

Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism

A position paper of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union.
Written by the Gay Women's Group of the CWLU and adopted by
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Women's liberation and gay liberation have a lot in common. Both were born out of an awareness that women and male and female homosexuals are discriminated against in jobs, in schools, and by law, and are oppressed by a culture with strict sex role expectations. But to understand how women's oppression and gay people's oppression are related to each other, and to discover the relationship of lesbianism to the women's movement, we need a deeper understanding of the structure and functioning of our society. In this paper we want to examine these questions from our perspective as socialist-feminists.

There are two major trends in the women's movement today, which are most frequently called radical feminism and socialist feminism. Neither of the two are complete ideologies, but they do emphasize different aspects of women's oppression.

We'll look first at the radical feminists, in order to give a background for the rest of the paper. The radical feminists view male supremacy as the basis for women's oppression. This is seen as not only the first form of social oppression historically, but also the primary oppression, or basis of all other forms of exploitation (like racism and imperialism).^{*} The institutions of society are seen as only the tools of the oppressor, male supremacy. This analysis is shared by all radical feminists, and it leads them to emphasize the psychological aspects of women's oppression, although different groups may interpret the basic ideology somewhat differently. For example, the more 'extreme' groups tend to see individual



men as the enemy, while moderate radical feminist view the male role as the enemy. The moderates then work for the elimination of sex roles, which leads them to view gay liberation as an ally, since homosexuality is seen as a blow against sex roles. The extremists are even clearer in their position. Since men are the enemy, they support a completely separatist movement, not only as a tactic for the present, but as a vision of the future. Lesbianism is seen as a political choice that is necessary and central to the struggle against male

supremacy. While this brief summary does not do justice to the ideology of radical feminism, it does indicate the importance of lesbianism in that ideology.

Socialist feminism emphasizes the important role of institutions in maintaining sexism, and the relationship between the economic system of capitalism and women's oppression. Women's position in society is determined by a combination of our roles in the family and in the labor force, or the productive sector. The liberation of women must involve changes in both of these areas. One of the most complete analyses is that of Juliet Mitchell in *Woman's Estate*; we describe it below. Because of its emphasis on institutions and on the complexity of society, socialist feminism does not describe a simple relationship between the oppression of the male homosexual, the lesbian and women in general. In fact, possibly because of this complexity, socialist feminism has been slow to discuss gay issues. As socialist

^{*} Saying that sexism is the primary oppression leads to the conclusion that destroying sexism will automatically also destroy the structures that came later: racism, capitalism, and imperialism. This would be true if history was like a set of children's blocks, where removing the bottom one makes the whole pile fall down. But history is more complex and evolutionary, with each stage evolving from the one before it. Even if women's subjugation was historically the first instance of one group taking power over another, that doesn't tell us much about how we fight it today. Slavery came before the industrial revolution, but the abolition of slavery didn't bring with it freedom for industrial workers.

feminists we see the need for beginning such a discussion, so that we can understand the relationship between lesbianism and socialist feminism.

This paper is primarily an analysis of lesbian oppression, although it also contains the beginnings of a strategy for a lesbian movement. We do not deal with other aspects of gay relationships here, such as our feelings about lesbian love and pleasure we have found in relationships with other women.

Background on Socialist Feminism

In this section we describe briefly the outline of socialist feminism given by Juliet Mitchell in her book, Woman's Estate, and in her pamphlet "The Longest Revolution".

In Woman's Estate, Mitchell outlines a way to identify and sort out the different parts of women's social role (p. 100). The key parts of this role are production, reproduction, socialization of children, and sexuality. The last three are in the context of the family. That is, the family is the place where these three functions are supposed to be connected. A woman, who clearly has a unique role in reproduction also has the task of raising children. Woman is seen as child-rearer as well as child-bearer. The dominant ideology of our culture also still proclaims the family to be the only "proper" place for sexuality and reproduction, even with the "sexual revolution". The family holds together woman's three main functions in society and so defines "woman's place".

The first sector of society is production, or how society is organized economically. This sector provides the economic framework that the family fits into, and ties together the other aspects of woman's role. It is the sector of society from which women are effectively excluded, because women's "real" work is at home. Many women work outside the home, but the ideology of the family attempts, and often succeeds in making women identify with their role as unpaid workers in the home rather than as paid workers outside it.

It is important to recognize these different parts of women's role because each of them can change at its own pace. Changes in society can result from changes in any one of them or in a combination of them. If we struggle against women's oppression in one area and ignore the others, we may make immediate changes in women's position in that area. But society will be able to compensate in other areas, leaving women in no better overall position than before. Therefore we must determine the weakest link in women's roles and examine how it relates to the rest of society, so that gains we make in these weak areas won't be swallowed up by the others.

