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FOR KNOWLEDGE ON MEN'S  
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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# Summary of “Violence in Same-sex Relationships – a Knowledge and Research Report”

# Summary

The purpose of this report is to describe the current state of international and Swedish research on violence in same-sex relationships. Different disciplines and fields in which this issue has been studied are presented; as well as the dominant theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. In the initial chapter, the reader is introduced to the terminology and general concepts, which provide a background regarding the theoretical perspectives in this field. Subsequently, the major international studies and their subjects are described; followed by Swedish studies and reports. Central themes, problems and areas of particular interest are then discussed. Lastly, a number of topics in different disciplines are suggested, pointing out the need for further research, in a Swedish context.

Violence in same-sex relationships is a relatively young research field, which was introduced in the USA, during the 1980's. Research has been conducted within several scientific areas, such as: psychology, medicine, social work, law, criminology, gender research and media studies. There are some seminal works, but most research has been published as scientific articles. The majority of the studies deal with violence in lesbian relationships. There are considerably fewer studies about homosexual men subjected to violence by their partners. Furthermore, knowledge about violence in bisexual and trans-gendered persons' relationships is limited.

When it comes to studies investigating the prevalence of violence within same-sex relationships, they show a variation in frequency, both among lesbian couples and gay men. The variation is explained by the different definitions of violence, as well as differences in the selection process. Since there are no demographic statistics on people living in same-sex relationships, it is difficult to base studies on a representative population. As a consequence existing prevalence studies, to a large extent, are based on sample populations. Thus, given that most of the research has focused on violence within established couples, very little is known about the occurrence of violence committed by a temporary partner or an unknown perpetrator. Another consequence is that the exposure to violence among younger as well as older groups has been investigated to a comparatively small extent.

There is a consensus regarding the similarities between partner violence within heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Physical, psychological and sexual violence as well as financial control and threats of violence have been identified both in heterosexual and in same-sex relationships. Several theoretical models have been developed in order to explain the occurrence of violence. These studies can be divided into those which explain violence based on individual behaviour (micro level) and those which assume structural explanations (macro level). The common factor for both perspectives is, however, that violence is described as a means of exercising power. Concerning the significance of gender, it is assumed that general gender relations and power structures, in which men have a dominant position over women, have an impact on couples regardless of whether they are homo- or heterosexual. However, homophobic and heterosexist structures often lead to alienation and an increased risk of isolation, creating particular conditions for

those living in same-sex relationships. Individual and structural aspects have also been combined in research, using a so-called socio-psychological perspective.

Moreover, the effects of homophobia and heteronormativity have been examined in relation to “minority stress”, which is the psychosocial stress that gay and lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered persons may experience, being in a minority position. One example of such stress is internalised homophobia. This refers to the phenomenon in which gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered persons themselves incorporate the negative attitudes of society into their self-image. Internalised homophobia has also been identified as a risk factor that may lead to an increase of violence within these groups. Indeed, incidents of heterosexist discrimination correlate with the committing of physical and sexual violence against a partner of the same sex. Research also shows that lesbians and gay men, to a much larger extent than heterosexual women and men, are subjected to physical assaults in public. Consequently, it is of great importance to study occurrences of violence in a broader perspective.

During the twenty-first century, an increasing number of studies have originated from a so-called intersectional approach. An intersectional approach implies that different structural positions such as gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity are studied in an integrated way, so that several parallel power perspectives can be taken into account at the same time. Analysing the social environment is also important in order to understand and interpret violence in a relationship. A person’s financial resources, for example, may play an important part concerning his or her possibilities to leave a violent relationship.

Another subject that has been studied is whether drug abuse and violence in the family of origin has an impact on violence in same-sex relationships. In these studies, patterns of violent behaviour are explained as something that is passed on between generations and is assumed to originate from the power structures within the family. In fact, there is a significant correlation between experiences of psychological, physical and sexual violence during childhood and similar experiences in relationships in adult life. During recent years, research has shown that health factors in adult life such as: depression, alcohol and drug abuse as well as sexually transmitted disease, also correlate with experiences of partner violence.

Knowledge about sexual violence in same-sex relationships is limited. However, some studies show that heteronormative beliefs about gender and sexuality affect views on sexual violence, in particular on who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. The idea of men as sexually active and virile and women as sexually passive recipients confounds the notion of men as victims of rape and women as perpetrators of sexual violence. As a consequence men, more often than women, feel part of and guilty of the crime committed against them, although the majority of men exposed to violence report that they were unable to defend themselves. Due to feelings of shame and guilt, many male rape victims do not report the assault to the police, nor do they seek medical care or support from friends and family. A problem when it comes to lesbians, who are exposed to sexual violence by a female partner, is that the law in many countries solely defines penetrative sex as rape. This has had an impact on the possibilities for lesbians to make their experiences of sexual violence understandable as well as legally valid. Research on trans-gendered people’s vulnerability to sexual violence in a relationship is scarce. However, there are studies indicating that lack of knowledge leads to inadequate health care for trans-gendered persons.

Few lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gendered persons report partner violence to the police and the unreported cases are estimated to be as high as 95–97 per cent. Also, because of a general anxiety of homophobic reactions, few victims seek support and help from other professional or non-governmental organisations. According to a study on the American police, the female perpetrator in a lesbian couple more often gets detained for minor incidents than the male perpetrator in a gay couple.

There is also little known about lesbian, gay and bisexual parents' exposure to violence in a relationship and there are only few studies covering this topic. The case is the same regarding children's experience of violence in "rainbow families". Nor has young lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gendered people's exposure to partner violence been studied extensively. Though, according to a Norwegian prevalence study in 2007, these groups were exposed to physical, psychological and sexual violence to a much larger extent than their heterosexual counterparts, they were also more likely to be exposed to violence in public places. Gay and lesbian adolescents were also subjected to four times more violence from their parents than heterosexual adolescents.

Relatively few studies about violence in same-sex relationships have been carried out in Sweden, with the exception of a prevalence study that was conducted in 2005. Out of 2013 respondents within the gay and lesbian community, 25 per cent reported that they had experienced physical, sexual and/or psychological violence in a relationship. Only a few had reported the incident to the police or had sought help from an institution or organisation pertaining to persons subjected to partner violence.

The need for more research on violence in same-sex relationships is great. The absence of research in this field results in lack of basic knowledge and evidence-based methods to improve the support of society, to women and men who are exposed to violence in same-sex relationships. Questions about sexual orientation is seldom included in larger population surveys, which leads to limited information on gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered peoples' life conditions and health. An area for particular need of attention in future studies is young respectively older gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered persons' experiences of and exposure to violence.