Reclaiming power
Women loving women and intimate partner violence in Guyana

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ABSTRACT
Intimate partner violence against women and children is a growing concern for feminist scholarship in the Anglophone Caribbean. This scholarship is significant in challenging patriarchal gender ideologies at the intersections of race, class and sexuality. This body of work reveals how violence is embedded in the state and governmental bodies, and highlights the overall disparities in the implementation of laws. Furthermore, this work demonstrates how neoliberal restructuring policies implicate and affect women differently based on their positionality. While this work is critical in addressing intimate partner violence against women and children, the LGBTQ community in the region has remained vulnerable to violence at multiple levels of society. This article contributes to this work by focusing on same-sex intimate partner violence between women in Guyana. The aim of this article is twofold: first, to map out the traditional gendered framing of violence against heterosexual and women loving women; second, to argue that in Guyana’s context of persistent social, political and economic inequalities, women loving women use violence as a resource of resolution to reclaim and secure power.

KEYWORDS
Women loving women, violence, Guyana, intimate partner violence, Caribbean, heteronormativity

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INTRODUCTION

Despite more than fifty years of independence, colonial violence is a significant feature in post-colonial Guyana’s political and cultural fabric. The history of slavery and indentured servitude has created racial, gender, class and sexual hierarchies maintained by violence. Gender and sexual-based violence, violence against children, and ethnopolitical violence that currently shape Guyanese society are remnants of its colonial past. For example, Guyana’s cross-dressing and buggery laws, relics of British colonialism, not only prohibit same-sex relationships between consenting persons but serve to legitimize various forms of discrimination against LGBTQ people. Media accounts have highlighted Guyana’s cross-dressing law as the country’s primary driver of homophobia and transphobia.¹ In 2018, the Caribbean Court of Justice ordered that Guyana’s cross-dressing law be removed as unconstitutional. This moment represented a legal and political gain for the local LGBTQ community, yet intimate personal violence within the community remains invisible.

While there are a few glimpses of women loving women’s (WLW)² experiences of violence from heteropatriarchal state structures and men, intimate partner violence between women is not part of the public discourse. This results in a lack of an understanding of how historical, social, political and geographical conditions shape LGBTQ women’s experiences of violence in the country. This article aims to map out these complex dimensions that shape contemporary forms of violence experienced by WLW in Guyana. Taking an intersectional approach,³ this article considers multiple power structures and how they interact with the social categories of race, gender, class and sexuality. This approach shows how women desiring women experience and perpetrate intimate partner violence (WLWIPV). This article argues that situated
within growing inequalities and power imbalances, WLW enacts violence as a strategy of resisting heteropatriarchy and heteronor-mativity. Within this space, for women, violence is a strategy for resolution, reclaiming their power and affirming their queerness.

**LITERATURE REVIEW: HETEROPATRIARCHAL FRAMING AND MYTHS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE**

Addressing gender-based violence (GBV) against women and children is an ongoing feminist concern in the region. In several feminist works, discussions of violence examined the conditions that produced domestic violence. In 2019, the Guyana Women’s Health and Life Experiences Survey was the first national-scale report to document the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) against women and children and intimate partner violence. The information defined *intimate partner violence* (IPV) as ‘any behavior (including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors) by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm’. While the definition of IPV is gender-neutral, studies maintain and reinforce violence as a phenomenon within a heterosexual relationship. The report documented that:

*Guyanese women experience IPV at significantly higher rates than the global average of 1 in 3 women: 55 percent of survey respondents who had ever had a male partner have experienced some form of IPV during their lifetime; 38 percent of them have experienced physical and/or sexual violence. More than one in ten have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a male partner in the past 12 months.*

These statistics are attributed to growing socioeconomic inequalities, gender norms and patriarchal culture. In Trinidad and
Tobago, another report surveyed 1,905 women, where 30 per cent indicated that they experienced physical and sexual abuse by an intimate partner, with 35 per cent exposed to emotional abuse. Although Haynes and DeShong note that while these feminist framings of violence are essential, ‘[t]hey run the risk of reproducing heteronormative theorizing on GBV and fail to account for the multiple ways in which gender and sexuality are implicated in violence experienced by diverse groups’. While alarming, the report reproduces a heterosexist and heteronormative framework of GBV and IPV across the Caribbean.

