**Thinking the Unthinkable: Older Lesbians, Sex and Violence <1>**

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## Introduction <2>

The range of public stories which circulate about intimate relationships, including LGBT+ lives, as well as sexual abuse, have a profound impact on the ways in which individuals and couples make sense of their own experiences, behaviours and expectations in their relationships (Jackson, 1993; Jamieson, 1998). Current generations of older lesbians have experienced profound social changes over the course of their lives. Many were actively involved (Giddens, 1992), bearing witness to the transformation of understandings of ageing and sexuality. Despite such social shifts, ageism, heterosexism and sexism impact on their lives in various and complex ways, frequently rendering older lesbians invisible culturally and socially (Traies, 2012). Thus, older lesbians experience a tricky paradox, in that they live in an increasingly sexualised society, and a moment when in many ways it might be easier to be lesbian. Yet, they also live in a society that views their sexuality as unnatural, distasteful, or a joke. In addition, as older members of the LGBT+ 'community' – arguably a commercialised, youth-orientated community - many older lesbians feel marginalised by the assumptions and privileging of heterosexual norms and values (Duggan's (2002) 'homonormativity'). What does this mean for women who experience sexual abuse within their relationships? What spaces are open to them to share and understand their experiences, to seek solace and support? This is a significantly under-researched area, with very little focussing specifically on the experiences of older lesbians. This chapter begins to fill in some of those gaps. Based on interviews from research into community responses to lesbian domestic violence, and data from a survey, and follow-up interviews, into LGBT+ lives in North West England, I argue that cultural stereotypes about women, sexuality and age have a significant impact on who gets to tell their sexual story (Plummer, 1995). Women's sense of inclusion/exclusion in relation to LGBT+ communities (if indeed it is salient to talk about communities) and wider society has a profound effect on their ability to both come out and 'come out' about sexual abuse. Thus, the violence and abuse older lesbians experience, I argue, is not sufficiently recognised and acknowledged either by professionals, or often the women themselves, as a direct result of hegemonic understandings of gender, sexuality, age and sexual violence.

This chapter begins by emphasizing the continued importance of a feminist analysis of women's violence in the context of a heteronormative and patriarchal society. The chapter then explores why a focus on age in relation to sexual abuse is necessary. This is followed by a brief outline of my own research methods, before considering the ways in which the triple oppressions of ageism, sexism and homophobia shape understandings and experiences of, and responses to, sexual violence experienced by older lesbians in their intimate relationships.

**Violent times? LGBT+ abuse <2>**

Sexual violence is clearly a significant 'everyday' social problem (Stanko, 2003). Amnesty International (2004: 1) described global violence against women as 'the greatest human rights scandal of our times'. Feminist research into abuse in intimate relationships has asserted that it is imperative for us to explore and understand all forms of abuse, no matter how difficult they may be for us to acknowledge (Dominelli, 1989; Kelly, 1991; Ristock, 2003). Some of the research presented in this chapter was conducted in response to studies which attempted to assert either that there has been a collective feminist and lesbian refusal to acknowledge the issue of lesbian domestic violence, or that the existence of lesbian domestic violence renders previous feminist theorizing and research into domestic abuse irrelevant. For example, Girshick claims that 'the feminist analysis views violence as inherently male…and to admit woman-to-woman violence would discredit this analysis' (2002: 55). Just because 'women do it too', a gendered analysis of violence, focusing on the wider socio-political and historical contexts, is still necessary. Lesbians do not live outside of patriarchal and heterosexist ideologies and institutions. Violence is still gendered; most violent crime, rape and abuse is perpetrated by men against women (Walby and Allen, 2004). Sexual abuse between women still requires a consideration of gender; if violence is understood as a masculine attribute, how does this impact on expectations of who is violent in a lesbian dynamic? Are assumptions gendered, focussing on butch/femme dynamics for instance? Whilst neither woman in a lesbian relationship enjoys male privilege and power, they occupy other identity/power positions in a society that promotes hierarchy, power differentials, inequality and violence, which are all pervasive features of patriarchy (Todd, 2013). Same-sex relationships are directly influenced by other societal power inequalities that impact all citizens, including sexism, and those based on class, age, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1991; Bowleg, 2012). My own research has focused more specifically on the intersections of age and class with gender and sexuality. Whilst not suggesting that all female violence is simply a result of social control, vulnerability or victimization, these surely should be considered.

