

THE RADICALESBIAN IN GAY LIBERATION

Once the radicalesbian has come out, privately and publicly, she may want to become politically active. To do this she may join Women's and/or Gay Liberation. Here I do not wish to analyze the reasons why she might join one of these groups rather than the other. Instead I am concerned with Gay Liberation and the fact that in this movement (unlike in Women's Liberation) the radicalesbian must work with men; men who because they are men, may oppress her yet because they are homosexual men also have much in common with her. For the radical homosexual male in Gay Liberation not only shares with her the "stigma" of being a homosexual he, too, wishes to destroy sexist society. Because he shares a similar experiences and has aims common to hers the radicalesbian often assumes that he will oppress her less than the heterosexual male. This is not necessarily true although generally the case. Certainly the radicalesbian in Gay Liberation arrives at a clearer and/or simply a different understanding of the enormous difficulties involved in attempting to combat sexism. Her understanding of this crucial problem is broadened because:

- 1) She must relate to men who are trying to understand why they oppress women and yet they may still oppress her.
- 2) She is open to a dialogue with men and the difficulties involved in such a dialogue serve also as an indicator of how much more difficult (impossible at the moment) any sort of dialogue with heterosexual men will prove to be.
- 3) She learns, especially through mixed CR groups, that the oppression of the male homosexual is very different from her own i.e. the instruments of sexism are even more various and insidious than she may have realized before talking to the homosexual male.
- 4) She comes to see that she as a lesbian may also oppress other lesbians (in Women's Liberation the radicalesbian may find it very difficult to meet other lesbians unless they organize as a separate group or "come out" as individuals).

First and foremost, however, it is vitally important to stress that the radicalesbian is committed to other women because she sees them as the most oppressed victims of sexism. But she also knows that to argue that sexist society oppresses only women and that all women are oppressed only by men is obviously simplistic. To see all men as the only enemy may be tactically sound but the danger is that tactics can become ideology. For the nature, extent and mechanisms of sexism and oppression are complex and ubiquitous. For example, I, a middle class, educated lesbian am potentially the oppressor of a working class, uneducated lesbian - especially in a job situation. If I am competing with another lesbian for a job and the employer mistakenly assumes that I am a heterosexual while the other lesbian openly declares or is unable to hide her lesbianism (given that she fits the mythical "butch" stereotype) then I will probably get the job (given the usual prejudices of a sexist society)... If, in such a situation, I accept the job then automatically I become an oppressor of the other lesbian who refuses to or does not "pass as straight".

To understand the ways in which some men are victimized by sexism is more difficult. To make such men understand the ways in which they oppress or are oppressed is more difficult still. We say, for example, that lesbians are doubly oppressed; we are oppressed as lesbians and we are oppressed as women. Yet homosexual men are also doubly oppressed; they are oppressed for their sexual preference and they can be oppressed because they are men. For example, they may feel oppressed because they do not live up to what constitutes the Australian image of "manliness". A heterosexual male may suffer this kind of oppression too. Yet there is still a sense in which all men do oppress all women - whether consciously or not.

Men, in this society, automatically reap benefits simply because they are men and they hold the power. For example, a homosexual male, who does not fit into the straight stereotype of a "poofter", can walk into a hotel and buy a drink and the bartender will probably relate to him as another human being. A woman cannot walk into a bar without being viewed, but at least some of the men present, as a sex object. In the former situation the male automatically reaps the benefit (given that nobody wants to be viewed as an object) of being male while in the latter case the woman can only feel - consciously or unconsciously - oppressed because she is female. How does a male give up this "benefit"? Why should he, in fact, relinquish a benefit? Again, a man - whether homosexual or heterosexual - may be competing with a woman for a job. If he knows that their qualifications are identical or that the woman is better qualified than he and he still gets the job because he is male then he automatically becomes an oppressor whether he likes it or not. (If he had been competing with the two lesbians in the hypothetical situation discussed above then he would most certainly get the job. Although one of those women oppressed the other both would probably be oppressed by the man simply because of their sex). This is the way in which sexism works. If this man claims that he also wants to destroy sexism (as liberated male homosexuals claim) should he protest and give up the job to the woman - especially if she is better qualified? Can and/or will men give up the benefits they receive simply because they happen to be male and live in a male-dominated, male-run sexist society? How does a man go about relinquishing such benefits in purely practical terms? Do any men find it oppressive to belong to the oppressor class and to receive automatically the benefits of this class? Yet sexual liberation, and in particular the liberation of women, means among other things that men must relinquish such benefits.

The radicalesbian, if she wants to combat actively sexism, understands that men have to fight a different type of oppression; the oppression of being or belonging to the oppressive class. There is a practical sense in which it is easier for women to fight their oppression as women. They understand that although they too might oppress other women that their main oppressors are men; they have a readily identifiable 'enemy'. The most oppressive oppressor of men in this society is themselves; they do not have an obvious enemy. Many radicalesbians who wish to understand fully the nature of sexism and how it effects themselves and homosexual men know that they need to work with and talk to the men in Gay Liberation. For sexism does not just result in the oppression of all women by all men. We all need to realize that we are all capable of being oppressed and of being oppressors in a society which rewards those who follow the norm and punishes those who deviate from the norm. The radicalesbian wants a new society and a new world. Until that time arrives then her prime concern will be with the society of women. To help break down the barriers of sexism she may choose to work only with the women in Women's Liberation and/or with the men and women in Women's Liberation and/or with the men and women in Gay Liberation. The choice is hers.

Barbara Creed.