Other factors contributing to a heterosexist framing of IPV are the myths and stereotypes associated with same-sex couples. One study from the US and Canada argues that gender dynamics are less relevant in cases of IPV because IPV is about power and control. In these analyses, the focus on power and control eclipses how lesbian IPV is a type of gendered violence, regardless of whether men are present or absent. IPV amongst lesbians has been explained as the internalization of misogyny and homophobia manifested in their partners. Second, feminists have been reluctant to discuss IPV in lesbian relationships for fear of further stigmatizing female homosexuality and undermining feminist goals of centering patriarchal violence against women and feminism as a political movement in mainstream society.

Scholarship on violence within same-sex women’s relationships is non-existent in Guyana and the broader Caribbean. Internationally, though, a growing body of research suggests that violence between queer women is frequent and pervasive. Several studies have taken different theoretical approaches to theorizing same-sex violence, indicating that IPV manifests in similar ways in same-sex relationships as heterosexual ones, including physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse. While there are commonalities between heterosexual women’s and same-sex women’s IPV experience, some additional factors contribute to the violence that same-sex women experience. Widespread
homophobia makes it increasingly difficult for women to disclose abuse due to fear of ‘outing’ themselves. Rejection from family and friends, discriminatory policies, heterosexism, stigma and hostility from service providers are additional constraints that affect women’s choices in seeking help and support.

The silence on violence within same-sex relationships is exacerbated by gender ideologies that position women as nurturing and loving, ideologies that are unable to recognize violence between women. Violence between women is also silenced by feminist discourses that position lesbian relationships as more ‘egalitarian’, which has ‘proved to be a formidable block to admitting and dealing with same-sex sexual violence and domestic violence perpetrated by women’. The shared sex/gender system makes it challenging to recognize same-sex violence between women and trivializes the violence between women as ‘cat-fights’, suggesting that the harm inflicted is less severe. Bisexual people have reported double marginalization because of biphobia within the LGBTQ community and the heterosexist environment. This precarious positioning within the LGBTQ community and mainstream society puts bisexual people at an increased risk of IPV. Given these perceptions, violence within women’s relationships is erased, silenced, ignored or seen as frivolous. Building on these insights, this article adds to the current literature on intimate partner violence and the experiences of WLW of colour located in the Global South. This article demonstrates how WLW intimate partner violence manifests at the cruxes of heteronormativity, gender, race and class. In this analysis, the lines between perpetrators and victims are blurry, complex, elusive and continuously negotiated between women loving women.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Procedures**

The data used in this article is drawn from my doctoral research on WLW and intimate partner violence conducted in Guyana in 2016.
Ethics approval was granted from the Office of Research Ethics, York University, Toronto, before fieldwork began. Each participant received an official project description letter. The nature of the research was verbally explained to each participant. Throughout this process, confidentiality and anonymity are maintained. Once participants agreed to be interviewed, informed consent was obtained. All interviews were transcribed and organized using the software Nvivo. The data was coded and then thematically analyzed to identify, research and develop overarching themes. Approaching the data through themes allows patterns, keywords, and ideas to emerge, producing rich and nuanced material.

Sample

This research used qualitative interviews to understand the nature and extent of violence against WLW, their role as perpetrators and as victims, and the attitudes and responses of different sectors (e.g., public officials, service providers, partners, family). Thirty-three women were interviewed, twenty-four women were recruited from the capital Georgetown, and nine from Berbice. All interviews were made possible through word of mouth from participants. Of the thirty-three women interviewed, three self-identified as Black/Afro-Guyanese, twelve Indian/Indo-Guyanese, seventeen mixed-race, and one Amerindian. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 50 years. Precautions were taken to ensure anonymity by using pseudonyms for all participants.

