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Sexuality and Gender Inclusivity in Victim Service Providers' Informational Materials

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Intimate partner violence (IPV)[1] is a serious social problem which impacts people from all walks of life. National estimates indicate that roughly two in five women and men will experience physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner during their lifetime (Leemis et al., 2022). While this high frequency of violence across gender groups is a serious concern, statistics show that IPV victimization is extremely high in the LGBTQ+ population (Messinger, 2017; Walters et al., 2013). Victimization rates are particularly pronounced when it comes to the transgender population where estimates show that roughly half of the transgender population has experienced violence at the hands of an intimate partner (James et al., 2016). The prevalence in which IPV occurs in the United States requires a critical examination of how victim services are distributed across these diverse populations.

Despite IPV being common across all social populations, the bulk of victim service providers (VSPs) have predominately catered to populations of cisgender, heterosexual women (Goodmark, 2013; Hines & Douglas, 2011; Jordan et al., 2020). This heavy focus on cisgender, heterosexual women has made it difficult for some populations of survivors (e.g., men, LGBTQ+) to access services following their victimization. For men, studies have shown that they are often turned away at the door or are misidentified as the person perpetrating the abuse (Dixon et al., 2022; Huntley et al., 2019). Members of the transgender community note that they are often turned away from services if they are unable to provide proof of gender-affirming surgeries (Goodmark, 2013; Seelman, 2015).

These disparities are so common that it has prompted the federal government to put in place nondiscrimination guidelines in the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) which stipulate that federally funded VSPs cannot discriminate upon the basis of sex, gender, sexual orientation, and other identity characteristics (S. 47). While disparities in services vary across survivor populations, one shared experience is that the informational materials (such as pamphlets, brochures, websites, flyers) given to survivors by VSPs often does not represent their experiences as they primarily focus on cisgender, heterosexual women who experience abuse by cisgender, heterosexual men (Jordan et al., 2020; Simpson & Helfrich, 2014; Tesch & Bekerian, 2015; Tesch, 2020).

A lack of inclusion within informational materials is a serious issue as nonrepresentation may lead underrepresented groups to seek assistance from other sources (e.g., family or friends) or hide their victimization overall. With there being over 14,000 VSPs in the United States (Oudekerk et al., 2019), and upwards of 80% of these agencies serving survivors of IPV in some capacity (Oudekerk et al., 2018), there is a need to understand what the current state of VSPs' informational material looks like. This research brief presents the results of an analysis of informational materials and websites from 80 VSPs across the U.S. As will be shown, agencies tend to focus most heavily on representing survivors who identify as cisgender, heterosexual women who were abused by cisgender, heterosexual men. The findings of this study provide avenues for improvement in VSP materials.

[1] The State of Texas refers to intimate partner violence as "family violence" (Thorstad et al., 2012).

Table 1: Definitions of Gender and Sexuality Terms

Term	Definition
Cisgender	A person whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth (e.g., man who was assigned male on his birth certificate)
Heterosexual	A person who is sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex (e.g., man who is sexually attracted to women)
Gay	A man who is sexually attracted to other men
Lesbian	A woman who is sexually attracted to other women
Bisexual	A person who is sexually attracted to both men and women
Transgender	An individual whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth
Queer	A blanket term denoting an individual whose sexual and gender identities are anything other than heterosexual and cisgender
LGBTQ+	An acronym representing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and any other groups that do not identify as cisgender or heterosexual

Defining and Identifying Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence can be difficult to define due to the broad range of behaviors that encompass IPV which may include physical violence, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), a popular report for determining IPV estimates, defines physical violence between intimate partners as,

...Many behaviors from being slapped, pushed, or shoved to severe acts that include being hit with a fist or something hard, kicked, hurt by having hair pulled, slammed against something, beaten, burned on purpose, attempted to be hurt by choking or suffocating, and having a knife or gun used on them (Leemis et al., 2022, p. 2).

In its estimates, NISVS breaks down physical violence into two categories: 1) slapping, pushing, or shoving and 2) severe physical violence (which consists of the remaining acts in the definition).