We also realize that there are limitations to Juliet Mitchell's ideas. She gives us an analysis of women's oppression in most aspects, but she neglects some other roles women play (such as consumers under capitalism). She also does not give us a strategy for how to change that oppression. (For an extended discussion of strategy, see the paper "Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women's Movement," a position paper of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union.)

Even so, this analysis gives us a framework for understanding society and the place of lesbian oppression in that society. Because this paper is about the relationship of lesbianism to women's roles, changes in those roles for women in general are not discussed. For example, increasing availability of birth control and abortion, the rising divorce rate, and new attitudes towards sex and marriage are changing somewhat both the ideas and the facts about women's roles in production, reproduction, sexuality and as socializers of children. While recognizing these changes this paper will discuss the relationship of lesbianism to the dominant ideology of women's role, which this society's institutions still reinforce pretty much unchanged. We shall look at each part separately in order to see how the oppression of the

lesbian in connected to that of other women, and to see how the struggles for gay liberation and women's liberation relate.

Production

We begin our examination of lesbian oppression by looking at the lesbian's position in the labor force. That position is essentially the same as that of other women in regard to type of work and pay scales. Many married American women do not work out of economic necessity, but most lesbians do not have a choice about working. Lesbians, like other women who partially or totally support themselves and their families, have to work outside the home except in certain circumstances (such as independent wealth or marriage). Most lesbians work for pay because of the exclusion from the family and the economic advantage of having a husband.

Many lesbians are married, however, and their position in the labor force is more like that of married heterosexual women than like that of non-married (lesbians, single, divorced, widowed) women. Some women married young, not realizing they were lesbians until later. Other suppressed their feelings, thinking their lesbian feelings would disappear in the face of heterosexual experience. When the realization of their lesbianism finally came, many married lesbians chose to get a divorce, although others (especially those with children) chose to remain married (not necessarily telling their husbands the true situation).

For any lesbian the fear of being "found out" and the danger of being fired makes it more difficult to find a job, keep it, and relate to her fellow workers than it would be for heterosexual women.

The restrictions on women in the labor force are supposed to be due to a woman's "physical weaknesses," especially in connection with her reproductive role. There are also social forces that prevent women from taking the same productive role as men. Such social coercion acts on the lesbian as on other women. In fact, the status of the lesbian (and in some ways that of male homosexuals) demonstrates the importance of social weakness as compared to physical weakness. By physical weakness, we mean the idea that women are actually physically incapable of performing the same tasks as men; by social weakness we mean

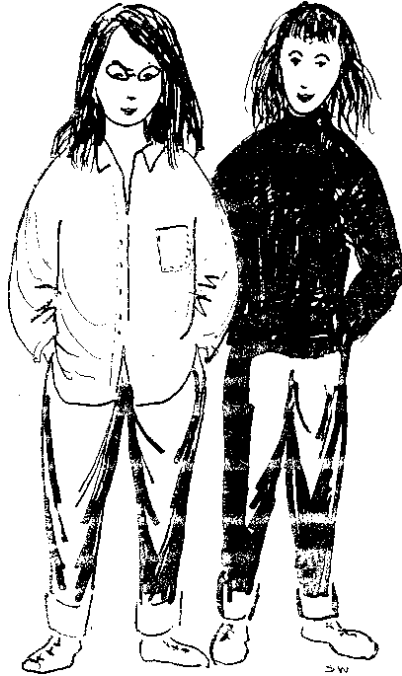
that social forces rather than physical incapability prevent women from taking the same productive role as men. The lesbian, since she doesn't necessarily play the same reproductive role as most heterosexual women, is still treated as if she had these "physical weaknesses" of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, etc. And so her oppression on the job must be due to social weaknesses or expectations. We can conclude that it is the ideology of the reproductive role and of the physical status of women and not the reality of women's lives which is the cause of women's oppression in this area. Social rather than physical factors determine women's status in the labor force.

Reproduction and Socialization

The other side of woman's minor role in the labor force (in the ideology of women's work, although in fact it's not minor) is her central role in the family. The combination of sexuality, reproduction and socialization make up that role, but each has a separate relationship to the lesbian. Mitchell, in discussing reproduction, says: "As long as reproduction remained a natural phenomenon, of course, women were effectively doomed to social exploitation. In any sense, they were not 'masters' of a large part of their lives. They had no choice as to whether or how often to give birth to children (apart from precarious methods of contraception and repeated dangerous abortions); their existence was essentially subject to biological processes outside their control" (p. 107). This has changed quite a bit lately for many women, with birth control and abortion becoming more available. But these methods are not

always reliable and are still not available to everyone, so control over reproduction is still an issue for most heterosexual women. Yet many lesbians have been able to choose whether to have children and so have control over the reproductive aspects of their lives. Lesbian mothers usually are women who had heterosexual relationships (usually marriage) early in life which resulted in children., or women who chose deliberately to have children and to raise them with their lesbian lover, and sought out a brief heterosexual relationship for this purpose only.