THE SPATIALIZATION OF VIOLENCE: HETERONORMATIVE MALE SPACES AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

In Guyana, the media portrays violence against trans* women and gender non-conforming individuals due to romantic love and
imagined, perceived or actual infidelity. This framing of violence as a natural and inevitable consequence originates in Guyana's indentured history. Colonial powers often stereotyped Indian men as inherently jealous, violent and ‘traditional’, whereas Indian women were seen as ‘unfaithful’.20 Archival analyses of violence against women show jealousy operating to justify and explain plantation violence, thereby erasing the brutality of indenture-ship. Mainstream culture extends this language of jealousy in describing violence within same-sex relations. For instance, Kaieteur News, one of Guyana’s prominent newspapers, reported the stabbing and subsequent death of 25-year-old Stacy James because of her ‘jealous lesbian lover’.21 While this might be true to some extent, this is an incomplete understanding of the underlying violence within women’s relationships. Violence is structured and influenced by heterosexual gender roles, even between WLW. Gender roles also impact WLW intimate partner violence because of where violence occurs, such as in public male-dominated spaces like bars, clubs and rum shops. This gendered spatialization underpins how same-sex violence between women is manifested and experienced.

The violence is contained in private spaces and worsened by socioeconomic inequalities and financial dependency. Even violence within private spaces is gendered, as the aggressor, as shown through my analysis, tends to be the primary provider. DeShong, writing on heterosexual relationships in the Caribbean, notes that men often regulate the boundaries between race, gender and space. Women’s bodies in public spaces are understood as men’s possessions.22 Men attempt to monitor and control women’s behaviour(s) to ensure they ‘are neither trespassed nor transgressed’23 by themselves or by other men. Heterosexual men are accorded social status, power and affirmation of their masculine and heterosexual identities. Commenting on lesbian relations, male privilege and power, Ellyn Kaschak notes that ‘while neither partner in a lesbian relationship enjoys male privilege and power,
we all live in a society that promotes hierarchy, power differential, inequality and … violence. These are endemic to patriarchy and … find their way into relationships? lived in this cultural milieu’. The influence of heteronormative gender norms, power and violence within WLW relationships can no longer remain ignored and discounted within feminist and queer scholarship. WLW also engage in similar coercion tactics, policing and monitoring their partner’s behaviour(s) in public. The strategies employed by WLW and their underlying motivation differ from those of heterosexual men who perpetrate violence against women. WLW do not gain the same privileges and benefits from heteropatriarchy that heterosexual men do when they assert themselves violently against women. To grapple with their marginality, disempowerment and public invisibility, WLW use violence to resolve conflicts. The use of violence becomes a primary way for WLW to assert their queerness within heteronormative masculine spaces. In doing so, women reclaim their power and reassert themselves as the dominant other in the relationship.

Kelly (20s, Indo-Guyanese), whose partner is mixed-race and in her 20s, says about their relationship:

She had jealous issues, and temper problem … like I hit her, and it escalated from every time we fight, hitting each other. It was okay, except the part of jealousy and fighting every other day; one day we by our boss’s house. He invited the staff over, and we were bbq’ing, we were watching the NBA play-off, they were doing hooka and drinking, and she went in between two guys, and she was sitting there. They are friends, of course. I know they are friends. I got so jealous, and I just jumped over and slapped her.

Jasmine (40s, Indo-Guyanese), whose partner is mixed race and in her 30s, narrates:

