Gender Violence in Australia

Historical Perspectives

Edited by Alana Piper and Ana Stevenson

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Gender Violence in Australia: Historical Perspectives

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Chapter 10

"IT WAS QUITE A SCARY TIME"

Lesbians and violence in post-war Australia

Rebecca Jennings

In 1993, the Australian Institute of Criminology described levels of anti-gay and lesbian violence as "worrying", reflecting a new concern with the prevalence of the phenomenon in Australian society.[1] A survey conducted by Victorian activist group Gay Men and Lesbians Against Discrimination between 1990 and 1993 found that 70 per cent of the 492 women surveyed had experienced some form of verbal or physical abuse and 11 per cent had been bashed or physically abused.[2] In 1997, Chris Puplick, President of the Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales, claimed that lesbians were six times more likely than other women to be the victims of assault.[3] Initiatives were launched by police forces and NGOs in an attempt to facilitate the reporting of such crimes and tackle the causes of anti-gay violence.

This concern with documenting rates of anti-gay and lesbian violence was matched by a growing academic interest in explaining the causes and history of hate crimes. Much of this literature drew on the psychological concept of "homophobia" and the sociological concept of "heterosexism" to give meaning to the violence experienced by lesbians and gay men. Michael

1 Duncan Chappell, in Gail Mason, "Violence against lesbians and gay men," *Violence Prevention Today* no. 2 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology).

2 Gay Men and Lesbians Against Discrimination (GLAD), *Not a Day Goes By: Report on the GLAD Survey into Discrimination and Violence against Lesbians and Gay Men in Victoria* (Melbourne: GLAD, 1994).

3 Chris Puplick, 'Foreword,' in *Homophobic Violence*, ed. Gail Mason and Stephen Tomsen (Sydney: Hawkins Press, 1997), iii.

Flood and Clive Hamilton's 2008 study of homophobia in Australia noted: "The term 'homophobia' has become a popular descriptor for attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and other cognitive and affective responses based on hostility towards and fear of gay men and lesbians," while "heterosexism" is "useful in emphasising the *system* of injustice and oppression organised around sexuality".[4] However, Gail Mason has also drawn attention to the importance of gender discourses in making sense of violence against lesbians. Drawing on feminist approaches to gendered experiences of violence, Mason argued that anti-lesbian violence differed from anti-gay violence in some important respects in that it sometimes more closely reflected patterns of violence against all women. More recently, Mason and Stephen Tomsen have noted that policing gender conformity is a key factor in both anti-gay and lesbian violence.[5]

These contemporary patterns of anti-gay and lesbian violence have a much longer history. Shirleene Robinson asserts that, although the term "homophobia" originated in the context of 1970s lesbian and gay activism, the phenomenon of an "identifiable set of prejudices" could be traced back to the late nineteenth century.[6] Historians have noted the historical specificity of forms of homophobia. Ruth Ford has explored post-war "homophobia-related" violence and discrimination in relation to women's same-sex love. Specific forms of abuse, Ford observed, drew upon notions then circulating in Australian society and elsewhere about female homosexuality being a sickness.[7]

Considerable scholarship from a range of disciplines has noted the connections between homophobic violence and visibility, emphasising the role of anti-gay and lesbian violence in policing the expression of gay and lesbian identities and behaviours.[8] Understanding anti-lesbian violence as a form of policing highlights the extent to which it has been a mechanism of control in the broader social, cultural and personal context of lesbianism in the past. Focusing on the post-war period from the 1950s to the early

4 Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton, 'Mapping homophobia in Australia,' in *Homophobia: An Australian History*, ed. Shirleene Robinson (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2008), 16–17.

5 Gail Mason, "Heterosexed violence: Typicality and ambiguity," in *Homophobic Violence*, 23; Stephen Tomsen and Gail Mason, "Engendering homophobia: violence, sexuality and gender conformity," *Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 3 (2001): 270.

6 Robinson, ed. *Homophobia*, 3–4.

7 Ruth Ford, "'Filthy, obscene and mad': Engendering 'homophobia' in Australia, 1940s-1960s," in *Homophobia*, 86–112.

8 Gail Mason, "Body maps: Envisaging homophobia, violence and safety," *Social and Legal Studies* 10, no. 1 (2001): 23–44.

