

# “I Wasn’t a Priority, I Wasn’t a Victim”: Challenges in Help Seeking for Transgender Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

Violence Against Women

1–21

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## Abstract

Among the crucial advancements in the study of intimate partner violence (IPV) is an understanding of the distinct help-seeking barriers that gay and lesbian victims face. Despite these additions to the literature, transgender IPV victimization remains under-researched. The current study utilized semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires of 18 trans-identified survivors of IPV. Working through a modified grounded analytic approach, two major themes emerged in the help-seeking process: “walking the gender tightrope” in which participants first struggled with gendered notions of victimization that made it difficult to identify abuse, and second, the challenges of “navigating genderist resources.”

## Keywords

transgender, help-seeking, intimate partner violence, LGBT

Over the course of recent decades, the field of intimate partner violence (IPV) has expanded to include the experiences of same-sex intimate partner violence victims. However, despite these advancements, transgender IPV victimization remains largely unexplored (McClennen, Summers, & Vaughan, 2002; Owen & Burke, 2004; Ristock 2011). Consequently, relatively little is documented in the literature about the distinct realities faced by transgender IPV victims. Girshick (2002) described this as a

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“complete lack of research on IPV among transgender people,” which she characterized as a “serious gap” in the literature (p. 7). In addition, Ristock (2011) stated that the field of same-sex IPV research has been dominated by a focus on lesbian victimization and that still “very little work addresses trans experiences” (p. 4). In one of the few trans-specific studies available, Courvant and Cook-Daniels (1998) cited preliminary analyses from the Gender, Violence, and Resource Access Survey of trans and intersex individuals that found a 50% victimization rate by an intimate partner. In 2006, the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence reported that of all their reporting agencies, too few had clientele that identified as transgender to garner any information. This difficulty in obtaining transgender samples has often led scholars to exclude trans responses in same-sex IPV studies or only “offering binary gender identity categories (i.e. only men or women),” which does not accurately represent the diversity of genders within the community (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs [NCAVP], 2011, p. 11). The term *trans* refers to a wide range of people whose gender identity or expression varies from the cultural norm for their birth sex (Bornstein, Fawcett, Sullivan, Senturia, & Shiu-Thornton, 2006).

With much of the existing research on same-sex IPV having often times lumped trans experiences with gays and lesbians, little attention has been given to how transphobia and genderism<sup>1</sup> structures trans victimization and presents barriers to help seeking. Help-seeking can be understood as the process by which victims of IPV first identify their situation as problematic, which may be followed by a need for external assistance that could involve navigating formal or informal avenues in an attempt to remedy the situation or leave an abuser (Dunbar, 2006; Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005). Examples of formal avenues may include court orders or police reporting whereas informal avenues may include assistance from friends or family. The current study addresses a major gap in the literature by focusing exclusively on help seeking among transgender survivors of intimate partner abuse. The guiding research question asked, how do transgender survivors of IPV describe their help-seeking processes? The following section examines the contexts of abuse that inform distinct realities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) victims of IPV and provides an overview of existing knowledge about IPV help seeking among the LGBT population.

## **Contexts of Abuse—Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Transphobia**

For the LGBT community, the cultural and social context in which IPV occurs frames the experiences of violence differently than for heterosexual victims. Specifically, homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia structurally disadvantage LGBT victims and also foster opportunities for abuse that rely on this power structure. The marginalization of LGBT individuals may fuel intimate abuse through the isolation and shaming of victims as well as present barriers to help seeking. Throughout the literature, the role of homophobia and heterosexism is prominent in tactics of abuse, the internalization of such beliefs, and how it systematically

disadvantages same-sex IPV victims (Bornstein et al., 2006; Burke & Follingstad, 1999; Guadalupe-Diaz & Yglesias, 2013; McClennen, 2005). However, because very few trans-inclusive studies exist, less attention has been given to the role of transphobia and genderism in the IPV victimization of transgender individuals particularly as they relate to help seeking.

Among the few trans-inclusive studies in IPV, Bornstein et al. (2006) conducted in-depth interviews with lesbian, bisexual, and transgender victims of IPV in a study where participants could more freely describe their experiences in detail. Although respondents expressed feelings of isolation, difficulty in identifying abuse, and a lack of community resources, no themes emerged that were trans specific. In one example describing attacks against victims' queer identities, the authors included one response from a trans participant who was attacked by their abuser as "not trans enough" (2006, p. 163). The authors cited transphobia as a potential barrier to help seeking but no further detail was provided into how this played out in the lives of trans victims. Furthermore, the authors relied on only five transgender respondents.