The lesbian's very existence demonstrates the division between sexuality and reproduction. Mitchell goes on to say that "the fact of overwhelming importance is that easily available contraception



threatens to dissociate sexual from reproductive experience -- which all contemporary ideology tried to make inseparable, as the *raison d'être* of the family." (p. 108) The threat of lesbianism, like contraception, is in showing that sexual experience doesn't have to result in child bearing and rearing.

The relationship of lesbians to women's role as socializers of children also points out inconsistencies in the idea of "woman's place." Most lesbians, except married lesbians, do not raise children in the context of the nuclear family. Either they do not have children, or they raise them alone, with a lesbian lover, or in a group situation. Changes in the family and living arrangements are becoming more common for women in general, also showing alternatives to the traditional nuclear family.

Institutions of socialization (schools, for example) exclude or degrade gay people. Although there are many gay people working as teachers, nurses, and so on, they usually must be dishonest about their sexuality for fear of being fired.

Among children and the adults who take care of them, popular images of gay people are used as negative role models. "Boyish" girls are called tomboys and "effeminate" boys are called sissies. Both of these expressions call up the image of "masculine" lesbians and "effeminate" male homosexuals.* Some of this imagery comes from gay adults, but since they are unable to be open and honest about it, they reinforce the negative attitudes among children towards gay people.

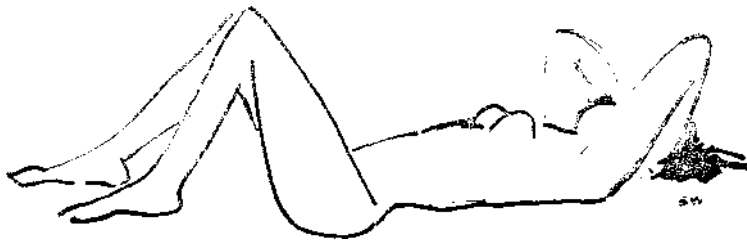
Sexuality

Finally we turn to sexuality, where it would seem we would find the focus of lesbian oppression. Once again, the lesbian faces some of the same type of exploitation as straight women. Though usually outside of heterosexual relationships, she still has the female status of sexual object. She too is seen as the potential property of men.

Lesbianism can also shed some light on the tension that exists between the ideas of love and marriage. As Mitchell notes, "The two have been officially harmonized, but the tension between them has never been abolished. There is a formal contradiction between the voluntary contractual character of "Marriage" and the spontaneous uncontrollable character of "love"—the passion that is celebrated precisely for its involuntary force." (p. 114)

* Concerning these words: it is interesting that tomboy has a much more restricted meaning, both among children and adults, than sissy. Tomboy only means a young girl with boyish manners, it is not used for adult women or even teenagers, who are more likely to be called "dykes." Sissy, however, is used among children to mean coward. In this sense it is applied to girls as well. Among adults sissy means effeminate male homosexual.

She goes on to state that "obviously the main breach in the traditional value-pattern has, so far, been the increase in premarital sexual experience. This is now virtually legitimized in contemporary society. But its implications are explosive for the ideological conception of marriage that dominated this society; that it is an exclusive and permanent bond." What Mitchell fails to consider is that marriage is not only exclusive and permanent, but heterosexual. In order to fulfill its child-bearing; and rearing functions, the present "model" family has to be limited to heterosexual relationships. The main breach with this has been homosexuality.



Marriage is still held up as the ideal place for sexuality (pre-marital sex is **pre**-marital, with marriage the ultimate goal). The nature of both heterosexual and homosexual relationships is affected by this. Marriage is an exclusive and permanent contract and, as the model for human relationships, condemns any variations (homosexuality, heterosexual "affairs etc.) Since homosexual relationships are outside the marriage contract and not socially or legally recognized, they are often forced to be the things society condemns – "undependable", "promiscuous". It's very difficult for homosexual relationships to survive in this society, and both homosexual and heterosexual relationships can suffer from the restrictions of marriage. The implications of lesbianism for our society's idea of marriage are more explosive even than those of premarital sex because such relationships have demonstrated the gap between spontaneous love and the legalized contract.

