



# BISEXUAL SURVIVORS

*A Focus on Survivor-Centered Design*

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## IPVI and LGBTQ Communities

**For decades, systems professionals have been attempting to address the problem of intimate partner violence through the work of Coordinated Community Response (CCRs).** The results have been promising for certain types of survivors. Often the needs of groups who are white, cisgender, heterosexual, and not living with a disability have been addressed by CCRs.

CCRs and Intimate Partner Violence and Homicide (IPVH) responses have largely ignored the concerns of survivors from various marginalized communities, including communities of color, LGBTQ+,<sup>1</sup> and disabled. The oversight has meant that many of the survivor's face violence in the home have to deal with systems' responses that do not meet their needs. Systems' responses can further jeopardize them, may not be culturally responsive and may not be able to prevent homicides. CCRs are designed to bring about changes to the system, and a part of the process of change requires CCRs to continually examine their work and consider ways in which they can focus on marginalized communities.



**Advocates have taught battered women how to navigate the criminal justice system.** It is time for that focus to shift to reforming systems in order to make them truly accessible and accountable to survivors. To address this problem, the Battered Women’s Justice Project (“BWJP”) decided to examine CCR and IPVH responses to the LGBTQ+ community in order to acknowledge the gaps in access to and response from systems’ players with the aim of making recommendations and providing solutions that are tailored to this specific community.

The project goal was to create frameworks, ideas for program design, tools, and analyses that are culturally and linguistically relevant, appropriate, and responsive to the needs of the most marginalized to better systems’ response to all survivors. As a starting point, BWJP brought together survivors and advocates from organizations that work with LGBTQ+ survivors to hear from them and utilize their lived realities and experiences to shape systems’ responses.

## **The objectives are the following:**

**to address the lack of inclusion of people who identify as LGBTQ+, specifically bisexual women, into CCRs,**

**to outline the current knowledge base, tools for effective work and recommendation for best practices,**

**and to layout a recommended blueprint for CCRs to utilize to bring back and enhance their engagement with diverse communities as a way to reduce IPVH.<sup>21</sup>**

**For this report, we examine the experience of bisexual+ survivors of intimate partner violence due to the alarming statistics concerning violence against bisexual+ women and the lack of resources in the field that address barriers and systemic bi-antagonism existing within systems.**

## **A Current Scan of Practice and Research: Lack of inclusion of bisexual+ survivors of IPVI**

The Bisexual Resource Center defines bisexuality as an attraction to more than one gender that could be physical, romantic, and or emotional.<sup>2</sup> Bisexual people may experience different kinds of attraction to different genders, and their attractions may change over time.<sup>3</sup>

According to statistics from the University of California's Williams Institute, of the nine million LGBTQ+ people in the United States, over 52% of all lesbian, gay, and bisexual people identify as bisexual.<sup>4</sup> According to a 2020 Gallup Poll, more than half of LGBTQ+ adults (54.6%) identify as bisexual.<sup>5</sup> This includes about one in six adult members of Generation Z (those aged 18 to 23 in 2020) and one in ten adult members who are Millennials.<sup>6</sup>





Male violence is amplified when women do not abide by traditional gender roles.

Bisexual women do not fall within the boundaries of conventional gender roles.

That is apparent by the statistics concerning intimate partner violence and bisexual women.

In 2010, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention conducted the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey. The survey found that bisexual women (61.1 percent) report a higher prevalence of rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner compared to both lesbian (43.8 percent) and heterosexual women (35 percent).

Research shows that in the LGBTQ+ community where, 43.8% of lesbian women, 61.1% of bisexual women, 26% of gay men, and 37.3% of bisexual men have experienced intimate partner violence.<sup>78</sup> Of the bisexual+ women who experienced IPV, approximately 90 percent reported having only male perpetrators, while two-thirds of lesbians reported having only female perpetrators of IPV.<sup>9</sup> Compared to white, middle-class, cisgender individuals, these disparities are cause for concern but are not necessarily an indicator that these communities are more violent. The overriding cause for concern is that systems are designed to serve white, middle class, and cisgender; therefore, the communities who need it the most are left unserved.