**Boom(ers): an ageing time bomb? <2>**

That we live on a socially ageing globe has been well documented. Ageing populations have been common across Europe and beyond for some time. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2018) by 2066, a quarter of the UK population will be 65 and over, exceeding those aged 16 and under. However, this social ageing is often framed as a serious social 'problem', with concerns about how, with a declining working age population, society can afford to adequately care for its ageing population. Material deprivations structured by gender, class and ethnicity certainly continue and become exaggerated in later life. Austerity measures in the UK and countries like Greece, for instance, have impacted on older people, particularly women (see Papanastasiou and Papatheodorou, 2018). Yet, such 'moral panics' point to a key issue regarding ageing, that of ageism and stereotypes. These concerns stem from an underlying assumption that older people are financially unproductive burdens to society. Older people are culturally devalued, and old age is viewed as a state of decline and vulnerability, which has a direct impact on the whether we can conceptualize older perpetrators of abuse.

Perhaps because of ageist and sexist stereotypes, until relatively recently, little effort had been made to explore the lives of older LGBT+ people, especially older lesbians (see Heaphy et al, 2003). The lack of a focus on age may, in part, be because older lesbians are a particularly hard to reach population. Heaphy et al (2003) also suggest the lack of recognition of age stems from a focus on sexuality as a key determining factor of LGBT+ experience, a factor which is assumed to be a prerogative of the young. This is of significance in relation to the sexual abuse of older lesbians.

Whilst the twenty first century has been a time of potentially progressive legislative and social change for LGBT+ people [the UK alone has seen The Civil Partnership Act (December 2004), Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007, Same-Sex Marriage Act (which came into force in 2014)], many older lesbians have lived through less liberal times. They will have lived through both informal and formal discrimination. This might mean older lesbians find ageing less problematic than their heterosexual counterparts; negotiating non-heterosexual identities in adverse conditions can provide skills in 'crisis competence' (see Balsam and D'Augelli, 2006). However, it can have a profound effect both on their preparedness to 'come out' as LGBT+, and impact on their use, and experience, of a range of services, including health services (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011). In fact, older LGBT+ people are five time less likely to

access services for older people than is the case in the wider older population, because they fear discrimination and homophobia (Todd, 2011).

Older lesbians may have lived through times when making themselves invisible, 'passing' as heterosexuals, was a deliberate and necessary coping strategy; the alternative might have meant losing a job, friends or family (Barrett, 2008). This can lead to what's referred to as a fracturing of relationships (Barrett et al, 2016). Many will have experienced levels of discrimination to the point of violence in their earlier lives (DeLamater and Koepsel, 2017). Cronin and King (2014) have shown how fear of discrimination prevents many older LGBT+ people from making friends in the wider community. Such social isolation perhaps puts them at risk of abuse, in addition to preventing them from seeking support. Intimate relationships for older lesbians are often viewed as a safe space (Smalley, 1987), making it even more dangerous when things go wrong.

In recent years, Weeks (2007) argues, society has undergone a transformation, from being a place where same-sex desire is seen as an aberration, a sin or sickness, to becoming a culture where LGBT+ lives are 'respectable'. As Weeks has noted, the potential to age as an 'out' lesbian, in a comparatively tolerant society is a relatively recent phenomenon and is itself a consequence of social change, a change many of the participants were involved with. Paradoxically, these women now often find themselves viewed as asexual – deemed physically unattractive in a youth-orientated society, uninterested in, incapable of, having sex (Heidari, 2016). Many of the women I spoke with in the study detailed below, felt isolated within so-called lesbian communities almost as much as they did in society at large, for example:

*Lesbian events are young events.* (Barbara, 58, S1)

Gradually, the stereotype of the sexless older woman is shifting to a focus on life-long sexual relationships; 'successful' sex is seen as a key aspect of healthy ageing (Hinchliff and Gott, 2008). However, such a view is not without its own problems and perhaps places older lesbians under new pressures to comply to their partner's(') expectations. However, much of the violence against women literature ignores the experiences of older women – possibly because they were/are positioned as asexual. Where violence is researched, it is often conceptualized as elder abuse (Todd, 2013).

These older women can experience new 'privileges' as fully recognised legal couples, through civil partnerships and marriage. The rewards which come with these - married couples' allowance and tax benefits etc – potentially place people who are abused in a difficult position.

This is a classed and gendered risk; working class women are more likely to be reliant on the state pension. Some have argued society is privileging particular relationship structures. Robson (2009: 315) has called this 'compulsory matrimony'. It has the potential to create new social divisions, in that some forms of relationship remain less visible, less socially recognised (Barker, 2012).