In studies with larger samples, the researchers discussed how transphobia and genderism are utilized by abusers to structurally disadvantage trans victims (Courvant & Cook-Daniels, 1998, 2001; Munson & Cook-Daniels, 2003). For example, as a result of a victim's gender variant status and the transphobic culture that permeates all aspects of social life, perpetrators may tear down victims by attacking their trans-status (Munson & Cook-Daniels, 2003). As Brown (2011) states, "perpetrators are acutely aware of the individual and institutional vulnerabilities faced by trans people and these vulnerabilities feature explicitly in the abuse tactics and harm done" (p. 117) In another example, abusers may undermine trans identities by intentionally using the wrong pronouns, ridiculing bodies, or destroying tools used to communicate gender (i.e., breast binders or breast enhancers; Munson & Cook-Daniels, 2003). The authors added that abusers may regulate victims' perceptions of their own ability to pass as the gender they wish to present; this often includes tormenting victims into thinking that they are not "believable" men/women, that they do not look like "real" men/women, and taking advantage of the lack of structural support for gender identity and expression protections against victims with threats of "outing." Ultimately, these abusers may deteriorate trans victims' sense of self by isolating them, making them feel less than human, or undeserving of love. Others have argued that transgender individuals are especially at risk of partner victimization due to shame, isolation, or loneliness (Bockting, Robinson, & Rosser, 1998). These factors may lower relationship expectations and make transgender victims vulnerable to staying in harmful relationships (Brown, 2011).

Although these works have opened the discussion on unique tactics of abuse and structural realities faced by transgender IPV victims, they do not all rely on empirical evidence. Moreover, the available empirical studies on trans-specific violence have been limited to incidents of crime in which IPV was not the focus (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002). As a result, very little empirical inquiry has examined the accounts of trans IPV victims.

## Help-Seeking Barriers

In general, survivors of IPV typically face a number of barriers to help seeking including poor response from law enforcement or service providers, financial abilities to leave abusive partners, or a lack of accessibility to shelters (Logan, Evans, Stevenson, & Jordan, 2005). However, for LGBT survivors of IPV, both formal and informal help-seeking avenues may be much more limited than for heterosexual women. Early studies examining gay and lesbian survivors of IPV and their help-seeking behaviors indicated several challenges to the accessibility of formal resources by introducing homophobia and heterosexism into the overall discussion as barriers to help seeking for gay and lesbian survivors (Island & Letellier, 1991; Renzetti, 1992).

First, homophobia may play a role in whether or not victims of same-sex IPV even come forward and seek help. Because same-sex relationships are already marginalized and characterized as inferior, the literature illustrates evidence for a reluctance of both the community and survivors to report victimization (Benowitz, 1986; Bornstein et al., 2006; Erbaugh, 2007; Girshick, 2002; Island & Letellier, 1991; McLaughlin & Rozee, 2001; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Renzetti, 1992, 1998; Ristock, 2002). For many in the community, the perception exists that disclosing same-sex IPV victimization sheds negative light onto an already oppressed population. McLaughlin and Rozee (2001) argued that this “maintains the silence about same-sex IPV and reflects an acute awareness of societal homophobia” (p. 44).

Beyond individual struggles with reporting same-sex IPV, systemic responses to abuse in intimate relationships have been historically limited to the needs of heterosexual women. Studies have illustrated that for lesbian women, domestic violence shelters and resources are not perceived as viable options for help in their distinct situations (Renzetti, 1998; Ristock, 2002). For gay male survivors, these shelters and resources may be even further out of reach as many of these programs have traditionally been woman-centered (Cruz, 2003; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000). In addition to shelters and other domestic violence resources, law enforcement intervention has shown to be a problematic help resource for victims of same-sex IPV. Renzetti's (1992) study showed that lesbian victims were reluctant to call the police as they perceived them to be homophobic or indifferent to their victimization. Of the few respondents who had police interventions, all reported their ineffectiveness. One respondent reported being called a “queer devil” by the police while another described that the police “basically took the attitude, ‘so two dykes are trying to kill each other; big deal’” (1992, p. 91). Other studies have also found that LGB victims of IPV consistently had negative experiences with the police or negative perceptions of the police and these experiences influenced reporting (McClennen, 2005; McClennen et al., 2002; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Younglove, Kerr, & Vitello, 2002). These factors all play a role in the fear of “revictimization” by police (Balsam, 2001; Herek, Cogan, & Gillis, 2002). In more recent national findings, the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) found that in 2010, almost a fourth of their sample experienced a “misarrest” by the police in which either the victim or both the victim and the perpetrator were arrested and 29.7% called the police and received no arrest. Furthermore, 7% reported police

misconduct in which they reported homophobic abuse at the hands of police. A multitude of other studies have gone on to show that legal and police remedies are often the least sought forms of help and the least helpful among LGB victims of same-sex IPV (McClennen et al., 2002; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Renzetti, 1992; Renzetti & Miley, 1996; Scherzer, 1998; Turell, 1999).

Although research has examined the challenges and barriers to help seeking among gay and lesbian victims of IPV, very little research has addressed the help-seeking behaviors of transgender survivors of IPV. Transgender survivors of IPV face unique barriers to help-seeking avenues and the criminal justice system than those who are cisgender.<sup>2</sup> The overwhelming majority of domestic violence resources are not only designed for women but also work from a cisgendered assumption. Moreover, domestic violence shelter systems are known to be both inaccessible and dangerous places for transgender victims (Mottet & Ohle, 2003). Furthermore, how our system defines “woman” typically dictates who is labeled a deserving victim. As Brown (2011) stated, this gender-based admission process often puts both female-to-male (FTM) and male-to-female (MTF) transgender victims in unique situations that force them to either “pass” as female (for MTF) or reject their identity and accept women’s shelter help. Erbaugh (2007) has argued that the victim–perpetrator gendered binary in dominant IPV theorizing is a central factor in the silencing of LGBT victims. Within the context of same-sex relationships, this pervasive construct of victim assumes that the victim in the relationship is the “woman” or the passive and submissive member. Conversely, it assumes that the perpetrator is the “man” or the aggressive and dominating member. Although this may be commonly assumed, it is not empirically supported (Marrujo & Kreger, 1996). As Erbaugh (2007) explains, “the gender identities of the participants in a given relationship may counter normative gender stereotypes, and first impressions based on gender-normative assumptions will not reliably reveal which partner has the upper hand in an abusive dynamic” (p. 454). This cultural construct has consequences in police reactions that may approach lesbian battering as a “cat fight” or gay battering as a fight between roommates.