**“The expectations that men have for bisexual women are immense and if those expectations aren’t upheld then violence can occur”**



**With the bisexual+ population expanding within younger populations, and if the rates of intimate partner violence remain steady or increases, we know that we will have an epidemic of violence occurring in these communities. We must examine the current barriers within the system to make them welcoming to survivors who identify as bisexual+.**

There is limited research on why bisexual women are more statistically shown to be victims of intimate partner violence. The limited research to date points to several vulnerability factors: a cultural milieu prone to hyper sexualization, objectification, and dehumanization of bisexual women; stereotypical understandings of bisexuality in women that may engender negative appraisals and resulting aggression toward this group; and an increased risk of problematic substance use, or negative consequences associated with one's use of alcohol and/or other substances, in this population, possibly as a result of the aforementioned risk factors.<sup>10</sup>

# The Process

**When amplifying the stories of the most marginalized, it is necessary to engage organizations and people who are living those truths.** We began this process with speaking to longtime advocate Connie Burke. She suggested that we reach out to the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence’s National LGBTQ Institute on IPV. We had a series of conversations with the LGBTQ Institute including a review of our listening session questions. They then suggested that we work with the Bisexual Resource Center (“BRC”), an organization that is working to connect the bi+ community and help its members thrive through resources, support, and celebration.<sup>11</sup> The Bisexual Resource Center envisions an empowered, visible, and inclusive global community for bi+ people.<sup>12</sup>

As a mainstream organization, it was critical for us to approach BRC with respect and patience. We spent time getting to know and understand the organization and its priorities. We believed that it was important

to ensure that we were not there to harm the organization by taking its resources and knowledge without credit or compensation.

With the additional help of the organization, Still Bisexual, a bisexual education and health advocacy organization representing folks across the nation who identify as bisexual, pansexual, fluid, queer—or prefer to use no label at all to define their attraction to multiple genders,<sup>13</sup> we organized listening sessions with survivors of intimate partner violence who identified as bisexual+. We also engaged in listening sessions with organizations and advocates representing people who identify as bisexual+.



To accurately assess where barriers exist in systems, we believed it was our obligation to partner with an organization that directly served survivors who identify as bisexual+. We officially partnered with the Bisexual Resource Center, working with their expertise in policy, knowledge and experience with people who identified as bisexual plus. We had sessions with Bisexual Resource Center, the LA LGBT Center, Connie Burke and the survivors from across the country. We transcribed the notes and looked for patterns and common themes. What follows are the themes that emerged from the conversations. Further exploring these themes and barriers will be critical to developing our knowledge, recommendations for advocates, and systems change. Providing safety for survivors who identify as bisexual.

## Knowledge Gleaned from Survivors

**The main themes that were identified as barriers for bisexual+ survivors in the listening sessions were**

Shame

Biantagonism

Erasure

**We discuss these themes further below.**

**“Abusers leverage the negative perceptions of bisexuality to convince bi+ individuals that others will not believe their experiences of partner violence or convince others that bi+ people are dramatic/unstable therefore cannot be trusted or believed.”**



# Shame

**Perpetrators of intimate partner violence use shame and guilt tactics to keep survivors silent.** Brene Brown

defines shame “as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.”<sup>14</sup> The theme of shame is used to control the victim-survivor so they will remain silent about the abuse. If the survivor does not want to keep quiet about the abuse, the abuser threatens them with telling their friends, family and/or systems actors<sup>15</sup> that they are bisexual. Bisexual+ survivors in the listening sessions have reported being threatened or coerced to stay in the relationship to avoid identity disclosure to individuals the survivor is not yet or cannot be out to. This is frequently traumatic and sometimes dangerous for the survivor.

Shame is used by making the survivor feel as if there is something inherently immoral about identifying as bisexual. One



survivor explained abusers use shame by “Equating being bi+ with being sexually deviant or sexually promiscuous, using it as a reason to isolate them from other bi+ people who would be ‘bad influences.’” Another survivor shared “Abusers leverage the negative perceptions of bisexuality to convince survivors that others will not believe their experiences of partner violence or convince others that bisexual+ people are dramatic/unstable therefore cannot be trusted or believed.”

