

## **A Tool for Reflection: The Realities and Internalized Oppression Faced by Lesbians of Color**

*The purpose of this piece is to provide background information for “My Girlfriend Did It.” Although some of the ideas border on generalization, Casa de Esperanza feels that it is critical to understand and grapple with this information.*

Our society assumes that girls will grow up to fall in love with boys and vice versa. This assumption leads to internal and external struggles—sometimes lifelong—for members of LGBTQ communities. The purpose of this piece is to present some of the additional pressures placed upon lesbians of color and to recognize the internalized oppression that is the reality for all members of LGBTQ communities.

Living in a heterosexist culture, LGBTQ individuals face numerous issues. Here are just a few:

- Struggles with feeling “unnatural,” “sinful,” or “abnormal.”
- Pressure from friends, family or peers to conform to heterosexist assumptions.
- Public questioning of their sexuality.
- The complicated and serious dilemma of the decision to reveal information about their personal relationships—to “come out.”

Lesbians of color face not only the same issues but also other stressors that are factors of race and culture. Our society is filled with prejudice, cultural norms, and attitudes of fear, ignorance, and indifference; the impact on a lesbian of color is powerful.

Intersectionality is an important concept in the lives of lesbians of color. Intersectionality refers to the various identities that intersect within the same woman and how these intersections contribute to her experience of oppression and privilege. For example, a woman experiencing domestic abuse may be Latina, immigrant, bisexual, employed, a mother of two children, Spanish-speaking, and over 40. Each of these identities does not define the totality of who she is, but the

combination of any or all of them affects how she receives services, the remedies to domestic abuse that are available to her, and the challenges that she must face to realize her goals.

Lesbians of color also face two types of pressure that may be serious stressors in their lives: their cultural and ethnic norms and batterers' use of culture/racial identity as a means of manipulation.

First, the cultural pressures that many lesbians of color face include family pressures, norms, and definitions of "success." These expectations vary for diverse communities, yet some commonalities exist.

- Cultural norms cause many women of color who experience same-sex attraction to struggle with their sexuality. If a Latina, for example, was raised with the expectation and understanding that ultimate "happiness" and "success" are accomplished through marriage to a man and having children, the result may be internalized oppression that is extremely harmful.
- The decision to come out or stay closeted is also difficult because the notion of family is integral to communities of color. In Latino cultures, the definition of family goes beyond the scope of parents and children; family includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, close family friends, and other distant relatives. The interconnectedness and interdependence of Latino families often forms the core existence of the individuals in the family; it is usually identified as one of the strengths of Latino communities. The question for a lesbian Latina is, "If my biological family disowns me, who will be my family, my support?" She may feel that she risks losing part of her identity--her core existence.
- Lesbians of color who have lost their relationships with their families may find a sense of belonging with their partners and their partners' friends. These relationships may replace the lost relationships with their biological families. Because family is so integral to a Latina's sense of identity, for example, Latina lesbians may be reluctant to leave a violent partner, fearing another loss of "family."

Secondly, another stressor affecting lesbians of color is batterers' use of cultural norms to control, manipulate, or abuse.

- If a Latina lesbian is experiencing IPV, her partner may use her past experiences of racism, internalized homophobia, and societal stereotypes to control her and maintain her fear. For example, if the abusive partner uses the societal stereotype that all Latinos are undocumented, the Latina may believe she has no rights—even if she is in the United States legally.
- If a Latina does not want to have children with her partner, her partner may question if she is truly “Latina” because she doesn’t want children.
- If a Latina has lost her family in the process of coming out, the battering partner may try to manipulate her by saying, “I am your family. You can’t leave me—Latinos never leave their families!”

These realities and examples of internalized oppression represent just a part of the experience of lesbians of color. Your reflection and understanding of these concepts is an important foundation for supporting lesbians of color.