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## Lesbian Women's Experience of Intimate Partner Abuse: A Phenomenological Inquiry

by  
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### Abstract

Evidence based Irish research examining the experience of female same sex intimate partner abuse (IPA) is nascent. Previous research, policy, and practice concerning IPA has tended to focus on heterosexual women who are victimised by male partners, family members, or other men. This exploratory study was designed to uncover the non-heterosexual female experience of IPA with a female partner. The study is the first qualitative exploration of female same sex IPA to be conducted in Ireland. Situated within an interpretive phenomenological perspective, the research draws on qualitative data generated by semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine women who self-identified as having experienced intimate partner abuse in a previous same sex relationship. Emerging research findings indicate participants experienced diverse forms of abusive behaviour from their female partners, including emotional, physical, identity, sexual, financial, and post-separation abuse. Findings generated from the research process will be used to make recommendations in terms of developing good practice.

### Keywords

intimate partner abuse, lesbian, interpretative phenomenological analysis, Ireland

### Introduction

Intimate partner abuse (IPA) is a phenomenon that pervades societies worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1960s, IPA in heterosexual relationships has been the focus of scholarship throughout the Western world. Extensive research and practice generated primarily by feminist scholars and

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<sup>2</sup> E G Krug et al., 'World Report on Violence & Health' (Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organisation, 2002).

researchers has focussed on male perpetrators of violence in heterosexual relationships.<sup>3</sup> The issue of IPA in lesbian relationships has a relatively recent history, and remains significantly under researched.<sup>4</sup> While the international research community have made inroads to understand same sex IPA most notably in Australia, Canada, the UK and the US, the Irish research evidence base examining this issue is nascent.<sup>5</sup>

Like their Western counterparts, during the 1970s, Irish women's groups coalesced to agitate for legal reforms in areas of domestic and sexual violence.<sup>6</sup> Anti-rape and anti-violence concerns acted as a major mobilising force for Irish women of the period.<sup>7</sup> Traditionally conceptualised as domestic violence, the phenomenon was framed in a heterosexual paradigm where such terms as battered women, battered wives and the battered women's movement framed the social problem.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, IPA research, policy, and practice in

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<sup>3</sup> J Archer, 'Sex Differences in Physically Aggressive Acts between Heterosexual Partners: A Meta-Analysis Review', *Aggression and Violent Behaviour* 7 (2002): 313–51.

<sup>4</sup> K Lobel, ed., 'Lesbian Battering: An Examination', in *Naming the Violence: Speaking out about Lesbian Battering* (Seattle, WA: The Seal Press, 1986), 173–89. Heidi S. Kulkin et al., 'A Review of Research on Violence in Same-Gender Couples: A Resource for Clinicians', *Journal of Homosexuality* 53, no. 4 (2007): 71–87; Carolyn M. West, 'Lesbian Intimate Partner Violence', *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 6, no. 1 (1 January 2002): 121–27, doi:10.1300/J155v06n01\_11; L. K. Burke and D. R. Follingstad, 'Violence in Lesbian and Gay Relationships: Theory, Prevalence, and Correlational Factors', *Clinical Psychology Review* 19, no. 5 (August 1999): 487–512.

<sup>5</sup> Jude Irwin, '(Dis)counted Stories Domestic Violence and Lesbians', *Qualitative Social Work* 7, no. 2 (1 June 2008): 199–215, doi:10.1177/1473325008089630; Janice Ristock, *No More Secrets: Violence in Lesbian Relationships* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Catherine Donovan and Marianne Hester, *Domestic Violence and Sexuality: What's Love Got to Do with It* (University of Bristol: policy Press, 2014); Lori B. Girshick, *Woman-To-Woman Sexual Violence: Does She Call It Rape?* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Women's organisations included, the National Commission on the Status of Women, the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM), Irish Women United (IWU), Women's Aid and the Rape Crisis Centre.

<sup>7</sup> Smyth, A, 'The Contemporary Women's Movement in the Republic of Ireland', *Women's Studies International Forum* 11, no. 4 (1988): 331–41.

<sup>8</sup> Intimate partner abuse is the chosen operational definition for the current thesis as it allows for a more inclusive investigation of the varied forms of abuse that can be experienced including online abuse, and further, moves the analysis away from more traditional research approaches that would have utilised the term domestic violence within a heterosexual relationship context.

Ireland has developed with a primary focus on heterosexual women victimised by male partners, family members, or other men.<sup>9</sup> Although other women experiencing abuse in their relationships were not specifically excluded, and even though lesbian women were active participants in the advancement of domestic and sexual violence services in Ireland, the domestic violence services were, and continue to be, targeted almost exclusively at heterosexual women.<sup>10</sup> Lesbian women are one group who continue to be marginalised in the provision of domestic violence services in Ireland.<sup>11</sup>

There is a dearth of knowledge pertaining to the lesbian experience of IPA and this group of women's engagement with formal supports. An unpublished report conducted in 2013 provides some insight into the level of services used by lesbian and bisexual women experiencing IPA.<sup>12</sup> Using an on-line survey instrument, Miner contacted domestic violence (39), and sexual violence services (18), and LGBT (14) organisations across the Republic of Ireland to assess lesbian and bisexual women's engagement with services over a three-year period. The number of women engaged with an individual programme due to IPA from a female partner was minimal – less than two per year. However, a different picture emerged across Dublin-based services. One refuge provided services to 11 lesbian and bisexual women in

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<sup>9</sup> Patricia Kelleher and Monica O'Connor, 'Making the Links: Towards an Integrated Strategy for the Elimination of Violence against Women in Intimate Relationships with Men', Briefing paper (Dublin: Women's Aid, 1995), Ireland Office of the Tánaiste, 'Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women', Full Report (Dublin: Office of the Tánaiste, April 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Susan McKay, *Without Fear: 25 Years of the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre* (Dublin: New Island, 2005). Crone, Joni, 'Lesbian Feminism in Ireland', *Women's Studies International Forum* 11, no. 4 (1988): 343–47; Smyth, A, 'The Contemporary Women's Movement in the Republic of Ireland'.

<sup>11</sup> Women's Aid is a leading national organisation that has been active in Ireland to stop domestic violence against women since 1974. Despite over forty years of providing services and supports in the domestic violence sector, Women's Aid does not include the female same sex experience of domestic violence in their training and awareness modules, "we don't cover the female same sex experience in our training". Email from the training manager at Women's Aid, to Lynne Cahill, (August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016) (on file with author).

<sup>12</sup> Susan Miner, 'Intimate Partner Violence: Services in Ireland for Lesbian & Bisexual Women', Unpublished (Cork: LINC, August 2013).