In isolating or causing the survivor to feel isolated, the abuse is left unaddressed and often grows worse. If the survivor is able to engage with systems, unfortunately the issues around shame can be further exacerbated.

# How the system uses shame

**Systems actors can replicate the same shaming tools used by abusers when it comes to survivors who identify as bisexual+.** Bisexual+ women whose abusers are male have reported that they do not come out as bisexual if they report IPV to systems. Often, for the survivors who do share that they are bisexual their sexual orientation can often be used against them by their abusers.

In one incident a listening session participant recounted her story about her relationship with a male partner. He assaulted her and she struck back in self-defense. When police arrived, she was arrested because he had marks on his body. The abusive partner told police she was crazy and bisexual. The female police officer who conducted a pat down of her stated, "you better not be turned on by this."

In another recounting, a listening session participant who is a mother reported a health care system professional telling her that she would have to report the mother to social services because of her daughter's questions to the professional about people who identify as transgender, implying that mom's sexual orientation was influencing the daughter.

**"Being bisexual, people think you are greedy and manipulative. Causing them to question not only your identity and trustworthiness but whether you have been abused at all."**

These experiences are unfortunately common within the bisexual+ community. In order to be fully committed to serving all people who have experienced interpersonal violence, we must examine systems and our own biases to ensure that we do not create barriers that will prohibit survivors from receiving assistance.

**“[Abusers use] isolation from peer support with the stereotype that bi+ individuals are not loyal or are not capable of monogamy. [Abusers] emphasize the justification of their jealousy based on the survivor’s bi+ identity.”**

## **Biantagonism and Bierasure Discussion**

According to the Bisexual Resource Centers report, “Holding Space, Creating Safety A Toolkit for Facilitating Conversations about Sexual and Intimate Partners Violence for Bisexual Peer Support Groups,

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**“Bi+ antagonism, sometimes referred to as biphobia, is defined as the aversion toward bisexuality and towards bi+ people as a social group or as individuals. Bi+ antagonism stems from stereotypes like bi+ people being hypersexual (leading bi+ people to be highly fetishized and objectified), promiscuous, and deemed untrustworthy because they will “sleep with anyone.” Abusers perpetrating intimate partner violence and sexual violence especially in a “heterosexual” presenting relationship, will often use the above stereotypes as a justification to coerce, control and police their partner. It is important to remember that bi+ antagonism is distinct from homoantagonism and trans antagonism (also referred to as homophobia and transphobia), and that bi+ antagonism can be particularly pronounced within the LGBTQ+ community and in LGBTQ+-focused organizations”<sup>16</sup>**

According to one of the survivors who participated in the listening session, “Abusers reinforce the bierasure phenomenon, that we don’t belong on either side of the orientation spectrum and our abuse experience is invalidated because of our orientation.

Queer relationships exacerbate this when there isn’t a clear “abuser” based on gender norms, thus further silencing the survivor.”

Only 28% of bisexual+ people are open with their friends and families about their bisexuality. Queer people don’t see people who identify as bisexual+ as fully queer. Queer organizations see the violence as male on female that is a “heterosexual” issue. This causes people who identify as bisexual+ to not feel as if they truly belong in any space. Many of the listening session participants have reported that queer serving organizations and mainstream organizations reinforce that assumption by deploying microaggressions or overt communication that leads survivors to believe that their



truths are devalued because of the lack of belonging in either space. These harmful practices by systems reinforce the shame that survivors reportedly feel by both systems and abusers.



# Recommended Best Practices

In using human centered design embedded within institutional analysis through the survivor and organizational perspectives given in the listening sessions, we have five recommendations for CCRs to recognize and eliminate barriers for survivors of intimate partner violence who identify as bisexual+.

