



## Spotlight #6: Episode 4

### Podcast transcript

Welcome to Spotlights, the podcast for the domestic abuse sector. In this series SafeLives are shining a spotlight on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans plus people experiencing domestic abuse. In this episode Collette Eaton-Harris meets with Evelyn Sharpe of charity Rise. Rise runs a specialist LGBT refuge project offering temporary accommodation, outreach and resettlement support to medium and high risk LGBT survivors of domestic abuse. Evelyn has worked as an LGBT specialist Idva and here talks about some of the potential barriers faced by Lesbian and bisexual women and highlights good practice points for Idva services to adopt.

- I: Evelyn, thank you so much for joining me in this podcast. You were a specialist LGBT domestic abuse worker, can you say a bit more about why that role was created and why there might be a need for a specialist?**
- E:** Yes, so that role was created at an organisation, Rise, in Brighton and it was part of a specialist project that was developed because it was recognised that there was a known large population of LGBT identified people in that area, yet looking at the amount of out LGBT people who were accessing domestic abuse services, they seemed to be very under-represented. So it was recognised there's perhaps some sort of issue there in terms of accessibility, therefore a specialist project was created. And really, the aim of that was to provide support to LGBT people around domestic abuse that was specialised to their needs and their experiences to try and help increase accessibility into domestic abuse support and to help build links, both with LGBT communities locally and other LGBT community groups and charities that were operating in the local area.
- I: So in your experience then, the forms of abuse being disclosed, were they similar to what we might expect heterosexual victims of domestic abuse to be disclosing in these victims of domestic abuse?**
- E:** We would see some real similarities that some of the forms of abuse could be very, very similar regardless of whether the person experiencing the abuse identified as LGBT or not. However, in addition to those, there are some specific forms of identity abuse that we identified were occurring specifically to LGBT people that were very much linked to their identity. So focusing in on lesbian and bi-sexual women, some things that we were aware of in our project include bi-sexual women who may be experiencing emotional abuse from a partner, whether that partner is a woman or a man and that abuse could be really focused on that person's bi-sexual identity, perhaps accusing them of being unfaithful or challenging the validity of their identity as bi-sexual. Another thing that we noticed supporting lesbian and bi-sexual women was a trend where we supported a number of women who had come out as lesbian or bi-

sexual later in life and who may, as part of that, ended a relationship with a male partner. And in some cases, if that male partner was abusive, there might be some very specific post-separation abuse that would occur that would be very much linked to her identity as lesbian or bi-sexual. They might also be told, if they had children, that being gay or bi-sexual meant they were an unfit mother and they could specifically experience some homophobic abuse.

We also found through our work that one of the ways in which people could be abused was through threats to out that person as LGBT, particularly if that person was not openly LGBT in all areas of their life. So they might, for whatever reason, not be out in their workplace or with extended family members and in some cases we knew that, particularly with family, that the survivor of abuse might be aware that it would really damage relationships or that they would be rejected or ostracised if their family were to become aware of them being LGBT. So that meant that it could have a particularly controlling and threatening effect, if they were threatened with being outed. Often that might be in relation to if you leave the relationship or if you don't comply with what you're being told to do, that you will be outed. Probably one of the main other ways in which we saw, kind of, different forms of abuse occurring against lesbian and bi-sexual women, would be in relation to families of origin. So in some cases someone might be from a family who hold homophobic or bi-phobic views or generally do not feel supportive of that person identifying as anything other than heterosexual and in those cases, that person might at times experience some specific abuse from their family that was very much centred on their sexual orientation, that seemed to be in response to them having come out. Potentially in some cases that can even link into issues such as so-called honour based violence or forced marriage that's been particularly triggered by that person coming out as lesbian or bi-sexual within a family who deem that to be unacceptable.

**I: So really for some clients there's going to be a risk beyond their current partner, there's going to be risk posed by previous partners, by family members and I guess some people also concerned about homophobic hate crime in the local area that they live in as well. So multiple perpetrators for some people?**

E: Yes, definitely.

**I: And in terms of how domestic abuse is often portrayed, usually it's depicted as a physically stronger man being violent to his female partner, how do you think that could impact on women's ability to identify abuse within their relationship with another woman?**

E: I think that for lots of women, in my experience, who are experiencing domestic abuse where they are not heterosexual, where the perpetrator is not necessarily a man, they may, sort of, genuinely believe that their experience does not fit within the definition of domestic abuse. They may have made an assumption that domestic abuse as a term really only applies to cases where a man is abusing a woman in an intimate relationship. That's a massive barrier to them being able to acknowledge their experience for what it is and seek support, and believe that they will be treated with respect, that it will be taken seriously and that there will be help there. And, of course, for a controlling and abusive partner, they are likely to try and really reinforce that idea that what's going on isn't actually abuse and that there won't be any realistic prospect of support out there.