## Methodology <2>

In order to explore these matters, interview data from two separate studies has been used. The first, (S1), one of the earliest UK studies into lesbian domestic abuse, used in-depth interviews conducted in the North East of England, to explore how communities responded to lesbian domestic violence over a period of 40 years. The research had a global reach; 25 self-identified lesbians were interviewed, aged 24-73, from across the UK, in addition to North Korea, Italy, Canada, Australia and the US. Interviews were conducted via telephone, email or in person. In addition to getting responses from diversely situated women in terms of age, culture and ethnicity, the research also considered the impact of social class on community membership. Though initially about whether LGBT+ communities had addressed the issue of same-sex abuse or ignored it, rather than personal experiences per se, it quickly became apparent that sexual violence was something which several women had experienced. In effect, the data from this research, which was carried out in 2005, has been 'recontextualised' (Moore, 2007: 1).

The second piece of research, (S2), was conducted in collaboration with a charity providing advocacy and support services for LGBT+ people in North West England. An online Smart Survey (conducted October–December 2014) contained multiple-choice and open questions about a range of issues experienced by the wider LGBT+ population, including health and social care, social activities, crime, violence and abuse. Participants came from a range of rural and urban, prosperous and poor areas. This chapter uses data from six follow-up interviews with older lesbians who had experience of abuse in later-life.

## Sexual violence in older lesbians' relationships <2>

A variety of themes emerged in relation to the sexual abuse of older women in lesbian relationships. This section will focus on a few, namely the problems of dominant and normalized narratives of abuse, how this effects our ability to conceptualize and articulate the sexual abuse of older lesbians, and a brief consideration of the impact of a sexualized lesbian culture.

***Telling sexual stories: the impact of hegemonic discourse* <3>**

A common theme is that victims often do not recognise themselves as victims of sexual violence and thus do not disclose it (Brossoie and Roberto, 2016). This impact of hegemonic narratives of abuse was echoed in my lesbian community study. None of the women discussed sexual violence without prompting when describing their own, or friends', experiences, although nearly all acknowledged that it was a possible aspect of domestic violence. When specifically prompted about sexual violence, many women recounted stories/memories of violence of a sexual nature:

> *Another woman, she told me of a long term partner, she met her at university and they actually still live together now and throughout however many odd years they've known each other, which would be 30 years, there'd been various hiccups and problems in their relationship and her partner had done something similar to her and it had been unpleasant actually, this one was a really violent act. It's interesting as you start talking about this, all the things I'd forgotten about. I remember her describing that to me as quite vicious and nasty.*
>
> (Jo, 50, S1)

Sex and sexuality are notoriously difficult to talk about. Research on sexuality, sexual practice and relationships can cause unease and perhaps this is especially the case with sexual violence in lesbian relationships. The tentative nature of Jo's description reveals the difficulty facing many when discussing sexual violence. Although violence perpetrated by a woman is, for reasons discussed earlier, not expected, as Girshick (2002) states, 'the thought of a woman *rapist* is even more removed from our sensibility' (Girshick, 2002: 3). Is it simply that sex is still viewed, in a heterosexist world, as primarily vaginal penetration by a penis (Smart, 1989)? Sexism, ageism and heterosexism means that sexual violence and older women is hard to think about. The complexity of talking about such issues may be because of established, often legal, definitions of sexual violence, which are constructed around hegemonic understandings of male sexuality. A problem one of the participants considered:

> *I know of someone who was violated, raped by her partner with a glass bottle. Now I know legally it's not defined as rape but you can't tell me she didn't feel raped. The law just emphases how ignored we are, it sort of minimizes her experience.*

(Sarah, 56, S2)

The sexualization of lesbians as a group may have also contributed to such views (Jeffreys, 2003). Lesbians, it has been argued, hold a contradictory position in society. On the one hand they have been feminized and sanitized to become the object of heterosexual male fantasy and, on the other, they can be read as 'morally dangerous' because of their perceived masculine sexuality (Wilton, 1995). It would be understandable, in this context, if many lesbians, especially older women who have lived through 'difficult' times, would not want to risk confirming society's suspicion that lesbians are sexual deviants, predatory and dangerous by acknowledging sexual abuse in their relationships.