2012. The report found evidence of a preference for Helpline type support, with one Helpline service receiving approximately 140 calls relating to same sex IPA from women in 2011.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the LGBT Helpline, a national support service, found callers experience of violence included incidents of IPA alongside disclosures of homophobic and transphobic abuse.<sup>14</sup> The support and information sought by callers in response to a violent experience included the opportunity to discuss the impact of the abuse, to consider personal safety measures and to get information on IPA services.<sup>15</sup> The most frequently sought information was in relation to LGBT-friendly counsellors and psychotherapists. Regarding sexual violence, all Rape Crisis Centres (RCC) provided services to lesbian and bisexual women, however, only one RCC supported a lesbian woman who had experienced sexual violence from a female partner.<sup>16</sup> A preference for counselling and therapy type support by LGBT people is well established in the literature on same sex IPA.<sup>17</sup>

The present research is intended as a first step toward an understanding of the experience of intimate partner abuse for women in same sex relationships. The overall aim of this qualitative study is to develop a theoretical body of knowledge to explain the participants experience of IPA and their help seeking strategies in response to abusive behaviour. However, the focus of this paper discusses a preliminary finding to emerge from the accounts of participants, namely, the finding that lesbian women are experiencing diverse forms of abusive behaviours including emotional, physical, financial, identity, sexual and post-separation abuse.

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<sup>13</sup> Representing 2% of the total number of calls.

<sup>14</sup> Violence, including homophobic and transphobic bullying and abuse represents 4 per cent of support calls. LGBT Helpline (2015). *Annual Report*

<sup>15</sup> LGBT Helpline (2015). *Annual Report*

<sup>16</sup> Miner, 'Intimate Partner Violence: Services in Ireland for Lesbian & Bisexual Women'.

<sup>17</sup> Donovan and Hester, *Domestic Violence and Sexuality: What's Love Got to Do with It*; Catherine Donovan, Rebecca Barnes, and Catherine Nixon, 'The Coral Project: Exploring Abusive Behaviours in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual And/Or Transgender Relationships', Interim Report (University of Sunderland and University of Leicester: Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, September 2014).

Following this introduction section, section two will look at the existing literature examining lesbian intimate partner abuse. Section three provides a description of the methodology, and section four presents the emergent findings. Section five concludes this paper.

### Intimate part abuse in lesbian relationships: What does the literature say?

In comparison to a large body of literature examining heterosexual women's experience of IPA from male partners, the study of IPA occurring in same sex relationships has been described as limited, with a significant lack of scholarly inquiries assessing IPA within LGBT populations.<sup>18</sup> Having said that, there is a growing body of literature that recognises the female same sex experience of intimate partner abuse.<sup>19</sup> Research concerned with lesbian IPA began to gain traction from the mid-to-late 1980s.<sup>20</sup> There is no statistical agreement regarding the prevalence of IPA in lesbian relationships. Some estimates indicate that lesbian IPA is comparable to the rates of heterosexual IPA. Previous studies have found the victimisation rate at between 9.6 % and 73.4%, and the perpetration rate between 17% and 75%.<sup>21</sup> However, empirical reviews estimate a range of between 20% and 50%.<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>18</sup> Kulkin et al., 'A Review of Research on Violence in Same-Gender Couples'; West, 'Lesbian Intimate Partner Violence'; Burke and Follingstad, 'Violence in Lesbian and Gay Relationships'.

<sup>19</sup> Lobel, 'Lesbian Battering: An Examination'; Claire M. Renzetti, *Violent Betrayal: Partner Abuse in Lesbian Relationships* (Newbury Park, Calif: Sage Publications, 1992); Ristock, *No More Secrets: Violence in Lesbian Relationships*; Irwin, '(Dis)counted Stories Domestic Violence and Lesbians'; Rebecca Barnes, "'I'm Over It': Survivor Narratives After Woman-to-Woman Partner Abuse', *Partner Abuse* 4, no. 3 (2013): 380-98.

<sup>20</sup> Lobel, 'Lesbian Battering: An Examination'; L Kelly, 'Unspeakable Acts: Women Who Abuse', *Trouble and Strife: The Radical Feminist Magazine* 21 (1991): 13-20; Renzetti, *Violent Betrayal*; Ristock, *No More Secrets: Violence in Lesbian Relationships*.

<sup>21</sup> Gwat-Yong Lie et al., 'Lesbians in Currently Aggressive Relationships: How Frequently Do They Report Aggressive Past Relationships? (Undetermined)', *Violence & Victims* 6, no. 2 (2 January 1991): 121-35.

G.A. Telesco, 'Sex Role Identity and Jealousy as Correlates of Abusive Behaviour in Lesbian Relationships', *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment* 8 (2003): 153-59.

<sup>22</sup> C E Murray et al., 'Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence: Dynamics, Social Context, and Counselling Implications.', *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counselling* 1, no. 4 (2007): 7-30; T W

variability of these percentages may be due to the lack of a standard definition of IPA across studies, different sampling, and methodological characteristics, an over reliance on convenience samples, and the measure of time periods to which the violence corresponds (e.g., over the lifetime, in the past 12 months, and 6 months).<sup>23</sup>

Key findings from the literature indicate non-heterosexual women are experiencing diverse forms of abuse from female partners including physical, emotional, sexual, identity, financial and post-separation abuse.<sup>24</sup> Lesbian women are not disclosing the experience of IPA because of fear of adding further stigma to an already marginalised community, fear of a homophobic reaction, a lack of trust in formal support services, and a perception they will not be believed or their claims taken seriously.<sup>25</sup> Unlike traditional models of power found in heterosexual abusive relationships, more complex configurations of power have been found in female same sex relationships.<sup>26</sup> For example, Janice Ristock's interviews with one-hundred and two women

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Burke, M L Jordan, and S S Owen, 'A Cross-National Comparison of Gay and Lesbian Domestic Violence', *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 18 (2002): 231–56.

<sup>23</sup> Burke and Follingstad, 'Violence in Lesbian and Gay Relationships'; S C Turrell, 'A Descriptive Analysis of Same Sex Relationship Violence for a Diverse Sample', *Journal of Family Violence* 15, no. 3 (2000): 281–93; Laura Badenes-Ribera et al., 'Intimate Partner Violence in Self-Identified Lesbians: A Systematic Review of Its Prevalence and Correlates', *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 27 May 2015, doi:10.1177/1524838015584363.

<sup>24</sup> Ristock, *No More Secrets: Violence in Lesbian Relationships*; Girshick, *Woman-To-Woman Sexual Violence: Does She Call It Rape?* Renzetti, *Violent Betrayal*; Catherine Donovan and Marianne Hester, "'Because She Was My First Girlfriend, I Didn't Know Any Different": Making the Case for Mainstreaming Same-sex Sex/Relationship Education', *Sex Education* 8, no. 3 (August 2008): 277–87, doi:10.1080/14681810802218155.

