



How to Better Assist Transgender Individuals Caught in Violent Domestic Relationships

Brian Peter Tesch, East Mississippi Community College

Transgender communities have become much more visible in the United States than ever before — in part because of the prominence of transgender celebrities such as Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner, and popular media portrayals of people with non-traditional gender identities as in Amazon's show *Transparent*. Although increased visibility is a step in the right direction, transgender people still face a great deal of discrimination, prejudice, and violence. Efforts to combat discrimination and violence against transgender people have been impeded by insufficient knowledge about transgender victims of domestic violence.

Research on domestic abuse finds that up to half of all transgender individuals have been victimized by a romantic partner, making domestic abuse a major health hazard in the transgender community. To craft effective solutions, policymakers, community organizations, aid/advocacy agencies, and even individuals must all take decisive steps to understand the specific challenges transgender people face and ensure that ample resources are accessible to those who need them.

The Problem of Transgender Domestic Violence

To understand the problem of transgender domestic violence, it is important to grasp the primary differences between gender identity and sexual orientation. Sexual orientation refers to the gender identities of those to whom a person is attracted, while gender identity refers to whether a person identifies as masculine, feminine, non-binary, or another category and how they wish others to relate to them. Sexual orientation and gender identity should not be conflated because they are fundamentally different characteristics. They also signify different needs for treatment in cases of domestic violence.

The few studies that have examined transgender domestic violence have found that many transgender people experience severe incidents of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Perpetrators of domestic violence target their victim's non-traditional gender identities by destroying cosmetics or clothing articles used when a person is making a gender transition, destroying hormones and medicines, withholding funds for medical visits, and perhaps sexually abusing or insulting their partners. Exploitation of such specific vulnerabilities is unlike other vulnerabilities studied in most domestic violence research.

Transgender Victims and Domestic Violence Agencies

Although some domestic violence shelters are ostensibly open to transgender victims, the shelter system as it exists poses major barriers for these victims. Many shelters entirely exclude transgender victims. Other domestic violence shelters have policies in place that require admissions based on victims' gender identity instead of their biological sex, but such policies are not easy to enforce. What is more, domestic violence

shelters that are specifically tailored to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals often do not provide adequate support for transgender victims of domestic abuse. In my research, I find that most of these shelters focus on victims who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual instead of those who are transgender or gender non-conforming. People who work in these domestic violence shelters reported that they rarely encounter transgender victims of domestic abuse; and even when they try to accommodate these individuals to the best of their ability, transgender people are sometimes excluded by other people staying at the shelter.

What Can be Done?

To help transgender victims, community organizations and public agencies must:

- **Signal to the transgender people that they are welcome.** This can mean assessing organizational language to ensure that it is inclusive, running awareness campaigns, or doing direct outreach that takes care not to patronize or belittle transgender people. Outreach can educate transgender people about the threat of domestic violence and resources for victims.
- **Recognize and actively address the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity.** Organizations that work with sexual and gender minority communities are often expected to provide services that will address the needs of all subgroups — a heavy lift for any one organization. Transgender-specific domestic violence services should be supported or expanded to help these individuals recover from trauma.

Most domestic violence services sexual and gender minorities are based in large cities with thriving communities of such people, but transgender domestic violence happens everywhere. Domestic violence services that operate outside of major cities often focus exclusively on serving non-transgender women. While these domestic violence services help men and non-traditional victims escape their abuse with hotel vouchers and other forms of emergency housing, they do not typically offer the safety of a shelter. Such non-urban domestic violence programs must find ways to include and support trans people, perhaps with resources from grant makers and state and local governments.

The sad reality is that it is very dangerous to be a transgender person, and such people face a high risk of experiencing domestic abuse. Romantic relationships are supposed to be one of the best parts of life, but for many transgender individuals romantic relationships often bring victimization and abuse. Domestic violence is a real threat to the transgender community, and appropriate steps must be taken to understand their risks and protect them.

Read more in Brian P. Tesch and Debra Bekerian, "Hidden in the Margins: A Qualitative Examination of What Professionals in the Domestic Violence Field Know about Transgender Domestic Violence" *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 27 (2015): 391-411.