In the absence of the penis, conceptualizations of what has happened as rape or abuse were sometimes limited. In addition, the dominant reading of sexual violence as rape, masked other forms of sexual abuse. Women have historically been constructed and read as sexually passive or receptive, therefore for a woman to conduct sexual abuse is virtually 'unthinkable', as Gina relates:

> *Well, sexual violence I mentioned it earlier, you see and I feel that it would be easier for a man to commit sexual violence on a woman than two women because a man has a penis that he can poke in you which is attached and there, you know, I'm not saying that's the only form of sexual abuse but that's just my opinion.*
>
> (Gina, 59, S2)

Smart (1989) has written extensively of how, in a phallocentric culture, sexuality is always assumed to be heterosexuality and sex is always (only) penetrative. The law, of course, reinforces this by stating who can rape and who can be raped. In England and Wales, for instance, rape in marriage was not a crime until 1991 and men could not legally be victims of rape until 1994. Women still cannot legally be considered as rapists – only the penis is viewed as a weapon capable of rape. This clearly has repercussions for how sexual assault commissioned by women is viewed - hegemonic constructions of rape mean it is invisibilized by law and often not recognised by victims and the wider community.

Stereotypes of older lesbians as isolated, desperate and perhaps vulnerable may also render potential perpetrators (and victims) of domestic violence invisible, as Annette and Rebecca suggest:

> *For lesbians, I think as we get older, it becomes easier for us to blend in with the rest of society. In a way all older women become more invisible, they are seen as sexless, they begin to look the same, and so lesbians generally and therefore abusers and victims aren't seen.*
>
> (Rebecca, 47, S1)

> *I don't think we focus enough on age, whether in a heterosexual or same-sex situation. There's some stuff on elder abuse but I mean domestic violence. I think older people are seen as safe somehow and so we might not think that they can be violent but I know for a fact they are. A friend of mine was abused by her partner who was much older and I don't think people believed her partly because of the age of her partner*.
>
> (Annette, 24, S1)

It may be that we find it easier to conceptualize the possibility of an older victim of domestic violence. Again, however, perhaps as a direct result of the intersections of ageism and sexism, older lesbians may be viewed as asexual, and the potential is for that victim to be viewed more generally as a victim of elder abuse, rather than a victim of lesbian domestic violence (though of course there may well be important similarities in terms of experiences, as well as key distinctions) (O'Keefe et al, 2007).

***Sexualized cultures and sexual abuse* <3>**

Another divisive issue within lesbian and feminist communities since the 1980s has been that of bondage and sadomasochism (BDSM) as a sexual practice (Jeffreys, 1994), a practice that became labelled by some as male-identified and/or heterosexual. For some, BDSM was deemed to be something which encouraged or produced power inequality within lesbian relationships (Jeffreys, 2003). About a third of the women interviewed made a connection between domestic violence and BDSM, and three also believed lesbian porn and stripping encouraged violence. An important question both for the women I interviewed, and some academics has been: do such sexual practices normalize sexual violence, and when do they become abusive (see Bindel, 1982)? As the following two quotes suggest, rather than just being a concern of the 1980s, this was still an issue for some women in the lesbian community:

> *I think S/M clearly is linked to domestic violence. That particular relationship may not be abusive but it's making violence acceptable, desirable and normal. It works in the same way as stripping. An individual stripper may say she feels empowered but she's doing the wider community of women no favours because she's objectifying women and making it acceptable to see us as objects of men's pleasure.*
>
> (Julie, 54, S2)

> *We need to combat all forms of violence – sexual violence, lesbian stripping, S/M, porn – which portray lesbians as appropriate objects of violence to other women. The lesbian sexual revolution in normalizing sexual objectification between lesbians has had the effect of releasing lesbians from restraint. I regularly hear tales now of young lesbians having bad experiences in casual sex, pressurized into S/M – these were not problems so far as I was aware twenty years ago.*
>
> (Fiona, 57, S1)

For Fiona, the recent proliferation in ways to 'be a lesbian'; and rise of the 'lesbian sexual revolution' have resulted in behaviours which, for her, can be construed as violent. In a sense, she argues that lesbians are now subjecting women to an objectifying 'gaze', which enables abusive behaviours. Sheila Jeffreys (1994) echoes this view and has argued that (heterosexual) pornography justified sexual violence and that the 'selling' of the idea of pornography to women in the 1980s has done lasting damage.

A key strategy employed by the women to manage the impact of abuse was to compare their experience to others'. Often, participants minimized their own experiences, Jean (62, S2) for instance, constructed the abuse she experienced as '*part of everyday life'*. Such 'normalization' can be an effective coping mechanism but raises significant concerns about the longer-term, insidious harm of considering sexual abuse as 'normal'. The cumulative effect of routine, everyday abusive encounters, over a lifetime, can be considerable (Stanko, 1990).