**1. Recognizing that relationships are different, and culture is evolving**

**2. The importance of language and shame**

**3. Not assuming that because someone is bisexual, they are untrustworthy (culture shift)**

**4. The importance of community**

**5. Modeling inclusion**

We have detailed these five recommendations below.

# 1. Recognizing that relationships are different, and culture is evolving.

**To truly move forward with the goal of a more inclusive system, free of barriers for marginalized communities, systems must begin with a self-examination from each individual who makes up that system.**

Systems are created and operated by individuals who have their and implicit biases inherent in every person. Having biases is normal, but they must be identified and examined as these biases are what cause systemic barriers to exist.

When survivors feel like the system actors are being judgmental against them for their sexual orientation, it can create a divide in trust. LGBTQ+ relationships were criminalized only a few generations ago. These survivors' have a well-founded distrust because of this long history of criminalization. Therefore, the ability to show up for survivors in a way that acknowledges this distrust and fear while acknowledging the systems barriers could go a long way in gaining trust.

System actors must also be mindful of their role over the trajectory of the case. If they are in a position of authority, they must be even more intentional about tone, choice of language and body language. These small intentional acts go a long way in building trust between the survivor and the system.

People who identify as bisexual+ often have intersectional identities. In 2015, the National Center for Transgender Equality conducted a survey documenting those who identify as both bisexual and transgender people. One-third of respondents to the survey (32%) identified as bisexual or pansexual<sup>17</sup>, as compared to 16% who identified as lesbian or gay, 21% who identified as queer, and 15% who identified as heterosexual.

Transgender women were more likely to identify as bisexual than were transgender men (20% vs. 12%), while there was little gender difference in the respondents who identified as pansexual. According to a 2013 Pew Research survey about LGBTQ+ Americans, people who identify as bisexual are the most likely to be parents about half (52%) of bisexuals are parents, including 59% of bisexual women and 32% of bisexual men.<sup>18</sup>

**“Do not make assumptions based on the on survivor’s current partner. Prioritize the needs and safety or the survivor. Promote cultural humility amongst staff and service providers rather than needing to be experts on the LGBTQ+ community.”**

These intersectional identities add to the robust lives of survivors who identify as bisexual+. Systems need to understand the complete view of every survivor’s life. By isolating a survivor’s experience only to be viewed in the context of their sexual orientation, systems miss how they can assist survivors in finding justice that actually serves them.

## **2. The importance of language and shame.**

**The use of language can go a long way in building trust with marginalized communities.** When working with any community, especially the LGBTQ+ community, systems must make sure language is clear, appropriate and free of outdated or disrespectful terms. Systems have to understand how shame can be used by the system on someone who is bisexual from a partner and how that can affect how a survivor “shows up” within systems. Survivors may be more hesitant to share and truly trust the system if systems actors shame them.

The first thing that system actors must do is share their own pronouns, ask for the survivors preferred name and pronouns. Do not assume that the name on the person's identification, police report or what others refer to them as is correct.

The next thing that systems actors must do is educate themselves on outdated, derogatory or disrespectful terms or slang. Websites such as the Bisexual Resource Center<sup>19</sup> and the Humans Rights Campaign detail definitions and terms which are appropriate to use.<sup>20</sup> Systems should also have training that includes examples of the ways that shame can show up in systems actors' language.

Finally, systems must delineate terms which are appropriate for advocates versus what is appropriate for law enforcement. Terms like victim and survivor are used in different settings. There is a long history of the usage of both of these terms. While both are correct, there must be clarity in the purposes of each system so that the survivor isn't confused about the intentions and direction of system actors.

**“Create clear distinctions between legal processes and healing processes- law enforcement/ legal systems cause more harm, so additional mental health and health support is needed to balance it.”**





### 3. Not assuming that because someone is bisexual, they are untrustworthy.

We repeatedly heard many survivors believe and have been told that being bisexual means that you cannot be trusted. Some survivors do not feel supported by the queer community nor dominant culture. It is essential to recognize the harm that has been done in the past to the bisexual+ community. It will take work to affirm a survivor by believing them. We recognize that this is a broader cultural shift that must take place in many systems, not just criminal justice systems.