### *A Postmodern Approach to Examining Trans IPV*

More recently, the concept of gender in intimate partner violence has expanded further through a postmodernist framework. Foucault (1972) explained that power, the ability to get others to do as you please, is rooted in hegemonic discourse. For feminist scholars and criminologists examining IPV, this means that power was not simply embedded in structural or social categories, but rather that ways of “knowing” were the root of power. Through this framework, then, IPV is not solely a result of a patriarchal power structure, but rather a consequence of structurally informed discourses that not only marginalize women but also create distinct realities across race, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Postmodern feminists have since departed from the notion that “woman,” or “man” for that matter, are static identities. As Butler (1990) questioned, “what is *meant* by women?” (p. 145). Butler’s proposition was that woman, and therefore biological sex, was just as much a social construct as gender. This approach is particularly critical in incorporating trans experiences in IPV research. Because transgender individuals

exist outside of the gender binary, larger sociocultural explanations of gender may be limited to explaining only the experiences of cisgender individuals. Moving beyond gender as a dichotomous social construct embedded and regulated in a patriarchal power structure, the current study views gender as situational power discourse that frames the experiences of abuse for transgender victims.

In this postmodern tradition, discourse or language fosters the domination of individuals through subjective interaction. As Arrigo and Bernard (1997) explain, “postmodern criminologists maintain that there is a conflict that underscores our understanding of crime, law, order, justice, and victimization; in short, only certain definitions are used to convey society’s meanings for these constructs” (p. 44). In its direct application to heterosexual IPV, Davis and Glass (2011) state that this form of theorizing “seeks to de-center the dominant homogenizing grand narrative that accounts for *all* violence, for *all* women, in *all* situations” (p. 18). In essence, they seek to deconstruct the binary gender constructs of the victim/perpetrator dynamic as well as the power and control assumed behind it. Postmodern criminologists interested in examining IPV can analyze the language used by both victims and perpetrators to construct micro contexts of power. For trans victims, the power lies behind the cisgendered discourse that shapes structural responses to IPV.

In examining IPV, queer criminology falls into the categories of both postmodern and critical traditions. Browne and Nash (2010) explain that queering “can be any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations” (p. 4). Through this approach, trans experiences can be examined through the meanings embedded within a genderist power structure that marginalizes their victimization, shapes their experiences, and limits their help-seeking opportunities. Queer criminology has been vaguely defined as “exploring the manifestations of transphobia and homophobia in the realm of crime and criminal justice” (Friedrichs, 2009, p. 216). More appropriately, it can be understood as locating both gender and sexuality as it is regulated by law, legal discourse, and how it affects a victim’s experiences.

The overall research design of this study was framed through a broad, postmodern and queer criminological perspective. Therefore, there is no intention to locate some form of objective truth, but rather to examine accounts of lived experiences and highlight emerging patterns in subjective discourses (Browne & Nash, 2010; Hesse-Biber, 2012). As such, this study sought to obtain rich, qualitatively detailed accounts of help seeking as told by transgender participants through semi-structured, in-depth interviews as well as through free-write questionnaire responses. The goal of this study was to empower otherwise marginalized voices and account for their distinct realities to further broaden our understanding of IPV victimization outside of hegemonic, genderist discourses.

## Method

### *Population of Interest*

This study sought participants who identified as transgender. This large umbrella term encompasses all gender identities that exist outside of hegemonic definitions of male



or female. Although there is much debate on who should be considered transgender and what it means as far as identity or medicalization, this study considered participants transgender if they report a gender identification other than cisgender male or female (Johnson, 2001). In addition, transgender respondents had to have experienced IPV within their lifetime.

### *Data Collection*

This study utilized targeted and snowball sampling techniques in an effort to cast a wide net and obtain the largest sample possible. Because the purpose of this study was to gain understanding into the rarely discussed issue of IPV in the transgender community, generalizability was not the goal. Rather, the sampling strategy sought to gain access to a highly marginalized group and explore how IPV is experienced, identify meanings and potential categories, and describe accounts of abuse. These sampling techniques involved advertising study participation through local and national LGBT organization email listservs, trans advocacy groups, anti-violence projects, as well as businesses or other locations that are publically known to be LGBT frequented (e.g., bars, clubs, community centers, churches). The “snowball” aspect of recruitment stems from word-of-mouth distribution or learning from other participants where to obtain more recruitment avenues or specific participants. In addition to national agencies, the local organizations targeted all offer trans outreach and they have obtained email addresses from those who have frequented events, services, or their locations. In both the emails and the physical advertisements used at the specified locations, a flyer was used that described the purpose of the study and participant requirements. The flyer stated that participants should be at least 18 years of age or older, identify as transgender, and have experienced violence or abuse by an intimate or romantic partner. Furthermore, it is specified that transgender was broadly defined to include MTF, FTM, transsexual, genderqueer, androgynous, or any gender-non-conforming identities.