We does fight … she does come visit meh but meh does normally sleep ah she house every night, and every day meh does sit down ahh deh shap
Kelly and Jasmine’s experiences of violence, both as victims and perpetrators, are located within Guyana’s homophobic, heteropatriarchal and heteronormative environment. Within this environment, jealousy and temper issues justify the violence and serve as legitimate psychological and physical tactics for controlling and policing their partners. In the Caribbean, public spaces are where men bond and interact with each other, with women sometimes being allowed to enter.\textsuperscript{25} Places like bars, rum shops and clubs are generally male-dominated and ‘understood to largely to be the domains of men’.\textsuperscript{26} However, DeShong does not mention that these spaces are also sexualized, perceived and coded as heteronormative spaces where heterosexual relationships are expressed. In nearly exclusively male spaces like bars, clubs and especially rum shops men gather to eat, drink, socialize and converse. Men’s access and ability to be out in the evening and late into the night in public spaces – with or without women – communicate their masculinity and heterosexuality. Men’s interactions with hostesses, waitresses and other women in entertainment spaces are explicit ways in which men perform heterosexual masculinity. Women remain mostly excluded from these sites, and their presence is always temporary, despite their labour roles as service providers. These sites in Guyana illustrate the social hierarchy and organization of gender, race, class and geography in shaping social relationships. Writing on lesbian perceptions of spaces in England, Gill Valentine found that lesbians are often alienated and are forced to hide their sexual identities in public areas such as work, hotels and restaurants. Most of these spaces, she notes,

\begin{quote}
reflect and express heterosexual sociosexual relations … Lesbians can, therefore, feel out of place because of the orientation of these places towards
\end{quote}
heterosexual couples, or they are made to feel out of place by the hostility of others who identify them as outsiders through their dress, body language, and disinterest in men.\textsuperscript{27}

Public and social spaces are underpinned by gender, sexual and racial norms. In describing the violence against their partners and themselves, most women refer to public spaces like rum shops, bars, clubs, camping sites, hotels and pools as spaces where violence occurs. The boss’s home in Kelly’s narrative and the bar in Jasmine’s account are public spaces understood as belonging to men and represent, for WLW, a domain belonging to the heterosexual/heteronormative world. In other words, bars, clubs and rum shops are heterosexual masculine spaces.

Despite sharing the same social circle, Kelly is possessive over her partner’s body and gender performance in the boss’s home. From the excerpt, we can see that Kelly’s surveillance intensifies when her partner moves to sit between two male co-workers. Influenced by many levels of oppression, Kelly’s feelings of disempowerment might be intensified if she believes her partner may have romantic and sexual interests in these men. Biphobia includes the fears, negative feelings, myths and stereotypes associated with bisexual people. Stereotypes of bisexual women involve having more than one partner, being unable to ‘pick a side’, and deep-rooted fear that women are ‘experimenting’ but will eventually choose male partners. According to one study, bisexual people, especially women, experience higher sexual victimization levels at 78 per cent versus 66 per cent for lesbians.\textsuperscript{28} The space of the boss’s home and her partner’s engagement with the two male co-workers resulted in Kelly slapping her partner, curtailing her bodily and, by extension, her gender and sexual performances, in a heterosexual space.

This violence is intertwined and complicated by Guyana’s historical racial ideologies. Mixed-race women continue to be perceived as hypersexual and more likely to have multiple partners.\textsuperscript{29} Mixed-race women’s sexuality is concomitantly a site of
desirability and racial violence at the hands of WLW. By slapping her partner, Kelly establishes the physical limitations of what her partner can do in a heterosexual male space, reinserting her non-normative sexuality in a heterosexual space and establishing herself as the dominant other. This physical act establishes the power differentials between Kelly and her partner and possibly signals and reminds the audience of the partner’s relationship.

