

## Partners in Pain

Lesbian domestic violence exists even though it's politically incorrect.

by Joy Parks

**November, 1985.** A social worker is telling me, her voice trembling over the phone, that the women's shelter she operates can do nothing to help me, despite the fact I've been to the emergency room twice this week. Not because the shelter is full or the caseworkers are overburdened, but because the shelter's politics dictate that the victims of violent men deserve to believe that women are safe in a women-only space. As a lesbian victim of domestic violence, I would shatter that illusion.

According to *Intimate Betrayal: Domestic Violence in Lesbian Relationships*, edited by Ellyn Kaschak, Ph.D., mine is not an unusual story. Much of what we believe about domes-

tic violence is based on a feminist analysis of the power imbalances between men and women. Domestic violence is a function of male privilege: it's how men reinforce their dominance over women. Lesbian domestic violence flies in the face of the radical feminist theory that men are violent and dangerous, with the capacity to rape and assault us. If women also have this potential, how do we know who the enemy is?

While too scholarly to offer practical solutions, *Intimate Betrayal* bravely explains why lesbian victims of domestic violence fear revealing their situation within their own communities. Those who do are often treated as pariahs, proof of something we're reluctant to admit exists.

This collection of essays, written both by academics and front-line

counselors, reverberates with several reasons for the pervasive reluctance to admit abuse by a female lover: internalized homophobia and/or the threat of being outed, accompanied by the possible loss of jobs or children; dread of dealing with homophobic police; fear of being refused emergency medical treatment; shame of not being able to defend oneself; and belief that the abuse was deserved. But according to many contributors, the most compelling reason is fear of being viewed as a traitor. Most abused lesbians prefer to

suffer in silence, even risk their lives, rather than blow the whistle on their partners and reveal a situation they believe would fuel society's hatred for

lesbians and gays. According to several accounts in *Intimate Betrayal*, those who do come forward find little community support and are often made to feel guilty for betraying their own kind and exposing this taboo.

How prevalent is lesbian domestic violence? Studies cited in *Intimate Betrayal* estimate that forty-three percent to seventy-three percent of lesbians surveyed have experienced some form of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Other reported abuses include being denied necessities such as food, water, or sleep. Over half the surveyed lesbians reported at least one incident of sexual coercion. But despite these alarming figures, only two percent of abused lesbians indicated they would consider



Ellyn Kaschak, Ph.D.

involving the police or court system.

Reading such a book in 1985 might have made me feel less alone and less ashamed. I might have told fewer lies. *Intimate Betrayal* deals a powerful blow to the myth of the nurturing lesbian relationship, free from power imbalances. This collection reveals both statistical and anecdotal evidence suggesting that incidents of lesbian domestic violence are on the rise, questions the double standard for abuses inflicted from outside and inside our community, and cautions readers not to perpetuate the violence by silencing survivors out of fear and denial. *Intimate Betrayal* is a difficult but necessary book, telling truths we mustn't turn away from.

Grade: **B+**

Joy Parks writes about lesbian writing for several LGBT publications.