<sup>25</sup> Pam Elliot, 'Shattering Illusions': *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 4, no. 1 (16 May 1996): 1–8, doi:10.1300/J041v04n01\_01. Joan McClennen, 'Domestic Violence between Same-Gender Partners: Recent Findings and Future Research', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 20 (2005): 149–54. Catherine Donovan and Marianne Hester, 'Seeking Help from the Enemy: Help-Seeking Strategies of Those in Same-Sex Relationships Who Have Experienced Domestic Abuse', *Child and Family Law Quarterly* 23 (2011): 26.

<sup>26</sup> Ristock, L., 'Exploring Dynamics of Abusive Lesbian Relationships: Preliminary Analysis of a Multisite, Qualitative Study', *American Journal of Community Psychology* 31, no. 3/4 (2003): 329–41; Irwin, '(Dis)counted Stories Domestic Violence and Lesbians'; Donovan, Barnes, and Nixon, 'The Coral Project: Exploring Abusive Behaviours in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual And/Or Transgender Relationships'.

found that, "In their accounts, power is not something that resides fully in one person (the abuser) but is instead relational".<sup>27</sup> Like the heterosexual experience of intimate partner abuse, first relationships create opportunity for abuse, differences occur with access and availability of appropriate support services.<sup>28</sup>

Non-heterosexual people tend not to report to mainstream support services, instead opting for more informal/privatised sources of support.<sup>29</sup> Findings from the first UK national study comparing love and violence in same sex and heterosexual relationships sheds some light on the reasons for the use of informal rather than formal support options. The study found that the dominant approach to understanding IPA is based on a heterosexual model, whereby the violence is understood as being perpetrated by a physically bigger and stronger male partner against a smaller and weaker female. The authors argue the impact of this understanding results in victims of same sex IPA not recognising their experiences as such, and thus, not reporting to police and other formal supports for help.<sup>30</sup> In addition, respondents reported that the police were perceived to be an unsafe or an unreliable source of help due to a lack of awareness about same sex IPA. The study also found evidence of a respondent perception that they would receive an unsympathetic response because of heterosexism.<sup>31</sup> In a similar vein, an unpublished Irish report indicates heteronormative assumptions prevent non-heterosexual women from accessing support.<sup>32</sup> There is also evidence in the Irish research context that LGBT individuals have been assumed heterosexual in the health services sector.<sup>33</sup> Overall,

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<sup>27</sup> Ristock, *No More Secrets: Violence in Lesbian Relationships*, 73.

<sup>28</sup> Ristock, L., 'Exploring Dynamics of Abusive Lesbian Relationships: Preliminary Analysis of a Multisite, Qualitative Study'. Burke and Follingstad, 'Violence in Lesbian and Gay Relationships'.

<sup>29</sup> Donovan, Bames, and Nixon, 'The Coral Project: Exploring Abusive Behaviours in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual And/Or Transgender Relationships'.

<sup>30</sup> Donovan and Hester, 'Seeking Help from the Enemy'.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Miner, 'Intimate Partner Violence: Services in Ireland for Lesbian & Bisexual Women'.

<sup>33</sup> Maria Gibbons et al., 'Recognising LGB Sexual Identities in Health Services: The Experience of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People with Health Services in North West Ireland' (Dublin: Equality Authority, 2008); Edward McCann and Danika Sharek, 'Survey



studies have established that dominant heteronormative understandings of IPA impacts upon recognition of behaviour as abusive in same sex relationships.<sup>34</sup>

Section three begins with a description of the methodology including the inclusion criteria, sampling procedures, recruitment, and data analysis.

## Methodology

### *Inclusion criteria*

The study population belong to a historically marginalised group.<sup>35</sup> In addition to being part of a sexual minority, participants were recruited based on having a previous experience of intimate partner abuse. There would be a certain degree of vulnerability associated with those experiences. Therefore, the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria were designed to minimise additional harm. Only adult women who were no longer involved in an abusive relationship were recruited for interview. Like previous same sex IPA research, the criteria for inclusion was based on a woman being at a minimum of six months to one year removed from an abusive relationship.<sup>36</sup>

### *Sampling*

Women were eligible to participate in the study if they were over 18 years of age, identified as lesbian, bisexual or queer, and had experience of intimate partner abuse with a female in a previous same

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of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People's Experiences of Mental Health Services in Ireland', *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 23, no. 2 (2014): 118–27.

<sup>34</sup> Jude Irwin, 'Lesbians and Domestic Violence: Stories of Seeking Support', *Women in Welfare Education* 8, no. 1 (2006): 28–36; Donovan and Hester, 'Seeking Help from the Enemy'.

<sup>35</sup> Paula Mayock et al., 'Supporting LGBT Lives: A Study of Mental Health and Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People', Main report (Dublin: Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) and BelongTo Youth Service, 2009), [http://www.glen.ie/attachments/SUPPORTING\\_LGBT\\_LIVES\\_-\\_Main\\_Report.pdf](http://www.glen.ie/attachments/SUPPORTING_LGBT_LIVES_-_Main_Report.pdf);

Higgins, A. et al., 'Visible Lives: Identifying the Experiences and Needs of Older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Ireland', Main report (GLEN, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Rebecca Barnes, "'Suffering in a Silent Vacuum": Woman-to-Woman Partner Abuse as a Challenge to the Lesbian Feminist Vision', *Feminism & Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2010): 233–39; Catherine Donovan et al., 'Comparing Love and Domestic Violence in Heterosexual and Same Sex Relationships, 2005-2006', UK Data Archive Study Number, (2006 2005), <http://www.esds.ac.uk/doc/6332/mrdoc/pdf/6332uguide.pdf>.

sex relationship. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the study, the researcher felt it would be inappropriate to ask participants to suggest others for interview. Intimate partner abuse is a sensitive topic primarily because of the potential threat it poses to the women who agree to share their experiences with the researcher, in that, the topic has the potential to arouse emotional responses.<sup>37</sup> For this reason, the primary focus during interviews was on the participant and their unique experience of IPA. Participants were not asked if they knew of other women with a similar experience as this would create a distraction, and pull the narrative away from their personal experience. Although snowball sampling has proven popular with sensitive research concerning hard-to-reach populations, this was not the case in the Irish research context.<sup>38</sup> Like previous Irish research, the current study found that snowball sampling was *not* an option.<sup>39</sup> One participant had never disclosed the abuse occurring in her relationship with anyone, apart from the researcher, and most women were not aware of others in the same position as themselves.

#### *Recruitment*

A multipronged recruitment strategy was used to promote the study and increase the potential to access a hard-to-reach population. This approach included a) a Service Providers' Forum with key stakeholders from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, front line workers from the Domestic and Sexual Violence support services, and those from counselling and therapy type professional services; b) Community venues sampling was utilised, involving convenience and purposive sampling within LGBT community organisations; c) a promotional research poster was designed and

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<sup>37</sup> K.V. Cowles, 'Issues in Qualitative Research on Sensitive Topics', *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 10, no. 2 (1988): 163–79.