1990s, this chapter explores some of the most frequent forms of violence experienced by women attracted to other women. Younger lesbians in particular experienced violence from their families and peers as well as from a range of authority figures, including medical professionals and the police. Women's experience of random acts of physical and sexual assault also indicates the extent to which violence was used to contain lesbian visibility in public spaces.

This chapter utilises oral history interviews with lesbian-identified women to trace patterns of anti-lesbian violence. Oral history has been widely used in lesbian and gay history, both as a means of recording minority experiences absent from the historical record and to enable historians to explore the subjective meanings which individuals have ascribed to these experiences.[9] Drawing on personal narratives, this chapter will therefore consider the ways in which women sought to make sense of violent encounters in the context of wider social attitudes to same-sex desire. Life history interviews, in which women recount their experiences of violence in the context of a much broader narrative of personal identity and experience, also highlight the extent to which lesbians have been subjected to violence – not only at the hands of "homophobic" perpetrators external to the lesbian community, but also from other lesbians in bars and from lovers within the home. Violence as a mechanism of control was evident in many different aspects of women's lives, as both recipients and perpetrators.

In his work on intimate relations between workingmen in interwar London, Matt Houlbrook has argued that "[i]ntimacy, sex, blackmail, theft, and assault constituted a continuum within the same cultural terrain"; it was the deployment of pejorative terms by workingmen which enabled their intimate relations with the queer.[10] While violence against or control of women within post-war lesbian communities did not facilitate intimate relationships in the way described by Houlbrook, it is clear that a cyclical relationship existed between the violent and repressive historical context in

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9 For example, see: Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "Oral history and the study of sexuality in the lesbian community: Buffalo, New York, 1940–1960," *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 7–26; Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, ed. *Bodies of evidence: the practice of queer oral history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

10 Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 178. See also: Amanda Kaladelfos, "'Until death does part us': Male friendship, intimacy and violence in late colonial Melbourne," in *Intimacy, Violence and Activism: Gay and Lesbian Perspectives on Australasian History and Society*, ed. Graham Willett and Yorick Smaal (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2013), 39–55.

which women enacted their same-sex desires and the violence and controlling behaviours which some women encountered in lesbian subcultures and in same-sex relationships. In considering these forms of violence alongside each other, it may be possible to elucidate both the impact of anti-lesbian violence on women themselves and the factors that precipitated violent behaviour within lesbian communities.

Peer and familial violence

Throughout much of the twentieth century, a powerful social disapproval of homosexuality impacted the lives of women who desired other women in Australia. Female homosexuality was subject to social taboos that restricted discussion and created a culture of silence. Cultural representations of desire between women in literature, film and television were prohibited under strict censorship laws; with the exception of very occasional salacious reports in the tabloid press, newspapers also avoided the subject. Social norms emphasised women's expected roles as wives and mothers. Women who recognised their desires for other women and chose to act on them typically lived double lives, hiding their emotional and sexual experiences and relationships from family, friends and society at large.[11]

In this context, women who were suspected of being lesbian or whose relationships with other women were discovered faced severe and often violent penalties. Girls and young women were particularly vulnerable in these circumstances. Although the lack of cultural recognition of same-sex desire between women meant the adolescents of the 1950s and 1960s typically did not articulate a lesbian identity until they reached adulthood, some experienced difficulties in performing the conventional heterosexual identities expected by family and peers. This could result in bullying at school and conflict within familial and social networks. Laurene, who was at school in Sydney in the 1960s, recalled:

> It definitely made me different from other people because particularly in my teenage years at high school and stuff, when we started the whole heterosexual game, I just couldn't play it very well…

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11 Rebecca Jennings, *Unnamed Desires: A Sydney lesbian history* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2015).