We know that for all survivors of domestic abuse, regardless of their gender, regardless of their sexual orientation, that minimising both the severity and the impact of the abuse they're experiencing is a very normal coping strategy in response to that trauma. So, for a lesbian or bi-sexual woman, they are likely to minimise their experience and on top of that, you've got the impact of the fact that their relationship

may not fit what they have assumed is the way that domestic abuse tends to look. There can also be a misconception amongst members of the public and professionals that abuse that's happening from one woman to another is likely to be less dangerous. They may make assumptions based on things like body size, height, strength, stereotypes about women and men, but that isn't necessarily the case. Of course, if someone really wants to cause significant harm, they often will find a way to do that, they may use weapons to do that, we don't want to ever downplay the risk that that person might be at. And that's, kind of, focusing in on the risk of significant physical harm, which we know is not the whole picture.

So, you know, survivors of domestic abuse will tell us that this is always accompanied by a pattern of control and typically belittlement and emotional abuse, which can have an absolutely devastating effect on someone's self esteem and someone's wellbeing and that's really, kind of, separate to physical violence. So we need to be remembering that as well and never, sort of, downplaying the potential risks that someone might be facing on the basis of gender. I think it's just sometimes also very hard for lesbian and bi-sexual women who've experienced abuse to find other peers, other women who have been through similar experiences, where they've experienced abuse potentially from a female partner, and that can be challenging as well in terms of levels of isolation and being able to feel that they're not alone or that they're not the first person who's experienced this happening to them.

**I: So, what do you think services need to do, therefore, in order to make themselves more accessible so that lesbian and bi-sexual women recognise them as services for them?**

E: I think that much of the domestic abuse support for women that's delivered across the country, is delivered by specific women's services and those services, understandably, often want to talk about the issue of domestic abuse using gendered language in their literature and promotional materials, and that's important to those services because what they want to acknowledge is that whilst domestic abuse can and does happen to anyone, regardless of gender, that it is an issue, it's a crime that disproportionately affects women. So we do see a disproportionate number of heterosexual women who've experienced abuse from men reporting domestic abuse and seeking support for it. And many women's services, they want to be really clear and they don't want to hide that, they want to talk about the gendered nature of the crime.

Alongside that, what can be really useful is to also make it really explicit that they are also able to support lesbian and bi-sexual women, because it may well be that lots of lesbian and bi-sexual women might look at the promotional material for services, might look at the imagery that's used on advertised material and posters and things like that, especially because they may be feeling pretty low in terms of their confidence and self esteem and in their expectations, they may make an assumption that that service is not able to support them. That is a big barrier, so what I would say is, that it's really useful for all services to make it really clear about the range of people that they can support so that no one makes an assumption, a wrong assumption, that that service won't work with them and therefore remains unsupported.

I think it's also really useful for services to consider their staff training. They may want to consider the need to have a specialist LGBT post or project, that may not always be something that is possible, but it can also be considering about whether the whole staff team, or perhaps just one or a small group of individuals are identified perhaps as LGBT champions and they receive additional training. I think that's a very supportive measure and that can help services identify sometimes some of the subtle ways that they may have accidentally ended up being perhaps not completely accessible to lesbian and bi-sexual women, or perhaps giving the impression that they only work

with heterosexual women. I think the other thing that is very useful, is for services to carry out accurate monitoring so they know the identities of the people they're supporting in their organisation, they know any gaps in terms of any under-represented groups in their services.

It's also really useful to make some links with local LGBT groups, LGBT services so that they are aware of what support for domestic abuse is out there and there may be some joint working that can happen in that area to enable accessibility and enable people to access support.

**I: I just wanted to pick up on something you said there around monitoring, because sometimes people express a concern, an anxiety about asking women their sexual orientation, their identity as part of the intake process. Some people feel that it's an intrusive question to ask, so I just wanted to ask what advice you would have on practitioners asking those questions and how they do that sensitively?**

**E:** I think it's a really common anxiety for practitioners and I would say that it is a useful process to go through. It's really common for services to routinely have questions or paperwork that they use to ask service users about many different aspects of identity and, in my experience, it is often questions such as the question as to sexual orientation that can bring up particular anxiety for practitioners, and sometimes that includes feeling that it's, you know, it's very, very private and personal information and that it's extremely intrusive or that perhaps it's irrelevant information that we don't need to be gathering it in the same way we might need to be gathering information about, for example, any physical accessibility needs. But, coming from a background of working in an LGBT specialised service, I would say that it is a very useful process and it is an important process.