<sup>38</sup> Claire M. Renzetti and Raymond M. Lee, eds., *Researching Sensitive Topics*, Sage Focus Editions 152 (Newbury Park, Calif: Sage Publications, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> Susan A. Miner, 'The Intersectionality of Silences: Parity-Impeding Cultural Norms Impacting on Lesbian Partnerships' (A thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, National University of Ireland, Dublin, 2003). Susan Miner's (2003) unpublished doctoral thesis is the only research in Ireland to exclusively examine the phenomenon of lesbian IPA. Miner's study is predominantly quantitative.

advertised within LGBT, domestic and sexual violence services, and within office spaces providing counselling and therapy type support options.<sup>40</sup> The poster was also advertised on LGBT social media platforms and within LGBT print media. Finally, d) permission was granted by the main administrator of an online Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) social networking club to email over one-thousand of their members.

Following an expression of interest to engage with the study, typically via email, participants were sent an information pack outlining specifically what participation entailed. At the initial point of contact, the researcher established if the study's ethical criteria were met, firstly, that the potential participant was over 18 years of age, and secondly, they were no longer involved in an abusive relationship.<sup>41</sup> If the study's ethical criteria was met, and women indicated that they wanted to proceed after reading the information leaflet, attempts were then made to negotiate a convenient time to meet for interview.

#### *Recruitment limitations*

There are problems inherent with this style of recruitment. The most serious weakness being the limitations on the generalisability of findings. The current study's recruitment strategy targeted organisations that provide services to the LGBT community. Consequently, participants may differ in significant ways from individuals who do not participate, in that they may be better integrated into an LGBT community. This would imply the sample may be more "out" about their sexual orientation than non-participants.<sup>42</sup> Having said that, the recruitment strategy employed can be viewed as a

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<sup>40</sup> Sampling in the community has a long history in LGBT research, as researchers used contacts in the community to access a population that was otherwise impossible to locate. One of the strongest critiques of community venues sampling is that researchers using this approach can only reach individuals who are engaged with the LGBT community, overlooking individuals who are not 'out' in their communities.

<sup>41</sup> Following the initial email correspondence, the researcher arranged a follow up call. During this call, the researcher explained the ethical parameters of the study in that, participants must be 18 years old and that they should be removed from the abusive relationship for a period of six months.

<sup>42</sup> I H Meyer and P A Wilson, 'Sampling in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations', *American Psychological Association* 56, no. 1 (2009): 23–31.

response to overcoming the problems associated with sampling concealed populations.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Data collection*

Research on a sensitive topic that examines the experiences of people is more likely to be undertaken by qualitative methodologies.<sup>44</sup> The primary concern of the current study is to give voice to women who have experienced intimate partner abuse from a female partner. Therefore, the core research method employed was the in-depth, semi-structured interview. In-depth interviews have the potential to yield rich, detailed information pertaining to an experience.<sup>45</sup> Evidence-based Irish research on female same sex IPA could be described as embryonic.<sup>46</sup> Qualitative research methods are particularly well-suited to investigate voices and perspectives of unstudied groups, while further enabling the participants to speak using their own terms of reference and to explore the contexts, complexities, and trajectories of their experiences.<sup>47</sup>

An interpretive phenomenological perspective was chosen as the framework for this research. This approach to qualitative data is concerned with a detailed analysis of human lived experience. Interpretive phenomenological analysis is an approach to qualitative research informed by debates and concepts from three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography.<sup>48</sup> Phenomenology is the philosophical approach to the

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<sup>43</sup> J Faugier and M Sargeant, 'Sampling Hard to Reach Populations', *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 26 (1997): 709–97.

<sup>44</sup> Pranee Liamputtong, *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods* (London: SAGE, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Delbert C. Miller and Neil J. Salkind, *Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement*, 6th Edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> The dearth of knowledge surrounding female same sex IPA is described by the author as embryonic following a comprehensive review of the literature examining the female same sex experience of intimate partner violence.

<sup>47</sup> R K Schutt, *Investigating the Social World: The Process and Practice of Research*, 7th ed. (University of Massachusetts Boston: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2012); Barnes, '“I'm Over It”: Survivor Narratives After Woman-to-Woman Partner Abuse'.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Theory, Method, and Research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009).

study of experience, especially in terms of things that matter to us. Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation with a focus on the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole e.g. to understand any part you must look at the whole, to understand the whole you must look at the parts. Ideography is concerned with the particular rather than attempting to make claims at a population level. A phenomenological analysis is committed to understanding how a phenomenon (event, process, or relationship) has been understood from the perspective of an individual in a particular context. Essentially, it is concerned with how individuals experience, describe, interpret, and understand a phenomenon under investigation.<sup>49</sup>

#### *Data analysis*

Key to an interpretative phenomenological analysis is the provision of both a descriptive account of how participants make sense of their experiences and an account of the researcher's interpretation. The analysis is a "joint product of the participant and the analyst".<sup>50</sup> To achieve a joint production of data, the researcher explored the transcripts using three distinct processes with different focuses, i.e. descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual exploratory commenting. Descriptive comments describe the content of what the participants has said. Linguistic comments focus upon exploring the specific use of language by the participant, for example tone, degree of fluency (articulate or hesitant), laughter, sadness pauses, and repetition. Finally, conceptual commenting represents a move away from the claims of the participant toward an overarching understanding of the issues being discussed. This type of commenting is more difficult for the analyst. You can draw on your own experiences, understandings and perceptions, and/or professional knowledge to interpret the participant's data.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Mel Duffy, 'Lesbian Women's Experience of Coming Out in an Irish Hospital Setting: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 8, no. 4 (December 2011): 335–47, doi:10.1007/s13178-011-0065-y.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Theory, Method, and Research*, 80.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Theory, Method, and Research*.

Overall, the conduct of analysis involves five distinct phases to bring an interview to completion. This typically involves initial note taking, exploratory commenting, developing emergent themes, a search for connections across themes, and finally the creation of superordinate themes.<sup>52</sup> Emergent themes identified are utilised to create a superordinate theme from the participant's data. Superordinate themes are developed by the process of abstraction or subsumption. Abstraction is where the analyst puts like with like and develops a new name for a cluster of emergent themes. Subsumption follows the same process as abstraction but the emergent theme itself acquires a superordinate status.<sup>53</sup> It is crucial that the researcher captures what was important for the participants in the telling of their experience and the themes should reflect both the participant's words and the researcher's interpretation. Essentially, themes should capture the participant's understanding of their experience.