Similarly, Jasmine, who is more ‘masculine’ presenting (her partner is femme), indicated that she waited at the bar every night for her partner to finish work so that they could travel home together. The rum shop is a designated space for men, requiring her presence to control her partner’s interactions with the men. Appealing to stereotypically gendered scripts of aggression, possession and control associated with butch lesbian identities, Jasmine positions her partner as weak and vulnerable. The power imbalance and Jasmine’s controlling behaviour are constructed as positive and protective acts in this narrative. Jasmine draws upon the partner’s mixed-race identity, working-class status and occupation as a bartender within a heteronormative space to construct her partner as sexually promiscuous. When the partner ‘sends meh home early’, Jasmine takes it upon herself to create restrictions by physically intervening in the space to protect, guard against and tame her partner’s sexuality. The violence is exacerbated by Jasmine’s insecurity over her partner’s sexual orientation. Jasmine sees her partner as promiscuous and attracted to both genders, a source of ambivalence which may have aggravated the violence. The use of violence to discipline her partner allows Jasmine to establish power, control and ownership over her partner. Jasmine’s narrative further suggests that women like her partner cannot ‘self-regulate’ their sexual desire and attraction. One study in South Africa has foregrounded similar findings that butch women, drawing on gendered scripts of butch and femme identities, find it necessary to control their partner’s ‘bad habits’. In identifying with heteronormative scripts of masculinity
and femininity, butch women saw themselves as ‘protectors’ of femme women from men. Consequently, when necessary, violence is permissible to uphold and reinforce gender roles.\textsuperscript{33} While Jasmine engages in coercion tactics, stalking and slapping her partner, we cannot discount her partner’s violent response to her either. In response to this violence, both Kelly and Jasmine’s partners retaliated with violence against them. Hitting and slapping seem to be a common form of interaction between Kelly and her partner. In Jasmine’s excerpt, her partner is the one who ‘chopped’ her on her leg after being confronted about her supposed infidelity with men. Janice Ristock explains that the use of violence in self-defence is not only a response to one’s abuse but is linked to power, control and similar ‘physical size and gender status that make fighting more feasible than in a heterosexual relationship’.\textsuperscript{34}

The violence inflicted by Kelly and Jasmine against their partners is not merely an act of jealousy but rather stems from a heteronormative environment where violence, invisibility and stigmatization are regular aspects of WLW’s lives. Additionally, the violence is precipitated by dominant heterosexual masculine and feminine scripts that shape women’s gender and sexual roles. The heteronormative environment perpetuates violence against women as a group. WLW experience homophobia, invisibility and cultural shame and stigma over their identity. While extremely problematic and traumatic, WLW actively engage in physical and psychological tactics to resolve their issues. It is difficult to fully distinguish who has power and control as each partner retains some control and power in their individual use of violence. In this assertion and use of violence, each partner reclaims their power and individuality and negotiates their sense of self.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE**

One of the most challenging and detrimental aspects of intimate partner violence are the effects on women’s mental health.
Psychological abuse is difficult to recognize within intimate relationships, as it is often interpreted as a private matter between partners. In comparison to physical abuse, what constitutes psychological abuse, and its severity, frequency and duration, remains inconsistent in current literature. Several studies conducted in the US and Canada suggest that LGBTQ people experience ‘sexual minority stress’, which refers to internalized homophobia, being closeted and stigma. Externally, sexual minority stressors like violence, discrimination, harassment and lack of legal protection positively correlate to IPV. These stressors are compounded by dependency, fear, class status and not being ‘out’, making it difficult for women to leave their relationships. Psychological abuse cannot be separated from the socioeconomic and political structures which women occupy in Guyana. In some cases, going against one’s partner might not even be an option.

Rebecca’s lack of financial independence prevents her from leaving her partner’s house. She states that,

My relationship is unjust. I don’t get do anything I want to do. If they [referring to her partner] wanna go somewhere if I say no, it means that I don’t get to go anywhere at all … it’s not like yuh know that they say ‘okay, it’s okay, go, you know? Just be sure that you be home such time or what time would you be back’, but it’s always like, ‘yeah, yuh go walk and do what yuh have fuh do, just walk out’.

Rebecca, a young Indo-Guyanese woman in her early 20s, did not complete high school. Her family does not accept her relationship with an older Indo-Guyanese woman in her 40s. Rebecca and her partner live together and are small vendors in a local market, making roughly $5,000 (GYD) or US$24 per week. Her working-class status, financial and housing dependence intertwine, causing Rebecca to remain with an abusive partner. Notably, in this epigraph, the controlling behaviours and confinement are tied to the heteronormative public realm. Could it be that Rebecca’s
partner has internalized the masculine ‘breadwinner’ and provider ideology? Could these factors fuel the psychological violence that Rebecca experiences? Could it be that her partner fears Rebecca will meet other women and men, given their age gap? Is it that dating options are so limited that it exacerbates psychological abuse? Rebecca indicated that, although she has also been violent towards her partner, she believes that the controlling behaviours and coercion she experienced in her relationship daily are ‘far worse’ than the physical.