Two different data collection methods were incorporated to maximize participation from this small and marginalized population. One involved an open-ended questionnaire administered online through *Qualtrics* and the other through in-depth interviews that were conducted by the first author via telephone and online chat. Personal, in-depth interviews were the primary and ideal method of data collection for this study. This method allowed for more detailed discussion of experiences and provided more context and rich accounts. As Weiss (1994, p. 3) explains, in-depth interviews achieve a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena, one that “permits ourselves to be informed as we cannot be by brief answers to survey items.” Although all participants were asked to participate in personal interviews, they were also provided the option to answer interview questions via an online questionnaire format in place of speaking to a researcher directly. The online, open-ended interview questionnaire allows potential participants to describe their experiences with IPV victimization without having to speak personally with an interviewer. Although this format sacrificed the opportunity for the interviewer to freely probe and develop responses, it is particularly

important to have this option as these conversations may be extremely intimate and uncomfortable for discussion with researchers. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured using loosely structured questions that were broad and open, allowing for the participant to speak more freely. On average, these interviews lasted well over an hour but generally under 2 hr.

Due to the sensitive nature of discussing IPV, the ability to skip or refuse a response at any point during either the online questionnaire or the interview is essential. Before a participant could agree to begin the questionnaire or interview, they were reminded that the questions may ask them to reflect on previous experiences with violence that may be difficult to discuss. All participants were provided contact information in the consent form to local services for IPV victims for local participants and the National Domestic Violence hotline that connects callers to services in their areas around the nation; both of these resources were trans-inclusive and welcoming. The study was approved by a university institutional review board.

### *Analytic Strategy*

The analytical strategy was informed by a modified grounded theory method. This approach moved from the specific to the more general as a process of continuous engagement in the analysis of the data. Charmaz (2006) explains that grounded theorists study their “early data and begin to separate, sort, and synthesize these data through qualitative coding” (p. 3). This coding process attempts to summarize parts of the data utilizing a researcher-defined label that constructs emerging categories. These codes ultimately represent the meanings behind stories. Together, these codes were analytically integrated into categories that emerged through “scrutinizing data and defining the meanings within it” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). These categories then merged into concepts that come to “represent an analyst’s impressionistic understandings of what is being described in the experiences, spoken words, actions, interactions, problems and issues expressed by participants” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 51).

Although this grounded method was the overarching analytic strategy used, the researchers also approached the analyses with a solid understanding of the IPV literature and theoretical frameworks. This informed curiosities, questions, and analyses of the data. For example, as previously discussed, prominent aspects of the IPV literature involve understandings of the dynamics of abuse, help-seeking behaviors, and victim identities. However, though prior knowledge enters the realm of analyses, the researchers remained open to new directions and close to the data and this process, avoiding “imposing a forced framework” and allowing for the opportunity for emerging directions in the data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 66).

### *Coding Strategy*

All interviews were transcribed and stored in a text file format; the five online questionnaires were also downloaded as text files. To begin, an initial line-by-line coding technique that assigned a code for each line of data was used. These initial codes were



open and useful in moving through the data quickly while remaining open and close to the data; codes were kept short, simple, and precise (Charmaz, 2006). Utilizing this strategy familiarizes the researcher with the data and begins to illuminate themes, patterns, and particular points of interest in participant accounts. Crucial to the development of grounded analyses are analytic memos. After each interview was conducted or each questionnaire was read, the interviewer utilized these analytic memos to assist in the reflection and processing of data. For this initial wave of coding and memoing, interviews and online questionnaires were analyzed separately to examine any potential differences in the accounts as they were collected through different methods. The only significant difference between interviews and online questionnaires was that interviews were far more detailed. The accounts did not differ in any other way and, therefore, were all analyzed as one body for the second wave of analyses.

Following initial line-by-line coding, the analysis progressed to focused coding. Focused codes are “more direct, selective, and conceptual” than the initial line-by-line codes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57; Glaser, 1978). This second wave of coding sifted through the data for the most frequent or significant codes found in the initial line-by-line stage. Through this process, the initial open codes obtained were read and conceptually arranged into emerging categories. Throughout this process, new codes were compared with existing codes to examine how they related to each other or if unexpected findings emerged. Comparing data with data helped the development of focused codes and ultimately refined the larger concepts they define. Here, the analytic memos became essential as they serve as a focused “code and category-generating method” (Saldaña, 2012, p. 157). The linking of codes and categories within the accounts became systematically integrated and built theoretical concepts.

## Findings

Once participants were engaged in open conversation, each person was asked to share the story of their experience(s) that led them to respond to this study. For all but one of the respondents, only one of their prior relationships had been abusive. None of the participants were currently in an abusive relationship and all participants had left the abusive partner they spoke of.