NISVS estimates that approximately 39% of men and women, regardless of sexual orientation, have experienced being slapped, pushed, or shoved over the course of their lifetime (Leemis et al., 2022). When focusing specifically on severe physical violence, women experience more injurious forms of IPV at a much greater rate than men (~33% compared to ~27%). The most recent NISVS report does not break down IPV victimization based upon gender and sexual orientation, but prior NISVS reports (Walters et al., 2013) indicate alarming rates of IPV within the LGBTQ+ population. According to the 2010 NISVS, 29% of lesbian women, 49% of bisexual women, and 24% of heterosexual women have experienced severe IPV during their lifetime (Walters et al., 2013). For men, it was found that 16% of gay men and 14% of heterosexual men experienced severe IPV. Further, a study focused entirely on the United States' transgender population, which used the NISVS's same survey questions, found that more than one-third of the transgender population had experienced IPV with 24% having experienced severe IPV (James et al., 2016).

Disparities in Victim Services

Although there is a chance that anyone will experience IPV, access to services that assist survivors of IPV has been limited for some populations. Historically, victim service providers developed in the United States following the Women's Movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Dicker, 2016). These VSPs were developed as a means of assisting women in exiting their abusive relationships and functioned under a feminist empowerment model which argued that if women were given the resources to become more independent, then they would be less likely to return to their abusive relationship (Dicker, 2016; Wood et al., 2022). VSPs, particularly those with a shelter component, have been found to be extremely helpful for women in reducing depressive symptoms (Campbell et al., 1995), increasing social support (Baker et al., 2003; Kunkel & Guthrie, 2016), fostering a greater sense of independence (Baker et al., 2003; Kunkel & Guthrie, 2016), and major decreases in abuse (Wood et al., 2022). The benefits of these agencies are truly unmatched and support the need for increased funding for new programming and services, but these benefits have not been distributed equally across all survivor subpopulations.

Although many agencies report offering services for cisgender, heterosexual men who experience IPV (Hines & Douglas, 2011), these services are often in the form of 72-hour hotel vouchers. While these vouchers are useful in getting a man out of an immediate abusive situation, they often do little to assist him in getting out of an abusive relationship. Further, when men do seek help from VSPs, they are often misidentified as the person perpetrating the abuse or are told that they cannot be a victim of IPV due to their gender identity (Dixon et al., 2020; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Huntley et al., 2019). Such experiences can be severely psychologically damaging to survivors who identify as men and can lead them to stay with the person perpetrating their abuse. The help-seeking experiences of gay and bisexual men are relatively underexplored, but the small amount of information that does exist indicates similar experiences to their heterosexual counterparts (Messinger, 2017).

Lesbian and bisexual women face difficulties in obtaining services, but these disparities differ based on their sexuality. While lesbian and bisexual women can often obtain services, albeit at a slightly lower rate than heterosexual women (Hines & Douglas, 2011), they face discrimination from agency staff. Some lesbian women have reported that staff view their experiences of abuse as more of a "cat fight" between partners, rather than a truly abusive relationship (Walters, 2011). Other research has supported that some victim advocates do believe that IPV in lesbian relationships is less serious in comparison to heterosexual relationships (Basow & Thompson, 2012; Hassouneh & Glass, 2008). Agency staff have also reported feeling concerned about the potential development of intimate relationships between lesbian clients, leaving the accused survivors feeling uncomfortable in what is otherwise a safe and healing environment (Simpson & Helfrich, 2014).

Members of the transgender community report some of the steepest difficulties in obtaining victim services. Transgender survivors have reported being told that they were unable to receive services unless they could "pass" as a cisgender woman (Goodmark, 2013). More specifically, some shelters noted concerns with the depth of the survivors' voice, their perceived masculine demeanor, and their lack of feminine-appropriate clothing (Goodmark, 2013; Guadalupe-Diaz & Jasinski, 2016; Messinger & Guadalupe-Diaz, 2020). Failure in being able to account for these concerns often lead to a denial of services. Further, when services are obtained, transgender survivors are often left out of group-based services and face transphobic comments from clients and staff alike (Smith, 2014).

Although experiences with service disparities vary widely based upon a survivor's gender and sexual orientation, one shared experience is that the informational materials (e.g., pamphlets, fact sheets, brochures) provided to survivors often do not align with their experiences of IPV. Cisgender, heterosexual men and members of the LGBTQ+ population often note that the informational materials cater to cisgender, heterosexual women who experience abuse by cisgender, heterosexual men with whom they share a relationship (Helfrich & Simpson, 2006; Jordan et al., 2020; Simpson & Helfrich, 2014; Tesch, 2020; Tesch & Bekerian, 2015). Such a lack of inclusivity in materials has served as a deterrent for some survivors from seeking services from VSPs (Huntley et al., 2019; Simpson & Helfrich, 2014). As funding sources, such as VAWA, have become increasingly focused on nondiscrimination, an analysis of informational materials is needed in order to highlight both what non-inclusiveness looks like and how these issues can be addressed.