Maya (20s, mixed-race) narrates a similar story of psychological abuse:

_We kind of started living together out of convenience sort of. She thought that because she was mostly the provider, if I go out with friends and come home late, she would lock me out and stuff, but it’s hard for me ‘cause my parents weren’t accepting of me. I kind of felt alone, and she was my only option at the moment. It went for like 4 years because I was studying. I mean, we weren’t together, but we still like have sex. I didn’t know where to go ‘cause I was still very young and I didn’t have a job yet. I was still studying, and my family weren’t very supportive._

Maya’s age, working-class status and lack of acceptance from her family prevent her from leaving her partner. The type of psychological violence Maya experienced is structurally sustained and reinforced by her working-class or socioeconomic status and magnified by the age difference between Maya, who is in her 20s, and her partner, who is in her 30s and more financially secure. Her partner is the primary provider, possibly paying for Maya’s education. Because Maya’s partner is older, she has more financial capital, social status and position in the community, giving her an advantage over Maya. Age difference contributes to a power imbalance and the ability to exploit and influence Maya, emotionally and psychologically. Notice how being ‘locked out’ of her home after being out in public spaces is a site of concern for Maya.
Maya explained how leaving the house resulted in personal threats and destruction of her personal belongings: ‘I couldn’t go out, and we weren’t together, so all my stuff was still there, and she destroyed some of my things. She started threatening me that she would kill the dogs and stuff if I leave; those were my dogs.’ The partner threatening to kill Maya’s dogs and destroying her stuff are effective ways of establishing her dominance and power over Maya. This exemplifies the use of violence, primarily physical and psychological tactics of control, confinement and threats, by women to hold onto their power and control over their partners. Isolation from family and friends, feelings of imprisonment and lack of control over one’s mobility are the most explicit expressions of WLW’s power over other women. Maya indicated that her partner is the first woman she has ever dated and had a long-term relationship with. Adam Messinger notes that: ‘leaving an abuser can mean simultaneously leaving a best friend and loved one […]. When the abuser is also the victim’s first partner, the built-up emotional need for a romantic connection can make it particularly difficult to leave.’ Working-class younger women like Maya and Rebecca have limited access to social services, financial security and family support. Partners engage in psychological manipulation to secure physical and psychological benefits with these vulnerabilities.

Psychological abuse can move beyond one’s partner or the victim. Violence directed at oneself is another toxic strategy to keep another person in the relationship. Jackie (20s, mixed-race) recounted how the physical violence meted out to her by her first partner kept her in the relationship:

I was afraid of her. She was a big girl; she could beat the crap out of me. She threatened to kill herself if I didn’t do certain things. In the first year of the relationship, she would run off with a handful of pills and a bottle of tequila, and I would be like girl ‘wa de fuck yuh doin inside there with this?’ She said yuh know if yuh don’t do this I am going to pop these pills and wash it down
with some of this’, and then I start to panic because I didn’t know if she would actually do it. She always locks herself away and threatens me to drown herself to slit her wrist, or drink pills; those were the threats.

The gender dynamics of masculinity and femininity were prominent in Jackie’s recounting of her experiences of violence. Jackie indicated that her partner was more physically built and ‘masculine’ and often made her feel like she ‘wasn’t black enough’. The gender presentation of her partner and racial commentary induced psychological fear and insecurity in Jackie. Creating guilt, anxiety and insecurity in Jackie led to an imbalance of power and perpetuated IPV by her partner. In her study of ‘lesbian battering’, Claire Renzetti argued that lesbians had multiple reasons for remaining with their abusive partner, such as love for a partner, hope for change; isolation from family and friends; and fear of reprisal. Only one participant in this study sought assistance from the police or medical and social services. There are multiple reasons why WLW in urban Georgetown did not seek out services. First, most of them did not see their experiences of violence as warranting police and medical attention or any intervention. Most of them, in their narration, laughed or joked about the violence. The inability to see their experiences as violence speaks to the normalization of violence as an acceptable way to behave, interact and communicate. Second, most of them indicated that they were unaware of the services available to them in the city. WLW suggested that they would not contact available services like Help & Shelter, SASOD and Red Thread, as it would result in them being ‘outed’. For this group of women, protecting their middle-class status is paramount; thus seeking help is not an option they would consider.