As discussed above, systems should be mindful of language and body language. Systems must also be intentional about listening with an open mind about the experience of survivors. One way that systems can model listening with an open mind is by asking open ended questions. Systems can also gently and sincerely inquire about and offer resources to survivors around their mental and emotional health. The way that systems can inquire in a respectful, affirming way is by simply asking, "Do you have a safe space or person to help you emotionally unpack this situation?" Ultimately, if mainstream advocacy

programs and the criminal justice system can begin with small shifts, survivors may place greater trust in the system.

The system is designed to think of men abusing women. Victims feel pressure to be perfect victims. They may hide their true identity of being bisexual because they think, rightfully so, it will make them look a certain way to law enforcement.

## 4. The importance of community.



**As with most marginalized groups, community is incredibly important for LGBT people.** Heterosexual, cisgender, white culture subscribes to an independent framework of interaction. LGBTQ+ communities generally organize in an interdependent framework that emphasizes the collective using the perspective of “we” over “I.” In order to help survivors who identify as bisexual+ we must identify ways to include their chosen community. One way to incorporate community is to include information for specifically for survivor’s support system. Systems could create pamphlets or guides for individual friends who are with the survivor as they go through the system. Systems could also build a peer response support network. Finally, partnerships with queer serving organizations will be essential in forging community with the LGBTQ+ community.

**“Pre-established active partnerships with bi+ and queer organizations/services is critical (goes far beyond mandatory trainings). Lived experiences should be prioritized by systems rather than education on statistics of harm.”**

## 5. Modeling inclusion.



**Systems and mainstream advocacy programs will improve their support of and impact in LGBTQ+ communities when they recognize the fluidity of gender.**

Bisexual + women have been hesitant about sharing their sexual orientation for fear of being shamed. One practice that systems can do is tell don't ask.

Talk about the organization's resources without waiting to ask what the person identifies as. To achieve this, organizations can create a script for advocates to use when they first interact with survivors to allow survivors to interject with their sexual orientation. For example, when first meeting the survivor, start with

**Tell, don't ask.**

"My pronouns are \_\_\_\_." Oftentimes, people will respond in kind with their name and chosen pronouns. If they don't tell you, ask them their pronouns. Then, follow up with "We serve all groups but specifically have the following resources for marginalized survivors including, people of color, lesbian, gay and bisexual survivors." The goal is to model inclusion, so the survivor doesn't have to guess or assume that the organization is or is not welcoming to survivors who identify as LGBTQ+.



## Conclusion

**Our systems have come a long way from the criminalization of LGBTQ+ relationships; however, there is a long road ahead.**

If we listen to what survivors have shared, we are closer to reaching our goal of a system that provides justice and safety for all.

# Appendix One

We developed seven questions that we used to guide the conversation.

1. What was your reason for contacting systems? Why did you reach out?
2. If you did not contact systems, why not?
3. Were you hesitant to reach out to systems? Why?
4. What were your expectations for that system?
5. Did you get the help you needed from systems? What was true about what you expected and what wasn't?
6. What are the ways in which systemic bias + antagonism has retraumatized survivors?
7. How do you feel that systems could improve? In what ways?

Then we spoke to professionals in systems to understand the ways in which they engaged with these two communities.

We held six listening sessions over the span of three weeks. Speaking with individual survivors and organization who provide services to or amplify the voices of survivors.

## Appendix Two

We spoke with seven survivors who identified as bisexual.

We spoke with two organizations who serve people who identify as bisexual, the Bisexual Resource Center and the LA LGBT Center.

We spoke with longtime advocate Connie Burk, who services people who identify as bisexual and are survivors of intimate partner violence.