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Methods

Informational materials and website data were gathered from 80 VSPs that received funding from the Office of Violence Against Women in 2020. Using this sampling frame ensured that 1) all included agencies provided either educational or shelter services to survivors of IPV and 2) that all agencies fell under the nondiscrimination guidelines put forth by VAWA. For the purposes of agency anonymity, no agency names are provided in this brief. Geographically, agencies were relatively equally distributed across all four regions of the United States: 20 in the West, 22 in the Midwest, 19 in the South, and 19 in the Northeast. Agencies ranged widely in the number of employees/volunteers (9 employees and 24 volunteers to 120 employees and 626 volunteers) and the number of clients served on an annual basis (200 to approximately 25,000). All agencies stated either directly or through their websites/materials that they served all survivors of IPV regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Screenshots were collected of all 80 VSPs' websites during the summer of 2021. Every link on each agency's website was clicked and scanned into a PDF document. This collection led to a total of 1,564 unique webpages for analysis. Further, all 80 agencies were contacted to see if they would be willing to provide informational materials for analysis. Eleven agencies agreed to provide informational materials and in total provided 50 additional documents. This led to a total dataset of 1,614 analyzable pieces of data.

A content analysis of the dataset was conducted to determine which survivor populations were represented most frequently within materials. Documents were coded at the paragraph level with line-by-line coding being used for bullet-pointed information and images. Coding for the content analysis occurred in two stages. The first stage involved the creation of codes based around the exact wording used by agencies (e.g., "woman"). In the second stage of coding, broad code categories were collapsed into narrower codes that represent various gendered populations of survivors and people who perpetrate abuse. The context in which the language appeared, for instance the words "woman" or "she" being used to describe someone who experienced abuse, was used to determine which category initial codes went into. The results of this analysis are presented at two levels: the document level and the segment level. The document level refers to any instances where a code appears at least once within a document, while the segment level refers to any instances where codes appeared within coded paragraphs. To ensure the accuracy of the coding, two coders assessed a random selection of documents and compared their coding results. This process indicated an agreement of .88 at the document-level and .76 at the segment level, both of which indicate strong agreement between coders (Miles et al., 2014).

Results

Code	Frequency (Documents)	Percentage (Documents)	Frequency (Segments)	Percentage (Segments)
Cisgender, Heterosexual Women	525	33%	1235	55%
Gender-Equitable/Neutral LGBTQ+ Victims	307	19%	573	25%
Cisgender, Heterosexual Men	193	12%	383	17%
	49	3%	70	3%
Documents with Code(s)	776	48%		
Documents without Code(s)	838	52%		
Total Analyzed Documents	1614	100%		
Total Segments			2261	100%

Table 2 presents the results of the analysis focused on gendered depictions of people who experience abuse. Of all analyzed documents, 776 of them (48%) presented at least one representation of a person who experienced abuse. Heterosexual, cisgender women who experience abuse were represented most frequently across both documents and coded segments (n = 525 documents, 1234 segments). These representations most frequently occurred through images or language which directly mentioned this population as a group who has experienced abuse. Women were often described as survivors of abuse on informational pages describing abusive tactics, agency services, and fact sheets about populations that frequently experience abuse. In total, 67 agencies (84%) represented cisgender, heterosexual women at least once in their materials.

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In addition to cisgender, heterosexual women, 63 agencies (79%) also provided gender-neutral/equitable depictions of survivors (n =307 documents, 573 segments). In these instances, agencies either did not use gendered language to describe survivors or they described both men and women together (often using “he/she” pronouns). Similar to representations of cisgender, heterosexual women, these representations most often occurred on documents describing types of abusive tactics, agency service offerings, or informational materials describing the frequency in which IPV occurs.