Moreover, participants implied that they were unsure if these spaces would cater to their needs as WLW. Hospitals, clinics, pharmacists and local NGOs are perceived as misogynistic, heterosexist and homophobic. In rural Berbice, additional factors prevent or complicate WLW from discussing intimate partner violence.
During the interviews, the participants knew of no resources or spaces for women to access help in Berbice. Second, the geographical layout and proximity to family and neighbours make it difficult for women to leave their villages and seek help in Georgetown without being noticed. Transportation and commuting time to the city make it impossible to leave their family and work confines without being subjected to family interrogation and work demands. WLW intimate partner violence is formed through and sustained by gender, race, class and sexuality ideologies. Heteropatriarchal colonial structures of violence are structured by racial, gender, sexual and class differences mapped onto women’s violent experiences. These colonial ideologies remain ongoing sites in which women experience intimate partner violence.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Violence is a normalized experience, an everyday encounter for Guyanese people. Although it is more common to recognize violence against women and children, violence against LGBTQ people is acceptable and justified due to homophobia and other social anxieties. As a residual of the British empire, Guyana criminalizes ‘buggery’ and ‘gross indecency’ between men without defining what this entails. Women are omitted from this constitutional clause and remain invisible in the public imagination. The invisibility of queer women in the public realm is another barrier that prevents the public, healthcare and other service providers from recognizing WLW intimate partner violence. Since much of this violence occurs within semi-public/private spaces like bars, clubs and homes, there is a lack of recognition of WLW intimate partner violence in Guyana. Gregory S. Merrill and Valerie A. Wolfe refer to this as “recognition failure” – that is, they fail to recognize behaviors which constitute domestic violence and, therefore, to seek help or otherwise respond appropriately’. Healthcare providers, shelters
and other social services can often fail to distinguish and accurately assess WLW intimate partner violence because of ignorance, homophobia and stereotypical same-sex/gender assumptions. Merrill and Wolfe note that ‘medical professionals who routinely assess heterosexual female patients for domestic violence typically do not similarly screen openly lesbian or bisexual female patients or male patients of any sexual orientation’. Writing on the influence of gender stereotypes, they find that:

When providers accurately assess same-gender domestic violence, many do not respond as compassionately as they would to heterosexual victims. Typically, they either have a homophobic reaction or subscribe to one of the many misconceptions about same-gender battering. These include assuming the violence is not as severe (because ‘women are not as violent to one another’ and ‘men can protect themselves’), that the violence is more likely to be mutual, and that the perpetrator must be ‘the man’ in the relationship. At the same time, the victim is ‘the woman,’ or that it is somehow easier for a victim of the same gender battering to leave.

Challenging heterosexist and gender biases that underpin WLW IPV in Guyana is a formidable task and certainly not one that will be accomplished overnight. However, there are approaches and solutions that officials and mainstream society need to take to reduce violence in Guyana. The heterosexist and heteronormative culture and structures are barriers for WLW seeking changes in their intimate lives. As this article has argued, heteronormative masculine and sexualized spaces are sites where women experience and negotiate their disempowerment, invisibility and marginalization. For women, the violence against their partners responds to heteropatriarchal oppression, and acts as a means to assert their power, desire and queerness in a heteronormative space. These feelings are exacerbated by the mainstream framing of violence as a heterosexual problem, thereby contributing to women’s perception that violence is not an issue in their lives.
Furthermore, the overall heteronormative structures, homophobia, attitudes and beliefs prevent WLW from seeking help from the police and medical and social services. The risk of being subjected to homophobia and ‘outing’ oneself takes precedence over some of the intimate violence that the women experience. Despite these barriers, many solutions need to be adopted in Guyana: developing new services that specialize in working with the WLW population; providing community programmes and outreach to combat homophobia; creating sexual diversity training for medical, legal and other services; having pre-existing services and organizations integrate policies and programmes to connect with the local LGBTQ community; and collectively working on changing the attitudes and beliefs of Guyanese people.