Some participants, however, talked about the damaging effects of the abuse. For instance, one woman reported that the sexual abuse she experienced in her same-sex relationship triggered memories of past abuses

> *I had forgotten, I think, or supressed the memory but after she did that to me, I kept having flashbacks to something that happened with my uncle when I was young.*
>
> (Lois, 53, S2)

The way in which Lois articulates her past abuse also serves to minimize what had happened to her. As Lovett et al (2018) have argued, discourses of denial, deflection and disbelief are powerful, impacting on victims' awareness of the abuse they suffer and their ability to act on it at the time. This seemed particularly salient for the older women I spoke to. Many of the participants stated that they felt 'stressed' 'hopeless' or 'anxious' as a result of the abuse.

For most of the older women, the sexual abuse meted out by their partners served to silence them. The majority had never disclosed what had happened to them to anyone before taking part in the research. Reasons put forward mirror reasons given in other studies including embarrassment, shame and not wanting to 'dwell' on it (see Ristock, 2003; Donovan and Hester, 2011). Over half stated that they did not believe anyone could do anything about it or would take it seriously. Only one woman had reported her sexual assault to the police and whilst this was ten years ago, worryingly, she said the experience was a poor one. For those women who have lived through less 'tolerant' times, this was a common expectation. Perhaps confirming Weeks et al's (2001) notion of the importance of 'families of choice' for the LGBT+ community, if any help or support was sought, women usually turned to their friends.

**Civil partnerships and marriage: narratives of safety and danger <2>**

Given the ways in which many older lesbians feel isolated both within their wider communities but also within LGBT+ spaces, many, arguably, will seek solace in coupledom, indeed, it has been argued that neoliberalism has cemented the significance of the couple to LGBT+ lives (Williams, 2004). At the time of my earlier research, the Civil Partnership Act 2004, which came into operation on 5th December 2005, was a very new piece of legislation and the women I spoke to had very mixed feelings about it. Civil partnerships heralded a major shift, in that, for the first time in British history lesbian relationships were now under state regulation. At the time, a significant area that was frequently overlooked in the debates surrounding citizenship and civil partnerships was how civil partnerships (and now marriage) relate to same-sex abuse. It could be argued that for the sexual abuse of older lesbians to be socially and culturally acknowledged, lesbian relationships must first be recognized. The introduction of civil partnerships meant that for the first time a certain type of lesbian relationship was publicly

recognized. Civil partnerships (and now marriage) also offered legal protection from domestic violence. However, in the past, many feminists have critiqued the institution of marriage and identified how certain of its characteristics have provided a context in which abuses of power and violence can take place unchallenged (Kelly, 1988; Clark, 1995). Until very recently such critiques did not transpose to same-sex relationships given they have been denied access to this institution. It is important, therefore, to consider the possible impacts marriage and civil partnerships may have for domestic violence, including sexual abuse, in lesbian relationships.

Several participants were worried that civil partnerships could see the advent of new social divisions within the lesbian community, possibly leading to more sympathy for those who experience abuse in 'official' couples. A few were also concerned that marriage will effectively render same-sex couples as 'normal' or mainstream, further invisibilzing lesbians (Ettlebrick, 1996). Many of the participants had, in the past, been committed, as feminists, to working outside of 'man-made' law, thus the increase in governmental scrutiny of lesbian relationships which comes with formalized relationships, was a cause for caution. Some expressed a fear that civil partnerships or marriage may co-opt LGBT+ individuals, who will perhaps feel less inclined to forge relationships outside the system (Stychin, 2003), creating a move from compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), to compulsory coupledom.

One participant worried about the semantics of marriage:

> *I'm uncomfortable with the ownership implied with marriage, 'my' wife, seems less balanced than my partner.*
>
> (Sally, 68, S1)

She went on to consider whether this impacts on attitudes and behaviours in relationships. Her fear was civil partnerships may render more lesbians vulnerable to domestic abuse, ironically, at the same time as it becomes legally recognized. She believed civil partnerships may be to the detriment of lesbian communities, meaning that women who suffer abuse may not have access to community support. Such fears are supported by various academics. Claudia Card (1996), for example, expressed concern that same-sex marriage would make lesbian couples stay together for the wrong reasons. Christopher Carrington (1999) critiqued the push for legal same-sex marriage, arguing that marriage would trap more LGBT+ people in unhappy relationships and reinforce inequalities within those relationships, as well as between single and married LGBT+ people. Several women expressed a fear that investment in civil partnerships may lead some women to remain in abusive relationships, a few went so far as to

suggest that civil partnerships may in themselves lead to abusive behaviour. Indeed, two of the women who were interviewed, stated that the abuse started after they had moved in together and had a civil ceremony. This may of course be coincidental but it is something which needs to be considered in future research.

