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Sexual Health + Identity

## Why Bisexual Women Are at a Higher Risk for Violence

“People often mistake someone coming out as bisexual as a sexual invitation.”

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It feels strange to admit this, but when I first read that **bisexual** women are more vulnerable to sexual and intimate partner violence than people of other orientations, I felt relieved. It wasn't the butterfly-winged relief of good news. It was the lightness of finally being able to breathe. Or perhaps, of feeling that I still couldn't breathe, but at least I knew it wasn't because my lungs were faulty: It was because our culture had never given us enough oxygen.

I always knew that women are at a **higher risk** of sexual assault and relationship violence than men. It was evident when men hissed at me on the street, their words crawling up my back. It was evident the first time I was harassed at work, the first time I was sexually assaulted, the first time a partner abused me. But what I didn't know—even though I had long been an out-and-proud bisexual, feminist activist—was that it wasn't just my gender. The truth is, we are more vulnerable to violence depending on our sexual orientation. And bisexual women are particularly at risk.

Physical and sexual violence in intimate relationships is painfully common. **Thirty-five percent** of heterosexual women, and 44% of lesbian women, experience sexual or intimate partner violence. For bisexual women, the risk almost doubles compared to heterosexual women. According to the CDC's 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (the most recent copy of this survey), 61% **of us** will be raped, stalked, or abused; one more recent **study** found that **75%** of bisexual women report being victimized. We're **more likely** to be sexually assaulted in college. We're also **more likely to live in poverty**, and to be at **risk of substance abuse**. Bi men also share some of these **heightened** risks. And because of the effects of structural racism, bi women of color — particularly black bi women — experience **higher rates of victimization** and **more challenges to recovery**. **Transgender** people are also at an increased risk: A survey from the National Center for Transgender Equality found that 47% of the transgender people surveyed had been sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime, 54% had experienced some type of intimate partner violence, and 24% had experienced severe abuse from an intimate partner. Of the people in that survey, 14% identified

as bisexual.

Like me, **Nicole Johnson** was alarmed by these statistics. A psychology professor at Lehigh University, Johnson was researching sexual violence victimization when she noticed a trend: bisexual women experience more harm. Drawing on her own experience as a queer woman, Johnson knew better than to dismiss this as random. “Maybe that’s something we should pay attention to,” she said.

So Johnson got to work. In **a recently published paper**, she argues that three factors make bi women more likely to be abused. First, **cultural stereotypes** portray bisexual women as constantly sexually available, regardless of our consent. Second, **high rates** of substance use across the LGBTQ community leave us vulnerable to violence. Finally, **biphobic harassment**—being targeted especially for our identities—ups our risk.

“These disparities are the result of having to exist in hostile and toxic social environments,” says Robyn Ochs, a bisexual activist, writer, and speaker, and one of *Teen Vogue’s* **9 Bisexual Women Who Are Making History**. “They’re not a result of our identities.”

Ochs has spent the past several decades busting **myths about bisexuality** through her writing, lectures, and organizing. She says that, too often, people blame bi identity for what is, in reality, preconceived notions about bisexual people that promote society-wide discrimination. This focus on discrimination is called the **minority stress model**, and it’s exactly how it sounds: Being a minority is stressful, and that stress can make our lives worse across the board. “Living under stress is exhausting,” says Ochs. “It’s not good for our health.” This is especially true for bi women of color, transgender bi women, and poor bi women, who experience multiple kinds of stigma.

One stressor that bi women face, as Johnson found, is harmful stereotypes about our sexuality. I’ve identified as bi since I was 14 or 15, but sometimes I still feel strange saying it out loud. My discomfort is contained in the word itself. *Bi*, as in split, dual. *Sexual*, as in, well, sexual. When I came out as bi, I didn’t just feel the fear associated with being a member of a marginalized community. I felt shame, as

though my identity was vaguely scandalous, the emotional equivalent of showing a stranger my panties.

This awkwardness isn't just in my head. It's a reality faced by bisexual women in American culture, and it's called **hypersexualization**. Because bi women are often depicted in popular media and pornography as objects of titillation for straight men, rather than as unique, autonomous people, we're thought to be perpetually down for sex—whether we consent or not. This false belief increases the likelihood that dangerous folks will target bi women to sexually assault.

“People often mistake someone coming out as bisexual as a sexual invitation,” says Ochs. “When someone is simply sharing their identity, people think that they're inviting them into the bedroom.”

Sexuality is a wonderful thing, and we should all have the right to embody and express our desire however we please. But in a patriarchal culture, where men are taught that they have **the right to control women's bodies**, independent female sexuality threatens the status quo. By having the capacity for intimacy with more than one gender, bisexual women disrupt traditional binaries between male and female, straight and gay. “Bisexuality makes everybody uncomfortable,” says Johnson.

This, in turn, may lead to the stereotype that bi women are untrustworthy, and can't be content with just one partner. Of course, some bi women do practice **polyamory or other forms of non-monogamy**, and that's OK. But there's a difference between choosing a consensually non-monogamous relationship, and being dubbed “prone to cheating” because of who we are. In the former case, we're expressing our agency to have the relationship of our choice. In the latter case, partners may use our sexuality as an excuse to behave in an insecure, possessive, or even abusive way.

“I had one girlfriend leave me because she was afraid I was going to leave her [because of my orientation],” says Ochs. “I wasn't confused about being bisexual. I was confused about not being trusted.”

My bisexuality, too, has sometimes been a tender spot partners press when threatened. I once dated someone who said that my sexuality made me especially interested in sex and thus untrustworthy. It felt like a joke until the physical abuse started. In retrospect, those words were a kind of justification, an assertion that my sexuality needed to be controlled and punished. That *I* needed to be controlled and punished.

These beliefs aren't just passive prejudices. They contribute to society's dehumanization of bisexuals. In one study, Johnson asked bisexual women to indicate where in the "ascent of man" scale—the stages of evolution from ape to human—they felt their friends and family would place bisexual women. More than 80% of study participants felt that their social circles viewed them as less than fully human. Women who reported greater dehumanization were more likely to have been sexual assaulted.

These findings are alarming, but they don't get the airtime they deserve. That's because bisexual identity is often erased from discussions of both women's and queer issues. This is true in everyday dating experiences. "We're seen to be straight in mixed gender relationships, and gay in same-gender relationships," says Ochs.

It's also true in the apportioning of research dollars, and the priorities of policy agendas. From 2013-2016, **less than one percent** of all funding directed toward queer research and advocacy funded specifically bi-oriented initiatives — despite the fact that **half of all LGB people identify as bi**. Bi women remain woefully understudied.

I'm grateful to Johnson and Ochs for taking these first steps to bring the problem to light. For many bi women who have been victimized, public acknowledgement that it's not our fault is a massive step forward.

I wish I could go back in time and tell my younger self that there was a reason she was having hurtful experiences, that she wasn't "crazy" for thinking something was wrong, she didn't "ask for it," and it wasn't her fault. I can't send a message in a time machine back to my teenage self. But I can pay it forward.

So here's the truth. Whether you're cis or trans, bi **or pan**, you are incandescent. The world may not fully understand your magic, and people may try to hurt you because they're scared of your light. But if the stats about bi women's vulnerability tell us anything, it's that the way people try to harm you is not your fault. Their shame is not your shame. Their hurt is not your hurt. You don't have to walk around with your lungs constricted by the steel corset of self-blame. You deserve to open your mouth, and your heart. To breathe deeply. To be filled with oxygen.

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