# Endnotes

1 In this publication, we use the terms LGBTQ+ and Bisexual+. LGBTQ+ encompasses people who identify as other identities, including two-spirit, asexual and pansexual. Bisexual+ is an umbrella term that includes all people who experience any kind of attraction to more than one gender. In this report, we use the terms bisexual+ and bi+ interchangeably. <https://biresource.org/bi-info/what-is-bisexuality/>

2 <https://biresource.org/bi-info/what-is-bisexuality/>

3 <https://biresource.org/bi-info/what-is-bisexuality/>

4 <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/how-many-people-lgbt/>

5 [LGBT Identification Rises to 5.6% in Latest U.S. Estimate \(gallup.com\)](https://www.gallup.com/press-release/2017/05/lgbt-identification-rises-to-56-in-latest-u-s-estimate.aspx)

6 [LGBT Identification Rises to 5.6% in Latest U.S. Estimate \(gallup.com\)](https://www.gallup.com/press-release/2017/05/lgbt-identification-rises-to-56-in-latest-u-s-estimate.aspx)

7 Center for Disease Control and Prevention

8 Breiding, M.J. Chen, J. & Black, M.C. (2014). Intimate Partner Violence in the United States—2010. Atlanta, GA; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

9 Center for Disease Control and Prevention

10 Johnson, Nicole & Grove, MaryBeth. (2017). Why Us? Toward an Understanding of Bisexual Women's Vulnerability for and Negative Consequences of Sexual Violence. *Journal of Bisexuality*. 17. 1-16. 10.1080/15299716.2017.1364201.

11 <https://biresource.org/about/>

12 <https://biresource.org/about/>

13 <https://stillbisexual.com/who-we-are/>

14 Brown, B. (2013). *DARING GREATLY: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*. London, England: Portfolio Penguin.

15 We recognize that actors make up systems. We are using systems and actors interchangeably

16 [Holding Space, Creating Safety A Toolkit for Facilitating Conversations about Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence for Bisexual Peer Support Groups \(lgbtqipv.org\)](https://www.lgbtqipv.org/holding-space-creating-safety-a-toolkit-for-facilitating-conversations-about-sexual-and-intimate-partner-violence-for-bisexual-peer-support-groups)

17 According to the Human Rights Campaign pansexuality describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of any gender though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree. Sometimes used interchangeably with bisexual. [https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms?utm\\_source=GS&utm\\_medium=AD&utm\\_campaign=BPI-HRC-Grant&utm\\_content=454854043851&utm\\_term=what%20is%20pansexuality&gclid=Cj0KCOiA8ICOBhDmARIsAEGI6o2BLruor2FLmr1PQzL5l\\_vO8eHnyVtnjUMFb42-McdD4Ha8YwgB2M0aAiSTEALw\\_wcB](https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms?utm_source=GS&utm_medium=AD&utm_campaign=BPI-HRC-Grant&utm_content=454854043851&utm_term=what%20is%20pansexuality&gclid=Cj0KCOiA8ICOBhDmARIsAEGI6o2BLruor2FLmr1PQzL5l_vO8eHnyVtnjUMFb42-McdD4Ha8YwgB2M0aAiSTEALw_wcB)

18 A CLOSER LOOK: BISEXUAL TRANSGENDER PEOPLE. Movement Advancement Project

19 <https://biresource.org/bi-info/what-is-bisexuality/>

20 [https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms?utm\\_source=GS&utm\\_medium=AD&utm\\_campaign=BPI-HRC-Grant&utm\\_content=454854043851&utm\\_term=what%20is%20pansexuality&gclid=Cj0KCOiA8ICOBhDmARIsAEGI6o2BLruor2FLmr1PQzL5l\\_vO8eHnyVtnjUMFb42-McdD4Ha8YwgB2M0aAiSTEALw\\_wcB](https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms?utm_source=GS&utm_medium=AD&utm_campaign=BPI-HRC-Grant&utm_content=454854043851&utm_term=what%20is%20pansexuality&gclid=Cj0KCOiA8ICOBhDmARIsAEGI6o2BLruor2FLmr1PQzL5l_vO8eHnyVtnjUMFb42-McdD4Ha8YwgB2M0aAiSTEALw_wcB)

21 BWJP is releasing a guide on reimagining CCRs that will examine the role that CCRs have played in being victim- centered and how CCRs can be responsive to all survivors, especially survivors in marginalized communities.



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