Having outlined the methodological approach applied to the research, this paper now moves on to describe the emergent findings from the study. Research examining IPA has tended to be over-reliant on quantitative methodological approaches that lack detailed and contextual information necessary to understand the complexity of the phenomenon.<sup>54</sup> At the present time, little is known about the personal experience of lesbian intimate partner abuse. This study provides an in-depth insight into the experience of lesbian IPA for nine women. The shame and embarrassment associated with being a survivor of IPA coupled with being a part of a historically marginalised group creates challenges with access to LGBT samples.<sup>55</sup> Regardless of the size of the sample, it is the voices of survivors of lesbian women that are crucial to

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Melissa Corbally, Judy Hughes, and David Delay, 'Gender Arguments and Paradigmatic Challenges within Intimate Partner Violence Research: A Call for a More Inclusive Paradigm of Understanding Regarding Physical Partner Violence Perpetration', *Journal of Family Violence* 31, no. 8 (2016): 1009–12.

<sup>55</sup> West, 'Lesbian Intimate Partner Violence'; S S Owen and T W Burke, 'An Exploration of Prevalence of Domestic Violence in Same-Sex Relationships', *Psychological Reports* 95 (2004): 129–32.

expanding knowledge of this phenomenon.<sup>56</sup> The findings of the present study are drawn from the voices of nine survivors of lesbian partner abuse. In recognition of the small sample size, it is not claimed that these accounts are representative of all women who have experienced intimate partner abuse from another female. Notwithstanding this limitation, the study's emergent findings are in accord with the findings of previous research as will be demonstrated in the discussion section of the paper.

### **Preliminary findings**

#### *Profile of participants<sup>57</sup>*

Nine women took part in the study, ranging in age from 31 – 64 years.<sup>58</sup> Eight participants were Irish, one woman was originally from the UK. Five participants were living in a rural location, one in a city and the remaining three lived in suburban areas. Most women stated they were employed, one unemployed and another retired. Five participants completed a third level degree, two out of the five completed a postgraduate degree including a Masters and a PhD, and four completed their leaving certificate.<sup>59</sup> In terms of relationship status, four were single and not dating, two were in a monogamous relationship, and three indicated they were single and dating. Two participants were biological parents, one woman had a dependent child. Women 'came out' about their sexual orientation between the ages of 17 – 48 years.<sup>60</sup> Women experienced their first same sex relationship between the ages 17 – 34 years.<sup>61</sup> For two participants, the abuse occurred in a first same sex relationship. The duration of relationships ranged from six months to twenty-six years. Four women indicated that they had experienced abuse in more than one same sex relationship. Seven women identified

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<sup>56</sup> G. Giorgio, 'Speaking Silence: Definitional Dialogues in Abusive Lesbian Relationships', *Violence Against Women* 8, no. 10 (2002): 1233–59, doi:10.1177/107780102320562709.

<sup>57</sup> The profiles presented represent information that the participants volunteered during their interview.

<sup>58</sup> The average age was 49.5 years

<sup>59</sup> The Leaving Certificate Examinations, which is commonly referred to as the Leaving Cert is the final examination in the Irish secondary school system.

<sup>60</sup> The average age was 25.5 years.

<sup>61</sup> The average age was 23.8 years.

as lesbian, with two identifying as queer. The women who identified as queer used the terms lesbian and queer interchangeably. Within the following accounts, each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identities.

*Types of abuse experienced by the participants*

Table I Main types of abuse reported by participants

Overall abuse experienced by participants	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
Emotional	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	9
Physical	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes		8
Severe physical	yes	yes	yes			yes	yes	yes		6
Post-separation	yes		yes	yes		yes		yes		5
Sexual	yes	yes		yes					yes	4
Financial	yes	yes					yes	yes		4
Identity		yes	yes						yes	3

\* Items to categorise the different abuse types were informed from previous same sex IPA research.<sup>62</sup>

Findings from the research suggest that participants experienced diverse forms of abuse that include emotional, physical, sexual, financial, identity, and post separation abuse. As can be seen from Table 1, emotional abuse was stated as the dominant abuse type experienced by the nine participants. This form of abuse was typically described as a precursor to experiences of physical violence, although in some cases, the abuse was reported to begin with a physical assault. As Table 2 illustrates, undermining value as a partner, undermining physical appearance, being put down/humiliated, being screamed, and shouted at, being blamed for your partners abusive behaviour, and threats to physically harm exemplify the nature of the most common forms of emotionally abusive tactics experienced by participants.

<sup>62</sup> Items to categorise the multiple forms of abuse identified in the current study were primarily informed by the COHSAR (Comparing Heterosexual and Same Sex Abuse in Relationship) Power and Control Wheel developed Donovan and Hester, *Domestic Violence and Sexuality: What's Love Got to Do with It*; Items to categorise the experience of sexual abuse where informed by Ristock, L., 'Exploring Dynamics of Abusive Lesbian Relationships: Preliminary Analysis of a Multisite, Qualitative Study'.



Table II Main types of emotional abuse

Emotional abuse experienced by participants	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
undermining value as a partner	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	8
being put down/ humiliated	yes	yes	yes		yes		yes	yes	yes	7
shouting & screaming	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes	yes		7
blamed for partners abusive behaviour	yes	yes	yes		yes		yes	yes	yes	7
name calling	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes	yes		7
undermining physical appearance	yes	yes	yes					yes	yes	5
being told what to do		yes	yes				yes	yes	yes	5
threats to physically harm	yes		yes	yes		yes				4
exploiting vulnerabilities	yes	yes	yes					yes		4
playing mind games	yes			yes			yes			3
using children	yes		yes						yes	3
disruption of eating patterns	yes	yes								2
disruption of sleeping patterns	yes	yes								2
threats to kill		yes			yes					2
silent treatment	yes	yes								2
made to feel bad	yes								yes	2
infidelity to punish	yes		yes							2
partner threatening suicide		yes								1
undermining participants family							yes			1
bullied by partner's family							yes			1
threats to jeopardise participants business							yes			1
threat of HIV infection	yes									1
undermining her profession								yes		1
blamed by partner for not having children									yes	1
rearranging home furniture	yes									1

For most participants, verbal abuse such as name calling and the constant undermining of their physical appearance were described as posing the greatest challenge to their sense of self. Women spoke of the long-lasting effects of this type of abuse and the pervasive impact it had upon on their lives, as Saoirse explains:

*“It’s funny the physical abuse I’ve got over, now I have scars and all that but it’s more, like even now what I deal with is the, is the emotional abuse she called do you know. It was just such, such a horr [sic]...a disgusting level”*

The main types of financial abuse reported by participants included partners creating debt and partners expecting the participants to financially support them in all facets of their lives. Two participants spoke of their partners having no financial income over the duration of their relationships. Participants also reported having money and property stolen, and credit cards and bank accounts used without their permission. Two women spoke of losing their homes and were still entangled in legal processes to try extricate themselves from previous lives with an abusive partner. Table 3 provides an overview of the main types of financial abuse identified by the participants.