LGBTQ+ survivors were also represented as survivors in materials (n = 193 documents, 383 segments). Fifty-seven agencies (71%) represented the LGBTQ+ population at least once. In some instances, these codes appeared in documents that were specifically catered to the LGBTQ+ population. These documents were often broad and favored representing the LGBTQ+ population as one cohesive group, rather than describing how abuse differs between the specific subpopulations (e.g., gay, lesbian). For the most part, these appearances occurred in small sections on broader documents describing abuse experienced by women. Only 13 agencies (16%) described the transgender population directly; a frequency that is disproportionate to the rate in which the transgender population experiences IPV (34%, James et al., 2016). While there are abusive tactics that are specific to the LGBTQ+ population (e.g., outing, destroying gender affirming clothing), only nine agencies (11%) detailed these tactics.

Cisgender, heterosexual men who experience abuse were described least frequently in comparison to other groups (n = 49 documents, 70 segments). Only 24 agencies (30%) described cisgender, heterosexual men at least once in their informational materials. These representations were unique as they clustered around descriptions of men perpetrating abuse. In these occurrences, agencies would describe how men who experience abuse may also perpetrate it in a retaliatory manner as well as the impact of witnessing or experiencing early childhood abuse. Further, agencies described support groups for men, but these groups were often tied to batterer intervention programs.

Table 3. Frequency Table Outlining Gendered Representations of People Who Abuse Within Agency Materials

Code	Frequency (Documents)	Percentage (Documents)	Frequency (Segments)	Percentage (Segments)
Cisgender, Heterosexual Men	198	12%	361	75%
Gender-Equitable/Neutral	50	3%	105	22%
Cisgender, Heterosexual Women	14	<1%	16	3%
Documents with Code(s)	237	15%		
Documents without Code(s)	1377	85%		
Total Analyzed Documents	1614	100%		
Total Segments			482	100%

Representations of people who perpetrate abuse appeared far less frequently within agency materials. 237 of the total documents (15%) included at least one of the gendered categories. Amongst these documents, cisgender, heterosexual men were represented as perpetrators of abuse most frequently in comparison to other groups (n = 198 documents, 361 segments). Most often agencies represented men as perpetrators of abuse using masculine pronouns (i.e., he/him/his). Additionally, agencies more directly used terms such as “husband” or “boyfriend” to describe those who perpetrate abuse. Agencies would depict men using violence against women through images of men grabbing women or looking at a woman with a closed fist. Representations of men occurred most frequently in documents describing relationship red flags.

Thirty-two agencies (40%) describe people who perpetrate abuse in a gender-neutral/equitable manner (n = 50 documents, 105 segments). These depictions appeared much less frequently in comparison to descriptions of cisgender, heterosexual men as abuse perpetrators. Similar to gender-neutral/equitable depictions of survivors, agencies would either describe men and women together as potential perpetrators of abuse or would not ascribe a gender to the person perpetrating abuse. Most often in these representations, agencies would use “his or her” when describing people who perpetrate abuse. These representations were common across materials that broadly described abusive relationships.

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Finally, agencies presented information on cisgender, heterosexual women who perpetrate violence, albeit infrequently in comparison to the other gendered representations (n = 14 documents, 16 segments). Of the 80 included agencies, only 11 (14%) presented any information on cisgender, heterosexual women who perpetrate abuse. It is important to note that while women were described, these representations contextually differed from other gendered groups. Across all documents, women were never described as the primary aggressors and instead were described as only perpetrating abuse in a retaliatory manner or describing violent behavior as a means of self-defense. No images depicted women perpetrating abuse within any of the documents.

Discussion

Analyses of victim service providers' informational materials indicate that there is room for growth when it comes to diversity and inclusivity. Across both documents and segments, cisgender, heterosexual women were most frequently described as survivors of abuse and cisgender, heterosexual men were described as perpetrators of abuse. Such representations align with traditional framings of IPV, which argue that violence is used by men as a means of controlling women whom they share an intimate relationship with (Dicker, 2016; Gruber, 2020). While this model has undoubtedly been useful in developing services and programming for cisgender, heterosexual women, this framework leaves out other survivor subpopulations, such as cisgender, heterosexual men, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Failing to include diverse survivor subpopulations in materials may lower the likelihood that men or members of the LGBTQ+ population seek help from VSPs. Although relatively unexplored in comparison to cisgender, heterosexual women, prior research has established that members of these groups believe that VSPs primarily cater to the needs of women and are often unwilling to serve members of their own communities (Dixon et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2012; Tesch & Bekerian, 2015). This lack of inclusion, coupled with the fact that survivors are already much more likely to seek help from informal sources of help (e.g., friends, family) in comparison to formal sources of help (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Dixon et al., 2020; Kattari et al., 2017; Tsui, 2014), could severely impact the number of potential clients at agencies.