## Respondents

A total of 18 trans-identified respondents participated in the study. Twelve of the participants were interviewed via telephone, one via online chat, and five through the open-ended online questionnaire. Although participants whose first language was Spanish could tell their stories in either English or Spanish, all opted for English. A major goal of this study was to empower trans voices to simply tell their stories and, through their own words, describe their violent and abusive experiences by an intimate partner. At the beginning of each interview, participants very generally described themselves and told the interviewer briefly about their lives, their relationships, and their transitional development. Table 1 describes the participants using pseudonyms

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics.

Pseudonym	Gender identity	Race/ethnicity	Age (years)
Todd	Transmasculine/genderqueer	White	22
Jessica	MTF transgender	White	49
Brittany	MTF transgender	White	34
Anna	MTF transgender	Latina	30
Laura	FTM transgender	Black	33
Tom	FTM transgender	Black	24
David	FTM transgender	White	23
Joe	FTM transgender	White/Latino	18
Rebecca	MTF transgender	Black	38
Chris	Transfeminine/genderqueer	White	22
John	FTM transgender	Multiracial/Latino	29
Fatima	MTF transgender	Latina	30
Audrey	MTF transgender	White	42
Jim	FTM transgender	White	21
Sam	Transgender stone butch	White	38
Casey	Genderqueer	White	32
William	FTM transgender	White	35
Owen	FTM transsexual	Latino	19

Note. MTF = male-to-female; FTM = female-to-male.

by gender identity, race and/or ethnicity, and age and illustrates the range of diverse gender identities. Although a majority of the sample identified as White, there was considerable racial diversity, including three Black and five Latino/a identified participants. The group was also diverse in terms of gender identities with seven identifying as FTM transgender, six MTF transgender, and then a variety of other identifications including transmasculine and transfeminine, genderqueer, transsexual, and transgender stone butch. Transmasculine and transfeminine identities fall more masculine or more feminine of center on the gender spectrum; genderqueer identities are fluid or overlap. Stone butch typically describes a hyper-masculine lesbian woman; this respondent also identifies as transgender (Feinberg, 1998). The average participant was 31 years old. As a group, all participants were either early into their transitions or coming out processes or just a few years into their transition. The proceeding section examines two prominent themes that emerged as participants discussed their help-seeking process. We described these two themes as “walking the gender tightrope” and “navigating genderist resources.”

### *Challenges in Help Seeking*

In recounting their experiences, participants discussed how these abusive relationships came to end. The process of identifying as a victim is one that is personal but also socially informed and is a crucial step in the help-seeking process. The idea or notion

of being victimized or being a victim is one that carries cultural significance. In these accounts, participants' most salient and consistent pattern involved what we termed the "walking the gender tightrope," that is, throughout the accounts, participants regularly utilized gendered language when discussing their victim identities in the help-seeking process. Specifically, they constructed the notion of "victim" as hyperfeminine and passive. Even for those whose gender identities were more feminine, there was an evident rejection of the idea that they were that kind of victim—a feminine and passive victim. A major component of this process involved others outside of the relationship acknowledging and confirming their victimization. Participants invoked the idea that others would either not take their victimization seriously because of their gender or that they simply would not be believed.

Finally, most of the participants ( $n = 14$ ) sought some form of help from either formal or informal resources. Examples of the formal resources included calling the police ( $n = 6$ ), using legal action ( $n = 3$ ), or going to shelters ( $n = 1$ ), while informal resources involved mostly family, coworkers, or friends ( $n = 10$ ). In describing these experiences, the theme of "navigating genderist help resources" emerged. Several of the participants experienced and encountered structural barriers to formal help on the basis of their trans-status. These experiences ranged from genderist or transphobic discrimination in the courtroom and by law enforcement as well as hospital and shelter staff. The majority described that informal resources were most helpful.

### *Walking the Gender Tightrope*

As participants discussed and reflected on their victimization and how they came to both view the abuse as problematic and themselves as victims, a gendered discourse emerged that constructed "victim" as totally submissive and, in many ways, traditionally "feminine." Several of the respondents discussed feeling conflicted with this regardless of their own gender identification. Anna (30, MTF) described her thought processes and grappling with the notion of being a victim of IPV. She and others invoked the heteronormative and genderist cultural narrative behind IPV victimization and stated,

Well like I wasn't just some helpless housewife or something like getting punched in the face and then apologizing for her husband or some shit like that, I mean, I guess it's hard because I still feel sometimes that I put myself in that situation but also because I just think victim means that you lost, like that you lost: something happened to you that was bad. But for me, I don't want to think of myself as "I lost." I didn't lose—bad things happened to me and I was able to get up and pick up the pieces and move forward and learn. That's not like "victim" to me.

Anna described grappling with what she knows it means to be a victim of IPV that is largely informed by the larger heteronormative and genderist culture and her actual lived experience. Other participants shared similar struggles in their process of identifying as a victim that invoked the idea that a victim was submissive, traditionally feminine, and did not fight back. In another example, Rebecca (38, MTF) described, "I

wasn't gonna be just any victim, I had to just butch up and survive." As part of this gendered narrative behind IPV victimization was the belief that victims "lose" and "don't fight back." In Laura's (33, MTF) words, she stated,

I was screaming, I was screaming and I punched and scratched him back but I couldn't get away [p] I tried I tried it's not like I wasn't like these other people who just freeze up, no I tried but my whole upper body was just sore and he was beating on me I was on the ground and he kicked me.