Table III Main types of financial abuse

Main types of financial abuse	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
expected to pay for nights out etc	yes					yes		yes		3
creating debt	yes	yes					yes			3
full financial dependency	yes						yes			2
participant paying all household bills	yes						yes			2
refusing to take paid employment	yes						yes			2
unauthorised use of credit card	yes						yes			2
unauthorised use of bank account	yes						yes			2
theft of money	yes						yes			2
theft of property	yes						yes			2
withholding financial support			yes							1
refusing to go to work							yes			1
lack of financial resources used to control									yes	1

Identity abuse is defined as threatening to out or outing sexuality, birth gender, gender identity or HIV status. Undermining their sense of self as a lesbian, gay, bisexual man, or women, controlling what she/he looks like, clothes she/he wears, threatening to, or withdrawing medication, hormones, refusing money for gender transition.<sup>63</sup>

Table IV Main types of identity abuse

Main types of identity abuse	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
control over appearance		yes	yes							2
forced to conceal lesbian identity									yes	1
outing sexuality								yes		1
undermining her sexual identity									yes	1

Table 4 illustrates the predominant forms of identity abuse reported by participants. In the current study, identity abuse manifested in relationships where contested identities existed between the couple, with the abusive partner controlling the appearance of the participant. This form of abuse was reported where the abusive partner identified as 'butch' and understood the relationship as having a butch/femme dynamic.<sup>64</sup> However, the participant did not see herself as a femme and further, did not identify with any label to describe her sexuality-

<sup>63</sup> Donovan and Hester, *Domestic Violence, and Sexuality: What's Love Got to Do with It*.

<sup>64</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s, the term butch/femme was popularised among lesbians to describe their relationships. During this period, butch/femme not only described masculine/feminine lesbian couples but also commonly referred to some lesbians' choices to adopt traditional masculine or feminine gender roles. See Jodi O'Brien, *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, vol. Volume 2 (UK: SAGE publications, Inc., 2009).

identity. In such cases, women described being pressured into wearing feminine attire and not being allowed to dress in clothes of their own choosing. The following quotes from Caoimhe's interview confirms this finding,

*Caoimhe: she'd been in the army and she was real eh butch, she wanted me to dress and look a certain way*

*LC: Ok would you see yourself in that butch/femme role?*

*Caoimhe: No, you see I don't, I don't identify as anything like that [ok] She was trying to make me something I'm not"*

Another example of identity abuse, Eabha described being forced "back into the closet". This participant expressed the view that she had been very much a part and connected to the LGBT community prior to this relationship. As a consequence of Eabha's partner not being 'out', she stated she was forced to conceal both her and her partner's sexual identity, refrain from taking career developing employment in the LGBT community, and remove herself from all LGBT community events and activities.

Identity abuse also involved being outed against your wishes. Aisling described being outed by her ex-partner after the relationship ended, she explained:

*you know there were places where I felt comfortable to be out and there were other [sic] that I didn't, and in any case, it was my decision, my choice as to when and if I told someone, where she would just take that power away from me and just do it you know and just out me*

For Aisling, the fear of being outed led her to remove herself from social activity and engagements. Aisling felt "less connected with the lesbian and gay community in Ireland because of that relationship" even though her relationship was over for almost ten years at the time of interview.

The experience of physical abuse was diverse across the nine participants, with eight out of nine women recalling their experience of being physically assaulted. Table 5 illustrates the comprehensive list of physical abuse experienced by participants. The main types of physical abuse identified includes being kicked, punched, pushed, and shoved, being slapped, and having their hair pulled.

Table V Main types of physical abuse

Main type of physical abuse	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
kicked	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes			6
punched	yes	yes	yes			yes		yes		5
pushed/shoved	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes				5
slapped				yes		yes	yes			3
hair pulled	yes					yes	yes			3
locked out of home			yes		yes	yes				3
being restrained	yes	yes								2
kept somewhere against her will	yes	yes								2
thrown across a room	yes	yes								2
endangering safety			yes		yes					2
scrapped							yes			1
bitten			yes							1

Participants described experiencing the violence predominantly in their homes but some participants stated they were physically attacked in public spaces that included their place of work, on public transport (taxi, bus), and at social events. They further asserted that at no point did any person intervene to assist women when they were assaulted in public. As Aoife recalled:

*She punched me in the stomach and said, "Fuck you" [on the bus?] On the bus and that was probably since I was fifteen, seventeen of having an experience of that level of violence.*

For six participants, the physical abuse experienced was categorised as severe. As Table 6 indicates, severe physical abuse encompassed being hit with a weapon, incurring head injuries, black eyes and bruising to the body. Other forms of severe physical abuse identified by interviewees included suffocation, strangulation, being beaten and strangled to the point of unconsciousness, being stabbed, and having bones broken.

Table VI Main types of severe physical abuse

Severe physical violence	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
hit with an object/weapon	yes	yes	yes			yes	yes	yes		6
head injuries	yes	yes	yes			yes		yes		5
black eyes		yes	yes					yes		3
bruising to the body		yes	yes			yes				3
scars		yes	yes							2
strangulation		yes				yes				2
suffocation		yes				yes				2
stabbed	yes	yes								2
attempts to aggravate an asthma attack		yes								1
beaten unconscious		yes								1
strangled unconscious		yes								1
kicked into the vagina			yes							1
loss of hair							yes			1
broken bones		yes								1
bitten			yes							1

Two women reported attending their general practitioner (GP) and accident and emergency (A&E) departments on two separate occasions with the injuries they sustained. Other participants stated they remained silent on the nature of their injuries and in one case, the woman described how she was accompanied to the hospital by her abusive partner. Following a violent physical assault, Caoimhe attended an A&E department with broken ribs. She recalled how a nurse encouraged her to report the assault. The following quote describes the scene,

*Then a nurse came into me and asked my friends to wait outside and eh, and the nurse said eh, "Tell us his name, we can help you, you know, you don't have to deal with this". And then I was like, "Do I say it's a woman?" and I thought, "If I say it's a woman she's going to judge me", she's going to think you know, "Ah it's only a woman like, she should be able to fight back with a woman".*

The quote highlights some of the challenges experienced by lesbian women when accessing healthcare supports. The nurse assumed that Caoimhe was heterosexual. This assumption closed off the opportunity for disclosure as Caoimhe was already concerned with receiving an unsympathetic response. In this instance, having to disclose your sexual orientation as well as the experience of IPA proved too large an obstacle for Caoimhe. In addition, the quote draws attention to the dominant

heterosexual model that informs both the nurse and Caoimhe's understanding of intimate partner abuse.