> They used to call me a dyke, witch, lesbian, all that sort of stuff and everything like that… But luckily I had a really good sense of humour and I was a very good fighter so I could actually withstand the blows.[12]

Girls who acted on their same-sex desires, kissing other girls or forming same-sex relationships, were often at risk of familial conflict and violence if their activities were discovered. The social expectation that unmarried women would remain living with family into adulthood meant that both teenage girls and young women could find themselves facing a choice between domestic violence or homelessness. Carolyn, who grew up in Petersham, Sydney, in the late 1960s, recalled her parents' initially hostile reaction to the discovery that she was in a relationship with another girl:

> I came up against a lot of rejection from my parents and a very, very tough stage of my life actually… They chose to read my personal diary … It was wide open when I got home that evening from TAFE … So it was a pretty rough night… [My parents became] very intimidating, very intrusive and very aggressive.

Carolyn remained living at home while she completed her studies. The situation escalated when her parents were again confronted with an awareness of her sexuality. She explained:

> Another time my father used my car … and there was a gay paper in the car. We'd been to the Centennial Park Hotel … and picked up the general papers… On the cover it had a very explicit swathing of sexual description … It was under the seat of the car … But my car was borrowed and my father took my brother to Sunday school and immediately he came back and just almost kicked the bedroom door in and I was immediately flung from one side of the room to the other, just because – he thumped and bashed and he gave me a hard time.[13]

Other women left home entirely to escape difficult domestic environments or attempted to minimise the risk of conflict by spending as much time as possible outside the home. However, the streets carried their own dangers and young women in these circumstances were at potential risk of random violent or sexual assaults. Explaining her experience of sexual assault as a teenager, Alex reflected: "I think because I didn't want to be at home, I

12 Interview with Laurene Kelly, 19 February 2013.

13 Interview with Carolyn Bloye by Sandra Mackay, 9 November 2007, Pride History Group Collection.

was hanging around the local park too much which actually did lead to me being pack raped."[14]

The streets could be particularly dangerous for women whose appearance or behaviour did not conform to conventional notions of appropriate femininity. Laurie described being the focus of repeated acts of verbal abuse and physical assault on the streets of Sydney in the 1960s and 1970s:

> If I was just walking up the street holding my girlfriend's hand, a car load of guys would go past and yell out lezzo, you know and all that sort of shit. Then they'd pull round the corner and come back and they'd always pick on the butch one. Because you want to look like a bloke, you fight like a bloke, hence they'd have bricks in their hands … and the more I retaliated, the worse it got … because one bloke would start on me and if I retaliated, there'd be another two.[15]

According to Mason, "Verbal hostility, the violence it insinuates, and actual physical assault constitute a warning or intimidating mechanism against breaking the wall of silence surrounding lesbianism."[16] Its aim is to police visible expressions of lesbian sexuality and render women fearful of openly expressing affection for other women or presenting an identifiable lesbian identity. Butch lesbians were particularly vulnerable to harassment when in the company of their girlfriends, as erotic statements such as holding a woman's hand were interpreted as an encroachment on male territory.[17] Women's accounts of their experiences of verbal abuse and physical assault on the streets also highlight the extent to which gender non-conformity was interpreted as a signifier of lesbianism, rendering butch lesbians particularly vulnerable to random acts of violence in public.

The authorities and social control

In a social context in which expressions of lesbian identity or sexuality were silenced, exposure as a potential lesbian could result in the intervention of the authorities, including medical professionals, social workers and even the police. Medical approaches to lesbianism varied widely in post-war

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14 Interview with Alex Kaufman, 23 August 2014, National Library of Australia, ORAL TRC 6510/48.

15 Interview with Laurie van Camp by Sandra Mackay, 18 February 2008, Pride History Group Collection.

16 Mason, "Heterosexed violence," 27.

17 Ford, "Filthy, Obscene and Mad," 96.

Australia, where the issue had not been the subject of any published research and was not on the medical school curriculum. Australian medical journals reviewed some of the key literature on homosexuality from Britain and the United States, which in the 1950s and 1960s typically adopted psychoanalytic models to explain homosexuality as a form of arrested development and advocated a range of therapies including psychotherapy, behavioural therapies, or psychosurgery. As a result, girls and women who were referred to doctors in this period described a variety of medical responses, depending on the level of knowledge and opinions of the individual practitioner.[18]