Laura distanced herself from "these other people," those who "just freeze up." She essentially distanced herself from a typical expectation of a victim because she fought back.

During the process of seeking help, participants discussed their concern that they would not be believed by others. This involved a process in which participants grappled with what they thought others expected of an IPV victim and their actual lived experience. For Tom (24, FTM), his experience with physical violence ended in a hospital emergency room. Tom's abuser, a cisgender woman, had thrown a hard object at his head that knocked him out. His abuser called an ambulance and Tom described what happened next:

She told them [the police] that I tripped on the router cable and fell and hit my head. The story was stupid and it just didn't even seem right and you know they didn't even question her at all. They just took her word for it like what?! That made no sense and I woke up in the hospital and I'm sitting there thinking, oh she's gonna get in trouble and nobody had even accused her of doing anything!?! They just bought that story hook line. And since nobody asked me what happened, I just didn't even want to start anything. . . . So to me, it just seemed like clearly I wasn't a priority, I wasn't a victim, I was just some butch woman who fell out and thankfully this girl was there to call the ambulance. I knew then that people just, just weren't going to get me or get that situation or anything. They're just going to think I just, I should just deal with it.

Tom described the significance of others not viewing him as a victim and did so in a way that invoked the gendered discourse behind "victimhood." To him, others would see him as "butch" and able to handle it himself and that his abuser was just a "girl." Rebecca (38, MTF) echoed a similar account that included how others would perceive her victimization as she was "male bodied" and larger, unlike her abuser. She stated,

I didn't have anyone to tell it to anyway but I mean, what if people didn't understand how serious it was. I mean, even the friend that finally took me in said, "Why didn't you just beat him up? You're bigger than him." I think others would just see that I have a big build, I mean I was born biological male so that means I can just beat him up too and just deal with it that way. So I thought, well, I mean, I'll deal with what I can. Like I said, I never just didn't do anything, I protected myself too.

Rebecca and many other participants described similar accounts in which they were either expected to "handle things" on their own or they otherwise would not be validated by others. As John (29, FTM) described,

I didn't think of myself as like, a soft, like you know, I'm a tough man, I really am, but I would've never thought that words could just bring someone down like she did. All those insecurities and all that, she got into it . . . I wanted no one to know, I just wanted to handle it myself and see if I could just make it stop. I didn't really think to do anything about it but, um, I don't know.

For John, contending with the notion of being victimized and his masculinity meant that he should help himself and not reach out. This was not just evident in those who were masculine identified but was also told by most participants as they struggled with processing their victimization. In the examples above of two transwomen, Anna and Laura, it is evident that regardless of gender identification, the notion of being victimized embodied a disempowered status from which the participants sought to distance themselves.

*Navigating genderist help resources.* In the majority of the accounts, participants left abusive relationships with the help of friends and family. However, for most participants, this was neither the first nor the only help resources they sought. Many of the participants either had experiences with or held strong perceptions about law enforcement and the criminal justice system; few contemplated shelter resources. When describing their experiences with seeking help or reflecting on their available options, participants recounted stories of exclusion and isolation, and genderism structured and limited many of their choices.

For many participants, especially for those who had experienced severe physical violence, the option of involving police was contemplated; sometimes, others called the police, or participants called the police themselves. Although there was no universal experience, most participants had strong negative perceptions or interactions with the police. Todd (22, transmasculine genderqueer) described what several other participants also feared about the police:

I didn't want to call the police for lots and lots of reasons. One because I don't feel comfortable around the police . . . but the police, there was a high likelihood that there would be some kind of discrimination—based on our gender identity and I guess things like that. They wouldn't understand the names or the pronouns or some kind of discrimination. Or they wouldn't take it seriously or something like that.

Many of the participants felt reluctant to involve police because of this fear of discrimination. This perception led to the majority of respondents not seeking any legal assistance at all. As Joe (18, FTM) stated,

I never did go to the police, I don't trust them because of my situation . . . I had just heard a lot of bad things, um it's a different situation someone who is um, trans, being abused by someone. I was torn by the whole the "men can't get raped mentality" that people had taught me growing up, the whole "you are a freak" police will see you as the attacker instead of the victim it would just be a whole mess and I didn't want to draw it out further I was afraid of the police, I was afraid of what other people would do if they found out.

Beyond a perception of transphobia in the police, Joe echoed a similar narrative that police would misunderstand the situation.

For some participants, negative accounts of the police were not just perceptions but actual experiences and interactions. When John (29, FTM) had neighbors call the police more than once and after one of many violent incidents escalated, he found himself injured and locked away in the bathroom as they arrived through the front door. Although police eventually helped John, he described a painful process in which police were reluctant to see him as the victim. He stated,

I mean maybe they saw her and saw me and then expected that I was the one starting things. She had just gotten off work so she was all in a business skirt and pretty and all but they don't know what she had just done. I bet they thought it was just like a common heterosexuals couple fight and so they were just ready to blame me because I was more masculine or just looked stronger or something I don't know. Instead of just like evaluating the situation they were quick to jump to conclusions about things. They asked her about her bloody knuckles and they saw my bruises and then they saw my head bleeding and the cup smashed on the floor, it was obvious they had it wrong. They arrested her and not me at least but if there had been no physical evidence, I bet you they would've arrested me or at least the both of us because, like most the other times, there was no real physical evidence.