Summary of Theory

Lesbian oppression is necessary for the continuance of the present structure of society. The lesbian provides a threefold threat to the family. Her sexuality shows that love and marriage are not necessary complements, and that sexuality can not be subsumed under a voluntary permanent contract, marriage.

Further, by her unwillingness to become the property of a male, she undermines the exclusiveness (and naturally the heterosexuality) of the marriage contract. By her ability to opt out of traditional child rearing patterns she shows that socialization is not necessarily tied to the nuclear family, and that women are not born to be mothers. By her opportunity to choose her reproductive role, she weakens the foundation of the family ideology and demonstrates the divisions within it. Because of the nature of her relationship to the family structure, she also threatens to expose the social coercion necessary for determining women's position in the labor force. In order for this society to continue functioning in the same way, the lesbian must be oppressed since admission of her existence as a natural phenomena, as an alternative, would expose the contradictions between the ideology of women's role and the reality of women's lives.



Finally we wish to look at the relationship between the oppression of male homosexuals, lesbians, and other women. A quick review shows that the situation is quite different, as reflected in the treatment of the two gay groups by society. The male homosexual is aggressively attacked, while the lesbian is more likely to be ignored. This is partly due to the higher status given to men. Male homosexuals are an affront to this status by trying to act like lower status women and therefore are

subject to abuse.

But lesbians are "uppity women" whose actions are unimportant, and are treated as isolated cases when it is necessary to be aware of them at all. On a deeper level this ignoring of lesbianism is actually important to the ideological framework of society. While both male homosexuality and lesbianism threaten the idea of a voluntary heterosexual marriage contract as the end-all and be-all of sexuality, it is the lesbian who exposes the distinctions between women's three roles in the family. Acknowledgement of the possibility that women were not subject to reproductive forces outside their control, and that women could choose whether and when to have children would have weakened the bond between reproduction and sexuality, and the ideological basis of the family. The oppression of the lesbian is closely tied to that of heterosexual women, since society needs to oppress the lesbian in order to maintain the ideological basis for women's oppression.

Although this is but a brief introduction to a socialist-feminist analysis of lesbian oppression, we can conclude that any approach to the subject which focuses on only one aspect of that oppression is incomplete. Change in just one area is inadequate, for that particular improvement in women's condition can be offset by societal reinforcement in other areas. Our struggles must recognize the necessity of understanding the connections between the different parts of women's oppression and also how that oppression is connected to the oppression of lesbians.



Towards Gay Liberation: How Women's Liberation Can Relate to Gay Issues

The Chicago Women's Liberation Union operates with a three part strategy of service, education and direct action. At the present time, educational and service programs are perhaps the easiest to relate to gay oppression, and direct action struggles more difficult.

The main methods of education and outreach are the Liberation School for Women, WOMANKIND (monthly newspaper), the Speaker's Bureau, and literature. We should aim for the inclusion of discussion of gay issues wherever it's appropriate, for example, in "Women and Their Bodies" courses in Liberation School, or in speeches we give on the nature of women's oppression. There

should be a reappraisal of heterosexual assumptions in more general situations, such as WOMANKIND articles. We must begin to consider what is the best approach to outreach situations and develop a good selection of outreach literature concerning lesbians.

The major service programs at the present time are the Abortion Counselling Service, the Health Project, and the Legal Clinic. Abortion counselling is clearly oriented towards heterosexual experience and cannot be evaluated on any criteria of gay consciousness. The health project is doing pregnancy testing (which also has a heterosexual bias), but it has more potential than abortion counselling to expand into areas of more concern to lesbians, such as STD testing and general gynecological exams and referrals. The legal clinic also could take lesbian rights cases.

Trying to develop a direct action strategy around gay issues is more difficult, because the situation of gay people is different from that of most other oppressed peoples. As Abbott and Love point out in *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, black activists know that there are some Afro-Americans passing for white, but the black liberation movement doesn't consider these people as its primary constituency. The gay liberation movement, on the other hand, sees as a major part of its constituency people who are passing for straight (at least part of the time). This makes it considerably harder to organize the gay movement, particularly around direct action struggles, because there are people who might feel free to attend a lesbian rap group or a gay dance, but who dare not become involved in a public demonstration for fear of being exposed, losing their job, etc. For this reason, it is crucial that struggles for gay rights should include organizations which are not identified as gay groups, such as women's liberation or civil liberties groups, so that all people can become involved in the struggle without having to declare themselves gay or straight. This does not mean that we do not support the right of lesbians to form separate groups from the predominantly straight women's liberation groups. Separate organizations have been important to the black and women's movements, and are necessary to build leadership from the constituency of the movement (black, women, gay, etc.) and to direct that movement.