Helen was referred to a psychiatrist in Perth in the mid-1960s when she attempted suicide due to the emotional pressure of experiencing same-sex attractions in a hostile society. The psychiatrist advised her that she must suppress her desires and keep silent in order to avoid being confined to a mental hospital. Helen tried to follow this advice by marrying and having a child, before the emotional strain again rendered her suicidal in the early 1980s.[19] Laurie, who grew up on a farm in Western Australia in the 1950s, was sent by her father to see a doctor at the age of 10 or 11. Laurie had her first sexual experience with another girl at the age of 11, but had no clear sense of sexual identity at that age. However, she recalled that her behaviour and self-presentation had caused her father to have some concerns about her sexuality:

> He'd figured there was something wrong with me and now I've learnt that that's what it was, that I was a lesbian… He was going to have me cured and I thought the doctor was giving me – at that age, I was about 10, 11 – at the time I thought it was hot needles I was having but it wasn't, it was electric shock treatment.[20]

This hope that doctors would be able to "cure" daughters of lesbianism reflected the attitude of a number of medical professionals who aimed to redirect lesbians' sexual desires toward men. A number of other women described being non-consensually confined in mental hospitals and subjected to intrusive treatments as juveniles and young women.

18 Jennings, *Unnamed Desires*; Emily Wilson, "'Someone who is sick and in need of help': Medical attitudes to homosexuality in Australia, 1960–1979," in *Homophobia*, 148–171.

19 Interview with Helen [pseudonym], 23 April 2008.

20 Interview, Laurie van Camp.

Despite the lack of any explicit legislation prohibiting sexual acts between women, a number of girls and young women were subject to intervention by the police and social welfare authorities as a result of their same-sex desires. Sandra received a police caution as a teenager in 1950s Sydney when her attempt to explain her attraction to a young woman who lived nearby ended in conflict. A few years later, when, at 16, she was discovered by police to be living with a girlfriend in a flat in Bondi, both girls were charged with "Being exposed to moral danger" and Sandra was sent to a girls' home for several months.[21] Alex similarly endured a number of periods of incarceration in Sydney girls' homes in the late 1960s and early 1970s after her parents reported her to the police as "uncontrollable" and "exposed to moral danger."[22] Both described the girls' homes as frightening and violent environments in which inmates were subjected to bullying and violence from staff and other girls. Sandra described the initial medical examination to which she was subjected upon her arrest as "a fearfully intrusive and painful experience, handled so impersonally by the Shelter's medical staff".[23] Laurie similarly recalled the internal examination she received on entering prison in 1975: "They hurt me, I fought it and four screws held me down and this bloke made me bleed, he took my virginity basically, in that sense, for lack of a better word."[24]

Violence within lesbian communities

Acts of violence or attempts to control women who were attracted to other women did not solely originate from hostile families or figures of authority: they were frequently endemic in these women's lives. Although many lived in isolation or alone with a partner in the 1950s and 1960s due to the constraints imposed by social taboos on homosexuality, some were able to form social networks through work or leisure activities. A small number frequented the camp social scene which existed in Australian cities from the early 1960s onwards.

This was a largely mixed scene, in which lesbians socialised alongside camp men, prostitutes and drug users. Although many women had positive memories of friendship, love and support in such spaces, most also

21 Sandra Willson, unpublished memoir. The author is grateful to Rev Peter Strong, beneficiary of Sandra Willson's estate, for a copy of this memoir, which is in the author's possession.

22 Interview, Alex Kaufman.

23 Willson, unpublished memoir, 46.

24 Interview, Laurie van Camp.

characterised the camp scene as violent and unstable. Historians of lesbian bar scenes in the United States and Canada have similarly noted the connections between bar subcultures and violent and criminal behaviour in the post-war period. In her work on the Toronto lesbian bar scene in the 1950s and 1960s, Elise Chenier has demonstrated that many of the (particularly butch) women who centred their lives and social networks on downtown lesbian bars had limited job options and were frequently drawn into criminal activities such as petty theft or into the drug and sex trades.[25] As Colette, who socialised on the camp bar scene in Sydney in the late 1960s, recalled:

> Look there wasn't any social life per se: it was the same thing as I found in Melbourne a few years later. Is that you would get the word that some back room in a pub was amenable to these groups of women…
>
> Often times … there was trouble and girls were beaten up or the police would come. But anyway after three weeks you knew that there would be another place that you would go to and you'd get the word on the grapevine and then you'd meet there. So it was very nebulous.[26]

Tensions around women's criminal activities could lead to violence in these venues, while their location in less affluent areas of the city meant that women were also vulnerable to abuse and assault from men on surrounding streets or from hostile locals in the pub's main bar. The vulnerability of bars to police harassment and closure, as well as the involvement of some bar owners in contravening licensing and other regulations, meant that some camp venues were hostile to perceived outsiders and could use violence or threats to deter women who were not regulars.[27]

Police harassment was a common occurrence for women who socialised in camp bars and the hippie scene in Australia. As in the Toronto bar scene documented by Chenier, police often used petty drugs offences and other minor misdemeanours as a means of harassing lesbians. Laurie was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment with hard labour in 1975 after being caught with a group of women who were passing a joint around in

25 Elise Chenier, "Rethinking class in lesbian bar culture: Living 'the gay life' in Toronto, 1955–1965," *Left History* 9, no. 2 (2004): 85–118.

26 Interview with Colette Parr by Digby Duncan, 1 December 2008, Pride History Group Collection.

27 For example, see: Interview with Jan McInnies and Margaret Cummins, Pride History Group Collection.

Sydney's Kings Cross. After ten years of verbal harassment from the police because of her self-presentation as a butch lesbian and her association with drug-users, she explained, the police were looking for an opportunity to charge her with an offence.[28] Colette recalled an incident in which police in Melbourne threatened to charge her with soliciting a woman:

> One night I had a fight with my girlfriend in the street … and the police came because they were around hotels anyway. They separated us and let her go and took me off in the police car at 18 telling me they were going to charge me with soliciting women… It went on all night it was terrible.[29]

Other women described frequent police raids on camp bars, resulting in the intimidation and harassment of the clientele.

In the 1970s, when the emergence of lesbian and gay politics and the women's movement enabled the silence around homosexuality to be confronted, police violence against lesbians shifted onto the streets. Activists began to challenge some of the negative social attitudes toward same-sex desire. But levels of police brutality varied from state to state and between different police stations. Sandra, a Sydney lesbian feminist, recalled that she and her friends frequently travelled interstate to Brisbane to support demonstrations organised by local feminists and lesbians as the Queensland police were perceived as particularly brutal.[30] However, accounts of Sydney's first Mardi Gras in 1978 also highlight the high levels of police violence which women received from plain clothes officers based at Darlinghurst station. As Robyn, who participated in the march, commented: "Darlinghurst cop station … was well known in that era to be totally corrupt and very violent." On the night of the first Mardi Gras, she herself was "grabbed" and "pulled" by police attempting to "throw [her] into the paddy wagon"; she recalled that she "had never seen so much violence, that the cops were meting out on people who were trying to get onto the pavement and go as they were asked to."[31]

Although police and hostile locals were regular sources of violence on the lesbian bar scene, trouble also frequently emerged from groups of women themselves. Ivy Richter, the proprietor of popular camp bars Chez Ivy and the Birdcage in 1960s Sydney, commented that, although she didn't recall

28 Interview, Laurie van Camp.

29 Interview, Colette Parr.

30 Interview with Sandra Mackay, 2 July 2007.

31 Interview with Robyn Plaister, 20 December 2007.

any problems with violence in the surrounding streets, "my only problems were with these girls … And I used to have a couple of them barred even."[32] Margaret also recalled the camp scene in the 1960s as "rough", while Kris gave a graphic description of the violence endemic in the Sydney scene she was a part of in the same period, commenting that: "a lot of the women were thugs and … you had to fight … This one woman I had to fight and then the others left me alone you know, in that scene."[33] Conflict often arose because of jealousy and fights were fuelled by heavy use of alcohol and drugs. Colette, who socialised on the Sydney camp scene in the 1960s, explained:

> But with the early drag days and things it was quite a scary time. Because the butches were really jealous and there were lots of knives and broken bottles and things involved. It was quite dangerous times.[34]

Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love made a connection between lesbian violence and negative societal attitudes toward desire between women. Their classic book, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* (1972), argued: "violence, internally or externally directed, is a predictable human response to intolerable, unrelieved suffering. Lesbian violence has often been noted but has not been understood in relation to the overwhelming forces in the Lesbian's life running contrary to any affirmation of self or possible self-respect."[35] In her work on the lesbian scene in Canada from the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s, Liz Millward has similarly documented the impact of alcohol and drugs on women's violent behaviour, linking these self-destructive behaviours with the material environment of the bars themselves. Arguing that the nature of the space in which lesbians were able to socialise impacted on the self-perceptions and behaviour of the women who frequented them, she claims that women's low self-esteem was fuelled by the hidden and neglected condition of bars.[36]

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32 Interview with Ivy Richter by John Witte, 22 May 2006, Pride History Group Collection.

33 Interview with Margaret Jones, 12 September 2007; Interview with Kris Melmouth, 25 August 2011.

34 Interview, Colette Parr.

35 Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, *Sappho was a Right-On Woman: A liberated view of lesbianism* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 43.

36 Liz Millward, *Making a Scene: Lesbians and Community Across Canada, 1964–84* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015), 32.

Such connections were apparent in Sandra Willson's unpublished memoir of her life in Sydney in the 1950s. During a troubled childhood, Sandra was harassed and assaulted by men on the streets. By the age of 16, she had already been incarcerated in a girls' home and a mental hospital, where she had both experienced and perpetrated violence. On her release, she obtained a job as a salesgirl and found herself attracted to a colleague. Reflecting on her approach to the girl, Sandra described her behaviour at that time in aggressive terms, explicitly linking her own experience of harassment from men with her behaviour towards women:

> If I thought men had been harassing and preying on me, I should have taken a look at my own behaviour towards women. There was a nice young girl working at Woolworths. Trying to get to talk to her, I joked about dragging her off by force. I thought the meaning of what I was saying was obvious, despite the fact that she also knew I was carrying a knife. The obvious interpretation was that one does not harm someone one likes by carrying her off. I just wanted to be able to indicate [my] feelings to her (with a caveman-like bravado) without having to do anything. But she took me literally at my word and reported me to the manager.[37]

This tendency to use violence and aggressive language as a form of communication resurfaced in future relationships.

The following year, Sandra was given permission to live at a Salvation Army hostel, where she met and began a relationship with another girl, Barbara. The pair set up home together and Sandra recalled their domestic relationship as one in which she sought to impose her will upon Barbara:

> I also thought all real love involved sex and that sex-love made us husband and wife, tying us irrevocably together. My body's reactions to being with Barbara made this very easy for me to believe. I thus got into every role-playing game in any book. I expected Barbara to prepare the breakfast porridge and was surprisingly impatient when she burnt it.[38]

Describing her behaviour toward Barbara in her memoir, Sandra linked her desire to control Barbara with her own experience of having her desires silenced by social disapproval. When the pair were taken by police

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37 Willson, unpublished memoir, 16.

38 Willson, unpublished memoir, 29.

to a girls' shelter and charged with "being exposed to moral danger", both were subjected to a medical examination. Bursting into the room during Barbara's exam, Sandra was confronted with the consequences of her behaviour toward Barbara. Before being removed from the room, she:

> had a glimpse of Barbara lying there, totally naked and exposed to the doctor… Although I had touched her and kissed her, I had never exposed her to gawk and gape at her like this fellow was doing! So I had never actually seen the extent of the blue bruising that I'd left upon her. If I had ever known that this was to happen to her, that the love bites would experience such public exposure, I would never have given them to her.[39]

The cycle Sandra described of responding to societal constraints by attempting to exert control over others was also apparent in other women's accounts. Personal testimonies record several women's experience of domestic violence and rape from lovers throughout this period. As in public spaces, domestic violence was often enabled or excused by alcohol and interpreted by the women who experienced it as an expression of frustration related to issues of control. Jan described her experience of domestic violence from a lover in the early 1980s as connected both to alcohol and depression, as well as a desire to exert some control in the relationship. She recalled:

> I suppose in most of my relationships up to a point I've been the dominant one and – it probably shows. Anyway, and the more stable one. I've certainly had a number of girlfriends who are alcoholic or had other issues… [One of my girlfriends] had a depression problem essentially which she medicated with alcohol and she lived here with me and the whole thing became completely impossible because her son committed suicide and that was obviously just completely traumatic and we had a really, really bad time. She did start to drink very early indeed and she was pretty violent. In fact she was definitely violent. In fact to the point that I had to get the police once… After she drank, yeah, she tried to strangle me.[40]

The dominance of lesbian feminist idealisations of lesbian relationships as egalitarian and nurturing during the 1970s and 1980s presented obstacles for lesbians to acknowledge or discuss these problems. Jennie, who

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39 Willson, unpublished memoir, 33.

40 Interview with Jan Aitkin, 5 June 2012.

experienced ongoing domestic violence for several years in the context of a committed relationship in the late 1980s and early 1990s, also recalled:

> [she] used to drink a lot of alcohol and get very physically aggressive and hit me quite a lot, yes … It was sort of punches and waking me up in the middle of the night and hitting me around the head. Punching me on my body where bruises were left and other people couldn't see and it was just frustration.[41]

In her American study of partner abuse in lesbian relationships, Claire Renzetti argued that, in addition to substance abuse and intergenerational violence, domestic violence in lesbian relationships was typically linked to three major sources of relationship strain: dependency versus autonomy, jealousy, and the balance of power in relationships.[42]

On reflection, Jennie felt that the domestic abuse she had received was related to her partner's successful career and her fears of exposure as a lesbian in that context. Jennie's account of her partner's behaviour focused on a range of controlling behaviour:

> At one point she took my purse with my credit cards and everything, all my bank cards, everything. She took them away and said 'I'm [not] giving you these back.' So I couldn't get any money, I couldn't get any food, I couldn't get anything, any fuel… And she kept withdrawing from our joint account until there was nothing left.[43]

Although aware that her partner's behaviour was abusive, Jennie felt unable to explain it or seek help in the context of dominant perceptions of lesbian relationships being based on equality. She explained:

> I thought 'Oh, this is not normal, this doesn't happen in what I've known as lesbian relationships … this doesn't happen, this must be me. What have I done, to sort of ask for this? And I think maybe I didn't talk to people, one, because I was dismissed with that one person that I talked to, dismissed as a liar virtually: 'Oh, you're exaggerating, can't possibly happen.' But yeah, I think I didn't tell

41 Interview with Jennie Partington, 30 April 2012.

42 Claire M. Renzetti, *Violent Betrayal: Partner Abuse in Lesbian Relationships* (London: Sage, 1992).

43 Interview, Jennie Partington.

> anybody else because it was a lesbian relationship, and because nobody would empathise anyway.[44]

Jennie's account suggests that, while issues of power imbalance within the relationship were certainly a factor, the domestic violence she experienced was also fuelled by the broader context of social attitudes toward lesbianism. This generated negative associations with the relationship itself and prevented either partner from seeking support to deal with relationship problems.

Conclusion

Women's accounts of their lives in post-war Australia indicate that violence was a common experience for women who were attracted to other women. Negative social attitudes toward female same-sex desire could be given expression through a variety of forms of violence and control. This could come from a range of sources, including familial violence, medicalised violence and controlling and abusive behaviour from the police, in addition to random acts of anti-lesbian violence from strangers on the streets. The women who experienced these forms of violence frequently understood them as attempts to prevent them from articulating or acting on their same-sex desires. In consequence, these women connected their experiences of violence with wider systems of gendered social control.

However, violence and controlling behaviour were also widespread within lesbian communities and relationships in this period. Women drew upon similar tropes of control and frustration in making sense of these experiences, linking them to negative social attitudes toward lesbianism. While individual instances of community and domestic violence had specific immediate causes, they can also be understood within the context of a wider culture in which women who desired other women experienced ongoing hostility and discrimination and faced the constant threat of violence from multiple sources.

44 Ibid.