In these accounts, the police represented a genderist help avenue that likely did more damage than good. Even for Jessica (49, MTF), who had local police swing by her car garage shop frequently for coffee and snacks described that after her transition, the police and local community distanced themselves. When she was arrested in one of many domestic disputes, Jessica stated, "Not one of them treated me as if they knew me, in fact I had asked for a female officer to do the search on me and they refused to do that and they didn't allow me to call a lawyer." Rebecca (38, MTF) described interactions with police and the overall thought process behind deciding not have them involved. She stated,

I had two cops before just refuse to call me by my girl name before I had everything changed and they still called me he. They'd kind of exchanged glances at each other and stuff. I mean I don't know, maybe I'm just paranoid and expected that but then again it's something I think about. How will they see me, will that play a role in how they treat me or believe me or something? Like if I have to explain myself before I can even explain my being a victim?

As victims navigated potential options, this was a common process in the evaluation of help-seeking avenues. The perception and actual experience of transphobia by police structured and limited legal recourse for these survivors.

For a majority of the respondents of color, their accounts of the police took on an added dimension that included perceptions of racism. While White respondents still echoed similar perceptions of genderism and transphobia by the criminal justice system, respondents of color shared experiences of racism and fear of racial bias. In a

conversation on the police, Laura (33, MTF) was asked why she felt calling the police was not an option when she was severely beaten. She replied,

I mean I was in mid transition . . . I am still a man on record and my ID and stuff and I'm black. I'm black in [southern state]. It's like first they're going to see I'm this black dude that got beat up by a white man, think that we're gay, then see that I'm trans and that I'm in mid transition and it would be a disaster having to explain all of that and you know the police have a certain way of looking at trans people.

Rebecca (38, MTF), another Black respondent, described past experiences with police that contributed to her negative perception and included racial bias. She stated,

I've had bad experiences with them [the police] in the past like just having to explain myself all of the time and I think they're just immediately suspicious of me. I mean I lived life as a black teenage boy and I know what it feels like to be judged by them but then being trans in addition and then being in the transition state, it was just all, just never good with the police.

For Anna (30, MTF), her immigrant status came up in her discussion of the police. When I asked her specifically about what made her feel the police were never an option, she stated,

Oh gosh definitely no I would have never called the police. I mean like what are they going to do? I am a transsexual woman and I'm an immigrant and also I mean, I was doing illegal things like the hormone sharing and I don't think they would've believed that my ex was forcing me to have sex for money. I mean they would've been seen me like a stereotype like what he used to say you know—I think that's true they would've just gotten me into trouble too.

Respondents of color faced unique situations that involved racial discrimination and bias. For these survivors, the structural realities and oppressive dynamics manifested in more negative experiences and perceptions of the police.

Very few participants discussed domestic violence shelters as an option and only one had utilized this help resource. Although only four participants mentioned this avenue, it is important to note the processes described that constructed this option as inaccessible. As John discussed how he processed his victim identity and attempted to leave, he debated the idea of seeking help at a domestic violence shelter. John's abuser owned the location they lived in together and he had very few options for shelter. He stated,

For a while I thought well maybe like, I don't know, maybe a shelter will take me but then, you think these things through and when you're like thinking about it, it's just like, "really!?" Like what am I gonna do inside a women's shelter? Like, they don't let men in there for a reason and I look like a man, and I mean, like I am a man. So then I thought a homeless shelter maybe for a little bit but then, no, I can't really, I don't look homeless, I



mean, I don't know how that works and it just, I don't know, what if someone found out I was in a homeless shelter, like my work or something?

Several factors played into this thought process, but central to this discussion was the assumption that only women were victims and that help avenues for IPV victims were strictly gendered. Although more shelters now accept and place men, there is still a strong perception that these avenues are strictly for women. This is largely informed by the gendered narrative of victimization.

Anna (30, MTF) was the only respondent who lived briefly in a domestic violence shelter. In her discussion, she described needing shelter regardless of whether it had domestic violence resources. With that in mind, she first contemplated a homeless shelter before then seeking out the domestic violence shelter. She described,

The homeless shelters are mostly full of men and I learned it wasn't safe for me there. Plus years ago when I needed them, I looked too much like a woman then that the staff was saying I needed to go to a woman's homeless shelter that the men there may threaten me or something. But I remember the woman's shelter didn't want me either they said they only allow women there and they have children there and that I would cause like a scene or something I don't know they were just weird about it.

Here, Anna's account represented the challenge of navigating resources that were gender based. She was "too woman" for the men's shelter and "too man" for the women's shelter. Eventually, she pursued a domestic violence shelter that accepted her. However, this came with its own issues, as she stated:

Well they wanted to help but they made a big fuss about my trans status. I overheard the staff say "the other residents are going to be scared and the children are going to be scared and it's not going to be the environment that we want here" and then told me they didn't have a room for a single person. So they put me in another room that housed four women in 2 bunk beds and I had one bunk . . . I couldn't wait to get out, I mean the women were not violent to me but they were just not welcoming. Like they were just like, they'd stare at me and when we tried to do the first group counseling like, the women just stared at me or just whispered or something. Even the staff was a little off because I knew from the start they weren't even on the same page about having me there.