Participants also recalled how nurses in A&E departments encouraged them to disclose the nature of their injuries. However, Saoirse chose not to reveal the true nature of her condition,

*There was one particular nurse she did say to me, "If there's anything you need to tell us, to tell me now" like they were there to help this one particular nurse. But I just kept on saying "no I fell"*

There was evidence of sexual abuse in the women's accounts, something the participants found extremely difficult to explain and describe. They struggled with a lack of language to explain their experience as the quote by Caoimhe highlights.

*Who is going to believe a woman would rape another woman? I mean how do you explain that?*

This was manifested during the interviews with silences, hesitancy, and participants becoming visibly upset.<sup>65</sup> However, participants did name and recognise this type of abuse as rape. Women reported being repeatedly raped by their female partners, being touched in a manner that caused distress, being hurt during sexual activity, having their requests to stop ignored, and partners re-enacting aspects of a previous sexual abuse history. Table 7 highlights the main types of physical sexual abuse.

Table VII Main types of sexual abuse (physical)

Main types of sexual abuse (physical)	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
touched causing distress		yes		yes					yes	3
rape		yes		yes						2
hurt during sexual activity		yes		yes						2
ignoring requests to stop		yes		yes						2
re-enacting previous sexual abuse experience	yes	yes								2

Two participants talked about a previous abuse history that included being sexually abused as young children by family members, and

<sup>65</sup> The challenges with recalling experiences of sexual violence is well established in the literature. Survivors find it difficult to talk about, however, the memories are typically very vivid, and the emotional impact is severe and long lasting. See Girshick, *Woman-To-Woman Sexual Violence: Does She Call It Rape?*

experiencing rape by a male in their adult lives.<sup>66</sup> Their previous abuse history became a part of their abusive experience in their relationship with female partners. Participant’s described their female partners re-enacting aspects of their childhood sexual abuse experience, both verbally and physically. This form of sexual abuse was viewed by participants as the ultimate act of betrayal, as this next quote by Caoimhe explains:

*“I told her what he’d [childhood abuser] said [pause]. So, when she was with me that night she used the exact same words, and I thought, you know what and I just started bawling uncontrollably”*

There was also evidence in their narratives of forms of sexual abuse which could be described as more emotional than physical. This involved sexual coercion, withdrawing sex to punish, being critical of a woman’s body and of her lesbian sexuality, rejecting and humiliating her immediately after intimacy, and ultimately making her feel sexually inadequate. Table 8 draws attention to the main forms of emotional sexual abuse disclosed by participants.

Table VIII Main types of sexual abuse (emotional)

Main types of sexual abuse (emotional)	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
sexual coercion	no	yes	no	yes	no	no	no	no	no	2
withdrawing sex to punish	yes	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	2
had to ask for sex	yes	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	2
critical of her body	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	1
critical of her lesbian sexuality	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	1
rejecting to humiliate	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	1
made to feel sexually inadequate	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	1

Post-separation abuse was evident in the women’s accounts. They described being isolated from friends and the LGBT community after the relationship ended. This occurred because abusive partners told others they were the victim in the relationship. Being labelled an abuser resulted in some participants removing themselves from the LGBT community and losing friends in the process.

Other forms of post-separation abuse identified included harassing phone calls and texts, ex-partner’s calling to their homes

<sup>66</sup> One participant recalled being physically and sexually abused by a male and female family member.

uninvited, stalking, both the participants and their friends being physically assaulted, being outed against their wishes, and having money and property stolen from their homes after the relationship had ended. Table 9 provides an overview of this form of abuse.

Table IX Post-separation abuse

Main types of post-separation abuse	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
isolating participant from friends and LGBT community			yes		yes	yes		yes		4
claiming participant was the abuser					yes	yes		yes		3
physically assaulted participant		yes					yes			2
perstaring phone calls/ texts		yes					yes			2
verbal abuse					yes		yes			2
entering participants home without permission					yes		yes			2
stalking	yes					yes				2
accessing a DV support group		yes								1
physically threatened current partner		yes								1
physically assaulted friends		yes								1
online abuse		yes								1
physically threats from a new partner				yes						1
threats to destroy participants business							yes			1
property and money stolen from participants home	yes						yes			1
threatened by partners family							yes			1
damage to property								yes		1
outing participant								yes		1

Women also reported being subject to online abuse. Examples included negative comments being posted on social media via private emails and on participants Facebook homepage. Saoirse recalls:

*she mentioned me on Facebook then, saying that I don't deserve [daughter] and I'm an embarrassment an all this*

Having reviewed one of the emerging findings from the current study, this paper now moves on to the discussion with a specific focus on participants experience of emotional abuse and the significance of a having previous abuse history on participant understanding of IPA.

### Discussion

The current research findings are consistent with data obtained in previous studies, for example, first time relationships creating opportunity for abuse, the experience of multiple forms of abuse including identity abuse, the assumption of heterosexuality in a health care setting, non-disclosure of abuse to a formal authority, a previous



abuse history being used to control and manipulate, and the dominant heterosexual model of IPA influencing participants understanding of their experience.<sup>67</sup> The remainder of the discussion section will highlight aspects of the most frequently reported type of abuse experienced by participants, namely, emotional abuse, and the impact a previous abuse history had on participants understanding of their relationship experience.

#### *Emotional Abuse*

Consistent with the literature on female same sex IPA, emotional abuse was the most frequent form of abuse reported by participants, and was reported by the nine women in the sample.<sup>68</sup> As previously demonstrated in Table 2, the experience of emotional abuse varied greatly across the sample, but the three main sub-groups identified were verbal abuse, jealousy and possessiveness and isolation. Verbal abuse was reported to include constant name calling, negative comments about their appearance, threats to harm and to kill, constant undermining of physical appearance, capability as a mother and value as a partner, and being put down and humiliated in front of friends.

Four participants spoke about their partners jealous and possessive behaviour which included being isolated from friends and being accused of having an affair, mostly with a friend. Table 10 demonstrates the main types of jealous and possessive behaviour experienced by participants.

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<sup>67</sup> Janice L. Ristock, 'Exploring Dynamics of Abusive Lesbian Relationships: Preliminary Analysis of a Multisite, Qualitative Study', *American Journal of Community Psychology* 31, no. 3-4 (June 2003): 329-41; Catherine Donovan, 'Comparing Love and Domestic Violence in Heterosexual and Same Sex Relationships', ESRC End of Award Report (Swindon: ESRC, 2007); McCann and Sharek, 'Survey of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People's Experiences of Mental Health Services in Ireland'; Donovan and Hester, 'Seeking Help from the Enemy'; Mikel L. Walters, 'Straighten Up and Act Like a Lady: A Qualitative Study of Lesbian Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence', *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 23, no. 2 (April 2011): 250-70, doi:10.1080/10538720.2011.559148.