In conversation with existing literature, my findings suggest a re-articulation of intimate partner violence from WLW’s perspectives in the Global South. Feminist, queer and anti-violence scholarship have primarily centered on patriarchal violence against women, suggesting that feminist scholars need to broaden their understanding of violence. We must again confront the gender and sexual roles that women are confined to which prevent us from seeing the violence that women can enact. This approach and shift in theoretical orientation does not undermine feminist movements and goals in the region: broadening the scope of violence supports feminist ideals and politics of having a more socially just and equitable society.

Similarly, queer scholars and activists must challenge the dominant liberationist discourses and politics at the core of the queer theory. Queerness, both as a theoretical orientation and embodiment, has become a metanarrative insisting on futurity, one in which the future is free from violence. Queerness – although ‘regulatory’ according to Jasbir Puar’s (2007) analysis – as an ideology and discourse is still envisioned mainly as a site of freedom and liberation, and perhaps that which can ‘save’ us from heteropatriarchal colonial structures of violence. As an embodiment and
performance, queerness focuses on the reclamation of individual and collective freedoms. The promises of queerness and modernity hide the violence between WLW and their intimate partners. The current neoliberal queer model promises human rights, increased access to legal and political state benefits, and access to capital. Discussing WLW intimate partner violence threatens to undo these promises of modernity. Given the historical and ongoing violence that queer communities experience from the state and mainstream society, LGBTQ communities and activists have worked to position themselves as ‘normal’ individuals. Queer communities across the globe remain in this battle for rights, benefits and freedom. Exposing the intimate partner violence within the queer community can be used in the future to stigmatize the community, thereby justifying the lack of state intervention and services. However, the possibility of these gains and the fear of stigmatization cannot be reasons for ignoring intimate partner violence in the queer community. In the metanarrative and glorification of queerness, we have invisiblized and ignored the violence that queer subjects can produce against themselves and others.

NOTES


2 ‘Women loving women’ is the language that my participants used to describe their own sexual practices, praxis and sexual subjectivities. The category of WLW refers to the women’s actions, choices and decisions regarding their romantic and sexual partners, not their sexual identity.


4 Valerie Youssef and Paula Morgan, ‘The Culture of Violence in Trinidad and Tobago: A Case Study’, Caribbean Review of Gender Studies, 4 (2010), 1–10; Lina Peake and Alissa D. Trotz, Gender,


6 Contreras-Urbina et al., ‘Guyana’s Women’s Health and Life Experiences’, p. 9


14 Renzetti, Violent Betrayal.


24 Kaschak, Intimate Betrayal, p. 2.


32 Nadia Sanger and Ingrid Lynch, “You Have to Bow Right Here”, p. 45.

33 Ingrid Lynch and Nadia Sanger, I’m Your Maker: Power, Heteronormativity and Violence in Women’s Same-Sex Relationships (Cape Town: Triangle Project, 2016), pp. 3–65 (pp. 46–47).

34 Ristock, ‘Decentering Heterosexuality’, p. 66.


38 Jackie’s partner is Afro-Guyanese or black. The phrase not ‘black enough’ signals otherness, non-belonging, or lack of belonging to the ethnic group. The word is a derogatory term, shaming others for their racial/ethnic identities. Jackie expressed anger, shame, guilt and disbelief regarding how people treat her because of her mixed-race identity.
39 Renzetti, *Violent Betrayal*.
43 Merrill and Wolfe, ‘Battered Gay Men’, p. 27.

**REFERENCES**