Although Anna's account only serves as one experience, it highlights the many dimensions involved in seeking formal help from a rigidly gendered structured resource.

The majority of participants managed to leave abusive relationships through supportive informal resources. Chris (22, transfeminine genderqueer respondent) stated that for hir [gender-neutral pronoun], "it was pretty easy once I came to just realize and accept what happened . . . I just went back home to my family." Although most participants did not have supportive family structures, they did have supportive friends and coworkers. For Joe (18, FTM), it was an online friend who helped him through the process of seeing that he was victimized and needing help. He stated, "she was a friend online for the longest time and I just sort of, I just sort of asked her some vague

questions and I just sort of basically told her everything I told you up until that point.” Similarly, Rebecca (38, MTF) described, “I got closer to one coworker and I told her what was happening. She immediately told me that I need to move in with her and just not tell him.”

Friendships and informal avenues were very crucial to these survivors as many of them had lost familial ties and relationships due to their trans-status. Furthermore, though some had informal ties with coworkers, most described a fear of involving their personal issues with the workplace. Fatima (30, MTF) described the importance of and what it meant to have a friend that would be supportive. She stated,

I don't have any family and I was not really like, familiar with the community. I didn't have connections to family anymore or that community at all, so um, that was not an option. But I did have the, the friends back home and it was two hours away but I, I knew that was the only way. To call a friend. . . . Um, if it wasn't for her. I don't know what I would've done.

Her account emphasizes that without this connection, she may have had no better way out. When structural and formal resources are inaccessible, unwelcoming, and discriminatory, families and friendships become much more important.

## Discussion

As survivors recounted their experiences with IPV and how they managed to leave abusive relationships, the unique realities of those who exist outside the gender binary emerged as they processed their victimization and navigated genderist help resources. The larger cultural narratives constructed a gendered discourse behind victimization that left participants rejecting their realities. In the broader IPV literature, it is common to find evidence of survivors struggling with seeing themselves as victims and then subsequently how that limited their ability to seek help. However, as this study illustrates, there are unique processes that play out for transgender survivors.

A significant factor in understanding help-seeking behaviors for survivors of IPV is to explore how individuals come to see themselves as victims. While for cisgender and heterosexual survivors of IPV, this struggle may include feelings of embarrassment, denial, or in some cases religious devotions to marriage or gender subservience, transgender survivors in the current study struggled with the gendered constructs of victimization and the cisgenderist response system. In a critique of dominant theoretical approaches to IPV, Erbaugh (2007) argued that the genderist assumptions in the victim–perpetrator binary contribute to the silencing of LGBT victims. She argued that these approaches were largely representative of the cultural assumptions of “victim” as feminine or always female. In the present study, most of the participants invoked some form of gendered discourse when describing their process of identifying as a victim of IPV. Specifically, they struggled with perceiving victims of IPV as “helpless housewives” or passive and non-resistant. Regardless of participants’ own gender identification, many of them described what it meant to be a victim of IPV in this way.

Of particular interest was the role that the perceptions of others played in how participants struggled to see themselves as victims.

Because of the gendered assumptions behind victimization, many participants described feelings of not being believed either because they were “too butch” or they were “once a man” among other reasons. The role of the perceptions of others was prominent in how participants described navigating various help resources. Although most turned to friends and family, many accessed more formal resources. In these accounts, participants experienced a range of various genderist barriers to help. In a world where the rigid gender binary structured these resources, participants described not fitting into the services or spaces provided.

Future research directions should include further exploration into trans-specific dynamics of abuse, diverse intersectional qualities, and evaluations of help resources in their accessibility to trans-survivors. Furthermore, larger and more representative samples could provide more generalizable aspects of IPV experiences within the transgender community. Of particular importance is the need for racially diverse samples that allow for the opportunity to explore how issues of race may create distinct realities. For example, the NCAVP (2011) emphasizes that transgender people of color may be at higher risk of violence and discrimination from police and other IPV help resources. One method by which more diverse samples could be obtained would be by offering a wider range of gender response options in national victimization and crime surveys that measure experiences of IPV. In addition, reaching out to organizations that serve transgender needs with large, diverse clientele could improve sampling.

These findings have various applied implications for domestic violence response organizations and LGBTQ serving programs. A stronger effort should be made to ensure that services and community education programs are trans-inclusive and approachable. Although many strides have been made in achieving this for gay and lesbian survivors, trans-inclusivity requires that services acknowledge the unique realities faced by transgender survivors. In addition, trans-safe spaces and trained staff are imperative for ensuring that those who reach out have positive experiences.

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## Notes

1. Genderism can be understood as “a social system of structural inequality with an underlying assumption that there are two, and only two genders,” and is used here to describe the structural, institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal systems that marginalize, subordinate, and threaten gender variance, and individuals who identify as transgender, gender-queer, and/or otherwise gender variant (Bilodeau, 2009, p. 21).
2. Cisgender describes individuals whose gender identity matches their biologically determined sex.

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