It informs lots of different things, so for example, it provides a picture, it builds up, in a sense, a body of research about who is and who isn't disclosing domestic abuse and seeking support for domestic abuse in any given local area or service. It then enables services to identify any particular gaps in terms of any groups of people who appear to be under-represented in terms of those accessing support from their service and they can consider that in relation to what's known about the identities of the local population and whether it may be that actually they need to be doing something additional to try and increase accessibility. If a service is wanting to apply for funding, or make a case for having a specialist worker or project, monitoring information is going to be very useful to back that up.

And also on a more individual, personal basis, it can help guide support for that survivor of domestic abuse in some cases. So, for example, a lesbian or bi-sexual woman might phone a domestic abuse helpline feeling very unsure about whether or not that service will support her or will adopt an affirming and positive stance towards her identity, and if the worker on the phone proactively asks her about how she identifies her sexual orientation, that sends a message to her that that service isn't making an assumption that she's heterosexual and that they are open to the fact that she may identify her sexual orientation in another way than heterosexual and that they're not embarrassed about it as an issue. So, that's quite a positive message to send out.

Additionally, it might be that someone is experiencing some really specific abuse linked to their identity as lesbian or bi-sexual and actually that can form part of the risks against them. So by that worker asking them how they identify, that opens up a conversation where they may feel more comfortable and safer to disclose that and that then may enable them to be able to get some support specifically around that risk. That might not have come to light otherwise and therefore it impacted the safety

planning and the support and advice that they would have been offered. So, potentially it can have some really big implications. In terms of how best to approach the question, I think that one of the things that's important is for the practitioner who's gathering that information, to try really hard to not appear embarrassed or shameful, because that gives a message to the client that perhaps their sexual orientation is a bit embarrassing or a bit shameful, or that the worker is going to respond in somewhat of a negative way.

So I'd encourage everyone to be confident, not to appear embarrassed, to be upfront, common wording might be just asking someone, how do you identify your sexual orientation. You can tell the client beforehand that these are questions that you ask everyone, that they don't have to answer them if they don't want to, that they're used for gathering information about the range and diversity of people accessing the service and, of course, some of them might not want to answer and that's absolutely fine. But I would really encourage services to be routinely gathering this information and to see the value of it.

**I: And, you know, a point you've made there is around how it might inform how you tailor a support plan to that person. So, just thinking about that specifically in terms of safety planning, what might domestic abuse workers need to consider in terms of safety planning for a lesbian or bi-sexual woman?**

**E:** So, I mean any safety planning needs to be really tailored to the individual clients, to their specific situation, to the risks that they're facing and really importantly, it needs to be tailored to what the client wants, where they're at, what their hopes are. So that's, kind of, those are good practice points for any safety planning. That means that developing a personalised and tailored safety plan for a lesbian or bi-sexual woman is often going to involve some specific considerations that may link to her identity as lesbian or bi-sexual. There are a few things to be aware of. One of them is that for some lesbian or bi-sexual women, not all, it might be that they socialise in very close knit friendship groups and it may be that them and a partner are, sort of, both very much a part of that in equal measure. So you may want to consider, perhaps if that person is thinking about leaving the relationship, about how they're going to maintain social support and not become isolated.

Also about any considerations with information sharing with other people within LGBT communities, ensuring that they're only sharing information with people they feel confident can keep that confidential. I think it's also good to do some myth busting at times. So, for example, some LGBT parents will have made an assumption that perhaps their identity will be seen as a negative thing as a parent. The person that's abusive to them might have told them that social services would consider it to be a child protection issue, for example, for a mother to be lesbian or bi-sexual, which of course we know isn't the case and it's important to myth bust that. I think also for services supporting lesbian and bi-sexual women, particular a woman where the perpetrator of abuse is also a woman, just something for practitioners just to be a little bit mindful of, is just that slight increased potential that perhaps the perpetrator of abuse might be able to impersonate the survivor to try and extract information from services.

Often women's services can be very used to supporting women who have by and large experienced abuse from men, so that's just something for practitioners to hold in mind in terms of information sharing.

**I: Evelyn, thank you so much for joining us on this podcast. A lot of points for people to consider in their practice, so thank you again.**

**E:** Thank you, you're welcome.

**For more information on Rise services please visit [www.riseuk.org.uk](http://www.riseuk.org.uk). Rise LGBT refuge project is offered to medium and high risk LGBT survivors of domestic abuse aged 18+. Referral to the LGBT Refuge project can be made directly to the caseworker on 07446 667 072 or via the Rise freephone number on 0300 323 9985. Additionally, Rise at the Portal offers some specialist provision within its services to support LGBT people in the community who are currently experiencing domestic abuse in Brighton and Hove. You can refer via [theportal.org.uk](http://theportal.org.uk) and the criteria for accessing this service is detailed on the referral form.**