**Conclusion <2>**

It seems we have much to celebrate in the UK, given that the international lesbian and gay association (ILGA, 2015) identified the UK as the most progressive country in Europe for LGBT+ rights. Sexual violence is rightly recognised as a problem of global proportions and in recent decades, there has been much research to map the extent and nature of such abuse. There are serious gaps in our knowledge, however, particularly in relation to the sexual abuse of older lesbians in their intimate partnerships; older lesbians remain under-represented in literature on ageing, abuse and on sexuality (Todd, 2013). Thus, we are left with many questions unanswered.

Richardson (2004) has highlighted the ways in which sexual citizenship rights, in many ways, are contingent on notions of responsibility and respectability. There are rewards, such as state tax breaks (Richardson, 2015), as well as cultural acceptance, for 'official' couples willing to stay in their relationships. But as down-payment for gains such as civil partnerships and marriage, perhaps has come 'compulsory coupledom' (Wilkinson, 2012). Riggs (2007) argues that liberalism, rather than understanding or valuing individual's experiences, reduces a broad range of experience down to a particular dominant narrative. As a result, only certain groups of people are entitled to rights, often at the expense of others (Phelan, 2001). Richardson (2004) posits that recent attempts by some LGBT+ groups to gain equal rights are based upon claims of 'sameness'. If so, it is possible that we will lose sight of lesbian domestic violence, and the sexual of abuse of older women in particular, as a distinct phenomenon before we have had a chance to examine it sufficiently.

This potential disappearance of lesbian lives, particularly of older lesbians, needs to be examined more closely. Like Westwood and Lowe (2018: 56), I see the invisibilzing of older lesbians both as an outcome but also an 'ongoing process of social marginalization and exclusion'. Rich's (1980) work on 'compulsory heterosexuality', shows how lesbian sexuality has not just been frowned upon, or ignored but has been constructed as unthinkable. The sexual lives of many older lesbians have been experienced within this context of social censorship (Waite, 2015). This chapter highlights the ways historic homophobia continues to shape the

experiences of many older lesbians' sense of self and connectedness to the wider community. Many of the older women I spoke to no longer feel welcomed within remaining LGBT+ spaces and/or were financially excluded from expensive bars and clubs (Chasin, 2000), the effects of ageism elevated by intersections with class. This means that there are fewer spaces in which older lesbians' opinions, experiences, histories and views can be heard (Todd, 2013; Westwood and Lowe, 2018). The loss of community support, I suggest, means some women may be driven into the arms of their abuser.

I argue that the myths which abound about rape and sexual abuse more generally (Smart, 1989), impact on older lesbians too. The triple oppressions of sexism, ageism and heteronormativity place these women as unlikely victims (and perpetrators) of such violence. Hegemonic constructions of sex and dominant narratives which distinguish between 'real rape' – perpetrated by a male stranger against a younger, sexually attractive woman - and other forms of sexual assault, serve to render invisible the abuse many older lesbians experience. Such myths mean it is hard for us to comprehend of a female perpetrator and/or an older perpetrator; both are subject positions understood as passive and vulnerable.

I recognise that there is huge diversity within the category 'older', which often captures those aged between 45 and 100+, and exploring the breadth and depth of diversity relating to the topic is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is imperative that we begin thinking more seriously about the ways in which age impacts on the experiences and understandings of sexual assault. Elsewhere, I have written about how growing up through particular political moments, such as Section 28, impact on women's sense of identity (Todd, 2013). More consideration is needed in relation to the impact of the age at which a woman 'comes out' on her responses to abuse. What happens when older lesbians find themselves having to provide care for their abusive partners or conversely need to be cared for by their abusers? In what ways do the experiences of sexual assault and elder abuse relate and diverge? To what extent does the age of both victim and perpetrator – who may, for instance, have grown up in an age where rape in marriage was not a crime and may experience sex as something private and indeed taboo – impact on perceptions of abuse (Mann et al, 2014)? Perhaps the biggest gap in all the research is looking specifically at the experiences of older transwomen who identify as lesbian. None of my participants identified as trans and there is a dearth of research into this. This is not to suggest that we should privilege the experiences of older lesbians but we need to begin opening up a space to recognise the phenomenon and think through ways of addressing the problem.

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