosexual women had experienced

no abuse since intake (34% compared with 44%), there were fewer bisexual victims/survivors who had ongoing contact with the perpetrator (27% compared with 36%). In addition, bisexual women were more likely than heterosexual women to say that they felt safer (95% compared with 85%), had improved wellbeing (93% compared with 82%) and that their quality of life had improved (89% compared with 77%), suggesting that their personal experience of the support they received had been largely positive.

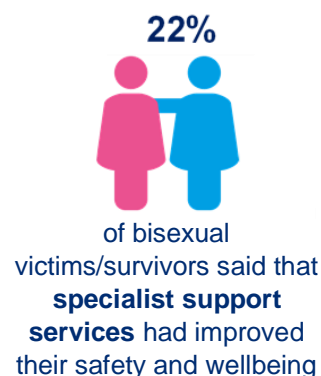
Outcomes reported by victims/survivors



Bisexual women were less likely to say that the police had made a difference to their safety and wellbeing (41% compared with 58%). Research by Stonewall shows that 81% of lesbians and bisexual women who have experienced domestic abuse never reported it to the police, and of those that did, only 49% were happy with how the police had dealt with the situation.¹² While there is growing awareness within police forces that it is important for them to improve their relationships with the LGBT+ community, this research suggests that there is still a good deal of work to be done to ensure that they are giving bisexual women who are victims of abuse the support that they need.

¹² Stonewall (2012). *Domestic abuse: Stonewall health briefing*. Available at: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/Domestic_Abuse_Stonewall_Health_Briefing__2012_.pdf

On the other hand, bisexual victims/survivors were twice as likely as heterosexual victims/survivors to say that specialist services had made a difference to their safety and wellbeing (22% compared with 11%). While this may be partially because bisexual women are probably more likely to have used specialist services since many will have sought the assistance of specialist LGBT+ services, it does demonstrate how crucial these services are to marginalised groups. However, these services are limited both geographically and in terms of capacity, and it is therefore vital that enough funding is invested to ensure that there are enough specialist services to meet demand as well as for staff in non-specialist services to be trained to support bisexual women and other LGBT+ victims/survivors adequately and sensitively.¹³



Conclusion

This briefing has shown that there are some very notable differences between bisexual women who are victims/survivors of domestic abuse, and victims/survivors who are heterosexual women. These include the fact that bisexual victims/survivors are more likely to face distinct forms of abuse as a result of biphobia and/or harmful myths surrounding the attitudes and behaviours of bisexual women. They are also more likely to come to domestic abuse services with a history of traumatic or difficult experiences (such as past domestic abuse or adverse childhood experiences), and to have additional needs in areas such as mental health, finance, and alcohol and drug misuse. This demonstrates how important it is for staff in domestic abuse services to be trained to both understand how a person's sexuality can affect their experiences of abuse and their surrounding needs, and also for them to feel comfortable and confident when asking about a victim/survivor's sexuality, as understanding this can help them to identify any additional issues.

While bisexual women are more likely to have many particular and additional concerns around the domestic abuse they have experienced, it is encouraging to see that on the whole the domestic abuse services who are working with them are managing to support them with these needs. It is clear however that there is still more to be done with regards to areas such as improving the police response to bisexual victims/survivors of abuse, as well as ensuring that specialist LGBT+ services receive adequate funding, both of which will be crucial moving forward if bisexual victims/survivors of domestic abuse are to receive the support that they need and deserve. As of the end of 2020, there were only six voluntary sector providers delivering LGBT+ specialist support, only three services were providing LGBT+ specialist Idvas and only 1% of refuges nationally were providing specialist support to LGBT+ victims/survivors.¹⁴ There is clearly a need for much greater provision of specialist services so that LGBT+ victims/survivors of domestic abuse can feel confident that their needs will be understood and that they will be supported appropriately.

It is important to note that some of the differences in outcomes for bisexual women highlighted in this report, such as their longer case lengths and the good support they received for their additional needs, may be affected by bisexual erasure within the data itself. It is likely that many of the women who were recorded in this dataset as being heterosexual were in fact bisexual but either were not asked about their sexuality by domestic abuse staff or did not feel comfortable disclosing this information. Following this, it is possible that those women who did discuss their sexuality might have been those with whom staff had managed to successfully build a trusting relationship, and an improved relationship between staff and a victim/survivor

¹³ SafeLives (2018). *Free to be Safe: LGBT+ People Experiencing Domestic Abuse*.

¹⁴ Galop. *LGBT+ priorities for the Domestic Abuse Bill*. Available at: <http://www.galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/DVA-Bill-LGBT-Priorities-03102019-final-edit-1.pdf>.

is likely to result in a better understanding of the victim/survivor's needs and therefore better support from services. While it is not possible to assess the extent to which this may have affected this dataset, it does further highlight how important it is for domestic abuse staff to feel confident when asking a victim/survivor about their sexuality and to build a trusting environment where the victim/survivor feels comfortable discussing this.

Further information on the LGBT+ community and domestic abuse can be found in the SafeLives [Free to Be Safe](#) report as well as on the Galop website, including more details on LGBT+ people's [experiences](#) of domestic abuse, [myths and stereotypes](#), details on the importance of LGBT+ [specialist services](#), [barriers faced](#) in accessing non-specialist services and guidance and support for [commissioners](#) to address the current gaps in service provision for LGBT+ people. There is also more information on [key priorities](#) that the Domestic Abuse Bill needs to incorporate in order to better protect the needs of the LGBT+ community.

Nicola Stokes, SafeLives (2021)