<sup>68</sup> Renzetti, *Violent Betrayal*; Ristock, *No More Secrets: Violence in Lesbian Relationships*; Donovan and Hester, *Domestic Violence, and Sexuality: What's Love Got to Do with It*.

Table X Jealous and possessive behaviours experienced by participants

Jealousy & possessiveness	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
isolated from friends			yes	yes				yes	yes	4
accused of being unfaithful	yes	yes	yes							3
monitoring mobile phone		yes	yes							2
controlling mobility	yes							yes		2
monitoring participant		yes		yes						2
jealous of relationship with child			yes							1
jealous of out status		yes								1

Women spoke of their partner’s jealousy of their out status, and jealousy around their relationship with their children. Women also reported having their whereabouts monitored and their mobile phones regularly checked. The overall aim of the jealous and possessive behaviours exhibited by abusive partners was to isolate the participants from friends and family support networks. As is well established in the literature, isolation is another key form of emotional abuse.<sup>69</sup> Isolation has been shown to be a significant tactic used by a female abuser to gain and maintain control in a relationship.<sup>70</sup> Table 11 provides an overview of this type of abusive behaviour.

Table XI Isolation tactics used by abusive partner

Isolation	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
claiming victimisation	yes		yes			yes	yes	yes		5
isolated from friends			yes	yes				yes	yes	4
isolated from LGBT community							yes	yes	yes	3
controlling mobility	yes							yes		2
claiming infidelity by participant	yes									1

Participants described how they were isolated from friends and family, made to choose their partner over friends and family, forced to conceal their sexual identity, and forced to disconnect from the LGBT community. Five women spoke of their partners claiming victimisation following the relationship ending. This tactic ensured that the women remained silent on their abusive experiences and in some cases, they removed themselves from the LGBT community for fear of being

<sup>69</sup> Rebecca Barnes, ‘Woman-to-Woman Partner Abuse. Research Summary Report’, Research Summary Report (University of Derby, 2009); Donovan and Hester, *Domestic Violence and Sexuality: What’s Love Got to Do with It*; Ristock, *No More Secrets: Violence in Lesbian Relationships*.

<sup>70</sup> Renzetti, *Violent Betrayal*.

labelled an abuser. Female abusers claiming victimisation is consistent with a recent UK study.<sup>71</sup>

#### *Previous abuse history*

Previous abuse history in the family of origin has proved to be a major risk factor for experiencing IPA in adult life.<sup>72</sup> Like heterosexual women, studies have found that lesbians with a previous abuse history are at risk of experiencing IPA in their adult lives.<sup>73</sup> Aoife had experienced multiple forms of abuse in her family home as a young child and as an adult, including physical abuse and rape. Caoimhe gave an account of being sexually abused by a male friend of the family as a young adult. During interview, both participants disclosed details of their female partners re-enacting aspects of their previous abuse experience, both verbally and physically. The current study corroborates previous research findings that indicate similar tactics are employed by female perpetrators in same sex relationships.<sup>74</sup> Participants who had a previous abuse history differed from those in the sample who did not, in terms of how they understood and made sense of the abusive relationship. For example, Aoife described feeling that she deserved the abusive behaviour, *"I actually thought I deserved that behaviour"*. Whereas, Niamh who never experienced any form of violence prior to her abusive relationship exclaimed,

*I had strong core all the time... What's going on here is not ok, that I don't deserve this, you know that I deserve better, I deserve better".*

Interestingly, more than half of the women reported their abusive partners had come from a household where there was violence, and they also had knowledge of their partners having an abusive history with both male and female previous partners. This finding is in accord with previous research indicating a lesbian abused by a member of her

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<sup>71</sup> Donovan, Barnes, and Nixon, 'The Coral Project: Exploring Abusive Behaviours in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual And/Or Transgender Relationships'.

<sup>72</sup> C. L. Whitfield et al., 'Violent Childhood Experiences and the Risk of Intimate Partner Violence in Adults', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 18, no. 2 (2003): 166–85.

<sup>73</sup> L. Lockhart et al., 'Letting out the Secret: Violence in Lesbian Relationships', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 9 (1994): 469–92.

<sup>74</sup> Renzetti, *Violent Betrayal*; Ristock, *No More Secrets: Violence in Lesbian Relationships*; Walters, 'Straighten Up and Act Like a Lady'.

family or who had witnessed family violence as a child was significantly more likely to be a victim or a batterer in an intimate adult relationship.<sup>75</sup> However, the significance of intergenerational violence as a predictor of becoming a victim or a batterer in adult life is debated within the literature.<sup>76</sup>

### Conclusion

Overall, the present study demonstrates that participants experienced multiple forms of abuse in their relationships with female partners. Like the types of abuse found in heterosexual relationships, participants experienced emotional, physical, sexual, financial, and post-separation abuse. There was also evidence of abuse specific to the LGBT population, such as identity abuse (control over appearance, being forced to conceal your sexual identity, and being outed against your wishes).

One of the successes of feminism over the past forty years has been to acknowledge, name and identify violence and abuse against women by a male partner. An unintended consequence of this activism and research, has embedded intimate partner abuse firmly within a heterosexual framework. This dominant approach to understanding IPA impacts upon those in same sex relationships in terms of recognising their experience as IPA, and thus, reporting to a formal authority for assistance. Furthermore, heteronormative assumptions by professionals create additional barriers for non-heterosexual women with respect to their ability to one, disclose details of an abusive relationship, and two, the potential to report an assault.

The same tenacity and energies previously applied to understanding male violence against women must also be applied to understanding both the experience of IPA for non-heterosexual women, and the motivations of the female abuser. The diverse forms of abuse experienced by the participants suggest the need to develop and implement training and awareness programmes that take into consideration the specific dynamics of abuse in lesbian relationships,

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<sup>75</sup> Lie et al., 'Lesbians in Currently Aggressive Relationships'.

<sup>76</sup> V E Coleman, 'Violence between Lesbian Couples: A between Groups Comparison' (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University Microfilms International, 9109022, 1990).

and in LGBT relationships, in general. Training and awareness is needed amongst professionals and practitioners working in specialist domestic and sexual violence services, counsellors, and therapists. court mandated programmes for domestic violence offenders, and an Garda Síochána.<sup>77</sup> A development of services in this direction, would create a pathway to developing a framework so that we can begin to understand and explain this phenomenon and further, enable the provision of an appropriate service response for those in need.

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### Abbreviations

Accident and emergency: A&E

General practitioner: GP

Intimate partner abuse: IPA

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender: LGBT

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer: LGBTQ

Rape Crisis Centre: RCC

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<sup>77</sup> An Garda Síochána, more commonly referred to as the Gardai, is the police force of Ireland.

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