Further, agencies should work towards fostering inclusivity in their agency materials, as funding sources are increasingly including nondiscrimination clauses in their funding requirements. Since VAWA included nondiscrimination clauses in its 2013 reauthorization (S. 47), numerous state and county funding sources across the United States have followed suit. While the definition of discrimination used by VAWA is relatively broad and seems to focus primarily on direct service discrimination, it is possible that the current definition could be interpreted to include a lack of inclusivity in informational materials.

The 2021 reauthorization of VAWA (H. R. 1620) increased funding and nondiscrimination requirements for LGBTQ+ survivors of IPV, so such definitional changes may be on the horizon. As established by VAWA in 2013 (S. 47), being found to be noncompliant with the nondiscrimination guidelines can lead to penalties such as the withdrawal of grant funding and a temporary ban on federal funding; therefore, agencies should strongly assess the potential lack of inclusivity within their own materials.

Moving forward, agencies should consider conducting censuses of survivor populations in their geographic locations. While agencies might initially assume that there is no need for diverse service provisions due to a lack of LGBTQ+ residents in their areas, such as in rural locations, it is highly likely that such residents do exist and are in need of services (Elliott et al., 2022; Hulko & Hovanec, 2017). Social factors might prevent LGBTQ+ individuals from being open about their relationships and sexuality in their community and national estimates of IPV indicate that they will likely have experienced IPV (James et al., 2016; Walters et al., 2013). All things considered, even if the LGBTQ+ population is small in a services providers' area, undoubtedly there will be cisgender, heterosexual men who have experienced IPV and need services (Leemis et al., 2022). Starting with inclusivity in mind might lead diverse survivors to seek help from the agencies and, in turn, highlight other programming needs.

VSPs in Texas should strongly consider the inclusivity of the informational materials as overall rates of IPV in Texas are much higher than the U.S. state average (35% versus 28%, regardless of gender; Smith et al., 2017). Further, there is a severe need for shelter and victim services as, in 2021 alone, 204 Texas residents were killed by their intimate partners (Texas Council on Family Violence [TCFV], 2022). Rates of IPV and intimate partner homicide have been on a steady increase for LGBTQ+ Texans over the past five years, with a major increase in intimate partner homicide in 2021 (TCFV, 2022). A lack of inclusion in materials will likely lead to a major decrease in help-seeking from the LGBTQ+ community, as other state policies might be leading members of the population to feel concerned about the potential outcome of seeking help from VSPs in Texas. By ensuring that informational materials account for both men and LGBTQ+ individuals, agencies are showing a sign of acceptance and solidarity with these survivor populations.

Victim service providers have, for decades, been at the forefront of social advocacy for victims' rights and services in the United States. These agencies play a crucial role in supporting survivors in exiting violent relationships and starting new chapters in their lives. While VSPs have been found to assist in fostering independence and safety for their clients (Baker et al., 2003; Kunkel & Guthrie, 2016; Wood et al., 2022), these services have disproportionately benefited cisgender, heterosexual women over other populations (Goodmark, 2013; Gruber, 2020). Increasing the recognition of diverse survivor subpopulations within informational materials will aid in spreading these benefits to other survivor groups leading to a safer society for survivors of all identities.

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JD Robertson, Wimberely
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Libby Hamilton, Round Rock
Victim Liaison, Texas Board of
Pardons and Paroles

**Senator Joan Huffman,
Houston**
State Senator for District 17
& President Pro Tempore of
the Texas Senate

**Hon. Lee Ann Breeding,
Denton**
District Judge, 462nd Judicial
District Court

Rep. James White, Hillister
Texas State Representative
District 19 & Chair of the Texas
House Committee on
Corrections
Chairperson for the CVI
Advisory Board

Erleigh Wiley, Forney
Criminal District Attorney,
Kaufman County

**Matthew L. Ferrara, Ph.D.,
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Forensic Psychologist

Brandi Reed, Amarillo
Director of Education, Family
Support Services of Amarillo,
Inc.

Melissa Carter, Bryan
Victim Assistance Coordinator,
Brazos County

**Chief Emmitt Jackson, Jr.,
Argyle**
Chief of Police, Argyle Police
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**Hillary England,
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Director of Trafficking and
Sexual Violence Prevention
Programs, Office of the
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